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CAPTURING THE UNSEEN EXPERIENCE OF ASIAN INTERNATIONAL
STUDENTS IN THE UNITED STATES

BY

MARTEL A. PIPKINS

A THESIS SUBMITTED

IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENT

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IN

SOCIOLOGY

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This thesis has been examined and approved.

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A Word of Thanks

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Bao Tran 1986-2006

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and Juhee and finally Rakshya. This thesis is dedicated to my dear friend Bao Tran.

ABSTRACT

International students bring unique elements to the campuses everywhere. Through their efforts we are able to experience their culture through events such as Japan Night, Nepal Night, Vietnamese New Year, and Africa Night among others. However, there are experiences of international students that are less likely captured. Through one-on-one semi-structured interviewing, the unseen experience of international students from Asia was brought to light. The specific focus here is on challenges they may face during their time of study. The three core challenges presented are 1) living situations, 2) developing relationships, and 3) language. These core challenges seem to have a cycle of impacts on one another contributing to the overall experience of Asian international students.

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INTRODUCTION

Many of us may have ideas of how it feels to be homesick, difficulties learning a new language, or moving to a new area trying to make friends. While our experiences may be living with a relative for a summer, changing schools, or fulfilling a language requirement for credit, international students may experience these things on an entirely different level.

As of 2008, students from Asian account for 61 percent of our total international student population in the United States. The majority comes from India (83,833), China (67,723), South Korea (62,392), and Japan (35,282) (Chow et al. 2009). International students contribute heavily to the US economy bringing in about \$14.5 billion each year since 2007 (Lewin 2007). However, not many get a “billion dollar experience.”

Throughout my college career I have seen international students both isolated and self-isolated partly due to a lack of attention to the specific needs of international students. While some colleges have a large number of international students, many are not internationalized, meaning they do not have adequate resources or processes to respond to the needs of international students. In these less prepared academic institutions it is not rare to find a number of issues that make the experience of international students problematic; professors/lecturers are not given the proper training on teaching styles to adjust to international students' academic culture, dining does not provide varying international dishes, and the residence halls fail to provide culturally appropriate accommodations.

The purpose of this study is to bring to light the all-encompassing experience of international students in depth, directly from them. With the yearly increase in

international students in the United States, it becomes imperative to know more about them and their experience here. Just as there are limitations to what universities can do for all international students, being that they come from a tremendous variety of cultures, there are also limitations to this study, which will be addressed more in the discussion section.

The United States has one of the fastest growing populations of international students and it's increasing. From Europe to the Middle East and from Africa to Korea, international students flood American universities. In their search for a good education, international students come with varying competence in English and with a wide range of expectations on what the experience will be like. Why do experiences vary and by what means? Are international students ignored and/or marginalized? How could this affect us? This paper will go into detail trying to understand some of these questions and answers.

Perspectives: Symbolic Interaction

“Symbolic interactionism emphasizes the mental and creative processes at the expense of the structural and external. Social action occurs when the self takes account of others, their values, ideas, and the definition of the situations...

(Swingewood, 2000:171).”

Symbolic interactionism (SI) defines the macro such as society, organization, class, and structure as only existing through the actions of individuals and the collective. Symbolic interactionism tells us that we learn to interpret and give meaning to the world through our interactions with others. Symbolic interaction theory would describe a university as a unit of interacting personalities that interact on the basis of symbols; words, gestures, rules and

roles. It is easy to conceptualize difficulties that emerge with international students when their interaction is based on symbols that are not mutually shared. What happens when symbols are not shared among actors in an academic setting because of differing cultural interpretations? SI tells us to expect a lack of coherence, a stress on those on the outside of the dominant interpretations, a confusion about meanings that emerge out of different subjectively held existing symbols and self-concepts diminished by the symbolic uncertainty. Further, the meanings that evolve from the interaction in the context of this symbolic uncertainty should be expected to be puzzling and stressful for international students and for those nationals who attempt meaningful interactions with these students. SI gives us the tools to unpack the difficulty in creating positive interactions and allows reasonable relationships by expecting misinterpretation and confusion given the symbolic nature of interaction (George Herbert Mead 1934, Herbert Blumer 1969). While Asian international students are a specific set of individuals, their experiences are part of a larger structure that impacts them in similar ways. Looking at many accounts taken from international students one can also see how they base their actions on what they believe others, in this case the host nationals, think of them. For instance, when international students avoid conversations with host nationals some of their reasons include their perception that host nationals may be impatient or not fully understand them. This is exactly what we should expect under a symbolic interactionist theoretical orientation.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Language

Language proficiency has direct impacts on the experiences of international students. Language is used as an indicator of intelligence, a roadblock to developing social relationships (Zhang and Mi 2010, Lee 2008), signifier of difference (Lee 2008), prevention of in-class participation, and causes an inability to fully express oneself and a longer amount of time required for reading text (Pipkins 2010, Hellsten and Prescott 2004). There is varying literature on international students in the US and other European countries focused on language and their experiences in the classroom. Lee (2010), noted that international students from Asian, African, and Latin American countries have a tougher experience with cultural and linguistic adaptation than those from other Western countries such as Canada, Australia, and parts of Europe. One major reoccurring finding is that students from Asian cultures speak much less than all others in the classroom. This is credited to a variety of factors, from culture difference to self-consciousness of their conversational flow in the English language (Hellsten & Prescott, 2004).

Difficulties for international students sometimes begin on arrival. In Zhang and Mi's study (2010), the questionnaire used found that the average international student has less of a problem with language after two years of being in the host country.

Within academics, language may play the largest role. It can become stressful for international students who cannot express their intelligence level through the English language (Yeh and Inose, 2003). In a study on Asian graduate students, Wang et al (2002) reports that English literacy problems lead to students being quiet in class, writing

poorly, and responding to professors with little to no relevance to the question. This is crucial, especially since many graduate courses are designed as discussions rather than lectures. In many cases, a certain percentage of the course grade is specifically for in-class participation. Presentations are also more often required in graduate classes. Even if the professor takes language into consideration, international students may have higher levels of nervousness and anxiety causing them to do poorly.

Social Network and Social Relationships

Upon arriving in their visiting country international students are stuck in somewhat of a limbo, where they are no longer have high level access to where they come from, but at the same time not a member of this new place. At this time, one may need a high degree of social support, which is discussed more by Sawir et al (2008). However, their main support system may be at the place they left, resulting in a kind of isolation (Sawir et al 2008). Aside from daily living problems such as language, some international students may be introduced to a personal autonomy that they may have not previously experienced. This can involve doing many things on their own for the first time such as finding housing, paying bills, and cooking (Sawir et al 2008). Along with having to do these things on their own, many international students find themselves experiencing loneliness. In the same study by Sawir et al (2008) they found that out of 200 international students interviewed, 130 (65%) said that they experienced loneliness. While at some point, everyone experiences this feeling, international students may experience it on a higher level than residents of the host country. International students suffer from the two different types of loneliness: personal and social,. Personal

loneliness involves not having a close connection with a significant individual, while social loneliness stems from a lack of a social network. International students are likely to experience an intense level of the social loneliness because of the lack of their cultural and linguistic setting and not having others around with similar views and concerns of the world (Sawir et al 2008).

Having strong social networks are critical to the college experience. For many, a lack of social support can make or break their college career; not having the support one needs can either lower or raise their chances of retention. For international students this can be a more difficult situation since their major support networks are many times on the other side of the globe from where they are studying. While international students desire these social networks, developing them remains a big challenge. (Williams and Johnson, 2010). Social networks refer to persons or organizations that contain different social relationships such as friendships and memberships within the same groups (Hendrickson et al, 2010). In one study, international students were asked if they try to make American friends. Most of them answered yes, but also explained that the responses and/or impressions they received were detrimental to their continuing attempts (Pipkins, 2011). For example, they would sometimes be asked to repeat themselves several times or observe facial expressions of frustration and impatience. Having a domestic support group makes the process of acculturation easier; however it is still essential to have a social support group of the same ethnicity because of the comfort level it brings. Having a domestic social group can bring a stronger sense of connection with the host country. Incorporation in such a group can influence a more successful adjustment and less stressful integration into the host society. While contact with the hosts brings about

positive results, low contact can lead to feelings of anxiety, depression, and alienation (Williams and Johnson, 2010). Developing friendships is critical to brightening the experience of international students. It is an essential factor of satisfaction, social support, and the success of international students (Hendrickson et al, 2010).

Hendrickson et al (2010) discusses a friendship formation of international students first grounded by S. Bochner and others in 1977 (Hendrickson, 2010). In that functional model there were three categories of functions: “(a) a co-national network whose function is to affirm and express the culture of origin; (b) a network with host nationals, whose function is the instrumental facilitation of academic and professional aspirations; (c) a multi-national network whose main function is recreational (Hendrickson et al, 2010:2). Co-nationals are friends who are from the same country. Host-nationals are friends from the host country and multi-nationals are friends who are international students.

While most of their friends come from the first function of this model, many international students want more friendships with those of the second function. Usually having more host national friends, international students experience less loneliness and less homesickness, positive feelings of host country, fewer social difficulties, and improved communication skills (Hendrickson et al, 2010). The frequency of interaction also plays a significant role. The more frequently international students interact with host nationals, the more they are able to understand the culture and common behaviors within the society.

Issues that prevent these social relationships from developing are verbal language skills that could hinder people from getting to know one another, as well as perceived

discrimination (Pipkins, 2011; Hendrickson et al, 2010). International students tend to comment on their English skills as a roadblock to developing relationships with host nationals. Often times, international students fear vocabulary misuse and the slow speed of their speaking. These fears give them the impression that the host nationals will be impatient when/if speaking with them. Discrimination or perceived discrimination also plays a large role. Some international students believe that host nationals, in this case, Americans, want to spend time with other Americans and are not interested in spending time with them on the basis of them being “foreign” or international (Pipkins, 2011). This is an important issue, but it is frequently ignored within research. When research presents negative experiences of international students, it tends to point the blame towards their inability to adapt and cope with their new experiences (Lee, 2006). This gives the assumption that the international students are responsible for these negative experiences and the institution and host country bare no fault. It is rare to find a study that focuses on the hostile environments the international students face. However, in an academic database search you will find countless articles of adjustment problems of international students. Lee (2006) reports that students from some Western regions including Canada, Europe, and Australia reported no experiences of discrimination at all while students from the Middle East, African, Asia, and Latin America do report incidents of discrimination (Lee, 2006). Lee (2006) used this as evidence of a new racism—neo-racism that is on the basis of cultural and national order. With all the same components of traditional racism, this neo-racism adds a justification for “discrimination on the basis of cultural difference or national origin rather than by physical characteristics alone and appeals to “natural” tendencies to preserve group cultural identity (Lee,

2006:2).” Thus racism and discrimination are based mostly on stereotypes and prejudices of people from their home countries. This can also stem from ideas of exceptionalism and national superiority embedded in American society. Some of the incidents reported involved insulting jokes about their home country by students, faculty, and administration that caused feelings of being unwelcomed. Further impacts included graduate students getting teaching positions and other academic jobs on campus mainly due to their “foreign” accents, which were often equated with a lack of intelligence (Lee, 2006). Many of these cases are not reported because of fear of making trouble or even being deported.

Moving forward with the model of friendship formation, the third function in this model is multi-national friendships, which are international students enduring friendships with other international students. This tends to be the most noticeable trend, especially when one’s own international student group is low in numbers. Although they may be for different cultures, they share many commonalities that relate to being in a foreign land. When talking about social networks it is important to mention social capital, resources within social networks. The quantity and quality of these resources have been found to influence the happiness and academic success levels of international students (Hendrickson et al, 2010).

Independence

In an article by Kobayashi et al (2010) the stereotype of Japanese being more collectivistic than are Americans was challenged. The researchers here were not exactly looking at collectivism and individualism as two different concepts but rather the same just on the opposite ends of the same spectrum. However, while the common stereotypes say that Japanese are more collective, the research results for Japanese college students contradicted that, showing that they prefer more individualistic ideals. It was also pointed out that the Japanese in the study might have looked for different collective factors and not so much the general measurements proposed in the study. In other words, this study may have used different indicators. It is also noted in the article that Japanese are socialized to not speak out against the majority, express opinions, and state preferences and desires. When discussing the data, Kobayashi et al, talks about how their sample contained a younger generation, which may have been impacted by modern capitalism and global participation in the economy, whereas most other research involved previous generations.

Living situations

Living situations, another aspect of the international student experience, gets little attention. Once again, while there is much on the students' adjustments to the new environment, there is not much talk of the environment itself. Pipkins (2011), found that international students living on campus came across multiple issues. One of the most prevalent involves experiences with dining services. Since students residing on campus

are required to purchase a meal plan, they were in position that compels them to eat the food provided. However, the food is not what they were accustomed to and in extreme cases caused illness. In adjusting to this some international students would cook their own native foods, but would often receive complaints of bad smells coming from their rooms and hall kitchens (Skinner, 2010).

Barbara Skinner (2010) speaks about housing accommodations for international students. According to her research, residence halls usually have a positive atmosphere; however the settings are too different from the international students' previous lifestyle. She goes on to mention the sharing of bathrooms, and loud noises through the walls and halls. Living in shared accommodation for them sometimes brings these and other issues that could grow overtime if the international student does not seek help or advice. Some of the Asian students come from cultures that value private personal settings not commonly shared with others. The residential living on U.S. campuses does not usually accommodate such preferences.

As mentioned earlier, much of the literature on the international student experience is focused on adjustment, coping, and language proficiency. This is an attempt to get more in-depth knowledge and understanding of their actual daily experience from both external and internal factors. To accomplish this, focus is placed on social support/relationships, living situations, and language as they impact the everyday life of international students as they endeavor to pursue their academic goals. This study also explores how international students perceived America/Americans prior to coming to the U.S. and how they view this country and its citizens currently. Also of interest are their perceptions on culture shocks, comparisons of academic cultures,

changes with self, and community involvement. The goal is to capture their experience as they see it.

METHODOLOGY

A word on methods—

Quantitative research is based on observations that are converted into discrete units that can be compared to other units by using statistical analysis... Qualitative research, on the other hand, generally examines people's words and actions in narrative or descriptive ways more closely representing the situation as experiences by the participants. (Maykut & Morehouse, 1994:2).

Data Collection

For the goal of this study, I felt using qualitative methods was the best choice. It is essential to capture thoroughly the daily experience of international students in detail. While stats and other quantitative methods may give a bigger picture, I believe in depth interviews will give a clearer, more detailed painting.

In order for me to really capture in detail this unseen experience of international students, I conducted 10 semi-structured interviews with women students specifically from the Asian countries-- those represented are India, Nepal, China, South Korea, and Japan. After reviewing studies in the like, I felt that in-depth interviews would be a sufficient amount to capture some of these experiences. To begin the search for my sample I made an announcement at the international student board meeting explaining my research and the participants I am looking for, I then used purposeful methods to acquire this sample of individuals.

The only criteria held is that participants are Asian international women students, meaning their home country is elsewhere outside of the United States in the Asian region officially here for educational purposes and identify as a woman. Asian country of

origin, age, and major are not designated criteria for this project, although these things may have impacts on the differences of experiences. Participants also range from second semester students to graduate level students. Interviews lasted between 45 minutes to 2 hours.

I used about 18 grand tour questions (Miller and Crabtree 2004) as well as category questions within each section for linkage and clarification. Grand tour questions include topics such as language, friendships, academics, campus living, homesickness, perceptions and views, host families, and adjustments and adaptations. The data collection took approximately 5 months.

Before any interviews took place I briefly researched each of my participants home country including that country's culture, linguistics, religious views, characteristics, and government. While there may be many subcultures within these countries, this gave me mild basis of where the participant is coming from.

All respondents were given the opportunity to choose the location in which the interviews would be held. All interviews were one on one, audio recorded, and transcribed along side of notes taken by me. Before any interviews took place, participants were made aware of the nature of the study and the types of questions that will be asked. I read the informed consent form with them and made them aware of the voluntary nature of the research and their right to skip questions that they feel uncomfortable with or terminate the interview at any time without penalty. Participants that agreed signed the informed consent form or gave verbal consent. Transcripts and audio will be held in my computer and password protected. All participants were giving

pseudonyms and nowhere in the audio recording, transcripts, or final paper will their names be mentioned.

Data Analysis

Data was analyzed using grounded theory (Glaser and Strauss 1967; Lincoln and Guba 1985). The grounded approach allowed me to simultaneously collect and analyze data as it is presented. Instead of searching for theory verification, emerging theory was expected to occur directly from the data as it is collected and analyzed. Coding was done using Microsoft Word for patterns and other commonalities. This allowed me to find concepts, categories, subcategories, and category families.

Memo writing was done to get a better understanding and organization of the data. These are in the form of theoretical memos, free writes, and the constant comparative method (Glaser and Strauss 1967), which allowed me to grab onto commonalities among the different participants and help me to better frame the data.

In preparation for technical mishaps, I audio recorded from both my Macbook Pro and my smartphone audio recorder. Another issue was location. Participants were able to choose the location of their choice, so the possibility arose that I was unfamiliar with the place and/or the place was not suitable for recording. If noise was an issue with recording, I kindly asked the participant if there was another quieter location they would be comfortable doing the interview. Language was another issue. While some questions involve language barriers I anticipated that there would be some between the participant and I. I was sure to not give impressions of impatience and politely asked if they could repeat. In case the issue was on my part, I stated in the beginning of the interview that

they should notify me when it happens. While Asian countries are known/stereotyped to be more private I also anticipated some not wanting to share certain information with me. The risk to participants was less than minimal. With my brief background about their country and my experiences in Asia, I was able to gain some trust from the participant. Not many emotions arose when discussing the questions. In my book bag I kept a box of tissues and be sure to reiterate that they do not have to answer all questions and can stop at any time and also gave on campus resources such as the Counseling Center.

FINDINGS

Living On, Off, With, and Without

After gathering and analyzing the data, I organized this findings into core challenges of the population studied. Living situation is described as a core challenge for various reasons. Some of the issues international students have are the option for housing, food difference, and culture difference. Combined or separate, these issues within their living situation brings a core challenge to their lives here as international students.

Before arriving they do not have the opportunity to look for apartments around the area, as residents may be able to do. This leads them to quickly apply for campus housing online before arriving which may cost more than what they would pay living off campus. Megumi, a nursing student from Japan, reports:

...Because I didn't know around here so I might I might I might not be able to find apartment or place first thing I just wanted to make sure that where I have apartment or room or something because I was in Japan.

It can be much easier for residential students to visit the area and shop around for cheaper living options in the nearby area, whereas international students are usually sent the housing information for on-campus living, which in many cases is more expensive.

Another issue comes with culture difference. Some participants in this study had not been used to sharing personal space with others—this caused emotional issues, sleeping issues, and them to be generally uncomfortable. Joy, a sociology student from Japan talks about this in a one on one interview:

It was the first time I had experienced in the dorm and my first time to share one room with someone so I didn't like it...I need privacy.

Megumi too, makes a similar statement saying,

Living with roommate...same room...it is very strange when someone is in my room...NO! NEVER! Japanese people don't like that! It's the most different here. Japanese are very private...Japanese people are private...how do you say...very shy.

Privacy seems to be essential to the international students I have interviewed and the main reason for them wanting to live off campus. Three of the participants wanted to meet people and enjoyed that part of living on campus, but at the same time wanted to be alone at times. Much of the time this is out of the person's control when living on campus being that they normally had to share a room, bathroom, as well as eating and study areas. It is clear that this is something neither Megumi, Joy, nor Naomi were used to and led them all to move off campus or plan to move off, giving them less chances of meeting new people or at least making it more difficult. Each participant that lived on campus expressed the common appreciation of being able to easily meet people by living on campus. They also addressed it already being difficult for them to meet (possible) American friends because they are international students—however they quickly sacrificed some of these chances for more privacy. Some of these experiences also led to strong emotional feelings as Megumi reports, she explains that it is frustrating and she feels she cannot do anything but live with that feeling of frustration everyday.

Aside from privacy issues there are also language and cultural barriers that impact the dorm life of these international students. For instance, Yong Ting from the Republic

of Korea said that she did not really hang out with other women on her floor. She goes on to explain:

There wasn't that many chance, there was some chance like having ice cream together but I did not want to go. Was somehow maybe I was busy or I didn't feel comfortable maybe. I don't know anyone there I mean we introduce each other but one time and we are not like really friends so and the first semester like I have hard time understanding English so there was communication problem.

Each floor of each residence hall on campus does various activities on the floors.

Activities range from special meals, game nights, and resource events to ice cream socials and study nights. Most floors are separated by sex. Only two residence halls have unisex floors. Two floors in one of the complexes are designated as the "international or cultural floors". These contain about 90% Koreans. A major pattern in living situations is the choice of living on campus or off campus by country. Students from Korea, China, and Japan tend to live on campus, while students from India, Nepal and Bangladesh live off campus. Those living off campus tend to be closer and more closed to their communities, while those living on campus are more open or at least have more opportunities to meet others outside their community. Shanti from India speaks briefly on this matter:

I can mingle with more people from my country and uh that question is difficult for me to answer because I never experience on campus living. But off campus what I like is that you get to stay with more of your people and since I am new I need to stay in more of comfort zone for a little while and on campus its difficult I think I don't really know but yeah that's what I like about off campus, staying with people of my country...I can say but I do have...its like very common that I have friends from my own country because I came 40,000 miles to study and I have to stay with my own people to get to know things. Even slowly I might lose them and I might have friends from other countries but right now I have most of my friends from my own country.

This is opposite from Naomi and others from Japan who decided that they would not get an apartment off campus with one another because they did not want to be isolated from others and possibly lose some of the English skills they attained.

The next common issue was food. Living on campus, students are to have a meal plan, which could cost more than buying groceries. However, the bigger issue was the food itself. Most of the participants said they did not like the food and it was unhealthy or distasteful to them. Naomi lived on campus one year then moved off due to cost, privacy, and food. She explains some of the issues regarding the food she had to eat in the cafeteria:

Tell the truth I don't ...I don't like at all. Like I don't know my stomach is kind of upset and during living on campus I had lots of stuff inside my mouth like you know it hurts so...

...I lose a lot of weight. My weight never has been never change in 10 years, when I was on campus I lose weight because I could not eat. So I eat to live, you know I have to alive so I force to eat.

While Naomi may have had the most serious challenge with food, Joy also mentions food several times throughout our session. Living off campus seems to give international students the freedom to cook their own meals that suites their lifestyle and interest.

Common among most of the participants were the needs to move off campus because of privacy issues, costs, and sometimes food. All the participants that mentioned privacy as a concern were from Japan, where they emphasized their culture played a huge role—this could be a bit ironic, being that they also describe Japan as more of a collective society and it being the reason for a lack of independence and expression of opinion. The only common motive for staying on campus was that the classrooms were closer.

What stops us from being friends?

Many of the international students I interviewed report great difficulty creating friendships with Americans, and suggested this might be due to language barriers, being unfamiliar with popular culture, and others not being interested in them. Slang, to me, seems to be another issue underlying problem with each participant. While some international students have the goal of building networks with Americans they come to realize that it is not as easy as they thought. In this section I review three major issues regarding developing friendships: language barriers, slang, and popular culture.

Language barriers—by language barriers, I mean the inability for international students to orally communicate with others because of English being their second or third language. Conversations international students take part in with native English speakers are at different paces and sometimes lead to feelings of avoidance, impatience, and general feelings of being uncomfortable. Here, Megumi says:

Yeah because my English not perfect so I don't want to...uh, when everytime I talk to American I feel bad because they have to be patient when I speak because I have to see their faces and they also they think that way I think they want to talk like but they but their thinking.

Megumi, although never expressed to her through words, feels that native English speakers get irritated and impatient with trying to speak with her, which makes her feel bad and increases the possibility of her avoiding conversations with others. Naomi, from Japan, mentions this as well saying, “especially my international accent is not clear so sometimes they ask again and again and again so I feel sorry.” Although they did not

mention anyone ever commenting on their slow speech, both Naomi and Megumi felt as though people get impatient when they speak, which in turn makes them avoid conversation sometimes and embody negative feelings towards themselves for not being able to keep up with the pace of the conversation.

Popular Culture—by popular culture, I mean idols/icons, systems, and characteristics specific to the culture. Developing friendships many times stem from having commonalities with others. However, international student experiences are much different than those who are residents. Even when living in the culture for certain amount of time is not enough to be a part of the culture. When intentionally trying to develop friendships among other residents in the hall, Naomi explains:

When I was living here on campus they had floor eating that all floor my floor get together and eat at dinner...(laughs) and mostly American students and two or three international students. So we want to make American friends so we separate each other and American friend people are talk about telev... ahh tv program which we don't have TV and we don't know what they talking about so they kind of change to their height and weight, but (laughs: I using uhhh metric terms) not English term so 'how height are you' I can say centimeter but not feet (laughs loudly) so oh my god.

Even when the American residents at the dinner notice that the international students were unfamiliar with the television series, they shifted to a more general conversation about weight and height, but even then with the unit measurements being different they were still unable to fully take part in the conversation.

Slang is a big part of everyday conversation. It may be harder for international students to understand because slang is a big part of every conversation especially among

friends, but slang is not taught—it is something that has to be picked up on while in the culture for a good amount of time and can change and have various meanings. When asked about her challenges in making friends with Americans Naomi said, “...language of course...because they use a lot of slang and culture and background that I don’t understand” stops from being friends with them.” With Naomi, the simple and maybe sometimes unconscious use of slang prevents her from understanding conversations leaving her unable to connect with others. This is a common challenge among many international students, especially when watching television. Listening to conversations may also be a challenge when slang is used because it can be a part of the main points. Joy mentions how the pace and slang together makes it tough for her to be involved in the conversation:

...Maybe because I'm international student and I had had time to listen to what American students say because they talk very fast and they speak slang that I don't know so.

While culture and food can either be adjusted to or worked around, language is something that takes time and must be learned. While international students work to learn and apply the language more, it is usually in the academic settings. When talking with friends or anything else outside the textbook, can bring an even greater challenge.

Yong Ting and Joy go on to explain:

...but communication impact on the social life I guess I cant understand like if they make joke I couldn't laugh so that kind of stuff. If I could understand more or if I could talk better than I think I can meet new people and make new friends

But I still don't know what they are saying. The shampoo in the back like this is this description, but I don't get most of them...ah, because the language is different from what I read on textbook, I get use to the English in the textbook and classes.

Slang may seem trivial and may be disregarded as not being “proper English,” but this is a major challenge international students face in their daily lives here in the US. Ebonics and other slang may never be taught in academia, but international students are left in this limbo—they do not know the slang so it can be hard to fit in, but they cannot fit in because they do not know the slang.

In another case here popular culture was received in a different way. Most of the time international students may have a hard time keeping up with television shows and other media, but in some cases, the media is a blockade in international students developing friendships as well. This was most clearly seen with Priya, a health student from Nepal. When asked why she doesn't trust Americans, Priya explains:

I don't know since our childhood we have been watching the American shows and stuff. I don't know come on. (Laughs) and we see the lifestyle how they live everyday life and their love life all those things that ...they aren't like good choice for us...we.

Watching Western media in their home countries left some international students with preconceived notions about how American life is like. Much of that media may depict bribery, betrayal, infidelity, and theft leaving them to believe it is the general way of American life. On the other side, it may show America/Americans as fun, party-loving, drinkers, and happy, which still results in preconceived views on American society as Naomi reports when asked about her views before arriving to the United States:

...So I told you like here is more diverse...they share their experience with different culture, but that I thought since then no...And I don't know this is only me because my friends Japanese friends say that 'you are crazy' because I used to watch American movie...most American movie are very party party happy end so

when I come here and I saw that some people is suicide I was shocked (voice escalate: 'American people also suicide ') (laughs) they must be very happy person but when I come here. And I heard that many people having pill for depression even students—that was shocking because in Japan depression pill is only like 40-year people so.

Rather the portrayal of American society is positive or negative, it still leaves those outside of the culture in awe once they found out things are contrary to what they have seen in the media.

Gaining Independence Within a Collective Tradition

In general we tend to identify Asian countries as having collective characteristics, values, and beliefs. While certainly these characteristics vary from country to country, it is seen throughout the Asian region and expressed through all of the participants here. These characteristics can be seen through the level of importance placed on groups and family over individual or personal interest.

In contrast, Western society, and specifically the United States, is seen as a more individualistic and independent. This individualism shows through the importance of leadership and the heavy competitiveness in our society. As I played pool with a young man from Nepal I would continuously count the winning games and after months of playing he stopped and asked me, “why do you count?” I was caught off guard with the question and quickly thought about it. Before I could answer he pocketed the eight ball winning the game and asked if I was still counting.

Independence is mentioned in every interview one way or another. Most instances involved the student previously relying on others for most things from decision-

making, cleaning, and cooking to finding partners and paying bills. Shanti from India and Shona from Nepal go on to explain:

Shanti:

I can say it's a little just stricter you know you always have somebody at every step that you take you know for every decision you make you ask somebody there you either professors or uh your parents who anyone who is elder someone who has experience and based on their decisions on we can take our decisions. So but here what I observed is you can do anything like take any course you can chose any path so that is the difference that I found from my home to here... lots of independence here that's the only thing I can say you get to know things you get to know responsibilities when I go back...anybody who wants to live an independent life or who wants to learn responsibility they should actually come here. Even if they are staying a lone back home they wouldn't have this kind of you know independency or something because there we don't have much of restrictions or rules I mean not freedom its like...that's one thing that I learned. And the word itself says it all like back home I use to depend on my mother and if I go out I use to depend on my friends for anything even like shopping if I go out I depend on my friends for shopping and if I stay at home even for small things I use to ask my mother if I can do that or only after permission I would do something then here I'm like -minded that I can say I'm started to become and think like that.

I had parents constraint we usually like back home we we don't have this much independency so for any kind of decision even to decide on what course or what major to take we have to ask our parents if they like or if they think it is good for us only then can we go into to but here the choices are us and we can just do it and we have number of reasons here to show something is good for us back home we don't have it like that like lets say I wanted to use an apple laptop back home if I wanted an apple laptop I really have to show immense number of reasons to show why this is clearly good for me but here I can like literally tell them give them some examples and I can like show some examples of why something is good for me.

Shona:

its good I learned a lot. I learned how to live independently actually. Got to know lots of responsibilities I mean back home people use to like...I stay with my mom back home so she use to cook for me she use to arrange things and all and when I use to go to college I mean an undergrad I usually come home study and do my things assignments eat sleep and again go back to college but then here I have to do everything on my own so I really got to know things here I really like it.

Others from the more central Asian region have a different take on independence. Megumi, Joy, and Naomi, all from Japan, commented seeing Americans as independent. Joy says that this common characteristic in the US helps her to be herself. Naomi says that it is a huge difference compared to her society as she usually puts many others ahead of her individual needs. Naomi also felt this as a huge culture shock, being that “leadership is not so important in Japan”. With leadership/individualism comes the need for expression and speaking opinion, which is still very difficult for her to adjust to. Qing from China and Yong Ting from Korea go further in explaining change in herself while studying here:

More independent, start to plan thing and uh try to organize my life more reasonable and then trying to work hard for my dream for my goal and actually do something before I would like to dream but never do something now I know every achievement based on one little step is every single step so I would just little by little work hard.

Yong Ting:

I mean like I when I was in Korea I see American culture as individualist I guess and Asian countries are more like sharing and doing like together but when I was in Korea I was more like individual person so I didn't have to change my lifestyle here you know what I mean I was like already individual enough.

yeah and I became more confident I guess then I became more I can I mean since I lived here more by myself I think I can take care of myself more better more independent yeah I think positive ways I guess not like negative ways... went back to Korea and met my friends and family and they like 'oh you changed little bit you know but I don't know in what ways but they are what they told me is I became more carefree, confident, independent...that's what I heard and yeah

Independence is certainly a change or different approach that impacted the women here in various ways. While this is not necessarily a core challenge it has great significance within this population. This new way of life seem to help them be more confident in

themselves as some may have even suggested. Others may look at it as collective versus individual instead of independent versus dependent, but here it seems to be a gain in independence within their collective tradition as seen through Shona whom feels she has become more independent, but remains close to her community sharing responsibility of cooking not only for herself, but everyone in the apartment.

Language in its Own

Previously I talked about how language plays a role in developing friendships for international students. Now I would like to go more in depth about language overall. This challenge is central to the core challenges. International students coming in have varying English speaking levels. For example, Priya is as nearly fluent as someone born here, whereas Naomi may stumble here and there, but Megumi, speaks little and has an extremely limited vocabulary.

Looking at the various interviews as well as talking to others, something crucial to point out is how English levels vary by country. While students from South Asia such as India and Nepal have high English proficiency being that most of them learn English from nursery. Students in the central regions of Asia such as South Korea and Japan tend to have lower levels of English proficiency. Many of those students reported different educational systems where speaking in English was not a major part of their curriculums or social lives. Shanti, from India, said that her first language was English and she usually uses it in academia and social settings. In Nepal, there are two major types of schools. Shona explains there are government schools and private schools. In the private schools you learn English from nursery, but in the government schools, which have less funds, the focus is on Nepal and the Nepalese language.

However, overall, language plays a big role in each of their lives here on a day-to-day basis within academics and their social lives. Language may play its largest role through academics. Language issues tend to have a hard negative impact on international students when it comes to inside and outside of the classroom. This brings a long range of added issues such as feelings of isolation, lower grades, and a longer amount of time spent outside of the classroom for academics. When explaining her lack of participation in the classroom, Yong Ting and Naomi had this to say:

Yong Ting:

I think the problem now is I have to attend discussion and its hard to speak out I guess ...I mean I need to think first then translate Korean to English and then during that time some other people will talk I lose my chance you know what I mean? That's the biggest problem I guess.

Naomi:

One thing is that because of my English I rarely spoke in classroom. I don't want to stop lecture. That happen when I speak something then professors ask again and again and again now everybody is waiting, so its kind of embarrassing. So I usually ask after class or during office time...office hours.... (Concerning participation points in class)... yeah this happens often and I usually wait and even if I know the answer and if no one knows then I raise hand. Homework is always too much. Reading textbook takes more than triple time than American students. For example, I usually use half of day on Saturday or Sunday to use one textbook for one course. As maximum on the weekend I can read only three textbooks you know...

Because of her English level, Naomi does not participate frequently in class, if at all.

Many international students are faced with the same issue, which may cause them to lose points if the professor grades on participation. It also requires the student to spend more

time outside of class because of the fear of embarrassment of asking questions in class.

Megumi and Joy also reports:

I'm taking just 12 credits but there like ...I still need to work harder because of my English.

In class lectures I never have any idea what is going on at all. I always read prior to class and assume what the professor is speaking of. I don't understand anything in class. Leads me to spending extra hours studying because it takes 10 minutes for Americans. Me it takes like hours so.

Yong Ting also reports:

...everything takes more time like reading and writing paper it takes twice time I guess than other American students if they like read one book in a day I have to read it like maybe a week you know so I need to spend more time...you know basically I have less time for other stuff I mean...during weeks days if I focus on my studies than I cant catch up with every other classes so, (cant hear) so especially this semester I have only three classes but those classes were so hard to understand and just too many homework and reading stuff so I didn't have any time.

Emotions

Feelings of isolation also arise when students have to form groups for in class assignments. Many times international students have the idea that *I am as smart as my English level*. This means that believe people rate their level of intelligence based on their language proficiency and ability to speak. It is similar to those who need interpreters, where it is the interpreter who sets the image. While in their native language they may be able to really express their intelligence, it is difficult in English. This can be seen through the interaction of international students when attempting to form groups inside the classroom. Megumi and Naomi both experience this and go on to report:

Even a professor ask us to make group and have to present it or something its always difficult to find partners (laughs)...because they know I am Japanese because its much more difficult...makes them more difficult to

complete assignment. Ah, its okay! Because I'm different I know that and if I was them I would think So I yeah I understand...it's very understandable

Because of my English in the classroom, but in classroom if I don't know anyone and have to have group its very hard to like be a group sometime I say 'oh, can I...?' and "oh, we already have group," so yeah.

Naomi explains the impact of feeling left out of groups because of her English level:

Not impact on academics but social life like...hmmm...I don't know...think a little bit harder to talk to them...It shows that they don't care...it's okay...I have to be careful.

Because of this, feelings of isolation arise both inside and outside of the classroom.

Harboring these feelings could lead some of the international students to be hesitant in talking or getting close with others. Feelings of frustration also arise and have a similar impact. For example, Yong Ting from South Korea says:

I guess...its not because I'm Asian or international student I think its because of the language because if I say something if they couldn't understand then they ask me again and again they just make me like annoyed and mad and sometimes it makes them mad cause they couldn't understand me they like "what, what did you say" you know...it just makes everyone mad.

Sometimes I get mad I mean the first feeling is... I am behind... cause if they are like teaching or talking same stuff in my language then I would perfectly understand and I'm very confident person I very like believe in myself and I know if I try to if I make effort I can do whatever I want that's who I am but since the language is the problem I just feel like I'm kind of its disadvantage for me if it wasn't for the language I would be way better than you guys you know that's how I felt and its kind of like ..i know I'm just believing myself so I know I will do better if I did the same thing in Korean so sometimes I get mad sometimes I get sad feel unfair yeah it's the same with other Korean students too that's what I heard

Nonverbal

Nonverbal communication is any form of communication that is not used through words or speech. Some forms of nonverbal communication include facial expressions,

interjections, hand signals, or even silence. Nonverbal communication is not universal. For example, putting the hands together vertically in the United States may be seen as someone praying or begging”, but in India or other parts of Asia it is used as a greetings or “thank-you”. (Paige et al 2002). International students face various language challenges and nonverbals are another form of just that. Here Yong Ting from Korea gives an instance of this:

“oh yeah there is one that I... like in Korea if you call someone like this way (fingering to come here) we don't do this to people its only for like dogs you know but here I see a lot of people like (fingering to come here) do this to me and like so offended...like why do they dot his like dog (laughs). OH yeah just a few weeks ago I went to downtown in the bar and I met my classmate and he was like (finger motion) to me and I'm like so offended”

Although Yong Ting is aware of the different meanings between the two, this non-verbal gesture is still seen and felt in a negative way. There is a slight culture clash here through language that may not have as big an impact as other clashes may, but nevertheless still an impact that could probably alter her view of the classmate and others. Silence is golden! As the saying goes, but even silence is not universal and could be more harmful then golden. Shanti from India recalls a time she came across this situation:

“yeah my friends from US, my US friends they usually don't like something they don't say it they will do some expression or make some tiny sounds and I really don't understand them and I just go on and sometimes later somebody else come to me that they didn't like that kind of statement then I realize that that sound or that expression means that they don't like it.”

Eye contact seems to cause a slight disconnection with some of the Japanese students. Naomi mentions here a session she had with a language counselor and an experience she had on the matter while Joy briefly mentions the behavior of professors.

Naomi:

“its not I don't understand but like I thought American people they are very friendly although me Japanese I not look at peoples eyes...that's American. Japanese usually do but uhhh...when I had a first session with communication program usually what we do, the counselor say if I met person eye to eye just smile, so I say 'okay' so one day I my eyes and her eyes met and just smile, but she (demonstrates how girl turned away quickly after smile) (laughs) so 'aw American also do that too so”

Joy:

“hm. Like eye contact we don't have this in japan. Even professor don't look at students like he is always looking at the textbook and speaking to us.”

In many Asian countries physical contact is inappropriate, especially among women.

However, in many western societies it is normal to greet friends and others with hugs and sometimes kisses. During her interview, Joy mentioned that in Japan they do not greet one another with touching, but rather words or a bow.

For some this brings some culture shock. For example, Yong Ting explains:

“So I was kinda shocked by that and I don't think like hugging each other like when see each other you just hug each other you know and for the first semester I was like shy to do that”

Shona, from Nepal, was also shocked by this, but eventually adjusted:

“I guess more of...its very very common over here but back home hugging and all that stuff is not that common over here its like you hug every single person but back home its not like that the was the first thing kind of different for me but you get use to it.”

Non-verbal communication is indeed a challenge branched from language and cultural differences. While students from all regions of Asia have varying English proficiencies, just as slang is not taught and have to be experienced, nonverbal communication does not seem to be a major focus upon learning the language and culture, which leads to another

challenge some international students face. Women in particular seem to have a place on large emphasis on physical communication and how it opposes their culture's ways of greeting.

DISCUSSION

Through this paper, I have presented three core challenges Asian international students go through on a daily basis from language barriers and developing friendships to their living situations and academics. These concepts give us some idea of what international students experience is like at the university level. Emphasized, should be the reasons in the decline of on-campus living, impacts on academics and social life due to language, and feelings of isolation. More themes that arose from the study included ongoing comparisons to their home country, homesickness, and use of technology. Priya and Shanti from Southern Asia reported falling behind in their courses due to their unfamiliarity with D2L and other online supplements.

As Yong Ting mentioned, she does not expect professors to set different standards for them, but rather looking for more forms of support. It is clear that some professors are either not equipped or untrained to teach international students and do not know of the issues international students face in class. Some professors that I spoke with about this topic were blown away and or completely oblivious to these experiences. There is a need for an initiative to equip professors and other departments with the tools needed to help international students excel while they are here and lessen the challenges and marginalization. Elizabeth Redden (2011) reports Uwe Brandenburg saying that internationalization should not be a mean to its own end, but rather focus on how internationalization contributes to learning, research, teaching, civic engagement, and new ideas. Brandenburg sees many schools leaving internationalization at just the amount of international students they bring in or the number of international school partnerships they have.

Important patterns to note are that of language and living situations. Looking at the data here one can see that those with higher levels of English tend to have some better experiences here at the university especially within academics. Those who tend to live off campus tend to be self-isolated or less involved with others outside of their cultural communities.

Many of the participants also mentioned at some point that they are involved in speech counseling or similar programs in an attempt to remove their accents. They see their accents as a problem, which may stem from the constant repeating or others pointing or making fun of them.

These tend to lead to the overall pattern of marginalization. While these three core challenges tend to be a constant battle for international students in general, they are also processes of marginalization as seen through the lack of friends and social life, classroom isolation, extra demanded time, and diet options. I am hoping to present these findings to both the International Center and other departments as a guideline to further their knowledge, understanding, and skills with working with international students.

Difficulties and Limitations

One of the drawbacks of this study was the language barrier. In all but three of the interviews, participants found it hard to come up with the words to explain what they wanted to express. With that, it was hard to gather data at times—since it was hard for them to make a clear point, it was especially difficult for me to express their point. Another drawback was the limited time I had to get closer to the participants, which may have impacted the trust level and willingness to answer fully or truthfully. At some point

in all the interviews, either the participant emphasized their honesty or asked for affirmation that others would not know their identity.

For further research, I would be interested in the specific differences in experiences with international students from different regions of the world. This research is specifically on Asian women who are students, however, I also did two interviews with men from Vietnam and Korea who shared many of the same experiences from each area. For example, Bo, from Vietnam talked a lot about having trouble listening to lectures, making American friends because of language and culture definitions of fun, as well as difficulties being stuck in the middle of two cultures.

I would also like to see how they all interact with one another, answering the question of rather there is an “international identity” or bond that they share amongst each other. This could be done through focus groups or 2-on-1 interviews.

In the beginning and throughout this project I had a very tough time gathering what would be considered rich data—some of the interviews lacked detail, stories, and elaboration. However, after gathering the data and compiling it into the findings section, I believe that there is some success in the overall project even if just the experience of doing my own study.

Recommendations

Growing up we are told “Knowledge is Power” and one of our childhood superheroes reminded us that, “With great power comes great responsibility” (Spider-Man 2002). After talking with these students and learning of their experiences I feel I have some responsibility in helping change some of these experiences. With that I come up with several recommendations I believe would help accomplish this. Being that

education funding is a reoccurring recipient of cuts; some of these may be more difficult than others to put in place. The first one I suggest is a mentor program. Although they have mentoring during orientation, I believe this is something that should be ongoing for at least the first academic year. Mentors could be international students who had been there at least one year who could be a human resource and helping hand for the incoming international students. I believe residential students could be involved in this process as well.

Since academics seem to be another big issue, professor training is as equally important. The first step of this is making the professors and graduate assistants (GA) aware of the international student experience in the classroom. While professors are already overly exhausted with research and classwork alone, it would be helpful for members of the International Student Office to collaborate with them on this. Professors or Graduate Assistants should also be a part of the mentoring process.

Graduate assistantships are scarce and need more funding. More GAs would be a great addition to International Student Office. They could help with organizing the mentoring program, setting meetings and presentations with professors and other departments, be a one the spot resource for walk-ins, and just a general liaison for students, faculty and administration.

While orientation and other supplements already in place for international students, adding more components to these could increase the positivity of the international student experience. For example, many of the students act towards what they perceived of another person or situation, this is a strong component of symbolic

interaction. This goes with culture in general not teaching us to learn about others or how to relate to one another.

Residential Life and housing in general has its set of challenges for international students as well. Residence Life and Sudexo meets on a weekly basis and they have made many changes over the year such as “Meatless Monday” (which is not entirely meatless), however, with the bulk feeding needed of three thousand students on campus students and maybe some of others from off campus it may be difficult to make changes for this particular group. In this case, I believe it is up to Residential Life to actively find strategious methods of making this a better situation for this population whom they lose after the first year. I intend to give this paper to the International Student Office and meet with them to discuss the findings and recommendations of this paper.

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APPENDIX A: INFORMED CONSENT FORM

I freely and voluntarily give my consent to be a participant in the research project entitled, "International Student Experience." The research is being conducted by Martel Pipkins, a student at Minnesota State University, Mankato. I understand that the purpose of the research is to gain an understanding of international students' experience at MSU and will be used in part for a thesis project.

I understand that I will be interviewed about my experiences by Martel Pipkins, who will keep my responses confidential. I understand that nothing I say will be associated with my name or used in any way that will identify me, my position, or my employer. I understand that I may be asked to participate in a one-on-one interview and/or a focus group. I understand that I may refuse to do either or both. I understand that any tape recordings of my comments will be transcribed for research purposes only and destroyed within one year of the date they are recorded.

I understand that I may withdraw from participation in the research at any time by saying I wish to stop, withdraw, or refuse to answer a particular question.

If I have questions, I understand that I can contact Martel by phone at (262-951-6759) or by email at martel.pipkins@mnsu.edu. I can also contact Dr. William Wagner, his faculty advisor, by phone (507-387-5602) or by email at William.wagner@mnsu.edu. Martel Pipkins guarantees the foregoing conditions to me in exchange for my agreement to participate in the research. I acknowledge that I may refuse to sign this form if I prefer to give verbal but not written consent to participate in the research. Dr. William Wagner will hold this consent form for 3 years under lock and key. If you have questions or concerns about the treatment of human subjects, please contact IRB Administrator, Dean Terry Flaherty at 507-389-2321.

In checking the following categories, I indicate my willingness to participate in Martel's research project and I affirm that I am at least 18 years of age.

_____ I agree to be interviewed one-on-one.

_____ I agree for my interview to be audiotaped.

Interviewee signature: _____

Date: _____

Researcher signature: _____

Date: _____