



# ACCULTURATION EXPERIENCE OF CHINESE INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS IN DENMARK

BY  
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## **Master's Thesis**

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## **Abstract**

With the increase in the number of Chinese students in Denmark, it is necessary to investigate their experiences in acculturating into the Danish educational system and Danish society. In this thesis, semi-structured interviews with six Chinese international students studying in Denmark are conducted for the qualitative study of Chinese students' acculturation experience in Denmark. Based on Berry's stress and coping framework, this thesis applies the literature of acculturation theory and the studies of Chinese international students to analyze the main difficulties that Chinese students encounter in Denmark and their corresponding coping strategies, together with the characteristics of the host society and their society of origin from Chinese students' perceptions.

The findings suggest that the main difficulties that Chinese student face in their acculturation in Danish society are language barriers, difficulties in learning and social-cultural interaction, as well as on and off-campus discrimination. Chinese students often cope with these difficulties by the utilization of Internet and mobile application services, university resources and services, and the help from their main social supports that range from their family in China, peers in Denmark, to friendly locals and public institutions. It shows that most Chinese students view the cultural differences between China and Denmark as a reason for many difficulties in the acculturation process, and they mostly show positive attitudes towards these difficulties.

**Keywords:** acculturation, Chinese international student, stress and coping, cultural differences

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## **Chapter 1. Introduction**

With the globalization of higher education and China's economic growth, the number of Chinese international students in western countries has increased in recent years. Besides, Chinese students choose among more countries such as many developed European countries other than the UK, US and Australia in the early years. Chinese international students are usually welcomed by host countries not only because they contribute tuition fee to the local economy, but also because they are potential high-skilled workforce after graduation (King and Raghuram, 2013). Different from other international students, some studies suggest that Chinese students have unique experience and greater stress during their study and life in host countries (Yeh and Inose, 2003; Liu, 2009). Therefore, it is necessary to investigate the experience of Chinese students studying abroad to help them adjust to study and life in host countries.

As a Chinese international student in Denmark, and as a student of the Global Refugee Studies program in Aalborg University, I am motivated to study this particular area. The three course projects I did all have a focus on the integration of different groups of migrants in Danish society. From the interviews conducted in these three projects, I found out that most interviewees mentioned the culture shock they encountered, the challenges of acculturation they faced, and their struggle between the culture of their countries of origin and the host country. Due to the analyzing framework, we did not dig deeper into these aspects. However, I become interested in this cross-cultural adaption experience of migrants during their integration process and want to study this topic further. In addition to the course project, I am also motivated from my own experience. As a Chinese international student in Denmark, I face many practical, educational and social challenges due to cultural differences between these two countries. Sometimes I talk with other Chinese international students about their experience in Denmark, they also mention the stress in their cross-cultural adaption process. From the communication with other Chinese international students, I find that we have some common experience in the cross-cultural adaption process. So, for the thesis, I decide to study the cross-cultural adaption experience of Chinese international students in Denmark.

After digging into the literature review in the field of acculturation and migration studies, I

found out that the international students, as a part of cross-national groups, have not been studied as much as other mobility groups like migrants or refugees. Given the differences of cultural background and social customs, international students from Asian countries usually have different experiences and challenges compared with their counterparts from western countries (Yeh and Inose, 2003). Meanwhile, most literatures study the adaption or acculturation process of Chinese international students in host countries like the United States, Australia and the United Kingdom, since Chinese students account for a high proportion of international students in these English-speaking countries. Therefore, it is necessary to study the experience of Chinese international students in other countries in order to enrich the literature and see if the challenges and experience in acculturation process are different in different host countries.

The aim of this paper is to study the learning and living experiences of Chinese international students in Denmark from the acculturation perspective. Specifically, this study is to understand what unique difficulties do Chinese students encounter in Denmark, how they cope with these difficulties in the acculturation process, and how they perceive the cultural differences of the host society and their society of origin. In order to figure out this topic, I have the following research questions:

1. What are the main challenges and difficulties that Chinese international students encounter in their study and life experience in Denmark?
2. What are the main features of Chinese students' coping strategies and their major social support when they face these difficulties?
3. How do Chinese students understand the cultural differences between Chinese and Danish society?

This thesis is structured as follows. In Chapter 2, I start with the discussion about the concepts of "migrant" and "international student" and introduce the concept of "Chinese international students" applied in this thesis. Then I introduce the acculturation theories, main acculturation models, and literature on international students conducted in many other countries. In Chapter 3, I introduce the qualitative method and semi-structured interviews that I apply in this thesis, as well as the interview settings in the fieldwork and consideration of the methodology. In Chapter 4, based on related literatures and data collected in fieldwork, I analyze the main

acculturative stressors and difficulties in Chinese students' experience in Denmark, outline the main features of their coping strategies and main social support they can get during their stay in Denmark, and analyze how they understand the cultural differences between Chinese and Danish societies.

## **Chapter 2. Literature Review**

In this chapter, I will introduce literature from the following perspectives: First, I will introduce the concept of migrant, discuss the role of international students in migration studies, and clarify the concept of international student in this thesis. Then, I will outline the acculturation theories and the main models I apply in the analysis. At last, I will introduce literature on the acculturation experience of Chinese international student in many different countries.

### **2.1. Concept of “Migrant” and “International Student”**

The United Nations Refugee Agency (UNHCR) defines migrant as “any person who moves away from his or her usual place of residence, whether internally or across a border, and regardless of whether the movement is ‘forced’ or voluntary” (UNHCR, 2020, para. 1). According to the United Nations Migration Agency (IOM), rather than a legal status defined under international law, the term “migrant” today is more like an umbrella term which includes many groups of people who move away from their habitual place of residence with different causes or motivations (IOM, 2019). Therefore, international students who move from their home countries to other countries for the purpose of studying or obtaining a degree are also migrants according to the definition of IOM. Although the concept “migrant” is so broad in its coverage and it is not sufficiently used in the study of international students, it’s still interesting to discuss the role of international students in the migration studies and to understand the corresponding attitudes and policies of their host societies.

Unlike traditional economic and political migrants, King and Ruiz-Gelices (2003) believe that international students are a group of migrants who move away from their countries of origin for mixed purposes such as study, travel, experience, recreation or work. The role of international students can be mixed as well. They can be students at school, employees in labor market, and breadwinners to support their accompanying family members at the same time, which makes it hard to define international students strictly within a certain immigration category. According to United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), international students are defined as “students who have crossed a national or territorial border for the purpose of education and are now enrolled outside their country of origin” (UNESCO, 2020).

In order to make the designation more relevant, I will use the term “international student” instead of “migrant” in this thesis. More specifically, drawing on the literature of other studies of Chinese students, the term “Chinese students” or “Chinese international students” in this article refers to international students from the People's Republic of China who are raised and educated in mainland China before studying abroad (Yan and Berliner, 2011; Cao, Zhu and Meng, 2016; Li *et al.*, 2017). I will further elaborate the selection criteria of interviewees in the fieldwork in Chapter 3.3 Sampling Method.

International students can be an important source of highly skilled migrants because they are usually highly educated, with good language skills, and have relevant work experience. They are usually welcomed by the local government and policy makers, not only because of the financial benefits of their tuition fees, but also because of their potential as highly skilled workforce after graduation (King and Raghuram, 2013). However, when it comes to national securitization and migration control politics, international students become an unwanted group again and for that they are subject to many restrictions (King and Raghuram, *Ibid*). For example, visas and social rights granted by the Danish Immigration Service to non-EU students are different from those granted to immigrants with long-term residence permit. Specifically, International students from non-EU countries are limited to work up to certain working hours, excluded from state educational grant (SU)<sup>1</sup>, and asked to submit proof of assets after graduation in order to obtain a two-year visa (known as “establishment card”)<sup>2</sup> for job searching after graduation. These facts show contradictory attitudes of local society and government towards international students due to the complexity of their identity.

## **2.2. Acculturation Theories and Models**

In this thesis, I use the acculturation theory as an approach to analyze and understand the experience of Chinese students in host countries. Specifically, Berry’s stress and coping strategy is applied as the foundation and theoretical framework in the fieldwork and analysis. I will focus on the acculturative stressors and coping strategies of Chinese students to understand their acculturation experience. The related literature of Chinese students’ experience will be applied in each domain of these stressors, difficulties and strategies to discuss and understand the empirical data collected in fieldwork.

### **2.2.1. What Is Acculturation?**

Redfield, Linton and Herskovits (1936, p. 146) define acculturation as “the process of cultural change that occurs when individuals from different cultural backgrounds come into prolonged, continuous, first-hand contact with each other”. Berry (2005) views the acculturation as “the dual process of cultural and psychological change that takes place as a result of contact between two or more cultural groups and their individual members” (Berry, 2005, p. 698). From my understanding, they think that the cultural change is a long-term process that happens in both parties. Two cultural groups contact each other closely enough so that the culture of both groups obtain some new elements. However, Berry (1997) suggests that the non-dominant group will have more changes compared with the dominant group, which also explains why most researches focus on the acculturation experiences and strategies of immigrants in their host countries (Berry, 1997; Arends-Tóth and Van de Vijver, 2003). I think this is quite intuitive because the dominant group usually has larger influence regarding the cultural background of the society, yet from an individual level, when there is no obvious dominance in their relationship, we observe more changes on both sides of the culture, such as the phenomenon in many cross-culture families.

Cultural maintenance, i.e. maintain one’s ethnic culture, and cultural adaptation, i.e. adapt to the mainstream culture, are two major acculturation attitudes to describe the preferences of individuals in their process of acculturation (Berry, 1997; Arends-Tóth and Van de Vijver, 2003). To understand the relation between these two attitudes, there are two major theoretical perspectives. One is the unidimensional model which focuses on the action of migrant groups. It suggests that an individual can only choose either to adopt the culture of host society or to maintain his culture heritage from country of origin (Smith and Khawaja, 2011; Benet-Martínez, 2012). According to Schwartz *et al.* (2010), the theory formulates that migrants abandon their culture of origin and adapt to the culture of the host society. According to the unidimensional model, individuals or the minority groups take the sole responsibility of walking their way through the acculturation process, which can cause abandon of their culture of origin in most circumstances.

The other is the bidimensional model. Contrary to the unidimensional model, it suggests that cultural maintenance and cultural adaptation are two unrelated independent dimensions, which is also supported by empirical studies (Berry, 1997; Arends-Tóth and Van de Vijver, 2003). Berry (1997) defines four acculturation strategies/orientations in the bidimensional model. The four acculturation strategies are integration, assimilation, separation, and marginalization. Figure 1 (Arends-Tóth and Van de Vijver, 2003, p. 251, Fig. 1) illustrates the four strategies along the two dimensions. On the vertical dimension one chooses to maintain heritage culture and identity or not. On the horizontal dimension one chooses to adapt to the culture of the majority or not. As we can see, these two dimensions are unrelated and one can choose either strategy of the two dimensions, unlike the unidimensional model, where one can only choose the assimilation or separation on the diagonal line. When one chooses to maintain the migrant culture and adopt the culture of the majority group, it is called integration. When one weighs adopting culture of the majority group as much more important than maintaining the migrant culture, it is called assimilation, and the opposite is separation. When one rejects both the migrant culture and the majority culture, it is called marginalization (Berry, 1997; Arends-Tóth and Van de Vijver, 2003). Berry (2005) further proposes that acculturation is the process that occurs in both individual level and group level, and can cause psychological and cultural outcomes respectively, such as beliefs, attitudes, values, and identities of the individuals as well as the culture or social system of the groups. When immigrants or international students move to a foreign country, cultural changes occur to these cross-national individuals, student or migrant communities, their host society, and their country of origin in the process of acculturation (Smith and Khawaja, 2011).

<b>Maintain heritage culture and identity?</b>	Yes	Separation	Integration
	No	Marginalization	Assimilation
		No	Yes

**Seek contact with and participate in the  
host society at large? (Berry, 1992)**  
**Adapt to culture of the majority?  
(Bourhis et al., 1997)**

Figure 1. Berry's four acculturation strategies of immigrant groups

(Source: Arends-Tóth and Van de Vijver, 2003, p. 251, Fig. 1)

### **2.2.2. Main Acculturation Models**

In Smith and Khawaja (2011)'s review, they categorize seven models and apply acculturation theories to international students' studies. In this chapter, I will follow their guidance and explain the main models that I find most related to this thesis extensively.

The first model is Berry (1997, 2006)'s stress and coping framework. Based on a wide range of stress and coping models including Folkman and Lazarus (1984)'s stress model, Berry (1997, 2006) proposed his stress and coping framework for the study of acculturation, which provides an excellent theoretical framework for explaining the many factors that influence the acculturation process. In the framework, Berry argues that a series of life changes occur for the individuals in the acculturation process. Individuals who are experiencing acculturation might view these life changes as opportunities or difficulties in their cognitive appraisal process. If they perceive them as difficulties, the life changes will then become acculturative stressors in their acculturation process. When individuals face acculturative stressors or difficulties, they use different coping strategies and resources to deal with them, resulting in different acculturation outcomes (Berry, *Ibid*). Adaptation, including psychological and sociocultural adaptation, is the long-term goal or outcome of this model and is defined as "the relatively stable changes that take place in an individual or group in response to external demands" (Berry, 2006, p. 52).

Ward, Furnham and Bochner (2001) expanded Berry's stress and coping framework and added the perspectives of cultural learning and social identification to understand the acculturation process at both social and psychological levels. For example, the acquisition of cultural behavioral skills as well as the cultural and social identities can also affect social and psychological adaptation (Ward, Furnham and Bochner, *Ibid*).

Following the theoretical approaches of stress and coping, cultural learning, and social identification, Arends-Tóth and Van de Vijver (2006) proposed their own acculturation models. Consistent with Berry's bidimensional model, Arends-Toth and van de Vijver (2006)'s model

also focuses on the influence of both individual and societal characteristics on acculturation outcomes, which are psychological and sociocultural adaptation. Differently, Arends-Toth and van de Vijvers (2006)'s model also incorporates the characteristics of society of origin as an influencing factor and include acculturation attitudes (see Figure 1) as a central factor between predictor variables and outcomes.

The factor of acculturation attitudes is also highlighted along with coping resources for their impacts on acculturation outcomes in Safdar, Lay and Struthers (2003)'s multidimensional individual difference acculturation (MIDA) model. MIDA has been empirically tested and the impacts of predictor variables psychosocial resources, co-national connectedness, and hassles on acculturation have been tested in some empirical studies (Rasmi, Safdar and Lewis, 2009; Fathi *et al.*, 2018).

### **2.3. Studies about (Chinese) International Students**

Literature on Chinese international students in Denmark is very limited. However, there are studies on Chinese international students in other countries and international students of other nationalities. In this chapter, I will give a brief overview of some of these studies. I will focus on Chinese international students' motivation to study abroad, their acculturation experiences, and in addition, how the characteristics of host society and society of origin influence their experience.

#### **2.3.1. Motivations of Chinese International Students to Study Abroad**

Motivations of international students to study abroad can vary depending on the time and the country they go to. However, from the research on international students, we can still find some common or often mentioned motivations for studying abroad.

On the one hand, along with globalization and China's reform and opening up, Chinese students have been exposed to more and more information about Western countries such as the United States and the United Kingdom. The portrayal of Western societies in the media or among their peers has influenced their perceptions to some extent. According to Wang (1992), the

differences between the reality in China and the images of the United States can cause the “push-oriented” motivation. Low incomes, low standard of living and limited career opportunities in their home country at that time can be “push” factors whereas high incomes, favorable living conditions and high-quality education in western developed countries can be “pull” factors. When Chinese students feel constrained by the limited possibilities in their career and self-development at home due to the poverty or backwardness compared to the advancement of western countries in the images conveyed by media or private discussions, they become motivated to study in those developed countries for a better future (Wang, 1992; Yan and Berliner, 2011).

On the other hand, according to the empirical study conducted by Brzezinski (1994), Chinese students choose to study in the United States for many practical reasons. A diploma obtained in western developed countries is highly valued by Chinese students. From a systemic perspective, they believe foreign qualifications often lead to better positions, higher social status, and opportunities to participate in a fairer system within the Chinese intellectual; and from a personal perspective, a degree earned in a developed western country brings higher prestige than one obtained in the home country, which is seen as an inherent drive (Yan and Berliner, 2011). Besides, Cao (1997) suggests that the peer pressure can also be a motivation for Chinese international students. Some Chinese students mention that they feel peer pressure when their friends, colleagues and relatives choose to study overseas, and thus they also tend to choose to study abroad (Cao, *Ibid*).

In addition to the practical advantages, personal growth is also a major motivation for Chinese international students. In the study of Chinese international students in the United Kingdom, Gu (2009) suggests that most Chinese students choose to study abroad because they regard it as a great opportunity to promote their intercultural communicative competence and personal growth. According to a case study on Chinese students in a joint pre-school education program conducted by a Chinese university and a Danish university, one reason for these Chinese students to study abroad is their desire to become “more self-reliant and creative individuals” (Thøgersen, 2012, p. 90). Thøgersen (2012) points out that, instead of adding asset to their resume and career, and becoming more competitive than local Chinese graduates, Chinese international students also want to study abroad for personal development and to become

independent and creative individuals participating in China's transformation of education area.

### **2.3.2. Challenges for (Chinese) International Students in the Host Country**

In this chapter, I will review the possible difficulties or stressors that are frequently mentioned in the literature, namely language, educational stressors, and sociocultural stressors. Then I will discuss how the characteristics of the host society and the society of origin influence the experience of Chinese international students.

Language barriers and communication-related issues are widely mentioned stressors for international students in related studies (Mallinckrodt and Leong, 1992; Andrade, 2006; Smith and Khawaja, 2011; Yan and Berliner, 2011; Cao, Zhu and Meng, 2016). Especially in developed western countries such as the U.K., international students from Asia and other developing countries can face serious language problems, and it can be even more difficult for them to understand English jokes and humor due to the different cultural background between the U.K. and their countries or origin (Li and Kaye, 1998; Spencer-Oatey and Xiong, 2006). In the study of Yan and Berliner (2011), some Chinese students mentioned that the English language training they received in China, aimed at passing standardized tests such as IELTS or TOEFL – the main language admission requirement of many graduate programs taught in English, does not match the English language needs in their academic and social life while studying abroad. The language barrier will pose a challenge to their academic and social life and will have impact on their adjustment process in these domains (Chen P., 1999; Lu, 2002; Wang, 2002). Due to the language barrier, international students can experience difficulties in understanding lectures, participating in class discussions or group work, writing assignments and taking exams in their study life, and they feel less motivated to make local friends and interact with local community in their social life (Chen P., 1999; Mori, 2000). On the other hand, studies have shown that higher levels of English proficiency among international students tend to boost their self-esteem and make them perform better in the academic area and sociocultural adjustment process in English-speaking countries like New Zealand or the United States (Barratt and Huba, 1994; Zhang and Brunton, 2007; Zhang and Goodson, 2011).

The stress related to the study experience is widely recognized as a main stress encountered by

Asian international students. It is suggested that Asian students, especially Chinese students, feel difficult to adjust to an educational environment with less guidance or supervision and more demand for self-learning ability (Watkins and Biggs, 1996; Cao, Zhu and Meng, 2016). According to the qualitative study conducted by Liberman (1994), Asian international students in the United States mentioned their challenges in adapting to the American approach of learning and teaching which emphasizes interaction and critical thinking (Smith and Khawaja, 2011). Many mainstream western countries, such as the U.S., use teaching and learning methods that are very different from those used in China. Difficulties in adapting to teaching methods and styles are also supported by studies of international students in Australia (Edgeworth and Eiseman, 2007; Townsend and Poh, 2008). As Bertram *et al.* (2014) state, there is a significant difference between the American teaching style, which focuses on interaction, and the Chinese teaching style, which bases on lectures. Therefore, Chinese international students will have a more difficult time adjusting to the educational environment and teaching style than their counterparts from other Western countries.

International students also encounter stress in terms of sociocultural interaction in host societies. It is suggested that Chinese international students in the United States often have limited social interactions with local people outside of school, and sometimes lead to social segregation which means that they only socialize within the Chinese community and remain socially isolated from the American locals (Tsai, 1986; Yan and Berliner, 2011; Ch'en, 2018). It seems that Chinese students are connected to the host society in academic or professional fields, whereas they are isolated from the local community and only connected to their ethnic community in private lives. This finding is also supported by other studies. It is shown that, for immigrants, they develop different acculturation strategies among various sociocultural fields and the most important distinctions occur in the areas of public and private domains of life (Taylor and Lambert, 1996; Phalet, Van Lotringen and Entzinger, 2000; Vermeulen and Penninx, 2000; Arends-Tóth and Van de Vijver, 2003). Also, according to the relative acculturation extended model (RAEM) by Navas *et al.* (2005), migrants can have different acculturation attitudes in different life domains, such as cultural adaption at workplace and cultural maintenance in private life (Smith and Khawaja, 2011).

Cultural distance (Hofstede, 1980) defined as “the extent to which norms and values in one

country differ from the ones in another country” (Cao, Zhu and Meng, 2016, p. 9), is suggested to be another factor which may lead to stress in social-cultural domains of Chinese international students. According to Redmond (2000), as the cultural distance between the heritage culture and the host culture increases, international students encounter greater difficulties in cultural adaptation. When a Chinese student who grows up in a collectivistic culture of Chinese society comes to a Western country that emphasizes individualism, he or she will undoubtedly experience many cultural challenges (Li and Kaye, 1998). It is also examined in the study conducted by Yeh and Inose (2003) that in an American university, international students from Asia and Africa encountered more difficulties in their acculturation process compared to their European counterparts.

In addition to stressors discussed above, international students also encounter practical problems in their daily life, and sometimes they are challenged by homesickness or discrimination during their stay in host societies (Smith and Khawaja, 2011; Cao, Zhu and Meng, 2016). It's worth noting that these stressors are not totally unrelated to each other. The quantitative study conducted by Cao, Zhu and Meng (2016) examines the inter-relationships between acculturative stressors. It shows that these acculturative stressors are not independent but are related to each other. For example, the language barrier is not only an acculturative stressor itself, but a negative factor in Chinese international students' social interaction in host countries as well. It is also supported in Wang *et al.* (2012)'s recent study that Chinese students are found to face more challenges than their European counterparts due to their lower English proficiency (Cao, Zhu and Meng, 2016).

### **2.3.3. Coping Strategies Used by (Chinese) International Students**

A study conducted by Chataway and Berry (1989) shows that Asian international students in Canada are less likely to use food, alcohol, drugs or exercise to relieve tension and stress than their French and British counterparts. Some studies suggest that Asian international students are less likely to seek help from peers, professionals or counselling services when faced with acculturation stress, and instead use emotional suppression as a coping strategy (Chataway and Berry, 1989; Smith and Khawaja, 2011). Some studies have attributed such tendency of coping strategies to the Asian culture with an emphasis on emotional control or to the perception that

seeking help for emotional problems is associated with personal incompetence (Wei *et al.*, 2007, 2008; Smith and Khawaja, 2011). From my point of view, these literatures only emphasize the individual choice and largely ignore the influence of the host social environment on the choice of coping strategies made by Asian international students. If the counsellors or specialists for emotional problems cannot provide effective help for international students due to language barriers or cultural differences, and if international students do not have local friends they can talk to because they are new to the country, it is difficult for them to seek help at these levels. In other words, they may passively choose not to seek help from outside. I believe this should not be ignored and I will elaborate on this further in the Chapter 4 Analysis.

In Li *et al.* (2017)'s qualitative study on Chinese international students in American universities, they outline various adjustment methods that these Chinese international students took and the help that they received from the host society. Chinese international students mentioned the support they got from organizations, such as local churches, universities and student associations, and the help they received from other individuals like roommates and classmates. Besides, the authors also emphasize the importance of one's "proactive participation" and "sense of purpose and direction" as adjustment methods in the acculturation process of Chinese international students. From my point of view, although individual efforts such as participation and attitude are important, it is not for sure that the self-adjustment methods can serve as coping strategies for international students. For example, when international students are looking for a job, strong desire and clear goals are helpful, but the strict visa policy or discrimination in the job market will make these individual efforts less effective. So, it is possible that policy or social circumstances in the host country diminish the effect of individual effort, and in some extreme cases, individual effort does not have an effect at all.

Although the above literature has examined many aspects of international students' acculturation experience, there are still limits in previous study about their acculturation process. In the systematic review of Smith and Khawaja (2011), they point out that it is important to understand both sides in the acculturation process, and do more researches in the attitudes of both the host society and international in this field of study. Also, they believe it is necessary to pay attention to whether international students have different cognitive appraisal of life changes due to their diverse cultural background in the acculturation process. In terms of coping strategy,

they highlight the lack of empirically tested interventions programs or actions in international students' acculturation process.

## **Chapter 3. Methodology**

In this chapter, I will first explain why I choose to use the qualitative method and semi-structured interview to conduct the investigation. Then I will show the way of conducting the interviews and the rationale for selecting particular methods, including target group, sampling, conducting interviews by phone, and other interview settings. At last, I will write about my consideration, challenges and the limitation of the methods I used in this thesis.

### **3.1. Choice of Qualitative Method**

As the research questions I outlined in Chapter 1 Introduction show, this thesis aims to investigate the motivations of Chinese students coming to study in Denmark, their experiences of living and studying in Denmark and their perceptions of both their society of origin and the host society in the acculturation process. According to Berry (1997, 2006)'s stress and coping strategy framework, whether the life changes are regarded as opportunities or stressors is depend on how they view them, so the cognitive appraisal of individual is emphasized. Therefore, this thesis not only focuses on what difficulties Chinese international students encounter in their study and daily life experience in Denmark, but also focuses on how they describe or perceive these challenges, why they choose specific coping strategies, and what are their reflections on the role of the host society and society of origin in this process.

It is suggested that qualitative research tends to study the individual's perception of the world and thus has the opportunity to understand the meaning behind human behaviors (Bell and Waters, 2014). In order to look at the perceptions of Chinese students studying in Denmark, qualitative methods are suitable in the investigation of this topic. In qualitative research, interview is a common method with which researchers can gain an in-depth understanding of an individual's experiences, perceptions, attitudes and feelings (May, 2011; Bryman, 2015). In the survey conducted for this paper, the interview method is suitable because it can help to obtain information about the respondents' perceptions of their experiences while studying abroad, their attitudes towards acculturation, and the reasons behind their selection of relevant coping strategies.

### **3.2. Choice of Semi-structured Interview**

In this paper, I chose to employ semi-structured interviews for survey data collection since it gives respondents more opportunities to share their views and thoughts with less constraints of predetermined questions, and let the interviewer obtain answers that are more detailed and explore more on the particular topic.

The general format of a semi-structured interview is that the interviewer asks the interviewee some open-ended questions and the interviewee answers them. Open-ended questions refer to a type of question where there is flexibility during the interview process, and the respondent can choose his or her own wording, decide on the length of the answer, and decide what to refer to in the answer (Denscombe, 2014). Thus, the interviewees have a lot of freedom to answer the questions in their own way and can mention some new ideas and thoughts arising during the interview. The flexibility of semi-structured interviews can also be seen in the questioning, where the questions in the interview do not necessarily coincide exactly with those in the interview guide prepared beforehand. The interviewer can adjust the questions during the interview according to the response of the interviewees. For example, they can adjust the order of the questions or add some questions that are not in the outline but are interesting to follow up on (Bryman, 2015). Thus, semi-structured interviews create a more comfortable space between the interviewer and the interviewee and make the whole interview process more open (Bernard, 2013).

However, the interviewer should also follow certain rules when conducting the semi-structured interviews. According to (Bryman, 2015), the interviewer should be as concise and clear as possible when asking questions; should respond appropriately to the interviewee's answers, avoiding talking too much or asking leading questions in the interview, which will affect the initiative of the interviewee; and should be patient and let the interviewee finish what they want to say.

Before conducting the semi-structured interviews, the interview guideline with around 20 open-ended questions was made to provide a clear set of instructions for the interviewer, which could lead to reliable, comparable qualitative data (see Appendix A. Interview Guideline). The

guiding questions in this investigation were set according to the research questions of this thesis and were developed to fit into the theoretical framework after reviewing the literature. These questions show that the focus area of the semi-structured interview includes main domains of acculturation and international student studies, such as the motivation of studying abroad, practical, educational and social stress, and the corresponding coping strategies, and also includes the social support or intervention programs of the host society and perceptions of Chinese international students in the acculturation process.

### **3.3. Sampling Method**

In this thesis, I choose the criterion of sampling method to ensure that the respondents all meet the research criteria that are consistent with the purpose of the study (Creswell and Poth, 2016). Based on the concepts of Chinese international students in Chapter 2.1 Concept of “Migrant” and “International Student”, I use the following selection criteria for the participants: the participants grew up in mainland China; their last degree was obtained in China; they had never studied abroad before coming to Denmark; they have no family or relatives in Denmark; they have stayed in Denmark for at least one year; they have studied in a Danish university for more than one year, or have graduated for less than one year. The selection does not depend on gender, age, religion or sexual orientation.

In order to recruit interviewees, I posted the recruitment information in a WeChat<sup>3</sup> group of 500 Chinese international students in Denmark. I also turned to my friends to post the recruiting information on their social media platforms to reach more Chinese international students in Denmark. In the recruitment information, I briefly introduced myself, explained the purpose of this survey and procedures of interview, as well as outlined the criteria of participants. Students who are interested voluntarily contacted me to schedule the interviews. Because of the time limit, I conducted six interviews. Among the six participants, there are two male students and four female students; one of them is undergraduate student, two are graduate students, and three are PhD students; three of the students are from Aarhus University, and the other three students are from University of Copenhagen, Roskilde University and Copenhagen Business School respectively; one of them is a person I know, and the other five are completely strangers.

### **3.4. Interview Settings**

I conducted one face-to-face interview and five online interviews by phone. Most interviews are scheduled from 9-11 a.m. Danish time, and each interview lasted for 30-60 minutes. I conducted most of the interviews by phone as it provides the possibility to interview respondents at various locations and as a requirement to reduce social contact during COVID-19 epidemic (Iacono, Symonds and Brown, 2016). In order not to lose the details of the interviews, all the interviews were audio recorded and transcribed, for which I got the consent of the interviewees beforehand. Also because of the recording, all the interviewees are anonymous so that they feel more comfortable to talk about their ideas and experiences, especially about their unpleasant experiences with colleagues and classmates or the discrimination they have experienced in Denmark.

As for the language, I used Mandarin Chinese to conduct all the interviews since both the interviewer and interviewees in this investigation are native Chinese speakers. On the one hand, the interviewees are able to express their feelings and thoughts more easily and directly without language barriers. On the other hand, I am also able to better understand what they were saying, avoiding misunderstandings and gaps in information caused by language as much as possible from both the interviewer and the interviewees.

I sent the interviewees a list of questions before the interview so that they have time to think about the questions in advance and to be more relaxed during the interview. During the interviews, I adjusted the order of questions or added some follow-up questions based on interviewees' answers to have a more fluent interview.

### **3.5. Ethical Considerations**

Before conducting the interviews, researchers are supposed to explain the purpose of the research and the usage of the data to the participants so that they can decide whether to continue (Bell and Waters, 2014). I included the basic information of the research and the researcher in the recruitment message. After the interested students contacted me, I introduced them the interview procedure and sent them an interview guide with a list of main questions to be covered

in the interview, and then asked if they still want to participate. Some students did not reply afterwards or decided to withdraw because of the questions, and in the end, six students agreed to participate in the interviews. Before starting each interview, I got the permission of recording from all the interviewees, and I also asked the interviewees about the anonymous setting and they all agreed with that.

Guthrie (2010) suggests that researchers should keep the interviewee's information confidential, and any information that might reveal the interviewee's identity, such as name, ID, address, etc., should not be disclosed. I keep the personal information of all the participants secured and will not disclose their identities. Thus, in this thesis, the six interviewees will be referred to as A, B, C, D, E, and F, and the information about their hometown, departments at university, detailed majors will not be mentioned.

### **3.6. Challenges and Limitations**

The biggest challenge in the investigation is my position as an insider and a researcher at the same time. As a Chinese international student studying in Aalborg University myself, I come from much the same cultural background with the participants and may share the similar experiences with them in Denmark. The advantage of this is that it allows for a better understanding of what the interviewee is expressing and also makes the interviewee feel more relaxed during interviews. However, I might be biased in this process because I am an insider of this group. So, I have to remind myself all the time that I'm a researcher studying this topic so that I will try my best to be objective in data collection and analysis. During interviews, I tried to use a neutral tone in the interview, avoiding judgements or asking leading questions. I also kept as curious as I could. If there is ambiguity in the interviewee's statements, I will ask them to explain more instead of guessing what they meant from my own experience or cultural background.

One of the limitations is that since the interviewees in this study are students who contacted me after seeing the recruitment information, it is possible that most of these interviewees are more outgoing or socially oriented, making it difficult to obtain data from those who are more introverted or not very interested in communicating with others. However, I still chose this

method because I respect the participants' personal willingness to participate, and the focus of this research is not on all Chinese international students in Denmark, but rather the thoughts, experiences and feelings of the individuals interviewed.

Because of time constraints, the sample is relatively small and only six people were interviewed. In further research, I would like to choose a larger sample size and interview more people to add richness to the data or to add more evidence to the common findings. The other limitation is the lack of variety of participants' city of residence in Denmark. Although the interviewees are from different universities, most of them live in the Greater Copenhagen area during their study period in Denmark. For instance, some students from Aarhus University study at the Copenhagen or Roskilde campus instead of Aarhus. Therefore, there is less data on the experience of international students in other cities of Denmark. An improvement would be to interview more Chinese international students who live in cities outside the Greater Copenhagen area, such as Aarhus, Aalborg or Odense.

## Chapter 4. Analysis

Based on Berry's stress and coping framework, I will combine the data collected in my fieldwork and the relevant literature of Chinese international students to analyze main difficulties and coping strategies of Chinese students in their acculturation process in Denmark. I will start with a brief description of the participants' backgrounds including their age, gender, major study field and length of time they have lived in Denmark. Then, I will outline the difficulties or challenges they have experienced in their study and life in Denmark and discuss how they view and understand these difficulties. After that, I will discuss the features of coping strategies these Chinese international students adopted and their social support during the acculturation process. At last, I will show Chinese students' perceptions of the characteristics and cultural differences between Chinese and Danish society. It should be noted that since the interviews were conducted in Chinese, all the quotations of the interviews are translated from Chinese to English by myself.

### 4.1 Participants' Background

Based on the criterion sampling method used in this paper, all the participants selected for the interviews are born and raised in mainland China and are Chinese native speakers. They had never studied abroad before coming to Denmark and have no family or relatives in Denmark (see Chapter 3.3 Sampling method). Throughout this paper, I will refer to these six participants using A through F. Participant B is an undergraduate student, participants D and E are newly graduated graduate students, and participants A, C and F are PhD students.

*Participant A:* 26-year-old female student studying social science and has been in Denmark for three years. After doing some research on European countries, she chose Denmark as her study destination and came to Denmark on a scholarship to study a master's degree. After that she was funded by a Danish university to continue her PhD studies.

*Participant B:* 21-year-old female student studying social science and has been in Denmark for more than two years. Prior to studying social sciences, she majored in natural sciences as an undergraduate at another Danish university, but found herself more interested in social sciences

and then switched to her current major one year ago. She gets financial support mainly from her parents and she also has a part-time job.

*Participant C:* 30-year-old male student studying natural science and has been in Denmark for four years. He learned about the PhD education in Denmark through his current supervisor who gave lectures at his graduate school at that time and then decided to come to Denmark for his PhD studies. During his study, he supported himself financially by CSC scholarships<sup>4</sup> (Chinese government scholarships) and working a part-time job as a teaching assistant. He got his PhD degree recently.

*Participant D:* 28-year-old male student studying social science and has been in Denmark for more than three years. He received a scholarship to study a master's degree at a Danish university and is now looking for a job after completing his master's degree.

*Participant E:* 25-year-old female student studying social science and has been in Denmark for four years. She came to Denmark as an exchange student in her final year of undergraduate study. After completing her undergraduate degree, she continued her study at another Danish university and graduated last year. The main financial support during her studies was from her parents.

*Participant F:* 30-year-old female student studying natural science and has been in Denmark for three years.

After receiving her master's degree in China, based on her research interests, she continued her PhD studies in a Danish university on CSC scholarships (Chinese government scholarships) and recently graduated.

Most of the respondents do not speak or have only learned a little Danish and they still communicate in English or Chinese in their daily lives. Only one respondent has completed almost all the course of Danish language education program<sup>5</sup> provided by local municipality and is able to communicate in Danish during an internship and part-time job. Another respondent is able to understand simple Danish but cannot speak or write in Danish.

Many interviewees had little previous knowledge of Danish society and culture before coming to Denmark. Their knowledge about Denmark was limited to information from the media on tourist attractions or the characteristics of a welfare state. Only one interviewee did some basic research about the overall social and natural environment of Denmark in advance. The other interviewee had some knowledge of the Danish education and welfare system from a Danish teacher who taught at her university in China.

## **4.2. Difficulties and Challenges in Their Experience**

According to the interviews, the most mentioned difficulties and challenges during their stay in Denmark are language, learning and social difficulties and some discrimination against Chinese students, and these difficulties gave them a great deal of stress at the beginning of their stay in Denmark. I will elaborate on these difficulties in the following.

### **4.2.1. Language**

Language barriers are widely mentioned by international students as the main issue in their adaption process in host countries (Mallinckrodt and Leong, 1992; Andrade, 2006; Smith and Khawaja, 2011; Yan and Berliner, 2011). For Chinese international students in Denmark, the language barriers are reflected in two languages, namely Danish and English. Danish is the official language of Denmark, and English is frequently used by teachers and students in universities.

The interviewees all study programmes taught in English and their classmates are international students from different countries in the world. Therefore, not only do they use English in the lecture, seminars, group works and exams, but they also communicate with their classmates and teachers in English. Although all the six interviewees passed exams such as IELTS and met the English requirements for admission, most of them expressed difficulties in applying English in their daily and academic life due to the lack of previous relevant practice. One interviewee mentioned that when she first arrived, she was frustrated because she cannot understand her peers. It is very unexpected because she got 8.5 in the IELTS listening part, which is a relatively high grade in the IELTS exam. This finding is in line with Yan and Berliner (2011)'s assertion.

They suggest that the exam-oriented English training that Chinese students receive in China does not match the need of using English in their social and study life abroad, creating language difficulties. One interviewee also mentioned that, when she just started her study in Denmark, it was very difficult for her to express herself clearly and fluently in English in class or other social activities compared to the European counterparts, which made her feel embarrassed. As a result, the language constraints may affect their academic performance and social interaction with other international students.

Unlike studying in English-speaking countries such as the United States or the United Kingdom, international students studying in other European countries will face more language challenges (Cao, Zhu and Meng, 2016). All the interviewees in this study can't speak Danish before coming to Denmark. One respondent said that she had no idea about the official language of Denmark and thought it was English before she arrived. Despite the high prevalence of English in Denmark, there are still a lot of inconveniences in the practical life due to the lack of Danish language competence for Chinese students. According to the interviewees, the written signs in many places were only in Danish and caused a lot of difficulties at the beginning of their stay. For example, they bought wrong products at the supermarket and went into the wrong toilet because they could not read the sign in Danish when they first arrived in Denmark. One participant also found it challenging that the automated voices were all in Danish when she called to make an appointment with her family doctor and called customer service.

Based on the interviews, the lack of Danish language skills also leads to a lack of access to the information written in Danish. The following interviewee mentioned a Halloween event at Tivoli<sup>6</sup> that he learned from a Danish-speaking friend:

*There is a Halloween event in Tivoli every year, and basically no foreigner knows about that, only some Danish people know. And then he (the Danish-speaking friend) told me to dress as a ghost and then you could enter Tivoli for half price. Because this information is written in Danish on the website of Tivoli, and you have to submit your name on it and so on, foreigners who don't speak Danish hardly know this.*

*(Interviewee C)*

Here we can see that, at the beginning of their stay, it is difficult for Chinese international students to know about such information in Danish or to attend this kind of events, which

sometimes makes them feel excluded.

#### **4.2.2. Learning**

Many participants reported the stress during their adaptation to Danish teaching methods. According to the participants, the teaching and learning process in Danish universities emphasizes interaction, group work and self-learning ability, which is quite different from Chinese teaching style which has a focus on lecture. Specifically, there are a lot of reading materials for students studying in social science programs in Denmark. One interviewee who majors in social science said that she was not able to finish the reading materials assigned by her teacher before class due to the lack of similar practice in her undergraduate studies in China, but other European students in the same group could do so, which affected her interaction in group discussion negatively and made her feel stressed.

Many participants also mentioned the high demand of self-independence and less supervision in Danish universities:

*There is no one to guide you and tell you what to do in detail in your study. You need to figure out many things by yourself. For example, if you are writing a thesis, of course there is an information section to tell you about the requirements you have to meet, but you still have to figure out many other things like the thesis contract and so on.*

*(Interviewee D)*

*I think the supervisors on both sides (China and Denmark) are quite different. My supervisor is a Dane, and he does not guide me that much and gives me a lot of freedom in my study area. He only gives some advice on my ideas most of the time, but Chinese professors usually guide students step by step and the students can just follow their supervisors and start the research directly. On the contrary, there is a long preparation process before starting the research in a Danish university. Usually you need to write a bunch of reports at first and discuss them with your supervisor.*

*(Interviewee C)*

These findings are similar to the studies conducted in other western countries (Watkins and Biggs, 1996; Cao, Zhu and Meng, 2016). These studies show that Chinese students face many challenges when they adjust to an educational environment with less guidance or supervision.

Based on the data of interviews, most participants expressed that it took time to adjust to the Danish style of education. They felt frustrated at first, but they adjusted positively towards the situation. Most of them have positive attitudes and view it as an opportunity to develop various skills, such as writing, listening, presentation, reading, self-studying, etc.

#### **4.2.3. Social Interaction**

It is mentioned in some studies conducted in the United States that Chinese students usually have limited social interaction with local people and some Chinese students are isolated from American community in the U.S. (Tsai, 1986; Yan and Berliner, 2011; Ch'en, 2018). In my fieldwork in Denmark, all the six participants also expressed that they found it is difficult to make friends with local Danes, or they could only be superficial friends rather than close friends with Danes. Some respondents thought the instability of international students can be one reason why it is difficult to make friends with Danes. International students may leave Denmark after graduation, so most local people don't want to spend time on a friendship that could end anytime. Some also attributed this to the characteristics of Danes that they prefer to spend time with a regular circle or their old friends:

*Actually, the Danes have a very small circle of friends and they usually do not want to step out of their comfort zone. Therefore, it is difficult for you to make close friends with them.... Take my boyfriend (a local Dane) as an example. He only has two close friends that he has known from high school, and he thinks it is enough and is not willing to have further interaction with many people.*

*(Interviewee B)*

However, most interviewees emphasized the importance of Danish in interacting with the local community, and sometimes these Chinese students felt uncomfortable in their social interaction experience with local people:

*I find it annoying in the social interaction that I don't speak Danish. I'm studying in an English-taught program and I have no problems communicating with my classmates in English. But sometimes when you interact with local Danish people out of school, you'll find they're kind of close-minded. Some Danes may speak English, but they still expect you to speak Danish.*

*(Interviewee B)*

*For example, the main language of the company where I did my internship is Danish, and my colleagues speak Danish most of the time. My colleagues would switch to English for sure when they spoke to me, but they would speak Danish with each other even when I sat with them during lunch time. They would not consciously think that you may not understand them and they need to speak English for you, no.*

*(Interviewee D)*

Through the experience of the interviewees, we can see that the limited social interaction between Chinese students and locals also happens in Danish society. From the participants' perspective, this phenomenon can be caused by their Danish language proficiency, instability of residence and characteristics of Danes. Meanwhile, the participants reported that they experienced exclusion during their interaction with the local community because of the language barrier. This is in line with Erichsen and Bolliger (2011)'s study that suggests international students will feel isolated and excluded in their experiences in host societies.

The interviewees suggested their main social groups are Chinese or international students from other countries. However, there are still challenges in their social experience with other international students. Some Chinese students found out that they didn't have many common topics or similar ways of entertainment with international students from other countries, especially western countries. Some respondents said they felt bored when they attended social activities with other international students because the main part of these activities was drinking and talking. One respondent mentioned that he found it difficult to add into the conversation with peers when his European classmates are talking about American drama and he had never seen these at all:

*They would talk about those American dramas, because they are exposed to a lot of American culture, and then they often talk about that stuff, but actually, for me I never watch American dramas and I couldn't talk with them [about that] at all. Anyway, I have never heard of those things, and I couldn't join their conversation.*

*(Interviewee C)*

According to the studies in international students and cultural distance, the different cultural backgrounds between Chinese students and international students from western countries may

lead to acculturative stress in social-cultural domains due to for example, lack of common topics and different preferences in entertainment (Li and Kaye, 1998; Redmond, 2000). Thus, culture differences can cause difficulties in Chinese international students' acculturation process and reduce their incentives to interact or hang out with those international students.

Loneliness is also a widely mentioned problem in many international students' social experience in host countries (Sawir *et al.*, 2008). This is also supported by the findings of my fieldwork. Some participants mentioned their loneliness after their previous friends and classmates left Denmark after graduation:

*There are a lot of friends [of mine] leaving Denmark because of the epidemic or graduation in these six months. Then I feel very lonely sometimes. Because most of my friends are either my classmates or students I met in activities, and it's hard to make new friends after graduation without the school environment.*

*(Interviewee D)*

#### **4.2.4. Discrimination and Prejudice**

According to a qualitative study conducted in the United States (Lee and Rice, 2007), many international students encounter various forms of discrimination both on campus and off-campus. The authors find out that the discrimination may come from teachers and faculty in universities, strangers on the street, or employers while seeking jobs. Additionally, it is suggested that students from Asian countries are more likely to be confronted with discrimination and racism than their European counterparts (Yeh and Inose, 2003). In my fieldwork, most participants expressed that the attitude of Danish society and universities towards Chinese international students are friendly in general. But there are still instances of discrimination and prejudice. All the interviewees reported different forms of discrimination they encountered during their stay in Denmark and they believed that these experiences had negative impact on their feelings and their lives to some extent.

Some of the discrimination occurs when Chinese students are looking for a job in Denmark. Because of their non-EU resident status and visa restrictions, they often face hidden discrimination from employers, which makes it more difficult for them to find a job. One

respondent reported the discrimination he experienced when searching for jobs:

*When I was looking for jobs, I did an internship but was not hired after that. They hired another intern who is Romanian, and I think the main reason is that Romanian don't need to apply for a work permit. Even if you [Chinese international students] don't need to worry about the visa because you have the establishment card now, but one year later, you still need to apply a new visa [when the establishment card expired]. They (the HR) don't want to hire someone who may leave in a year due to the visa problems.*

*(Interviewee D)*

This respondent said he had been working hard on networking, learning Danish and doing internship but still cannot find a full-time job due to this kind of discrimination. The work-related discrimination is not only from employers, but from the policies regarding international students as well. According to Danish policy and regulation of non-EU international students, Chinese students are restricted to 20 hours per week during the normal period of study from September to May<sup>7</sup>. Meanwhile they can only get a maximum two-year residence and work permit (the establishment card) after graduation for job searching and settling themselves in Denmark. In addition, they are excluded from graduate allowances (dimmitenddagpenge) when they are holding the establishment card<sup>2</sup>. Therefore, Chinese international students can be excluded from employment to some extent due to the limited residence and work permit (Lee and Rice, 2007).

Some participants mentioned their unpleasant experience on campus when they interacted with the faculty or administration of the universities. One interviewee told me the study secretary of his department always showed a bad attitude towards him and other Chinese students. And he thought the study secretary would deliberately delay work related to Chinese students such as reimbursement matters. Another interviewee also shared a similar experience with the international office of the university. He said that he had to give up an internship opportunity in France because the faculty of the international office got angry with him during their interaction and refused to provide the agreement he needed on time. However, both participants were not sure about whether it is discrimination and described that as “more like prejudice”. These difficulties that international students face in the process of interactions with administration and faculty are also found in Lee and Rice (2007)'s study in American

universities. They suggested that even though it is hard to define whether these experiences are actual discrimination, it is clear that white students and students of color have different experiences. In the context of this thesis, at least we can see that Chinese students have different difficulties in interacting with school staff than their European counterparts.

It is suggested in some studies that more serious forms of discrimination usually occur off-campus (Lee and Rice, 2007). The participants in my fieldwork also reported more direct discrimination and verbal abuse in their off-campus interactions. One female interviewee reported her experience:

*I used to live in an apartment which is not good, and two of my neighbors living downstairs might be drug dealers. Once they had a conflict with my landlord and they came to my apartment for my landlord. But my landlord was in Greenland that time, so I told them he was not here, but they thought I was lying and called me 'Chinese bitch' and I thought it was ... It's probably the worst discrimination I've ever experienced.*

*(Interviewee B)*

Chinese students also experienced much discrimination during coronavirus epidemic in Denmark. One male interviewee said he was confronted with verbal insults in a shopping mall because he was wearing a mask. Such direct confrontation happened to not only Chinese students but also international students from other Asian countries according to another participant.

Besides, interviewees mentioned that some Danes and European students had negative social images and stereotypes of Chinese, such as Chinese tourists all have bad manners or Chinese are stealing their job opportunities in Denmark. Participants said they always encountered the kind of questions stereotyping Chinese and China when socializing with people from western countries. Most Chinese students expressed they would respond to these negative stereotypes and try to explain. But they also found it very challenging and exhausting as they usually feel uncomfortable without knowing how to respond appropriately. Two respondents both mentioned being asked if Chinese people eat dog meat by their European classmates and one respondent explained this feeling of discomfort as:

*For example, some of my classmates will ask me if the Chinese eat dog meat and I actually feel awkward when it comes to this question. Because one presumption I have in my mind about this question is that, I think it's cruel to eat dog meat. So, when they ask that question, perhaps you could also express it like this, is it true that the Chinese are doing something as cruel as eating dog meat?*

*(Interviewee A)*

This finding is consistent with Lee and Rice (2007)'s statement that international students have to deal with these negative stereotypes and cope with them in many ways.

As described by the participants, most Chinese international students have experienced various forms of discrimination and prejudice during their stay in Denmark and they view the discrimination and prejudice as an inevitable challenge in the social interaction with other communities. It can cause bad feelings for Chinese students or even influence their coping strategies chosen in the acculturation process. For example, Chinese students might be not willing to seek help from the university resource due to related unpleasant experiences with school faculty.

### **4.3. Coping Strategies and Social Support**

Many acculturation studies show that international students' acculturation process can be influenced by the coping mechanisms (Berry, 1997, 2006; Ward, Furnham and Bochner, 2001; Arends-Tóth and Van de Vijver, 2003; Safdar, Lay and Struthers, 2003; Smith and Khawaja, 2011). In this chapter, I will discuss the main features of coping strategies that Chinese international students adopt in their acculturation process in Danish society. And I will also outline the major social support of Chinese international students during their stay in Denmark.

#### **4.3.1. Internet and Mobile Applications Service**

The widespread use of Internet and mobile applications is a commonly cited coping method by the Chinese students in my fieldwork. Many interviewees mentioned that they got a lot of help from the Internet and various applications services, especially when they just arrived without knowing anyone. For instance, translation tools such as Google Translate<sup>8</sup> helped them

overcome the Danish language barrier in many situations, such as going to grocery stores or reading letters. Another example is that many interviewees mentioned that it was very confusing for them to figure out the transfer and payment rules of Danish public transportation, because it's a different system from the one in China, and the related apps services such as Rejseplanen<sup>9</sup> and Check Udvej<sup>10</sup> helped a lot.

Through the fieldwork I find out that, the Internet and mobile applications service are the most frequently used methods by these Chinese students to cope with practical difficulties in their daily life. Some interviewees explained this preference as:

*The technology is more advanced now. The very first challenge when I just arrived is that I don't know anything about public transportation and names of items in grocery stores. And there are Google Translate and various other apps that you can look up directly online, all in English. And I will search for public transportation and so on... I mainly use Google Translate while buying groceries. And if you want to cook, there is a Chinese app called Xiachufang, it will show you the videos or step-by-step instructions and then you can learn how to cook something.*

*(Interviewee F)*

Some Chinese students preferred to solve the practical problems by themselves before asking others for help when they just arrived in Denmark. One interviewee expressed that she felt independent and accomplished when she was able to solve problems by themselves:

*I think that when you encounter difficulties in Denmark ... it is true that when you are alone in a foreign country, you have to solve a lot of problems by yourself. Maybe I will rely on my parents when I was in China. But you know, I have to do many practical things all by myself now, like moving or applying for a visa, etc. But I think it's really helpful to develop the independence.*

*(Interviewee B)*

To sum up, for these Chinese students in Denmark, the technology of internet and mobile applications allow them to solve the problems by themselves and make them feel independent, and thus can be applied as a positive coping strategy in their acculturation process. Especially during the COVID-19 epidemic with social contact restrictions, searching on the Internet or

using application services can be effective ways to solve practical problems.

#### **4.3.2. University Resources and Services**

International students usually spend most of their time on campus to study or attend social activities. When they encounter academic, social, and practical challenges or stressors, one of the coping strategies is seeking help from university services and resources. In this chapter, I will write that how Chinese students apply university resources as coping strategies based on my findings in interviews.

In the related literature of international students conducted in the U.S. and Australia, underutilization of student counselling services is mentioned as a main feature of their coping strategies during the acculturation process (Nilsson *et al.*, 2004; Ang and Liamputtong, 2008; Smith and Khawaja, 2011). Some studies attribute this to the stigmatization of emotional problems and mental illness in student perceptions (Ang and Liamputtong, 2008). According to my fieldwork, many interviewees have tried to get help from the university resources and services. Most Chinese students in the fieldwork are not ashamed or refuse to seek help from the student counselling service or departments like international office of their universities. However, whether or not they choose to use school resources as coping strategies depends on the different stressors they encountered.

Some interviewees said they got a lot of help from the university resource and were satisfied with it. One participant shared her following experience about receiving help from the university in her acculturation process:

*Our college of education is in Copenhagen campus and our class is the only one class of international students, so the international office of the whole campus is actually only working for our class.... I think it's really nice.... I remember it was very difficult to rent an apartment in Copenhagen at that time, and they (the international office) helped me to get an apartment.... And they (the international office) would also hold activities or parties on festivals, like a Thanksgiving dinner for students.*

*(Interviewee E)*

Meanwhile, some interviewees expressed their hope that the university could hold more social activities for international students and provide more opportunities for them to meet new people and understand different cultures. We can see that when they are satisfied with the effectiveness, they are willing to continue using university resources and services in coping social-cultural and practical stressors.

However, not all participants are satisfied with the service provided by the university and some students thought those services are not always effective enough based on their personal experience. One participant described her help-seeking experience of psychological counseling and explained why she did not continue as below:

*I've tried the counseling service once at the beginning of my PhD studies. Our department recommends the service of a counseling agency, I called that agency and made an appointment, and then I went. But my experience was not so good. One reason was the language, because we communicated in English and the counsellor usually did not understand me and I had to say the same thing several times. The other thing is the counsellor's counselling style, which feels like it's a quick fix. I don't like that style. I tend to find someone to talk to and get some company, maybe just talk and don't focus on solving the specific problem. So, I think I won't try any counseling like that anymore.*

*(Interviewee A)*

As the participant described, if students feel that the counseling services provided by the school are not appropriate for them or the counsellors are not helpful, they will choose not to use them as a strategy to address emotional and psychological problems. In line with some studies about international students' underutilization of university services, the reasons could be that the counsellors are lack of adequate cultural knowledge in students' perceptions or the service provided by the universities are not culturally appropriated for international students (Ang and Liamputtong, 2008; Smith and Khawaja, 2011).

On the one hand, Chinese students are willing to seek help from universities in their acculturation process, but they will make the choices based on whether the help is appropriate for them. On the other hand, multicultural services are needed when universities provide the counselling service and resource for their international students. The study conducted at an Australian university by Russell, Thomson and Rosenthal (2008) shows that international

students' high rating of their health and counselling services might be due to the high quality of multicultural services offered by this university.

### **4.3.3. Main Social Support**

Family and friends back in China are important social support for most Chinese international students in Denmark. Firstly, although some Chinese students have part-time jobs or scholarships during their study, they are financially supported mainly by their parents, especially when they just arrived in Denmark. Secondly, most Chinese students emphasize the emotional support from their family and close friends in China. Many participants mentioned that they would call their parents or friends when they had some unpleasant experience or in bad mood and would get some comfort from them. Because of the close social connections in China, one interviewee chose to go back to China after her PhD studies even though she likes the work-life balance culture in Danish workplace.

In Denmark, Chinese students also get much support from their classmates, colleagues and peers, who can be locals or people from other countries. The support could be practical guidance on how to adapt to the new environment or psychological support in their acculturation process. One interviewee said her main social support in Denmark is her Danish boyfriend. Another interviewee talked about the help she received from her colleagues on campus as below:

*There is a postdoc in our department who is Portuguese, but he has experience in teaching Chinese students. So, every time when I talked to him about the problems I faced, he would guide me and tell me how to deal with them. I think that helped me a lot.... The technician department is near our department. The colleagues from that department are mainly locals and are really nice to me. And they'll often come and talk to me voluntarily when I'm upset. Although we don't have the counselling service, they might be the ones who help me with emotional problems in the adaption process.*

*(Interviewee F)*

According to the interviews, most interviewees said their main social group is still Chinese in Denmark. It can be their Chinese classmates or colleagues, new Chinese friends made in Denmark, and Chinese working in restaurants, renovation or medical industry in Denmark. One respondent expressed her preference for a Chinese dentist because she would feel more secured.

Also, through the Internet, Chinese international students have more opportunities to connect with the Chinese community in Denmark, even though they don't know each other. Many participants told me that they got a lot of help from Chinese community via the Chinese online discussion group called WeChat group<sup>3</sup>. The members of these groups are Chinese living in Denmark and the main aims of such groups are information sharing and asking and answering questions. Even though they do not know most of the members in these groups, they can ask questions that they and other Chinese people encountered and get support without language barriers and cultural differences.

Beyond the social supports mentioned above, Chinese students also receive help from the universities, Danish public institutions and friendly strangers in their acculturation process in Denmark. For example, one respondent shared his experience that he lost his wallet and then a stranger called him and gave the wallet back to him. And many participants mentioned the support they got from medical care, police, and student housing institutions, etc. in different areas of their daily life.

#### **4.4. Cultural Differences**

Most Chinese students in the fieldwork mentioned the cultural differences between China and Denmark, as well as the culture shock or social-cultural stressors caused by that. In this chapter, I will show Chinese students' understandings on the differences in how people behave and think between their society of origin and the Danish society.

One notable difference emphasized by Chinese international students is that Danish students are more likely to express their ideas and opinions directly in class, and dare to question what teachers and professors say. On the contrary, Chinese students are afraid to interrupt teachers during the class and they tend to talk about their ideas when they are invited to do so. One interviewee said that students are encouraged to express themselves at any time in the Danish class, which is quite different from the traditional Chinese class where students are usually asked to be quiet and listen to their teachers unless they are asked to answer questions. He shared his experience in the class of a Danish university as below:

*During the seminar or lecture, the Danish students have a habit, that is, if they're*

*interested in what the teacher is saying, or if they don't think it's right, or if they want to discuss it further, they will raise their hand. They [the Danish students] won't interrupt teachers, but they will raise their hands when they have something to say, even if it's not the Q&A time.... And the teachers will leave them some time to talk about their ideas or something.... That is a big difference between Denmark and China in class.*

*(Interviewee C)*

Another interviewee also discussed the different habits of expressing one's opinions between Chinese students and students from Denmark or other countries. She attributed it to different attitudes towards supervisors and professors. Chinese students tend to treat professors as the authority and thus feel unconfident about their own ideas and are not dare to question the authority, whereas students from Denmark or other countries usually view professors as ordinary people and are equal to them, and thus they actively participate in discussions and talk about their own views. She explained this kind of difference as:

*I think Chinese students are still a bit timid, maybe due to language constraints. They will treat teachers or professors like the authority and think what teachers saying are right and what they say might be wrong. Then they are afraid to express their own ideas, or they are afraid to speak up more in group discussion, especially at the very beginning when they are in a lower position. However, for people from other countries, they will view supervisors or professors as equal to themselves, and they can express their ideas directly, particularly in scientific research.*

*(Interviewee F)*

Another difference between the Danes and Chinese is their different perceptions towards gender and marriage. One participant who has a Danish boyfriend mentioned their different attitudes towards gender. She hoped her boyfriend would treat her differently because she is female, whereas her boyfriend did not understand because he thought they are equal to each other and should not be treated differently according to gender. She also shared the different perceptions of marriage between Chinese and Danes:

*I think the biggest difference of our ideas [between me and my boyfriend] is that in the Chinese mind, you should do the specific things when you reach a certain age. For example, my mom is pushing me to get married, or pushing me to find a more stable*

*job, but Danes will think that you are just 25, and you are still very young. For many Danes, they don't think that people have to get married. Many of them have been in relationships for 10 or 20 years without getting married, or get married when they're in their 50s or 60s and their kids are grown-ups.... I think they're not obsessed with getting married....As for when one should be matured, it feels like they [Danes] just let it happen, and there's no timeline in their mind to push them to do what they should do [at a certain age].*

*(Interviewee E)*

Most Chinese people, especially the older generation, believe that people need to get married at a certain age. This age is especially emphasized for women, usually before their 30s, and therefore this concept can trigger anxiety about the age and marriage among young people, especially women. However, according to the interviewee, getting married at certain ages seems not to be emphasized in Danish society, and the timing of life events is more natural, so young people are more focused on the present.

Through these differences in attitudes and behaviors observed in China and Denmark, Chinese students are able to examine their culture and ideas of origin, and have the opportunity to enrich their perceptions of self-expression, authority, gender relations, etc. Most Chinese students express respect for these cultural differences. Some mentioned that they would like to learn the behaviors that they thought were good, such as learning to express themselves more confidently in discussions. At the same time, they understand that these cultural differences can result in some social challenges or cultural shock and they need to face it. In all, despite the difficulties and stress that international students face in acculturation, they also gain many aspects of personal growth and self-development. Some studies also suggest such benefits from the perspective of intercultural communication (Gill, 2007; Brown, 2009). The intercultural learning takes place during the process of acculturation, and when international students live and study in another culture which is different from their culture of origin, they not only can improve intercultural competency, but also have an opportunity to understand the cultural differences. They can view their previous culture and ideas as well as themselves from a different perspective, and thus improve the reconstruction of self-identity (Gill, 2007; Brown, 2009; Li *et al.*, 2017).

## **5. Conclusion and Discussion**

Chinese students as a large group of international students in Western developed countries have been studied in many international students' studies, though most studies are conducted in the English-speaking countries, such as the U.S. and the U.K., which are traditional study abroad destinations for Chinese students. This thesis aims to study the learning and living experiences of Chinese students enrolled in higher education in Denmark from the perspective of acculturation. The findings of this study can be used to help Chinese students understand the difficulties and challenges they encounter in acculturation process, and can be served as a reference for policy and practical initiatives of host universities and related public institutions.

This thesis applies a qualitative method and conducts six semi-structured interviews. Using Berry's stress and coping framework as a theoretical framework, this thesis analyzes the main stressors and difficulties that Chinese students encounter in Denmark and how they cope with them according to their experiences. It focuses not only on the characteristics and attitudes of Chinese students, but also on the characteristics of the host universities and Danish society based on the personal experiences and perceptions of Chinese international students.

In this thesis, I find that the main stressors and difficulties that Chinese student face in their acculturation in Danish society are language barriers, stressors related to learning and social-cultural interaction, as well as different forms of discrimination. The language barriers include difficulties arising from English and Danish respectively, which can cause further learning and social hindrances. The Danish teaching and learning styles and which are different from those in China. It can cause learning-related stressors. Social difficulties mainly include the limited interaction with local community due to low Danish proficiency of Chinese students and characteristic of local Danes; the lack of common topics or ways of entertainment with European peers due to cultural differences or distance; and the loneliness due to the departure of other international students and friends. Discrimination and stereotypes towards Chinese are experienced by Chinese students on and off campus, which can also result in challenges for interpersonal interactions.

When facing these difficulties mentioned above, one of the widely cited strategies by Chinese

students is the use of the Internet and mobile application services, with which they can solve some practical problems on their own. At the same time, most Chinese students make use of the university resources or counselling services, but sometimes these services are not culturally appropriate for Chinese students, which is the main reason why they do not always choose them as coping methods. Chinese students also receive many help from their social supports, including family and friends in China, classmates and colleagues on campus, peers and friends in Denmark, local strangers, and public institutions in Danish society. At last, this thesis illustrates the major Sino-Danish cultural differences mentioned by Chinese students regarding the expression of opinions, teacher-student relationships, and ideas of marriage and age and their understanding about these differences.

One reflection of this research is that sometimes interviewees did not reveal all of their perceptions and attitudes during interviews, especially the negative ones. Although I did not know five of the six interviewees before the interview, they still had certain concerns during the interview process and did not want to share all the feelings and experiences. Thus, the interviewees tended to say some “correct” or “common” answers for certain questions. For example, when asked about their attitudes towards acculturation or interaction with locals, most interviewees said that international students should integrate positively into Danish society, and be as proactive as possible in social activities, etc. But this contradicts some of the unpleasant experiences they mentioned or the ideas they had in those experiences. This might be out of the protection of their personal information or the desire to make a better impression. So, I tried to be more critical and cautious about these “correct” answers in my analysis, but it may still have an impact on the findings.

For future research, it is possible to study in two directions. First, since only six interviews were conducted in this research, the results are not representative enough to draw a general conclusion for all Chinese international students in Denmark. Nevertheless, this thesis still reveals the perceptions of Chinese students and shows the features of their acculturation experience in Denmark, and thus serves as a pilot research for Chinese students’ experience in Denmark. For future research, one can conduct a qualitative study or a quantitative study with larger sample size to have findings that are more representative. Second, this thesis focuses on Chinese students’ experience in Denmark from Chinese students’ perspectives and thus the

characteristics and attitudes of Danish society are mainly analyzed from Chinese students' perceptions. According to the bidimensional model, the characteristics of both individuals and host societies can influence the acculturation process and outcomes (Berry, 1997; Arends-Tóth and Van de Vijver, 2003). For future research, one can examine Danish society's characteristics and attitudes towards Chinese students from the host societies' perspectives via policy, media press, perceptions of locals, etc.

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1. SU (Statens Uddannelsesstøtte) is the Danish students' grants and loans scheme, a financial aid that is provided mainly for Danish citizens or EU citizens in the period of their study. Available at: <https://www.su.dk/su/>.

2. A residence and work permit allows international students who have completed a Danish master's degree or a Danish PhD degree to stay in Denmark for the period of time the permit is valid (normally two years). When they are granted an establishment card, they are allowed to work in any company and in any position in Denmark. Available at:

<https://www.nyidanmark.dk/en-GB/Applying/Work/Establishment%20card>.

3. WeChat is a Chinese social media and messaging application. A WeChat group is an Internet discussion group of WeChat app, similar to a Facebook group but with a maximum of 500 people.

4. CSC Scholarships, also known as Chinese government scholarships, are awarded by Chinese Scholarship Council (CSC) and sponsored by Chinese government for Chinese students studying abroad or international students studying in Chinese universities. Available at:

[https://www.campuschina.org/content/details3\\_74776.html](https://www.campuschina.org/content/details3_74776.html).

5. Danish language education program is offered by the local municipality. The course consists of 6 modules. Available at:

<https://international.kk.dk/artikel/danish-language-education-programme-0>.

6. Tivoli, also known as Tivoli Gardens, is an amusement park and pleasure garden in Copenhagen, Denmark.

7. To study in Denmark in a higher educational program, in addition to the residence permit as a student, applicant will be granted a limited work permit. Available at:

<https://www.nyidanmark.dk/en-GB/You-want-to-apply/Study/Higher-education>.

8. Google Translate is a Google's service that instantly translates words, phrases, and web pages between English and over 100 other languages. Available at:

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<https://translate.google.com/intl/en/about/>.

9. Rejseplanen is a Danish mobile application and website for traffic information and travel planning on public transportation and has a English version. Available at:

<https://help.rejseplanen.dk/hc/da/articles/115000127329-Mere-om-Rejseplanen>

10. Check Udvej is a Danish application that allows people who hold "rejsekort personal and rejsekort flex" to submit a missing check out when they forgot to check out or the system was malfunctioning. Available at: <https://www.rejsekort.dk/da/check-udvej>.

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# **Appendix A. Interview Guideline**

## **Part 1. Background information**

1. Age
2. Gender
3. Are you born and raised in mainland China?
4. How long have you been in Denmark?
5. Have you ever studied abroad before coming to Denmark?
6. Where did you get your last degree?
7. What is your current study degree?
8. What is your current major?
9. Which university are you studying in Denmark?
10. Can you speak Danish?
11. What is your main income?
12. Do you have any relatives or families in Denmark?

## **Part 2. Acculturation experience**

1. Why did you choose to study in Denmark?
2. How much did you know about Denmark before you came?
3. What are the difficulties/challenges that you encountered in your daily life?
4. How did you adjust to the new environment? Did you seek any help?
5. Which group of people is your main social group in Denmark? (Chinese, Danes, or people from other countries?)
6. What were the difficulties/challenges that you encountered in your social life?
7. Is there anything related to cultural differences/cultural shock between China and Denmark that impress you?
8. Have you encountered any kinds of discrimination during your stay in Denmark?
9. Do you think the atmosphere on campus where you study is friendly/open to Chinese international students?
10. Compared to your study experience in China, what are difficulties/ challenges that you

encountered in your study life in Denmark?

11. Do you think these difficulties or stressors mentioned above have impact on your physical and mental health?
12. What social support do you think you can turn to for help in your life in Denmark?
13. Have you ever been to the counseling center of the university or seeking any psychological counselling services to address these challenges?
14. Have you ever participated in any programs provided by the government or other public institutions to help international students adapt in Danish society?
15. In general, do you think the Danish society and Danes are friendly/open to Chinese international students?
16. Is there anything that the university or other public institutions in Danish society could have done to make your transition to Denmark easier?
17. Do you think the COVID-19 epidemic has made any impact on your practical, educational and social life?
18. What is your plan after graduation? Why?
19. Do you have any advice for Chinese international students who are about to study in Denmark, helping them to adjust to Danish society more easily?
20. Is there anything that you would like to add in this interview?