

# Chinese Wives' Perceptions of Their Life in the USA during the Period of Their Husbands' Doctoral Study

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This study focuses on how Chinese graduate students' wives adapt to American society and how they evaluate these experiences while their husbands are about to attain the doctoral degree. The wives of five new Ph.Ds or candidates were interviewed. The results are presented in two parts. The first reveals general modes of adjustment. There are two diverse patterns of adjustment shown in the initial period. Afterward, all the informants share the three later stages. The second part stresses the effects of specific factors and life incidents on the adaptation process. Herein they experience some alienation and a great many other difficulties. Yet the endeavor pays off in the various forms of improvement. When their husbands were about to obtain their degree, they also are aware of the need to have continuous growth. This study underlines the interaction between individual mental state and environment adaptation, notably the positive effect of going back to school on the wives' sense of self-worth and the smoother functioning of their marriages. Attention is also paid to some of the negative effects of the dependent role on the wife's career. The study also suggests the necessity of English classes and adaptation counseling for them.

**KEY WORDS:** sojourner adjustment, Chinese students' wives, life incidents, return to school

Every year, many Chinese women accompany their husbands when they go to the United States. Their husbands often are graduate students at a certain university and have to stay in the host country for several years to pursue their advanced degree. Church (1982), Mallinckrodt and Leong (1992), Manese, Sedlacek, and Leong (1988) indicate that international students, moving to a new country and experiencing new cultures, often face problems, such as language, financial straits, social adjustment, loneliness and problems of daily life. Females feel these problems even more acutely and have less social support than their male counterparts.

Furukawa's (1997) longitudinal study of 199 Japanese exchange students in various countries

recommended that the adjustment of international students should be paid close attention. He stressed that the students showed substantial emotional distress while abroad as well as during the readjustment period after a foreign sojourn. Culture shock and reverse culture shock are likely to happen.

### Students' Wives' Special Situation as Dependents

International student spouses are presumed to be in a plight similar to (or even worse than) an international student's plus having the unique experience of being legally dependent. They are less prepared to come to the U.S. They may have limited previous foreign cultural experiences, limited host language ability and limited social contacts with Americans, in comparison to international students (Lo, 1993). Often their experiences may be compared to the immigrant women who are viewed as "passive followers or passive dependents" (Morokvasic, 1984; Snyder, 1987). Snyder points out that the immigrant women who follow someone else's decision to migrate were observed to experience a higher level of depression than those who made the final decision themselves.

Church (1982), based on his comprehensive review of sojourner adjustment literature, concluded that women had more adjustment difficulties than men did. Espin's (1987) and Freidenberg, Imperiale, and Skovron's (1988) studies on the process of emigration reached the same conclusion.

Chinese spouses had supported (or joined) their husbands' careers and usually left their careers and families behind, and had no specific goals of their own life in the U.S. They face a purely new land and new social-cultural system. Chinese student's wife, Lo (1993) studied the adjustment of 11 Chinese student's wives within their first year of arrival, from 1-12 months, and found that they generally experience the following problems: identity confusion, language difficulties, homesickness and isolation, poor living conditions, culture shock (adjusting to the food, climate, customs etc. of the U.S.). Feelings of helplessness and stress also arise as a result of the change in life events and occupational status. What do they work out in the later period and what becomes of them after several years of adaptation? It has received little research attention. There are a number of studies on immigrant women and some on international students but rather few on the sojourn of graduate students' spouses.

The student spouses are not registered; they are not part of the university community. The university takes responsibility for the international students but not for their spouses. They have no formal affiliations except their family; they are almost invisible in the public world. Besides, if you were not one of them, it would be difficult to gain access to them. Their struggling in a foreign country is usually presumed according to research data related to immigrant women and international students. This presumption is not necessarily appropriate.

## Chinese Students' Wives Compared to Immigrant Women

The research on immigrants pointed out that proficiency in the language of the host country leads to faster and easier adaptation. Korean and Chinese immigrant women usually stayed home or were employed for low pay and long hours of work, highly incompatible with their educational level, due to their language difficulty (Kim & Hurch, 1988; Lee & Cochran, 1988). Lo's (1993) study found that the Chinese students' wives has undergone drastic career changes. The similarity to those of Korean and Chinese immigrant women is they have language problems and difficulty in finding a job compatible with their educational levels.

*Career, language, and life.* The impact of career change is a little varied between the Chinese students' wives and the immigrant women, however. For instance, Kim and Hurch's (1988) study shows that the Korean immigrant women suffer from the high stress of double roles without any adequate preparation for their new environment. Such role management could have negative effects on the women's self confidence, health and their relationship with other family members. The Chinese students' wives in Lo's study changed from career women to full-time homemakers and mothers. They were frustrated at a career abruptly altered by circumstances not of their choosing. Some of them believed by the time their English improved, everything will improve. However, it takes time to achieve language proficiency. Furthermore, there are several factors other than language that influenced their attempts to re-establish careers, such as incompatible social system, F2 visa, etc.

In Lo's study, language deficiency is considered unanimously as the major problem in sojourner adjustment to life in the U.S. The language difficulties of Chinese students' wives not only limited them to unrewarding jobs but also hampered their daily communications, such as answering the phone, medical problem, etc. rather than academic work. In addition to having no car they seldom went out by themselves. They had negative feelings about depending on their husbands both in daily routines and finance. For the sake of overcoming their deficiency, 7 out of 11 informants in Lo's study spent nearly 40 hours per week in average in activities related to learning English.

*Marital relations.* Many researches indicate that the marital relationship influences the psychological well-being of immigrant women. Snyder's (1987) study of Mexican immigrant women emphasizes that the perception of support from their spouse through open communication and intimacy was the only type of support that eased the depression. Freidenberg, et al. (1988) point out that the marriage acts as a buffer under the stressful situation; the same thing is evident in the sojourner adjustment.

Lo's (1993) study takes for granted that the better the marital relationship of the Chinese student's wives, the better their adjustment to life in the U.S. Yet, their marital relationships have to be re-defined. No matter how good the relationship is, a new life and environment inevitably create conflicts. Hence, for the sake of family reunion, wives will feel that they have sacrificed some things for the husband. The husbands are usually under great pressure to maintain their study and assistantship, in addition to the new role of taking care of their wives and children, who

have become more dependent on them. Sometimes tensions would grow between them. Regrettably, often they do not have time together except for errands, such as grocery shopping. Besides, the longer the couple was separated before reunion, the more likely they would have marital problems.

Morokvasic (1984) revealed that numerous immigrant women are ambivalent about keeping the right to remain in the country, or escaping the oppressive conditions by getting them deported. Social isolation, the language barrier, and for some, discrimination and fears of deportation were major barricades stopping them from seeking help (Bauer, Rodriguez, Quiroga, & Flores-Ortiz, 2000). However, in Lo's (1993) study, one informant was battered by her husband, and she asked for help from the husband's advisor and the international student advisor. Finally she filed for divorce. She was not threatened by the possibility of deportation. It seems the students' wives and immigrant women do not always have the same major problems or share similar perspectives or strategies to cope with life incidents or circumstances.

### The Adaption and Perception of Chinese Students' Wives

The literatures of the sojourner adjustment process outlined that sojourners go through developmental stages, from an initial period of excitement and fantasy, through negative sentiments, and a gradual recovery or reintegration to the new milieu, to finally achieving a high level of adjustment. It is supposed to follow the U-curve hypothesis which views the sojourner's level of adjustment as a function of time (Church, 1982). Such theories implied an exclusion of the impact of life incidents, the need of professional help and their endeavors in the adjustment process. Chinese students' wives as a subculture group may be different from immigrant women in general. There are few studies analyzing their adaptation, the factors advantageous and disadvantageous to their adjustment, and their unique experiences and feelings in the whole process.

Lo's (1993) study focuses on the target population in their early phase in order to develop an orientation program for them, but none has covered the later periods. Their struggles, strategies of coping, and their final triumph remain untold. The people in different situations interpret their lives differently. How does their condition as a wife of a student influence their perceptions and feelings? What are the factors influencing their life in the New World or their husbands' education? What do they feel or how do they evaluate this period of their life? What do they expect of their future beyond this sojourn? How do they relate their husbands' graduation to themselves? Do they follow any specific pattern in the process of adaptations? Can their unique experiences of struggling in a foreign country serve as an inspiration for newcomers? This study aims at exploring the experiences of such wives during the whole process of their adaptation in the U.S.

## Method

A central assumption of the life history method, which is used in this study, is that human conduct is to be studied and understood from the perspective of the persons involved (Denzin, 1989). The researcher actively solicits the informants' experiences and views and constructs of their life histories (Taylor & Bogdan, 1984). The life history approach enables us to know people intimately, to see the world through their eyes, and to enter into their experiences vicariously. Also, life histories provide a touchstone to evaluate the validity of theories.

### *Sampling*

A semi-structured in-depth interview was planned for the purpose of the study. Chinese student spouses were selected. The interviewer and informants had the same language and cultural background, which was a helpful factor in conducting in-depth interviews. Most of the students or their wives have no close relationship with the interviewer. They are usually seen as better informants than close friends (Taylor & Bogdan, 1984).

The name list of the Chinese Student Association in a land-grant university in Virginia was the source of potential informants who met three criteria: firstly, she should be the spouse of a doctoral student who was about to finish or had already finished within the year; secondly, her initial status should be a passive follower supporting her husband rather than a visiting scholar or a student in her own right; and, thirdly, she should have already stayed in the United States for at least three years with her husband.

For the study, a preliminary informants list was made. Then the relationship network was used to gain access to the potential informants. The informants often were defensive before agreeing to an interview. After making quite a few overtures, three informants were located. The fourth informant was found as a result of a "snowballing effect" (Taylor & Bogdan, 1984). The last informant was a new friend of the interviewer from Taiwan. Her experiences, also as a reference, were helpful in developing theoretical insights into the topic being studied.

The background and economic status of students from Mainland China is somewhat different from that of students from Taiwan where most of the people live in democracy and wealth. Few students from Mainland China get financial support from their families of origin. In addition, they are more likely to stay in the U.S. after their graduation due to the democratic life-style and social-political climate and much better salaries. Those differences may impact on the sojourn life of their wives'.

### *Conducting Interviews*

When each informant agreed to be interviewed, the time and place were scheduled for her convenience by the author, the only interviewer. Establishing a trustful rapport between the interviewer and the informant was of great importance. The principle of unobtrusive and nondirective manner suggested by McCracken (1988) and also adherence to the non-judgmental and sensitive attitude suggested by Taylor and Bogdan (1984) were followed during the

interviews.

In the initial period, the interviewer chatted with the informant about personal experiences. The informant was then offered professional guarantee of, (a) anonymity, (b) the opportunity to read and comment on the draft prior to publication, (c) privacy in keeping the interview tape from any other individual other than the interviewer. A friendly and supportive atmosphere was painstakingly created to induce the informant to talk freely.

An interview guide was used in the procedure to make sure that key topics were explored with all the informants. The key topics included the informants' general background in their country, their original expectations of American life, their perception of cultural differences, their work experiences and difficulties during the process of adjustment, the important changes and their consequences, the important life incidents, their perceptions of their husbands' success, their aspirations or expectations for the future.

Each interview, in Mandarin, took about one hour and a half on the average. The interview process was audiotaped and field-noted. Afterward, it was transcribed. Each transcription was double-checked by the informant in order to increase the reliability of the study. The author translated the citations in the text.

### *Characteristics of the Informants and Their Background*

The informants, code-named "Joan", "Lisa", "Joyce", "Katty" were all from Mainland China, ranging in age from 35 to 37 years old. They had been in the U.S. from 4 to 5.5 years. The first three had one child each, about 7 - 8 years old. Katty's daughter is only one year old. They shared similar experiences in the Great Cultural Revolution when they were young. They also shared the common experience of educational interruption. Joan, Lisa and Katty had the chance to enter a college later, but Joyce was taught Japanese by her professor father at home. All of them were from educated families.

Before they arrived in the U.S., all enjoyed professional jobs with good social status. Currently, Joan's and Joyce's husbands are about to finish their Ph.D. degree, whereas Lisa's and Katty's husbands are doing post-doctoral work. Joan was enrolled in nursing school this summer. Joyce is a part-time waitress. Lisa and Katty are part-time technicians.

The Taiwanese informant, Heidi (code name) is 31 years old and has been in the U.S. for 3.5 years. She is also from an educated family and has followed a continuous educational path. Before she came, she was a full-time teacher. Her husband had just finished his Ph.D. degree and gone back to Taiwan with their one-year-old daughter. She had stayed to complete her master's degree.

### *Data Analysis*

Data analysis refers to reading the transcript in order to determine the categories, relationships and assumptions that formed the respondents' view of the world in general and of the topic in particular. McCracken's (1988) five-stage strategy was followed and adapted to the data analysis process of this study. Each of the stages represents a higher level of generality.

In the first stage, the researcher took a glance at what took place in the interview itself and got

to know how the issues were constituted in each respondent's own experiences. The author treats each utterance in the interview transcript on its own terms. The second stage examined the key terms (or main ideas) and their implications, according to the previous literature and culture review, and in terms of the evidence in the transcript. The third stage examined the inter-connection of the transcript, literature, and culture review. At this stage, reference to the transcript is made only to check ideas as they emerge from the process of comparison. The fourth stage was to determine the consistency or contradictoriness of the patterns in the commonality and specialty of each experience. The fifth stage took the patterns and themes related to the context and developed the final statement from them.

Following the five stages of the data analysis, two major categories emerged: (1) the time line of wives' adaptation to life in the U.S.; (2) the important incidents that happened during this period, such as marital problems, going to school, child birth, etc. that might change the curve of adaptation to life in the U.S.

## Results

### *The General Adaptation to the New World*

The first categories of data analysis showed two general modes of adjustment along a time line in the U.S. In the initial period of the informants' arrival two diverse responses appeared toward their life in America. Afterward, all the informants share a 3-stage adaptation.

*The same pathway to the USA but different periods of separation.* All my informants came to the U.S. by the same pathway; the husband studied in the USA first; then requested his wife to join him after he had partially settled down. The separation period ranged from a half year to three years.

*Diverse expectations of American life before arrival.* It is likely that Mainland China informants had very positive, high, or unrealistic expectations of their life in America due to insufficient information about the United States. Their feelings, expectations, and experiences are quite similar. A typical example is Joan:

*When I received my passport and visa, all my family, friends and colleagues celebrated with me. They praised me: "how keen your eyesight is that you have such a prominent husband". At that time, I was so fascinated with the world outside of China. I was happy to go abroad and had a high expectation of American life. I felt I was very lucky and felt superior to others.*

Lisa said:

*Everyone congratulated me and believed America to be a very nice place where you are able to do anything you like. But, I didn't entirely understand the United States. Everything*

*was so ambiguous. I couldn't imagine how wonderful it could be. It must be a place easy to earn a living. My English is poor. However, I supposed I would master English naturally after arriving in this country.*

In contrast, Heidi, from the economically developed area, Taiwan, had a more realistic understanding of international students' life in America. She said:

*I was reluctant to come, because, at that time, I was satisfied with my life and I had a good job.*

No matter what they thought and felt, they eventually relinquished their good jobs and left their families and loved ones behind because they must join their husbands to save their marriage. Joan said:

*We had already been separated from each other for three years. My daughter had no impression of her father.*

Heidi said:

*I decided to come although I was reluctant. One year after our separation, I found our conversational topics diminishing. I was scared that we would gradually have nothing to talk about. I thought I would like to partake of his student experience and struggling process in the United States.*

*The initial period of arrival: a diverse mode of experience.* The initial period to some was characterized as a "honeymoon", to others it was a negative experience: dull, pathetic and distressful. This was related both to one's previous life experiences in her home country and the situation met at that time in the host country. Joan, Lisa, and Katty had a good impression of the U.S. For example, Joan said:

*I assessed American life as better than Chinese life in every respect. Since my husband had a car when I first arrived, we had freedom and traveled here and there. We could enjoy our life.*

Lisa said:

*Everything was new and special. I cherished it.*

However, the initial experiences of Joyce and Heidi are totally different from those mentioned above. Joyce, the youngest child in her family of origin, did not feel good after the novel feeling wore off. She was not allowed to bring her son with her; she missed him and stayed at home most of the time. She said:

*I cannot talk (language deficiency); I cannot go anywhere (no car); I cannot understand things even after I have heard and watched. I know nobody except my husband. I am crippled, blind, deaf, and dumb!*



Heidi, from Taiwan, felt bored and lost in the town. She said:

*The rhythm of my life became slow. I lived in the past that provided honorable memories. I got lost. I was scared that the people I left behind would forget me. All other Chinese students and spouses here are outstanding; I am nothing special. I'm so common that no one looks up to me. I often cried and always wrote letters home.*

At that time, her husband had just come from another state. They had no car, knew nobody, and there were no activities or social events on campus in May. Her distress continued for at least 3 months.

*The exploratory and struggling period.* Life is an exploratory and struggling process. Fantasies must be confronted with reality and difficulties can be overcome. Grief, resentment and crying are useless. In the next step, Lisa, Joan, Katty and Joyce started to look for jobs. A great many problems arise; language deficiency is the greatest barrier. Joan used to be a teacher of Chinese herbal medicine. She found it impossible to find a decent job in such a small American town. Out of financial considerations, three months later she took a part-time job in a Chinese restaurant, doing kitchen chores and waitressing. She felt lost, had no social status in the host society, on top of her language deficiency. This period lasted for 8 months. Joyce was an expert in Japanese. She, too, remembered her first job in the kitchen:

*I couldn't speak English. I couldn't drive a car. A friend drove me to the restaurant. My task was cutting onions. The odor mingled with my psychological suffering, made me cry. My manager took pity on me and didn't complain although I always made mistakes. At the end of that night I earned fifteen dollars. My tears melted into a smile. It was the first time I had earned American dollars, but with such an inferior status.*

Katty was a researcher in chemistry. She was qualified to apply for a technician's position, which was available on campus. Although she had some background in English, her language skill was not sufficient for her to pass the interview. A half year later she became a part-time technician after improving her language skills. Lisa was luckier, as she got a technician's position in her husband's department within two months. At the beginning, communication was really a problem for her. She usually asked her husband for help. But this job required limited English and she could guess at the meanings from the drawings and mechanical specifications, so she could be on her own. All of my informants had to work fewer hours or had to quit their jobs temporarily in order to participate in intensive English classes. This strategy was a valid way to cope with stress and made their lives easier.

Because they had sufficient financial support from family on one hand and due to legal prohibition to work on the other hand, Heidi did not have a job, but English classes contributed a lot to her daily life, socialization, and the plan for further study.

*The settled-down and endeavoring period.* Overcoming the language barrier accelerated their adjustment. During this period, they either found a job or established meaningful relationships. All my informants met their temporary goals. This period often started 6-8 months after their arrival. Heidi prepared for the TOEFL exam. Katty and Lisa dedicated themselves to their jobs.

Joyce was delighted with her son's arrival. She also worked as a part-time waitress. Her goals were advancing her language skills and understanding the culture her host country. Joan said:

*Besides supporting my husband and caring for my daughter, earning money and increasing my language skills were my goals.*

She was proud of her ability to send money to the family members she left behind.

Even in the settled-down period, struggles and conflicts persisted, although they eventually decreased. Heidi found that her interactions with Americans stayed at a superficial level. She concluded:

*They always showed good manners but they kept you at a distance. It is impossible to become close friends with them.*

Additionally, speaking English was another burden or pressure for her. She said:

*When I was depressed, I avoided any occasion that called for me to speak English.*

Joan worked at the Sheraton and the Red Lion as a housekeeper. She experienced unfairness and dishonesty that perhaps derived from racial discrimination. Her manager always took the tips that customers left for her. She was angry but did not want to accuse her manager. Katty's work experiences were mixed with stress, anxiety and misunderstanding. Sometimes she made mistakes because she was reluctant to communicate with her boss or did not clarify questions or problems. She often worried about being fired, convinced that her boss was dissatisfied with her. However, she said:

*This was not really the truth, because after I quit my job due to pregnancy, my boss often asked my colleagues what was the true reason for my resignation. He asked: "Was she dissatisfied with her salary or unhappy with me?"*

The settled-down period lasted about two to three years in the experience of all my informants. Most of them achieved their goals and became more relaxed, self-confident, and adaptive. Joan changed jobs and began working at the Warm Hearth, doing housekeeping for an American family for about two years. She said:

*I attained my greatest achievement in earning money and advancing my language skills.*

Heidi passed the TOEFL exam and was admitted to graduate school at the same university as her husband; but soon she became pregnant. Although she postponed returning to school for the sake of an insecure pregnancy, her life was more comfortable than ever before. Her pregnancy provided the feeling of warmth and the admission offered hope. Lisa also changed her attitude toward the host country. She explained:

*I eventually got an insight into this country. Americans are the same human beings as we Chinese. Although I am a foreigner, I can live here well based on my hard work, cordial nature, and other virtues.*

*The redefining and recovering period.* Based on my informants' experiences, this next period is characterized by increased English proficiency, resolved financial problems, the husband's academic success, improved self-confidence and self-esteem and equilibrium with regard to the new culture.

Through the adjustment process, they acquired knowledge, developed competence, and obtained a sense of achievement. In addition to a change in political climate and financial improvement, they were able to redefine their goals.

In this period, my informants faced issues such as, potential permanent stay, full-time jobs, social status, etc. Joan decided to go back to school, where she is a part-time student at a nursing school. Katty often stayed at the library or went shopping with American women after she got pregnant and quit her job. She said:

*Life is easy and satisfying.*

She had her baby around Thanksgiving time and prior to this interview. From that time on, she has been a full-time mother and part-time technician. Both she and Lisa intend to take classes in graduate school. Katty said that she wanted to update her professional knowledge and learn new skills. She expected that school life would advance her language ability, enhance her confidence and refresh her life. Lisa expected that she would progress persistently and contribute more to this society and eventually to her son's development. Lisa worked on the TOEFL exam very hard. Currently, Heidi has deferred her student career until her baby's birth, which alleviated her homesickness.

In the previous summer Heidi was enrolled in a counselor education program. Life for her is busy, fulfilling, and satisfying. Joyce's life has become relaxed and easy too, but her agony is still focused on her lack of a professional career. She complained:

*It is too difficult to find a good job in this small town.*

She expects to move to a large city in the future so that she can utilize her expertise and also her social isolation will not be as severe. Joyce is also proud of her knowledge of America and American culture, but, based on my informants' responses, their close friends are often limited to other Chinese women. Their source of news is from Chinese newspapers. My informants have been away from their home country for several years and during this time none of them have gone home. They often miss their family members, surrounding them with sweet memories. In view of the isolated and stressful experiences in the process of adjustment, their homesickness is natural and their conflict is perennial. However, when they have almost gone through the whole process of sojourn, they got new insights to the experience in the U.S. Joan told me:

*Before entering school I felt depressed about my status; there was no reason to stay here; I would have gone back. However, my friend convinced me, "You have forgotten the disadvantages of our society. You may have status there but you will lose your freedom. Could you tolerate it now?"*

Lisa evaluates her home country and host country and concluded:

*Living in any place is almost the same.*

Kathy and Joyce mentioned how nice and delightful their lives were in their home country. Before they arrived, they believed that the American moon was much bigger than the Chinese one. Now, several years have passed and they have adapted well to their new world. They now believe the moon in their homeland is clearer and brighter than in any other place.

### *The Effect of Marital Relationship and Life Events on the Adaptation to the New Land*

A marital relationship is the most important source of support for a couple in a foreign country (Snyder, 1987). However, the pain and stress of adjustment or life events or both often influence the marital relationship.

*The pressure on the husband.* All my informants' husbands were doctoral students with a teaching or research assistantship. Generally their husbands were under much pressure in their classwork, exams, papers, research, and other adjustment problems at the beginning of their stay. These tensions were often reflected in their marital relationships. The informants illustrated their husbands' situations as follows.

Katty described:

*The rhythm of American society is so fast that he must adapt to this new environment. He was under a great deal of pressure and stress due to study, lab, and language. In Mainland China he was a nice husband and always respected me. But, here, he often lost his temper and found fault with me. We quarreled often. This is a common thing in Chinese student families.*

Joan said:

*My husband feels distress from studying. He believes that to study hard is a sufficient expression of his responsibility to his family. I need help to stay in this country but he doesn't know how to offer help. Possibly, he has never thought about this issue. Due to lack of communication and understanding, we have conflicts and are suspicious of each other. I think he doesn't care about me anymore because of his rising status.*

Lisa's case was almost the same:

*"My husband is too busy to take care of me. Instead he often asks me to do some extra chores to serve his needs. I hope to study and hope that he will share some household and childcare chores with me. However, he is unavailable. I feel stressful and unhappy toward him. Two years ago I got a permanent job in Washington, D.C., and I gave it up because of his disagreement. His opinion has always overridden mine. Sometimes I feel I have sacrificed too much for this family."*

*The effect of separation before reunion.* Long periods of separation before reunion in the U. S. often resulted in marital conflicts. This was evident in Joan's experience. Joan had had a very intimate relationship with her husband originally. However, ten months after they got married, her

husband went abroad. He only met their daughter once:

*After three years' separation, when we were together again, I immediately felt that both of us had changed somewhat. However, I couldn't identify what had really changed. He was not used to being a father, and he didn't know how to get close to his kid or what to do with her. My daughter felt strange toward her father. She didn't want to give him a kiss each morning when he left home. He felt frustrated and disappointed. This situation lasted until she was five years old. Owing to her anxiety and insecurity in the new environment, she always clung to me and strongly depended on me, which infuriated him.*

*The birth of a child.* A baby's birth is a great life event to a family. It may cause stress or bring joy. Heidi postponed her graduate study for one year due to pregnancy; however, with good family support she believed that her best period in the U.S. started from the birth of her baby, which helped them form a sweet home for themselves. Her mother-in-law, visiting them from Taiwan for the birth of the child, helped to care for the baby for three months. Then they sent the baby to a baby-sitter during the daytime each weekday. For the remaining time, her husband cooperated with her to take care of the baby. It was apparently a sweet home after her baby was born. Heidi said:

*I changed my home identity from my parent's family to this small family. My homesickness disappeared.*

To Katty, a baby indicated satisfaction, warmth and pride. Her husband also loved their daughter, but she lamented that the energy and time consumption on childcare mixed with financial burdens sometimes diluted their delight. This implies that the impact of babybirth depends upon social resources and the family support system.

*The husband's graduation.* According to the Chinese point of view, the husband's academic success is supposed to be shared by the wife. When the husband's dream came true, how did the wife live this vicarious achievement? How did this event impact on the marital relationship?

Generally speaking, my informants felt good after their husbands finished their coursework, passed their preliminary exams, and fulfilled their hopes. Additionally, they were happy for their husband's comfort and felicity. Joyce had a satisfying relationship with her husband. She imagined that they could leave the small town, that her husband would earn good money and then support her to go back to school. But she also emphasized that the Ph.D. degree he earned ultimately belongs to the husband himself and not to the wife.

Lisa perceived her husband to be suffering from his desire to be a good provider after he had passed his preliminary exams. He often woke up in the middle of the night before he got a post-doctoral position. Her husband's perception of his own role was an especially traditional one. She said:

*He has never done any household work but took my services for granted. He is demanding in our household. If I can't serve well or when something is overlooked, he finds fault with me. He is a male-centered person, and treats his own extended family as having*

*priority over me.*

Based on this understanding, she pointed out:

*As a wife, you don't expect your husband to offer you happiness but you create happiness for yourself.*

She continued:

*A husband cannot be relied on; a wife should develop herself, be assertive, be independent, and be self-reliant! If a wife always improves herself, the husband will be more satisfied with her. A human being is a group animal. To be a full-time housewife is to be as isolated as a prisoner is.*

Katty stated:

*My husband does not require much from me. He is basically a conservative and reliable man; I don't have much worry about the impact of his rising status on our relationship. I am confident of myself. I'm competent; I have a job, my own interest, and a good character. Although I say so, I like to develop and make progress all the time. I strongly insist on the equality of the family relationship between husband and wife.*

*Wife's schooling.* Does the wife's going back to school have a positive influence on her and the marital relationship? Katty, Joyce and Lisa expected that the schooling experience would create a psychological well being for them. Joan and Heidi experienced this as well. Helping to reconcile a friend's marital conflicts, Heidi got insight into her own needs and prospects. She told her friend:

*If you have your own career, you may have a broader horizon. You will not be so pestered by your husband's behavior.*

She, then, decided to pursue a student role. In better economic status, she concentrated all her mind on passing the TOEFL exam and obtained the admission form in the next year after arrival. Since she began to take classes, she said:

*I feel happy, confident, and have a sense of value and hope. Spiritually, I rely on my studying, though financially I feel a little stressed. I've achieved autonomy by myself. My career ambition has emerged.*

Joan also described the positive influence of her own studies on her marital interaction:

*Often I told my husband, "Since I have taken classes you have shown more respect toward me than ever". He did not concede it. Before I took classes, he often inhibited my activities outside of the home. Now he has changed; he often encourages me to join in activities. Why? Now, I can share his experience as a student in the United States. The communication between us has improved. In case I am busy or careless in my housework, he*

*will help with childcare or other things spontaneously. He has begun to care about my schoolwork now.*

After this statement, she smiled. Originally, her husband had discouraged her. He told her his goal in this life was not confined to just academic achievement. He had already sacrificed other enjoyments in life for the sake of his student career; he didn't want her to follow this lifestyle forever. The Taiwanese wife Heidi also interpreted her change from nonstudent to student very keenly and vividly:

*Before taking class, I had no insights into his experience; vicarious experience is not so vivid as direct experience. Now, we share common experiences and similar conversation topics. The relationship between us is psychologically equal. He encourages me in many ways. On the weekend, he takes care of the baby and lets me stay in the library. Since I started taking classes, I have become more self-confident, more expressive of my opinions or ideas. My life has a clearer goal. Now I am preparing for the future, though I am very busy.*

## **Discussion and Implications for Cross-Cultural Counseling**

### *Pattern of Adaptation and Influential Factors.*

Church's (1982) collection and description of the stage theory for sojourner adjustment, can be partially applied in the present study. Current informants showed two diverse modes of adjustment in the initial period, a 'honeymoon' experience or a distressful living pattern. Two of the five informants had no excitement or fantasy in the initial period. Afterward, all of them went through 3 stages along a time line: the exploring and struggling process, the settled-down and endeavoring stage, and the redefining and recovering stage. All of them became more relaxed with the host environment after exploring and struggling. The home country environment, original expectations, separation from children, financial state, the timing of arrival, the time length of the stay, and various life events that happened during the time are important variables influencing their adaptation process. Lo (1993), Ward and Kennedy (1999) mention that different perspectives or attitudes toward the host country were also associated with better sociocultural adaptation. It is also shown in the present study.

The most recent study on the Korean immigrant women's acculturation into the American society has identified 4 stages: dreaming, conflict, renunciation, and remorse (Shin & Shin, 1999). The present study shows differences in the first and the last stages between the Korean immigrant women and the Chinese student's wives. The difference in the final stage is probably between the mentality of permanent immigration and that of temporary sojourn.

The Chinese students' wives in this study describing their difficulties and their efforts in the first year are quite similar to the wives in Lo's study. However, Lo's informants all had a feeling

of helplessness, and many expressed the mood of suffering and adversity. They did not think it possible to plan for the future, because they did not know what the future would bring. They took one step at a time hoping that the circumstances would improve. In contrast, evidently all of the wives in this study were optimistic about the future as if most of their dreams would come true. In the latter period, they got rid of grief or resentment, and made the best efforts to beat the odds; their life horizon was extended, language improved and self-esteem rose. They became far more independent. They empathized more with their husbands' struggling. The different response to life events and perspectives toward the future also reflect the different stages of adjustment. After all, a human's behavior is the function of his personality and the environment.

The informants' experiences suggest that when one's self-esteem increased, one's interpretation of the external world may change too. Human relationships will improve if the wife is independent or progressive, and she will gain both psychological and substantial rewards. Obviously, a husband's support is a very powerful source of well-being and academic achievement. As the informants' experiences suggested, although the adjustment to a new world is hard, there are many different options or strategies to get through it.

### *Dependency and Career Development.*

According to the literature, the wives' employment outside the home relates positively to their mental health, broadening their social horizons, enhancing their sense of independence (Staines & Pottick, 1986; Foner, 1998) and reducing the negative effects of some forms of marital stress (Krause, 1984). However, for the international student spouse, these conclusions should be mediated by their attitude toward work, the compatibility of this work with her educational level, and the possibility of relieving household and child care stress.

As a dependent wife and for financial reasons, wives have to downgrade themselves to part-time jobs. Professional training is often in vain. Sometimes they confined themselves all day long to a limited home space for childcare which is tantamount to house-arrest. Several years down the road, the husband will normally advance his educational level and achieve higher status. By that time, will he, originally expecting a dual-career family, still be satisfied with the wife's dependency and expect to be the lone breadwinner? If the wife wants to go to school in order to reactivate her career, will he support her emotionally and financially? It all depends on the relationships and the husband's perspectives.

My informants' marital relationships are fundamentally decent. During the period of their husbands' graduation, the most cheerful time, most of them feel good about themselves and feel confident in their husbands and their relationships. They don't think too much about risk and change in the future. Only Lisa was alert to the need of independence and self-reliance.

The role of being a follower is often encountered with the problem of job availability. A compatible job for the husband does not mean a similar opportunity for the wife in the same place. The immigrant women are less likely to be employed and promoted than immigrant men and native born women (Goyett & Xie, 1999). So the wife often obtains a job incompatible with her educational level, limiting her personal growth and development, impoverishing her inner life, not to mention the disadvantages in promotion. Gradually, the wife feels detachment from the



workplace or leaves it. Such a compromised career is likely to happen in the later life of the follower's career.

### *The Narrowing of Life Goals and the Attempt to Break Out.*

All my informants are highly educated women and have their own social status in the home countries. When they are in the USA, their personal goals became uncertain and as a rule were temporarily replaced and redefined by the husband's educational goal. After the narrowing of life goals and the shifting of the center of gravity to their husbands, they became over-vigilant toward the husbands' performance, thus often causing grief and resentment. Besides, it is a moot question if the husband is grateful to the wife for her crucial assistance and shares his achievements with her. One of the informants specifically expressed her doubts.

The need for personal development and the fear of social isolation shown in immigrant Chinese women (Lee & Cochran, 1988) were also evident in the students' wives in both Lo's study and this study. Based on my informants' comments, if they can overcome financial straits and the language barrier, taking classes as a student in the field they are interested in is an alternative to being a full-time housewife. It helps to set their own goals and provide opportunities for further growth. This study shows obviously that the husbands of an originally dual-career family tend to appreciate their wives' efforts to develop. The informants' experiences implied that when one's self-esteem increased, one's perceptions of the external world might change also. Accordingly, life will be more satisfactory. This suggests that husband and wife should work and be educated together.

### *How a "Home" is Constructed.*

That Lo's informants yearn to have "the feeling of a 'home'" in the U.S. is also expressed by the informants in this study. The wife of a Chinese graduate student often has a confused sense of "home". Her family of origin is more likely to serve as her psychological "home". The young couple moved to the U.S. but their "home" is left behind. Uprooted in a foreign country, wife and husband are interdependent on each other. With the birth of a child, they began their own "home" in U.S. Her mind is settled and her homesickness is relieved. The emotional and psychological attributes of "home" are realized. Heidi's clear experience and specific expression supported to some extent Bi's (1996) study, which indicated that "home" implied a different meaning for men and women. To men, home is a rest place after a day's hard work. But to women, home is also a workplace, which is meaningful in terms of its "emotional attributes and affiliations".

According to the study, a baby or child is a crucial factor to construct a feeling of home in the foreign country. There is no doubt that it is a cheerful thing in a family with a good marital relationship and with the necessary financial support. At last the parents are able to afford the necessary time and energy. But, if such conditions are unavailable, the birth of a baby often causes trouble and difficulties to the young couple in a foreign country. Katty's utterance is only a signal to indicate a big trend. Besides, how a "home" is constructed in psychological meaning from one person to another is worthy of exploration

### *The Improvement of Studying-Abroad Through Orientation Programs.*

A “studying-abroad workshop” provided by a home country government to both students and their spouses would be a useful way to modify their expectations and equip them with life skills for studying in a new world. Language efficiency of the host country is a fundamentally important factor in the adaptation of students’ wives, both for daily live and knowledge acquisition. Accordingly, the language skill training is as important to the spouses as to the students. It is vital to be well prepared. An appropriate orientation program in addition to an ESL program offered by the host institutions or the university to international student spouses is necessary to lessen the difficulty of their adaptation. Searching for the meaning of sojourn abroad and setting up the spouse’s own goal would help them to reduce emotional distress and enhance their adaptation skills.

### *Postscript: Other Stories not Included in the Study*

The current informants have above average marital relationships. They decided to be a participant in this research of their own accord. However, other wives who were undecided may have their own stories.

In one uncited case, a couple from China had talked about divorce due to great marital conflicts. The wife was reluctant to participate in this study because of her fear that her husband, who had obtained his degree and a full time job, would be angry and prevent her from getting the green card.

Another wife who worked in a Chinese restaurant was extremely interested in the research and eager to participate but her husband reneged on her behalf. When I called her in a last attempt, he said defensively: “my wife told me what you want. However, ‘we’ felt that it was inappropriate for her to participate in your research. She is O.K. in America, no problem at all; besides, I will provide for her to go back to school.” Nonetheless, the wife had told me a different story earlier: “My husband is the kind of guy who prefers his wife to stay home and be fully supportive of him. He is unlikely to support me to go to school.” Thus, I became suspicious of the true reason of her lack of response.

The original inspiration for this research is from two doctoral students’ wives from Taiwan. In the early phase of my stay in the U.S., one of them told me how she had encouraged her husband to study abroad in order to detach himself from the meddlesome in-laws. She treasured the freedom that she had now. The other regretted about a broken dream; she depleted all her savings and borrowed from the in-laws because his graduate assistantship was inadequate. Legally she was not allowed to work. She did not enter school due to the birth of their baby and financial straits. All her friends’ careers went well in Taiwan. She has been sacrificed for so many years. She often counted the days to her husband’s graduation.

### *Limitations and the Need for Further Study*

All the uncited cases are valuable would-be informants, which might enable the researcher to explore the subject more comprehensively. However, it is difficult to bring this population into the

research for many reasons. One who has marital problems is unlikely to become an informant. The wives located in a big city or metropolitan area may encounter different opportunities and acquire a different living style from those in the countryside. The U.S. experiences of international spouses from different culture areas may vary. Accordingly, the result and conclusion of the study can be referred only to the women of similar backgrounds and situations, such as highly educated wives of Chinese graduate students', wives with above average marital relationships, et al.

Further research is needed to examine the career development of these women, whose careers have undergone drastic changes. A follow-up study on these wives' career development will be beneficial to the understanding of the women's situation and their dilemma as a dependent. It is also interesting to explore the adjustment process and the decisions in life incidents of metropolitan wives with marital problems. The author waits for the chance to supplement this study.

The other angle of approach is cultural influence. The wives of international students from different culture areas may confront different things resulting in different adjustment processes. Their perceptions of life in the foreign country may vary. How culture factors work on their lives, and how their home are constructed, etc., also merit our attention. It will be very interesting to widen the study by making a comparison between Chinese students' wives in the U. S. and American students' wives in China or Taiwan.

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# 留美博士妻子對伴讀生涯的知覺與回顧

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通識與核心課程組

## 摘 要

經年有無數妻子陪伴丈夫負笈新大陸，留學生初到異國常面臨各式挑戰，而其妻子帶著轉嫁的人生目標，成為法定的依附者，會面臨怎樣的問題？她們如何適應這段時間的居留？哪些因素影響適應過程？她們有怎樣的獨特經驗？當丈夫即將或已完成學位時，她們怎樣評估這些經驗？這一連串的問題向來鮮少為研究者所注意，本研究試圖從這角落進行試探性與前導性的開發。

本研究使用質性分析法，五位留美中國籍博士或候選人的妻子應邀做深度訪談。受訪者的特徵：初以眷屬身分赴美，年齡跨距 31～37 歲，居美時間已 3.5～5.5 年，曾受良好教育，已育子女，婚姻關係基礎良好，夫已得博士學位或至少已通過論文大綱口試。

研究結果分由兩大部份陳述，第一部份顯示居留期適應的模式以及因時間而顯出不同的階段特色；在初始階段有兩種適應型態的區別，三位有如度蜜月的感受，另兩位卻覺得日子難過；其後受訪人大致共有了以下三階段的經驗：掙扎探索期，具體奮鬥期，重新定位期。第二部份顯示適應過程中特定因素及個別事件的影響，例如：工作遭遇，孩子的出生，重返校門，夫妻感情，丈夫的負荷與學位完成等。

在此過程她們大體經歷了人際隔離及諸多不順。但奮鬥的成果顯示：財務寬解，能力增加，成就感與自信、自尊都相對提高。在丈夫即將或已完成學位之際，她們亦有必須與時俱進、不斷成長之自覺。

本研究指出個人的心理狀態與環境適應互相影響；特別是重返校門對妻子的目標感、自我價值感以及婚姻的良性互動有相當正面的作用，亦兼論附從角色之不利於妻子的生涯發展。

本研究建議留學生研習營能把妻子納入做行前輔導，在地國的學校與相關機構能提供外籍生妻子語言訓練及生活環境輔導，以利於妻子的適應。

**關鍵詞：**留學生妻子、短期居留適應、英語訓練、生活事件、重返校門、婚姻關係