NESTED UNDER A CAGE: A CASE STUDY OF SOCIAL NETWORKS FORMED BY
CHINESE STUDENTS' WIVES IN A UNIVERSITY SETTING

BY

Dandan Kong

A THESIS

Submitted to
Michigan State University
in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of

MASTER OF ARTS

Sociology

2011

ABSTRACT

NESTED UNDER A CAGE: A CASE STUDY OF SOCIAL NETWORKS FORMED BY
CHINESE STUDENTS' WIVES IN A UNIVERSITY SETTING

BY

Dandan Kong

Being relocated to a new setting, overseas particularly, means disruption of established social networks and challenges to develop new networks. In this study, the author aimed to examine how the Chinese students' wives, who were relatively socially isolated, managed to keep the established social networks and develop new ones in a U.S. university setting. The result of this study indicated that Internet played a significant role through the process of networking and mutual support. Strong ties and weak ties became blurred and happened at the same time through Internet. New networks developed in the host place functioned in a more utilitarian way. Even though these wives hardly had chances to interact with people in the host place, they managed to form a "virtual" ethnic enclave through the Internet. In other words, the technology created a space for sharing information, mutual support, and other needs, which enabled them to adjust well in the new environment, and increase life satisfaction.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Introduction

Humans are social beings, and interact with others through all kinds of networks. Social networks have been seen as important sources to provide social support and the exchange information through weak ties and strong ties (Adelman 1988; Granovetter 1973). Based on this understanding, there are many studies (see, for instance, Ye, 2006) which investigate how and what kind of social supports could be gained for vulnerable people and people of minority status. In the last few years, immigration scholars (such as Toyokawa, 2006) have paid attention how the social networks functioned in terms of cross-cultural adjustment for the immigrants or sojourners. This literature has mostly focused on the groups that immigrated or relocated through familial or other well-organized work networks. For instance, Zhou (1992) described the Chinatown immigrant workers who came to work in the U.S. through familial or similar relations and George (2005) described the Indian nurses who came through the well-organized work networks to work in the U.S. This paper builds on this literature focusing more specifically on the case of the spouses of international students.

Accompanying spouses of sojourner students present a particular case. They neither have solid networks that help them to immigrate or relocate; nor can they easily find an enclave of people or a place with similar people predominantly locate in the new environment. Despite increasing numbers of married international students and increasing interest by universities in international students because they can often constitute significant revenue for universities (as many come on scholarships from their government or third party institutions) surprisingly limited attention has been paid to these spouses in the literature based on their experiences. Given that they are not necessarily located in proximity to an ethnic enclave, what are the struggles that this subpopulation face? How does this relatively socially isolated group manage

1

to build their social networks? What kind of social support can they find through social networks? What are the strategies they use to build and maintain networks? How do strong ties and weak ties defined in the literature function in their social networks? Additionally, what role does online social networks play during their adjustment process?

Being relocated to a new setting overseas implies disruption of established social networks. It also presents a challenge to developing new networks. This challenge is difficult enough for international undergraduate or graduate students, but the accompanying spouses often suffer greater disruption due not only to their physical location, but to their sudden changes of social and work status, social isolation, and uncertainty of future stay. This study will use qualitative interviews to elucidate the networking challenges that this subpopulation face through interviews with Chinese students' wives in a university setting in Michigan.

Background

As China reopened its door to the rest of the world by economic reform after 1978, the high speed of economic development created an increasing demand for a highly educated and skilled technical and professional work force. As seen today, becoming educated and trained at home is not enough for competing in the job market. As a result, more people seek opportunities to get trained abroad, mostly in developed Western countries. The reputation of its educational system and the key role it plays in the global economy, has allowed the U.S. to become one of the most desirable countries in which to pursue higher educational training. As one of the benefits of the 1965 Immigration Act, which aimed to facilitate family reunion for skilled workers in the U.S., many spouses come as "dependants" with those international students.

According to the statistical report of the Office of International Students and Scholars (OISS), China has the 2nd largest population of international students in the U.S., and the largest in Michigan in 08-09 academic year[1]. For example, at Michigan State University in the Fall 2009, Chinese students composed 38% of the total number of international students (1,934 out of 5,056), rising sharply compared to the previous year's number 1,291. Furthermore, graduate students comprised as 36% of the total Chinese students (689 out of 1,934)[2]. As more mostly male Chinese students pursue a post-graduate degree in the U.S., there are a larger number of mostly female spouses following them. They come to the U.S. as a dependent of their student spouses, holding an F-2 visa, which constrains their status as companions of their spouses during their post-graduate study. This also gives the spouses no legal rights to work. The major problems upon the spouses' arrival are related to "their being outsiders, having family responsibilities, being institutionally unconnected, having their status almost exclusively determined by their spouses' career commitments, and being both transients in the community and in transition in their own lives" (Schwartz & Kahne 1993, p.453).

Theoretical framework

According to Ye (2006, p.864), "social network theory is concerned with the properties of social support networks and social support and resource exchanges among network members". Those resources may include information, goods and services, social and financial support (Ye 2006; Marsden & Campbell 1984).

---

[1] http://oiss.isp.msu.edu/about_stats08.php

[2] http://oiss.isp.msu.edu/documents/statsreport/09pdfs/Country,Gender,Level.pdf

This paper is grounded in the theoretical perspective of social support developed by Adelman (1988), and his understanding about the relationship between social ties/networks and cross-cultural adjustment. Being relocated in a new environment, the sojourners lose the control of things they used to be familiar with, and become ambiguous and uncertain. This ambiguity and uncertainty makes it difficult for the sojourners to form accurate attribution and recognizable response, thus hindering the adjustment process. According to Adelman (1988), human assistance is critical to cross-cultural adjustment, whether it is in form of information, referrals, emotional support, or tangible help. To be more specific, Albrecht and Adelman (1987, p.19) define social support as "verbal and nonverbal communication between recipients and providers that reduce uncertainty about the situation, the self, the other, or the relationship, and functions to enhance a perception of personal control in one's life experience".

Based on uncertainty and control, Albrecht and Adelman (1987) identify several types and functions of supportive messages: perspective shifts on cause-effect contingencies; enhanced control through skill acquisition; enhanced control through tangible assistance; enhanced control through acceptance or assurance; enhanced control through ventilation. To acquire these supports, sojourners can depend on their social ties, which simply refer to the relationship between a certain individual and a particular network member (Ye 2006).

The network is connected through ties. According to Granovetter (1973), a tie could be weak, strong, or absent, depending on the combination of the amount of time, emotional intensity, the intimacy, and reciprocal services which characterize the tie. The characteristics and functions vary by the strength of ties. While strong ties involve more intimate and self-disclosure forms of resource exchanges, weak ties involve less intimate exchanges and less frequent maintenance (Ye 2006). Compared to strong ties, which can effectively satisfy

4

individual's emotional needs; weak ties can bring individual resources that are not available through strong ties, such as flow of new information (Granovetter 1973; Ganovetter 1982; Ye 2006). While close ties can provide emotional support for the sojourners in their early transition, the strength of weak ties cannot be neglected, which can provide unique information to cope with change without developing into more intimate relationships (Grannovetter 1973).

Other than social supports, social capital is another well-discussed topic related to social networks. Among various definitions, Putnam's (2000) definition of social capital is well known, which is "connections among individuals and the social networks and the norms of reciprocity and trustworthiness that emerge from them". Putnam (2000) also distinguishes two types of social capital: bridging (characterized by weak ties) and bonding (characterized by strong ties). As the Internet has become a feature of daily life, there have been growing debates about its influences on society and community. A growth of scholarship has emerged which explores whether this technology will increase or decrease people's social capital, and whether it will isolate people from local community (Wellman 2004). Previous literature proposes that the Internet can affect community in three ways: it can decrease community interaction, as more people access information and form relationships virtually; it can transform communities through changing the dynamics of interaction and social action; and it can supplement existing community processes, dynamics and interactions (Wellman 2004).

Based on this framework, social supports and social capitals enable the sojourners to better adjust to the new environment. Social networks provide various supports via ties. In the literature, scholars have shown interest in examining what types of social networks provide mutual support among sojourners in the process of cross-culture adjustment, and how those networks function in terms of providing support.

Literature review

This literature review will involve several parts. First, I will start with reviewing the social network studies in the sojourner and immigration literature, which will provide a broader view of types and functions of social networks. Following that, I will narrow my focus to the literature about the adjustment and supportive networks of the sojourners' spouses. I will identify particular gaps within this literature. My study aims to fill those gaps.

Types and functions of social networks among sojourners

Previous studies have showed that social support networks play important roles in sojourners cross-cultural adjustment, especially in terms of sociocultural and psychological adjustment (Kim 1988; Yum, 1982; Ye 2006). Two types of social networks have been examined in reference to sojourners' cross-cultural adjustment: traditional social networks; and online social networks.

Traditional social networks

The literature on social networks and immigrant adjustment defines two forms of social networks that resemble strong ties: . new networks that individuals establish in the host country; and old networks that individuals keep from the home country. For sojourners, the close relationships with friends and "compatible others" established in the host country are positively related to successful adjustment (Adelman 1988; Ye 2006). The old ties with families and friends in home countries facilitated by telephone and Internet, however, tend to offer comfort and stability in cross-cultural transition (Ye 2006; Bargh and McKenna 2004).

Take the Indian nurses for example. George (2005) indicated in her research that there were well-developed social networks to help the nurses in India work in the U.S. These networks were often built through cohorts developed during the stages of immigration, first during training programs in India; then through the organizations that sent the groups of nurses to the U.S.; and, then, connections that developed within those previous sections helped them settled down in the new locations.

Online social networks and virtual community

With the rapid growth of computer-mediated communication (CMC) in a recent decade, on-line social networks cannot be neglected. Rheiagold (1993) named this phenomenon of "a gathering of people in an online space where they come, communicate and connect" as virtual community. In fact, some of the current most popular social network websites, such as Facebook, Myspace, or Twitter, offer a convenient platform for the users to create a virtual identity and networking with friends and acquaintances on-and-off lines, thus forming the epitome of a "virtual community". Among various virtual communities, some online social support groups among scholars. Preliminary research suggests that online social support groups have advantages compared to face-to-face support groups, such as convenient access, anonymity, and an extended network (Sullivan 1997; Winzelberg 1997). Particular studies about special online social support groups (such as for young single mothers, eating disorders, and people dealing with cancer) suggest that being actively and consistently engaged in these groups can help lower stress levels and lead to the development of coping strategies for those involved (Dunham et al. 1998; Kim 2009; Winzelberg 1997). Montgomery's (2008) work has also shown that the "virtual ethnic enclave" works as an important communication channel and space of support for transnational professionals.

However, limited research has been done to examine how the online social networks function in terms of adjusting to the new environment for sojourners. Tuner and her colleagues (2001) have claimed that online communities can provide "weak tie" support. Ye's (2006) empirical work about the social networks among Chinese international students in the United States has shown that online social groups, especially ethnic groups, are another important source of social support for sojourners.

International sojourners' spouses' supportive networks in the literature

In the past decades, the literature about sojourners' cross-culture adjustment has been heavily focused on the group of international students (Hayes and Lin 1994; Heikenheimo and Shute 1986; Locke and Velazco 1987; Ye 2006) or personnel on overseas assignment. However, studies about the living experiences of their accompanying spouses, wives in most cases, are very limited. Studies show that psychological adjustment of accompanying spouses to the host community critically contribute to the productivity of international students and business personnel who temporarily live in foreign countries (Copeland & Norell 2002; De Verthelyi 1995; Black & Gregersen 1991). Copeland and Norell (2002) have reported that among the sojourners' wives, those who adjusted better tended to feel fewer losses in friendship networks, have more functions of social support adequately met, and receive more support from local rather than long distance providers. However, their subjects were from multiple countries, thus the results may not be directly comparable when focusing on specific ethnic groups.

Studies have shown that Asian wives tended to hesitate in asking for help during their sojourn in the U.S. (Arnault 2002; Shin 2002). According to Toyokawa (2006), Japanese sojourners' wives highly valued resources that allowed them to continue mothering and

homemaking in Japanese way during their sojourn. Japanese wives networks were perceived as the only source to obtain desired resources and functioned as a corporate body with a hierarchical system (Toyokawa 2006). Would that be the similar situation among Chinese sojourners' wives due to those two groups sharing similar contextual culture that value collective support?

Little is known about the experiences of sojourners' spouses in general, and even less is known about the support networks of international students' spouses. Due to the differences in social status, income, and living environment, different support networks would likely be developed between the spouses of business personnel and the spouses of the international students.

International students' wives cross-cultural adjustment in the literature

Four articles were located that specifically focused on the living experiences of international students' spouses in the United States (De Verthelyi 1995; Martens & Grant 2008; Schwartz & Kahne 1993; Vogel 1986). According to those works, the population that was examined was highly educated and comprised primarily women. Several areas of difficult adjustment were identified, which include language difficulty, role changes (shifting from professional to domestic roles), social isolation, financial concerns, and psychological problems.

However the literature mentioned above only identified the difficulties the international students' spouses encountered during their sojourn and they did not show how those spouses overcame these difficulties. In addition, the works mentioned previously were conducted through questionnaires by spouses from multiple countries. While this allowed for greater generalization, this method tended not to acknowledge the in-depth voices from specific ethnic groups.

My empirical study intends to bridge the gaps in the sojourners' social networks and adjustment literature. By focusing on one specific sojourner group (i.e., Chinese students' wives in the U.S.), I attempted with my study to examine how this socially isolated group adjusted to their new environment. During this adjustment process, would they be able to keep their old social networks and develop new ones in the host country? Through their social networks, would they be able to get satisfactory social supports? Would online social networks or "virtual community" play a significant role in their sojourn lives?

Method

This study has been based on a standardized, open-ended interview, which facilitates faster interviews and can be easily analyzed and compared. The same open-ended questions were asked to all participants. These interview questions were structured by the following topics: background/demographics (such as name, age, education, duration of relocation, working experiences); knowledge/facts (such as what do you do during your free time? How do you form your new social networks and keep your old social networks after you moved to the U.S.? Who do you contact frequently, and how? How often do you use Internet and what do you usually do with it?); opinion/values (Do you think your current social networks can provide the support you need?); and feelings (Do you feel yourself adjusting well to the new environment? Do you feel need to expand your social networks in other ways?)

Participants

Nineteen Chinese women whose husbands currently are enrolled in a large Midwest university of the U.S. voluntarily participated in the interview. Interviews were conducted from December 2009 to February 2010. The mean age of the wives was 27.4 ranging from 25 to 32.

The average length of marriage was 2.5 years ranging from half a year to six years. The most common educational degree attained was a Bachelor's degree, and eight of them held a Master's degree. These wives had spent 1.4 years on average in the U.S., ranging from around two months to four years. Except for two of the wives, all had working experiences before their relocation to the U.S. None of the participants had any children. None of the participants showed preference to settle down in the U.S. or go back to China once their husbands completed graduate study. According to their responses, they preferred to choose where they would settle based on their husbands' future career choices.

Research settings

This qualitative research was conducted at a large university in Michigan. Compared to schools on the West coast or East coast, or in large cities like New York City, Los Angeles, or Chicago, where there is a large population of Chinese inside and outside campus, the Chinese population in Michigan is much less. Furthermore, there is no large ethnic enclave like "China Town" existing there. The organization of Chinese in Michigan is relatively weak, and there are only two student organizations on campus, which are Chinese Association of Students and Scholars (CASS) and Chinese Students Coalition (CSC), and the latter one is mostly for undergraduate students. There is no formal or informal organization for Chinese students' spouses. Most of the participants lived in a university apartment complex for grad students and their families, where there are many Chinese and other international students. Some lived in an out-of-campus apartment complex, where there were also many Chinese and other international students.

Procedure

As a Chinese student in a U.S. university, I used my access to the network of Chinese Students and Scholars Association (CSSA) to send a recruitment letter requesting participants for this study. Due to the confidentiality and the change of total number each semester, I could not get the exact number of the current Chinese wives through the Office of International Students and Scholars (OISS) of the university. However, the OISS offered to send the recruitment letter to the entire male Chinese graduate student through their official mail list. The response from the first round of recruitment was not very satisfactory (only five wives replied my email). After the first couple of interviews, I asked the participants if they could introduce this study to other Chinese wives they had contact with. The interview location was chosen based on what was convenient and comfortable for the participants, most chose the café area in the library where most students prefer to have meetings with others around campus, or in their own apartments. The interview questions were semi-structured based on four general themes: personal information (e.g., age, education background, pre-arrival experiences, family members); major problems after relocation; current social networks (including old and new ones); perceived support to overcome problems through those social networks. All the interview questions under those four themes were open-ended, and the participants were encouraged to tell more of their personal stories. All the interviews were conducted in Chinese because this was the preferred language of conversation for all participants. The interviews lasted around one hour. With their consent, all the interviews were tape-recorded and later transcribed in English for analysis. The actual names of the participants have been changed to protect the confidentiality of participants.

Strauss' (1987) posits four basic guidelines for conducting open coding of the data: "ask the data a specific and consistent set of questions; analyze the data minutely; frequently interrupt the coding to write a theoretical note; and never assume the analytic relevance of the traditional

variable such as age, sex, social class, until the data show it is to be relevant" (c.f. Berg 2007, p.317). This procedure is described as unrestricted coding of the data. Using this procedure allowed me to get as much information as possible from the data. Upon the completion of the open coding, axial coding provided a good frame for further content analysis. Axial coding is is the process of relating codes to each other through the creation of concepts and categories (Strauss 1987). Using this method, I was able to see several themes emerge, which I could assess through my theoretical framework combined with grounded theory, several themes emerge through the data analysis.

Findings

Major problems the Chinese students' wives encountered during their sojourn

The problem most commonly mentioned by spouses of Chinese students is that they have too much time that they spend alone. Most of the wives told me that they did not know what to do with all the free time available, especially during the first couple of months after they arrived in Michigan. Because of their special status, they arrived in the new environment without knowing anyone beforehand except their husbands. Furthermore, there are limited occasions that they can develop new friendships. Most of them claim that for the first few months the only people they know are their husbands' colleagues. They meet the spouses of these colleagues at occasional social gatherings held by their husbands' department, but otherwise have limited interaction with them. They are often further isolated because they either lack a driver's license or they are not able to freely use the only car in the household, making it inconvenient for them to go out alone. This situation leaves them no choice but to spend time staying at home. As one of my participants, Ying 26, told me:

13

Well, before the semester started, my husband had more free time with me, we didn't know any other friends here, and so we either stayed at home or went out to check around the place. However, when the classes begin, my husband is very busy, so I just stay at home doing some cooking and other chores for him. Other than that, I will watch TV or go out nearby by bus, because we didn't buy the car back then. Even though we do have one now, and I just passing the driving test two days ago, my husband still have the priority to use it to drive to school.

Others have indicated the same situation to various degrees, either spending a lot of time at home alone, or going to the campus with their husbands and finding some places such as the library to spend a lot of their time.

Language is another major obstacle mentioned by the wives, and most of them still have a difficult time communicating clearly, or even understanding the conversation in English with locals. Many of them have mentioned that it was surprisingly hard for them to carry on an easy conversation, especially in the first couple of months after they arrived. This challenge extended beyond the social setting and had implications for their ability to accomplish basic activities. For instance, respondents reported difficulty such as communicating with a cashier in a grocery store, ordering food in a restaurant, or even buying a coffee. Respondents reported that either the speed the native English speakers spoke, the words used in the conversation, or just the way they said things that made it difficult for the newly arrived wives to understand. However, all the participants in this study have bachelor's degree or above, which means they had passed a certain English level according to the post-secondary education requirement in China[3]. When being asked why this still happened despite of the fact that they all passed the tests, they claimed that they did not have many chances to actually practice oral English in the past and focused too

---

[3] In China, all undergraduate students are required to pass the College English Test level 4(a national English as a Foreign Language Test in China) to be qualified to graduate; and required to pass level 6 for postgraduate.

much on reading and writing. This explains why the English classes offered either by the university or by other organizations could be of considerable interest. All of my participants attended at least one English class by the time I had interviewed them.

Another significant complaint expressed by many respondents was that it was not convenient to eat authentic Chinese food. This may be partly explained by the demographic idiosyncrasies of the participants in this study. The average age of my participants was 27, and most of them had just graduated from college and gotten married. In China, most universities required the students to live in dorms, and most of the dorms do not have kitchens; this means most of the fresh graduates hardly had much experience cooking. In China, the flavor of food differs by region. Often, it is very convenient to find a good restaurant in different regions within walking distance in bigger cities where most universities are located. On the contrary, in the U.S., especially in small cities, there are a limited number of Chinese restaurants, and it is usually not easy to find one within walking distance. Restricted by the number and target people from different regions, the restaurants often combine different flavors together, making it hard to keep the food authentic. This situation leaves most of the Chinese wives no choice but to begin to learn how to cook by themselves. Developing a proficiency at Chinese cooking usually takes a long time. An additional challenge was availability of raw ingredients. Some of my participants claimed that even though they were good cooks, they still sometime found themselves having a hard time to get the exact ingredients and materials in the Chinese grocery stores. For instance, Ke, 29, who has been in the U.S. for three year, told me:

> "…there are only two or three Chinese restaurants in the downtown area, which is far from where I live. My husband and I tried there once, the food is not as good as we expected. I think they try to make the food the way as the Americans prefer. I have been learning how to cook since then…and the Chinese grocery stores are

not satisfactory as well. Sometime I doubted if the food had passed the expiration date."

The new networks established in the host country are mostly built for utilitarian function (to be practical) such as language learning and study partners for further education

Most of the wives come to the U.S. with a relatively clear plan in mind, either to get another degree or at least improve their English at some level. In that case it is not surprising to find that most of the networks of the wives are built through the language learning courses either offered by the University or by a local Church. As Fafa, 29, indicated in her interview:

> "I went there (the Church) very often at the beginning, every week basically. The American couples are our English tutors. They have hosted the international family for more than 10 years, very nice people. I am very impressed by how nice the Americans here at first I came. As I said the living condition is not as good as I expected, but the people are much nicer than I thought. But after a while, you will find it's hard and rarely chances to communicate with the younger generation of Americans, but the older people are very willing to talk. That's why I like to go to the church to practice my English. They are nice, very considerate that you are new here, so they will talk patiently and slowly to you, and make sure you understand. But learning English is all what I do in the Church."

The others have mentioned the similar experiences, and they all mentioned that the interaction mostly happened during the courses and hardly outside the class.

The other common way they built connections was through their husbands. The wives attended some occasions with their husbands, usually social events within their husbands' department. Through their husbands' connections, they met their husbands' cohorts, and maybe some other companion wives as well. Usually the wives found it was easier to keep contact with other wives, especially Chinese wives, because they shared similar background, similar interests, and mostly similar time schedules. Typically, the odds to find companions with the same situation are really small. The odds are narrowed down by their husbands' connections, the total Chinese wives nearby, living distances, and their husbands' time schedules. Restricted by all the conditions above, the result is that not many wives have other close wives friends. As Jing 25 told me:

"I know some other F-2 wives too, all Chinese, we get together to do some sports occasionally, not often. They are all busy about their own stuff…"

There are a few international wives associations around the campus, which not many of my participants are aware of. The objective of those associations is to build connections between the international students' spouses and provide support. The way these associations work are very similar. There are usually certain places near university apartment where the wives meet once or twice every week, and start conversation. Among those associations, three stand out. One is organized by the university residential life, another is held by church, and the other is initiated by one of my participants. The participants in my study who know about these associations have indicated that the first two are usually filled with wives from other countries, and can hardly find Chinese wives there. The third one, however, is a Chinese wives group. Angela, the one who founded this group, 31, used to be a social worker at Hong Kong before she followed her husband to the U.S. She clearly knew a lot of detailed information about most international wives associations during the interview. It is she who found out that there were not many Chinese in other associations, and thus deciding to found a specific Chinese wives group. However, it did not turn out as well as she expected:

"…So that made me to send an E-mail to all the Chinese (students), to see if I could organize a Chinese- wife group; and see how they respond. But it didn't turn out well, there weren't many people respond to me, only around 10 people or so. We got together every other week, chatting, sometimes making some homemade stuff. But overall, it was not very successful. I don't know, it's very different from other international wife groups I was with before. I feel that if we have a very clear functional object, like shopping for groceries, teaching homemade stuff, people are more active to attend, but if we are just gathering to chat, not many people come. "

When being asked why she thought this happened according to her interaction with other Chinese wives, Angela said:

"I guess it is because everyone's expectation is different, they all have their personal goal to achieve here. So it is ok to get some people together to chat once a while, but it is hard to have a relatively formal group, having certain members to meet on a regular base."

During the interviews with all my participants, the words 'independent', and 'value' has been mentioned several times that cannot be neglected. Especially those who have working experiences before they relocated to the U.S., it took them some time to adjust to the new role as

dependents. One of my participants even mentioned that she was "so afraid that I will get lost by the piles of chores, and can never find myself again". As most of my participants claimed that other than family reunion, or taking responsibility as a wife, the reason they came to the U.S. as an opportunity and challenge for their personal and career life. These situations also correspond with Angela's observation about how Chinese wives differ from other international wives, especially Asian wives, through her experiences:

> "I feel the most different thing for the Chinese wives is most of them want to be independent, either though higher education to change the status, or try to do something else to prove their value, even though they come here as dependents. They want to contribute rather than just be a receiver. It's a shame for them for just being dependents. I am a full-time wife, and I am happy about who I am and what I am doing now. But when others ask me about what I am doing here, I feel hard to explain to them, or at least it's hard for them to understand. For other international wives, their goal to be here is just being full-time wives, such as Japanese or Korean wives."

Internet plays a significant role to form and keep social networks among the Chinese students' wives

As mentioned above, most of the Chinese wives spend a lot of time alone. If you are curious about what they do with all the free time, the answer is: the Internet. It is surprising how long these wives spent on the Internet. According to my participants, the average number of hours they are on the Internet is over five hours per day. As they mentioned, "you basically can find everything you need on the Internet". The function of the Internet works in several ways for the Chinese wives, keeping connections with friends, getting information they need, and entertainment.

All of the participants indicated that they still kept good or even close connection with family and friends back in China. Because of the time difference, schedule difference, and cost; making a phone call is not always convenient. Under this situation, the Internet provides various

good choices for them to keep connections online and offline, for example, emails, online chatting tools like instant message (QQ, MSN are commonly used), and social network websites.

It is worth mentioning that how the social network websites impressed the Chinese wives. Social network websites are highly popular among all types of people (not just younger people) in China as well. Among all the various social networks, two websites named 'Renren' and 'Kaixin' stand out. The previous one mainly targets college students, just as the start of Facebook had done, which means you need a college email to create an account. However, like Facebook, the company loosened restrictions later on as the popularity rose. 'Kaixin', on the other hand, was targeted more generally from the beginning, which allowed people to extend their networks. Most of my participants spoke in complimentary terms about how these websites worked for them.

> "It is just everything I need. I can post some of my pictures to share with my family and friends, who won't have a chance to come here. I can also visit my friends' websites to see what's new with them. Besides, when it's not convenient for me to make phone calls, I can simply leave a message on their website, because I know they will check it very often as well. I sometime enjoy writing blogs and sharing my feelings with my friends. I can also interact with my friend with online games on these websites. These things make me feel like I am still part of their lives and they are part of mine, like I am never away from them. And as long as you have Internet connection, all these are free, how good is that!"

Getting various kinds of information is another significant function of the Internet for the Chinese wives. They read news (mostly from Chinese websites), join the discussion board to ask questions, and use search engines to get the information they need. Among those, the discussion board tweaked my interest the most. Respondents discussed two types of discussion boards; one is the mail list formed by the Chinese students and their spouses in the university; and the other is nationwide formed by the Chinese in the U.S. Through these discussion boards they can ask questions about issues of concern, sell and buy stuff, get to know new people who share similar interests with them. Some of my participants mentioned to me that especially at the first few months when they did not know anyone nearby yet, they got all the information they needed

from the Chinese students' mail list. Some examples are: finding where to live, where the grocery stores are located, how the phone plans work, which mall provided particular types of shopping opportunities, where to meet other people, and how to enroll in English classes.

For entertainment, the Internet is a major source for them as well. Because the TV programs are still relatively hard for the Chinese wives to understand, especially when there are no subtitles, they turn to the Internet. There are some very popular software applications in China that allow them to watch TV shows, videos, and movies online, in both English and Chinese. For them, it is a good chance to entertain themselves while practicing English through watching English movies with Chinese subtitles. This also gives them access to watching the newest Chinese TV shows so that they can keep up to date with what is going on in China.

The distinction between strong ties and weak ties become blurred, and happens at the same time through online platforms

As indicated in the theoretical framework, Granovetter (1973) defined strong tie as effectively satisfying an individual's emotional needs, while weak ties can bring an individual resources that are not available through strong ties, such as the flow of new information. According to that definition, scholars usually categorize online connections as weak ties, and face-to-face interactions with local community as strong ties. In this study, however, the distinction between strong ties and weak ties are not that clear. Most of the wives claimed that they sought emotional supports either with their husbands or with family and friends back in China via Internet. However the interaction with the local community or other Chinese wives were more likely to seek or share information they need.

Successful cross-cultural adjustment for sojourners doesn't necessarily mean adapt to the host country culture

A successful adjustment is determined by the effective social relationships between the host and the visitor in terms of exchange of information, or communication (Brein and David 1971: 216). As Adelman (1988) stated previously, the common problem when sojourners encounter a new culture is unfamiliar behaviors and demands in the new environment, thus hindering their adjustment process.

In this study, the findings are not exactly as might be predicted given the literature. It is true that the Chinese wives do not have much interaction and effective social relationships with the host; however, I cannot say they have adjusted poorly. They do know where and how to exchange information, they know well about the place they live, they can satisfy their emotional needs, and they feel comfortable with their current lives. Most of the wives indicated that their life style had not changed much from when they lived in China. Most of the respondents to this study eat Chinese food most of the time; play Chinese games; and watch Chinese TV programs. They also mentioned that they were open to American culture as well. They like going to different restaurants once a while, maybe watching football, and driving to somewhere else to take a vacation. This combination worked for them so far. One of my participants, Jin, 25, talked about how satisfied she was with her current life:

> "I think it all depends on your attitude and your personality. I, myself, am happy with my current life. I came here right after I graduated from school, and didn't have a job before. So I have nothing to lose, but a lot to gain. I feel gratitude about this opportunity. If my husband didn't choose to come to the U.S., perhaps I won't have a chance to experience this lifestyle. So I really cherish this opportunity to learn and get to know another world."

When asked about their plans for the future, they all claimed it depended on where their husbands would get a job after graduation. They did not have a strong preference where to live in the future; to return to China or stay in the U.S. However, they did mention that even if they

decided to settle down in the U.S., there was no worry about the adjustment, because they were just doing fine.

Conclusion/Discussion

Through this study, in-depth knowledge about the current life of the Chinese students' wives in a U.S. university setting has been gained. The major struggles expressed by Chinese female spouses in this study included the amount of time to spent alone, language fluency, and the availability of familiar foods.

Internet played a significant role in building and keeping social networks for the Chinese students' wives. The Internet blurred strong ties and weak ties, and helped to provide a coping mechanism for these housewives, in terms of addressing loneliness, boredom, and isolation, and in terms of maintaining social networks in China. It is because of the Internet that Chinese students' wives were able to keep closer and more frequently in contact with their far-flung family members and friends, thus sharing a "virtual" ethnic enclave for mutual support (Montgomery, 2008). Unlike the Japanese wives' network, which formed as a corporate body to obtain their desired resources (Toyokawa 2006), the Chinese wives sought to form their own networks individually. However, the new networks built after their relocation is primarily for their personal utilitarian function.

It is also the Internet that helped the wives adjust to the new environment by providing resources to sort out modern American society. This point may have implications for the scholarship on immigrant adjustment to new settings. Even though the Chinese students' wives still keep their old lifestyle, keep close connections with their co-ethnics, and only occasionally interact with the hosts, they somehow manage to get the support and information they need and feel content with their current lives. It is time to re-think what really matters in terms of

successful adjustment. Is it possible that the internet allows for sojourners to feel well enough integrated in a new environment even when they are apparently isolated? Additionally, are there any standardized patterns in terms of successful adjustment that can be applied to all sojourners?

The implications of this study can be applied in several ways. First, this study provides a better overview of the major problems and concerns of this specific group (Chinese students' wives in Michigan), so that the facilities of the university or other related organizations could provide better services that specifically intrigue their interests and meet their needs. Second, it provides a reference and comparative study for fellow scholars to investigate the social networks of other ethnic groups under a university setting. Last but not least, it opens a new window to look at the trend of ethnic community through "space" other than "place". With the affordability and popularity of the Internet, what Montgomery (2011) called a "virtual" ethnic enclave that enables sharing space with far-flung co-ethnics for mutual supports could be the major support system for newly relocated sojourners or immigrants.

There are some limitations about the representativeness of the sample. The types of social network and function may be different among the wives with children. Furthermore, the location matters. This study took place in a small city in the Midwest, where the Chinese population is limited. Results may be different in another geographical location, where a larger Chinese community exists.

REFERENCES

REFERENCES

Adelman, Mara B. 1988. "Cross-cultural adjustment: A theoretical perspective on social support." *International Journal of Intercultural Relations* 12:183-204.

Albrecht, T.L. and Mara B. Adelman. 1987. "Communicating social support: A Theoretical perspective." Pp. 18-40 in *Communicating social support*, edited by T. L. Albrecht, M. B. Adelman, and Associates. Newbury Park, CA: Sage.

Arnault, S.D. 2002. "Help-seeking and social support in Japanese sojourners." *Western Journal of Nursing Research* 24:295-306.

Berg, Bruce L. 2007. *Quallitative Research Methods for the Social Sciences*: Pearson Education, Inc.

Black, J. Stewart and Hal B Gregersen. 1991. "The other half of the picture: Antecedents of the spouse cross-cultral adjustment." *Journal of International Business Studies* 3:461-477.

Bradac, James J. 2001. "Theory comparison: Uncertainty reduction, problematic integration, uncertainty management, and other curious constructs." *Journal of Communication* 51:456-476.

Copeland, Anne P and Sara K Norell. 2002. "Spousal adjustment on international assignments: The role of social support." *International Journal of Intercultural Relations* 26:255-272.

De Verthelyi, Renata Frank 1995. "International students' spouses: Invisible sojourners in the culture shock literature." *International Journal of Intercultural Relations* 19:387-411.

Dunham, Philip J, Alan Hurshman, Elaine Litwin, and Joanne Gusella. 1998. "Computer-mediated social support: Single young mothers as a model system." *American Journal of Community Psychology* 26:281-306.

George, Sheba, Mariam. 2005. *When Women Come First: Gender and Class in Transnational Migration*: University of California Press.

Granovetter, Mark S. 1973. "The strength of weak ties." *The American Journal of Sociology* 78:1360-1380.

—. 1983. "The strength of weak ties: A network theory revisited." *Sociological Theory* 1:201-233.

Hayes, R.L. and H.R. Lin. 1994. "Coming to America: Developing social support systems for international students." *Journal of Multicultural Counseling and Development* 22:7-16.

Heikinheimo, P.S. and J.C.M. Shute. 1986. "The adaptation of foreign students: Student views and institutional implications." *Journal of College Student Personnel* 27:399-406.

Kim, Kyung-Hee, Haejin Yun, and Youngmin Yoon. 2009. "The Internet as a facilitator of cultural hybridization and interpersonal relationship management for Asian international students in South Korea." *Asian Journal of Communication* 19:152-169.

Locke, D.C. and V. Velasco. 1987. "Hospitality begins with the invitation: Counseling foreign students." *Journal of Multicultural Counseling and Development* 15:115-119.

Martens, Vonda Plett and Peter R. Grant. 2008. "A needs assessment of international students' wives." *Journal of Studies in International Education* 12:56-75.

Montgomery, Alesia F. 2008. "Virtual enclaves: The influence of alumni email lists on the workspaces of transnational software engineers." *Global Networks* 8:71-93.

Putnam, R. D. 2000. *Bowling alone: The collapse and revival of American community*. New York: Simon & Schuster.

Rheingold, Howard. 1993. *The virtual community: Homesteading on the electronic frontier*. Reading, MA: Addison- Wesley.

Schwartz, Charlotte Green and Merton J. Kahne. 1993. "Support for student and staff wives in social transition in a university setting." *International Journal of Intercultural Relations* 17:451-463.

Shin, J.K. 2002. "Help-seeking behaviors by Korean immigrants for depression." *Issues in Mental Health Nursing* 23:461-476.

Strauss, A.L. 1987. *Qualitative analysis for social scientists*. New York: Cambridge University Press.

Sullivan, C. F. 1997. "Cancer support groups in cyberplace: Are there gender differences in message functions." in *annual Central States Communication Association Convention*. St. Louis, Mo.

Toyokawa, Noriko. 2006. "The function of the social network formed by Japanese sojourners' wives in the United States." *International Journal of Intercultural Relations* 30:185-193.

Turner, J.W., J.A. Grube, and J Meyers. 2001. "Developing an optimal match within Online Communities: An exploration of CMC support communities and traditional support." *Journal of Communication* 51:231-251.

Vogel, Suzanne H. 1986. "Toward understanding the adjustment problems of foreign families in the college community: The case of Japanese wives at the Harvard university health services." *Journal of American College Health* 34:274-279.

Wellman, Barry. 2004. "The global village: Internet and community." *Idea&s*.

Winzelberg, A. 1997. "The analysis of an electronic support group for individuals with eating disorders." *Computers in Human Behavior* 13:393-407.

Wright, Kevin B. 1999. "Computer-mediated support groups: An examination of relationships among social support, perceived stress, and coping strategies." *Communication Quarterly* 47:402-414.

Ye, Jiali. 2006. "Traditional and online support networks in the cross-cultural adaptation of Chinese international students in the United States." *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication* 11:863-876.

Zhou, Min. 1992. *Chinatown: The Socioeconomic Potential of an Urban Enclave*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press.