Paths to Belonging: How Chinese Parachute Kids Construct Identity Across Borders

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Paths to Belonging: How Chinese Parachute Kids Construct Identity Across Borders

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Submitted to the Department of Sociology of Pitzer College and Department of Asian American Studies of the Claremont Colleges in Fulfillment of the Requirements of the Senior Thesis

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ABSTRACT

Chinese parachute kids, defined as unaccompanied minor who study in foreign countries alone while their parents remain in China, represent a unique segment of international students. This research specifically focusing on Chinese parachute kids studying in the U.S. Grounded in interviews with nineteen individuals who were once parachute kids, this study challenges the popular view that all international students have monolithic experiences especially within the assimilationist framework (see Terminology and Definitions on page 6 for additional clarification).

I propose a typology of three orientations (the heritage, the instrumental, and the global) and argue that Chinese parachute kids’ orientation determines their sense of belonging and their approaches to embeddedness in American education system. Ultimately, this study suggests that Chinese parachute kids are a distinct “mobile” group that achieve their belonging in the U.S. in multiple pathways.

Keywords: parachute kid, international student, Chinese, immigrant adaptation, transnationalism, belonging, identity, American culture, education, social capital, mobility, assimilation
INTRODUCTION

This study focuses on the belongingness of Chinese parachute kids as it has both personal and social significance. I document the diverse experiences of Chinese parachute kids and explore the question of belongingness. Where do they feel they belong? What determined their sense of belongingness? And what does this belongingness mean to them? I came to the United States in sixth grade while my parents remained in China. Throughout my parachute journey, I have lived with my aunt, uncle, and with a host family. The unstable living environment and lack of parental supervision and guidance shaped my adolescent experience. The struggle of fitting into school was also challenging and impactful. My experience as a parachute kid has influenced me until today.

Sociology and Asian American Studies provided me with framework to analyze my experience. Through my early pilot literature review and interviews, I realized that parachute kids are an understudied topic in the scholarships as most scholars focus on the academic attainment and psychological adjustment of parachute kids. Through my pilot interview, I observed that most parachute kids experience an identity crisis at an early stage and, as adults, were uncertain about their social positions in both China and America. Parachute kids are almost always in the "in-between" situation. Some parachute kids fear being "different," while others aim to be "special." Ultimately, the complexity between external and internal influences on parachute kids' identity and formation process has been understudied. As identity is a relatively abstract concept, I decided to focus on belongingness for this project. Belongingness is highly linked to identity as well as personal orientations towards one’s place in society.

Three orientations emerged throughout the interviews, including the instrumental, the heritage, and the global. The three types of orientation show that the parachute kids' frame of
reference is influenced by many factors such as expectations, past and present experiences, value propositions, family backgrounds, and available resources. This typology shows that parachute kids are a diverse group where members within the group look at the world differently. Furthermore, three sub-typology of Chinese parachute kids' approaches to embeddedness in the American educational system emerged in the later stage of the interview. These three approaches are: integration, acquisition, and hybridization.

Questions related to belongingness and identity are something that we all encounter. Belongingness is built upon who we are and determines where we will settle and who we will be with. Understanding belongingness of Chinese parachute kids can apply to categories beyond, such as in international student studies, immigrant adaption studies, adolescence studies, transnational studies, cultural studies, development studies, and education.

**Terminology and Definitions**

In this thesis, the terms “Chinese parachute kid,” “international student,” “Chinese student,” and “Chinese American” all represent different groups of people. For clarity, I provide a list of important terms and definitions here. The definitions provided here do not represent a complete definition of the terms. However, each definition accurately describes the context and meaning of each term in relation to this thesis. Distinguishing these terms is important because it highlights the specific roots and routes of parachute kids.

- **Chinese parachute kids**: students born in China and came to the U.S. as a minor without their parents.
- **International student**: a foreign-born student who studies in the U.S. with an F-1 study VISA, often at college level.
• **Chinese student**: Chinese student who is born in China. The term Chinese student includes Chinese parachute kids and Chinese students who came to the U.S. as adults, often attending undergrad or grad school.

• **Chinese American or American-born Chinese (ABC)**: Chinese born in the U.S., often an American citizen or permanent resident of the U.S.

**LITERATURE REVIEW**

**Introduction**

Anchoring my interests in how Chinese parachute kids embedded themselves in the U.S. educational system and what determines their sense of belonging in the U.S., this literature review synthesizes the sociological literature that provides meaningful analysis about immigrant adaptation, assimilation theory, immigrant children, transnationalism, and belongingness. The literature review aims to explore theoretical frameworks, different perspectives, and related topics regarding the experience of parachute kids in the U.S. and the influence of these experiences on their frame of reference and sense of belonging. The review also introduces the concept of social capital early on, as defined by Coleman (1998), to frame the discussion of parachute kids' experiences within the context of their available social networks and resources.

Most existing research on parachute kids focuses on psychological and behavioral adjustment and outcomes and lacks contextual analysis and nuances of individual subjective experiences. Furthermore, most studies of Chinese parachute kids blend into the category of international students and 1.5- or second-generation Asian immigrants. Understanding the experience of Chinese parachute kids is significant as it captures a unique immigrant group that is “mobile,” and it shows a micro picture of many contemporary macro phenomena, such as
globalization and transnationalism. The experience of Chinese parachute kids also covers sub-themes relevant to everyone’s lives, including identity formation, adaptation, socialization, culture and language, development in the coming of age, parenting, and education.

The first section of this literature review focuses on the phenomenon and the characteristics of parachute kids and adolescents. The section will also cover the literature on how belongingness influences the adolescent experience and introduces the framework of social capital. The knowledge about the characteristics of parachute kids and adolescents and how belongingness plays a part will set the foundation for understanding the background and experience of parachute kids.

The second section of this review provides an overview of the existing immigrant adaptation theory to introduce the underlying structure that shaped immigrant experience and expectations as they came to the U.S. The section begins by reviewing existing assimilation theories, including the classical and segmented assimilation theories. Recent analyses and studies about the assimilation theory will also be highlighted to provide a more thorough picture of the application of the theory. The second section also covers relevant concepts such as transnationalism that aim to provide a better contextual understanding of the experiences and daily practices of the “mobile” immigrants, such as the Chinese parachute kids. That knowledge will frame the understanding of immigrant adaptation studies in the context of the U.S.

**The Phenomenon of Parachute Kids**

As the leader in the world's business and education, the U.S. has always been a top destination for studying abroad. Every year, millions of international students from all over the world come to America with an F-1 student visa and pursue education in different states,
schools, and programs. Students studying abroad in the U.S. are called "the exchange student" or "the international student." The term "international student" has been widely linked to higher education, and international students in primary or secondary education are often ignored due to their small number. "Parachute kids" refers to underage students attending primary or secondary school in a foreign country while their parents stay in their home country. While parachute kids come from various parts of the globe, include China, Taiwan, Korea, Japan, and even Europe. This study focuses on ones who come from China (Chiang-Hom 2004:144).

In Chinese, parachute kids are referred to as "little overseas students "or "小留学生." Unlike the commonly referred "international students," who are mostly above eighteen years old when they come to America, parachute kids are minors who are below eighteen years old. Parachute kids have limited residency options as unaccompanied minors in the United States. Most parachute kids live with a host family if attending day school and live in a student's dorm if they attend boarding school. Living with relatives is another option if parachute kids' families have relatives in the United States. There are also rare cases where parachute kids live alone.

The phenomenon of parachute kids first emerged in the 1980s. The emergence of the parachute kids parallels the inflow of Asian immigrants in the U.S. and the uprising of Asian economies. The 1965 Immigration Act and the act's revision in 1990 led to rapid growth in the Asian population and a rise in the number of professional immigrants by increasing the quota of Chinese immigrants admitted into the U.S. (Tsong 2008:366). Furthermore, the year 1979 marked the normalization of China-U.S. relations. It was also the year of the economic and emigration opening of the Republic of China. Chinese students began studying abroad in the U.S., and the newly wealthy Chinese started pursuing transnational mobility for their families, especially a global education for their children (Lan 2018:34).
Most Chinese parachute kids are from middle-class or upper-class families with parents with higher education degrees and occupational statuses. On the one hand, parachute kids' parents have the financial resources to send their kids to study abroad in the U.S. On the other hand, Chinese parents chose to remain in China and "parachute" their kids as a strategy to maintain their socioeconomic status and fulfill financial and family obligations while having their kids study in the U.S. (Chiang-Hom 2004:145). Zhou and Lee (2004) also noted that the long-distance nature of the family relationship could alleviate the pressure of family expectations and regulations on the kids. By staying in China, the parents of parachute kids avoid the challenges related to migration, such as inadequate English proficiency, familiarity with American culture, and understanding of the host society. Besides pursuing better education, Cheng (2020) suggested that status anxiety is another reason Chinese middle-class parents send their kids to study abroad. The process of social stratification in China has produced a deep sense of insecurity and restlessness in the consciousness of the average Chinese. For the anxious middle class, studying abroad is a way to create new opportunities for differentiation and may allow already privileged individuals to maintain their class status.

The U.S. has been the most preferred destination for international students because of its reputed quality of education, easily learned and widely used language, and the already existing co-ethnic network (Perkins 2014:246). The developed economic conditions and greater freedom in life and politics are other incentives for individuals to choose to study abroad in the U.S. Hosting many prestigious and highly ranked universities, America is also a destination that will maximize parents' return on education investment (Perkins 2014:251). Furthermore, compared with China's competitive, hierarchical, academic, and exam-oriented education system, the U.S. education system is more flexible and liberal (Zhou 1998:688). On the other hand, the growth of
the Asian immigrant population in the U.S. provided Asian families with more overseas relatives and connections. Cities with Asian ethnic enclaves, such as San Francisco, New York, Los Angeles, and Chicago, also made the U.S. seem less foreign to Asians (Hom 2002:35).

As parachute kids are a relatively new concept and a very nuanced group in the 1980s, there were limited scholarships for parachute kids in general and even less research specifically targeting Chinese parachute kids. Most scholarships categorize parachute kids as a single group and focus on analyzing parachute kids as a phenomenon centering on the historical context and the factors within the trend. On the other hand, scholarships that look at parachute kids as a single group and as a phenomenon lose the nuances and the emotion of the individual in the group. Also, most analyses of parachute kids focus on the social, economic, and family factors instead of the individual's day-to-day experience.

**Parachute Kids Experience**

Current scholarship on parachute kids has limited analysis of the daily experience, the emotion, the development, and the rationale of action and ideas of the parachute kids. Within the literature focusing on parachute kids, scholars mainly analyze the issue from a psychological or educational perspective. Scholars also tend to categorize parachute kids as international students, with an emphasis on the college setting, or 1.5 or second-generation Asian American focusing on adaptation and acculturation.

Although studies focusing on Chinese American youth can sometimes apply to the Chinese parachute kids' experience, as the two groups shared some cultural and social similarities, Chinese parachute kids and Chinese American youth are in different positions as they have different family compositions, identities, and frames of reference. For example, social-
economic status is essential in the adaptation approach in Chinese parachute kids and second-generation Chinese Americans. Lan (2018) observed that children of higher-socioeconomic-status immigrant families are especially likely to visit their countries of origin frequently. Leslie Wang coined the term "strategic in-betweenness" to show how Chinese American consciously maneuver the "socially ambiguous space between cultures" to their benefit. For example, as a parent brought economic capital earned in Asia to America to cultivate cultural capital in the next generation, in reverse, the youth can return to Asia and convert their ethnic heritage and cultural advantages into market gains (Lan 2018:42). Although the studies by Lan and Wang focus on Asian American and immigrant families, the result can apply to the Chinese parachute kids in some extent as both groups are in the "in-between" situation. What's different is that while the Chinese parachute kids shared the same economic status as the Chinese American immigrants, the cultural and social experiences of the two groups are distinct. Chinese parachute kids are in the U.S. alone and have very little social or cultural capital in the new environment. In comparison, Chinese Americans can acquire social and cultural capital from the family and the local community. To some extent, Chinese parachute kids might have completely different experiences than Chinese Americans as their advantages and identity are rooted in different countries.

The framework of social capital provides a social analysis of parachute kids' experiences. As defined by Coleman (1998), social capital refers to the structure of relationships between and among individuals, which can facilitate or constrain action. Social capital encompasses "obligations, expectations, information channels, and norms" (Coleman 1998:103). As parents are physically absent in the U.S., parachute kids experience what Coleman called "structural deficiency." As a result, Chinese parachute kids must establish social capital independently, as
no social capital is available outside of school. Furthermore, the absence of parents also hinders parachute kids' access to adult human capital as children's access to the adult's human capital is often through the social capital within the family. In addition, parachute kids might feel pressure to fit into the school as the school is a "closure" setting which can easily constrain an individual’s actions and establish effective norms (Coleman 1998:104). Most of all, parachute children must navigate the universal “labor of growing up” with the absent of their parents, community, and social networks. Thus, a study of parachute children can also shed important light on life course development generally.

Using the social capital framework, Hoff (2019) pointed out that the ultimate adjustment for parachute kids is moving from a privileged to a disadvantaged situation. In contrast to their easy and comfortable life in China with financial resources and social networks, Chinese parachute kids lose their sense of entitlement and become disadvantaged in America as they are forced to cut off their social connections and network within China (Cheng 2020: 838). Financial resources are one of the few privileges they could bring over from China (Cheng 2020:836). Chiang-Hom (2004) shared a similar view with Hoff in that parachute kids lose their cultural capital advantage once they come to the U.S. as they would often find themselves categorized and ridiculed as racialized minorities by their U.S.-born peers (Chiang-Hom 2004:143). The loss of cultural and social capital lead to parachute kids’ status change from the mainstream and the dominant group to the marginalized and minority group. Thus, parachute kids’ adaptation process is also a process of reacquiring their social position as well as cultural and social capital. The social and cultural capital framework suggests the structural changes in the life of parachute kids as they came to the U.S. The framework depicted the changes in parachute kids’ social position from China to the U.S. through the perspective of cultural and social capital.
Some scholars analyze the approach and strategy parachute kids take in adapting to the United States. However, most studies are done within the field of psychology and are mainly scenario-based, focusing on how certain situations or relationships influence an individual’s behavior or mental health. Furthermore, studies that focusing on parachute kids' emotions mainly centered around family and peer relationships while one's inner emotions, confusion, struggle, and dissonance have been insufficiently addressed.

Parachute kids actively rebuild their social support networks to include those who understand the complexities and hardships of adjusting to a new culture and consciously develop in-group solidarity to assuage the negative effects of prejudice, discrimination, and rejection from U.S.-born peers (Chiang-Hom 2004:151). As a result, Chinese parachute kids often befriend other foreign-born youth rather than U.S.-born Chinese, Asian, or white youth because they share similar backgrounds, experiences, and an appreciation for a culture other than the American one (Shih 1998). They have an instant connection with those who speak their language, experienced similar childhoods, share similar beliefs and values, observe the same norms and customs, and follow the same popular culture from their homelands, such as music, movies, and books. Perhaps most importantly, foreign-born youth share the same disorienting effect and loss associated with transplanting to a new place. These shared experiences give them a common frame of reference (Chiang-Hom 2004:152). Thus, parachute kids remain critical of American culture and do not subscribe to the belief that becoming American is necessarily positive or the only path to getting ahead (Chiang-Hom 2004:156). Rather than internalizing rejection or inferiority, Chinese parachute kids reverse the situation and actively reject mainstream American culture and their U.S.-born peers.
Tsong (2008) illustrated how the absence of parents influences parachute kids negatively in emotion. Parachute kids living in the U.S. without parents take on a great deal of responsibility that frequently forces them to grow quickly and possibly prematurely. Parachute kids assume greater responsibilities left unfulfilled by the absent parent, such as paying the bills and managing documents (Tsong 2008: 371). The lack of adult guidance and care creates an emotional vacuum for parachute kids (Cheng 2020:833). Furthermore, because of the lack of parental supervision, parachute kids often have more freedom than other adolescents. To fulfill the emotional vacuum of family and belonging, parachute kids spend considerable time hanging out with friends and forming a strong attachment with their peer group (Chiang-Hom 2004:150).

Chiang-Hom and Tsong's work illustrates the social network-building process of the Chinese parachute kids and analyzes the various factors that influence the process, including background, experiences, and culture. However, the study assumes that all parachute kids have a monolithic experience that tends to be negative and that everyone is willing to build their social network actively. A study that covers a spectrum of parachute kids' experiences that shows the difference among the members will help us to understand parachute kids as a distinct and diverse group.

Social relation with the host family is another common topic within the scholarship of parachute kids. Cheng (2020) suggested that parachute kids and host families’ relationships ranged from “peaceful coexistence” in which two sides did not have much conflict or communication to a real harmonious relationship where they liked and helped each other (Cheng 2020:832). Tensions occur as the two sides have different expectations and living habits, particularly when the host family does not fulfill their responsibilities and parachute kids disobey. Firstly, American host families often adopt a Euro-centric American family ideology that emphasizes the display of affection, while Chinese family ideology emphasizes instrumental
forms of love (Pyke 2000: 248). With different family ideologies, parachute kids and the host family also subscribe to different values and expectations regarding a family relationship. It is also worth noting that although the host family is termed “family,” many parachute kids view the relationship more as a business than a family one.

Overall, many studies were done on the adaptation approach and strategy that parachute kids use, but most studies only focused on one group within a few scenarios. More research is needed on differences in the adaptation approach that parachute kids take and the changes in their sense of belongingness as they adapt to the American educational system.

**Adolescent and Belongingness**

Chinese parachute kids are different from the more commonly known "international student" as Chinese parachute kids came to the United States as adolescents in either middle or high school. As adolescents, Chinese parachute kids must deal with double tasks, including developing and adapting to the new environment. Adolescence is a period of life span, also a relatively new concept that emerged at the beginning of the twentieth century. In the adolescent stage, one is "desiring greater autonomy, becoming more sensitive to peer influence, and questioning adult authority and limits" (Furstenberg 2001). At the same time, adolescent is treated neither as adults nor as children, they became the "marginal man" that does not belong to any of the groups, and they are uncertain about their belonging (Lewin 1951:143). Lewin also noted that the situation of "marginal man" also occurs for members of an underprivilege minority group and individual in the "marginal" position often experience "emotional instability and sensitivity" and "tend to unbalance behavior, to either boisterousness or shyness, exhibiting too much tension. A frequency shift between extremes of contradictory behavior" (Lewin 143). The
"marginal" character as an adolescent and the "marginal" character as a foreigner makes the Chinese parachute kids as a double "marginal" man.

Fischhoff (2002) pointed out that "adolescents face special sources of vulnerability as they expand their lives into domains beyond their guardian's control." Adolescents' level of vulnerability depends on their environment, the efforts made by society to protect them, and their understanding of reality. Furthermore, the decisions and judgments about reality are more difficult for an adolescent when the environment is novel, the choices are discrete, the consequences are irreversible, and the sources of authority are in doubt (Fischhoff 2002). Chinese parachute kids deal with all factors that add to the complexity of understanding reality and making judgments. Therefore, Chinese parachute kids are more vulnerable in judgment-making than American adolescents. The literature shows adolescents' "marginal" and vulnerable characters and the challenges they might experience. The situation and struggles of the adolescent apply to the experience of Chinese parachute kids and further demonstrate the importance of acknowledging parachute kids as different from international students.

Many psychological studies have shown that belongingness is a fundamental, powerful, and pervasive motivation for the individual as humans are "not only social animals but also rational animals (Leary and Cox, 2008:38). Everyone has the needs within human nature to form some minimum, significant and positive interpersonal relationship. Baumeister and Leary (1995) suggested that individuals who share similarities and experiences or have frequent interactions are more likely to develop friendships or other attachments. On the other sides, individuals may also resist ending an attachment even when there are no practical or tangible benefits to maintaining the relationship. An individual's need to belong influences one's cognition and emotion and ultimately influences one's behavior (Baumeister and Leary 1995). Baumeister and
Leary have briefly mentioned the need to belong also influences one's behavior. Still, there needs to be a follow-up explanation of the behaviors and how one's behavior is influenced by the need to belong. Further study on the sociocultural aspect of belonging will better explain how the need to belong influence an individual's behavior and in which way across different setting.

**Immigrant Adaptation**

Although not immigrants in the traditional sense, Chinese parachute kids are often subjected to the same societal expectations in the U.S., being perceived and treated as part of the immigrant community. Regardless of their temporary or permanent status, Chinese parachute kids face pressures to adapt in ways like other immigrants, a process extensively documented in immigrant adaptation scholarship.

**Classical Assimilation**

Classical assimilationists such as Milton Gordon (1964) and Robert Park (1928) suggested immigrant adaptation as a linear process and saw 'Anglo-conformity' as the most prevalent ideology of assimilation in American history. Within the linear hierarchy in America, outsiders are at the bottom, and the children of immigrants are expected to gradually lose their ethnic and cultural identity as they assimilate into American society (Bankston and Zhou 1997). Scholars believe that assimilation is more likely to occur in the 1.5 or the second-generation immigrant and that the first-generation immigrants are closer to the accommodation model (Rumbaut 2001).

Classical assimilationists also vary in their approach to analyzing immigrant adaptation. Robert Park placed immigrants as "marginal men" who lived in two worlds. Park assumed that
immigrants are in a dichotomy situation that will eventually discard "old habits" and form new ones (Park 1928:893). Park's concept of "marginal men" is a relative concept, as Park placed American culture in the center, the immigrant who carries a different ethnic culture does not fall in the center, and they become the "marginal man." It's important to acknowledge that the "marginality" depends on the frame of reference.

In *Italian or American? The Second Generation in Conflict*, Child (1943) studied second-generation Italians’ assimilation in the U.S. Child took social conditions into consideration and analyzed the individual's reactions to the conflict of being ethnic and becoming American. Child's adaptation theory also analyzes how the acceptance and attitude of the American population toward the Italian immigrants influence Italian immigrants’ ability to assimilate. For example, Italian cuisine is one of the most persistent traits in Italian culture because of the rewarding and non-punishing attitude of the American population (Child 1943:1979). The dilemma faced by young Italian Americans was whether to abandon the cultural heritage of their parents in favor of assimilating into American culture or to maintain Italian ways at the expense of upward mobility. Based on this dilemma, Child established a typology of different ways immigrant children respond to the conflicting cultural values or goals of their ethnic groups and those of the larger society. There is the rebel reaction in which one rebels and abandons their ethnic membership, the in-group reaction in which immigrant youth accept and confirm the ethnic community, and finally the apathetic reaction in which individuals escape from the conflict by "de-emotionalizing symbols of facts relating to nationalities" (Child 1943: 71-72). Child argues that individual attributes such as experiences and interpretation about the consequences of the approach determine which ways one will choose. Child also suggests that the rebel is best adjusted to American society because of their willingness to abandon the old
culture and to embrace the new one. Although Child takes social conditions and personal attributes into consideration, the theory itself is still very American-centric by emphasizing assimilation into American society and the superiority of American culture. Child contends that there is still just one standard path toward assimilation.

In *Assimilation in American Life*, Milton Gordon (1964) suggested that America is a cultural "melting pot" and that immigrants will gradually be melting into the pot over generations. Gordon sees the cultural patterns of "middle-class white protestant Americans "as the "core culture" of America (Gordon, 1964:74). He defines assimilation as a minority group's adaptation to the "cultural patterns" of the host society. Gordon proposes that there are two types of assimilation: structural and cultural assimilation or acculturation. Acculturation is the first step in the process of assimilation, but it does not guarantee structural assimilation that provides entrance to the host society (Gordon 1964:77). For Gordon, structural assimilation is the "keystone of the arch of assimilation" that will inevitably lead to other stages of assimilation (Gordon, 1964:81). The disappearance of ethnic values and characteristics is a price of structural assimilation. Gordon suggests that over time, the most ethnic group will lose all their distinctive traits and cease to exist as an ethnic group as they pass through the stages of assimilation, eventually intermarrying with the majority population and entering institutions on a primary-group level. Gordon hints that structural assimilation is the "true" assimilation and that immigrants should pursue structural assimilation, although the cost could be the loss of their ethnic identity.

Traditional assimilation theories have received many criticisms about their linear and binary process. Alba and Nee (2003) critiqued the one-sidedness of the traditional assimilation theory and how the theory has overlooked the value and sustainability of minority culture and
assumed the superiority of Anglo-American culture. The American mainstream originated with the colonial northern European settlers and has evolved through the incremental inclusion of ethnic and racial groups. In the middle of the twentieth century, the “melting pot” as metaphor was at its apogee, and assimilation was integral to Americans’ self-understanding (Alba and Nee 2003, 12). Alba and Nee reconceptualize the American mainstream as one that may contain not just the middle-class or affluent White suburbanites but also working-class and poor urban racial minorities. By reconceptualizing American culture, Alba and Nee allow for the possibility that newcomers can assimilate into different parts of society. In line with Alba and Nee’s argument, Chinese parachute kids' conception of the American mainstream is mainly based on culture and national origin rather than socioeconomic class. Chinese parachute kids classify students at school by "Chinese student," "international student," and "local student," which echoes Alba and Nee's conception of the American mainstream that contains not just the middle and affluent white but also the working class and poor urban racial minorities.

Hirschman and Falcon (1985) analyze the educational attainment of religious and ethnic groups in the U.S. They suggest that educational outcomes are not significantly impacted by either the generation or the length of U.S. residence. Instead, education attainment is more strongly influenced by social and human capital than factors such as generation or length of residence in the U.S. Children of highly educated immigrants demonstrate consistently better academic performance than the fourth or fifth generation of students whose ancestors were poorly educated (Zhou 1997). Chinese parachute kids' educational attainment is intricately linked to their family's socioeconomic status and human capital, which acts as a buffer in adapting to American society. This perspective challenges the traditional view of assimilation as an individual endeavor, underscoring the importance of social context in immigrant adaptation.
Echoing Durkheim's (2002) notion of integration, where individuals highly integrated into a group adopt its values and norms, this study shows that parachute kids' adaptation is influenced by the broader societal framework, including the pressures to assimilate, which can impact their ethnic identity and self-esteem.

**Segmented Assimilation**

As an alternative to the classical assimilation theory and a response to the rise of the new second generation, Portes and Zhou (1993) propose the segmented assimilation theory that suggests there is not just one singular route to assimilation, but multiple pathways. The differences in the passing of immigrants' cultural, social, human, and financial capital and different opportunity structures from first-generation to later generations resulted in several distinct paths toward incorporation. The segmented assimilation challenges the uniform characterization of the American mainstream as Portes and Zhou view American society as segmented by race and class rather than formed around an undifferentiated White middle-class core (Portes and Zhou, 1993). The segmented assimilation framework places the process of becoming American in terms of both acculturation and economic adaptation. The process is composed of three multidirectional patterns: 1) upward mobility pattern, 2) downward mobility pattern, 3) integration into Middle-class America (Zhou, 1997). Portes and Zhou take social context into consideration and suggest that immigrants' strong ties within the co-ethnic community may not always be a symptom of escapism but "the best strategy for capitalizing on otherwise unavailable material and moral resources" (Portes and Zhou 1993). The default of segmented assimilation is that second-generation immigrants are "becoming American," but in
the case of Chinese parachute kids, none of the participants ever said that they are American or ever want to be American.

Bankston and Zhou's (1997) study on the social adjustment of Vietnamese American adolescents in New Orleans supported the segmented assimilation framework. Vietnamese American adolescent experience shows that "the benefits of Americanization depend entirely on which segment of American society absorbs new immigrants. As new immigrants are often at the bottom of the American hierarchy, they are also often absorbed in the least-privileged segment of American society. Therefore, Americanization disadvantaged many immigrant youths (Portes and Zhou, 1993). As an alternative to the disadvantage of Americanization, immigrant groups find it more advantageous to channel their kids to their ethnic network and increase solidarity and cooperation within the immigrant community. The study also highlights the significant role of peer groups in shaping the adaptation of young Vietnamese Americans, surpassing the influence of individual and family characteristics. While international students have historically not been considered “migrants,” I include discussions on migration here because new research suggests that international students who stay in the U.S. for prolonged periods experience many aspects of life like those of children of immigrants.

On the other hand, family characteristics and involvement in ethnic communities affect adaptation indirectly by channeling young people away from undesired groups. The approach to acculturation also influences family relationships. Portes and Rumbaut (1996) show that generation consonance takes place when parents and children remain unacculturated or become acculturated at the same rate. In contrast, generational dissonance arises when children do not match the levels of parental acculturation or comply with parental guidance, resulting in role reversal and increased conflicts between parents and children. Parachute kids experience fewer
intergenerational conflicts as they see their parents with a different frame of reference that centers on Chinese culture and values instead of American culture and values. They are rarely against parental expectations as they share similar expectations, and their parents are their biggest sponsors. Furthermore, many parachute kids build a better relationship with their parents after they come to America as the parental relationship shifted from control and support to mainly support.

Segmented assimilation has offered us an alternative way to look at immigrant adaptation that considers social context and the diversity of the immigrant groups’ experiences. While classical assimilation expects immigrants to engage in structural assimilation, segmented assimilation highlights the possibility of immigrants assimilating into different sectors of American society. However, the two frameworks shared a common assumption that immigrants will stay in the U.S. permanently and that the default for immigrant adaptation is assimilating into the American society. Thus, both of these frameworks ignore a large group of immigrants who are "mobile" and travel between countries. For this reason, the optics of transnationalism and globalization are perhaps more useful and salient in the analysis of lives in motion, such as parachute children. These optics have gained momentum in the past 30 years in research on immigration.

Recent Studies on Immigrant Adaptation

Overall, assimilation still represents the primary process in today's immigrant adaptation study and often overlook mobility as a possibility. Zhou and Lee (2007) point out that both the public and the research community commonly assume that assimilation carries normative implications, implying that immigrant "should become more like native-born, non-Hispanic,
White Americans" (2007:193). The American societal norms set the white American middle class as the reference group that newcomers should compare. As a result, non-white ethnic groups are subject to "outsiders" description, and how other perceive them influence their identity (Zhou and Lee, 2007). Coming to America, Chinese parachute kids are given new labels such as Asian and foreigner. Like the Asian American youth, the label Asian also constrains the identity option of the Chinese parachute kids (Zhou and Lee, 2004; Zhou, 2004). In the field of sociology and Asian American studies, many immigrant youth studies have focused on how Asian American youth construct their identity, while the foreign-born Asian youth, like the Chinese parachute kids' identity formation process, is not widely discussed (Waters 1999; Kasinitz et al., 2004; Zhou and Lee, 2004). While U.S.-born Asians must constantly assert their native-born status to others who may identify all Asians as immigrants, Chinese parachute kids face a different identity dilemma, that of belongingness. Parachute kids have their own modes and pathways of incorporation that diverge from the adult immigrant, their native-born white American peers, and the second-generation immigrant.

Recent scholarships focusing on parachute kids' adaptation has primarily focused on areas like family relationships, academic outcomes, and psychological well-being (Xie, 2011; Zhou and Lee, 2004; Greenman, 2011; Portes, 2005; Haller, 2011; Stodolska, 2008). Haller (2011) suggested that external intervention has a significant positive influence on immigrant youth. A proactive stance by teachers and counselors and external voluntary support programs can make a significant difference in helping immigrant youth overcome the handicaps of a negative mode of incorporation. Different from other scholars, Gans (2007) proposed a new way of looking at assimilation by reversing the relationship between assimilation and mobility and asking, "whether upward mobility could bring about assimilation and acculturation" (158). He
found that economic mobility encourages acculturation and assimilation. Gans also brought up the term "mobile immigrants" and pointed out that occupationally mobile immigrants might turn to American practices in business while maintaining immigrant ways at home, suggesting transitional and mobile ways of immigrant adaptation.

**Gaps, Limitations, and Further Research**

In summary, the literature on immigration and children adaptation offers keen insights in analyzing the characteristics and phenomenon of parachute kids, the experience of parachute kids and adolescents, and the assimilation framework. The literature builds a foundation for understanding parachute kids as a group and knowledge of immigrant adaptation theory. However, the current scholarship on immigrant adaptation has ignored the large and growing population of people on the move. I added to the discussion of immigrant adaptation by showing that parachute kids represent a distinct group among transnational and global subjects in the new economy. Segmented assimilation helps us learn about the adaptation of the youth in the U.S., but one of the shortcomings of segmented assimilation is that it doesn’t count the people who are mobile but are still embedded in U.S. life. Segmented assimilation assumes people who came to the U.S. will then be settled. It doesn’t include the complex reality of the mobile immigrants, such as the international student, the children of contract workers, and global businessmen and women.

Building upon previous literature on immigrant adaptation and parachute kids, one of the major purposes of this thesis is to demonstrate how Chinese parachute kids are a unique “mobile” group with a complex orientation that shapes their daily life and experience. The second purpose of this thesis is to show the complex, ambiguous, and often contradictory
emotions that Chinese parachute kids feel as they try to embed into the American society. And last, this thesis also aims to demonstrate how learning the life of parachute children can lead to a better understanding of immigrant adaption generally.

**RESEARCH METHODS**

Centering on sense of belongingness, this research utilized a qualitative method with open-ended semi-structured interviews to explore personal narratives while including a spectrum of experiences of the Chinese parachute kids. A total of nineteen interviews were conducted over the course of one semester, beginning in January 2023 and ending in April 2023. Interviews were conducted in the language of the participant's choice, either in English or Mandarin or using both languages. As the principal investigator, I am fluent in both English and Mandarin. The interview took place online over Zoom or face-to-face, based on the participant's choice. Face-to-face interviews were conducted at the participant's convenience, often in the participant's apartments or nearby restaurants.

The interview was designed to be between one hour to one and a half hours long. In practice, each interview took between one and a half hours to two hours. The interview lasted longer than expected in practice because participants needed extra time to recall their middle school or high school memory in the interview. Many participants also expressed how they never really thought of these questions such as belongingness and their adaptation approach and they needed extra time to reflect their past experience or further clarification about the question. The interview contains twelve primary questions, and each primary question contains a subset of follow up questions. Questions were broken into four sections include: background, parachute experience, belongingness, and identity. Demographic information was collected in the end of
the interview. The interview guide served as a reference instead of a strict procedure; the exact questions and the order of questions for each participant varied. The interview guide is attached in the Appendix.

The study was approved by the Pitzer Institutional Review Board. To protect the participant's rights, each participant was given a consent form prior to participation and their signature was required upon participating. During the interview, I asked for participants' verbal consent before I started to record the interview and all interview recording was saved in a private password-protected folder. I was the only one who had access to the recording. The interview recording was then transcribed with the help of the Chinese transcription software "Xunfei Yuji."

Furthermore, all participants' quotes in this thesis were either originally in English or were translated from Chinese into English according to their original meaning. All translation was done by me with the help of the English and Chinese dictionary. To protect participants, all participants are given a pseudonym and I have edited all identifiable information in the writing stage.

In this research, the term "Chinese parachute kid" was defined as adolescent students from China who study abroad in the U.S. while their parents stay in China. All participants in this study were recruited through my personal social network, given my own experience of being a parachute child earlier in my life. Participants were selected based on the criteria of age, nationality, and parachuting experience. All nineteen participants are former parachute kids who were born in China. I chose to do nineteen interviews for this study as it was a good starting number to observe for potential pattern and typology within the parachute kids while covers a spectrum of experiences. I chose to interview former parachute kids instead of current parachute kids as they will have a more reflective and thorough perspectives and understanding of their
parachuting experience, American culture, and sense of belonging. To recruit participants, I sent out interview invitations and a brief introduction about the research project to nineteen potential participants through WeChat private message. All nineteen participants agree to participate in the study.

Among the nineteen participants, eleven are female, and eight are male, the ratio parallel with the slightly higher number of Chinese female parachute kids in reality. The age of participants ranges from twenty to twenty-eight years old who are currently in either college, grad school, or early career stage. Participants came to the U.S. in elementary, middle, or high school. When they were parachute kids, four participants attended boarding school, and fifteen participants attended day school. Participants lived with relatives, host families (paid caretakers), or in a student dorm until they attended college. Geographically, the school participants attended as parachute kids are across the U.S., including California, Massachusetts, Texas, Maine, Nevada, Florida, and Tennessee. All nineteen participants attended four-year universities in the U.S. Two are currently in a master's program, and one is in a Ph.D. program. Currently, sixteen participants are in the U.S. The remaining three participants are in Brazil, Japan, and China.

Socioeconomically, all nineteen participants are from affluent Chinese families (middle class or above) who can sponsor their children to attend private school in the U.S, is typical of the larger parachute kids’ phenomenon. Participants hold either an F-1 student visa or green card (permanent resident). Participants were born in the era of the One Child Policy in China, which restricts each family to having only one kid. As a result, fifteen participants in this study are only children in their families. Sixteen participants are from big cities such as Beijing, Shanghai, and Shenzhen in China, and three are from small cities in China. None of the participants in this study are married, and all their parents are still in China today.
This study has no field observation as the project focuses on the participants' past experiences and personal interpretations instead of behavior and relationship patterns. As the primary investigator, I have known all participants for many years. I have known one participant since elementary school, twelve participants since high school, and the remaining six participants since college. The personal relationship and shared experience with the participants helped me shorten the rapport-building process.

After collecting data from the interviews, I coded the data based on themes and sub-themes in my research. The coding was done conventionally by hand and using an Excel sheet. Three main themes include adaptation, belongingness, and frame of reference. Sub-theme includes education, family, immigration, socioeconomic status, adolescence, expectation, identity, American culture, Chinese culture, lifestyle, social capital, and transnationalism.

Based on the coding of the interview, one main typology and one sub-typology emerged among eighteen participants. The main typology describes participants' orientation that influenced their perception of the world, including America, China, and possibly other countries, and the orientation ultimately influences one's sense of belonging. Participants generally fell into one of three main types: instrumental orientation, global orientation, and heritage orientation.

The second typology is a sub-typology that describes participants' approaches to their embeddedness in the American society. Participants generally fall into one of three approaches: integration, acquisition, and hybridization. In this typology, the American society includes society as a whole and its subsystem, including schools, the workforce, and other social groups. The embeddedness approach is a sub-typology of orientation because one's orientation influences the adaptation approach one will take. The three types of embeddedness in the American societal structure aim to provide an overall interpretation of the different types of adaptation that foreign-
born immigrant youth may pursue when adapting to the American society. Individuals may use a mix of approaches, and the approach one used might change depending on one's stages of life and needs. The characteristics of each typology were rooted in the interview data. The typology also responded to Child's (1943) typology of how Italian immigrant children respond to the conflict between ethnic culture and the bigger society.

1. **Integration**: Chinese parachute kids seek validation from the American society, especially the dominant group, and strive to be popular. One may prioritize fitting into American culture and making American friends as essential to their life. Individuals might also seek to conform to American cultural norms to fit in and gain acceptance.

2. **Acquisition**: Chinese parachute kids acquiring the rules and norms of the American society by focusing on learning the language, rules, and customs of the American culture. One may prioritize developing skills valued in American society and adapting to the American way of life. The focus is on goal and interest rather than social integration.

3. **Hybridization**: Chinese parachute kids absorb the American culture while maintaining their ethnic culture. Individuals may strive to integrate their ethnic culture and the American culture as they adapt to it. One may seek to find a balance between their original culture and the American culture by preserving their ethnic identity and adopting aspects of the American culture.

**Limitations**

This study's limitations include its potentially biased sample size and its lack of focus on some key topics. First, all nineteen participants were recruited through my personal social network, which created a bias within the sample size. All participants, who are also my friends,
shared a similar, if not the same social and economic background as me. Specifically, all participants are from affluent middle or above Chinese families. And all participants enrolled or have attended four years of university in the U.S. Furthermore, almost all participants were top students when they were back in China, and over 80% of the participants got accepted to the top 50 universities. As parachute kids are already a selective group that requires family connection and resources, my sample represents a hyper-selective group of Chinese parachute kids, although not intentionally. No matter how participants started and felt about their life in the U.S., all participants in this study adapted to the American society and were considered "successful" under the traditional framework of success: attending a good college and landing a good job.

Thus, the data in this study only represents a partial experience of the Chinese parachute kids. Unlike the success stories in this study, there were also many Chinese parachute kids who failed to adapt to the life in America and were not adjusting well socially, academically, and emotionally. As some participants mentioned in this study, there were Chinese parachute kids dropped out of school because of various reason. The experience of parachute kids is not always positive, and the journey might not end up happy or ‘successful’. While this study encompasses a range of Chinese parachute kids' experiences, overall, the narrative is skewed towards success stories of parachute kids and does not focus on the potential darker sides of this global phenomenon. To gain a more comprehensive understanding, further large-scale and diverse studies are necessary, ensuring a fuller representation of the experiences of Chinese parachute kids.

Second, as the study covers many topics, there was an uneven distribution between topics in the interview stage. I chose the topic of belongingness as it was the most prominent theme that emerged during the first round of five pilot interviews. By centering on Chinese
parachute kids’ sense of belongingness, the study can only cover the most related concept such as orientation, identity, adaptation, American culture, etc. While other topics, such as transnational family relationships, are essential in understanding the experience of Chinese parachute kids, this study cannot cover all related topics at once. This study reflects the potential and value of studying the family relationship and intimate relationships of Chinese parachute kids.

DATA ANALYSIS

Overall Patterns

*Table 1 Participants Distribution of Orientation, Belongingness, and Approach*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Orientation (# of participants)</th>
<th>Belongingness</th>
<th>Approach to Embeddedness in the American Educational System</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Instrumental (12)</td>
<td>- 1 feel a stronger sense of belonging to China</td>
<td>Acquisition (All 12, with 5 transitioning from integration)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- 6 feel a stronger sense of belonging to America</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- 4 doesn’t feel a sense of belonging to either China or America</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- 1 feel equally belong to both U.S. and China</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Heritage (5)</td>
<td>- 5 feel a stronger sense of belonging to China</td>
<td>Hybridization (All 5, with 2 transitioning from integration)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Global (2)</td>
<td>- 1 feel a stronger sense of belonging to China</td>
<td>Hybridization (Both, with 1 transitioning from integration)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- 1 feel belongingness doesn’t matter</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The data were analyzed in three categories: orientation, belongingness and approach to embeddedness in the American educational system. The data bolster the argument that the orientation of Chinese parachute kids is a predictor of their belongingness and their approach to embeddedness in the American educational system. The findings also indicate that an individual's chosen orientation and approach can profoundly impact their sense of belonging.
This is particularly evident in those with an instrumental orientation, who often exhibit a subtle disconnection from both the U.S. and China.

Orientation-wise, among the total of nineteen participants, twelve participants fall under the instrumental orientation, five fall under the heritage orientation, and two fall under the global orientation. Among the eight male participants, six male participants fall under the instrumental orientation, one male participant falls under the heritage orientation, and one male participant falls under the global orientation. Of the eleven female participants, six female participants fall under the instrumental orientation, four female participants fall under the heritage orientation, and one female participant falls under the global orientation. It is also worth noticing that although very rare, there was a participant who underwent a transition of orientation. In this study, a female participant changed from the heritage orientation to an instrumental orientation. In her experience, the transition process was gradual without a specific moment or instance.

Regarding the approach to embeddedness in the American educational system, all twelve participants with the instrumental orientation take an acquisition approach. Within the instrumental orientation typology, there were four female participants, and one male participant transitioned from the integration approach to acquisition approach. All five participants who fall under the heritage orientation take the hybridization approach, with two female participants transitioning from an integration approach to acquisition approach. Finally, two participants fell under the global orientation. Both took the hybridization approach, with one male participant transitioning from integration to hybridization. In the end, twelve participants with the instrumental orientation adopted the acquisition approach. Seven participants with heritage or global orientation took the hybridization approach. Although eight participants started with the integration approach, everyone eventually transitioned to another approach.
Belongingness-wise, participants' responses are categorized into five categories:

1. Feel a stronger sense of belonging to America.
2. Feel a stronger sense of belonging to China.
3. Feel equally belong to America and China
4. Doesn't feel a sense of belonging to either China or America.
5. Belongingness doesn't matter.

Among the twelve participants with the instrumental orientation, six felt more belonging to America, four didn't feel strongly about belonging to either China or America, and one felt an equal sense of belongingness in America and China. For the five participants with the heritage orientation, all five participants feel more of a belonging to China. Lastly, of the two participants having a global orientation, one participant felt more belonging to China, and one felt that belongingness does not matter compared to other things, such as learning a new language and culture.

The data support my argument that Chinese parachute kids' orientation determines their sense of belongingness and their approach to embeddedness in the American educational system. Furthermore, the data also indicated that orientation and approach influence one's sense of belonging and lead to different consequences. For example, participants with instrumental orientation are likely to be in a stage of not feeling a strong sense of belonging to either the U.S. or China. I was interested in the relationship between orientation, approaches to embeddedness in the American educational system, the sense of belongingness, and the consequence of different orientations and approaches. To clarify the relationship between orientation and approaches to embeddedness in the American educational system and a sense of belongingness, a detailed analysis of the participant's orientation formation process and the adaptation and
belongingness-related decision-making process are necessary. Therefore, rather than interweaving the narratives of all nineteen participants, I employed a typological and thematic method to dissect four representative stories that cover the three identified orientations. Each story also represents a different relationship between orientation, approach, and sense of belongingness. Thai's (2006) writing in *Money and Masculinity Among Low-Wage Vietnamese Immigrants in Transnational Families* inspired this method of writing in the analysis.

To clarify, these three types of Chinese parachute kids' orientation (the instrumental, the heritage, and the global) do not identify the entire range of orientation Chinese parachute kids might have. Although not complete, these three types of orientations represent the dominant types. In addition, it is also likely that some participants fall into multiple typologies. For example, individuals with a global orientation who live in many countries and have a great framework of reference often share many characteristics with their heritage orientation, such as the value one's ethnic identity. For analytical clarity, I present four examples to provide an exploratory look at Chinese parachute kids and their path to becoming embedded in the American educational system and establishing a sense of belongingness (Thai 2006).

**The Instrumental Orientation**

Individuals with an instrumental orientation are more capital and utility oriented. Capital includes financial, human, social, and cultural capital. Financial capital includes money and investment. Human capital entails credentials and skills. Social capital includes friends and networks. Lastly cultural capital is an understanding of American culture (Coleman 1998). People with the instrumental orientation often have a more structural-based optic and tended to see China and the United States as opposites. They exhibit less mobility compared to those with
heritage or global orientations, which consequently leads to a tendency to settle in one country. This decreased mobility results in a gradual weakening of their social connections with China. Additionally, people with an instrumental orientation are more likely to take the acquisition approach.

Ella is in her early twenties. She is from an upper-middle-class family where both of her parents work as doctors. Ella grew up in a small city in Henan Province, China, and came to the U.S. in ninth grade at age thirteen. As a parachute kid, Ella attended a Christian high school in California. She just graduated from a top twenty master's program in California and is now in her first year of work in the tech industry as a product manager in California. For undergraduate study, Ella attended a top fifty public university in California, where she majored in computer science. Until now, Ella has resided only in China and the U.S.

Ella came to the U.S. to get a better education, which she pursued with the help of her uncle, who has friends in the U.S. Ella agreed to study in the U.S. because she thought moving to the U.S. was a "cool" thing. One of her uncle's friends in the U.S. introduced her to the high school she attended. The school is K-12, with about 400 students in the high school. It was diverse, with around forty Chinese students in the high school. The school has its own international student program and arranged host families for international students. Ella feels disciplined by the host family as there are rules and expectations in housework, return time, and attending church. Ella’s family was "paying" for the host family, and it was "a business relationship." Ella recalled that she didn't understand the host family's responsibility and position then, and she discussed how she would fight with her host family when she went out at night and came home late. She pointed out that almost all parachute kids have disciplining conflicts with their host families. For example, one of Ella's friends didn't like the food the host family cooked,
but the host family didn't allow the student to order delivery food, and the student was too young to call a rideshare and go out to eat. Ella's conflict with the host family was rooted in the characteristics of adolescents who seek freedom and try to become adults at the stage but often fail to do so (Fischhoff, 2001).

Furthermore, using the word "business" and "paying," Ella is hyper-aware of the exchange nature of the relationship between her and her host family and how the relationship was fundamentally different from a family relationship. The conflict arose between Ella and her host family as non-family members take the parenting role in a stage where Ella was vulnerable. The absence of her parents greatly influenced Ella's perception and experience at her early stage of life in the U.S.

In China, my parent always take care of me, trying to find resources for me and guide me to different paths, but they can do none of that in the U.S. It’s like you’re just yourself; there’s no one giving me guidance or advice. No one really makes me feel supported. I figured everything out by myself in the end. I felt that my parent had sacrificed a lot for me to study in the U.S. The opportunity is precious, and I want to be different and have a meaningful experience. If I stay lost, I’m wasting my chance, and wasting opportunity is something I will undoubtedly feel regretful about.

The absence of parents has put an emotional burden on Ella as she has to "figure everything by [herself]" in the U.S. Ella felt lost, aimless, and helpless as there was no one to depend on. Although her parents are absent in her life, Ella still shows great appreciation and acknowledgment of her parents' sacrifice. That sacrifice became one of her motivations to adapt to life in America. Influenced by peers at school, Ella also wishes that her parents could be better informed about the educational system in the U.S. and be able to introduce her to related resources. Ella imagined she might get into a better college if she had additional parental support, but she also knows it was very hypothetical. Ella has complained to her parents as she felt they couldn't help her at all, and her parents are also very helpless. Ella's interaction with her
host family and her parents shows how the environment influences one's orientation in the U.S., including physical space and social relationships. Back in China, Ella excelled as a top student in all directions. She was also the popular kid in class and had many friends. Coming to America, Ella started with poor English and with no friends. The drastic change created cognitive dissonance in Ella and shaped her “instrumental” orientation as she tried to overcome challenges and acquire things that she used to have.

I felt a strong sense of unevenness compared to the accomplishments that I have made in China. I can’t make friends, get recognition from the faculty, and perform poorly academically. I was never in such a situation, which was a huge bummer. I was really sad and lost. I want to improve my English and grades, have deep conversations with faculty, make friends, and experience life in the U.S.

To adapt to the environment and reconcile the dissonance, Ella came up with her definition of challenges and classified challenges as “obstacles” and “dilemmas.” The obstacle frame, such as language and grades, is something that Ella had to overcome. A dilemma is something that Ella had to reconcile cognitively, such as the environment and norms. The biggest obstacle Ella had is language. In the beginning, Ella didn’t even feel like she was attending a school in the United States as she couldn’t understand words from others, didn’t know how the school functioned, or what everyone was like. Thus, Ella always lacked confidence when communicating with others. Without knowing how the grading system worked. Ella started with a 1.8 GPA, as she didn’t realize that homework counts for credit. She assumed homework was supplementary to graded assignments due to her schooling experience in China. Ella expressed that she didn’t even know what GPA was initially until a teacher at school visited her host family.

Instrumentally oriented, Ella knew that as no one was taking care of her in America, she had to seek the help and resources she needed actively. Ella observed that, unlike the passive
learning environment in China, school in America has a more active learning atmosphere. The teachers in America tend to listen to the student, whereas the teachers in China are more like an authority figure. Regarding adapting to school in the U.S., Ella recalled that friendship was her biggest support. In her experience, Chinese students at school naturally came and formed groups together. They would go shopping, eat Chinese food, buy milk tea, watch movies, go to each other’s houses, and travel together during breaks. For Ella, making Chinese friends was the first step for her to “fit into school.” To clarify, throughout the thesis, the term “fitting in” is used through the lens of a Chinese student. The original Chinese term for ”fitting in” is “融入,” which means blending in or becoming a part of something gradually. As China is a homogenous society with only a small population of immigrants compared to America, concepts such as “assimilation” or “acculturation” are not applicable in the context of China. The term “fitting in” was used because it has the closest meaning to the original Chinese word “融入”, and multiple participants have used the English word “fitting in” in the interview. When participants talk about “fitting in,” they refer to the process of becoming a part of the American social group or society. For Ella, fitting into school does not stop at the co-ethnic social group.

Fitting into school is important because I would be in pain otherwise. I needed friends and validation at that age in high school as I hadn't developed my value proposition nor knew what I wanted. Validation from others kind of became the only thing that I wanted. Fitting in is important to me. Otherwise, I can't get validation from others and would break down mentally. Also, both my parent and I expect me to be a high performer at school, including fitting in and getting a good GPA. To fit in, I would pretend I like things I don't truly enjoy, such as learning to do makeup and dress up. I would shop at stores and buy clothes that other people like despite my preferences, tastes, and feelings. I would also watch popular shows and follow celebrities that I don't know to have common topics with others. I must know these topics to fit in, whether I like it or not.
Ella’s repetitive use of the word “fitting in” and “validation” indicates the importance of forming a social group and becoming a part of the school. The need for validation was especially critical for Ella in adolescence. The emotional vacuum created because of the change of environment and the absence of parents needed to be filled elsewhere, and Ella turned to peers (Cheng 2020). The stage of adolescence that needs validation from others, the environment that lacks support, and the self and family expectation of becoming a high performer came together and shaped Ella’s orientation as instrumental. Furthermore, the combination of the result-centered instrumental orientation and Ella’s personal need for validation influenced her to take the integration approach to be embedded in the school system. Ella used strategies such as imitation, following, and faking to fit in. The benefits of the integration approach for Ella were the increased social acceptance and validation from the American peers. On the other hand, the cost of such an integration approach is the adaptation of norms and values against personal preferences, which leads to the loss of the authentic self.

Ella reflected that she didn’t think she had fit in very well socially in the end because she didn’t see herself as a popular person in high school. She was trying hard to be popular. Ella observed that popular girls in her high school were mostly white, and there were rarely any popular Asian girls. She would observe and learn from these popular girls, such as what they would wear and how they would behave and talk. Becoming popular was important to Ella because it allowed her to get validation from others. Ella felt she was an outsider in settings like homecoming and prom, where everyone had their small groups, and she was not involved in those groups. She knew that she would never have the chance to be Homecoming Queen or Princess. Looking back, Ella still feels that getting validation from others is important to her mentally, and fitting in has enabled her to get into a good college.
Ella’s transition from high school to college was influenced by the change in environment and her development. Transitioned to a state college in California with a more diverse student body, Ella became aware that figuring out what she wanted is more important than gaining acceptance or validation from others. Ella also feels that her value proposition has solidified in college, allowing her to focus more on herself as compared to high school. Although Ella’s orientation is still instrumental, her approach switched from integration to acquisition as she realized the importance of focusing on herself and her awareness of the unpleasant integrated experience in high school.

In college, Ella also observed the differences between Chinese students who came to the U.S. before college and Chinese students who came to the U.S. during college or later. Ella sees one’s residence duration in the U.S. as having a major influence on one’s adaptation to the U.S. She thinks that individuals who come to the U.S. earlier will adapt to American society better. She also noted how socioeconomic status plays a role in one’s adaptation to the American society. Ella thought these master students were probably in the middle or lower middle classes. Thus, the master's students have a narrower pathway to success, and privileged students are more likely to be on a path they are interested in, as they can take the risk. Compared with the Chinese students who came later, Ella sees how "Americanness" has shaped her.

I’m less competitive and care less about success than the Chinese who come to the U.S. for graduate school. I focus on what I want rather than what is considered secularly successful. I feel that many Chinese students who arrive in the U.S. at a later stage lack reflection on whatever they’re doing. I also feel that I’m more open-minded and accepting of different viewpoints. I focus more on spiritual richness instead of socioeconomic status. The American side of me does not influence my relationship with my family, as I do not impose my thoughts on them. While I may disagree with them, I would not argue with them because they’re my family, and I know we’re very different. It influences my friend choice as I get along better with people who are more Americanized. We shared more things in common.
Ella’s perception of “Americanness” is shaped by her understanding of American culture. As Ella has lived in the U.S. for nine years, she now has a more concrete understanding of America. She sees and feels America as more “liberal” and “open-minded,” which aligns with her values. Furthermore, Ella sees the U.S. as very different from China in multiple ways. She sees the U.S. value human rights and an emphasis on anti-discrimination, including race, gender, and disability, and that was not something Ella was exposed to in China. Ella also feels that America is a very chill country. It doesn’t require an individual to be that accomplished to have a good life. Americans do not judge others’ occupations or people’s social and economic status as harshly compared to people in China. Diversity is another word Ella learned in America. She enjoys how the U.S. is a diverse country where she can meet people worldwide. Ella pointed out that before she came to the U.S., she thought everyone in the U.S. was American, with blond hair and blue eyes. After she came to the U.S., she realized that not everyone is like that, and people are from different ethnicities and countries. Ella expanded on how diversity is not prevalent in China because there are just Chinese people in China, and people have remained Chinese throughout the generations. The encounter of people across countries and ethnicities has shifted Ella’s understanding of what constitutes a good life, now valuing liberal principles and diversity.

Ella's instrumental orientation was a dual framework that stemmed from her experience and perception of China and the U.S. Furthermore, Ella's dual framework was binary when comparing the U.S. and China. For example, if the U.S. is "diverse," then China is not "diverse." If the teacher in the U.S. is listening to the student, then the teacher in China is more like an "authority" figure who doesn't listen to the student. We can see how this instrumental orientation shaped and solidified Ella's perception of American society, and in reverse, it also influenced her perception of Chinese society.
The binary instrumental orientation shaped Ella’s current sense of belonging to the United States. Ella served as a unique case among participants as her orientation had changed from heritage to instrumental. This shift in the orientation was not evident when I analyzed Ella’s approach to embeddedness in the U.S. as one’s approach is behavior-based and result oriented versus belongingness is sentiment-based and identity oriented. Furthermore, most participants have a harder time reflecting on their sense of belongingness than their adaption approach, as belonging is a relatively more abstract and metaphysical concept. Different from most participants, Ella could recall how her sense of belongingness changed over time. In high school, Ella did not feel any sense of belonging in the U.S. as she thought she would definitely return to China one day and contribute what she learned to her country. The strong connections and recognition of Chinese identity and culture and China as a country marked Ella’s heritage orientation.

In college, Ella started to focus on her personal growth and consider which country would be better for her development. The goal and capital-oriented mindset in college marked Ella’s shift from the heritage to the instrumental orientation. Specifically, Ella reflected that in high school, her sense of belonging in China was 90%, and in college, her sense of belonging to China was down to 20% as she realized that she didn’t have any friends in China and all her friends were in the U.S. The 20% sense of belonging was solely based on her family and a small number of friends who are still in China. In addition, Ella’s realization of the different frames of a good life (liberal, diversity) has altered her approach to national ideology. Ella recalled that she realized her sense of belonging to the U.S. during the job-hunting process as she became aware that all her Chinese friends were international students whom she had met in America, and they would likely stay in the U.S. as well. Now that Ella has stayed in the U.S. for more than nine
years with many built capitals (social, cultural, and financial), she also prefers to bring her family to the U.S. and to reside in the U.S.

Ella’s current sense of belonging is rooted in social relationships. She feels that she belongs more to America as she has gradually established and accumulated social relations in the U.S. Nowadays, her only connection to China is her family. Ella’s job, credentials, and friends are all in the U.S. The emphasis on social relationships is a key characteristic of the instrumental orientation, as the social relationship is a type of social capital that can be accumulated through personal efforts and time.

I feel more like I belong in the U.S. now. I haven’t been to China for many years and am not familiar with many things in China now compared to America. Home is the only place I feel comfortable in China now. I also don’t identify with native-born Chinese who don’t have study abroad experience as we have a totally different mindset. Although I don’t have a home in the U.S. and must move regularly, I still feel more belong to America as everything I built was here. America has given me a better offer and an environment with much freedom in which I can develop my career. Most of my friends were Chinese when I was a student, and I hadn’t built my American community back then. Now, I’m more blending into the American community. Most of my Chinese friends are also staying in the U.S.

Ella’s experience of a summer internship in China made her more aware of the differences between her and the people in China. At work, Ella made her point clear and said whatever she wanted to say, regardless of who she was talking to. In contrast, her Chinese colleagues had a hierarchy mindset, and they tended to hide their feelings and ideas when talking to their leader. Ella also pointed out that people in China are more competitive and performance oriented. Ella felt she had a different mindset from people in China, and they shared very little in common. She felt she was in a different world with them as they had no shared experience nor identified with each other.
Furthermore, Ella also sensed the differences in views on consumption and money. Ella gave an example of how some students in China are against Chinese who study abroad and think they are privileged. It was clear that the instrumental orientation and the acquisition approach that Ella took had the consequences of the loss of social and cultural connection with China. On the other hand, the benefits of the instrumental orientation and the acquisition approach are that it allows Ella to focus on capital accumulation within America and establish a relatively strong sense of belonging based on the social and financial capital she acquired.

William, also in his early twenties, shows a different path of formulating and having an instrumental orientation. William is in a top private university in Pennsylvania, double majoring in architecture and business administration. William is from a middle-class family in Shenzhen, China. Both of William's parents graduated from a Tier 1 university in China. William came to the U.S. as a freshman in high school. His parents decided to send William to America because they didn't like the education system in China. William's older brother was already in the U.S. at that time, and his uncle worked in Nevada. William first attended a language school in Nevada. He was there for one year and then transferred to a bigger local Christian school in Nevada. In his junior year, to better prepare for college application, William transferred to another Christian school in California, where his brother attended college nearby. William's parents have standard expectations for him in terms of studying well. William initially expected to fit into school, make friends, and return to China as soon as possible. William's expectation of returning to China was rooted in his comfortable position in China, where he was the top student in the class and had many friends. The desire to return to China disappeared in his junior year of high school.

Like Ella, William doesn't feel that returning to China is necessary nowadays because he doesn't have any close friends in China anymore, and he doesn't feel that he fits into the Chinese
culture. In addition, William now has more American friends than Chinese friends. He also feels that he has more things to do in the U.S. than in China, including his interest in sports cars and exercise. Economics plays a significant influence on William's perception of a place. William thinks that China is not doing well economically. For example, a monthly salary of 30,000 RMB is considered very high in Shenzhen, but one month of William's internship is already higher than that with a payment of $25 an hour. A full-time position will be even higher. He was not that optimistic about China and felt his interests, such as race cars and the gym, were not as accessible in China as compared to the U.S. William is a typical example of someone with a clear instrumental orientation, as seen in his focus on material and financial capital. Having the instrumental orientation, William also tends to perceive China and the U.S. as opposites.

William's understanding of American culture is concrete based.

American culture is In N Out, big serving sizes in food and drink, infrastructure built around cars, poor public transportation, and a tipping culture that I dislike, especially with the current tipping inflation. American culture is my life now.

William’s understanding of American culture was mainly material based and focused on tangible things such as food, drink, and cars. William also perceived American peers as more independent economically than his Chinese peers. He concluded by saying, “American culture is my life now.” This quote hints at both William’s instrumental orientation and the acquired approach that William chose. He tended to put himself first in an environment and behave based on acquiring practical things from the environment, such as the high internship salary and the loose road regulation that allowed him to engage in his interest in sports cars. Together, the instrumental orientation and the acquisition approach shaped William’s sense of belongingness in a material sense.

I feel a medium level of belongingness to America. I feel I belong to America mainly because I don’t want to go back to China. I really don’t like the politics in both the U.S.
and China. And I have thought about going to Europe. I think Europe is more chill, and the relationships among people there are nice. America’s economy is also not doing well, and there are many other problems, such as mass shootings and racism. To be honest, I don’t want to stay in the U.S., but it is my only option now, and it is a safe choice for me. So, to answer your question, I would want to stay in the U.S., but not necessarily because I feel I really belong here.

William's response shows that belongingness can be built upon many different reasons, even within the same orientation category. Ella's sense of belonging hinged on both social and financial capital, while for William, it was predominantly tied to financial capital, with his personal happiness and freedom stemming from his interests and the environment. William added that he feels a greater sense of belonging in the U.S. in three ways: the natural environment, the sports car environment, and the work environment. By region, William felt most belonging in California as he likes the weather and the wide roads there. He has had a positive experience interning in the U.S., as the company cares about their staff's work and work-life balance. William also felt that Americans are hyper-aware and accommodating of individuals' identities, such as sexual orientation, feminist, religious, and cultural backgrounds. Both Ella and William perceive America as a more open, caring, diverse, and inclusive society with a better work environment that emphasizes work and life balance.

William hasn't been back to China for two years after the Covid pandemic. He enjoyed the food, the efficiency, and the public transportation in China, but he also felt that many places were becoming more and more commercialized. While he enjoyed the cheap human labor in China, he also felt guilt and thought that it was fair that the U.S. had a high human labor price as the workers should be well paid. In comparing efficiency, William specifically pointed out the slow efficiency of the U.S. in road construction and document processing, such as the DMV. He also disliked how China has too many cameras and how changing car parts will be challenging
compared to the U.S. As an architecture major and an outdoor person, William disliked how the local government regulated and changed a lot of natural landscapes in China, such as adding a business street or fence. He felt it was artificial, and he enjoyed the more open and natural landscape in the U.S. William's attitude on cheap human labor indicated that moral value or custom also plays a part in deciding one's sense of belongingness. Despite putting great value on his own human and financial capital, William also valued other people's financial and human capital. And he felt America had shown more respect to human and financial capital than China. Value proposition also influenced Ella's decision on approach. With an emphasis on getting validation from others, Ella first chose the integrated approach and switched to the acquiring approach when she realized that focusing on oneself is more important. William had always taken the acquiring approach, centered on material reality, financial and human capital. William's lack of a strong sense of belonging versus Ella's strong sense of belonging indicates that an emphasis on social relations might help one establish a stronger sense of belonging, and an emphasis on material might weaken one's sense of belonging.

William had a very different high school experience from Ella. In high school, William lived with his older brother in an apartment. He had to handle everything, including paying bills, signing leases, preparing forms and documents, signing contracts, and dealing with the government and third parties. William's brother didn't take care of him, and it felt like he was living alone. Although he struggled in the past, William appreciated the experience of living in the apartment in high school as it helped him to be independent and prepared him for adapting to college life. In turn, he has had a very smooth transition to college. William's challenges at school include culture and language, and he overcame these challenges by making friends and
attending classes. He felt that there was a great difference in the education system between the U.S. and China.

Socially, friend groups in China are more stable as everyone in the class attends the same classes at the same location. One can easily become friends with classmates. In America, students attend different classes in different classrooms, so friends are more interest-base and students can focus on what they like. Academically, American schools emphasize active learning, which means students must be responsible for themselves. In schools in China, teachers supervise student’s learning. Curriculum-wise, American schools have a greater margin in academics, which has a higher top and a lower bottom compared to China. American students can take AP classes that they’re interested in, while China has limited options for classes that one can choose. In this case, American schools allow the student to explore their interest.

William had an acute understanding of the American and Chinese school systems. He also personally benefited from both education systems, as he was a top student in China and later a top university student in the U.S. It is important to note that most of William’s interpretation is structurally based instead of relational or culturally based. It is important to note that most of William’s interpretation is structurally based instead of relational or culturally based. Focusing on structure and system instead of social relationships is another key characteristic of instrumental orientation.

Fitting in is not important. Having goals and friends, knowing what to do, and living a happy life is what matters. If you try hard to fit in, you will get lost in the sauce and do things you don’t want to. I never really try to fit in because I don’t seek self-validation from others. It never occurs as important to me. Financial independence and seeking my physical ceiling are what matter to me. I want to have money, be in good shape, take care of my parents, and reach my physical limit. I make friends through interests such as basketball, fitness, gym, arts, and rock climbing. I think the way I interact with Chinese and American friends is the same. What we do and talk about are the same. It would only be different if you made friends to fit in; then, you would end up making friends with very different life habits. There’s no need to please the American or anyone. Instead of trying to fit in, we should find our group.
The differences in expectation and the perception of American schools differentiate the approaches Ella and William took. With the expectation of becoming popular and getting validation from others, Ella initially took the integrated approach. With no need to get validation from others and instead focusing on personal goals and things that he felt happy with, William took the acquiring approach and adopted social norms selectively. William felt he was too nice to people in high school and should have set up boundaries between himself and others. Thus, in college, he rejected others directly, and he resisted others’ influence. William pointed out that instead of caring about what others think and feel, one should primarily be kind to oneself. William’s transition in his interaction with others shows how his instrumental orientation had further solidified as he put himself first in all relationships despite the differences in social settings.

William confessed that he initially felt some unevenness when he came to the U.S. However, the unevenness was not from academics, life, or social circumstances but rather because of the change in his environment and his lack of social connections. William’s interpretation of the unevenness he felt suggests that he had a clear set of values and judgments in adolescence. He did not compare himself with others and, therefore, did not feel inferior. William’s reference to “house” also indicates that money provides a buffer for parachute kids adapting to American society, of which William is keenly aware. Although absent, parachute kids’ parents provide financial capital for their kids, which serves as a foundation for parachute kids’ confidence in an environment that they are not familiar with.

At last, like Ella, William also thought that there are apparent differences between Chinese students who come to America early and Chinese students who come later. He felt that Chinese students who come to the U.S. in college or later require more time to adapt to American society.
Especially for Chinese people who come to the U.S. for their master’s, it will be almost impossible to fit into the American culture if they receive their undergraduate degree in China. He also pointed out how many Chinese people are not confident about their English proficiency and care about what Americans think about them, which also affects their ability to fit in. William felt the Chinese students were in their own world, talking to their Chinese friends and doing their own thing.

I don’t really hang out with Chinese now as we have different interests. People from China like to play video games, while I like American things more, such as rock climbing, workouts, and sports cars. I also have Chinese friends, but they are very “mixed” like I am, almost like they are ABC (American-born Chinese). I don’t identify with Chinese students. I hang out with whoever has the same interests as me.

Similar to Ella, William also felt that he shared very little in common with the Chinese students who came later, or for William, Chinese students in general. Acknowledging his bias and limited frame of reference, William also pointed out the anti-weed and drug attitude that people from China carry in compared to him and his ABC-like Chinese friends, who see touching the grass as a natural thing. William felt that they had a different value proposition. For example, he observed how some Chinese students who came later liked to compare themselves with each other in terms of the cars they drove and the restaurants they visited. William also sensed that people from China like to compete with each other and want to impress others, such as working extra hours in an internship. He felt that mindset was very Chinese bureaucratic. William valued work and work-life balance, and he would not respond to emails after work and would not work extra hours without payment. He knew how to fight for his rights, and he felt that Chinese or Asian people, in general, were less vocal about their rights.

I’m straightforward when communicating with others. I will say no if I don’t like something, and I won’t say things with a lot of implicit meaning like people from China
do. For example, a lot of girls from China are very indirect when it comes to relationships. For me, I would ask if they wanted to have sex or not directly, and consent is, of course, important. I think Americans will also appreciate the straightforwardness of the situation, instead of how people from China like to sugarcoat when they are asking for something.

When participants use the word “people from China,” they refer to Chinese who came to the U.S. in college or later or Chinese students who had not lived in the U.S. before college. The Chinese term is “国内来的,” which means they are from the country, and “the country” in this context is China. By indicating people who came to the U.S. in college or later stage as “people from China,” parachute kids separate themselves from other Chinese students. Although William identifies as Chinese, he distinguished himself from “people from China” as he is not from China but elsewhere in the U.S. William indicated how “people from China” have a slower time fitting into American society as they are not willing to speak English confidently or participate in more activities, he assumed that everyone is in the same position as he is without acknowledging that not everyone is like him in which their personal interests align with the things that are “American.” The heritage orientation will show how people who don’t like “American” things adapt to American society and build their sense of belonging.

The Heritage Orientation

Individuals holding heritage orientation tend to have great and consistent exposure, interest, and reflection in Chinese culture. They value their Chinese identity and appreciate Chinese culture, including food, language, and people. Having heritage orientation, one is more likely to have a strong culture and social tie with China, although it does not necessarily mean that the person feels a strong sense of belonging to China. Individuals who have a heritage
orientation are also more likely to maintain the "mobile" status and travel between the U.S. and China.

Mandy is twenty-two years old, a junior in a top liberal arts college in California, majoring in politics and economics. She grew up in a middle-class family in Tianjin, China, and came to the U.S. in 9th grade at fourteen. Mandy is from a middle-class family. Her dad has a bachelor’s degree and is working in the banking industry; her mom has a master's degree and is a doctor. Mandy was a top student back in China. In ninth grade, she felt she already knew which high school and college she could attend. The path was clear, and the people around her were similar. Mandy felt she was in a bubble. Mandy's grandfather had a friend in Texas who recommended that she attend high school in the U.S. Mandy wanted to give it a try, but her parents were strongly against it. However, her grandfather was on Mandy's side. She applied to high school in February as a late applicant. Unlike William and Ella, who applied to schools with the help of acquaintances, Mandy found an agency to help her with the application. She felt the agency was not helpful as they always underrated her. Mandy ultimately got into a boarding school in Texas, which her grandfather's friend recommended as the best local school.

As Ella and William represent the day school category, Mandy represents another category: the boarding school. The city where the school was located was diverse and had a small Chinese population. The school is Catholic and ranked as one of the top fifteen boarding schools in the U.S. Each class had about 120 students, with 20 international students and about seven Chinese students. Faculty and teachers provided all-rounded support to students. Mandy felt that there was always someone she could go to. For Mandy, there were no clear expectations regarding studying in the U.S. Her family and her own expectations were standard: getting into a good college and exploring different things. The school had also assigned a host family to each
international student whom they could talk to and spend time with during the break. Mandy is thankful that the school provided her with many opportunities to talk with people from different generations.

Mandy's experience in the boarding school shows how the present environment plays a significant role in shaping parachute kids' perception of the U.S. and their experience in daily life. Mandy felt supported at school and had no specific challenges, as the teacher paid a lot of attention to the student. Unlike William and Ella, who attended day school and received limited support and attention from the school, the boarding school that Mandy attended created a support network for her where she felt safe and welcomed. Regarding social capital, as William and Ella live in an apartment or with a host family, they had to develop their own community and accumulate social capital on their own. Mandy's community existed within the school, and the social capital was provided to her either directly or indirectly. Despite the great support from the school, Mandy still struggled to fit in initially due to her perception.

I was trying really hard to fit in initially because I didn’t want to be different from others, and I was scared of uncertainty. I have even set a quota for making friends, such as having both local friends and friends from different ethnicities. Sometimes, I would even tell myself to become friends with at least half of the people from a class that I took. To make friends, I would participate in activities that I don’t necessarily enjoy. And there’s one time I prepared gifts for everyone, although there are people I dislike. Gradually, I realized that the quota was not necessary because I would have the opportunity to get to know everyone from the class. It’s just in terms of ratio when it comes to becoming friends with them or not. Fitting into school is just a natural process as I’m living at school every day.

Mandy initially used an integrated approach as she tried to fit into the group. The incentive for Mandy to integrate was that she did not want to be “different” from others, and she was “scared of uncertainty.” Making friends would help Mandy blend into the school, which would decrease her level of uncertainty. Mandy used an integrated approach, such as following
the norms and trying to get close to the dominant group. Like Ella, Mandy also pretended to like something she disliked, fitting into the school. Ella and Mandy’s experience shows that a lack of certainty, stability, and recognition from others will influence one’s perception of the environment and might lead one to take the integrated approach to get a sense of verification, stability, and certainty. As a result, Mandy’s strategy of setting up a quota on the number of friends she would make was a way for her to create some certainty to protect herself from uncertainty.

Furthermore, Mandy recalled that she was in the margins of the school’s theatre program as it was a white-dominant group. She felt that she must keep fighting and prove herself to get the role she wanted. Sometimes, proving their ability was also fruitless, as others could approve of Mandy’s ability but still disqualify her. Mandy’s uneasiness at school was primarily socially related as she was pretty aggressive, and friends may have found it hard to interact with her. Mandy felt a sense of stability when everything was anticipated, and she could be more spontaneous. It was when all her opinions could fully represent herself and match her character and incentive.

We can also see how different incentives can lead to the same approach. As Ella uses the integration approach to be popular or “special” compared to others, Mandy uses the integration approach to blend into the group and is afraid of being “different” from others. Their experience suggests that both the worry of being “indifferent’ and being “different” will affect one’s judgment and perception of oneself. Different from Ella, the community nature of boarding school minimized the cost of fitting in for Mandy as fitting in became a “natural process” which she didn’t need to put extra effort into to make friends. For Mandy, fitting in also varied by degree and environment.
I feel there’s a difference between fitting into school and fitting into the environment. School is a bubble within a bubble. It is where one can most easily fit in, as many at school share similar value positions and have similar knowledge levels. The school encouraged me to be myself and smoothed the process of fitting into the environment. I felt that school was the first step to fitting into society. It enabled me to establish an optimistic assumption about American society, and the assumption is really important.

Mandy’s’ quotes suggested that one’s perceptions of “fitting in” and “society” influence one’s approach. The boarding school made Mandy feel safe and supported, helping her establish a good perception or orientation about American society. However, a good perception of American society does not necessarily mean a strong sense of belonging to America.

I don’t have a strong sense of belonging to any city. I feel I belong where I settled; it’s my self-protection method. I think Texas is my second home; it’s a place I feel safe and familiar and a place where I underwent many changes and emotions. My first home was Tianjin, where my family lived and where I created many memories. Belongingness is important to me, but I haven’t figured out its rationale.

Mandy used the feeling of “home” to replace the sense of belonging. For Mandy, the determinant factors for the feeling of “home” were familiar and safe. However, Mandy was certain that she would like to return to China for work because China was where she felt most comfortable and where she could demonstrate her full potential. She enjoyed the atmosphere and how she could interact with people naturally in China, such as how a vendor chats with a customer enthusiastically. Mandy said that interacting with people in America sometimes felt like working, as she couldn’t fully relax. Although she felt increasingly relaxed in America, it was still different from China. When asked why she felt more relaxed in China, Mandy responded:

I think I’m good at dealing with different things in China because I know how the system works and feel connected to the people within it. Familiarity with the system brings me a sense of happiness. I feel that I have a life in China, whereas in the U.S., I feel that I’m just living.
Mandy pointed out that familiarity with the system made her feel relaxed and comfortable. The function and meaning of space and time also play a part in Mandy’s interpretation of her sense of belongingness. Mandy was in a social and leisure mode when back in China and in a study and working mode when she was in the U.S. Social and leisure is what she feels more comfortable and relaxed when doing. Mandy’s identification, built attachment, and familiarity with China marked her as the heritage orientation that values culture, language, and ethnic identity. Mandy values her Chinese identity as she enjoys the atmosphere in China and interacting with the Chinese.

Having Chinese friends in my life is essential to me. I must have Chinese friends. Their presence makes me feel comfortable and gives me verification. I’m also very obsessed with the Chinese language, and I feel more connected with Chinese. Using English feels more like a working mode. It’s not just about the language; it’s also about a collective consciousness in culture. My Chinese friends and I will know the meaning of a word without further explanation. It’s important to me to have a Chinese culture group. If I had to settle in the U.S., I would choose a city that is friendly to the Chinese.

Mandy’s passion for the Chinese language also marks her heritage orientation. Unlike William and Ella, Mandy recognized Chinese friends as an essential part and a “must” in her life as she received verification and cultural resonance that she couldn’t get elsewhere. Mandy’s strong acknowledgment of her Chinese identity served as an anchor point as Mandy oriented between different cultures. Mandy reflected on how she felt and learned in China to compare her feelings and learning elsewhere and then decide what was more important. Thus, Mandy took the hybridizing approach as she tried to integrate and balance the two cultures. Unlike the acquiring approach, which is more material and capital-based, the hybridizing approach focuses on culture and is more abstract and sentiment-based. Mandy further added that she felt that she was speaking exactly how she want to speak when using Chinese and felt strongly connected to her words. When speaking English, Mandy didn’t feel she had total control of the language, and
sometimes, she felt like she was just trying to finish a sentence instead of truly expressing her opinion in English. With its heritage orientation, Mandy was also more mobile and maintained a solid social and cultural ties with China.

For Mandy, American culture, or the “American Spirit,” is freedom. She believed that Americans are more self-centered and independent, that people are more equal, and that there is less of a hierarchy structure. The second characteristic of American culture is inclusivity, a byproduct of freedom. Last is anti-competitiveness. Mandy saw all lifestyles as accepted in the U.S. She believed that although a select few elite white kids were competitive, they didn’t expect others to be competitive. Like Ella and William, Mandy also saw Americanness as straightforward in communication and emotion. She noted that she was always straightforward and thought the experience in America only catalyzed her personality instead of shaping it. Mandy recognized that America had influenced her aesthetic and lifestyle, such as focusing on fitness and health and embracing different beauty standards. Different from Ella and William’s perception about the Chinese students who came to the U.S. at a later stage, Mandy felt that the assumption that Chinese students who came to the U.S. at a later stage are less “American” is very stereotyping.

It’s not the experience in the American high school that makes one confident. Individuals are confident in America because they are already confident in the first place. These “American” and confident people who chose high school instead of high school shaped their Americanness and confidence. I also know many people who are less confident after finishing high school in the U.S. They may undoubtedly have an easier time living in America, but they’re still in a small bubble. I think the nature of American high school is placing one in an isolated place at an important stage of development and seeing what changes one might have. Different people will have different outcomes.

Unlike Ella and William, Mandy considered social conditions when perceiving Chinese students’ adaptation in America. She was aware of how people might confuse the
influence of family and personality with the influence of America. By jumping out of the American narratives, Mandy considered multiple factors when evaluating things under the influence of the American culture. Mandy’s non-U.S.-centric view is a vital part of the heritage orientation. In the final analysis, we will look at how individuals with multiple frameworks orient the American society and what determines their sense of belongingness.

**The Global Orientation**

People with a global orientation often have experience living in various countries besides China and America. They have a more fluid definition of belongingness and no preference for residing in the U.S. or China. On the contrary, individuals with a heritage orientation maintain a profound connection to China, considering it central to their identity. In contrast, those with a global orientation exhibit a more hybrid identity, demonstrating greater flexibility in their attachment to China. Notably, individuals with a global orientation tend to be the most ‘mobile,’ showing a higher propensity for international travel and a broader global engagement.

Michael, twenty-eight years old, was born in a middle-class family in Guangdong Province. He came to the U.S. in 2011 as a tenth grader. His parents graduated from associate college. Michael graduated from a top liberal arts college in California, majoring in international relations. He is currently taking a gap year in his master’s in management program in Paris and will soon be attending a scholar program in Master of Global Affairs in Beijing this fall. He is currently studying Portuguese in Brazil and has freelance work with interpretation and consulting. Besides living in the U.S. and China, Michael has also resided in Singapore, Panama, Argentina, Mexico, France, and Brazil. Residing here means staying in one country for more than two months. Studying abroad in the U.S. was Michael’s own decision. Like Ella, William, and Mandy, Michael had always been a top student in China and was accepted to the best high
school in his province. In high school, academic pressure was intense, and there was always ranking after exams. Like Mandy, Michael felt he already knew what college he could get into at that point, and he didn’t like how his future was all set and predictable. Michael applied to high school in Singapore and the U.S. in late April. He was in the Singapore school for one month until he received a late admission offer from a boarding school in Massachusetts. The agency helped him in the application process as he had limited access to information about the U.S. Michael’s initial perception of the U.S. was that it was only about pop cultures such as the NBA, Friends, and Hollywood movies. Like all other participants, Michael and his parent had a standard expectation of coming to the U.S.: getting into a good college and landing a stable job.

The boarding school was one and a half hours away from the city, and Michael’s first impression was that it was rural and open. The school has 450 students; 1/3 are international students, and about half of the international students are Chinese. On one side, Michael felt that having many co-ethnics in the school was nice as it felt familiar, and Chinese students would help each other in daily life. On the other hand, Michael felt it was hard to break out of the Chinese group as the group was so big and solidified, and no one expected a Chinese student to be out of it.

On my first day at school, when I went to the dining hall, people were already showing me the way to the “Chinese” table. There was also the “Korean” table, the “Japanese” table, etc. The division was clear, and the table had been passed down through generations of the students. It was not just international students; there was also the “theatre” table and the “ice hockey” table. It was just a very quirky atmosphere.

The labeling and classification of the ethnic tables have put international students into a “marginal” position that is outside of the dominant group (Park 1928). While there was also the “theatre” table and the “ice hockey” table, these two tables still fell under the dominant group, and the group members within these tables were in a relatively fluid position where
they could across different groups. On the other hand, members of the “Chinese,” “Korean,” “And Japanese” tables might have had a hard time breaking out from the group as the group was a close circle outside of the dominant group, and breaking out might have meant not being able to find a group elsewhere as well as not be able to rejoin the group. The naming and the set-up of the dining tables show that the metaphor of the U.S. as a cultural “melting pot” does not accurately depict the reality of the immigrant or the minority group’s daily experience (Gordon 1964). The table drew a clear line between the dominant group and the other groups, and, according to Michael, had existed for many years.

Michael had a good time with his Chinese friends, but he also wanted to get close to Americans. Like Ella, Michael wanted to fit in because he felt he had come from China, and his family had spent much money on the opportunity. Michael started by chatting with American students who are less popular as they are more accessible. At the same time, he was afraid of "losing face" or his image in both groups. He didn't want the Chinese to see him as only spending time with Americans, and he also didn't want the Americans to see him as only spending time with the Chinese. Michael also found it hard to show his identity and character in America as he is not fluent in English. He overcame social challenges by taking leadership roles to get in touch with more people naturally. Michael actively learned American culture by searching for references and using the dictionary. Michael recalled that it felt like he was doing cultural studies at that point as he wanted to know the mainstream.

I was a bit fake and unauthentic when I tried to fit in. Sometimes, I would hang out with Americans just for the sake of hanging out with them. We might not even get along well or have any shared interests. I would feel proud at some moment when I’m the only Chinese student in an American group. I felt that I had stepped out of the circle. I’m also aware that sometimes I’m trying to please or earn others’ favor, but I also feel happy when others like me, so that is okay overall.
Michael's desire to fit in led him to take the integrating approach. Furthermore, being different from others and being cool was important to Michael in high school. For example, he thought that dating an American girl was cool and would make him different from others. It was also a way for him to integrate into the American group. Michael's experience as an outsider was often in social settings. At prom and when it came to dating, he often felt shy and embarrassed to ask out the girl he liked. He also recalled how popular kids would get applause and cheers from others in assembly sharing, and he would want to be popular like them. The school Michael attended is very athletic-focused. He joined the ice hockey and football teams but still felt that he was far away from the world as he didn't have the talent in sports. Like Ella, Michael wanted to and tried different things to become popular. His primary strategy was to observe and follow what popular kids were doing. For Ella, it was learning how to do makeup; for Michael, it was learning to play sports. They differed in that Michael was able to get close to the dominant group as he took leadership positions, while Ella always felt that she was deficient and not "popular". The differences between Michael and Ella show that there is no such thing as a right or wrong approach, as each approach's consequences are different depending on one's situation and the available resources. Michael benefitted more from the integrating approach, while Ella sacrificed more from the same approach. Ultimately, both Michael and Ella ended up shifting away from the integrating approach.

Different from Ella, William, and Mandy, Michael's understanding of American culture was shaped by multiple cultures:

I would think that America is a very confident nation. A common characteristic of Americans is that many of their references are also references for others. The American pop culture is the world’s pop culture in many ways. It makes people think that movies and music are all centered around America. I didn’t realize that many things are actually not American until I came to France. For example, Drake and Justin Bieber are Canadians and L’Oréal is French. It’s disappointing to see how many things in the
world are U.S.-centric, but I also felt that I’m very lucky as what I learned in the U.S. is also the mainstream that people across the world accept.

Michael had a more global framework when looking at American culture. He pointed out how many things are U.S.-centric and how many people are unaware of this. Michael provided a structural understanding of the American culture, in which American culture is the center and the reference of many other cultures. In addition to Americans, everyone worldwide is influenced by the U.S.-centric reality. By considering American culture comparatively with other cultures, Michael took the hybridizing approach in which he compared and found the balance and intersection point between cultures.

Anchoring on his personal experience and the importance of references in a culture, Michael felt that students who came to the U.S. earlier were better adapted to the U.S. as they had a head start compared to Chinese students who came in a later stage. Students who come at an early stage are exposed to American culture and acquire the references that will help them interact better with Americans. He also pointed out that this differs from case-by case. For example, he felt many Chinese students in his high school never stepped outside the circle; most students stayed at the Chinese table. As for himself, Michael did not think America necessarily shaped his seemingly “American” characteristics.

Many people say I’m like an American, but I feel the term “American” has a lot of bias. Others think that I’m American because I like to explore new things. In the alternative, they think that “Chinese” have a close circle and do not like to explore. From an outsider’s perspective, my openness to culture is my “Americanness.” This could be because I have consumed many American cultures and am familiar with them. I am certainly familiar with the geopolitics and culture of America as I have lived on both the East Coast and the West Coast and have gone on many road trips.

Michael pointed to the potential implicit bias that may result from labeling someone as “American.” He also suggested that most of his “Americanness” is shaped by his behavior and
decisions instead of the influence of America. For example, his familiarity with the geopolitics and culture of America because he has lived in and traveled to various regions, and his interest in exploring new things was already a part of him before he came to America. Michael’s parents also see his Americanness through his interactions with others. They felt that Michael was more open in communication and more willing to meet new people and lead a conversation. Michael acknowledged that the public speaking skills he built in the U.S. had helped him communicate. He felt more confident and comfortable in conversation and making connections after having been in the U.S. for many years.

Michael was the president of the International Student Club in high school. He liked his “international student” identity as he liked the clash and fusion between different cultures. Michael also valued his Chinese identity, especially when someone from a different culture expressed interest in his identity. He enjoyed sharing Chinese culture with others. Whenever Michael was in a new country, he would try to find a local community interested in the Chinese culture and connect with them.

I think Chinese identity is a very valuable asset. We have a Chinese face, and our face is what people see first when they meet us. For example, Chinese is very exotic in Latin America, and people there are curious about it. I feel that I’m a cultural ambassador in many places.

Michael felt that he belonged to the U.S. because it was place he felt comfortable and familiar with. Especially as he had been living in non-English-speaking countries in recent years, it was easier to build relationships with others in the U.S. as he is fluent in English compared to other languages such as French and Spanish. He also had complex feelings about America because of some unpleasant experiences. Michael lost his passport during his recent stay in the U.S. because someone broke into his car. Michael felt it was easier to have deep conversations in the U.S. as people are more diverse and have different mindsets. Michael argued that in China,
what people discuss tends to be restrained within a box. People in China rarely talk about politics and tend to share the same political thoughts. Michael reasoned that it could be because the Chinese lack access to different information channels. In the end, Michael indicated that belongingness does not matter that much to him:

I’m not someone who really needs a sense of belonging. I didn’t have any sense of belonging in Brazil, but I enjoyed the stay because I was exposed to and learned new information every day. I enjoy experiencing new things. In the current stage, language, and dance give me energy, and the U.S. opens these two doors for me. One can explore different activities in the U.S. compared to China.

Like Mandy, who has a heritage orientation, although traveling between multiple countries, Michael maintained a solid social and cultural tie with China. He values Chinese identity and culture and is interested in being the ambassador of Chinese culture.

**Discussion**

All participants recognized that their ability to come to the U.S. at an early stage was a privilege. No matter what orientation and approach the individuals held or where they felt they belonged, all participants identified as Chinese. The experience of Ella, William, Mandy, and Michael reflected that the past experience, present experience, expectation, value proposition, family background, and currently available capital all influence parachute kid’s perception of their environment and gradually shape their orientation, which determines their sense of belongingness and the approach they take to the embeddedness in the American society.

Also, orientation and approach alone cannot explain the whole experience of the parachute kids. The three types of orientation serve as a framework to look at the experience of the parachute kids instead of a complete guideline. Furthermore, as shown in the analysis, people might shift between orientations and approaches as they enter different stages and develop
different needs. It is also worth noticing that people with the same orientation might have
different experiences. Again, an individual’s experience varies and is shaped by multiple
determinants, as mentioned above, including past experience, present experience, expectation,
value proposition, family background, and currently available resources. While there is
undoubtedly a pattern regarding the consequences and the influence of each orientation and
approach, these do not represent any individual experience fully.

I also want to clarify that the success story of Chinese parachute kids in this study should
not be attributed to the model minority framework. Instead, it is important to acknowledge that
Chinese parachute kids in this study are a hyper-selective group from affluent families. Many are
already the top-performing students in China.

CONCLUSION

Orientation plays an important role in Chinese parachutes’ kid daily experience,
emotions, sense of self, and sense of belongingness. By focusing on the “orientation” of
parachute kids, we can have a more nuanced, thorough, and personified analysis of one’s
experience, identity, perception, and expectation.

Future studies on parachute kids should focus on two aspects: understanding and action.
Scholars should focus on the nature and determinants of orientation to better understand Chinese
parachute kids. For the nature of orientation, as my study provides three typologies based on a
relatively small sample size of nineteen participants, it will be helpful if future studies can
include more participants and develop a more thorough and represented typology of the
orientation. Potential research questions for the determinants of orientation can address how each
determinant influences one’s orientation, to what degree, whether the determinant changed over
time, and if yes, how. For action, scholars can focus on the important determinant of orientation and explore how the institution can help the student. Scholars can also focus on the approach to embeddedness in American society to potentially change the rules in different social settings to reduce the obstacles immigrants face when trying to become a part of the system.
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APPENDIX

Interview Questions

Background

1. Tell me about the family in which you grew up.
   a. Do you have any siblings? If yes, what do your siblings do? How was your relationship with them? How has your relationship with your family changed after you came to the U.S.? In which way? How do you feel about the change?
   b. Which school did you attend in China? How do you like the school? What do you do in and outside of school? Who were your friends, and what did you do together? Where are they now? How has your relationship with your friends in China changed after you came to the U.S.? Do you still have contact with them? How do you feel about the change?
   c. Do you have any family members or friends who studied abroad before you came to the U.S.?

2. Tell me about your process of you coming to school in the U.S.
   a. What was your age when you came to the U.S.? What school did you attend before you came to the U.S.? What was your motivation for coming to the U.S.? What was your parents’ expectation of you coming to the U.S.?
   b. What do you know about American culture and school in the U.S. when you are still in China?
   c. Tell me about the school you attended in the U.S. Who helped you identify the school? Why did you or your parents choose that school? What was the application process?

3. How would you describe your current situation?
   a. What do you do now (for those who start working)? Where do you live? Which college are you currently attending or have attended? What is your major? How was your work or school atmosphere? How was the college experience different from high school or middle school? What is your plan after college? Who do you spend the most time with? How do you like to spend your free time?
Parachuting Experience

4. How do you feel about the school? What are some differences between schools in China and in the U.S.? How did you deal with the differences?
   a. How are you different (academically and socially) in school in China versus in the U.S.? Why?
   b. What are some changes you have had throughout your years in school in the U.S.? Socially and academically? What do you like about the school in the U.S., and what do you dislike about the school in the U.S.?
   c. How did you feel when you first came to the U.S.? What are some obstacles or challenges that you have at school? How do you overcome those challenges?
   d. Who do you make friends with? How do you make friends with them? How do you feel when you hang out with them? What are some differences when you hang out with local American students and when you hang out with Chinese students? How does each group support you?
   e. What were your goals or expectations when you first came to the school in the U.S.? How did it change overtime and why?
   f. How has your understanding of American culture changed over time, and why?
   g. When and in what setting do you feel comfortable at school? When and in what setting do you feel uncomfortable at school?

5. Do you feel fitting in is important to you? Why and why not? How long did it take for you to fit into the school? What are some strategies that you used to fit into the school? How has that turned out to be? What do you feel along the process? Do you feel authentic?
   a. What are some instances that you feel “fit in”? In what instances do you feel you are an “outsider”? Who has helped you along the way?

6. Who do you live with when you attend school?
   a. How do you feel? Do you get along with them? What are some conflicts, if any? What are some differences between your family and the person or family you live with? How do you adjust to such differences?
Belongingness

7. Do you feel more comfortable/authentic in the U.S. or China?
   a. In which way and in what settings do you feel more comfortable/authentic in
      the U.S.? In which way or in what settings do you feel more comfortable/authentic in
      China? How does that influence your decision to stay in China versus the U.S. in
      the future?

8. Thinking about your current situation, in what ways do you feel you belong to the U.S.,
   and in what way do you feel that you do not belong to the U.S.? Can you describe a
   moment? When do you start to feel that you belong to the U.S.? Any instances?
   a. Do you feel more belonging in the U.S. or China? Why? How did that change
      over time?
   b. How do you answer when people ask, “where are you from” now? How do you
      answer the question in the past? What makes the difference if there is one?

9. What are some differences between you and Chinese students who came to the U.S. after
   high school? What are some differences between you and Chinese American students?
   a. Many people observed that parachute kids are more confident, more
      “Americanized” or “westernized” compared to Chinese students who came to the
      U.S. after high school. Do you also feel that way? How do you see the
      “Americanness” within you? How does “Americanness” influence your life and
      interactions with others, especially with your friends and family?

Identity

10. [Question about public versus private identity] How would you introduce yourself in a
    new place? Will you mention that you are from China? Why?
    a. How would you introduce yourself when you are with your co-ethnic group? Will
       you mention that you are from China? Will you mention that you are in the U.S.
       at an early age? Why?
    b. How would you introduce yourself when you are in China?
    c. How do you feel when people call you an “international student”? Do you feel
       any differences between you and other international students?
11. [Question about class identity] How did your consumption and life habits change when you came to the U.S.? How do you adapt to such change, and how do you feel?
   a. Who did all the domestic work (cleaning, cooking) back in China? Who did all the domestic work in the U.S.? How do you adapt to such change? How do you feel?
   b. What are some changes in your lifestyle as you came to the U.S., often from a mega city in China to a suburban area in the United States? How do you deal with such changes? What do you enjoy and dislike about different lifestyles?
   c. Do you feel more convenient in the U.S. or China? What makes such differences? How would you describe your social status in China versus in the U.S.?

12. [Question about ethnic, cultural, and gender identities]
   a. Have you been involved with any identity group (e.g., Chinese Student Association, Asian Pacific Islander Association, Queer Student Center) in school? Why or why not? Why did you choose to participate in such a group? What do you think about the members of those groups? What do you think is the purpose of those groups? How do you feel? What experience do you try to get? What actual experiences do you have?
   b. Which language do you feel more comfortable using now? Mandarin or English? Why? How do you feel about your language and writing skills in English and Chinese? In what setting do you use Chinese, and in what setting do you use English? What platform do you use to access information, entertainment, and social media? Why did you choose these platforms? In which language and why?

Demographic Questions

1. What year and where were you born? What is your gender, ethnic identity? Educational background?
2. Tell me about the educational background of your parents. What kind of job do your parents do?
3. Family income? How would you describe your family’s economic situation/status?