"Self-Fashioning": Female Chinese International Students Navigating United States Campuses

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ABSTRACT

Gender studies in Western institutions of higher education tend to focus on the deficiencies of female students in adjusting to new cultures compared to their male counterparts (Contreras-Aguirre & Gonzalez, 2017; Manese et al., 1988; Mallinckrodt & Leong, 1992). Few researchers have delved into female Chinese international students' ways of self-fashioning and the opportunities it brings them. Using a phenomenological theoretical framework combined with a critical lens to conduct detailed interviews, this study shifted the lens of focusing on female students' deficiencies, instead exploring how a group of Chinese female international students self-fashioned as they navigated the U.S. higher education environment. Three major themes emerged in our female Chinese international students' stories: their "self-fashioning" helps them (1) sophistically navigate the U.S. system better, (2) tactically fit into the new U.S. society, and (3) adaptively create more genuine personal identities. Implications were discussed at the end of this study.

Female Chinese international students are one of the largest international student sub-groups in the United States today, and they contribute significantly to the institutions' internationalization and economic priorities (Xu, 2021). Chinese international students have held significant importance throughout history (Gargano, 2009; Lee, 2020; Yao & Mwangi, 2022). The SEVIS statistical report states that 44% (548,705) of F-1 and M-1 international students in 2021 were female (SEVIS, 2021). Research on the intersection of gender and international student integration tends to find that female international students may experience more difficulty in adjusting to new cultures than their male counterparts (Contreras-Aguirre & Gonzalez, 2017; Manese et al., 1988).

Attracting female international students can add various forms of capital that could benefit U.S. society (Qin et al., 2022). Few researchers have delved into female Chinese international students' ways of self-fashioning in an asset-based light. To this end, a deep understanding of how female Chinese international students smartly navigate higher education in the U.S. is worthy of exploration. To ensure a higher quality and socially equitable education, it is crucial to appreciate and acknowledge the uniqueness of female Chinese international students' experiences in self-fashioning.

Hence, we ask this research question: What are female Chinese international students' ways of self-fashioning during these experiences in (1) navigating the U.S. system, (2) fitting into U.S. society, and (3) constructing their identities? By giving them voices, we consider female Chinese international students intentionally choosing to construct and enact their identities as they respond to their environments.

This study aims to theoretically unpack and empirically explore the self-fashioning experiences of female Chinese international students using a strength-based perspective. This study fills a void in gendered Chinese international student research by challenging the deficit narrative of female Chinese students and understanding their self-fashioning ways through their struggles. This study also responds to calls from prior research studies, such as Martin (2017), to deeply explore and confirm that female Chinese international students are an asset to global education.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Gender studies literature that discussed females of color and their invisible intersectional marginalized identities called for continued exploration of how people of color navigate complex environments and the intersectional identities of gender, ethnicity, and race (Cheng & Xie, 2000; Huang, 2022; Hsieh, 2006; Martin, 2017). Responding to the calls of these works, we decided to use a self-fashioning lens in our study, which allows research to focus on the asset-based perspectives of the values and complex identities that female Chinese international students bring to U.S. campuses. Studying how they fashion themselves to navigate a foreign institution, fit into an alien society, and create a diverse identity based on their experiences in the U.S. can help researchers and administrators better understand how to create opportunities for them to grow and become success stories.

Further research is needed on the positive attributes of female Chinese international students. Female international students find adjusting to host cultures more complex than male students (Manese et al., 1988; McMillen, 1982). Even though a growing body of Chinese international students research has focused on the female student population, they focus on their struggles, such as (1) gendered differences in academic achievement (Cheng & Xie, 2000), (2) female students' identity negotiation (Hsieh, 2006), (3) gendered perceptions and needs (Manese et al., 1988), (4) female students' problems of adjusting to new

environment (McMillen, 1982), and (5) female students' sense of belong and low support networks (Le et al., 2016).

Self-Fashioning and Navigating New Society

Regardless of who we are or where we come from, physical transitions affect us all and are usually followed by a period of adjustment (Miller, 2010). One expects to undergo lifestyle changes, adjust to new societal values, and transition to language (Haslam et al., 2009). This is precisely what international students go through when they migrate abroad for their higher education goals.

Previous studies found that female international students suffer from more adjustment-related issues in a new country than their male counterparts simply due to the demands and obligations of traditional gendered roles they are expected to keep (Mariville, 1981). Fong and Peskin (1969) found that female Chinese international students have higher levels of conflict with their role expectations than their male counterparts as they attempt to balance adjusting to a new society and retain their traditional roles as a female. These conventional roles include their roles as mothers and caregivers, which see education as something that endangers these female roles. In our study, we moved away from the existing deficit-based studies on gender and international students towards looking at the resilience and strengths of female Chinese international students in the U.S. as they navigate a foreign society.

Self-fashioning Fits into the New Society

Studies have found that female international students see educational mobility in a new society as a means of fashioning an acceptable identity (Conradson & Latham, 2005; Elliot & Urry, 2010; Martin, 2017). Calhoun (1995) stated that a person's identity is rooted in their ideals and moral aspirations. Rizvi (2005) explains that Calhoun's concept strongly suggests that international students' identities are partly shaped by their new cultural experiences in a new society. Self-fashioning in international students entails the construction of their identities based on their interactions and experiences while studying in a foreign country, enabling them to better integrate into the new society and feel a sense of belonging.

Self-fashioning: Identity Construction

Self-fashioning among international students involves substantial changes in their identities quickly as they move across geographical, political, cultural, and linguistic boundaries (Marginson, 2014). Specifically, female Chinese international students may be more susceptible to negotiating identities desirable to them (Hsieh, 2006). Hsieh (2006) explains that female Chinese international students most likely embrace the Confucian philosophy of harmony combined with the gendered role of females to be passive and yielding to others, making it harder for them than any other international student subgroup to negotiate an

identity desirable to them. In our study, we are interested in exploring how female Chinese international students reconcile an identity in the U.S. that would help them carve a path forward for their academic, professional, and personal lives.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This study adopts the concept of self-fashioning in exploring the experiences of female Chinese international students. Self-fashioning refers to the active process by which individuals in a given society construct and enact their identities as they respond to their environment through their actions (Gee, 2006; Greenblatt, 2012; Martin, 2017).

Martin (2017) employed the idea of self-fashioning to critically question the motivation of female Chinese international students before their trip to study abroad in an Australian context. While Martin (2017) emphasizes the "self-fashioning" of female Chinese internationals in somewhat negative connotations impacted by the complexity of the gendered risks in post-socialist China, we want to challenge these perspectives to employ self-fashioning in a more positive light while exploring female Chinese international students.

In our study, we see self-fashioning as the iterative and positive process by which female Chinese international students see their new social and academic environment and make changes to better fit into contemporary society, navigate it, and fit in (construct a genuine identity).

METHOD

Given our aim to explore international students' self-fashioning during their experiences of (1) navigating the U.S. system, (2) fitting into U.S. society, and (3) constructing their identities, we adopted self-fashioning as the framework because it is well-recognized in studying identity development in general educational research and interdisciplinary work, such as discourse with youth (Gee, 2006, as well as female Chinese international students (Martin, 2017). However, few studies in the U.S. adopted "self-fashioning" as a theoretical lens to study the experiences of female Chinese international students.

Given the importance of female Chinese international students in U.S. higher education and to comprehend their self-fashioning experiences, we combined multiple case studies (Yin, 2009) and critical orientations. Numerous case studies served as the lens for understanding each participant's navigation experiences in the U.S. context. Our critical orientation allows for an in-depth analysis of an asset-based approach. Being -critical means honoring the participants' voices as counter stories, challenging the existing discourse for this population.

Phenomenological interviews (Seidman, 2013) are appropriate for this study because they offer a framework for investigating the experiences in three stages: (1) learning about their general life histories; (2) sharing counter stories and narratives in their cases and daily experiences of self-fashioning encounters while

negotiating the researchers' preconceived notions about the phenomenon; and (3) reflecting these experiences meaning through reflections and interpretations.

The researchers obtained the appropriate IRB review and approval from the College of William & Mary.

Participants

This study employed purposeful sampling in selecting case participants to enhance trustworthiness (Creswell & Creswell, 2017).

Table 1 Participants

Name	Which part of China were they from?	Role as a higher education	How long have they been in US
Quinn	Shanxi	Master's students. Graduate Assistant	10 years (including high school)
Sally	Jiangsu	Ph.D. Graduate Assistant	5 years (including masters' work in U.S., currently a PhD student)
Jane	Shandong	Ph.D. student Graduate Assistant & Now a Working Professional in higher education	12 years
Anna	Gansu	Ph.D. student Graduate Assistant	5 years (masters+ went back to China for three years + came back for PhD studies)

We chose these four cases because they were unique in their experiences of "self-fashioning" developments and processes. Overall, we reported saturated data reflecting prominent themes that emerged from these four cases; we also discussed three themes that we articulated explicitly from our research questions based on the research gap in this area.

Data Collection

Dr. Huang conducted phenomenological interviews with the participants, each lasting 30 minutes and one hour. Dr. Huang had biweekly or monthly personal communications (e.g., Starbucks chats and WeChat conversations) with each case over three years (2021-2023). In addition, memos (Merriam, 1998) were written

during and after interviews to document the interactions, note reflections, and better understand the female Chinese international students' experiences. For each case, Dr. Huang wrote more than 30 pages of memos.

Interviews were conducted in Mandarin or English, depending on each participant's preference. Interviews were first recorded and then transcribed through Zoom. The interviews conducted in Mandarin were translated into English before analysis. Pseudonyms were used to maintain confidentiality.

Data Analysis

A critical hermeneutic (interpretive) approach asks marginalized groups or individuals to discuss experiences from their lack of privilege and authority (Huang et al., 2023). A critical hermeneutic method provides us with the necessary interpretative and critical lens to examine the interview data using self-fashioning notions discussed in our research questions.

We dug into the asset perspectives of female Chinese international students' self-fashioning processes. We used critical concepts and three categories in the research question (navigating the U.S. context, fitting the new society, and shaping identities). The hermeneutic approach was the right approach for this study because it enables participants to share their stories, their sense-making, and comments.

NVivo and Google Drive were used to organize interview transcripts, field notes, and memos. This enabled us to create and merge codes across all data sources. We began the initial coding analysis by focusing on situations where participants identified discriminatory practices using themes such as grading. The first round of initial reading of each transcript (we put our agreed codes into a Google Sheet code book) resulted in 206 initial codes. Our inter-coding reliability reached 90% (i.e., the meanings of codes from different researchers were similar across codes). We used both, top-down and bottom-up analysis of the data from interviews (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005) from our theoretical lens and the literature to consolidate our initial coding; hence, we also coded the types of self-fashioning (navigating, fitting, or identities), along with identifying female Chinese international students' perceptions of these experiences, and the subsequent ways participants interpreted these interactions and responded to them. We also adopted open and axial coding (Saldaña, 2012) to identify the uniqueness of each of the multiple case participants and also discussed common themes and participants' experiences to identify patterns. Finally, we built trustworthiness by member checking biweekly (sometimes monthly) throughout the data analysis and writing process (Creswell & Creswell, 2017). We invited the participants to expand and problematize the notions of the data as a way of member checking. Dr. Huang and Shadeed analyzed, wrote memos, wrote themes, studied literature, discussed articles, compiled, and revised our findings and the manuscripts from Fall 2022 to Summer 2023.

Positionality

The researcher's positionality deeply affects the data collection and analysis process. Hence, during this research, we continuously engaged in reflexive practices (Huang et al., 2023). Dr. Huang was a female Chinese international student and is now a faculty member in Education. Having spent over a decade working with female Chinese international students on American campuses, she understands female Chinese international students' intentions, self-fashioning, and aspirations, having been one of them and now being there as an advocate. Shadeed is an Indian international student working on a higher-education doctoral degree with a research focus on international students. He has had over five years of experience working as an International Admissions Coordinator and Advisor. Shadeed has had first-hand experiences as an international student and has gleaned more on student experiences from his female Chinese international student peers.

FINDINGS

Three major themes emerged in our female Chinese international students' stories: their "self-fashioning" helps them (1) sophistically navigate the U.S. system better, (2) tactically fit into the new U.S. society, and (3) adaptively create more genuine personal identities.

 # 1 Self-Fashioning Helps Sophistically Navigate the U.S. System

When international students come to study in the U.S., they bring a rich tapestry of values and behaviors that contribute to American campuses' diversity and cultural exchange (Pandit, 2013). This is precisely what we found with the four participants in this study in navigating the U.S. society regarding (1) immigration and (2) communication. We use Jane and Anna's stories as examples in this finding.

Most international students struggle and need the help of International Student Support Services to navigate the immigration system and its stringent policies. These departments, however, are required by the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) to ensure that they maintain their legal student status and return home on the completion of their program or employment. This help is seldom to the advantage of the student but is geared towards meeting the rules and regulations put forth by the DHS. When asked about the sacrifices she had to make as an international female student and professional in the U.S., Jane told the interviewer:

It's in my sacrifice that I have to apply for graduate school … my primary motivation is to keep my lawful or legal status while working as a master's student.

As an experienced international student in the U.S., Jane strategically navigated the immigration process to her advantage, aligning with DHS requirements. Faced with the setback of her academic department denying her green card application for a teaching position, she resiliently applied for an Ed.D. program to maintain her legal status. Jane recognized the importance of a

terminal degree in advancing her career, and employing tactical gender management and cosmopolitan self-fashioning, to pursue academic growth, shaping her path to achieve her dream of teaching at a university.

Another participant (Anna) indicated that she learned communication skills are critical in helping you get what you want in the U.S. When asked about her graduate assistant experience, the participant said:

They only need a person to do what nobody else wants to do… So, I contacted her (a professor) to do a research apprenticeship with her. We ended up doing something together. But that's not something she offered me; I asked for it. But I think I'm pretty lucky because at least Dr. Z and I had a match. Yeah. So we were able to do something together. But if I don't have this as my interest area. I don't think anything would happen.

Anna realized she needed to actively mold her assistantship work for personal development during her graduate studies. Acknowledging the significance of pursuing pertinent duties, she contacted a professor with similar research interests and conveyed her wish to work as a research apprentice. Her proactive approach enabled her to acquire invaluable research experience. Anna adopted self-fashioning in the U.S., actively seeking opportunities to navigate the norms of the American educational society, after growing up in China, where opportunities could not be sought.

Being a Chinese woman used to communicating in a submissive manner, Anna realized that to succeed in the U.S., she would need to take a more direct approach. She became a confident person who was not afraid to stand up for the rights and advantages she had worked so hard to obtain; this change allowed her to adjust to the new society smoothly. It's critical to recognize that in China, cultural norms surrounding communication frequently impede direct communication, making it difficult for her to express herself to her senior colleagues.

Our participants needed to receive equitable treatment in their academic and professional positions. However, they were able to adapt to the U.S. ways of getting things done to help themselves overcome obstacles often faced by international students. The capacity to successfully traverse a new culture and country enriches one's experiences, fosters integration, broadens one's perspective and gives one the necessary abilities to thrive in a globally integrated society. The participants of this study successfully demonstrate this claim.

The participants demonstrated individual strengths that they gained through the practice of self-fashioning. Jane navigated the functioning of a complex U.S. immigration system to achieve her goal of simultaneously remaining a legal and in-status international student and pursuing her terminal degree. Anna was able to use her learned communication skills and strategies to gain research and professional experience while still a student. Without Anna asking for a better role and tasks as a graduate assistant, which her home culture would not promote, she may have never had a fulfilling experience during her graduate degree.

2 Self-fashioning Helps Tactically Fit into the New U.S. Society

Fitting into the new society and keeping up with its changing nature is essential for female international students. In this finding, we share two examples: (1) Quinn's career change and (2) Sally's tactics of reading strategies in the U.S.'s rigorous social studies master's program.

Quinn explained that self-fashioning means changing her academic major to fit the new U.S. society. Quinn realized that her educational background would impact her future career and financial stability. In her senior year of college, Quinn faced challenges in career development when she found out that "there was no job" (Interview, 2021) for her when she finished her undergraduate degree in finance after spending many years pursuing this education. The participant exclaimed that two things helped her assimilate (self-fashion) into the diverse U.S. culture. The first was "to step out of their comfort zones," and the second was "to be more culturally responsive" (Interview, 2021).

Quinn said,

> You see little of this in China…one goes into a program with a narrow mind of sticking with the program and chosen profession. You seldom see one changing degree concentrations or occupations. This may be due to population-based competition in society, which leads to a high workforce and talent available in every possible field. This prevents one from starting over in a new area as they would instead continue to grow in a field they are accustomed to. In the United States, the population competition is not high, but the avenues for development are. (Interview, 2021)

Quinn shared that in China, students find it challenging to move between academic tracks and thus are limited to specific career choices based on their initial educational choices (Personal Communication, 2021). While studying at a U.S. University, she realized that she needed more than just her finance undergraduate degree to guarantee a bright career path for herself. Through her academic experiences and interactions with her peers from college, she realized that Computer Science was the field that could help her reach her career goals. When asked about her experiences overcoming obstacles in the U.S., Quinn reported:

> I was applying for finance for my master's degree. But then I realized that … it's really tough to find a job with this degree. I met my boyfriend, who became my husband now, and he studied computer science. I also met many of his friends; I realized it's much easier to find a job with big pay if you're in computer science. That made me start thinking about switching my career. And luckily, I found … an analytic program that needs some economics and computer science background. Although I have zero experience in computer science, I still went ahead to enter that degree.

Quinn believes that taking a contextualized approach is necessary for career development to be culturally responsive. The intense competition in American culture forced this English language learner to push herself beyond her comfort zone to advance personally and professionally. Quinn's ability to shape herself is demonstrated by her astute decision-making when choosing her advanced

Computer Science and analytics degree to improve her career and financial situation. This contrasts the possible obstacles she would have encountered if she had pursued her original academic goal of earning a master's degree in economics.

Here is evidence that Quinn took alternative routes in seeking creative ways of "self-fashioning" in her U.S. career. Quinn tactically exceeds instrumentalism as even though the norm in China is to "go into a program with a narrow mind of sticking with the program and chosen profession,". She challenged herself to move out of her "comfort zone" and NOT "stick with the program (in her case, the finance major)." She filled herself with passion, grit, and persistence in engaging in gendered risk management and cosmopolitan self-fashioning. This allowed Quinn to refocus on her academics and profession on something that may (risk) bring her more financial stability and offer her a better place in the American society. Quinn was successful as she had landed a fulfilling career in data science at the time of the interviews; regardless of all the obstacles she had to manage, she continued to work. She said, "I am glad that I switched (career pathways)."

Sally's self-fashioning is not about career development. She faced an issue many of our international student interviewees faced while studying abroad, especially in the U.S., i.e., the sudden change of academic rigor and requirements. Sally, a third-year Ph.D. student, was majoring in education at the time of the interview,

Sally confessed that "the academic rigor in the US was much different than in China" (Interview, 2021). Sally did not have to do as much work in China during her undergrad as she "had to during the Master's program in the US." (Interview, 2021). Sally found that she "had to read many long and detailed research papers as a part of just one single class" (Interview, 2021), and with her weaker language skills as an ELL, she was not sure she would be successful. Sally said,

> *Compared to my studies here, I didn't work hard in my undergrad [in China].... First, it's about tons of reading, and second, I can only maybe understand half of what the professor said in class. Because of my language barrier, I am very nervous about asking questions to professors, and that negatively affects my academic performance.*
>
> *After two months, I went to my advisor, who cared about international students' experience ... I told her that I couldn't finish the reading, and she gave me some tips. She explained that my task was not to finish the reading but to get reflections. This lesson ... may help my younger academic sisters facing the same issue."*

Like Quinn, Sally exercised her self-fashioning skills by "engaging tactics" of managing her reading and studying (risk management) and being a good student (self-fashioning). In her case, she took advantage of meeting with her international student advisor, who was able to give her good advice. Sally utilized this advice to benefit her and succeeded in her Master's program. This utilization of new knowledge on how to effectively function in her new

academic environment shows that Sally had fashioned herself to adjust academically and had succeeded.

Quinn and Sally both utilized self-fashioning to fit into the U.S. society they now inhabited. Quinn's choice of moving away from Economics and towards a Computer Science and Analytics program is something she would not have been able to do in China. For her, it was the most unique of situations that she was studying away from home, where students are encouraged to diversify their knowledge and experiences - which she took full advantage of and, in the process, advanced her career. Sally's experience of self-fashioning was regarding academics - specifically with the foreign concept of reading and analyzing research papers. She was not exposed to this when studying in her home country. By speaking to the right person for support, Sally overcame many obstacles faced by international students.

#3 Self-fashioning Helps Adaptively Create More Genuine Personal Identities

In Martin's (2017) analysis, the self-fashioning processes for female Chinese international students were "not only economic opportunity maximization but also calculative risk reduction and projects of reflexive self-fashioning" (Martin, 2017, p. 2). Anna considered that among all the inequalities she faced at work, "I think maybe education is fair enough because we have tons of women in this area." (Interview, 2021). Hence, getting a doctoral is her way of "gendered risk management and cosmopolitan self-fashioning" (Martin, 2017, p. 1). Anna said,

> *After I graduated with a US master's degree, I went back to China for work. And then everybody, all of a sudden, started to ask me why are you not getting married. Why are you not having a child? Why don't you get yourself a boyfriend? So that's too difficult for me. That's partially why I came here for a doctorate like most; I came here because that's my career. But there are reasons for the stress I had in my personal life. (Interviews, 2021)*

Annas' self-fashioning provided a means of self-expression and empowerment. By actively shaping her identity as an educator and researcher, Anna asserts her agency and takes control of her narrative by pursuing her dream of earning a Ph.D.. This was a way for her to resist external pressures to conform to gender-specific cultural norms - in this case, getting married, or other expectations (e.g., having children, finding a boyfriend). Instead, she was able to create an identity that was true to her values and aspirations.

While her friends back in China adhered to traditional norms, Anna remained unaffected, recognizing the freedom in the U.S. culture to pursue her dreams without social pressures. She focused on achieving the coveted "Doctor" title in this new environment.

Anna comes from a middle-class family. Her father is a college professor, and her mother is a city designer. Anna wanted to pursue an advanced degree to escape the Chinese dating scene and the pressures of getting married. Anna is not alone. Her female Chinese international student friends shared her "leftover

lady" struggles. Her resilience demonstrated in self-determination, hard work, persistence, and grit was obvious.

Studying abroad has influenced students' social identity, fostering their self-perception as "national and global actors" and has impacted them across social, national, global, and personal dimensions (Dolby, 2004, p. 154). When female Chinese international students come to the U.S., they find themselves experiencing two vastly different societies, cultures, and value systems. When asked about the struggles of being a female in China and the U.S., Quinn explained regarding her family:

> *I sometimes need to do more work around the house because I contribute less to the family than my husband. So I need to contribute more in terms of cooking and washing dishes.*

Quinn's earning less than her husband's initially made her feel obligated to take on more household responsibilities in line with Chinese values and social norms. Quinn, however, found support when she talked about these emotions with her husband because he rejected the traditional gendered roles. By taking this stance, she could focus on her professional career, which she had worked hard to achieve, by reducing the extra time and stress associated with household chores.

In this way, Quinn navigated the split roles of being a Chinese female in the U.S. and remained successful in her professional career. She also had some help from her mother, who seemed to weigh on the other extreme of gendered roles.

> *My mom wants me to do better. However, she constantly compares me with my husband. She said, 'If you study what he studied or learn from him, you could get paid more.' She tells me that his career and work are better than mine. I wouldn't say I like those negative thoughts or my conversations with my mom about this.*

Quinn understands that her mother is trying to convey messages that will influence her to have more money for herself and her family, and a financially equitable position in her relationship with her husband. Even through these opposing thoughts on her role as a Chinese female, Quinn established her gendered identity by balancing being a working professional and contributing equitably to caring for their home in the U.S.

Anna and Quinn experienced two very different cultures that function with varying philosophies on the role of women in society. While their Chinese upbringing encouraged the following of Confucius's perspectives, which require women to be passive and yielding, the societal culture they found in the U.S. promoted the idea of gender equality and the advancement of women. While in the U.S., Anna understood the importance of advancing her academics and career over following the expectations of her family and friends, which were in direct conflict. Anna molded her identity as a career-oriented woman instead of reverting to the comfort she would have found as a traditional Chinese woman, with her family and friends being happy with her choices. Quinn struggled to balance her conventional Chinese role with her newfound life in the U.S. as a professional. However, once she realized that her husband did not support traditional Chinese-gendered roles, she felt comfortable and happy retaining her

identity as a working woman in a competitive world. Quinn's mother's view on her 'equitable' partnership with her husband seemed contradictory to the prescribed traditional Chinese female role, which also pushed her to continue developing her identity as a working woman. Many international students can benefit from and be inspired by the lessons that Anna and Quinn learned regarding being who they want to be. Like the participants, international students can work towards establishing a powerful sense of identity, which can further aid in their integration into U.S. society, their personal growth and development as students and professionals, and a more positive sense of self.

DISCUSSION

Using a phenomenological theoretical frame combined with a critical lens and by taking a deep dive into the lives of our four participants, we were better able to study and understand the experiences of female Chinese international students on how they used self-fashioning to navigate a new society, fit into it, and construct genuine identities for themselves. In our findings, we found that the self-fashioning ways of being our participants have implications for a conceptual framework of self-fashioning. Figure 1 shows our conceptual framework of self-fashioning.
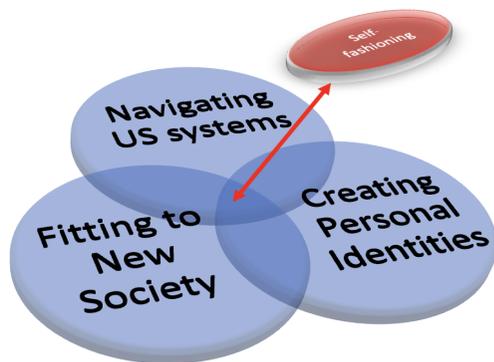
Figure 1, Three Pathways for Female Chinese International Students in Self-Fashioning

1 Self-Fashioning Helps Sophistically Navigate the U.S. System

Self-fashioning is a tool or strategy that can assist individuals in their endeavors within the U.S. system. Navigating means successfully moving through or dealing with a complex or challenging system or situation. In this case, female Chinese students' efforts involve adapting to different cultural norms, navigating the legal and political landscape, or achieving personal and professional goals within the country.

 # 2 Self-fashioning Helps Tactically Fit into the New U.S. Society

This pathway conveys the idea that intentionally adopting a strategic approach can be advantageous in adapting and integrating into the changing or evolving social fabric of the U.S.. Here, self-fashioning refers to a helpful tool or strategy that can aid individuals in assimilating into the new U.S. society. This pathway should be used carefully and strategically, indicating that individuals should make calculated decisions to fit into society effectively. This self-fashioning strategy could include adapting to new cultural norms, societal changes, or demographic shifts within the country.

#3 Self-fashioning Helps Adaptively Create More Genuine Personal Identities

Female Chinese international students achieve success or navigate the complexities of the U.S. system by strategically shaping their own identity and adopting a sophisticated approach. In this pathway, self-fashioning refers to the process of constructing or molding one's own identity, personality, or image. It involves deliberate choices and actions to present themselves in a particular way, often to achieve specific goals or adapt to a particular environment.

The general international student population could benefit from the self-fashioning experiences of the participants to better situate themselves academically and professionally while in the U.S. and have a richer and more positive experience.

Complimenting Chinese International Students' Research

While most existing studies on female Chinese international students focus on their academic experiences and challenges and social adaptation (Ching et al., 2017; Inouye et al., 2022; Meng et al., 2017; Zhang, 1999), our study extended the research to look into how they successfully overcome academic and social challenges while in the U.S. Instead of simply noting the challenges they face, our study chose to focus on the individuality of the participants, and how they employed self-fashioning to overcome academic, social, and cultural barriers they faced while studying abroad.

Challenging the Gendered Discussions via Asset-Based Perspectives

Along with echoing existing findings about female Chinese international students and their struggles (Contreras-Aguirre & Gonzalez, 2017; Le et al., 2016; Mallinckrodt & Leong, 1992; Manese et al., 1988), our study offers alternative ways of interpreting female Chinese international students' experiences - dealing with a stringent immigration system, and a higher level of communication skills which are not required of females in China. Female Chinese international students often have to choose between fulfilling their

professional goals abroad or staying in China and abiding by the gendered roles prescribed by society and their families, highlighting their unique struggles and difficulties (Le et al., 2016). These specified functions include being a wife and a mother, with a passive and yielding societal and familial role promoted by the patriarchy and traditional Chinese values (e.g., Martin, 2017; Hsieh, 2006). We considered that there are unique features of female Chinese international students' self-fashioning themselves - their identities are fluid and constantly changing. Female Chinese international students should be considered in a more positive light for future research instead of the previously skeptical and deficit-based portrait crafted of them.

Extending Research through the Lens of Self-Fashioning

We innovatively employed a less discussed concept in international students' literature – self-fashioning (Martin, 2017), along with previous discussions from the social sciences field of this concept (Gee, 2006 in sociolinguistics) - to offer a complex picture of how female Chinese international students can fashion themselves, just like their male counterparts, in navigating the new society, fitting to U.S. contexts, and constructing identities. Our findings extend similar discussions on Chinese international students, such as their self-formation (Yu, 2021), to highlight how female Chinese international students can uniquely navigate a foreign society to their advantage.

LIMITATIONS

The small-scale study does not include all female Chinese international students' self-fashioning experiences. We hope to see more studies focus on long-term, larger-scale, and more comprehensive experiences in the collective pool of Female Chinese international students. Another limitation of this study is that the "self-fashioning" experiences were only a "moment" of the perspectives of the case participants' lives. The female Chinese students and their opinions and interpretations of these experiences could be a fluid process that shapes and is shaped by the sociopolitical milieu, political environment, the chronological era, personal growth, and many other factors. While we can only offer a "slice" of the rich lives of these participants, this study still provides implications.

Implications for Future Practice

The implications of this study include tips for future Higher Education Institutions (HEIs). HEIs can adopt a more asset-based and change-based approach to welcome female Chinese international students instead of passively perceiving them as vulnerable. Caring with "respect" is the best way to honor the diversity and value female Chinese international students. The findings of this study can help professionals in HEIs highlight the experiences of female Chinese international students that have led to their personal, academic, and

professional success in the U.S. and thus take tangible actions to help others in the same boat as they navigate a new society.

Practitioners in the international education field can also learn how female Chinese international students at their unique institutions can overcome some of their everyday struggles to become success stories, much like our participants. Faculty could also be provided with knowledge and resources to help them become more culturally responsive in acknowledging the asset-based views toward female Chinese international students.

Implications for Future Research

Future studies should explore the specific factors and methods that can contribute to enhancing their strengths. Understanding individual, cultural, and contextual factors promoting resilience and adaptability can provide valuable insights into creating intervention and support systems for this student sub-population. Further, it is essential to consider the intersectionality of gender and cultural identity in future studies, as this study focused specifically on female Chinese international students. Future comparative studies on female and male Chinese international students can contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of the strengths and struggles of female and international students.

CONCLUSION

Considering everything, this study sheds light on how female Chinese international students can successfully navigate U.S. society, fit into it, and create a more genuine identity for themselves. Our study moved away from traditional research, which focused on the difficulties faced by this student sub-population. It redirected it towards looking at how they become a success story. The findings highlight the importance of recognizing and leveraging the strengths of female Chinese international students as they navigate the challenges of studying abroad in the U.S. Further, this study challenges the standard narrative of female Chinese international students being a vulnerable population who need constant support by highlighting the strengths that they bring to the table. HEIs in the U.S. can create an environment that promotes the development and well-being of female Chinese overseas students by adopting a strength-based attitude. Furthermore, these findings add to the body of knowledge on the experiences of female Chinese international students and have applications for creating personalized interventions and support services that capitalize on their advantages.

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