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Chinese International Scholars' Work–Life Balance in the United States: Stress and Strategies

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ABSTRACT

Acculturative stress and strategies have been investigated with undergraduate international students in the United States. However, not much is known about scholars who come to the United States for advanced educational or career opportunities. Guided by Berry's (2006) acculturative stress coping adaptation theory, the current study explored lived experiences of CISs through longitudinal interviews. Inductive analysis revealed themes about stressors that challenged work–life balance. Three types of coping strategies for these stressors were identified: (a) grandparents' and spousal support, (b) mental strengths, and (c) planning ahead for the future of their family. Practical implications are discussed for supporting CISs. Findings of the current study expand our knowledge about CISs' challenges and strategies for maintaining work–life balance.

Keywords: acculturation strategies, Chinese international scholars, work–life balance

International students' acculturation to the United States has gained more attention over the last decade, particularly with the increasing number of Chinese undergraduate and graduate students matriculating in U.S. institutions of higher learning. Approximately 363,341 Chinese students enrolled in U.S. institutions of higher education during the 2017–2018 academic year, which represents about 33% of the total number of international students studying in the United States

(Institute for International Students, 2018). Many of these students pursue educational and work experiences beyond undergraduate training. For this study, we focus on scholars of Chinese descent who are linked to U.S. institutions of higher learning and fit into one of the following categories: enrolled in doctoral training, pursuing a postdoctoral fellow or visiting scholar appointment, or obtaining permanent professoriate positions in the United States. Less is known about the acculturative stress and strategies of this group of Chinese international scholars (CISs), especially as they navigate in academia while simultaneously balancing their family life in a new culture.

The current study focuses on CISs and how they manage acculturation stressors to maintain a work–life balance in the United States. CISs deserve research attention for three reasons: (a) CISs are a collective group who are constantly influenced by the economic and political environment in the United States, such as the immigration policy; (b) CISs are transitioning to a new culture with new norms and expectations in the United States; and (c) CISs must balance pursuing an academic career while being caregivers. CISs in the current study shared these commonalities, even though they have different visa statuses. Importantly, CISs in the current study shared similar lived experiences with some within-group variations that enriched the data: different academic standings and various family structures.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Acculturation Theory

Stan Knapp (2009) noted that "theory performs vital descriptive, sensitizing, integrative, explanatory, and value functions in the generation of knowledge about families" (p. 133). Knapp conceptualized explanatory functions of theory as a process that allows scholars to develop ideas that help explain, understand, or interpret data. This study relies on Berry's (2006) theory that acculturation experiences occur on both the individual and group level, and these experiences lead to long-term adaptation. First, acculturation demands come from the conflict between an individual's culture of origin and the host culture, along with each set of norms and expectations. Second, in the process of navigating two cultures, individuals might encounter stressors due to the dissonance between these two cultures. When the high-level stressors sustain, they become acculturative stress, and individuals can address these stressors by developing coping strategies that promote adaptation.

Chinese International Scholars' Stress and Strategies Adjusting to Their Life in the United States

The acculturative stressors that CISs experience challenge work–life balance during their time in the United States. For many CISs, they acculturate as a family. The scholars' mental, physical, and academic wellbeing is influenced by their family life due to family and societal expectations (family systems theory; Cox &

Paley, 1997). The current study addresses the lack of literature investigating how this acculturation process occurs for CISs (i.e., stressors and coping strategies) as they strive for balancing work and life in the United States.

The few studies on Chinese international postgraduate students have identified acculturative stressors that derive from language barriers (Choi, 2006; Sato & Hodge, 2009; Yan & Berliner, 2013), which can result in low esteem and a sense of incompetence (Leki, 2001). Moreover, high levels of cultural distance between work and family can lead to great stress (Ward, 1996). For instance, CISs come from a collectivistic culture and must adjust to an individualistic culture that places a higher value on autonomy, individualism, and independence. How this manifests in U.S. classrooms (e.g., assertiveness) might put CISs at a disadvantage (Kim et al., 2001). Additionally, the acculturative stress arises from differences in education systems that result in new academic expectations, such as negotiating complex relationships with advisors while a part of U.S. institutions (Sato & Hodge, 2009; Yeh & Inose, 2003). These stressors can accumulate and influence CISs' psychological wellbeing, especially due to language barriers and becoming an ethnoracial minority (Lee & Rice, 2007).

Acculturative stress has been studied at length with Chinese international students, particularly with a heavy focus on Chinese undergraduates (e.g., Heng, 2017; Heng, 2018a; Heng, 2018b), or samples of both undergraduates and graduate students (Gautam et al., 2016; Li et al., 2018; Zhang, 2018). Postgraduate scholars from abroad are likely to experience stressors that are distinct from those of undergraduates, considering they are likely older and in a different phase of family life.

Work–Family Balance

The literature on work–life balance is broad and covers a wide range of topics. For the sake of parsimony, we focus only on the research relevant to the family life of the target population for this study.

Existing research reveals the stressors and management strategies of U.S.-born citizens balancing family and academic work. Sallee's (2015) study of 18 masters-level graduate students revealed a variety of strategies utilized to fulfill academic responsibilities (e.g., time management, prioritizing their parental role with academic roles, etc.). U.S. doctoral students utilized strategies such managing their time, clarifying responsibilities, and seeking social support across contexts to promote balance (Martinez et al., 2013). What remains unknown are the specific coping strategies of CISs with children when trying to balance family life and acculturating into their academic or career program. For CISs, work–family balance likely presents additional complexity in their acculturative adjustment compared with domestic parent students, because acculturative stress and strategies are not only encountered individually, but also within the context of complex family structures. CISs may have aging parents living with or near them in the United States while they work or study. Additionally, CISs may need to develop their own coping skills and then foster these skills in their children.

This study extends the work–life balance literature to the CIS population in the United States.

Research Questions

Guided by the integrated conceptual framework, the current study aims to investigate two research questions. First, in order to maintain work–life balance, what challenges have CISs experienced? Second, in order to maintain work–life balance, how have CIS coped with these challenges?

METHOD

Research Paradigm and Methodology

We used interpretivism to guide the current research. The core of interpretivism is to recognize the existence of the subjective meanings that are experienced by acting persons (Pizam & Mansfeld, 2009). Guided by this research paradigm, we aimed to search for the interpretations of culturally and historically situated social experiences of the participants, which are unique, qualitative, and in-depth (Crotty, 1998; Goldkuhl, 2017). Interpretivism is appropriate for this study because we believe the nature of CISs' reality and experience are situated in a culturally derived world where lived experiences have subjective meanings. Due to the nature of interpretations of social meanings as the guiding philosophy for the current study, we used hermeneutic phenomenology as our research methodology as it is the science of interpretations of social phenomenon through written or spoken texts with an emphasis on everyday conversations that reflect everyday lived experiences. According to hermeneutic phenomenology, meanings are expressed and can be interpreted through the way language is given. We aimed to identify and clarify the meanings of CISs' everyday life in the culturally and socially constructed world (van Manen, 1990). The goal of the current research is exploratory rather than explanatory, expanding our understanding of CIS's work–life balance in the United States. The current research sought to explore what problems CISs encountered and how they coped with them.

Data were collected over the course of three interviews with each participant, a data collection method commonly used in phenomenological studies (Seidman, 2006). The three interviews allowed the investigation of CISs' lived experiences at different points of time: (a) previous and present time; (b) detailed current academic and family life; and (c) future plans. This helped participants reconstruct their experiences as a CIS regarding their work–life balance.

The focus on finding varying perspectives (Lincoln & Guba, 2000; Olesen, 2000) guided researchers to conduct in-depth qualitative research using the purposeful sampling strategy to recruit a small group of participants ($N = 6$) who had similar lived experiences with various characteristics (Creswell, 2015; Gautam et al., 2016; Halic et al., 2009; Xing & Bolden, 2019). Purposeful sampling strategy helped us select participants with rich information related to

work–life balance as a CIS in the United States. This sampling strategy is effective especially when there are limited resources and the research population is very specific and not commonly accessible (Patton, 2002). According to Morse (1991), this is an acceptable sample size for phenomenological research. Data saturation was evident when not much new information was generated from the interviews (Saunders et al., 2018).

Positionality Statement

The primary author led the data collection and analysis processes and is bilingual in English and Mandarin Chinese, which allowed for the study participants to feel comfortable sharing their lived experiences in a language they felt could best express their thoughts and feelings. The second author is an ethnic minority scholar in the United States and contributed to refining the theoretical framework. We both contributed to interpreting findings and the implications of the study. It is likely, however, our ethnoracial backgrounds influence our interpretations of the data. To avoid speaking for the data, we made efforts to bracket existing biases or assumptions. To avoid bias, we took notes on all preconceptions that arose about the study population in order to bracket these existing assumptions during data collection and analysis process (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Sites and Participants

This study was approved by the university Institutional Review Board of the first author. We recruited participants from a listserv that was used by students and scholars and by word of mouth in a Midwestern college town. We conducted a total of 18 face-to-face interviews with six CISs. All six participants shared similar lived experiences, which was being a postgraduate scholar who had a young child living in the United States. The within-group variations that enriched the sample and data were that these scholars were from different academic backgrounds and were in different academic standings. Their family structure while in the United States also varied (see Table 1).

We conducted interviews primarily in English, unless study participants felt they could not express themselves fully in English, at which point they used Mandarin Chinese. Each of the 18 interviews lasted 30–60 min. Interview protocol is presented in Appendix A.

All six CISs had similar lived experiences as international scholars from mainland China working in a U.S. institution with young children. They possessed different views regarding challenges and strategies in balancing these two roles in the United States. Those differences were rooted in varying characteristics (levels of training or status of scholarship, gender, and academic programs).

Table 1: Demographics of the Participants

Name	Years	Academic position	Gender	Child age	Child gender	Marital status	Spouse	Grandparents
Ling	6.5	Doctoral student	F	3.5	M	Married	Yes	Yes, on and off
Yan	5	Doctoral student	F	2.5	M	Married	Yes	Yes, on and off
Peng	10	Faculty	M	7	F	Married	Yes	No
Li	1	Postdoc fellow	F	1	F	Married	No	Yes
Ting	4	Postdoc fellow	F	3.5	M	Divorcing	No	Yes
Fang	1.5	Visiting scholar	F	5	M	Married	No	Yes

Note. Names are pseudonyms. Years = total number of years living in the United States at the time interviews occurred; spouse = whether participant's spouse was currently living in the United States; grandparents = whether at least one of child's grandparents had been living in the United States since child's birth or arrival.

Data Analysis Procedure

We used inductive analysis (Hatch, 2002) via an open-coding process in NVivo. The study goal was not to quantify experiences but rather to understand CIS stress and strategies to have a work–life balance. During interviews and after data transcription emerging themes and salient points were noted. Across the interviews, the themes and salient points reemerged during subsequent readings through the transcripts. We used open-coding by targeting the interactions that answered the research questions and highlighting the meaningful units to create codes line-by-line. Upon completion for one participant, we repeated this process for the next participant. We then coded the data and checked against and compared to themes and points found in the previous participant's coding (Corbin & Strauss, 2014).

Trustworthiness

Multiple tools can be employed to ensure trustworthiness (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). We used field journals to accumulate information and make sense of three interviews. We used personal logs to keep a record of personal biases, noting frustrations, post interview self-reflections, and methodological adjustments while transcribing interviews to note more in-depth probing opportunities. Secondly, one of the authors had prolonged engagement among the CIS community, building rapport with individuals, while being mindful of possible distortions of the research process. Third, we made initial contact through community engagement to assure the CISs' understanding of procedures of the research. Next, we used peer debriefing to get feedback on coding, outline a writing strategy, and make methodological adjustments. We used audio

recordings and note-taking to maintain referential adequacy, along with multiple listening sessions and verifying the original data sources. We performed informal member checks with CISs who were parents but who were not in the current study. These nonparticipant members helped check analytic themes, interpretation of our results, and the conclusions for this study.

RESULTS

Bronfenbrenner's (1986) ecological system theory argued that individuals' lived experiences are influenced by their environments, which he split into five levels: the microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem, macrosystem, and the chronosystem. CISs struggled with balancing work and life (mesosystem), which is influenced by external (macro- and exosystem) factors. Family members (microsystem), especially spouses and their children's grandparents, helped CISs maintain work–life balance. Their future career decision (chronosystem) was determined by their family, mainly as a child-centered decision-making process when it came to their future career. Such a decision-making model demonstrated the interactions between person and environment and these interactions constantly evolved in proximal progress (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006).

Challenges to Maintaining Work–Life Balance

CISs experienced psychological stress in trying to maintain a good work–life balance. Their stress came from being new to their academic program in a new education system, in conjunction with being a parent raising a young child in a new culture. In their second interview, all six participants discussed in length all the challenges they encountered in the United States. CISs' psychological stress and emotional turbulence was heightened when they strived to keep a balance of their work and their relationship with their young child. CISs also experienced frustrations when they aimed to maintain a balance of their work and their relationship with their spouse.

My Work and My Child

A consensus from their interviews emerged when CISs discussed their children. All CISs gave the highest priority to their children's wellbeing despite their stressful workload and pressure to succeed in their professional career. Their ways of attending to their children's wellbeing varied. Two CISs in the current study suffered intensely during the first few months of their staying in the United States since their ways of prioritizing children's wellbeing was to leave children behind in mainland China while they came to the United States to pave the way for their children's arrivals.

Both Li and Fang (pseudonyms) left their young children with their children's fathers and grandmothers back in China when they first arrived in the United States. They reasoned that by being here first without their children, not only could they smoothly transition to their academic career before their children's

arrival, they could also settle down and make a new home out of their rental place for their children's transition to the United States. During the time being apart from their children, they struggled intensely emotionally because they missed their family, especially their children. They were also lonely because they had not established a social group in the community.

Sometimes the imbalance of work and life was because the CIS gave birth to children as they transitioned to a new academic program. Yan shared that she suffered from postpartum depression after giving birth to her son. "I couldn't focus very well on my study," she said. She had some emotional problems especially during the first 4 weeks postpartum. She expressed that

> My life was just messed up. I remember that when I first took class, it was very stressful. I feel like it was totally different life. In the first few months, he cried a lot. I need to feed him a lot. I cannot sleep very well, and in the meantime, I need to focus on my study. I'm from China, but the classroom is in English. I need to read a lot. The homework is about writing, not only several paragraphs, but 10 pages, for homework assignment. I need to talk a lot on the class.

She went on to discuss her struggles as a new parent still in the first few months of postpartum while battling her new role as a PhD student to survive, catch up, and succeed.

At the time of the interviews, all CISs were living with their young children. Similar to non-CISs, participants expressed that their work–life balance was well maintained in the aspect of their child's wellbeing. But when their children would get sick, it went off balance again. When asked what they thought about being in academia and simultaneously being a parent with a young child in the United States, Ling said, "Hard to handle … I have to miss some of the class sessions, if my son is sick, and [I need to] stay at home taking care of my son. I think it's not easy to handle parenting and being a student."

Other times, it was more about their children's mental and emotional wellbeing that CISs considered on top of their job responsibilities. Peng, Ting, and Fang shared their children's happiness was number one for them. In order to ensure that their children were happy, Peng "suffered a lot." He added, "I have to sacrifice myself to make both (my daughter and my boss) happy." This was because he was in academia and his boss believed that his time should be flexible when it came to research. As a H-1B1 visa holder at the time of the interviews, he had a lot of anxiety about job security while dealing with a harsh and demeaning boss. Both Ting and Fang had a preschool-aged child at the time of the interviews. Their children did not speak English growing up in China. When they first arrived in the United States and started school in a local daycare center, they did not know any English. Their preschoolers cried, struggled, and felt scared and confused. Fang's child said to her he did not want to go to school and threw tantrums in the mornings during the first few weeks of his time in the United States. Both Fang and Ting had very tight schedules, with the former as a visiting scholar with a more than 8-hr workday each day, and the latter recently having secured a postdoc position after working with a demeaning boss for a while in a different university.

My Work and My Spouse

Long distance relationships were also prevalent among CISs. Among six CISs, three (Li, Ting, and Fang) were living in separate countries from their spouses at the time of interviews. Their spouses had jobs in mainland China and did not see it possible to identify a promising opportunity to work in the United States.

In addition to these internal challenges to work–life balance, external factors at exo- and macrolevels further challenged work–life balance.

Becoming A Minority: External Challenges in Maintaining Work–Life Balance

International students, scholars, and families often find themselves as ethnoracial minorities as soon as they arrive in the United States. This is not only due to their physical appearance, but also to their English being a second language and their "alien" status.

"Secondary Citizens"

Challenges to CIS work–life balance came from local communities, such as when CISs tried enrolling their children at childcare or public schools. In explaining this, Fang (visiting scholar; mother of a 5-year-old child) shared that a local elementary school would not take her son's application for enrollment simply because he was Chinese. The administrators assumed that her son was not proficient in English and had to take the English language learner (ELL) classes, which were not offered at their school. In fact, Fang's son's English tested as proficient in reading, listening, verbal, and writing ability. A few weeks after the third interview was conducted, Fang shared that her child was able to attend that local elementary school after he proved his abilities on an ELL test, which he was able to take as a result of intense negotiations between Fang and the administrators. This was such a relief for Fang who could finally give undivided attention to her work during the day. Challenges like this that Fang and other CISs experienced may be a reflection of the local community's misconceptions of CISs and their families, and possibly an unwillingness to work together.

Immigration Policy

CISs in the current study faced work–life balance challenges at the macrolevel due to immigration policy: job insecurity for Peng (assistant research professor) and Ting (postdoc fellow); an uncertain future career trajectory for Ling and Yan (both doctoral students); and the limited period of parents or family legally being able to reside in the United States (6 month increments) on a B1/B2 visas. Although participants in the current study maintained slightly different immigration statuses (J-1 visa, F-1 visa, pursuing OPT, and H-1B1 visa), they all experienced job insecurity and an ambiguous career trajectory.

CISs were under high pressure to be productive, working long hours in order to maintain their visa status. Immigration policy also cast a constraint on their families, which were a significant source of support but who could only stay for 6 months per entry.

Ting, a postdoc and a mother of a 3.5-year-old child, shared in all three of her interviews that she was torn between asking their parents to help out (with childcare, mainly), and feeling guilty that her mother and father were not able to see each other for most of the year. She said:

> I cannot be dependent on my parents, it is bad for them to take turns. My mom goes back on the May 1st, my dad comes here on April 17th. One has to stay in China, one has to stay [in the] U.S. with me. … My whole family is separate. … I feel like it costs stress to me.

For Ting, her parent's presence helped her be productive at work and increased her confidence as a new parent. She relied on her parents as childcare support when she was occupied by her work. However, as Ting revealed during her interviews, she had a strong sense of guilt and frustration in the face of the dilemma between prioritizing her parents' marital relationship and the fact that one of the parents had to be here to take care of her son. Like Ting, Li, Ling, Yan, and Fang faced the same challenge.

Ethnic Identity

Some participants expressed concerns about their children's peer relationships in the U.S. schools (e.g., differential treatment of ethnic minorities). Ling, a doctoral student and a mother of a 3.5-year-old child, was concerned about her Asian identity, not only for herself, but for her young son, whom she believed was very shy and very possibly might become the target of peer bullies as he transitioned to a K–12 program. This concern was best expressed by the following quote:

> From what I know, children have ethnic identity since they are little. I'm not sure if this is correct or not. From what I know, since they are little, children like to hang out with people who look like them and have closer relationships with them (e.g., to play with them). Because of this, I hope my child can spend time with Chinese people, so that he is not an ethnic minority within a Chinese group, and he won't be impacted psychologically.

CISs also faced unique challenges due to their status in the United States. First, they had to manage long-distance relationships with their spouses who needed visas in order to visit. Second, CISs and their children were perceived as less competent in English and consequently faced stereotypes and systemic and personal racism. Third, in the context of current immigration policy, support was time limited. However, CISs weren't discouraged or destroyed. All CISs in the current study demonstrated successful adjustment to their life in the United States thanks to all the support they received from their spouses and their parents or in-

laws. Their mental strengths also contributed to their transitions to being a parent and new to an academic program simultaneously.

Strong Family Support Helps Maintain Work–Life Balance

Actively Involved Grandparents

Grandparents played vital roles in helping CISs in this study maintain work–life balance among all but one family. The instrumental and emotional support CISs received from their children's grandparents helped alleviate pressure associated with balancing work and life. The presence of the children's grandparents allowed the CISs to focus more on their academic work. Fang expressed her appreciation to her mother-in-law: "Without my mother-in-law or other relatives, I cannot take care of [my child] by myself. My work schedule is quite quite tight." Grandparents contributed to a range of family tasks. For example, Li's mother-in-law "took care of her very carefully...Food wise, grandmother makes porridge, put in vegetables, balance nutrition at every meal." Their close family ties allowed CISs the opportunity to promote work and family life balance, while also adjusting to a new location.

Spousal Support

In addition, CISs also received support from their spouses. Ling expressed that "fortunately, his schedule is kind of flexible because he is a post-doctor researcher. So sometimes if I have to go to class, he can stay home taking care of my child." Yan also discussed at length the support from her spouse; they shared household choices, emotional support, and scaffolded study habits. The resources Yan received from her husband had microsystemic implications at home. Shortly after Yan gave birth to her son, she mentioned that her husband "did a lot to help me, so that I have time to take care of myself. Because I don't need to spend any time on housework." Yan also benefited from her husband regarding her academic program:

> Since he came to the U.S. before I got here, he had several years of experiences in American education system. He knows better than me and gave me so much support. For example, how to read the paper, how to finish homework, and so many other things.

This consequently helped Yan balance her role as a new mother and as a student in a new academic program. She also highlighted that "the most important thing for me is that I can take care of myself, in order to recover from giving birth to my son and focus on my study."

Mental Strengths

Not only were all the CISs adept at navigating resources in their surrounding environments over time, they were also motivated and demonstrated high levels of persistence in being both a scholar and a parent. For example, both Ting and

Yan emphasized their strategies of time management. Ting took advantage of the time, perhaps only 10 min in the car, when she was on her way to drop her son off and to pick her son up. She used this time to engage in teaching him English or other general knowledge. Similarly, Yan pointed out how she managed to balance her two roles:

> I need to balance my study and my family. I need to schedule the time very carefully. I do not do anything last minute. Once I have some homework, I need to finish it as soon as possible. Once I have any problems, I should solve them as soon as I can.

All CISs involved in the current study also had strong educational backgrounds and rich professional experiences prior to coming to the United States. They all were the top of the top students in their cohort growing up in China. Despite all the challenges to maintain a work–life balance, they all demonstrated a strong sense of incremental self (Dweck, 1996). The CISs reflected positive attitudes seeing being abroad as a very beneficial experience for their children. They perceived challenges as opportunities for self-enhancement in their career and as a parent, which ultimately helped them maintain and promote a work–life balance in the United States.

What About My Future? It Is *Our* Future.

When we asked CISs to think about themselves in the near future, some were uncertain and others were determined. What was similar across all six CISs was that their decision-making process was child-centered. Regardless of whether they decided to stay in the United States or wanted to return to mainland China, it was because they wanted to choose the most optimal environment for their children to grow up in. Yan and Li were uncertain about their future, specifically where their jobs or their spouses' jobs would take their families. Peng and Ting were determined to stay in the United States for their children. That was also why they fought hard to maintain job security. They believed that life in the United States would benefit their children' life in the long term. Ling and Fang were planning to return to China. Ling chose to go back to China to pursue her future career due to her concern that her son and her family became ethnoracial minorities in the United States. Fang was a visiting scholar and she knew that her family's staying in the United States would be temporary. They would eventually return to China. Her son's experience in the United States would help him learn English and provide him a valuable cultural experience. For both Fang and Ling, returning to China required efforts to rebalance work and family. However, social and family support back in China would ultimately promote their children's development.

Ling was concerned about her Asian identity. To cope with this stress, she was determined to return to China. She wanted her son to be in the majority group, not an ethnoracial minority. She was comforted by the fact that being in the United States was temporary and that her son would eventually identify himself as a majority as soon as he returned to China and was surrounded by his Chinese peers and family.

DISCUSSION

Guided by the stress coping adaptation model (Berry, 2006), we set out to investigate the research question regarding how CISs navigated challenges and developed coping strategies to maintain work–life balance in the context of different home and educational experiences. The current study was a response to Sharma's (2019) call to focus on further understanding international students and scholars who are in the United States for postgraduate study or work.

We examined the stressors and coping strategies used by CISs to promote work–life balance. Results revealed that CISs were actively engaged in proximal processes (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006) as they were constantly negotiating their immediate and surrounding environments at meso, exo, and macro levels. CISs elicited support from their spouses, parents, and in-laws, as well as took full advantage of their mental strengths (perseverance and positive attitudes) as their coping strategies.

Challenges to Maintain Work–Life Balance

The "publish or perish" academic culture also applied to these international scholars, whose English was not fully developed and who may be in need of support from their mentors and their academic programs (Rockquemore & Laszloffy, 2008). Language barriers have been repeatedly evident in the existing literature as an acculturative stressor among international postgraduate students (Choi, 2006; Sato & Hodge, 2009; Yan & Berliner, 2013). Such a high personal level of constraint is potentially at the cost of CISs' future success. This constraint has a spillover effect on their other social roles—as a parent, a spouse, and an adult. It also takes time to alleviate such constraints.

CISs also experienced immense psychological stress as they strived to balance work and family as they constantly negotiated unfamiliar environments as a result of cultural distance (Ward, 1996) and differences in education systems for themselves (Sato & Hodge, 2009; Yeh & Inose, 2003) and for their children.

Becoming Ethnoracial Minorities in the United States

At times, these CISs were in situations that forced them to realize their ethnic minority status in the United States, which is similar to Sharma's (2019) argument that CISs can experience a sense of foreignness and also be perceived as outsiders due to nationalistic ideologies. CISs were concerned that their children may face neoracism, which refers to the discriminations and prejudices based on the rationales of cultural and national superiority among their peers. They were also concerned about their children getting admitted to public schools due to their cultural backgrounds, countries of origin, and English proficiency levels, as suggested from Lee and Rice (2007) who interviewed international students across several different countries. Both Fang's experiences and Ling's perspectives in this study extended our understanding that CISs do face racism due to personal characteristics— their Asian identity and English as a second

language might concern them as parents raising young children as an ethnic minority. Thee children might encounter unfair treatment in micro (such as classrooms and families) and exosystems (local community and neighborhood).

Immigration policy (macrosystem constraint) is another level of strict regulations that encouraged feelings of helplessness. Not only was the concern that CISs could lose their visa statuses, which did not provide them a sense of job security, echoing a similar concern in a previous study (Yan & Berliner, 2013)—but also that their parents or parents-in-law could not remain in the United States for more than 6 months at a time. Despite the contributions of CISs' parents or parents-in-law, their support was usually time limited. Additionally, an older couple might not see each other for most of time during the year when taking turns to come to the United States to help their adult children.

Coping Responses to Maintain Work–Life Balance

In order to deal with challenges at multiple levels, CISs developed the following coping strategies: (a) relying on grandparents and spousal support; (b) drawing on mental strengths; and (c) thinking ahead to make a future career plan that is family-oriented (especially child-centered). Similar to U.S. domestic postgraduate student parents' coping strategies (Martinez et al., 2013), CISs in the current study also elicited social support to help them achieve work–life balance. What is different is that grandparents played an active and vital role to help CISs maintain and promote work–life balance due to Chinese cultural values. Chinese families value interdependence (Markus & Kitayama, 1991) and grandparents are expected to get heavily involved in their children's and grandchildren's life (Chen et al., 2011; Low & Goh, 2015), even when their adult children are abroad (Xie & Xia, 2011). These grandparents were present to assist with housework and child rearing, which is likely to enhance these scholars' cross-cultural adjustment (Chen & Lewis, 2015). The instrumental and emotional support from their children's grandparents helped CISs move through the challenging transitions to their new academic programs and their experience with being parents in a new culture (Chen & Lewis, 2015). This is different compared with the domestic U.S. postgraduate student parents, especially among the racial majority group of European American families who value independence and have lower expectations of grandparents' responsibilities.

Another important source of support came from their spouses. Cox and Paley (1997) argued that family subsystems are interdependent. A supportive spouse who performs as a coparenting figure or a mentor could provide CISs emotional and intellectual support that benefits CISs' academic success as well as alleviates parenting stress (Schoppe-Sullivan et al., 2016).

Mental strengths (e.g., perseverance, positive attitudes, and other practice strategies) also contributed to CISs' work–life balance, as it did for the U.S. domestic postgraduate student parents (Martinez et al., 2013; Salle, 2015). Dweck (1996) discussed that people with an incremental theory of self believe challenges can be dealt with and problems can be resolved. People with this mentality also believe that there is a promising future as long as they work hard and smart. CISs

in the current study all had an incremental theory of self. Such a strong and positive mentality helped them cope with these challenges as they tried to balance work and family in the United States. This aligns with what Sallee and Hart (2015) found with international faculty fathers in U.S. research universities. The CISs in the current study, however, might have embraced more difficult times and obstacles due to lack of job security and less clear future with F- (student) or J- (postdocs and visiting scholars) visa statuses. Despite hurdles they faced in their everyday work and family life, they were able to rely on resources within contextual systems (e.g., family and their community). Additionally, intrinsic motivation, agency, and positive attitudes empowered and prepared them for new challenges and future uncertainty, which aligns with previous research on this topic (Pan et al., 2008; Ramburuth & McCormick, 2001; Sharma, 2019).

Another notable finding that helped CISs balance work and family in the long term is that when they made plans for their future career, CISs thought holistically with a heavy focus on their child. Chinese cultural values might influence CISs to prioritize their children over their marriage (Lynch & Hanson, 2011), and definitely above their work.

Findings of the present study extend the literature about CIS stress and strategies to maintain work–family balance. Though acculturation is a continuous, dynamic process, with possibilities for new stressors expectedly or unexpectedly, many of these CISs saw this process as a learning, growing, and thriving process as they adjusted to U.S. culture.

Limitations

The findings and implications are significant for educational institutions and local communities to understand CISs' stressors and coping strategies to maintain work–life balance. Despite the contribution of the present study, a few limitations are noted below.

One limitation is the small sample size found through one listserv of one university in the Midwest and a local church in the same college town, which limits the generalizability of the findings. To be sure, this is not the goal of qualitative research, nor was it the goal of this study; rather, we sought to develop a framework to allow a full description of the problem (Atieno, 2009) and some solutions. However, having a broader understanding of how these proximal processes influence CIS acculturative process has implications for how successful they are in U.S. institutions and what specific resources are needed to help support their education and career. For instance, the specific resource needs of these participants may vary from similar identified scholars with families working and/or studying at urban institutions in other geographical areas. We were essentially relying on the perspective of the family to provide us information about how they navigate home and education.

This study included multiple contact between researchers and participants, but much of the proximal processes being discussed were out of our purview. Thus, it may be that how the issue was articulated to or interpreted by the researchers does not fully represent the actual proximal processes experienced by

the scholars. Although CISs shared similar lived experiences, especially as they strived to balance work and life in the U.S., participants in the current study cannot be viewed as a homogenous group (Shih et al., 2019). Future research can further delineate the intricate variations of CISs based on their academic positions.

Finally, our sample consisted primarily of mothers. How males and fathers experience similar proximal processes may be uniquely distinct from that of females and mothers. Further, some of these families included multiple generations and that perspective is missing from our analysis, which leaves a gap in the literature regarding how or whether multiple members of the same family unit experience these processes similarly or differently.

Implications

Findings from this study have several implications, particularly for universities that recruit Chinese international students or scholars with children. These CISs might encounter model minority stereotypes (Shih et al., 2019) when interacting with mentors, peers, or community members. A welcoming environment in higher education institutions and local communities could help the CISs with academic productivity and psychological adjustment. Potential workshops include the following topics: English speaking and writing skills in academia, active participation and collaboration in class, career opportunities and professional development, childcare and school enrollment for children, and support for families adjusting to local communities. The CISs played important roles in their academic programs as teaching assistants or research assistants, leading the lab experiments and lecturing for undergraduate level courses in their current institution, with several likely to become future faculty members. Providing early academic and social support can effectively conquer barriers in acculturation so that CISs can balance academia and parenting and also promote the success of diverse faculty (Rockquemore & Laszloffy, 2008; Turner et al., 2008). To be sure, institutions should use appropriate theoretical models to fully understand the challenges and needed support of CISs associated with their work inside the institution. In order to provide support that is the most needed and evidence-based, future research might also consider using Schlossberg's transition theory (Schlossberg et al., 1989) to guide studies that focus on the transitions that hinge on the situation, self, support, and strategies, as well as how higher education institutions may impact these transitions for CISs or international scholars in general.

As argued by both Collier and Hernandez (2016) and Sharma (2019), the host institutions need to provide out-of-class professional development that fosters CISs' agency via needs-based mentorship at international centers or through academic programs. Such programs need to be inclusive, easy to access, and encourage active engagement, with considerations of fostering CISs' academic skills, as well as supporting work and life balance. For example, advisors at international centers could potentially provide orientations to address practical issues in everyday life in the United States and provide these scholars additional support for academic achievements and professional development. The CISs and

their spouses, who may also be in academic programs as well, voiced common challenges related to publication and strategies for searching for future careers. Perhaps joint support from international centers and academic programs might be useful resources, or networks with international student alumni who can offer support or advice in searching for jobs in the United States. Such implications might be applied to CISs who come to the United States by themselves without their families or children. Additional and unique support is needed for CISs with children and their families.

Support to CIS families and their mental wellbeing is still lacking (Collier & Hernandez, 2016). Effective collaborations between the host institutions and host communities are greatly needed. Local college town communities can keep updated with changing demographics of the university (e.g., increased international families). Further, other community institutions (e.g., childcare facilities and public schools) should also be aware of such changes. International centers at universities can serve as liaisons to connect the CISs and their families with the local community. It would also be beneficial for institutions to develop mechanisms for discussing challenges with potential students who intend to continue as scholars in the United States. Finally, and as shown in our model, given that acculturation is a process and CISs and their families are likely to continuously face new challenges as they come up with strategies to deal with existing challenges, academic and social support from host institutions and local communities should be provided to CISs and families continuously during their stay, not just limited to engagement during the recruitment process.

Note

An appendix for this article can be found on the JIS website at https://www.ojed.org/index.php/jis

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