

A COMPARISON OF THE LEISURE LIFESTYLES OF CHINESE AND AMERICAN GRADUATE STUDENTS AT THE PENNSYLVANIA STATE UNIVERSITY

Huan Li
Department of Recreation, Parks and Tourism
Management
201 Mateer Building
The Pennsylvania State University
University Park, PA 16802
Email: hul119@psu.edu

Garry Chick
The Pennsylvania State University

Abstract.—The purpose of the research is to examine the leisure lives of Chinese graduate students at Penn State University as they compare with those of American graduate students. Current and desired leisure activities, perceived constraints, and feasible improvements were addressed for both cultural groups. Both Chinese and American male and female graduate students showed consensus in terms of their ratings of the importance of their current leisure activities, desired leisure activities and perceived constraints. However, none of them demonstrated consensus in terms of feasible improvements in their leisure. Future research should involve students from other institutions and from other countries, along with additional demographic and other data that would help explain within-group differences.

1.0 INTRODUCTION

In recent years, Chinese students have been the second largest group of international students at the Pennsylvania State University. Currently approximately 706 Chinese students are enrolled, most of whom are graduate students. (The largest of international groups at Penn State is from India, with a current population of 740 [ISS at Penn State 2003]). Coming from a country with a different cultural and social system, Chinese students encounter cultural differences in the classroom and their daily lives, including their leisure activities. Concurrently, they encounter new educational systems, study styles, language difficulties, and nostalgia. Furthermore, problems like dietary restrictions, financial stress, misunderstandings, and loneliness can occur (Furnham 1986). Leisure may play an important role in soothing the physical and psychological stress Chinese

students face. However, Chinese students also experience constraints in their pursuit of leisure activities.

While the number of Chinese students is increasing each year (ISS, Penn State 2002), little concern has been paid to their leisure participation. Moreover, relatively little research has been directed at student ethnic groups with respect to the leisure lives they expect, the leisure opportunities they have, and the factors that constrain them from participating in those desired leisure activities from a cultural perspective. Given the sheer numbers of diverse immigrant groups and their roles in society, it is hard to overlook their effects in North America (Stodolska 1998). In addition the leisure opportunities of immigrant populations and the constraints that they face have certain characteristics that can be examined to better understand the constraints on the leisure behavior of minorities (Goodale 1992).

Life in American culture, which differs significantly from what they are accustomed to in China, poses numerous problems for Chinese students. In the long history of the Chinese civilization, Confucian ideology has been firmly ingrained as a system governing nearly all aspects of Chinese life. A feudalistic system of thousands of years has also dominated the Chinese view of themselves and the world (Xing 1995). Chinese culture tends to be collective as opposed to the individualism of American culture. As defined by Hofstede (1994), individualism describes the degree to which people prefer to act as individuals rather than as members of groups or collective clusters. According to Triandis and Suh (2002), China is a typical collectivistic culture within which people emphasize in-group cohesion, respect for in-group norms, and directives and cooperation. Therefore, there may be many differences between Chinese and American cultures pertaining to leisure.

Recent evidence indicates that leisure helps to alleviate stress and maintain both physical and mental health (e.g., Moen et al. 1989, Rook 1987, 1990). For instance, Cohen and Hoberman (1983) reported that positive

events, including leisure, help individuals protect themselves against the pathogenic effects of negative events to maintain good health. Wheeler and Frank (1988) investigated a set of 22 variables to determine the relative importance of each as a stress buffer and concluded that “there are four ‘true’ buffers: sense of competence, exercise pattern, sense of purpose, and leisure activity” (p. 78). Iwasaki and Mannell (2000) summarized the coping functions of leisure based on an integrative view of social psychological research and leisure research on coping. At the most general level, leisure coping refers to people’s beliefs that their leisure helps them cope with stress. This contrasts with leisure coping strategies, which are actual situation-grounded behaviors or cognitions available through involvements in leisure. However, both functions work in coordination to mitigate stress (Iwasaki 2001).

The benefits of leisure and the increasing number of Chinese students in the United States make it worthwhile to examine the leisure lives of Chinese graduate students at Penn State as they compare with those of American graduate students. To this end, four major concerns were addressed: (1) What are the current leisure activities of Chinese and American graduate students? (2) What are the desired leisure activities of Chinese and American graduate students? (3) What are the constraints that Chinese and American graduate students face with respect to leisure? and (4) What feasible changes do Chinese and American graduate students believe would improve their leisure lives? Additionally, we wanted to determine whether members of our sample (grouped by national culture and gender) showed within-group agreement with respect to the four questions above.

2.0 RESEARCH METHODS

This research is based on cultural consensus theory and methods. In brief, according to cultural consensus theory, culture consists of agreed-upon knowledge among individuals. Cultural consensus analysis, which is similar to reliability analysis, consists of factor-analyzing a data matrix wherein the respondents are treated as variables. A single factor solution means that there is consensus among the respondents. There are three assumptions that underlie consensus analysis: (1) There is a single culture;

that is, there is one culturally correct answer for every question asked, (2) informant responses are independent of each other, and, (3) items are homogenous and at the same level of contrast. That is, all questions are about the same topic and the probability that informants know the correct answer is the same for all questions. In the first step of the study, we used free listing to obtain our initial lists of leisure activities, desired leisure opportunities, leisure constraints, and feasible improvements. The use of free listing and cultural consensus analysis is based on the assumption that during interviews about culture patterns or items which are highly agreed-upon, reliable and valid answers can be obtained even with small numbers of informants (Weller & Romney 1988). The population for this study comprised all Chinese graduate students from mainland China and all of the U.S graduate students on University Park campus of Penn State. The sample was expected to contain several subgroups from those who responded to the surveys online. Respondents who answered the survey questions online were the sample. Because the full list of graduate students could not be released due to university policy, Chinese respondents were recruited through a mail list operated and used by Chinese graduate students at Penn State and American students were snowball-sampled by Chinese students who provided the survey website to their American colleagues or classmates. The questions for both groups were the same. Then, we developed a survey relying on informant responses to the free listing procedure. Items listed twice or more by both Chinese and American students and over five times by either of the two groups were selected to be rated on four-point Likert-type scales about their importance ranging from “Not at all important” (1) to “Extremely important” (4). For example, the American informants did not list Karaoke Singing while it appeared more than five times in the Chinese responses. Hence, this item was included in the subsequent survey. Informants were also asked to report their age, gender, major, marital status, number of children, if any, years at Penn State, nationality, level of income, and time spent on leisure compared to others in their ethnic group. Both the free listing and the follow-up survey were conducted in both Chinese and English versions to eliminate any misunderstandings of the questions because of language.

Table 1.—Top 5 items free listed by chinese and american graduate students

Current Activities	Watching TV; Watching movies; Reading; Surfing internet; Swimming.
Desired Activities	Travel; Swimming; Watching movies; Singing with Karaoke; Listening to music.
Perceived Constraints	Lack of time; Lack of money; Work and/or study pressure; Lack of companions; Lack of leisure facilities and/or resources.
Feasible Improvements	Find a job to earn more money; Work efficiently to gain more free time; Have less work and study; Make more friends; Decrease user fees.

3.0 RESULTS

Weller and Romney (1988) suggest a minimum sample size of 20 to 30 for free listing. Therefore, our sample of 48 informants for the free listing questions was adequate for the first step of data analysis. Of the 48 graduate students, 30 were Chinese and 18 were Americans. Among the 30 Chinese students, 16 were males while 11 of the American informants were males. For the survey phase of data collection, the sample consisted of 27 male and 27 female Chinese students, and 13 male and 20 female American students. This sample demographic structure is similar to that of the Chinese and American populations of graduate students at Penn State (Penn State Budget Office 2003).

Table 1 shows the five items free listed most frequently by informants. We applied cultural consensus analysis to four groups, namely Chinese males, Chinese females, American males, and American females. We employed Handwerker's (2002) five criteria to determine whether cultural consensus exists in these groups. These are: (1) all of the factor loadings should be positive on factor one; (2) the ratio of the eigenvalues between the first factor and the second factor should be no less than 3; (3) matrices that contain only one genuine factor should exhibit a dramatic scree fall between the first and second components; (4) on a two-dimension component plot, all variables should cluster at the positive end of the axis for the factor one if there is high cultural consensus; and (5) component loadings should ideally be equal to or greater than .50. We used principal components analysis to test the five criteria after transposing the informants into variables.

Most of Handwerker's (2002) criteria for cultural consensus are realized among Chinese male students regarding current leisure activities. The first component

has an eigenvalue of 8.48 and explains 33.92 percent variance in the underlying cultural construct. The eigenvalue of the second component is 2.71 and accounts for 10.85 percent variance of the total. Therefore the ratio of the eigenvalue of the first and the second component is 3.13 (Figure 1). Figure 2 shows the informant loadings on factor 1 by those on factor 2. Although not all of the informants have component loadings above .50, all tend to cluster toward the positive end of the first component. These findings suggest that a single culture exists among Chinese male students in terms of the importance of their current leisure activities.

Similar analyses were applied to each group with respect to the four research domains. The results indicated that there is consensus among Chinese and American graduate students, both males and females, on the importance of activities, what activities they would like to have available, and what constrains their leisure. However, there is no consensus among members of any of the groups in terms of feasible solutions to the leisure constraints that they face.

4.0 CONCLUSIONS

The main factors that constrain Chinese graduate students are time, money, leisure partners, and leisure resources. Each of the subgroups (Chinese males, Chinese females, American males, and American females) demonstrated consensus on the importance of their current leisure activities, desired leisure activities, and perceived constraints but showed no within-group consensus on how their leisure could be improved. Perhaps it is possible that "current activities," "desired activities," and "constraints" are more natural and reasonable categories to think about than "feasible improvements." Hence, informants may find it easier to list and rate items in the more natural categories. So,

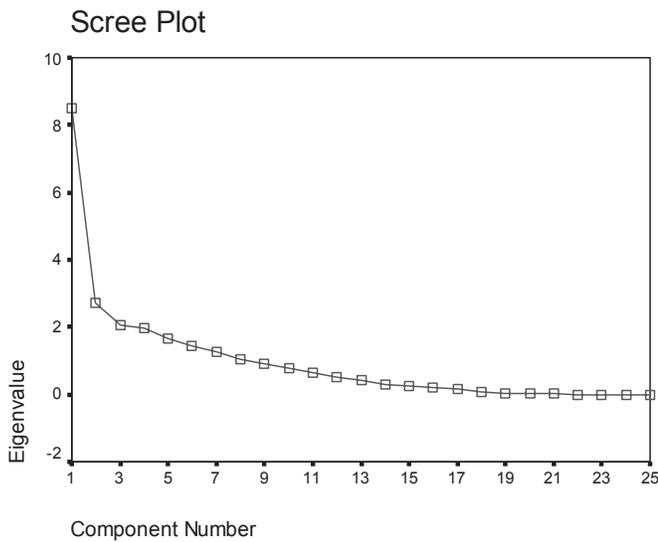


Figure 1.—Scree Plot for Principle Components Analysis of Male Chinese Students' Current Leisure Activities.

the result might be an artifact of the questions asked. It is also possible that people simply do not agree on what improvements are feasible.

Although there are sampling problems with this study, and we think that research with other student groups is needed at more universities, we can suggest that there is little agreement among either Chinese or American graduate students at Penn State with respect to how their leisure lives can be improved. Hence, we feel that this issue requires more intense and in-depth research. We also feel that university administrations should be sensitive to results such as these and attempt to provide the kinds of leisure opportunities that graduate students, such as those surveyed in this study, would like to have available to them. We also feel that our results may be valuable for other groups of international students in addition to the Chinese. If students are made aware of the constraints that they face in their leisure, they may be able to adjust their resources accordingly. For example, members of the Chinese Friendship Association, a group that promotes understanding among Chinese students and the public, could purchase several sets of Karaoke equipment and initiate competitions to involve Chinese students who love this activity. They might also rent the equipment to allow Chinese students access to their desired leisure activity.

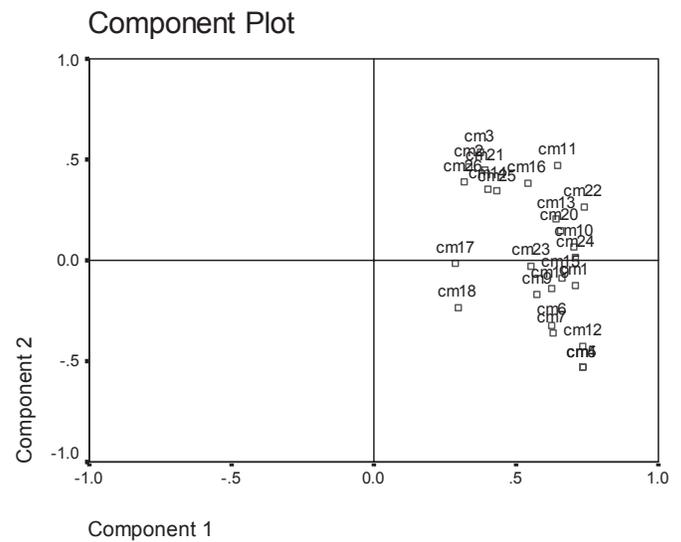


Figure 2.—Scatterplot of Chinese males' (cm) Loadings on Components 1 and 2 for Importance of Current Leisure Activities.

The results of this particular study cannot be generalized as it is limited by the sampling method and socio-demographic background data. We therefore suggest that it would be worthwhile to conduct similar research in other U. S. universities that have large numbers of international students. Future studies should utilize different populations (e.g., Chinese, Indian, Japanese, African, and American students) as well as larger sample sizes. Finally, researchers could further explore both within-cultural and between-cultural differences in leisure activities, opportunities, and constraints and their possible effects on student adjustment, mental and physical health, and academic performance.

5.0 REFERENCES

- Cohen, S.; Hoberman, H.M. 1983. **Positive events and social supports as buffers of life change stress.** *Journal of Applied Social Psychology.* 13: 99-125.
- Furnham, A.; Bochner, R. 1986. **Culture shock: Psychological reactions to unfamiliar environments.** London: Methuen.
- Goodale, T.L. 1992. **Constraints research: Performing without a net next time.** Featured speaker, *Psychological/Social Psychological Aspects of Leisure*

- Behavior, Part I, NRPA Symposium on Leisure Research, Cincinnati, Ohio.
- Handwerker, W.P. 2002. **The construct validity of cultures: Cultural diversity, culture theory, and a method for ethnography.** *American Anthropologist*. 104(1): 106-122.
- Hofstede, G. 1980. **Culture's consequences: International differences in work-related values.** Beverly Hills, CA: Sage. Hunter.
- Iwasaki, Y.; Mannell, R.C. 2000. **Hierarchical dimensions of leisure stress coping.** *Leisure Sciences*. 22: 163-181.
- Iwasaki, Y. 2001. **Contributions of leisure to coping with daily hassles in university students' lives.** *Canadian Journal of Behavioural Science*. 33(2): 128-142.
- Moen, P.; Dempster-McClain, D.; Williams Jr., R.M. 1989. **Social integration and longevity: An event history analysis of women's roles and resilience.** *American Sociological Review*. 54: 635-647.
- Rook, L.S. 1990. **Social relationships as a source of companionship: Implications for older adults' psychological well-being.** In: B.R. Sarason; L.G. Sarason; G.R. Pierce, eds. *Social support: An interactional view* (p.219-250). New York.
- Stoldoska, M. 1998. **Assimilation and leisure constraints: Dynamics of constraints on leisure in immigrant populations.** *Journal of Leisure Research*. 30(4): 521-551.
- Tirandis, H.C.; Suh, E.M. 2002. **Cultural influences on personality.** *Annual Review of Psychology*. 53: 133-160.
- Weller, S.C.; Romney, A.K. 1988. **Systematic data collection.** CA: SAGE Publications, Inc.
- Wheeler, R.J.; Frank, M.A. 1988. **Identification of stress buffer.** *Behavioral Medicine*. 14: 78-99.
- Xing, F. 1995. **The Chinese cultural system: Implications for cross-cultural management.** *S.A.M. Advanced Management Journal*. 60(1): 14-20.