Displaced Self and Sense of Belonging: A Chinese Researcher Studying Chinese
Expatriates Working in the United States

by

Zhong (June) Wang

A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy
Department of Communication
College of Arts and Science
University of South Florida

Major Professor: Arthur P. Bochner, Ph.D.
Carolyln Ellis, Ph.D.
Jane Jorgenson, Ph.D.
Miriam Stamps, Ph.D.

Date of Approval:
March 24, 2006

Keywords: Ethnography, Identity, Intercultural Communication, Globalization,
Multinational Corporation

© Copyright 2006, Zhong (June) Wang
Dedication

To my major professor, Dr. Arthur P. Bochner, who has been my mentor and such a special person in my academic journey.

To Dr. Carolyn Ellis. She and Dr. Bochner are my day-to-day emotional ties to the academic world.

To my committee members and the faculty at the Communication Department at the University of South Florida, the group of people whom I respect and appreciate.

To my very understanding husband, Xiang Li; my loving mother, Zongyang Bao; my darling son, Andric Li – I am indebted to all of them because their love supported me to complete this dissertation.

To my father, Zhengtang Wang, who has been my role model and has always been so dear and encouraging in my memory.
Acknowledgments

My heart is filled with gratefulness when I write this acknowledgement. First and foremost, I would like to thank my major professor, Dr. Arthur P. Bochner. He has been my mentor and my source of unconditional support. His influence and inspiration are profound and will be with me for the rest of my life. He helps me think of the meaning of my academic journey, my career, and my decisions in life. He has been the most understanding, brilliant, informative, available, and encouraging advisor I could have hoped for. He and the faculty members I have known at the University of South Florida are the reason I maintained a strong passion for my academic goal, even after eight years of working full time in the corporate world.

I would like to respectfully acknowledge my committee members. Thanks to Dr. Carolyn Ellis for her ever-present loving support and patience. During my years of full-time work and my leave of absence from school, she and Dr. Bochner have always been there for me in my career and life. They are my day-to-day emotional ties to the academic world when I am physically away from school. Thanks to Dr. Jane Jorgenson for her tremendous inspiration on intercultural, family, and organizational communication; I admire her unique research angle and insight, and I felt very fortunate to have her join the faculty during my first year in the Ph.D. program. Thanks to Dr. Miriam Stamps for helping me build up relations with my research informants at SINOCHEM due to her leadership role in the China Florida Linkage Institute in 1997 and 1998. Her familiarity with the Chinese culture endears her to me.
I would also like to express my appreciation to several faculty members who have been so special to me. I am forever grateful to Dr. Mark Neumann and Dr. Marsha Vanderford, who provided me tremendous guidance and care – especially during my earlier stage of graduate studies. I adore their brilliant thoughts and dynamic spirit. Dr. Kenneth Cissna first recruited me into the graduate program. Dr. Eric Eisenberg, Dr. Frederick Steier, Dr. Navita James, Dr. Elizabeth Bell, Dr. David Payne, Dr. Carol Jablonski, Dr. Dajin Peng, Dr. Scott Liu, and Dr. Harvey Nelson all influenced me to be a better scholar.

Additionally I would like to acknowledge the support from friends: Dr. Liqun Liu, Dr. Christine Keisinger, Dr. Lisa Tillman-Healey, Dr. Mei Zhong, Dr. Shane Moreman, USF staffs Keysha Williams, Janet Giles, Monique Johnson, my copy editor Mark Wellhausen, and my colleagues Hong Wu and Jun Han - for all your help and encouragement!

There are many dear people whom I will always remember: Dr. Jennifer Pickman, Dr. Kim Golombisky, Dr. Dr. Emmett Winn, Dr. Barbara Jago, Dr. Krista Hirschmann, Dr. Janna Jones, Dr. Peg Ostrenko, Dr. Keith Cherry, Dr. Daniel Makagon, Dr. Ling Chen, Dr. Yang Jiang, Xiaoli Zhang, Dionel Cotanda, Lowell Harris, Sue Viens, Sharon Smith, Connie Hackworth, Houmin Luo, Bing Li, Xia Peng, Ming Ying, … and there are so many more names that I lack the space to acknowledge here.

I will forever appreciate the support my research informants have provided to me throughout my dissertation fieldwork: Xuesong Yu, Xiaoli Li, Yanming Zhao, Jing Cai, Ming He, Tongxuan Li, Ernie Helms, Irene Dobson, and Joy Peevy. A special thank you to Ruliang Du, who first gave me the green light to conduct my research at
USAC Holdings Inc.; and special thanks to Mrs. Du who provided me warm friendship during my latest years of effort to balance career, degree, and family life.

Finally, my profound and heartfelt thanks to my husband, Xiang Li, and my mother, Zongyang Bao, without their love and support, I cannot imagine the completion of my dissertation. Deep thanks to my father, Zhengtang Wang, who has been always in my heart and memory. I am indebted to all of them and to my dear two-year-old son, Andric Li. Thanks also to my extended family, Suping Wang, Tianwei Song, Qing Wang, and Peng Ye, for their constant love and encouragement, not to mention their understanding of the challenges involved in obtaining a Ph.D. while working full time.

To all of you, my gratefulness is beyond my expression.
# Table of Contents

List of Tables iii

List of Figures iv

Abstract v

Chapter One: Introduction 1
  Chronology of the Research 3
    Instigation of the Research and Research site 3
    Transition Phase of the Research 11
    Researcher and the Researched 13
  Research Theme: Displaced and Shifted Self 15
  Preview of the Chapters 21

Chapter Two: Literature Review 25
  Globalization 27
    The Globalization Concept and Its Dimensions 27
    Conceptualizing Globalization Phenomena 31
  Multinational-Corporation Studies 33
    Phenomenon of Multinational Corporations 33
    Economic Perspective 35
    Management Perspective 37
      “Managing” Cultural Differences 40
        Tactics or Etiquette Guides of Doing International Business 41
  Intercultural Communication Perspective 43
    Communicating in a Multinational Corporation (MNC) 45
    The Anthropological View of “Culture” and My Research 49
    Intercultural Communication on Cross-Cultural Adaptations 52
    Social Construction of Shifted Identity in the Globalization Era 59

Chapter Three: Research Methods 66
  (Auto)Ethnography, Narrative Inquiry, and My Research 66
    Narrative Inquiry of Global Workplace and Displacement 68
      (Auto)Ethnography and Research Reflexivity 69
    Research Techniques and Interpretations 75
    Research Process Summary Table 85

Chapter Four: Ethnographic Stories 91
  Chapter Four: Part I: “Outsider” and “Insiders” 92
    Connections and Research Site 92
List of Tables

Table 1. Examples of Globalization Definitions 29
Table 2. Globalization Trends and Their Aspects and Attributes 31
Table 3. Research Process Summarization 85
List of Figures

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Figure</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Figure 1.</td>
<td>High Level Illustrations of My Research Theme and Research Journey</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Figure 2.</td>
<td>Structure of Literature Review</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Figure 3.</td>
<td>Relationships of Cross-Cultural Adaptation Terms (Kim, 2002, p. 261)</td>
<td>56</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Figure 4.</td>
<td>Structures of Ethnographic Stories</td>
<td>91</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Displaced Self and Sense of Belonging: A Chinese Researcher Studying Chinese Expatriates Working in the United States

Zhong (June) Wang

ABSTRACT

In this dissertation, I tell the story of the ethnographic fieldwork I conducted between 1997 and 2005 in which I focused on a group of expatriates sent by one of China’s largest multinational corporations to work in the U.S. for extended years. My initial interest was to investigate how this Chinese state-owned multinational company operated its overseas subsidiaries in the U.S. However, as my fieldwork progressed, I became increasingly interested in how the expatriates’ and their family members’ careers and lives were impacted by globalization, how these Chinese expatriates and family members adjusted, adapted, understood, and tolerated cultural differences inside and outside the workplace, where they and their American coworkers gave meanings to their day-to-day work and life. The question for my research became: What does it mean to be a Chinese person but not to be working and living in China? And what does it mean to be living in the United States but not be American? After their long-term assignments were over, many of my participants were repatriated back to China, though some stayed in the U.S. where they had to reorient their career paths. At this point I was struck by how their sense of “displacement” was related to mine when I was a full-time graduate student in the U.S. and then became a senior manager in a U.S.-based multinational company. My informants’ silent struggle to define their shifted identities is similar to my experiences of
figuring out where I belong – to academia or a corporation. Thus this dissertation is not only my journey of growing from “an outsider” to be “an insider” with my research informants, but also an exploration of the reflexive relationship between researcher and the researched.
Chapter One: Introduction

The ethnographic research I conducted in this dissertation happened in a specific time frame from the mid-1990s to mid-2000 when many people around the world experienced globalization. I studied a group of expatriates sent by one of China’s largest multinational corporations, SINOCHEM, to the United States.

In the business context, an expatriate is an employee hired and formerly working at a corporate headquarters, who is assigned to one of the company's overseas operations temporarily, often with a generous benefits package to accommodate family, housing, and hardship caused by relocation (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Expatriates, 2005.)

When I started the research, my goal was to investigate how SINOCHEM as a Chinese state-owned multinational company operates its overseas enterprise in the United States and how the Chinese expatriates and their American co-workers socially construct their workplace differently or similarly. (For instance, when they were both using the metaphor “family” to refer to the workplace, their interpretation involved both common and different understandings of social/power relationships.) However, as my research moved along, I was drawn to question how these expatriates’ and their family members’ life and career choices were impacted by globalization and how these Chinese expatriates adjust, accommodate, understand, and tolerate cultural differences inside and outside the workplace. During and after their overseas assignments, they experienced geographical relocations of job and family life, learning curves of running
a free enterprise in the U.S., privatization of Chinese state enterprises, and many involuntary changes. They tried to fit in at a new workplace and community where they and their American coworkers gave meanings to their day-to-day work and life.

After these Chinese expatriates’ long-term assignments were over, many of them were repatriated back to China, though several stayed in the U.S. where they had to reorient their career paths. What gain and loss have they experienced through taking long-term overseas assignments? Have they had struggle(s) in making the decision to either go back to China or stay in the United States? What issues have they confronted after they were repatriated back to China? What challenges have they faced after they decided to stay in the United States? How have they survived the uncertainties? How have they dealt with changes? What common value have they found in the United States despite the differences they experienced between the foreign land and their home country? How do they define who they are and their sense of belonging?

As time went by, what also struck me was that their sense of “displacement” is related to mine when I was a full-time international graduate student in the United States and then a senior manager in a U.S.-based multinational company. My informants’ silent struggle of defining who they are in a changing environment is similar to my experiences of trying to figure out where I belong — to academia or a corporation. In this dissertation, I incorporate my experiences over thirteen years of living, studying, and working in the United States to understand the “displacement” that my informants experienced. I explore how this globalization makes individuals’ sense of belonging and identities more shifting in nature especially in the past decade. This dissertation is about my developing relations with my dissertation research and how this
dissertation research also impacts my life and career. Therefore, this ethnographic research is for both my informants and me. The beginning of the story is theirs; the end is mine.

**Chronology of the Research**

**Instigation of the Research and Research site**

Figure 1 below shows the structure of Chapter 1, which illustrates theme of my research and my research journey.

![Figure 1 - High Level Illustrations of My Research Theme and Research Journey](image)

I started my dissertation research in 1997 when I was a full-time doctoral student. I wanted to study a group of Chinese expatriates sent by their home company to work in the United States for an extended period of time. The site of my ethnographic
fieldwork was USAC Holdings, Inc., located in Tampa and Forte Meade, Florida. The company is the subsidiary of China’s most prominent international trading company, SINOCHEN. The USAC Holdings Inc. employed about two-hundred-sixty American employees and twenty-plus Chinese expatriates. The duration for overseas assignment for the Chinese expatriates ranged from two to six years.

I chose to study an overseas Chinese corporation because of my ever-passionate linkage with my cultural roots and my willingness to identify with sojourners who came from the same country. As a Chinese student, I had felt and struggled with the conflicts of studying abroad, I wanted to connect my experience to these Chinese expatriates who worked and lived away from home for rather lengthy durations and make these cross-cultural experiences more understandable.

The connection with overseas Chinese people embodies a sense of collectivity that is a part of my cultural upbringing. An appreciation for collectivity derives from the Chinese nationalism, which had been ingrained in me throughout my education in China and which also accompanied me through my years in an American graduate school. Holding a critical attitude toward social and cultural hierarchies pre-tuned by Confucianism in the collectivist Chinese society, I considered myself a pro-individualist receptive to American values when I moved to the United States, however, I found myself to be culturally complex: No matter how long I lived in the United States, part of my “Chinese-ness” never disappeared. This complexity was also revealed to me by the SINOCHEN employees and family members I studied in this dissertation research.

In recent years, the economy of China has shown extraordinary vigor, while moving toward internationalization (Zhao, Lu, McCarty, and Hille, 1992; Teng &
Wang, 1988). In 1994, the *Economist* predicted: “Over the next 25 years, the world will see the biggest shift in economic strength for more than a century … Within a generation China will take over … as the world’s biggest economy …” (pp. 3-4, issue 14, October 1994). Though I have some doubt about the optimism of this prediction, the observation provokes me to look at how this change relates to a global perception of Chinese nationality and affects the individuals who are involved in the globalization of the economy.

Since the Open-Door Policy of the late 1970s, China has achieved spectacular success in attracting foreign capital to spur the country’s economic development. While the Chinese economy has benefited enormously from direct foreign investment, China has also emerged as a “global exporter of capital” since 1988 (Wu, 1993, p. 14). According to China’s Ministry of Foreign Trade and Economic Cooperation (MOFTEC), by the end of 1991 China already had 1,008 enterprises operating in 105 countries and territories, and the cumulative value of China’s global investments slightly exceeded US$3 billion (Wu, 1993, p. 14).

At a political and economic level, globalization is the process of denationalization of markets, politics, and legal systems. At a business level, globalization occurs when companies decide to take part in the emerging global economy and establish themselves in foreign markets. The “mainstream” understanding of globalization is Western multinational corporations that have set up their subsidiaries in developing countries. SINOCHEM, on the other hand, seemed to take “another way around”: As one of the largest state companies in the developing country of China, it
built up its foreign subsidiaries in many countries including the ones in more economically developed country such as the United States.

The research on multinational corporations was only a “Western thing” in different fields of scholarship before the 1980s. Most of the largest companies, judged by revenue, are American or Japanese. In 1996, 162 of the 500 largest companies globally were from the United States and 126 from Japan. Only a few of the largest companies were from developing countries. An exception is China. By 2005 SINOCHEN has been listed among the Global Fortune 500 companies for fifteen consecutive years. In 1996, SINOCHEN was ranked 204th and in 2004 was ranked 270th among the Global Fortune 500 list. By 2004, SINOCHEN was 4th among China’s 500 largest companies (SINOCHEN homepage, 2005). Known as one of China’s first multinational corporations since the early 1980s, SINOCHEN reflected the rapid economic progress in China. Indeed, making SINOCHEN’s subsidiary the site of my dissertation research seems to had special meanings on me — a Chinese doctoral student trained in an American graduate school who wants to add “Chinese experiences” or “Chinese voices” to the current scholarship of globalization research.

SINOCHEN, formerly known as China National Chemical Import and Export Corporation, is a state-owned enterprise that evolved into a multinational company. As a large and diversified state-owned company, SINOCHEN enjoys “many advantages over smaller counterparts, including better trained management, stronger balance sheets, wider political connections, and higher public profiles” (Wu, 1994, pp. 14-19). Unlike some organizational research in America that focuses on relating China’s economic development to current politics (Barnathan, Roberts, Clifford, Einhorn, & Engardio,
March 16, 1998; pp. 44-49), I focus on the cultural phenomena and human experiences I discovered at SINOCHEM as nation’s pioneering multinational organization.

I acknowledge the impossibility of being “objective” and providing “neutral observation language,” because “no scientific conclusions could possibly be reached without the intrusion of human judgment” (Bochner, 1985, p. 31). The “truths” of social life I seek in this dissertation are narrative truths, not historical ones (Bochner, 1985, p. 30; Carr, 1986). What I see and what I write is constrained by who I am, where I have lived, and what I have experienced. Though not affiliated with any political interests in particular, I cannot deny that my cultural upbringing — my education, family background, and life experiences — navigate how I experience, understand, and represent the world. Also, I cannot ignore the fact that SINOCHEM employees come from a country whose “political system” is different from that of the United States. Indeed, while doing research and observation in SINOCHEM’s subsidiary, I was drawn toward the employees’ different understandings of such concepts as “bureaucracy,” “leadership,” “individual accountability,” and “community.” All these concepts here are value-laden and rooted in individuals’ cultural belief systems.

SINOCHEM employees are a special group of people to study. Having graduated from the most prestigious universities in China, these employees are chosen to work at one of the largest state-owned companies in the nation, and then are sent overseas for either short-term or long-term assignments. They are the best-trained and best-educated group among their generation. Interviewed by his American colleagues Brigit, Jack, and Helen, the USAC News and Views editors, Mr. Guoqiang Chai, the former human resources manager in the local subsidiary in central Florida, said: “In
SINOCHEN, ninety percent of the workers are college graduates.” His wife supplemented this during the interview: “SINOCHEN hires the best graduates. When someone has the position of secretary to the president, it is more than a clerical position, and that person is often one of the top graduates” (USAC News & Views, June 1997, p. 2).

In spite of my identification with SINOCHEN expatriates, I was rejected twice when I requested to conduct rather lengthy research (ethnographic studies) instead of just a few short visits at their company. The person who strongly rejected me was the Chinese human resources manager, Mr. Chai, while the American personnel showed more welcoming gestures. This captivated me and challenged my understanding of “intercultural differences.” Mr. Chai and I came from the same city in China and were able to speak the same home language, but as a doctoral-student researcher who had primarily been working in academia both in China and the United States, I had not been fully exposed to the corporate environment and thus had a “cultural difference” from the group of people such as Mr. Chai, who spent years working in China’s largest state-owned multinational company.

Nevertheless, the key obstacle was not merely the cultural gap between the academic world and the corporate world, but also a deeper and more multifarious distance between us. We were two different Chinese people, who had different backgrounds and both of us extremely persistent. Mr. Chai persisted on his role as a loyal gatekeeper of the company until he saw that his boss provided me a passport later on. I was persistent because I was determined to conduct ethnographic research at the site of his company and I wouldn’t give up until I reached my goal. During the
moments when I felt more at ease in communicating with the American human
resources personnel, I couldn’t help wondering whether I had become “Americanized”
in certain aspects that caused an invisible distance between “me” and expatriates like
Chai. The irony was I thought I had been typically Chinese among the graduate students
in my communication department because in mid-1998, I had been the first
international graduate student in the department. This made me consciously inspect my
“cultural ingredients” and question who I am. “Am I a typical Chinese student in front
of my faculty and graduate-student cohorts or an Americanized Chinese student who
had been largely influenced by American culture without being aware of it?” A similar
situation was confronted by SINOCHEM expatriates, who were considered the best
class of young business professionals in China. They were English-proficient and
familiar with American management systems, but they conformed to a lot of Chinese
organizational cultural codes when they worked in USAC Holdings, Inc. The
conventional and unconventional sense of “cultural differences,” the difficulties of
getting into the organization, and the cultural gap between the academy and the
corporation fascinated me and made me determined to undertake this challenge and
make sense of this complexity.

I tried to overcome this “intercultural gap” between my academic world and
their corporate world by starting with something similar — homesickness that
SINOCHEN expatriates’ family members and I both have encountered when we first
came to the United States. I spent a tremendous amount of time in getting to know the
family members and gradually built up friendships with them. I helped the family
members apply for the scholarship offered by the China-Florida Linkage Institute to
study the MBA program in the same university where I study. We spent a lot of time chatting, studying, shopping, cooking Chinese food, watching their children together, and sharing our memories of our hometown of Beijing and the nostalgic feeling we had toward “who we were.”

What hit my heart was how much they felt “displaced” by moving to the United States. By supporting their husbands’ careers and overseas assignments, the women gave up their successful careers in China and came to a foreign place to live. Disconnected from the outside world and financially dependent on their husbands, they felt extremely lost and isolated. Their self-confidence and self-respect were destroyed to a certain extent. Growing up in the time frame when China was predominated by a centrally planned economy, they followed the cultural norm that all women are supposed to be “equal” with men and should have their own careers. It was extremely rare for young, educated women to stay at home before the mid-1990s, when being a housewife was not an honored decision in China. They experienced how painful it was to live a life without choice because the U.S. law during the mid-1990s still prohibited L-2 visa holders (the spouses of multinational-company expatriates) to work in the United States. The law was modified in January 2002, enabling L-2 spouses to obtain work authorization due to the increased numbers of global expatriates (Murphy.Com, March 8, 2002).

I asked one of them to describe how painful it is to stay at home with no family and friends nearby and without a career to occupy their minds. She told me: “It’s worse than being dead.” The words “worse than being dead” made my heart heavy, and I felt I was being alerted not to live this kind of choiceless life forever if it was not necessary.
My compassion naturally evolved toward these well-educated, intelligent, quiet but lively young women, who were so constrained by their immediate situation.

I spent a year and half visiting and conducting interviews at USAC Holdings, Inc., in both Forte Meade and Tampa. Feeling that I had plenty of data from American managers, workers, Chinese expatriates, their family members, spouses, and previous executives’ children, a questioning inner voice arose: “What do I lack in my lived experiences to comprehend what I have been seeing and hearing?” “How can I understand the profound impact of globalization upon human beings?” “How can I tell these stories truthfully and faithfully?” “Why does my dissertation research matter to me so much?” “What is my relationship with my research?” “How does my research impact me?”

Transition Phase of the Research

In June 1998, I wrapped up my fieldwork and moved from Tampa, Florida, to join my husband, who worked in San Diego, California. For the first two months after I moved to San Diego, my peaceful academic mind was completely stirred up by several social occasions in which my self-worth was challenged. The social occasions I confronted are described in detail in the following chapters of my dissertation. Two months after I moved to San Diego, Qualcomm, Inc. offered me a full-time job. I agonized about whether to accept the offer because taking the job meant the risk of having no time to finish my dissertation, especially given the demanding nature of the job. When I felt was able to convince myself that gaining work experience in a multinational corporation like Qualcomm would definitely enhance my understanding
of my informants’ cross-cultural experiences at work, I decided to accept the offer. Suddenly I became a full-time professional in the telecommunication industry instead of a full-time Ph.D. candidate.

With the expectation that my work experience in a multinational company would fill the gap between my academic experiences and SINOCHEN expatriates’ corporate experiences, I was motivated to make progress in my dissertation writing. During my first year working at Qualcomm, I worked during the daytime and wrote my dissertation prospectus during nights and weekends. In March 1999, I successfully defended my dissertation prospectus. The same month, the Infrastructure Division of Qualcomm was sold to Ericsson, the world’s number-one telecommunication infrastructure provider. This incident made Qualcomm’s stock skyrocket “overnight,” and thousands of employees who stayed at Qualcomm quickly became millionaires or multimillionaires from the stock values they had. After this change at work, I became an employee in an American-based, Swedish multinational company. The workload during the company’s transition made my dissertation writing impossible. I was working as much as two or three people while the management team tried to sort out new organizational structure. After a year of my submitting dissertation tuition without making any progress on writing, my major professor kindly suggested that I take a leave of absence from school to concentrate on work until I was ready to resume my dissertation writing.

During the four years’ leave of absence from school, I moved up from an entry-level professional in the company’s Marketing Department to a bid/proposal manager in Business Operations, then to a manager in the Product Management Organization, and
then a senior product manager in the same department. During the years of “moving up” in the corporate world, I kept in close touch with SINOCHEM people to keep my dissertation research alive. The close contact with them was not only intentional but also natural because I felt connected with my informants. They were not purely research participants, but friends who felt like colleagues. The more I became an insider in the corporation, the better I was able to speak a common language with former SINOCHEM expatriates and their family members. The more success I had at work, the more respect I gained from them. The more international travels I had and the more organizational changes I went through, the better I understood what it took for SINOCHEM people to deal with the similar uncertainty and change in their lives.

During the identity change from a full-time Ph.D. candidate in an academic world to a telecommunication professional in corporate, I saw myself as both a worker and a manager who was carrying the goals that a corporate executive management team set up. My academic education in communication had imprinted me with critical views on the management values in the corporate world. Therefore, during my years of working for Qualcomm and then Ericsson, I did not only experience an acculturation of being a Chinese person who works in an American-based multinational company, but also went through the struggle of how to “fit” into a corporate world with my eight-year-upbringing in the academic world. I felt a constant need to negotiate who I was in the workplace in order to cope with the feeling of being displaced.

**Researcher and the Researched**

During the years 2000-2005, I took several international business trips to China, Hong Kong, Sweden, India, Malaysia, Canada, and domestic trips to Texas and Florida.
During these trips, I was able to interact with many international (including Chinese) employees within Ericsson’s Business Units and Market Units global-wide. The living interactions with them at work provided me with a better understanding of how they (and I) live through linguistic barriers, complex multicultural contexts, frequent organizational change, fast technology development, and the demand of updated knowledge and skill sets in a fast-paced global workplace. When I started my dissertation research at USAC Holdings, Inc., I saw myself different from “that group of people” in SINOCHEN, but now, I feel I am among the group. My training in communication, my conscious reflexivity as an ethnographer, and my years of full-time work experience in a multinational company help me to draw “the researcher” much closer to “the researched.”

During business trips to Beijing, China, in 1999, 2000, 2002, and 2005, I was able to spare time to interview my “old” research informants, Mr. Ming and his family. In the year 2002 trips, I visited the SINOCHEN Residential Buildings, a unique factor of Chinese corporate culture. In 1999, Mr. Chen’s spouse, Yanming, and her son spent two weeks with me in my home at San Diego. In 1999, 2001, and 2003, I visited Forte Meade, Lakeland, and Tampa and went out of my way to meet with my informants, Mr. Yu’s family, and Mr. Chen’s family. In 2003, I reconnected with former USAC Holdings President Mr. Du and his family. The details of how I kept my fieldwork alive in the past years are described in Chapter 3 Research Method. Through my years of being in touch and follow-up with my research informants, a growing friendship among some of us has been established.
When first approaching SINOCHEM’s local subsidiary USAC Holdings, Inc., in Florida, I had little background knowledge about its parent company, SINOCHEM. Nevertheless, I was impressed by the Chinese employees’ strong sense of belonging to SINOCHEM and I spent extended time acquiring information of SINOCHEM from public resources. When talking to them later, I could see the employees’ faces light up when I shared some of my knowledge about SINOCHEM with them. Though my research is not focused on the history, structure, and financial accomplishments of SINOCHEM, I have found that comprehending this information helps to gain a better understanding of my research participants’ background. My desire to know more about my participants through multiple channels reminds me of the feeling described by Barbara Myerhoff (1978), who wanted to study Yiddish in order to better understand her aging Jewish informants.

Research Theme: Displaced and Shifted Self

As mentioned in the previous section, the recognition at work and the growing regard from previous SINOCHEM informants provided me with job satisfaction and bestowed on me a higher self-confidence. It is one of the reasons I stay in corporate life now. Yet I have to ask myself: “Do I have the courage to leave the sort of security I have built up at work? Am I brave enough to quit my job to finish my dissertation and then find a job in academia? Am I capable of coping with another drastic change in career? Can I take another risk, considering the financial responsibilities I have to my family? Do I have much choice except for keeping things going and trying to be up beat when the company cuts down operation costs and reduces headcounts? What is autonomy? What does ‘freedom’ mean? Do we always miss what we had before? Do
we always want to have what we do not have anymore? What does it mean to have a nostalgic and shifted identity? Can financial security help to provide a sense of belonging? What fears do SINOCHEM people and I have? Is it a fear of not being able to control and predict our future or a fear of not having a sense of belonging? What is a sense of belonging? Do we have one when leaving our home in China to live in the United States, for whichever legitimized reasons? Will we be able to create a sense of belonging that we can live with?” These are the issues that SINOCHEM people face in their lives and careers, and these are the issues I face in my daily life. The philosophical or cultural dimension of globalization’s impact on individuality and identity is central to address these issues and questions.

Carrying an American institutionalized management style with Chinese baggage as well as fluent English with a very subtle Chinese accent, SINOCHEM expatriates who came to Florida were actually a group of people who had been largely influenced by Western/U.S. culture through their educational background and work experiences, even though they often defined themselves as Chinese or Chinese managers. This complexity determines that their life and career paths would be very much diversified after they finished their six years of overseas assignment in. Not all would go back to China; not all would stay in the United States.

Among my participants, there were Chinese expatriates who resigned their jobs at SINOCHEM after their overseas assignments in Florida. They choose new careers and life paths. Some of them changed jobs and even changed industries; some of them went back to school and started all over again. Also there were many mid-level Chinese
Managers who didn’t know how long the overseas assignment would be or where their next assignments would take them.

Some of these expatriates returned to SINOCHEM headquarters in Beijing and experienced another “cultural shock” after they returned home because China had changed considerably in the six years when they were gone. They felt challenged to repatriate themselves and their family members.

Many of my participants and their family members struggled to understand the concept of “home.” They told me stories of how much they missed their roots in China when they were in the United States, and how much they missed their work and life in Tampa and Lakeland after they went back “home” to Beijing. They told me about their painful decisions regarding whether to stay in the United States or bring the family, especially kids, back to China. Once the decision was made, it was not easily reversed due to the constraints of immigration law. There is little room to negotiate being in both places. Thus, globalization caused people either periodic or eternal feelings of “displacement” whether they bought nice houses in the United States or owned comfortable apartments in China. Financial success does not necessarily provide a stable sense of belonging.

Some of these people used to be insiders in SINOCHEM, and then left and became outsiders. I wanted to understand how they manage to cope with changes, predict their future, and overcome uncertainty. My research thus tries to address the following inquiries: How do Chinese workers and their families working for a multinational corporation (SINOCHEN) make sense of their experiences? What sense do they make of them? What significant dislocation have they experienced in both work
and other aspects of life? What does the experience of dislocation and cultural difference feel and look like? How is the experience different for different families and for different members of the families? And how unique is the experience in different frames or horizons of meaning or “provinces of meaning” (Berger & Luckmann 1966; 1989)? The underlying theme of these questions can be expressed by the following questions: *What does it mean to be Chinese but not to be working and living in China? What does it mean to be living in the United States but not be American?* By telling stories of Chinese expatriates’ and their family members’ dilemmas, nomadic life, nostalgic feelings, and uncertainty, I seek to help them make a coherent explanation that connects their past, present, and future.

Therefore, my ultimate goal of studying a multinational corporation is not to generate tactics for “managing” cultural differences. Instead, my primary concern is to understand how globalization influences individuals’ beliefs, values, and behaviors at work and in other aspects of life. By placing SINOCHEM people’s cross-cultural communication practices in this particular cultural context — inside and outside multinational corporations in the globalization era — I can examine how culture influences the creation of meaning, and how various meanings and symbols constitute what we call cultural reality (Gonzalez, Houston, & Chen, 1994, p. xiv).

When I first approached USAC Holdings, Inc., I was totally an outside student researcher who never had full-time corporate experiences (my previous work experience in China was primarily in academia as well). As a doctoral student at that time, I wanted very much to use my dissertation research to bridge my academic world and their corporate world. However, I confronted rejections when I planed to do
ethnographic research at their site. When I expressed my difficulty to one of my committee members, Dr. Jorgenson, she encouraged and inspired me that the stories of rejection can be a dissertation. Indeed, it was thought provoking to see that the first person rejecting me was the Chinese HR manager, while the American HR manager(s) seemed to be more receptive to my idea of doing research at their company. Later, the local subsidiary president (from China) as well as the successor Chinese HR manager provided more support. These two people and their families became friends with whom I kept in touch, and they still live in Florida. They made my research possible. The experience of being rejected implied that I would have a long way to go to become an insider of SINOCHEM people’s world.

This dissertation also narrates my own struggle to balance my corporate reality and my academic dream. At this moment, my corporate life is a “paramount” reality and my academic life is a “provincial” reality, but I know it could be reversed. Therefore my dissertation is also a story of an “ethnographic I” (Ellis, 2004) who experienced homesickness and cultural displacement. It’s not only about my “nostalgia” toward China after moving to the United States but also my “nostalgia” toward my academic life after I became an employee of corporate.

My career decision has been painful. Behind my success at surface level (the promotions and awards at work), there is always silent self-doubt about whether this is ultimately where I want to be. After years of fruitful job experiences in corporations, I still missed Tampa and the university where I spent my first five years in the United States. Tampa is the site of nice memories of education, support, and friendship that became symbolically important to my self-definition. I live a life of both satisfaction
and anxiety. The satisfaction is that I proved myself able to do well on what I want to do; the anxiety is that I was losing the time and opportunity to get my doctoral degree, which had been my first and primary goal when I came to the United States. The satisfaction enhanced my self-confidence during the day, while the anxiety increased my self-doubt at night.

I have tried to negotiate among the boundaries of being a doctoral candidate and a corporate employee. I try to make sense of my fragmented life: I have a demanding job during the day time with almost every decision involving profit-and-loss consequences; I am a mother of a two-year-old boy who needs me while I need to engage my dissertation writing at night. I manage projects during the day, interact with the babysitter in the evenings, and fight against physical exhaustion and self-doubt to reach my goal. When I interviewed former SINOCHEM expatriates and their spouses, they told me of a similar hectic pace they had to deal with both at work and in domestic life. They also experienced tough decision-making, for example, one of the spouses had to give up a promotional opportunity in New York and Shanghai to keep her family united in Tampa. We (SINOCHEM expatriates, their family members, and I) went through the same experiences: leaving our home country, overcoming homesickness, changing careers, fitting into a new environment, juggling family and work, surviving the nostalgia toward a “previous life,” sorting out certainty from uncertainty, and making sense of who we are in our very fragmented lives.

Therefore, the experiences I explore in this dissertation are unique but also common. Defining a sense of belonging and “who we are” is a constant struggle of human beings who live in a changing and displaced world. Even changing a job or
changing a role or responsibility at work is a process of redefining who you are. This dissertation is not only for those who migrate to another country to live and work for an extended period of time but also for those who deal with changes in their day-to-day life. The study of international experiences in intercultural communications is also for the interest of those who deal with cultural change, although they do not necessarily travel to other countries.

**Preview of the Chapters**

In this dissertation, I provide multi-layered accounts of meanings hidden behind the Chinese employees’ and their families’ sense of belonging as they are socialized into a foreign land. By entering the world of these displaced Chinese, I seek to gain a better understanding of the tension between work and family life, the divisions between the corporation and the academy, and the researcher and the researched.

My research is grounded in the theoretical framework of social constructionism and narrative inquiry as they related to globalization, self-understanding, and multinational corporations. The research methods I use are ethnography and autoethnography. The subject areas are intercultural and organizational communication.

Chapter One (this chapter) states the goals, background, and rationale for my research. In this chapter, I primarily address the following questions: “Why did I choose this subsidiary of SINOCHEM?” “How is the group of Chinese workers I study different from other groups of overseas Chinese historically and regionally?” “Why is this research important to me?” “How are their geographical relocation and cultural dislocation related to mine?” “How can I connect my multinational-corporate experiences with theirs?” “Why do I think that the experiences of SINOCHEM
informants and my experiences are not only unique but also common?” In this chapter, I also reveal the theme of my dissertation, which focuses on the nostalgic, fragmented, and shifted self and identity that are the direct consequence of globalization.

Chapter Two examines the current scholarship of globalization and multinational corporations mainly in the areas of intercultural communication, related economic research, and international management. By doing this, I hope to make sense of where my inquiry stands in relation to the studies in other disciplines and what particular contribution I can make as a communication researcher. In reviewing previous scholarship, I contrast my research with mainstream or orthodox approaches both to intercultural communication and to organizational/management research. The concepts I reviewed include “globalization,” “self,” “nostalgia” and “acculturation”; the communication theories I use as the infrastructure of my dissertation are social constructivism (Berger & Luckmann 1966; 1989) and narrative inquiry (Bochner, 1994; Ellis & Bochner, 1992).

Chapter Three discusses ethnography and autoethnography. I use a narrative approach to tell stories of cultural dislocation and cross-cultural communication that are the focus of my dissertation. In this chapter, I also examine the concrete issues I encountered in fieldwork, issues related to interpreting interviews and fieldworks, and how I wrote my ethnography and autoethnography. I incorporate reflections of my own acculturation experience at an American graduate school and voice out unheard feelings of (international) employees. My goal is to study “local narratives,” to attempt to “make them part of a coherent story of our lives … and “to attach meanings to our actions and the actions of others” (Bochner, 1994, pp. 22-23; Ellis & Bochner, 1992). This grants
the possibility “for us to consider people who have been ignored, forgotten, neglected, or misunderstood as ‘one of us’” (Rorty, 1982, p. 203; Bochner, 1994, p. 21).

Chapter Four is the ethnographic story session, which records my journey to approach, to know, to get involved in, to understand, to reflect on, and to interpret what I saw and heard at my research site and from my informants and participants. Because my research includes autoethnography, the stories are written in an autobiographical genre. I include the story of my own cross-cultural adaptation as a parallel narrative that merges with the stories of SINOCHEM informants. I write my stories in a chronological order with a plot of my growing identity from an “outsider” to be an “insider” in the past eight years. The three story sessions are as follows:

Part I: “Outsider” and “Insiders”: Entry to SINOCHEM: As a doctoral student who first approached SINOCHEM in Florida, I provide the cultural context of my research site, which specifies how my research participants are a particular group that is different from other international workers.

Part II: Getting to Know the “Insiders”: How I got to know SINOCHEM family members to gain an access as an insider to the life of a multinational corporation.

Part III: Becoming an Insider: This story is about the transition that occurred in my life when I left Tampa and started to work for corporate. I tell about the struggle for an identity, when the “I” abandoned my role as a full-time dissertation writer and became a corporate employee. My story shows how I entered into the corporate world and then become an insider of multinational corporations to build up connections with the experiences of SINOCHEM employees. I also narrate my contact with previous SINOCHEM employees who are now in Tampa, Florida, and Beijing, China and
describe our common struggle of making the meanings of self, work, and life in the past, present, and future more coherent.

In Chapter Five, I reflect on an analysis of the ethnographic narratives I composed in Chapter Four as well my research methods and rationale. I include applications that could help future employees and their families who enter into this cross-cultural work and life experience.
Chapter Two: Literature Review

As an ethnography and autoethnography on the cultural identity of those who work and live inside and outside multinational corporations in the contemporary globalization era, my dissertation engages various concepts and theories addressed by different scholarly disciplines. The structure of this chapter can be illustrated in Figure 2.1 below:

![Figure 2 - Structure of Literature Review](image)

- **The concepts** and **social phenomena** on which this research focuses are “globalization” and “multinational corporations.” Multinational Corporation is the subset of the phenomenon of the globalization movement. It contextualizes my research and signifies the historical background of the

25
ethnographic stories in my dissertation. My research informants and I are the people whose life paths have been impacted by these social phenomena. As individuals, we may not be able to control or predict what impact that globalization brings to us, but we are able to make sense of the social, cultural, career, and life changes we went through by narrating our experiences.

- **The academic discipline** that my dissertation primarily belongs to is Intercultural Communication, in which “culture,” “enculturation,” “acculturation,” “deculturation,” “assimilation,” and “adaptation” are the main concepts. Here I review and examine these concepts. Of course the ethnographic stories in my dissertation happen in both interpersonal and organizational settings. I examine how my research may contribute to existing intercultural communication studies as well as other scholarship and perspectives on multinational-corporation research.

- **The communication theory** I primarily use in this dissertation is social constructionist, specifically the theory of the Social Construction of Reality, in which the social construction of “self-identity” is my major research focus.

In the following sessions, I will discuss how my research relates and contributes to the theories, concepts, and communication disciplines listed above; what aspects I primarily look into on the globalization and multinational-corporations phenomena; what new perspectives I bring to the intercultural-communication field; and the value of research on sense-making, identity, and belonging in the postmodern world.
Globalization

The Globalization Concept and Its Dimensions

Covering a wide range of distinct political, economic, and cultural trends, “globalization” has become one of the most debated concepts in the political and academic arena. The term “globalization” has gradually become commonplace in academia since the 1970s (Modelski, 1972). In the communication field, there has been very little literature devoted to the study of the implications of the globalization phenomena for human communication. The only “Globalization Theory” I found in the communication discipline is a monograph dedicated to organizational communication research, published in 2005 (May & Mumby, 2005). In this monograph, Cynthia Stohl writes that understanding globalization is important because it is “critical to understand how organizations were positioned in relation to the larger communicative, economic, political, cultural, and social forces of the times (2005, p. 227). As an ethnographic study of shifting cross-cultural adaptations and personal identity residing inside and outside multinational corporations, my research is focusing not only on organization but also on identity issues in a multinational corporation context, a considerably broader issue related to and impacted by globalization. This necessitates a broader literature review that covers a wider scholarly landscape of disciplines in order to explore what difference I can make as an interpretive-communication scholar of this subject.

In the nineteenth-century, social commentary provided numerous references to an awareness that space is inevitably transformed by the emergence of high-speed transportation (for example, rail and air travel) and communication (the telegraph or telephone). These new devices dramatically heightened the possibilities for human
interaction across existing geographical and political divides (Harvey, 1989; Kern, 1983). The word “globalization” first appeared in *Webster’s Dictionary* in 1961, but virtually no academic journal articles or books published before 1975 included the words “globalism,” “globalizing,” or “globalization” (Scholte, 2000; Stohl, 2005, p. 227).

Since the mid-1980s, social theorists have moved beyond the character of previous reflections on the compression of space to offer a rigorous conception of globalization. Contemporary analysts associate globalization largely with “deterritorialization” (Tomlinson, 1999, pp.29-30), according to which a growing variety of social activities take place irrespective of the geographical location of the participants. Multinational corporations manufacture products in many countries and sell to consumers around the world. Money, technology, and raw materials move ever more swiftly across national borders. Along with products and finances, ideas and cultures circulate more freely.

As a result, laws, economies, and social movements are forming at the international level. Many politicians, academics, and journalists treat these trends as inevitable. But for billions of the world’s people, business-driven globalization means *uprooting* old ways of life and *threatening* livelihoods and cultures. Will local cultures inevitably fall victim to this global “consumer” culture? Will English eradicate all other languages? Will consumer values overwhelm peoples’ sense of community and social solidarity? Or, on the contrary, will a common culture lead the way to greater shared values and political unity?

The following definitions of “globalization” represent diversity of current views:
“[T]he inexorable integration of markets, nation-states, and technologies to a degree never witnessed before — in a way that is enabling individuals, corporations and nation-states to reach around the world farther, faster, deeper and cheaper than ever before . . . the spread of free-market capitalism to virtually every country in the world” (Friedman, 1999, pp. 7-8).

“The compression of the world and the intensification of consciousness of the world as a whole . . . concrete global interdependence and consciousness of the global whole in the twentieth century“ (Robertson, 1992, p. 8).

“A social process in which the constraints of geography on social and cultural arrangements recede and in which people become increasingly aware that they are receding” (Waters, 1995, p. 3).

“The historical transformation constituted by the sum of particular forms and instances of . . . [m]aking or being made global (i) by the active dissemination of practices, values, technology and other human products throughout the globe (ii) when global practices and so on exercise an increasing influence over people’s lives (iii) when the globe serves as a focus for, or a premise in shaping, human activities” (Albrow, 1996, p. 88).

Integration on the basis of a project pursuing “market rule on a global scale” (McMichael, 2000, p. xxiii, 149).

“As experienced from below, the dominant form of globalization means a historical transformation: in the economy, of livelihoods and modes of existence; in politics, a loss in the degree of control exercised locally; . . . and in culture, a devaluation of a collectivity’s achievements . . . Globalization is emerging as a political response to the expansion of market power . . . [It] is a domain of knowledge” (Mittelman, 2000, p. 6).

Table 1 - Examples of Globalization Definitions

The 1980s were a time of great upheaval in the world of organizations. Economic integration was just one form of global exchange that was increasing exponentially; there were also escalations in political, cultural, and personal global interconnections (Stohl, 2005, p. 227). In summary, researchers often look into three aspects of globalizations: economic dimensions, political dimensions, and cultural dimensions.
Economic dimensions of globalization in relation to production, exchange, and consumption of commodities refer to the intensification and stretching of economic interrelations across the globe. Gigantic flows of capital and technology have stimulated trade in goods and services. Markets have extended their reach around the world, in the process creating new linkages among national economies. Incumbent multinational corporations, powerful international economic institutions, and large regional trading systems have emerged as the major building blocs of the 21st century’s global economic order (Steger, 2003, p. 37).

Political dimensions of globalization in relation to the generation and distribution of power in societies refer to the intensification and expansion of political interrelations across the globe. These processes raise an important set of political issues pertaining to the principle of state sovereignty, the growing impact of intergovernmental organizations, and the future prospects for regional and global governance (Steger, 2003, p. 56).

Cultural globalization refers to the intensification and expansion of cultural flows across the globe. “Culture” is a broad concept and is frequently used to describe the whole of human experience. In order to avoid the problem of overgeneralization, culture here is referred to as symbolic interaction, construction, articulation, and the dissemination of meaning. Part of the cultural system includes sets of widely shared ideas, patterned beliefs, guiding norms and values, and ideals accepted as truth by a particular group of people. It offers individuals a more or less coherent picture of the world. Like all social processes, globalization contains a cultural dimension filled with a range of norms, claims, beliefs, and narratives about the phenomenon itself. The
exploding network of cultural interconnections and interdependencies in the last decades has led some commentators to suggest that cultural practices lie at the very heart of contemporary globalization (Steger, 2003, p. 69).

**Conceptualizing Globalization Phenomena**

It is impossible to precisely define and measure a nebulous concept like globalization; however, the increasing “connectivity” (Tomlinson, 1999, p. 3), including the increase in international trade and the greater role of multinational corporations, is apparent in a host of economic, demographic, technological, and cultural changes. The examples below describe distinct dimensions of globalization. These include greater international movement of commodities, money, information, and people; and the development of technology, organizations, legal systems, and infrastructures to allow this movement. A number of trends have evolved since World War II, but they have been developed rather rapidly in the past two decades. The list below was digested from both Wikipedia [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Globalization](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Globalization) and the Global Policy Forum [http://www.globalpolicy.org/globaliz/charts/index.htm](http://www.globalpolicy.org/globaliz/charts/index.htm), complemented with observations from my own experiences:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Aspects</th>
<th>Attributes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| Global Technology  | • Greater transborder data flow, using technologies such as the Internet, communication satellites, and telephones  
                   | • Development of global telecommunications infrastructure  
                   | • Declining cost of transportation and communication                                                                                                                                 |
| Global Regulations | • Increase in the number of standards applied globally, e.g., copyright laws and intellectual-property restrictions  
                   | • Increased role of international organizations such as WTO (World Trade Organization), WIPO (World Intellectual Property Organization), and IMF (International Monetary Fund), which deal with international transactions |
| Global             | • Increase in international trade at a faster rate than the growth in the |


<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Aspects</th>
<th>Attributes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Trade and Financial</td>
<td>world economy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Systems</td>
<td>• Promotion of free trade: reduction or elimination of tariffs; construction</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>of free-trade zones with small or no tariffs; reduction or elimination of</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>capital controls; elimination or harmonization of subsidies for local</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>businesses</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Increase in international flow of capital including foreign direct</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>investment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Erosion of national sovereignty and national borders through</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• international agreements leading to organizations like the WTO and</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>OPEC (Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Development of global financial systems including IMF and World Bank</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Global Migrations</td>
<td>• Increase in the share of the world economy controlled by multinational</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>and Mobility</td>
<td>corporations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• More and more expatriates as the result of increased multinational</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>corporations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Increased career mobility, increased global market competitions, and</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>increased uncertainty of job security resulting from multinational</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>corporations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Greater immigration, including both legal and illegal immigration</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Global Cultural Changes</td>
<td>• Greater international consumer cultural exchange, for example through</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>the export of Hollywood movies, global chains of McDonald’s restaurants,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>etc.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Spreading of multiculturalism and better individual access to cultural</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>diversity, with on the other hand, some reduction in diversity through</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>assimilation, hybridization, Westernization, Americanization, or</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Sinosization of cultures</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Greater international travel and tourism</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2 - Globalization Trends and Their Aspects and Attributes

The ethnographic stories I tell in my dissertation reflect many phenomena appearing on the list above, especially the ones I italicized. The central problem of today’s global interactions is the tension between “cultural homogenization and cultural heterogenization” (Appadurai, 1997, p. 230). *The Global Syndrome* is subtitled *Transformation and Resistance* (Mittleman, 2000). So what are the implications of globalization for individuals who have gone through cross-cultural adaptation both
geographic-wise and career-wise? This is the question I explore through the narratives of my research informants and stories of my own experiences.

Among the different aspects of globalization, the one I am most interested in looking at from cultural perspectives to the perspective of individual human experiences is multinational corporations where severe competition in the global business environment, the ups and downs of the global economy, global migration or geographic relocation, feelings of displacement, cultural adaptations, and a sense of belonging are produced. All these are experienced by the Chinese expatriates from SINOCHEN, their family members, and by me in this particular era of globalization.

**Multinational-Corporation Studies**

The study of the multinational corporation has tended to be divided by various perspectives ranging from economics to organizational theory, history and politics. These perspectives are complementary insofar as the multinational corporation is an economic organization that evolves from its national origins to span across national borders (Kogut & Zander, 2003). An examination of current scholarship on multinational corporations provides me with a sense of where my inquiry stands among the research in these disciplines and what particular contribution I can make as a communication researcher.

**Phenomenon of Multinational Corporations**

A multinational corporation (MNC) or transnational corporation (TNC) is a business enterprise with manufacturing, sales, or service subsidiaries in one or more foreign countries. These corporations originated early in the 20th century and
proliferated after World War II. Typically, a multinational corporation develops new products in its native country and manufactures them abroad (often in developing countries), thus gaining trade advantages and economies of labor and materials. According to the Columbia Encyclopedia, by the mid-1990s, most of the largest companies by revenue were American or Japanese. In 1996, 162 of the 500 largest companies globally were from the United States and 126 from Japan. Only a few of the largest companies are from developing countries. An exception is China, which has three entries in the top 500 list (Fortune magazine, “Top 500”). With growing strength, more and more companies began to set their eyes abroad. Twelve Chinese companies are listed among the world’s top 500 (Embassy of the People’s Republic of China in the United States, Economic Reports of November 2003).

Per the U.S. Bureau of Economic Analysis, the number of MNCs operating in the United States was estimated to be 3,500 in the early 1990s (Harris & Moran, 1991, p. 340). In 1996, the total revenues of the 500 largest companies globally were $11.4 trillion, total profits were $404 billion, total assets were $33.3 trillion, and the total number of employees was 35,517,692 according to International Labor Organization http://www.itcilo.it/english/actrav/telearn/global/ilo/multinat/multinat.htm, 1996). Given the size of the internationalization of business and the evolution of MNCs, one would expect a lot of research to be devoted to understanding the dimensions of human life in these multinational firms. Although it is true that transnational corporations have been given a good deal of attention over the years, the scholarship on these types of organizations seldom comes to us from a humanistic perspective. The research that
exists centers primarily on economic analysis and business management (Wiseman & Shutter, 1994, p. 12).

One explanation for the lack of research is that transnational corporations may be difficult to access, a difficulty exemplified by the challenges I experienced as a student researcher. Other obstacles include linguistic barriers, complex multicultural contexts, and the distance between the researcher and the researched. All of these impediments pose major challenges to studying human experiences in multinational firms. Of course, the biggest problem faced by communication researchers is the “translation” issue, i.e., they study multinational organizations (not necessarily “pure” Western multinational firms) with categories provided by Western organizational communication theory, and thus confront obstacles to authenticity and “accuracy.”

“Although these obstacles are formidable, the preponderance of this organizational form mandates that they be overcome” (Wiseman and Shutter, 1994, p. 14). To portraying the complex entities of such non-Western multinational firms, “thick descriptions” such as ethnographies can be used as an alternative method rather than adapting a categorical approach commonly associated with mainstream organizational research.

**Economic Perspective**

Based on a computer search of 800 business journals, Shutter (1992) found that the most researched countries outside the United States on management behavior and communication are Japan (66 entries) and the People’s Republic of China (22 entries). Before the 1990s, however, there was little research on Chinese MNCs, let alone the specific topics on cross-cultural experiences in Chinese MNCs. In this section, I would like to demonstrate two major facts. First, Chinese MNC studies were parsimonious
before 1990 and were only increased after the mid-1990s. Second, a brief review of the “production” theme in economic studies on MNCs provides a compelling reason for communication researchers to focus on “human” aspects in multinational-corporation studies.

During my visit to China in the summer of 1997, I acquired a copy of *The Transnational Corporation and the Internationalization of Chinese Enterprises* (Liu, 1992), a publication reviewing the first Chinese dissertations on MNCs. This book is an economics monograph. At the beginning of the 1990s, when the author, Yan Liu, a doctoral candidate of the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences (the same academic institution where I worked three plus years before I came to the United States), was writing her dissertation, she felt constrained by the lack of substantial MNC references available to her. Liu had the disadvantage of not having anyone she could consult about MNCs. Even the data provided by the United Nations were not systematic enough because of the diversified situation of each MNC and each country. At the time, MNCs were new to China; research was scarce but nonetheless very much in demand (Liu, 1992, p. 179).

Liu’s comments spring from the situation of a “changing world environment” explained by economist John Dunning (1988, pp. 3-26). Throughout the early 1980s, the United States and the United Kingdom remained the world’s largest foreign investors. Beginning in the late 1970s and early 1980s, some industrially less developed countries as outward direct investors emerged in East Asia, South Asia, Southeast Asia, and South America (Dunning, 1988, p. 3). Therefore, the MNC is no longer a
privileged phenomenon of the developed countries. Instead, MNCs have become a worldwide occurrence.

Overall, economists are concerned with the macro-level situation of today’s world, such as unemployment, environmental concerns, and the depletion of nonrenewable resources and how this may affect the attributes of MNCs in the future (Dunning, 1988). For instance, Dunning (1988) foreshadowed that some MNC businesses would be more information-and technology-intensive, while the majority of MNCs (such as SINOCHEM in my research) would still remain traditionally resource-based investments (Dunning, 1988, pp. 21-22).

My dissertation is not intended to testify to the predictions made by economic theories. By referring to these economic explanations, however, I can better understand the changing world environment that SINOCHEM confronts and thus focus more completely on how individual transnational-corporation workers experience the situation observed at the macro level by economists. In addition, I want to see whether the “threats” or “excitement” of globalization viewed by economic scholars also reflects the feelings and concerns of individual multinational corporation employees. If the mission of economic research is to serve global, macro-level, industrial, and institutional purposes, then the mission of communication scholars should be to focus on micro-level human experiences.

Management Perspective

Regarding the dynamic and diversified nature of MNCs, studies of international business, along with international economic theories, provide some solutions for country-specific and MNC-specific situations in the areas of finance, marketing, and
management (Paliwoda, 1991; Alkhafaji, 1995; Swanson, Alkhafaji, & Ryan, 1993; Zhao, Lu, Mcarty, & Staneley, 1992; Harris & Moran, 1991). According to Dunning (1988, pp. 21-24), who addressed global business activity, there is always an “inherent conflict” between the ways in which individual countries and MNCs view the world. As an economist, Dunning concludes that a resolution of the “inherent conflict” is very likely to depend on the following factors: (1) how people look at the costs and benefits of MNC activities, (2) how both home and host governments perceive the impact of these costs and benefits on their national economic and political objectives, and (3) the home countries’ or host governments’ bargaining power to affect the actions of MNCs or their affiliates so that they can best meet the objectives mentioned in (2).

Nevertheless, as a communications researcher, I prefer to look at “the conflict” as dissimilarities of opinions, policies, goals, and interests induced by different social and economic roots. In this section, I reviewed themes of MNC studies from an international-management perspective and then continue to specify how I, as a communication researcher, can distinguish my communication perspective in studying MNCs.

In international management, global organizational behaviors are usually studied under the domain of “managing cultural differences” (Harris & Moran, 1991), in which cultural differences are viewed as manageable factors. Before the 1970s, MNCs were seen only in a few countries such as the United States and the United Kingdom (Dunning, 1988), and much of the investigation on global management originated in the experience of Americans. American-trained researchers and managers used these models and theories to explain the behaviors they observed in U.S.-based multinational
organizations. They implicitly assumed that what was true for an American company was also true for non-U.S. firms and people from other countries (Adler, 1997, p. v). In that research literature (Fayerweather, 1969; Negandhi, 1975), culture was viewed as “an ingredient in the recipe for doing business abroad,” and it was transferable or exportable from (American) parent companies to local subsidiaries.

During the 1980s and into the 1990s, MNCs became a worldwide act instead of a practice monopolized by Western countries, and thus cultural differences no longer seemed negligible. Nevertheless, management theory still emphasized the need for universally applicable guides or prescriptions to reinforce the control of the parent company over the subsidiary. In this situation, communication is typically viewed as linear “one-way” conduct (presumably transmitted from American parent companies to their overseas subsidiaries) instead of as an interactive process.

After 1980, the current scholarship on cultural differences in the global workplace was no longer exclusively United States - or Western - centered. They recognized there could be more than one best way to manage. However, while acknowledging the complexities and diversities of today’s global business environment, many management scholars still believe “variations across cultures and their impacts on organizations” are not random but “follow systematic, predicable patterns” (Adler, 1997, p. v). This type of research is more managerially oriented and thus organized by major issues that managers need to deal with in the global workplace. Different from the goal of management scholars, my goal is not to create strategies to help managers to resolve problems or to “manage”; rather, my concern about MNCs is employees’ individual experiences of work and the workplace and how these experiences matter to
their well being. Of course, in my research, I interviewed various employees including those who hold mid-level management positions, yet the focus of my research is on how these people feel about their work and workplace instead of what they are supposed to say from their formal positions. As I continue my following review, I try to distinguish my research perspective from traditional organizational communication and management studies.

“Managing” Cultural Differences

The first major issue that international management scholars usually discuss is Managing Cultural Differences. They describe the ways in which cultures vary and how this variance may influence an organization’s operational functioning. Based on the earlier works of anthropologists F. Kluckhohn and F. Strodebeck (1961), and Hofstede (1980), management scholars Fons Trompenaars (1994) and Nancy Adler (1997) generalize national cultural differences into major dimensions. They include the power orientation (power respect versus power tolerance), social orientation (collectivism versus individualism), uncertainty orientation (uncertainty avoidance versus uncertainty acceptance), goal orientation (aggressive goal behavior versus passive goal behavior), and time orientation (long-term outlook versus short-term outlook) at the workplace. Both Alder and Trompenaars explore how these differences impact workplace (organizational) behaviors. They try to link these cultural orientations to explain the consequences of work behaviors. For instance, certain cultures do not appreciate punctuality, and certain cultures have more “doers” than “talkers.” These classifications do encourage people to notice cultural distinctions, but they lead to stereotypes that over-simply the complexities of a cultural group’s behavior. I believe culture(s) involve
experiences and meanings that are rich, vibrant, various, dynamic, and specific. Therefore, cultures of multinational corporations are in need of thick descriptions and interpretations in addition to generalization and categorizations.

Management scholars often view cultural differences as something that can be manipulated strategically. Hence, from a management perspective, cultural diversity is seen as manageable in order to achieve organizational efficiency. For example, one management strategy — the cultural synergy approach — “creates organizational solutions to problems by using cultural diversity as a resource and an advantage to the organization” (Adler, 1997, p. 118). In these situations, cultures are perceived as manageable variables. Managers are seen as “influencers of organizational culture,” “leaders in cultural change,” “creators of cultural collaboration,” “negotiators,” and “communicators” (Harris and Moran, 1991). The literature gives recommendations on what managers should or should not do in certain situations. In this literature, researchers are seen as providers of strategies and training instead of as co-participants in learning about cultural difference and acculturation. This type of research literature tries to provide a pragmatic guide for corporation managers.

Tactics or Etiquette Guides of Doing International Business

The second issue that management scholars normally explore is “Tactics of Doing International Business” and “etiquette for conducting business in various countries.” They emphasize such questions as how to create cultural synergy (Adler, 1997; Harris & Moran, 1991; Moran & Harris, 1982) and how to manage business protocol and technology transfer (Chen, 1996; Harris & Moran, 1991). The research also comprises the issues of how to manage global human resources (Harris & Moran,
how to provide cross-cultural training (Bristlin, 1994; Sadler, 1996; Reeves, 1996), and how to manage transitions and foreign deployment or expatriate issues. The foreign deployment and expatriate issues focus on how to cope with culture shock, how to foster acculturation, and help on relocations (Harris & Moran, 1991). In this area, Nancy Adler is one of the few management researchers who emphasize the importance of international employees’ spouses or families (Adler, 1997).

There are examples of “etiquette guide” for conducting business in various countries, for instance, how to do business with Europeans, Africans, and Asians, or how to do business with Japanese, Russians, Chinese, Mexicans, and so on (De Mente, B., 1987; Knight, M., 1987; Knight, M., 1987; Reed, G. & Gray, R., 1997). These “guides” often include details of what the appropriate manners are at dinner tables in certain countries. To me, they have the feel of travelers’ or tour book guide.

International management and intercultural communication have somewhat of a “kinship” insofar as they both investigate cross-cultural issues in global organizations, especially the concepts of culture and human behavior. However, there is a drastic difference between research that focuses primarily on people in organizations and research that focuses on the organization that contains these people. The goal of the former research is to make sense of organizational life as experienced by individual employees in order to make the workplace a healthy environment, while the goal of the latter research is to solve problems and to improve organizational structure, efficiency, productivity, and profits. As a researcher, I choose to focus on people in organizations instead of organizations containing these people. In Chapter 3, I discuss the research method I use in my dissertation. In the next chapter, I also demonstrate why the
research method I chose is congruent with the research goals and theme I indicated in Chapter One.

**Intercultural Communication Perspective**

My motive in studying multinational corporations is to make sense of why, what, and how international (Chinese) employees and their family members feel about and make sense of what they experience in a cross-cultural context. My eyebrows were raised whenever I opened books claiming to serve as “manuals” (Chin-Ning Chu, 1988) for politicians and businessmen to “conquer” the business landscape in another culture. In the study of multinational corporations or international business environments, various authors have written books with the illusion that “categorizing” cultural prototypes can help managers better “manage” cultural diversity. Peter Berger mocks corporations that hire “longhaired academics” to teach intercultural or gender “sensitivity” to their employees in the possibly mistaken belief that this will enhance productivity (Berger & Huntingdon, 2002, p. 5). My interest in studying communication in international organizations is not for the purpose of increasing productivity, or predicting and controlling behaviors such as contract negotiating or legal document writing for businesses across national borders. Instead, my purpose is to make cross-cultural work and life interpretable and understandable to people who have (or have not) experienced cross-cultural encounters. As globalization has become a ubiquitous phenomenon, fewer and fewer people can claim that they have not had a cross-cultural experience. Cultural differences used to be considered sources of conflict or dissension (Sullivan, 1981; Waters, 1992). In a culturally diverse world, we seek less
misreading or dissension and we honor sincerity and empathy. With this effort, the intercultural workplace may become a more harmonious milieu.

Culture does not have a value hierarchy in terms of one culture seeming higher or superior, and the other lower or inferior. Culture differs from one place to another, and “there are no absolutes, for the principles that we may use for judging behavior or anything else are relative to the culture in which we are raised” (Hatch, 1983, p. 3). Melville Herskovits wrote: The core of cultural relativism is the social discipline that comes of respect for differences — of mutual respect that emphasizes on “the worth of many ways of life, not one, is an affirmation of the values in each culture” (Herskovits, 1973, p. 33). This mutual regard calls for a tolerance that “expressed the principle that others ought to be able to conduct their affairs as they see fit, which includes living their lives according to the cultural values and beliefs of their society” (Hatch, 1983, p. 65). Here, reiteration of cultural relativism reaffirms that the ethic of intercultural communication research is to promote this mutual respect and understanding.

There is an extensive literature of intercultural communication in various contexts such as health-care (Tseng, 2001), small group (Ting-Toomey & Oetzel, 2001), and interpersonal communication (Gudykunst, Ting-Toomey, & Nishida, 1996). This research focuses mainly on such concepts as intercultural communication competence (Wiseman & Koister, 1993), identity management (Cupach & Metts, 1994), anxiety, and uncertainty management (Gudykunst, 2005). The current literature more relevant to my writing and research, however, is the anthropological view of culture (Geertz, 1973), human condition (Clifford, 1988, 1992), identity ((Kondo, 1990; Anderson, 1997), nostalgia (Ritivoi, 2002), sense of home or sense of belonging.
(Jackson, 1995), issues of cross-cultural adaptations (Kim and Gudykunst, 1987; Wiseman, 1995), and intercultural studies of transnational corporations (Clifford, 1988, 1992; Wiseman & Shutter, 1994).

I acknowledge the contribution of traditional intercultural-communications research that provides useful categories for getting a general sense of what is involved in intercultural communication. However, there is rarely “flesh” on the bones of the concepts described in this literature. That is, in these intellectual discussions of intercultural-communication concepts, we do not see, hear, and feel the ongoing, daily, and concrete experiences that cross-cultural individuals go through. This literature does not help us to enter cross-cultural persons’ worlds in a bodily, emotional way so that the readers can empathize with what these cross-cultural people experience. Rather, they view the differences manifested in intercultural communication as “barriers” that can be “resolved,” “controlled,” or “managed.” This intellectualized, cognitive, and rational approach distances its research from lay readers and participants who live an intercultural life. Divergent from traditional communication research, my dissertation (an ethnography) of cross-cultural encounters outside and inside multinational corporations is intended to gain a situated understanding of the experiences that cross-cultural people encounter and make them accessible to those who go through these experiences.

**Communicating in a Multinational Corporation (MNC)**

There is very little research on multinational corporations in the communication field, and there seemed to be only one major monograph “systematically” addressing communication issues in multinational corporations (Wiseman & Shutter, 1994) that
has been published to date. There is also very limited research done on “interpersonal and small-group factors” (Wiseman & Shutter, 1994, p. 4) in MNCs, such as initial interaction, conflict, and nonverbal messages (Sullivan, 1981). But there is a relatively larger amount of literature in business management-related areas. These include studies focused on managing across cultural work teams (Christopher, E. & Gibson, C. B., 2002; Adler, 1997; Hofstede, 1980), training and career development in multinational organizations (Furnham & Bochner, 1986; Black & Mendenhall, 1990), culture shock (Tung, 1987), negotiating across cultures (Sullivan, 1981), and leadership styles in business settings (Smith & Peterson, 1988). In general, either business-management or social-psychology scholars have conducted the bulk of the research on MNCs. What is missing from the business-management and social-psychology literature is a dedicated line of research on an organizational-communication across multiple national cultures, and “therefore, we know little about communication in MNCs and even less about multinational communication in specific countries or world regions” (Wiseman & Shutter, 1994, p. 7).

In reviewing the literature related to the communication perspective of studying MNCs, Wiseman and Shutter (1994) identified two major approaches: “an approach stressing organizational universals, and an approach focusing on national cultural differences” (p. 4). Studies on “organizational universals” seek to create rules that can be applied worldwide no matter the varieties of organization types and the specific regions where these organizations locate. Research on national cultural differences can be divided into two areas: “etic” and “emic” approaches to organizations (ibid., p. 5): The etic approach assumes that certain national cultures share common values and can
be grouped or categorized into value classifications (Hofstedede, 1980). In contrast, “the
emic approach does not attempt to classify cultures on the basis of values; rather it
draws conclusions about organizational dynamics within a specific country” (Wiseman
& Shutter, 1994, p. 5). Both etic and emic approaches focus on the impact of national
cultural differences on organizational behaviors and managerial communication such as
leadership style and decision-making. Both approaches tend to classify the dynamic
organizational behaviors and cultural differences. Hofstede’s pioneering classification
of cultures on the basis of values (1980) is primarily used in the international-
management literature. My comments including critiques of the managerial version and
universal approach to the international workplace can also be seen in the previous
section in which I reviewed the current management perspective of MNC studies.

Wiseman and Shutter (1994) believe that providing a communication
perspective is crucial because “communication shapes the form and functioning” of
transnational corporations, which need to develop “effective internal and external
communication” in order to be “effective multinationally” (p. 7). In this sense, MNC
studies from a communication perspective are considered the interface between national
culture and organizational communication (Shutter, 1984, 1985, 1990). Based on this
assumption, communication studies on MNCs emphasize “the transfer and reception of
information within and between organizations in the same or different national cultures”
(Wiseman & Shutter, 1994, p. 8). One example of this kind of research (Teboul, Chen,
and Fritz, 1994) is examining communication in MNCs’ structuring process (including
an employee’s perception of job specificity, hierarchical levels between headquarters
and a foreign subsidiary, the frequency of communication such as organizational
meetings at different levels). Other examples include studies of communicating in MNCs of different countries, such as Japanese MNCs (Goldman, 1994), Latin American MNCs (Archer & Fitch, 1994), and the U.S. and Western MNCs (Cushman & King, 1994). In their monograph on communicating in MNCs, Wiseman & Shutter (1994) found only one article focusing on qualitative analysis of communication-adjustment experiences between Japanese and American co-workers in a Japanese multinational corporation in the United States. However the “real-life examples” provided in the research were used for identifying problems, locating strategies, and examining the validity of communication-competence theories. In short, although most of the communication studies in MNC use an anthropological definition of culture, the majority of these works test hypotheses or produce new categories of organizational analysis. Very few of these studies endeavor to interpret the subtleties, nuances, or intricacies of communication and language experiences that may fall outside established terminology and orthodox modes of inquiry.

The research topic of my dissertation touches on the communication issues within MNCs, but my research is not centered on the internal and external organizational communication methods. Instead, I examine the meaning of “cross-cultural communication” by providing narratives of how I, as a communication researcher, came in touch with the intercultural gaps between academia and the corporation and thus entered a limited space between the researcher and the researched. I focus on the drama of cross-cultural experiences that my research participants encountered and how these experiences shaped their sense of identity; how their cross-cultural work assignments affected their family members and thus their career and life
path; and how I, as a communication researcher, come to better understand my researchers’ experiences by being reflexive and making myself an insider to their world of work and life. I believe my approach to the subject and to theme of my research makes it unique in MNC studies so far.

The Anthropological View of “Culture” and My Research

In relation to communication and everyday experiences, culture is a “shared-meaning system” or “a set of ideas, values, or symbolic codes” that helps to understand “different aspects of subjective experience, social practice, and individual behavior” (Shweder & LeVine, 1984, p. 1; p. i). As defined by Clifford Geertz (1973), culture is “an historically transmitted pattern of meanings embodied in symbols, a system of inherited conceptions expressed in symbolic forms” by means of which human beings “communicate, perpetuate and develop their knowledge about and attitudes towards life” (p. 89).

This anthropological definition of culture enlightens my research. By the 1980s, many industries had entered the multinational phase (Adler, 1997, p. 8). Organizational culture study developed mainly in response to global changes in society and to new developments of science and social research (Eisenberg & Goodall, 1996, p. 24). Some scholars have questioned whether hegemony of global business will dissolve cultural/national differences (Eisenberg & Goodall, 1996, p. 124; Clifford, 1992). In contrast, I found from my research so far that (national) cultural differences seem impossible to diminish in transnational firms, i.e., globalization may not lead to a common or universal culture regardless of what products and services are common in the world market. This is because culture is not merely what is visible on the surface,
but is the shared ways in which groups of people understand and interpret the world
(Geertz, 1973). For USAC Holdings, Inc., the subsidiary of SINOCHENM, the
techniques of producing chemical fertilizers and the management process might be seen
as the common practices of production either for Chinese or American workers, but it
became obvious to me that these practices are understood and interpreted in different
ways. The Chinese employees view their business practices as a contribution to their
parent company and home market; the American employees (such as Mr. Ernie Helms
and Mr. Stephen Susick in my following chapters) consider these practices as the help
they offer to their Chinese colleagues and owners. By the same token, in each culture
the phenomena “such as authority, bureaucracy, creativity, good fellowship,
verification, and accountability” (Trompenaars, 1994) might be described in similar
words, however, they are experienced differently by different groups of people.

Of course, globalization does reproduce some similarities, e.g., seen from the
macro-level — products, technologies, and even organizational structures. Nevertheless,
important dissimilarities can be seen at the micro-level — the actions and social
constructions of self and organizational realities. Confronting these similarities,
differences, shifts, and changes, international employees face a dislocation
geographically and culturally. Their adaptation, accommodations, assimilation, and
resistance indicate what is possible to change, what needs to be altered, and what must
be retained to protect the integrity of their view of the world.

A handy illustration related to what I brought up here is the example given by
Peter Berger in his book “Many Globalizations” (2002, p. 4), which is a comparison
between East Germany and India. After German unification in 1990, a horde of
business consultants descended on the former German Democratic Republic, teaching
and advising on how to behave in the new economy — essentially, how to become
Wessies. “There has been a good deal of sullen resistance to this (including the so called
Ossie nostalgia), but the cultural resources to maintain or construct alternative personal
lifestyles have been very meager” (Berger & Huntington, 2002, p. 4). By contrast,
despite a multitude of business schools and training courses to teach Indians how to
behave as participants in the global economy, many of the computer professionals in
Bangalore succeed in combining such participation with personal lifestyles dominated
by traditional Hindu values (Berger & Huntington, 2002, p. 4).

Regarding the differences both geographically and culturally, I can’t help
considering again the larger context in which the overseas SINOCHEN employee is
situated. Bearing 2,500-year traditions such as the remains of Confucianism (Peng,
1995), China has also gone through drastic social changes in the past decades and is
now experiencing a transformation from a centrally planned economy to a market-
driven economy in a “multinational phase” (Adler, 1997, p. 8). As adults fully
socialized in their native culture, SINOCHEN employees are chosen to work in their
overseas subsidiary on the basis of their successful achievement in China. In addition
to going through current rapid social change in China, they face another transformation
cross-culturally. After arriving in the United States, they must conduct their
intercultural interactions on a daily basis in a context that is drastically different from
their homeland socially, culturally, politically, economically, and historically.

Since the 1980s, globalization characterized by rapid information exchange and
unprecedented mobility has led to blurred boundaries and endless possibilities for
reinventing ourselves in shifting cultural landscapes (Anderson, 1995, p. 10). Thus our contemporary globalized society manifests itself as a “condition” in which there is no way to have centered or unified meanings to live by. James Clifford calls this state of being “off-centeredness” (Clifford, 1988), a condition characterized by cross-cultural regional migrations, career mobility, spatial transformations, technologies, internationalized organizational structures, and tensions between the global and the local. This constantly changing cultural landscape fosters a multiple cultural identity and interrupts memory of the past, roots, and traditions.

By exposing cultural specificity, anthropological studies on the “self” mount a challenge to “the whole subject” (Kondo, 1990) — the complete, intact, non-fragmented, predominant singular version of “I” presupposed from Augustan lineage in Western discourse (Wang, 1995). By listening to the experiences of Chinese expatriates and their family members, I seek to understand and validate their autobiographical experiences cross-culturally and legitimize their struggles, which have not been highlighted in either the collectivist tradition of Chinese society or mainstream multinational-corporation studies.

**Intercultural Communication on Cross-Cultural Adaptations**

Because my dissertation involves interpretation of sojourners’ and expatriates’ acculturation experiences as well as the cross-cultural encounters of an ethnographic researcher who lived through the process as an outsider, then an insider, it is necessary for me to examine the current literature on cross-cultural adaptation that will involve concepts such as “enculturataion,” “acculturation,” “deculturation,” “assimilation,” and “adaptation.” At a conceptual level, cross-cultural adaptation is experienced by
individuals “who are born and raised in one culture and find themselves in need of modifying their customary life patterns in a foreign culture” (Kim & Gudykunst, 1987, p. 7). The literature related to cross-cultural adaptation has accumulated since the turn of the century in the disciplines of psychology, anthropology, and sociology. As I mentioned earlier in this chapter, the increasing speed of globalization manifests itself with mobility of human beings including immigrants (legal, non-legal) and expatriates (multinational-corporation employees, diplomats, scholars, military personnel, missionaries, journalists, etc.). The complex nature of the phenomenon results in the variety of existing conceptions and research approaches. Although the field has benefited from rich information and insights, it suffers from disconnectedness (Kim, 2002, p. 259).

The existing approaches can be grouped into two broad categories: group level and individual level. Group-level studies have been common among anthropologists for more than sixty years (Kim, 2002, p. 259). From an anthropological perspective, acculturation refers to those phenomena that “result when groups of individuals have different cultures and come into first-hand contact with subsequent changes in the original pattern of either or both groups” (Redfield, Linton, & Herskovits, 1936, p. 149; Kim & Gudykunst, 1987, p. 10; italics added). Indicated by this definition, anthropology has studied acculturation on a group level by observing the presence of kin, friends, ethnic affiliates, and sociological studies on acculturation. These studies primarily focused on issues pertaining to social stratification, that is, the hierarchical classification of ethnic groups based on the unequal distribution of resources, power, and prestige (Kim & Gudykunst, 1987, p. 10).
Comparatively, *individual-level studies* are numerous in cultural and social psychology, psychiatry, communication, and other related disciplines that have dealt primarily with the intrapersonal and interpersonal phenomenon of newcomers in an unfamiliar environment. For instance, Taft (1977), from a psychological perspective, delineated seven stages of “assimilation” progressively from the “cultural learning stage” to the “congruence” stage. Berry and his associates (1980) identified four types of “acculturation” including “integration,” “assimilation,” “rejection,” and “marginality.” Though these researchers study adaptation experiences on an individual level, they still aim to create theoretical categories or models for cross-cultural adaptation behavior.

Intercultural communication scholar Young Yun Kim (2002, p. 260) summarizes that these *individual-level studies* aim to understand and explain the experiences of individuals who (1) have had primary socialization in one culture and find themselves in a different and unfamiliar culture, (2) are at least minimally dependent on the host environment for meeting personal and social needs, and (3) are at least minimally engaged in first-hand contact and communication with that environment. Some sociological studies have also analyzed the patterns and processes by which immigrant (ethnic) groups are “integrated” into the political, social, and economic structure of the host society. These studies also include research on dynamic relationships within and among minority and majority groups (Glazer & Moynihan, 1963; Kim & Gudykunst, 1987, p. 10).

My research involves intercultural/cross-cultural encounters at both individual level and group level. In addition to *acculturation*, some other intercultural
communication terms related to my research are *enculturation*, *deculturation*, *assimilation*, and *adaptations*. In intercultural-communication studies, *cross-cultural adaptation* serves as a “superordinate category” (White, 1976, p. 18) under which other commonly used terms can be subsumed. First, cross-cultural adaptation is a phenomenon that occurs subsequent to the process of childhood *enculturation* (or socialization) of individuals into recognizable members of a given cultural community. Second, all individuals entering a new and unfamiliar culture undergo some degree of new cultural learning, that is, the acquisition of the native cultural practices in wide-ranging areas directly relevant to the daily functioning of the resettlers — from attire, food habits, behavioral norms, sense of humor to cultural values. The resocialization activities are the very essence of *acculturation*, but *acculturation* is not a process in which new cultural elements are simply added to prior internal conditions. As new learning occurs, *deculturation* (or unlearning) of some of the old cultural norms has to occur (Kim, 2002, p. 261). The act of acquiring something new is inevitably the “losing” of something old in much the same way as “being someone requires the forfeiture of being someone else” (Thayer, 1975, p 240). As the interplay of acculturation and deculturation continues, newcomers undergo an internal transformation in the direction of *assimilation*, a state of the highest degree of acculturation and deculturation theoretically possible (Kim, 2002, 261). The relationships of the cross-cultural adaptation terms in figure 2.1 below to a certain extent theorize the process my research participants and I went through in our cross-cultural adaptation experiences.
What I find more interesting is Young Yun Kim’s summary of *cross-cultural adaptations* studies that emphasize “adaptation-as-problem” as opposed to those that emphasize “adaptation-as-learning/growth” (2002, p. 263). Kim observes that most investigators have tended to view adaptation experiences mainly in terms of the difficulties they present, justifying their studies as scientific efforts to find ways to help ease such predicaments. This problem-solving approach is most apparent in studies of culture shock that almost exclusively focus on individual sojourners’ frustrated reactions to their new environment (Anderson, 1994). Syndromes of this frustration on dislocation are manifested by irritability, insomnia, sense of loss, and rejection by the individual members of the new society/group (Taft, 1977). According to Bennett (1997), the cultural shock occurs due to “change of life-style related to passages, loss of familiar frame of reference in an intercultural encounter, or change of values associated with rapid social innovation.” Ruben (1983) questioned the problem-oriented perspective by pointing out that the intensity and directionality of culture shock were found to be unrelated to patterns of psychological adjustment at the end of the first year in the alien land.
On the other hand, many other researchers emphasize adaptation-as-learning and growth. Alder (1975) explains that cultural-shock experience should be viewed as a form of self-awareness. In the learning and growth perspective of cross-cultural adaptations studies, Oberg (1979) described four stages of cross-cultural adaptation: (1) a “honeymoon” stage characterized by fascination, elation, and optimism; (2) a stage of hostility and emotionally stereotyped attitudes toward the host society and increased association with fellow sojourners; (3) a recovery stage characterized by increased language knowledge and ability to get around in the new cultural environment; and (4) a final stage in which adjustment is about as complete as possible, anxiety is largely gone, and new customs are accepted and enjoyed. Other researchers demonstrated the U-curve hypothesis (e.g., Furnham, 1988) or “W curve” (e.g., Gullahorn & Gullahorn, 1963) by adding the “re-entry shock” or “reverse culture shock” (Gaw, 2000) after returning home.

Whether the studies emphasize “adaptation-as-problem” or “adaptation-as-learning/growth,” I found that the literature helped in generalizing and theorizing the individual cross-cultural experiences both my research informants and I went through. However, patterns and categories of experiences may never capture the dynamics and diversities of individual experiences in various cross-cultural conditions or the changing world. Theorizing experiences may help individuals to generalize cross-cultural encounters, but they may have limited capacity to help individuals cope and make sense of their ongoing, shifted identities and changing environment.

In his recently edited Intercultural Communication Theory, Richard Wiseman (1995) states his view on the functions of intercultural communication theory. In
addition to pointing out its “heuristic” and “inspirational” nature, Wiseman (1995) believes that intercultural communication theory should provide an “explanation” and “prediction” for social phenomena in order to “control” social behaviors. That is, theorists “need to know the antecedent causal variables” for some social phenomenon in order to “predict its occurrence” (pp. 4-5, bold added). Examples of such research include Gudykunst’s anxiety/uncertainty management theory (1995), Burgoon’s expectancy violations theory (1995), Gallois et al.’s communication accommodation theory (1995), Oetzel’s decision-making model (1995), and Y. Kim’s integrative theory of cross-cultural adaptation (1995).

As a qualitative researcher who believes that human feelings, motivations, actions, and languages (speech act) are diverse, and meanings are often too exuberant to be interpreted, I doubt that human experiences can be limited to “behaviors” classifiable by limited categories. Again, I acknowledge the contribution of traditional intercultural-communication research that provides me helpful concepts to name part of what I encounter in intercultural communication. However, the concepts do not provide thick descriptions or a concrete sense of what it is like physically, emotionally, and intellectually to go through the acculturation process, and hence they do not lead to identification with other human beings’ experiences, which I believe is necessary to achieve mutual understanding.

Though each individual’s cultural transition is different in terms of being abrupt or smooth, voluntary or involuntary, and temporary or permanent, most do share adaptation experiences (Kim & Gudykunst, 1987, p. 8). Because of its multiple facets and dimensions, cross-cultural adaptation has been viewed from many angles such as
“changes in economic condition, perception, attitude, behavior, linguistic proficiency, and ethnic/cultural identity” (Kim & Gudykunst, 1987, p. 9). There is no clear continuity or distinction between the two diverse cultures that a person confronts. For instance, the result of being exposed to both Chinese and American culture does not mean that a person’s self is constituted by Chinese heritage plus American enrichment. Moving into a different culture is a transformation process instead of a clear integration process. The process includes a person’s resistance to, agreement with, and ambiguity toward all cultural realities, experienced. This process cannot be generalized by an equation such as “one plus one equals two” (Chen, 1994, p. 8; Wang, 1996, p. 20).

Therefore, my dissertation as a hermeneutic work differs from empiricist contributions. As stated by Bochner (1985), the major differences between traditional empiricist studies and hermeneutic research stand on the goals held by researchers (Bochner, 1985). While the empiricists aim to predict and control human behaviors in cross-cultural contexts, my dissertation, as a hermeneutic study, seeks interpretations, meanings, and understandings of cross-culturally lived experiences. Thus, the ethnographic research I conducted in the dissertation highlights concrete, daily, mundane experiences necessary for examining the concrete conflicts and dilemmas confronted by people living a cross-cultural life.

Social Construction of Shifted Identity in the Globalization Era

To a significant degree, globalization has entailed increased interpenetration across different sorts of boundaries and increased cross-boundary access. For many scholars from different disciplines, the dislocation of place and space is a dominant and recurring theme that imposes on such broadly applicable social and human concepts as
“cultural identity.” In the era of globalization, identity is located amid “deterritorialized” channels of communication by individuals, groups, and institutions, which may enable more transnational encounters to develop (Robertson, 1992).

In my dissertation, the consequence of globalization on the self involves the examination of concepts such as “nostalgia” and “self-identity.” It is not intended that concepts such as “nostalgia” and “self-identity” should be accepted as negative effects of globalization. The sense of self is important because it is at the heart of so much of what we do and what we think, both as individuals and as a society, and it is a way of answering the questions of who and what we are. The sense of self is also at the heart of social-science academic disciplines, which are institutionalized attempts to understand the self (Anderson, 1997, p. xiii).

In the contemporary globalization era, the information/communications technology revolution creates a vast and mysterious electronic landscape of new relationships, roles, identities, networks, and communities, while it makes self-definition more complex. The globalization of economics and politics pulls up roots, tramples boundaries, and shakes the old certainties of place, nationality, social role, and class. And meanwhile, the ancient esoteric traditions are now thriving far from their original hangouts and disseminating their teachings through the mass media. All these phenomena should be researched. My study focuses on how globalization has shaken up human mobility geographically and career-wise. In addition, I inquire about how career mobility and uncertainty bring up the new definition of self, and how a job relocation and career change shape one’s sense of identity.
In the contemporary globalization era, having a job usually means being employed in a clearly defined and stable occupational role, with duties, hours, rates of pay, and promotion all more or less standardized within an organization. But a job is a social invention. Work has to change because organizations have to change to survive in the new global economy. In the advanced industrial countries, businesses are rushing to remodel themselves. Change is the expectation of occupational stability in the globalization era — instead of learning the skills of a lifetime trade or profession, many people have to learn how to survive in a fluid, fast-moving economy in which they may have to change occupations several times in the course of their working lives (Anderson, 1997, p. 181). And employees are less likely to feel that the companies they work for will show allegiance to them. Corporate downsizing, merger mania, and white-collar-job losses have guaranteed that one can’t count on any employer for long (Anderson, 1997, p. 186).

From a hermeneutical perspective, interpretations of individual experiences, observations, and analyses must be grounded in historical investigation (Ritivoi, 2002, p. 5). In my ethnographic stories, I provide a “root-cause analysis” narrative of the cross-cultural experiences and career decisions made by my research informants and me. For social-science research, the investigation of these experiences can shed light on the questions of “how and why people adjust or fail to adjust” (Ritivoi, 2002, p. 2). What I want to understand is how individuals define the tasks of adjustment and how they set out to accomplish them. These individual responses to a changing environment include learning new languages (both a foreign language and new career lingo); dealing with separation from home country, family, old friends, and familiar cultural
environments; losing the comfort zone of a previous job; taking up the challenges and excitement of new opportunities; making a new home; making new friends; building up a new social network; revamping value systems; and building more self-confidence. The stories of each participant are unique, but their individual responses to the changing situation can be commonly understood and shared as human experiences.

Most of the expatriates in my research have three to six years of overseas assignments. The duration is long enough for them to feel geographically detached from their home country. The expatriates’ family members suffered more on their separation from their home land due to their visa status and the constraints on international travels (including to their home countries). There is a nostalgic feeling I discovered, especially among the family members.

Feelings of nostalgia are among the most commonly shared human experiences of adaptation and adjustment. From Greek roots, Nostalgia refers to a medical condition, a pain felt by people who are away from home and yearn to return to their native land but are not able to or fear they will never be able to do so. Many researchers consider nostalgia to be one of the major issues that identity has to face now, assuming that the current situation is a disturbing departure from various local or regional ideal pasts. Nostalgia and the consequent dislocation of self and identity (self-alienation) are thereby regarded as symptoms of a socio-cultural malaise that has been brought about by the forces of globalization. Like Andrea Deciu Ritivoi’s research (2002) on nostalgia, my dissertation treats nostalgia as an instance of self-reflection rather than a physical illness. In the context of cross-cultural adaptation, nostalgia and personal identity are tied together due to their involvement with a changing environment in a
way that nostalgia both undermines and supports adjustment as well as the development of self-identity. Nostalgia also serves as a defense designed to maintain a stable identity by providing continuity among various stages in a person’s life (Ritivoi, 2002, p. 6-9).

In my view, nostalgia as self-reflection provides sources of a person’s memory to the past and drives projection of the future in a narrative mode.

Nostalgia and longing for home attests to the statement that home is “perhaps the most important and least recognized need of the human soul” (1995, p.3). Home is a symbolic residence or root of a person’s identity. Personal identity with no claims to permanence is open to variation, degrees, and transformation (Ritivoi, 2002, p. 7).

Change, adaptation, and transformation need not always undermine, on a common understanding, our sense of personal identity. At the same time, we belong to communities whose other members need to know who we are, and to know that they can count on us remaining more less the same. How does identity unfold in this contentious domain of sameness and difference? (Ritivoi, 2002, p. 44).

Ritivoi’s inquiry above exposes the complex nature of identity. On one hand, identity is characterized by a group/community/country but on the other hand, identity can shift when the social context changes. “How does a person develop a robust sense of self-identity? Can identity survive rupture and displacement? Is personal identity the product of a specific place or community? Can selves be efficiently translated?” (Ritivoi, 2002, p. 43).

Personal identity is a topic pulled back and forth between realist and constructivist perspectives. Realists hold the view that the identity of a person exists outside a symbolic system and often try to define “I” in accordance with an immutable trait. From a realist perspective, the meaning or existence of the self is not constructed,
but given (Ritivoi, 2002, p. 6). Social constructivists, on the other hand, point out that the identity of a person is embedded in a social-cultural context and is subject to interpretations. One of the social-constructivist assumptions stresses that all knowledge is historically and culturally specific. Labels, classifications, denotations, and connotations of social identity are always products of their times. Furthermore, the process of constructing identities depends heavily on social, political, and historical factors, as human beings rely on current ideologies to create social-identity categories and their meanings (Allen, 2005, p. 37). Of course, the most important assumption of social constructivism rests on the premise that social processes sustain knowledge. Among these processes, language or symbolic interaction is a fundamental tool. Identity is a fitting topic for social-constructionist research that allows us to concentrate on how specific individuals “appropriate, reproduce, and/or transform social discourses in and through everyday communicative processes that enable and/or constrain how members enact identities” (Threhewey, 2000).

As a researcher who believes in the social construction of reality and holds a cultural view of communication (Carey, 1989), I perceive my research informants’ cross-cultural encountering as a process to maintain, produce, repair, and transform the meanings of their lives. I believe there is no stable or unified version of a culture or meaning. Living a life crisscrossed by Chinese traditions, current social reforms, contemporary American society, and an international workplace, the Chinese expatriates/immigrants and their family members are in a position to negotiate their roots with their present existence in the United States. It is a complex negotiation of temporality and spatiality filled with contested meanings. Saturated by multiple cultural
resources, they find it impossible to a unitary sense of self. I wonder, for the expatriate employee’s wife, if the “I” who had been a career woman in China is the same “I” who stays at her temporary or permanent American home to be a housewife or a full-time mother. For the Chinese expatriates, is the “I” who is at home the same “I” who is at work? Is the “I” who talks to family members the same “I” who talks to colleagues and boss? Is the “I” who interacts with Chinese co-workers the same “I” who communicates with American colleagues and friends? Is the “I” who talks in Chinese the same “I” who speaks in English?

As a person who also has cross-cultural experiences, I seek to understand how the SINOCHEM people reconstruct their sense of belonging after a drastic relocation both geographically and culturally. How do they manage to predict their future while living a life of uncertainty? What does the experience of dislocation and cultural difference feel like and look like? How is it different for different families and for different members of a family? And, as I suggested in Chapter One, how unique are this dislocation and cross-cultural adaptation to what Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann (1966; 1989) call “provinces of meaning”? How can I, as a researcher who began as an outsider of their world become an insider to their experiences? How can my unique experiences contribute to making sense of their experiences? By narrating SINOCHEM expatriates and their family members’ life paths, I seek to help them and myself to create a coherent explanation that connects past to present to future as well as corporation to academy.
Chapter Three: Research Methods

The cleavage between the research literature on transnational corporations and the personal stories of SINOCHEN employees, as well as those of family members, not only reinforces the importance of the theme of my research, but also urges me to consider my research methods carefully. In this section, I will discuss the moral imperative underlying my ethnographic approach and narrative perspective. Also, I will discuss how I applied these methods in the global workplace, what kind of concrete issues I faced when I conducted my ethnographic research, and how I planned to write the stories of the Chinese workers’ cross-cultural experiences.

(Auto)Ethnography, Narrative Inquiry, and My Research

From an anthropological perspective, organizational life is studied as a socio-cultural entity that embodies subjective experiences instead of as a political and economic structure:

“This socio-cultural entity continues to emerge as ongoing relationships among subjective experiences of its members, symbolic communication and representation, manifested socio-political alliances, behavioral patterns, collectively expressed artifacts, and physical, socio-political and economic environments. Thus it is safe to say that many anthropologists are interested in ‘organizing’ instead of ‘organization’” (Hamada, 1994, p. 21, italics added).

From an anthropological or ethnographic perspective, the purpose of studying other people is not to classify them or to explain one’s own remote origins
(Czwarniawska, 1997, p. 5). Instead it is “to enlarge the possibility of an intelligible discourse between people quite different from one another in interest, outlook, wealth, and power…” (Geertz, 1988, p. 147). Therefore,

“It is a mistake to think of other people’s accounts of their actions or cultures as epistemologically privileged in relation to the view of the world of the observer…. We have a duty to listen to his account, not because he has privileged access to his own motives but because he is a human being like ourselves” (Rorty, 1982, p. 202, italics added).

Cultural interpretation as part of hermeneutic human science recommends explaining the less known with the help of the better known. Barbara Czwarniawska (1997) believes that “when the list of differences becomes longer than the list of similarities, when most of the related concepts (environment, adaptation, and even evolution) appear to be metaphorically deceptive, it seems obvious that what we need is to add new vocabulary” (p. 4). Organizations are “human worlds comprised of fulfillment or frustrations of the mental models held by real people” (Trompenaars, 1994, p. 21). Making sense of the internal workings of a multinational organization (such as SINOCHEM) may contribute to organizational members having alternative ways of looking at themselves and the institutions at which they work.

As discussed earlier in my introductory chapter, the center of my dissertation is human experiences in a global organization, the experience of the Chinese workers, especially their condition of living a life fraught with hard-to-predict changes and ambiguities. Human future is something to be creatively imagined instead of simply endured (Clifford, 1988, p. 6, italics added). Contemporary ethnography is a way to create a story that we can live with, the story that connects our past, present, and future
by means of our human imagination (Crites, 1971), thus, inventing and reviving our ways of life (Clifford, 1988, p. 9).

**Narrative Inquiry of Global Workplace and Displacement**

As a genre of writing and scholarship, narrative provides moral accounts of social life (MacIntyre, 1981). It is connected to ethnography through their common focus on lived experiences as resources for knowledge and living.

My research is about a global workplace. However, it is more about human lived experiences happening in the particular place(s) or circumstances than the mechanism of organizational structure. I use narrative genres of writing to preserve the complexity of human action with its interrelationship of temporal sequence, motivation, chance happenings, and changing interpersonal and environmental contexts. By writing about the SINOCHEM expatriates’ and their family members’ lives, I try to make sense of how organizational life is accomplished communicatively (Pankanowsky & O’Donnell-Trujillo, 1982, p. 165).

In communication (Bochner, 1994, p. 30; Fisher, 1984) and its related disciplines sociology (Richardson, 1990) and anthropology (Tedlock, 1991; Angrosino, 1998), narrative is acknowledged as a means of “knowing” and a way of “telling” about the social world. It is “a theory-directed and a story-centered field of inquiry” (Bochner, 1994, p. 29). My choice of narrative inquiry — “a story-centered field of inquiry” — is based upon the following justifications: (a) Social sciences study societies, human beings, and relations that are characterized by emotions, bodily experiences, changing norms, values, beliefs, and attitude; (b) researchers are human beings whose writings are constrained by who they are and what they observe; and (c) language is itself
contingent as part of human “actions and behavior” (Bochner, 1994, p. 25). Based upon these beliefs, my moral stance is implied in what I research, how I write, and what I write about (Richardson, 1991, p. 203). By telling the story of my growing relationship with my research participants and my evolitional identity as a researcher, I challenge the distance between the researcher and the researched in traditional social-science research.

\textit{(Auto)Ethnography and Research Reflexivity}

Since the shift from “participant observation to the observation of participation,” fieldworkers have rejected sharp distinctions between “self” and “other” (Tedlock, 1991, p. 7). In hermeneutic social science, authorship is crucial because there is no way for the researcher to detach herself from her research and to be completely “objective.” For an interpretive researcher, her role is to be responsible for what she researches and be \textit{part of her data}. Dr. Bochner refers to this form of interpretivism as “\textit{a narrative social science}” (1994, p. 31, bold added). When entering the narrative domain, researchers (interpreters) try to be \textit{reflective} (in showing ourselves to ourselves) AND \textit{reflexive} (being conscious of ourselves as we see ourselves) (Steier, 1991, p. 5). Therefore, interpretive research is not merely a \textit{research story} of what has been researched but also a research story of the researcher herself.

I cannot separate myself from my story which is not only about the organization but also the journey or history of interaction between the SINOCHEM employees and me. This “history” includes how I entered the organization, how I first was turned down and then accepted, how I came to some of these Chinese and American workers as an “outsider” and gradually became their friend, and finally became an “insider.” I reflect
voices of SINOCHEM employees in my story, and, of course, the story is written by me — I am the one who gives meanings to what I see and what I heard according to how I feel. Thus, I am an observer “vulnerable” to what I observed (Behar, 1996).

As a doctoral candidate, a corporate employee, and a communication researcher who studies cross-cultural lived experiences in a workplace co-constructed by Chinese and Americans, I need to ask: “What do I learn from them (my informants, research participants, or reciprocators)?” “What do I learn about myself (researcher)?” “How do they (my research participants) see me and how do they see me seeing them?” “How does the fieldwork affect and change me and them?” “When I judge them, how am I judging myself?”

In my earlier stage of research, I did encounter both direct rejections and subtle resistance. I was surprised to see that the primary rejection was from a Chinese informant. Although the situations, results, and interpretations of the rejections vary, my experience of rejection illustrates the fallacy of the following equation: culture (singular) equals language (singular).

This equation...has been thoroughly unraveled by Bakhtin for whom a language is a diverging, contesting, dialoguing set of discourses that no “native” — let alone visitor — can ever learn. An ethnographer thus works in or learns some part of “the language.” And this does not even broach the question of multilingual/intercultural situations (Clifford, 1992, p. 99).

No matter the concrete reasons behind each rejection, there might be a common fear among my informants because most organizations are concerned if the research disrupts the routine, brings exposure to sensitive aspects of the organization, or gives voice to dissident elements (Raymond M. Lee, 1995, 123-133; Shapiro, 1987). By
writing thick descriptions of how I approached the company and the people whom I interviewed, I explored the meaning of trust:

Trust does not reside in integrated circuits or fiber optic cables. Although it involves an exchange of information, trust is not reducible to information.... Trust is the expectation that arises within a community of regular, honest, and cooperative behavior, based upon commonly shared norms, on the part of other members of that community (Fukuyama, 1995, p. 25-26).

While Francis Fukuyama (1995) addresses the roles of “trust” in “low-trust” and “high-trust” societies in terms of how they matter to a nation’s economic development, I am interested in making sense of how a researcher may better convey her research purposes to her informants, gain acceptance and trust, and then become an insider among her research participants.

Contemplating my own research experience reminds me of my role as a researcher. Doing ethnographic work, the researcher becomes an interpreter who tries to articulate the silence of experience beyond language. A.L. Becker (1991) says that specifying a world through language is obscure in three aspects: its silence (things in one language have no counterpart in another), its deficiency (it often says less than it wishes to say), and its particularity (everything said is said by someone in a particular space). Coming into another culture or another history of interactions, we face not only a reality that is linguistically phrased distinctly from our own but also a world that is experienced variously. Sharing the same home language with my informants, I do have advantages to understanding their lived experiences. However, it doesn’t mean I will be able to understand my informants just because I know the language. “A new code would not be so hard and painful to learn; a new saying” of experiences of the world is
(Becker, p. 231). Therefore, all languages have exuberances and deficiencies and are spoken by someone with a history and a particular memory (Becker, 1991).

Frederic Steier (1991) stresses the outcome of taking (self)-reflexivity seriously in research. By holding our own assumed research structures and logic as researchable and not immutable, and by examining how we are a part of our data, “our research becomes, not a self-centered product, but a reciprocal process” (Steier, 1991, p. 7). Rather than becoming narcissistic (which most orthodoxical research is), we become social constructionist researchers. The voices of those with whom we interact, our reciprocators, respondents, informants, and subjects, are enhanced rather than lessened (Steier, p. 7).

This statement has moral implications to me. A researcher needs to have double consciousness, balancing the creation of us (researchers) and the needs and rights of others when confronting meanings or new experiences (Abraham, 1986, P. 51). This can be seen as the value significance of an innovated interpretivism that I would like to call “co-construction” (Ellis & Bochner, 1995) or “reflexivism” (Jorgenson, 1991; Myerhoff, 1980).

Thus, I include my experiences in my dissertation not for the purpose of self-service but with the hope that my “parallel” experiences may better illustrate the cross-cultural countering experienced by the Chinese workers. Earlier, I discussed the shifting and fragmented identities of the Chinese employees, who live in a condition of change and cultural dislocation. As a cross-cultural person myself, I experience a different sense of “self” in different domains. My concept of “I” who takes classes as a Chinese doctoral student is different from the concept of “I” who teaches American undergraduates in the classroom. My “I” who used to interact with my teachers and
schoolmates in China is different from the “I” who communicates with my American professors and school friends. My “I” who was purely a full-time doctoral student is different from the “I” who is both a doctoral candidate/student researcher and full-time employee in an American or Swedish multinational corporation. My “I” who plans to go back to China is different from the “I” who thinks about staying in the United States. My “I” who is being a senior product manager in a corporation is different from the “I” who is still strongly attached to the academic world. My intercultural encountering and self-explorations have been filled with the joys of learning as well as the pains of misunderstandings and self-doubts. My life has been accompanied by the attempt to make endeavors to self-explain “who I am.” These efforts of sense making of lived experiences provide me with therapy for my physical detachment from my home country and secure my spatially disconnected yet multifaceted self at home, school, the workplace, China, the United States, corporations, and the academic world. And my emerging self-understanding can be helpful to others who struggle with a similar sense of “dislocation of self.”

My choice to do a “narrative ethnography” (Tedlock, 1991) that embodies my reflexivity is not merely a methodological safeguard but an ethical imperative to legitimize unheard experiences. The predominant narrative of global profits in economic and business archives overshadows the stories of individual employees and their families whose life were impacted by globalization. Through my reflection, my story may give a voice “to those who are silenced or marginalized” in canonical stories (Richardson, 1990, p. 212; Bochner 1994).
Reflexivity (Steier, 1991), self-introspection, and interactive introspection (Ellis, 1991) are crucial to my research due to the special tie I have with my research and the passion residing throughout my entire writing process. As a social process, interactive introspection examines “current thoughts and feelings of researcher and subject” (Ellis, 1991, p. 31), and a researcher must introspect about her own responses in reaction to experiences and feelings of respondents (Denzin, 1971; Ellis, 1991, p. 30).

Therefore, I have given a lot of introspection (Ellis, 1991) to my sensitivity as a researcher: Why did I feel exceptionally hurt when I was regarded as “an outsider” by one of my Chinese informants? By the same token, why did I feel exceptionally grateful when other Chinese informants told me they would like to help my research simply because I am Chinese? Why does the recognition of my Chinese identity matter to me so much? How does the feeling relate to my unrealized but deeply rooted sense of collectivity? What is the difference between my “Chinese-ness” and that of the SINOCHENM people? How *diverse* is a Chinese identity?

My writing is an attempt at sense making of cross-cultural experiences. Sense making is activated by social interactions, either by direct experience or as reflection in hindsight (Blumer, 1969). Living a life across two distinct cultures labeled “East” and “West” makes me think twice where I am from, who I am, and who I will be. I am unable to understand others without knowing myself. In return, the capacity to understand others makes me more aware of who I am. I want to learn about “me” from the stories I tell about SINOCHENM employees. My research at SINOCHENM not only embodies my passion for my cultural roots but also embraces questions about the value system I hold from my own culture. Because I am a person receiving a Western
education but also born and raised in China, the exposure to Western culture provides me a perspective to examine my Chinese cultural origin. During my earlier stage of fieldwork, I was constantly provoked to ask the question: Who am I? Where do I fit in? What is my role in my research? Am I more a doctoral candidate who received communication training in the United States or am I more a Chinese who studies the shifted identities with a Chinese origin in a changing global world and changing workplace? Am I an insider or outsider of my research? After starting to work full time at an American-based multinational corporation, I still ask similar questions: Who am I? Where do I fit in? Am I more an ethnographic researcher or a corporate employee? Do I fit better in academic life or in the corporate world?

Within the academic discipline of anthropology, the study of a researcher’s own cultural origin has been felt to be a little suspect because one’s vision is “prejudiced” by personal life experiences (Leach, Edmund, 1985, p. 10). However, it is no longer possible to speak of “one’s culture,” as Czarniawska (1997, p. 5) once said: “I, for one, would find it very difficult to establish what is my own culture, being a Polish-Swedish hybrid who communicates in English.” Dorinne Kondo (1990) also expressed similar feelings. Therefore, my dissertation is an effort of “mucking around looking for truth” (Bochner, Ellis & Tillmann-Healy, 1998). By telling stories of my interaction with overseas SINOCHEM employees, I will inquire further into the relations among language, culture, the researcher, and the researched.

**Research Techniques and Interpretations**

I started this research while taking a doctoral seminar on ethnography during spring 1997. After I went through rejection and then official acceptance, I paid two
visits to U.S. Chem Resources and three visits to U.S. Agri-Chemicals for formal interviews (spending one whole day at their workplace for each visit) in spring 1997. I interviewed Chinese expatriates, American executives, mid-level managers, and blue-collar workers. The topics of the interview centered on how Chinese and American employees feel about working with people across different cultures, their view of communication styles at work, and how they interpret the meanings of their workplace.

While conducting these interviews, I continued to develop friendships with individual employees and their family members. Because some of the Chinese expatriates’ family members took classes in the Business College at the University of South Florida, I had an opportunity to interact with them at campus in addition to being invited to their homes. The establishment of friendship and trust between the researcher and the informants took time and effort. When one employee had a business trip back to Beijing, I helped his spouse by picking up her baby daughter from day care and driving her from home to school when she needed help.

There were seven Chinese expatriates and family members with whom I closely interacted. I spent extensive time with three key family members, helping taking care of their children, running errands, and having lunches and dinners together in addition to the formal interviews that I conducted with them. I also invited one expatriate’s daughter to spend vacation with me when my husband and I traveled to Georgia and Tennessee during spring break of 1998. In fall 1997, my graduate-student colleagues and I held a party for one Chinese expatriate’s family. The valuable friendship with them has been built up through those “informal” occasions. The stories they told me were filled with vivid personal feelings of being thousands of miles away from their
homeland and trying to have certainty in their career path and future life. Though their acculturation experiences were different from mine, I could empathize with their effort of re-constructing their identities after living in the United States for an extended time. These family members’ stories touched my heart and provided me with a better understanding about who they are. These stories also provoked my plan to get a third entry to both UCSR in Tampa and USAC in Forte Meade.

With the help of my informant Tong and my committee member Dr. Miriam Stamps, I connected with the new Chinese human-resources supervisor, who was very helpful in fulfilling my research needs. Thus, during May 1998, I made three visits to U.S. Agri-Chemicals and one more visit to U.S. Chem-Resources. During these trips, I interviewed two more Chinese expatriates for twelve hours in total. I also conducted interviews with five Americans employees including executives, mid-level managers, and a blue-collar worker in three separate trips. My interviews with American employees focused on the following aspects: How do you view Chinese expatriates going through the acculturation process at work? How do Chinese expatriates get involved in the local communities? And how do you feel about the cultural changes in the factory since the transition to Chinese ownership?

In mid-summer 1998 I moved to California. On my way to Southern California, I detoured to North Carolina and ran into one of my informants, Yu, and his family in the Smoky Mountains. After I settled in Southern California in August 1998, I started full-time work in Qualcomm, Inc., and then Ericsson Wireless Communications, Inc. In March 1999, I went back to Florida to complete the defense of my dissertation prospectus. During that trip, I was invited to visit the Chinese expatriates’ residence in
Island Walk in Lakeland and spent time with the expatriate Yu and his family members (his wife, his baby daughter, and his in-laws). This is a special trip because I had always planned to visit Island Walk, which has seven properties that SINOCHEN-sponsored USAC Holdings, Inc., had purchased for expatriates and their family members. The nickname of this community is “SINOCHEN village.” I also got a chance to revisit USAC again in March 1999 and meet with several American employees (including Ernie and Irene) whom I have interviewed before.

From December 1999 to February 2000, I went on a business trip to Beijing and met with my informants (Ming and Jing) who were repatriated to SINOCHEN headquarter in Beijing and another informant (Tong) who decided to move back to China. In summer 2000, an expatriate’s spouse (Yanming) who had become my friend visited me and my family in San Diego and stayed at my house for two weeks. Yanming and her son and mother visited me again in late 2000. In January 2002, I went on a business trip to Beijing again and met with Ming, Jing, and their American-born daughter, Alice. It was a special experience for me because I got a chance to visit SINOCHEN’s housing facilities in Shang-Long-Xi-Li in Beijing.

In 2003, I got reconnected with the ex-president of USAC Holdings, Inc., Mr. Du, and his family. Though it is my preference to keep to a minimum all information about Mr. Du and his family, I have always been grateful that he had been very supportive in my earlier stage of doing ethnographic studies at USAC Holdings, Inc. In November 2003, on my way back from the National Communication Association, I went to Tampa to visit Mr. Yu, his wife, Li, and their daughter JenJen, as well as Mr. Chen, his wife, Yanming, and their son Tianbo.
In September 2004, in the same trip accompanying my professors Dr. Bochner and Dr. Ellis to attend the fourth Asia Communication Forum in Beijing and the fiftieth anniversary of the Communications University of China, I got a chance to visit Jing and her daughter again. This trip with my professors Dr. Bochner and Dr. Ellis became very important because I decided to resume my dissertation writing. I had taken several years of leave of absence from school since I started working full time as a corporate employee. Even though I had been on leave of absence from school for five years, I had kept in touch with my informants and never stopped my mental work on my dissertation research. The stories have been in my heart, and I was ready to write.

After my trip back from Beijing and after finishing two other intensive business trips in Kula Lumpur and Montreal between November and December 2004, I started to refresh my library research for my dissertation. It took two months to do that. Concurrently, I completed the draft of Chapter 1 in January and Chapter 2 in February.

In March 2005, I spent the entire month revisiting my field notes and re-listening to the twenty audiotapes I had kept for years. The types of field notes are described in more details in next few pages. The audiotapes contained my interviews with my research informants. Most of them had been transcribed years ago, but since I wanted to know how my years of corporate experiences changed my perspective of looking at this research again, I did an experiment. In addition to listening to all of these tapes again, I selected ten of them and redid the transcribing work and then I compared the new transcription with the old ones. Indeed, I realized that my sensitivity to certain detailed information had changed. Some examples are given here:

(1) During spring 1997 and spring 1998 when I interviewed American
executives, middle-level managers, and blue-collar workers at USAC Holdings, Inc., I paid more attention to their very positive interpretation of their new Chinese ownership, such as the reformed rewards system, the better benefits package that was implemented, and all the capital they invested in improving the technologies and productivity in the factory. Two interviewees mentioned that after SINOCHEN took over in 1989, there were indeed layoffs including both top executives and hourly workers. In 1994, the rock-mine site in Miami owned by USAC was also closed down. These two facts were so briefly mentioned in the interviews that I almost overlooked them when I conducted interviews in 1997 and 1998. Now in 2005, after I have worked for seven years in a multinational corporation and have gone through numerous layoffs and corporate restructuring, these two facts caught my attention when I revisited my interview audiotapes. However, because I was purely a doctoral student without industry experiences back in 1997 and 1998, I could not relate myself to corporate layoffs and thus did not ask follow-up questions on these facts to induce more details. If I conducted my interviews with the same people today, the questions I would ask would be different, and thus I would generate a different focus for the content of the interviews.

During 1989, after SINOCHEN acquired USAC from U.S. Steel, the Chinese management implemented the new structure. Since SINOCHEN is more experienced in international trading and has virtually no experiences in operating chemical plants in the United States, they hired local American
operational experts to run the factory. Meanwhile, they built up the trading firm USCR to separate commercial issues from manufacturing routines. SINOCHEN sent more Chinese international traders to work at USCR with American marketing and salespeople. Besides USCR and USAC, SINOCHEN built up USAC Holdings, Inc., and sent expatriates from China from time to time to be the president of USAC Holdings, Inc. In 1997 and 1998, I looked at this new structure as being for the sake of increasing profits due to the fluctuations of the chemical-fertilizer business. Today when I revisited the interview audiotapes, I understood more of the interviewees’ comments: “SINOCHEN enhances the Chinese ownership of USAC Holdings, Inc., as its subsidiary in the U.S.” It seems the new structure implemented in 1989 and 1990 has equal significance both commercially and politically.

(3) When I interviewed Chinese expatriates and their family members in 1997 and 1998, I was married, but my life was pretty much like a “single” graduate student. I was not able to understand how difficult it is when the expatriate’s spouse is both a full-time mother and going to school as a full-time student until I had a child of my own.

(4) Only after I changed my career path in 1998 did I start to realize how challenging or almost painful it is for SINOCHEN expatriates to endure job and career changes. I have a much better understanding of what is meant by “shifted identity” or feeling “displaced.” The change of life and career is brought up not only by the geographical relocations at the surface but also by
the deeper level of force underneath — ubiquitous globalization happens both in the West and in the East.

In summary, after re-listening to all the audiotapes and revisiting all the field notes generated in the past years, I notice that I am a different audience for my own research and I am a different reader of my own field notes. I realize how much I have grown in my understanding of my research subject and my informants. My friendship with my informants has become more profound, my understanding of my research has deepened, my identity has changed from a full-time doctoral student to a full-time corporate worker, and my relationship with my research has changed from “an outsider” to “an insider.”

My remembering of details relied on both audiotapes and field notes. Field notes were primarily taken in Chinese when I was in observation mode. The conversations occurred during the extensive interactions (such as Tong and I traveled to Atlanta and Chattanooga, Yanming visited me in California, I went back to China to meet with Jing and Ming, etc.) were described in field notes. E-mails and correspondence (with Ernie, Irene, Tong, Chai, Jing, Li, Yanming, Yu, and Dr. Bochner) are all in English. The audiotapes are both in English (when I interviewed American employees) and Chinese (when I interviewed Chinese participants). The only exception is the formal interview with the Chinese informant Chai, who had been utilizing English with me most of the time.

The field notes I took in Chinese were not necessarily well-polished stories due to the limited time I had, but, compared with English, the Chinese characters were more sensational to me when helping me to recall all the details. Just twenty or thirty Chinese
characters could bring back all the memories of a certain scene I had during my participate observations. Re-listening to the audiotapes (as I described earlier) was also very helpful to refresh my memory and reminded me of certain details that I overlooked before. The audiotapes help me to be emotionally involved in writing. Certain background noise, laughter, and pauses during the interviews are helpful to make descriptions of the interviewing scenes more lively.

In addition to field notes I had, I took pictures whenever I was allowed or it was appropriate. These pictures help me to remember the momentum of the stories. There are other materials I consider part of my field notes too: the regular letter and paper correspondence between my research informants and I, USAC Holding Inc. News Letter, SINOCHEN annual reports, and USAC Holding’s Inc. company’s brochure, etc.

I had at least six hundred e-mails (between my major professor, Dr. Bochner, and committee members Dr. Ellis, Dr. Jorgenson, and me) I kept in my e-mail folder as part of my field notes. These e-mails recorded some of my struggles of “who I am” after I became a full-time corporate employee, and how I tried to keep up my fieldwork during my full-time work schedule. The e-mails from my professors showed their support encouraging me to face the dilemmas and to make progress on my research and writing. Among the six hundred plus e-mails, I only chose one from Dr. Bochner in Part III Becoming an Insider of Chapter four.

Translation of the Chinese field notes into English takes some effort, especially Chinese phrases created in a specific context. For example, “Three Guidelines” in SINOCHEN as an informal directive for employees doing business can be nicely chanted in Chinese (合法经营；合理赚钱；和气生财) because the first character of
each guideline sounds the same phonetically. I translate them into English: “Operate businesses by legitimacy; get contracts with decency; gain profits via harmony.”

SINOCHEM people combine contemporary business ideology with traditional Chinese philosophy. These translations embrace my understanding of these terms based upon my cultural upbringing.

I believe that my own lived experiences in conducting this dissertation research in the past eight years demonstrate that social science is subjective science. The choice of a research subject, the focus, and the interpretation of qualitative data are decided by who the researcher is. The interpretations are decided by who the audiences are.

For instance, by the questions that we ask of the organization, we are revealing ourselves as communication researchers. I have discussed this with my American graduate-student cohort who went to USAC Holdings, Inc., with me once in 1997. The questions I was interested in were: “How do Americans and Chinese cross-communicate? What is carried over from Chinese corporate culture by SINOCHEM expatriates and adopted by the American workplace? What does this organization say about multinational corporations in general?” The questions my American graduate-student cohort was interested in were: “Is this a communist experiment with capitalism? Are the Americans concerned with working for a Chinese government-owned enterprise? Are the Chinese expatriates picked by the Chinese government to work in the United States?” Since the researchers will ask questions from different perspectives, the interests reveal who we are as researchers.

Regarding the writing process, I generated several folders on my laptop: “prospectus folders,” “library research folders,” “field notes folders,” “draft folders,”
and “dissertation format check folder,” “dissertation revision folder.” The field notes folders are classified by years (from 1997 to 2005) and draft folders are organized with chapters (from Chapter 1 to Chapter 5).

**Research Process Summary Table**

The following table is the summary of my research process from spring 1997 to 2005. In this table I also describe the major fieldwork I conducted. That also includes how many times I formally interviewed each person as well as where and when, i.e., over what period of time. In formal interviews, everyone allowed me to record upon my request. I marked the ones that were recorded in the summary table below. However, the conversations occurred during participant observations were based upon field notes. Phone interviews with Guangyan and Chai between January and February of 1997 were based upon field notes.

In order to help readers keep their place and remember all the characters, I also provide a chart/figure at the beginning of Part I, II, and III of my ethnographic stories in Chapter Four.

Table 3. Research Process Summarization

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Time span of the research</th>
<th>January 1997-present</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Major locations to</td>
<td>U.S. Agri-Chemicals, Forte Meade, Florida</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>U.S. Chem Resources, Tampa, Florida</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

85
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 3. Research Process Summarization</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Conduct the research</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Research informants’ homes:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Their home locations in Lakeland, Florida</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Their home locations in Tampa, Florida</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Their home locations in Shanglongxili sub-division, Beijing, China</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Their new job locations in Beijing, China</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• My business trip to Hanwei Plaza, Beijing, China</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• My home office in San Diego, California</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>College of Business, University of South Florida campus (where Chinese expatriate employees and their family members take classes)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other occasions: formal and informal interviews conducted in informants’ homes and social gatherings in Tampa, Lakeland, Forte Meade, North Carolina, San Diego, and Beijing.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Informants (or research participants)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chinese Expatriates</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alex Yu,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wei Li,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ming He,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Guo-qiang Chai,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shu-lang Chen,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jin Chen,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ru-liang Du</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Family Members of Chinese Expatriates:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jing Cai</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yan-ming Zhao</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tong-xuan Li</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Xiaoli Li</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

| 7 |
| 4 |
### Table 3. Research Process Summarization

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Types of Research</th>
<th>Interviews &amp; Observation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Ten long, intensive interviews (two hours to six hours for each) – All recorded. Eleven short interviews (forty minutes to one hour for each) - All recorded. Informal interviews and intensive interactions with informants (outside the workplace). Forty-five times/occasions plus. These informal interviews or conversations occurred during the participate observation are based upon field notes.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**American colleagues:**
- Earnest Helms,
- Irene Dobson,
- Joy Peavy,
- Frank Dempsy,
- Stephen Susick,
- Paul Sutton,
- George Stratton,
- Carolyn Acton

**One co-op student from the Chemistry Department at the University of South Florida:**
- Guangyan Zhu

| Number of people whom I interacted with or interviewed (Total) | 21 |

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>8</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 3. Research Process Summarization</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Major trips to the workplace (for formal interview and observations) for which duration is longer than 6-8 hours each time</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Types of formal interviews,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Table 3. Research Process Summarization</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-----------------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>informal interviews outside workplace</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Research</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Table 3. Research Process Summarization</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-----------------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Portfolio</strong> (To show to my dissertation committee members)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Other Materials Involved</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Type of writing</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Chapter Four: Ethnographic Stories

This chapter represents the main body of ethnographic stories in my dissertation. These narratives are arranged chronologically in order to reflect my developing relationship with the issues of my dissertation research as well as with my participants. The main plot shows my journey as a researcher and my increasing understanding of my informants and myself. The three main story sessions are listed below:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Part 1: “Outsider” and “Insiders”</th>
<th>Part 2: Getting to Know “Insiders”</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Characters:</td>
<td>Characters:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“I” – PhD. Student &amp; Researcher</td>
<td>“I” – Ph.D. Candidate &amp; Student Researcher</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ming - Manager of Marketing</td>
<td>Jing – Ming’s wife</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chai – Human Resource Mgr.</td>
<td>Chen – Mgr. of Accounting</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Du – President of the Subsidiary</td>
<td>Shulan – Mgr. of Accounting</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ernie Helms – Vice President</td>
<td>Yanming – Chen’s wife</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Irene Dobson – HR Director</td>
<td>Yu – Legal Consul &amp; HR Supervisor</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Frank Dempsey – Factory Worker</td>
<td>Li – Yu’s wife</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>George Stratton – GM, Marketing</td>
<td>Shulan – Mgr of Accounting</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Joy Peavy – Supervisor, Labor Relations</td>
<td>Tong – expatriate’s daughter</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Guanyan – Co-op student from USF</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Part 3: Becoming an “Insider”</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Characters:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“I” – from full time Doctoral Candidate to Telecomm Professional &amp; Senior Manager</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ernie Helms – Vice President</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Irene Dobson – HR Director</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yu – Law School Student at UF and then J.D &amp; Attorney, Bales Weinstein</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Li – MBA Student at USF and then Citigroup Financial Analyst</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ming – Chief Representative, ICEC</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jing – Commercial Controller of Michelin</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Du – Previous President of USAC Holdings Inc.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 4  Structures of Ethnographic Stories
Chapter Four: Part I: “Outsider” and “Insiders”

Connections and Research Site

On January 11, 1997, a Saturday afternoon, as usual, I drive to my office where I plan to study. A teaching/research assistant and a second-year Ph.D. student in the Department of Communication at the University of South Florida, I have been lucky to have an office since the time I started my master’s program in 1993. As the first and only full-time graduate student from Asia in the department, I see my office not only as a space to work, to study, and to be close to the faculty and graduate-student community, but also as a space to gain a sense of belonging that shelters me from a feeling of not having a stable “home” after leaving China to attend graduate school in the United States.

As I enter the parking lot at the side of the Communication and Information Science Building, I notice Dr. Peng, an assistant professor in the Political Science Department, has also arrived. He goes to the library almost each Saturday afternoon and I have run into him many times. We greet each other.

“So what brings you in today?” Dr. Peng asks.

“I am trying to get some reading done for my ethnography class next week. It’s too hectic to do that while I am teaching during the weekdays,” I reply. “However, the challenge of this class is not so much the reading, I must find a research site...”

“A research site?” he seems intrigued. “What kind of research site are you looking for?”
“Well, I hope this research site is profound, not only for my ethnography class but also for my future dissertation research. I exhausted almost every single line in the yellow page of Tampa, St. Pete, and Clearwater, but haven’t found the one I was looking for yet.” Noticing Dr. Peng is listening attentively, I continue: “It would be nice if the site has a Chinese and American intercultural communication dynamic, for instance, a business site where a group of Chinese and Americans work together. But please don’t get me wrong, I am not looking for a Chinese restaurant.”

Dr. Peng bursts into laughter: “OK, June, I got you. You actually reminded me of something. I should contact my old school mate Ming on your behalf. He and I were in the same master’s program back in 1980s in the University of International Relations in Beijing. Ming was two years ahead of me in the program, but he is a few years younger. Very smart guy! After our graduation, I went to Princeton University for a Ph.D. program, and Ming went to work for SINOCHEN.”

“SINOCHEN? You mean China’s biggest import and export company of chemical products?” I interrupt.

“Yes,” Dr. Peng nods. “I heard SINOCHEN has subsidiaries in Tampa and Forte Meade in Florida. Ming actually works and lives in Tampa! He called me almost a year ago, but I have been so busy and haven’t got a chance to meet either him or his family. Maybe I can get you in touch with him to see if he can help you to gain access to SINOCHEN’s subsidiary as your research site.”

“Boy! That will be fantastic!” I feel like jumping up and down, and am thrilled. “That’s something I have always been looking for as my research topic! SINOCHEN is one of China’s largest state enterprises, and it’ll be interesting to see how the employees

93
live their life and operate their subsidiaries in the United States. When ‘socialist’ meets
‘capitalist,’ there must be unique experiences. ”

“I believe so, but don’t forget China is labeled a communist country though it’s
becoming truly capitalist.” Dr. Peng is searching his address book, which he had taken
from his pocket: “Got a pen? Here is Ming’s home phone number: 813-887-3452.
Mention my name and he should help you.” Dr. Peng checks his calendar on the back of
his address book. “I will invite Ming, his family, my family, and you, of course,
together for a dinner one night, say the 25th evening this month. ”

“I truly appreciate your help, Dr. Peng!” I say sincerely. “I should pay for the
whole dinner though.”

“No worries,” Dr. Peng smiles. “Ming is my old school mate. I don’t mind
buying him dinner at all. But call him first to check out his company so that you don’t
delay your school project.”

* * *

I am pleasantly surprised that Dr. Peng has revealed the existence of
SINOCHEN’s subsidiaries in Florida. I had heard about SINOCHEN many times from
the media when I was in China. After I started graduate school in Tampa, however, I
felt disconnected from my home country because I had no access to TV news or
newspaper reports about China. Even if I were able to subscribe to China’s People’s
Daily, I would probably still be fully occupied by schoolwork, teaching assignments,
and convention papers, and I would have no time to follow up on the latest news from
China. Being apart from what had been so familiar makes me feel displaced. I have no
anchor. Though I have developed many friendships with American graduate students, I
am the only full-time Asian student in the department and I have a hunger to study something related to my roots, my home country, and my people. The feeling is like a craving for certain food. The excitement of finding out the existence of SINOCHEM is sensational; it rejuvenates my Chinese spirit, which has been dormant for three and a half years.

Though I did not know much about SINOCHEM, I was eager to learn about it. From the moment Dr. Peng mentioned SINOCHEM to me, I felt my fate would be tied up with research at this site.

* * *

I want to call Ming immediately, but I hold off until Sunday evening. First, I think I should let Ming spend some quality time with his family during the weekend. Second, I need to search through public sources to learn more about SINOCHEM before speaking to Ming. However, I find only two significant results about SINOCHEM through the USF library database. I am surprised that information about such a big Chinese global company is not abundant in a U.S. academic library.

I dial Ming’s home phone number at 7:30 p.m. Sunday, hoping he and his family have already finished their supper. After three rings, a young and clear voice appears on the other end: “Wei?” *“It’s a hello in Chinese! Either she’s expecting a Chinese phone call or her social circle is most Chinese.”* Having not met Ming and his family, I hesitate, not sure if this is Ming’s wife or daughter. “请问我可以与何明先生讲话吗? (May I speak to Mr. Ming?)” I inquire tentatively in Chinese.

“Ming went to the office to catch up some work today … Oh gosh, my daughter is crawling off the sofa! Would you please hold on one second?” She sounds a little
panicked, and yet doesn’t lose a polite manner. After five seconds, she is back:

“Sorry … now Alice is OK.”

“Is this Mrs. Ming?” I probe, imagining she just put her crawling baby daughter in a playpen.

“Yes, calling me Jing is fine. May I ask who’s calling?” Her voice is pleasant.

I introduce myself and telling the purpose of my phone call. “Not a problem.

Yes, I have heard about Dr. Peng many times! I will tell Ming about your request when he is back. Which graduate program are you in?” She is obviously interested in chatting with me.

After I explain my area of study and describe a little bit of my graduate-school life, she sighs: “I wish I were able to go to graduate school like you!”

“Why don’t you?” I ask naively. “I believe you can if you want to.”

“Well, it’s complicated,” she says. “My daughter is too young, and I am holding an L-2 visa and can’t go to school unless I change to a student visa.” Noticing my pause, she explains: “An L-1 visa is for multinational corporate expatriates who work on overseas assignments, and an L-2 visa is for their spouses and children. Right now, I am preparing my GMAT while taking care of my daughter during the day.”

I detect many feelings behind her sighs and gentle voice. I comfort her and offer my help: “Jing, let me know if I can do anything for you. I am familiar with the procedure of applying for graduate school and I am willing to spend time to chat more with you about it.”
Jing’s tone sounds delighted. She assures me one more time she will ask Ming to call me back. She emphasizes that she enjoyed talking to me and would like me to call her again.

Ming calls back at 9:50 p.m. He has a booming and energetic voice, showing no signs of being exhausted from working overtime. Yet, I feel apologetic that he has called me back this late. “Have you had dinner yet?” I ask.

“That’s OK. I ate a little at work.” Ming cuts it short: “I will call Chai tomorrow night. He is our HR manager and lives in Lakeland, close to our factory over there. I will ask him to call you on Tuesday evening, but just in case, here is his home phone number: 941-644-1310. You can talk to him and start from there. Let me know if you still need my help afterward. Oh, by the way, tell Dr. Peng that I accept his dinner invitation! He seems busier than I am!”

Ming’s relaxed manner draws me closer. That he can be so casual tells me that he and Dr. Peng must be buddies since graduate school. This seems to be a good start! I tell myself. Dr. Peng’s connection works! I thank Ming for calling me back. He seems the opposite of Mrs. Ming, who is sweet yet ceremonious. He hangs up before I can say good night.

Tuesday evening works well for me to talk to Mr. Chai because it’s the only night I don’t have 6 p.m.-9 p.m. classes except for Fridays. I mark 5 pm, January 14 on my calendar to remind myself to be home earlier.

Around 7:15 p.m., Mr. Chai calls. I had calculated the time he needs for driving from his office at Forte Meade to home at Lakeland and the time he needs for supper, and I imagined that’s the earliest he could try to call me. Not wanting to add cost to his
home phone bill, I tell Chai that I will call him back immediately because the phone
calls from Lakeland are considered long distance. Chai complies.

The phone conversation lasts about two hours, but Mr. Chai is very efficient as he speaks, wasting few words in his conversation with me. Different from Ming, who sounds close and casual, Chai is “professionally distant,” making me feel I am a newspaper reporter who’s interviewing a big company’s professionally trained spokesman. You don’t get a bit of personal bias in his introduction of his company. I know he doesn’t read from the company’s brochure, but the way he introduces SINOCHEN reminds me of a fact sheet created by a company’s corporate marketing — with pictures of SINOCHEN office buildings and introductory blurbs on glossy paper. Nevertheless, Chai’s introduction is helpful because there is not much information about SINOCHEN that I can obtain from either an academic library or other public sources nearby. I put everything Chai says into my notes, because it is basic knowledge I must master before talking to each individual employee.

Though his tone is very calm, I can tell Chai has a great passion for his job and his company because he not only is familiar with SINOCHEN’s general profile but also knows a lot about the products and SINOCHEN’s market situation. He memorizes various numbers including SINOCHEN’s annual turnover, though I don’t think he has presentation slides in front of him when he speaks to me on the phone. Chai talks like a subject-matter expert in “strategic marketing” or “operation development” not a human-resource person. This amazes me. Distant as he is, I still gain respect for him after this first long conversation.
I tell Chai this is actually the first week of my ethnography class, so I need another week to inform him exactly about the scope of my project and what further help I may need from him and his factory at Forte Meade.

“Understood,” Mr. Chai says.

“While I am organizing my research scope this week, would you mind if I pay a visit to your trading office in Tampa?” I ask.

Chai is silent for three seconds, and says, “I think it will be OK as long as your visit won’t interrupt employees’ work over there. I suggest Friday be the better day.”

“Yes, Friday works fine for me,” I responded immediately, because it’s the only day I neither take classes nor teach.

“You can confirm with Ming if he can spare a couple of hours with you on Friday. The name of the receptionist there is Carolyn. The main line is 813-282-0300.”

I thank Chai for providing me SINOCHEN’s overview. I know this is not part of his job description but a personal favor due to Mr. Ming, and Mr. Ming helps me due to a personal favor from Dr. Peng. However Chai does not mention one bit about this chain effect on the phone. I guess it is not only because he is a succinct speaker but also because he seems to view this as a business matter instead of a personalized project.

I compliment Chai’s knowledge and his being a very clear speaker. Normally when I have complimented American professionals, they say, “Oh, thank you!” without hiding their genuine happiness to hear my compliment. Chai, on the other hand, is very calm and plain in his reaction.

After hanging up, I glance at the clock: 9:15 p.m. I have a class to teach tomorrow morning, but I need to type up my notes before preparing my class and going
to sleep. I have no difficulties with typing field notes because Chai is an extremely
organized speaker. Several highlights of the information from Chai arouse my pride in
being a Chinese person who sees that a Chinese state enterprise is doing well globally,
at least according to Chai.

**Corporate Profile of SINOCHENM and USAC Holdings Inc.**

Most of the following overview of SINOCHENM was taken from Chai’s
introduction, but was endorsed and double-checked after I was able to obtain
SINOCHENM’s annual report and brochures from its local offices as well as from the
public sources at a library. When I examine some numbers Chai told me from the phone
introduction, I am impressed how accurate Chai’s memory was on the company’s

The official name of SINOCHENM is China’s National Chemical Import and
Expert Corporation. In1997, the company was listed among the top 30 in *Fortune*
magazine’s annual list of the world’s largest corporations (CB Media Ltd., 1995, p. 55).
According to Chai, who rephrases the current president and CEO’s statement of the
company’s “three-fold” transition development strategy, SINOCHENM has been
developed “from a single import and export business to international trade, from
commodity trade to multinational operations, from a Chinese foreign trade company to
a transnational corporation” (“Forty-Five-Year History of SINOCHENM, 1996, pp. 13-
14). Now, SINOCHENM is a comprehensive, multifaceted firm, handling not just
imports and exports but also production, finance, transport, insurance, advertising, and
other services.
Comparing the 1988 economic reports with the ones of 1996, I learned that the company’s amazing growth resulted from its globalization. In 1988, SINOCHEM’s total business turnover was just $1.9 billion (Wu, 1994, pp. 14-19). In 1996, SINOCHEM’s business turnover amounted to 17.953 billion U.S. dollars.

Founded in 1950 as an import-export business for chemicals and petroleum, SINOCHEM started its major ventures beyond the border of China after 1987. As of 1997, SINOCHEM had 94 subsidiaries and joint ventures. Hundreds of SINOCHEM’s staff employees were deployed outside China, while its overseas affiliates employed over a thousand local workers. Among SINOCHEM’s largest offshore ventures is the 100 percent ownership of a chemical fertilizer plant and phosphorus mine in the United States (Wu, 1994, pp. 14-19). This plant along with its trading subsidiary USCR (which are together called “USAC Holdings, Inc.”) is the site of my research, first for my ethnography class, and then for my dissertation.

Having an overview of SINOCHEM helps me better understand why SINOCHEM Chinese expatriates are proud to be part of SINOCHEM, especially in our first conversations. The strong profile of the company provides employees a strong sense of belonging. Working for SINOCHEM constitutes part of their identity. It’s not hard to understand what a difficult decision it is when some of the employees decide to leave the company in my later stages of interviewing them. In this section, I will not present the whole organizational chart of SINOCHEM. Instead, I use the small graph below to illustrate the key organizational relations that will be evident later on in my ethnographic stories.
If Chai’s familiarity of the SINOCHEM profile indirectly shows his passion for his company, his introduction about how SINOCHEM acquired the local companies in Florida embodies a more subtle enthusiasm. I can tell that the buildup of Florida subsidiaries has been an important part of his life. It’s also the major justification to bring himself and his family to Florida for nearly six years.

In March 1989, SINOCHEM acquired the fertilizer division of U.S. Steel to build up U.S. Agri-Chemicals Corporation (USAC), which is now a chemical fertilizer plant employing three hundred people. Among the three hundred employees, there are nine Chinese expatriates and 289 American local employees. “Why did SINOCHEM need to purchase a plant so far away from home?” I asked Chai, and Chai explained. As an agricultural country with a large population, China has become the world’s biggest chemical fertilizer importer. However, most of the phosphorus mines in China are preserved in remote mountain areas. Florida, a state that is usually known for its tourist industry, contains the most abundant phosphorus mineral reserve in the world.

Purchasing a mine and plant in Florida saves SINOCHEM the considerable expense of
constructing a new plant and solving the difficult transportation problems in China’s remote areas. This action greatly benefits Chinese farmers and satisfies the need of China’s domestic market for ammonium phosphate.

Two years later, in 1991, a trading subsidiary called U.S. Chem Resources (USCR) was formed to reduce the cost and procedure of selling and shipping finished products back to China. This turned out to be a highly beneficial strategy that met the necessity of serving China’s domestic customers in a faster way and increasing China’s share of the international market of fertilizers. Some of USAC’s finished products are now shipped to other countries in need of these products. There are 11 employees working in USCR. Ming is working there as an international marketing manager.

In 1991, USAC Holdings, Inc. was formed as “the strategic planner and corporate parents” of USAC and USCR. USAC Holdings, Inc. also adds one more level of organization separating SINOCHEN’s headquarters and its subsidiaries USAC and USCR. Chai resides in Forte Meade, Florida, and held the position of human resources personnel supervisor and then manager between 1991 and 1997.

Understanding the goal of building up these two local subsidiaries, I can see what brought the main characters (the Chinese expatriates and the family members) of my ethnographic stories to Florida. These expatriates carry a noble mission — a mission to contribute to an agricultural China, their home country, who needs to feed over one billion people!

**First Visit to Trading Firm USCR at Tampa**

I call Ming the next day to confirm my visit on the next Friday.
On January 17, 1997, a humid and breezy winter morning, I depart from the main campus of the University of South Florida and head for Rocky Point located between Tampa and Clearwater, the site of USCR. Caught in the thick flow of traffic, I am a bit overwhelmed by feelings of excitement and uncertainty.

I feel bonded with the Chinese employees who work there because of my cultural origin. Knowing how demanding I have found it to move from China to study and work in the United States, where I have encountered a life of adaptation and transformation, I anticipate that SINOCHEM employees will be a group of people whose cultural background and experience are close to my own. I hope that my research will yield insight into their acculturation experiences, and mine too. My ambition — to make this the site of my future dissertation research — is embryonic, but I am determined and hopeful.

Nevertheless, an unspoken anxiety runs through my body. My life experience is exclusively academic both in China and in the United States. I have no “lived experiences” in the industrial or corporate world. To write about SINOCHEM employees who have come here from their motherland poses a formidable challenge. Because they are corporate workers, their acculturation processes must be different from mine, an international student who wants to understand and reflect upon global corporate life, but who is unfamiliar with the life she intends to study. Though seventeen months later, I will myself become a full-time employee in an American company, the start of this research is a maiden voyage — a quest, a venture, and an intercultural, inter-organizational journey.
Driving along North Rocky Point Drive, I search visually among the immense modern edifices in Tampa’s Island Center. I guess that the white office building in the middle is the one I am looking for. I park my car, walk through the driveway next to the multiple-story garage, and stop at a huge dark-brown glass door, the shade of which is best described in Chinese as the “color of tea.” The gigantic glass door reflects my image. I peer at the image of this thin, tall Chinese woman, with straight black hair, wearing a royal-blue wool suit, and looking rather hesitant. I am not used to seeing myself in formal business attire.

Entering the building, I stand on the gray marble lobby floor, feeling puzzled by the various elevators that all have the same shining metal doors. Noticing my consternation, a sixtyish white man in a neat dark gray uniform asks me gently, “May I help you, Ma’am?” He appears to be a security guard.

“Yes, I am looking for suite 1030,” I reply, looking at the address in my hand.

“You take that one, then when you get off on floor ten, you turn right and go straight, and then you will see suite 1030. Good luck, young lady.” He points to one of the gold shining elevators.

Arriving at floor ten, I step out of the elevator. I take the right-hand path that leads me to another winding hallway that is plain and empty. The door of each office suite quietly shuts probably for privacy. I look up at suite numbers, one after another, and finally arrive at 1030. I push the door open and enter another hallway and lobby, tiny but well decorated and arranged: green plants, three matching brown leather sofas, two cherry-wood end tables, framed pictures, and a four-foot-tall rosewood and glass cabinet with fine china and cloisonné vases displayed in it. The wall facing the suite
entrance is painted purple-blue and inlaid with three-dimensional metal characters reading: “U.S. Chem Resources.” Standing in the lobby, I am surprised by the light smell of tobacco. Some people must smoke in their offices. The smell brings me back to China. Unlike in the United States, smoking is still allowed in many Chinese offices. But this is America, and the company has American-born managers and sales. I wonder how American employees react to this; however, I wouldn’t dare ask. At the moment, I hear the distant sound of unintelligible talk from an office beyond my view. The conversation is in Mandarin Chinese, my home tongue. The sound comforts me in this unfamiliar environment.

I walk through the tiny hallway in the suite office and find another lobby about thirteen hundred square feet in front, where the offices, conference room, and workrooms are visible at one glance. There are about sixteen offices in the suite. In the lobby closer to the workroom, there is a huge L-shaped reception desk, seven feet long and six feet wide. It is occupied by phones, switchboards, a tiny computer exclusively used for FedEx mails, a fax machine, a regular computer, a pile of files, and family photos in frames with SINOCHEN logos. A middle-age American woman sits behind the reception desk. “May I help you?” she asks. Her voice is sweet, mellow, and full, like the one of a mezzo-soprano. The voice makes me recognize her: This must be the assistant, Carolyn, whom Mr. Chai mentioned to me first and whom I later contacted by phone before I came here.

As I start to introduce myself, Carolyn stands up and greets me. “Glad to meet you, Ms. Wang. My name is Carolyn. We had expected you today.” Slim in her dark
rosy outfit, Carolyn looks as if she could be a retired dancer, though she stands a couple of inches taller than that of average ballet dancers.

Ming, whom I am scheduled to meet, is on the phone. Carolyn leads me to the conference room to sit down and wait. She thoughtfully provides me some notepads and pens and then asks if I would like to have a cup of hot water because “most Chinese here drink hot water,” she says in a charming manner. I thank her and ask for a cup of ice water. But Carolyn is right. When I first came to the United States, the busy schedule of a graduate student made it difficult for me to spare the time to heat warm water or hot tea whenever I wanted. Cold beverages bothered my stomach for quite a while before I finally got used to them. Now my stomach is no longer used to hot drinks. My acculturation in the United States spans both the intellectual and the physical. To me, the effects of the acculturation processes on emotion and intellect (especially beliefs and values) are more intense than these physical adjustments. I wonder whether this will also be true for the overseas Chinese employees of SINOCHEN.

Carolyn goes back to work after a chat with me. Holding the cup of cold water that she fixed for me, I take in the interior of the suite office’s conference room: artificial plants in the corner, an oblong conference table, and fourteen armed chairs with blue-gray contoured cushioning. One wall is comprised entirely of a wide glass window reaching almost from floor to ceiling. Since the building overlooks Tampa Bay, from the window I can see the expanse of splendid water and blue sky. On the other wall hangs a huge three-dimensional world map. The map displays the market distribution of the company, and the voyage patterns of shipping phosphate fertilizers to
China, the Far East, Central and South America, and Eastern and Western Europe. The global journey undertaken by SINOCHEM inspires me to envision my journey of writing this dissertation metaphorically as a similar global trek.

I remember reading Dr. Peng’s paper on overseas Chinese. Due in part to the deep Confucian influence of “li,” which stresses order and stability (Peng, 1995, p. 2), the Chinese have been traditionally reluctant to leave home. Though there are abundant numbers of Chinese people overseas, leaving home is a difficult thing for Chinese to do. For various groups of overseas Chinese from Taiwan, Hong Kong, etc., I am interested in looking at the most current migrating groups — the intellectuals and businesspeople who have come from mainland China to the United States since 1978, when China initiated her Open-Door Policy. I want to learn what it means to these people to migrate, work, and live in another culture.

While envisioning my research journey to understand SINOCHEM expatriates, several questions linger in my mind. They are the questions that I ask myself and probably they are also the questions that my readers want to know:

Among the many overseas Chinese enterprises, why am I particularly interested in this subsidiary of SINOCHEM? How is this group of SINOCHEM employees different from other groups of overseas Chinese regionally and historically? What is the state of current scholarship on studying transnational corporations? What are my perspectives on studying human life in an international workplace? How am I going to define multinational organization from my chosen perspectives? Which aspects do I
particularly want to look at concerning global organizations? How do my cultural upbringing and training contribute to my research? What kind of problems will I encounter if I use my American training — Western organizational communication theory and language — to study this not-purely-Western (cross-cultural) organization? Upon finishing my writing, what kind of insights, assistance, and help will I have provided to both the theory and the lived experience of the global workplace and life? How can I apply my work to help Chinese workers and families who are sent to the United States?

In the USCR conference room, I quickly write down some of these questions onto the notepad that Carolyn provided me. And I know, of course, more questions will emerge as my research journey continues.

A couple of Chinese employees walk fast by the conference room. They look busy though not stressed out. The chemical fertilizers business is seasonal. I later learn from Ming that early January is the perfect time to sell products. This Friday is eight days before the Chinese New Year by the lunar calendar of 1997. Probably because of the holiday spirit or maybe because Du, the president of USAC Holdings, Inc., is back in China for a conference at that time, employees talk in a loud voice. I never saw that again after my third visit.

Mr. Ming steps into the conference room. We shake hands, and I’m glad to see that we finally meet after several phone conversations. Since it is a Friday, Ming doesn’t wear the suit and tie that is strictly required during other weekdays. Instead, he
wears a Polo shirt and slacks. Having a sonorous voice and an athletic look about him, he later tells me he was a soccer player when he was in college.

After we step out of the conference room, Ming shows me around briefly. I am able to see the back part of the suite. Receptionist Carolyn’s office desk faces the exit of the conference room. She sits exactly in the conjunction of the front suite and back suite. The back suite has a cul-de-sac type of lobby. President Du’s and his executive manager’s offices are in the center surrounded by offices for the coordinator, computer administrator, and shipping managers. Du’s office is the largest one in the suite, approximately six square feet smaller than the size of the conference room. His tidy office desk is about two meters long, and I didn’t see any documents on the table except for stationery. Through the French window, Du can get a spectacular view of the Bay at Rocky Point. The bookshelves behind his chair constitute the background of his office. I am tempted to take a closer look at Du’s books, but Ming looms in his office door. It made me feel as if Du were in the office at that moment. A Chinese brush painting and calligraphy hangs on the wall, as is traditional in many Chinese officials’ offices. They are the typical signs symbolizing high-class taste, a good education, and scholarly experience. Du’s painting is of a high quality, and the calligraphy reads, “Unity, Development, Realistic Approach, and High Efficiency.”

We swing back to Ming’s office. Ming’s and the other two senior accountants’ offices are in the front part of the suite. They are the sets of offices I saw when I stepped in at the entrance. In Ming's office, there are two desks occupied by a computer, a phone, framed pictures of his baby daughter, piles of faxes, and the production reports from the company’s factory in Fort Meade, where four million tons of diammonium
phosphate (DAP), sulfuric acid, and phosphoric are produced annually. Another thick stack of documents — buying and selling records and the orders that contain some confidential information on the global market of chemical fertilizers — is also in a pile. Mr. Ming has all this information since he sells these fertilizer products back to China. And since China is the biggest chemical fertilizer importer in the world, Mr. Ming’s role is crucial. During our conversation, the phone interrupts us several times. Most of the phone calls are international, and because Mr. Ming is talking in Mandarin, I guess some calls are also from China.

“No, no. I told you $205 per ton last week. This is it. You know, the price has gone up to $225 these two days. I received two more orders already. If you think the price is not agreeable, I may ship them elsewhere...” I hear Mr. Ming say assertively. Later, after he hangs up, he tells me that “one ship may contain 30,000-50,000 tons of DAP. If I give up $10 for each ton of the FOB (Free on Board Price), the company will lose $300,000-$500,000 for one ship. It’s a big deal. But, sometimes, I feel it’s OK to give up a little bit, because most of my customers are Chinese buyers from provincial governments. Some of these buyers have had relations with our company for decades. It’s like we sell goods to friends.”

Mr. Ming is obviously busy even though this is a Friday. I remember a day before I couldn’t get hold of him until my sixth call. The first time was early in the morning and he was on the phone. The second time, he was in a meeting. The third time, he had not yet returned from lunch. The fourth time he was on the phone again. The fifth time he was still on the phone. It took me almost an entire day to get hold of Ming. Every employee in the trading firm has an individual phone line, but they do not
release this to the people outside the company, not even to the customers. The business
cards only provide extension numbers. Therefore, every time I call, I need to go through
the assistant, Carolyn, who has a very gentle and sweet voice: “I am sorry, Ms. Wang,
Mr. Ming is still on the phone. Maybe you can try again later.”

Mr. Chai did the right thing to advise me to visit Ming on Friday. I can barely
imagine how I could have gotten hold of Ming to sit down and talk to me on any other
weekday. Busy as he is, Mr. Ming is still supportive and patient.

The year 1996 was a tough one for the chemical fertilizer industry, which was
fluctuating for a quite a while. Ming obviously wants to get business going strong from
the beginning of 1997. He shows aggressiveness and spirit on the phone, and that’s also
probably why he worked overtime during the weekend too.

As noon approaches, Ming invites me to join him for lunch at the cafeteria
downstairs so that I can continue my questions. After exiting the USCR suite, we take
one of those shining elevators and reach the bottom floor. Entering the cafeteria feels
like boarding a cruise ship. It faces the same direction to the Bay as President Du’s
office does. “Your office building has an incredible water view!” I compliment him
sincerely. Some employees from other companies in the same building sit on the patio
outside to enjoy fresh Gulf breezes during lunch. “How do you like your life in Florida”
I ask Ming after we carry our food and sit down besides a huge window facing the Bay.

“Winter here is like heaven!” Ming says. “I always bring my family out during
the weekend when I am not that busy. I sometimes drive to Lakeland to get together
with the families of Chai and five other Chinese expatriates over there. Chai and I often
play golf together. Since Chai is an HR manager ‘by default,’ he always leads family gatherings and activities during weekends.”

“I guess it’s not just ‘by default’; Chai must be a very warm-hearted person!” I comment; meanwhile, I think about how formal and distant Chai sounded to me on the phone. “You expatriate families seem to have an interesting lifestyle. If you don’t mind, I’d love to include this type of story in my project.” I sound out about this possibility. Ming doesn’t have objections, and I think: *They seem still to live in a collectivist society after work hours!*

“Hey, how are you?” two gentlemen say as they stop at our lunch table.

“Oh, this is Shulang and this is Chen,” Ming introduces them to me. “They are the two accounting managers here.” I remembered seeing their offices closest to Ming’s in the front part of the USCR suite. I stand up to introduce myself and shake their hands. They tell me that they both are taking classes in the MBA program at the same university where I am. “This is great! I hope to catch up with you later!” I am very glad that I have found more association with them.

After they find seats nearby to eat, I turn my head back and continue my conversation with Ming: “How do you like your job at SINOCHEM?”

“I do enjoy it. My title is International Marketing Manager, but it’s actually a sales position. Dr. Peng probably told you that my master’s degree is English literature. Though I don’t have a chemical-engineering background, I learn fast on products. By the way, I was ranked number one among all the employees in the certification examination of economists held by the Ministry of Foreign Trade and Economic Cooperation (MOFTEC) in 1992. At that time I was the youngest certified economist
among all the employees in the entire MOFTEC.” Mr. Ming is very proud, and I express my admiration for his talent and achievement.

“My wife, Jing, says she truly enjoys talking to you,” Ming switches the subject a little bit. “You’re very welcome to visit her when you have time.”

“Thanks, I feel flattered.” I am glad Jing is sweet and approachable. In my heart, I am hoping Jing can help me open another window of my research — to understand the joys, frustrations, constraints, and challenges of expatriates’ spouses. “I know Jing wants to apply for an MBA program, but she seems concerned that out-of-state tuition will be a big expense for the family,” I say to Ming, and I’m pretty sure Ming knows that Jing feels rather bad for not being financially independent.

Ming reacts without any hesitation: “I will totally support her if she can get enrolled and get a student visa. I think it’s a worthwhile investment to go to graduate school.” Like most of the Chinese, Ming considers the expense of education a great trade-off: “I also told Jing that I will expect her to be a breadwinner after she gets her MBA…” Ming laughs. Ming’s sense of humor mixed with the confidence he has on his wife.

“I can help Jing to apply for a China Florida Linkage Institute scholarship,” I offer. “This scholarship pays out-of-state tuition for Chinese graduate students who have excellent academic records. I got one when I applied for my Ph.D. program, but I didn’t use it because my department worked out a full fellowship and then full assistantship for me. China Florida Linkage Scholarship can’t be used in a combined way with full assistantship but it’s large enough for overseas Chinese students,” I explain to Ming and he is obviously delighted to hear about this.
We finish lunch and go back to Ming’s office. The shining elevators gets very jammed. It stops on each floor before we get to ours. After the lunch chat, I feel more acquainted with Ming and more at ease in chatting with him.

The day before I came to visit Ming, I had typed up some questions I planned to use for individual employees. Before presenting the questions to Mr. Chai, I thought it would be a good idea to consult Ming first, because he is my first point of contact.

I explain to Ming that my project is an interpretive research study. I don’t want to bring any assumptions to my field research and don’t expect to draw a particular conclusion after my semester-long study in his company. At this stage, I only know, at a high level, that I am looking at how Chinese expatriates work and live in the United States for a long time. I told Ming that my research is open-ended and will include multiple interpretations. At this moment, I would like to look into how Chinese expatriates adjust themselves in an American work environment, how local American employees view the operations under Chinese leadership, how American employees perceive their Chinese co-workers, and how Chinese expatriates and their families cope with the life changes they encounter outside work. Of course my research theme and scope may either evolve or be diverted to other questions after interviewing both Chinese and American employees. I believe that what I observe will drive what I describe.

I hand over to Ming a few sample interview questions. He puts the page of questions on his computer keyboard and starts to read.

(1) How did you get assigned to work on an overseas assignment by SINOCHEM headquarters? Which department had you been working for before you came to the subsidiary in Florida?
(2) What was the biggest incentive for you to accept assignment to USCRUSCR and USAC?

(3) For yourself, what’s the biggest challenge you see from working in SINOCHEN headquarters in Beijing compared to working in USCRUSCR and USAC in Florida? Language? Changing job responsibility? Relocating your family?

(4) What is the biggest adjustment you have had after you started work at USCR?

(5) From a daily operation perspective, what is the biggest difference you see between the China state enterprise environment and a local U.S. company under Chinese leadership?

(6) What do you like best about SINOCHEM overall?

(7) Do you have any concerns about your company’s strategy on USCR, USAC?

(8) How do you define “leadership” and “accountability”?

(9) What personal value or contribution do you add to SINOCHEM by taking overseas assignments in Florida?

(10) What is your next plan after your six-year assignment in the United States? Do you plan to move on to leave SINOCHEM for some other opportunities, or do you plan to stick with SINOCHEM for many years?

(11) During the time you worked on your overseas assignment, what kind of goals did you provide yourself to achieve career-wise?

(12) What do you like best about your life in Florida?

(13) What is the main challenge of the cultural differences you have encountered outside work?

(14) How does your overseas assignment impact your family?

Ming has finished my sample questions. He doesn’t show concern for the types of questions I prepared. I tell Ming that the nature of the ethnographic project is observation and interview. “Do you think there is a problem if I come to your company
once a week to observe, to talk to the employees who agree to be interviewed, to write field notes, and to attend your business meetings once or twice during the semester to see how Chinese and American managerial staffs interact and make decisions?” I ask.

Ming scratches his head and is rather hesitant to answer. My plan seems to be too much for him. Negative thoughts run through my head: Why visit once a week? Why interview? Why do I want to attend staff meetings a couple of times? Ming seems to have a hard time comprehending the virtue of my research, though he is a capable sales manager with a master’s degree. Ethnography? Participant observation? What are you talking about?

“Ms. Wang, I thought you would just plan to pay a couple of visits and talk to us, which might be enough for your school project. Now it seems that your research scope is much larger than I thought. Can you please tell me why you are so interested in doing an in-depth study at our company?” Ming wants to understand the nature of my research from another angle.

“Sure,” I say. I slightly move my notebook on the table clearing a physical space for my thoughts too: “When Dr. Peng first mentioned your company and your subsidiaries here, I had a hunch that this research site would be exactly what I want for both my ethnography class and my dissertation. The first fact that struck me immediately is your company being one of the first Chinese enterprises going to multinational status and on the Global Fortune 500 list. This is something that makes me very proud to be Chinese.”

Ming looks attentive, and I feel more engaged in expressing my thoughts: “Honestly, I don’t have much multinational corporate experience, nor is my academic
area MBA or economics, but I believe my naïve nature in those domains actually adds a fresh perspective to the research disciplines of multinational corporations and corporate workers. In addition, I am sure my Chinese origin and my own cross-cultural experiences will especially add value to the research of Chinese multinational corporations, Chinese expatriates, and their family members. And I truly believe my passion and conscientiousness will make this research different.”

Ming seems to be convinced. “June, I would like to help you, but I can’t make this decision by myself. I need to consult President Du. He is attending a conference in China right now. Can you wait till early February?” I notice he says my English name “June” instead of “Ms. Wang” now. I am glad for this subtle change. “Or you may talk to Chai again, since he is the human resources manager. He might be able to make a decision during President Du’s absence.” Ming is trying to sort out a way to help me without putting himself in a too difficult situation.

I thank Ming for spending more than half of his day to host my first visit. I think he probably has to work overtime during the weekend again to compensate for the time he spends with me today. I am indeed very grateful.

Rejections — Insider and Outsider, Academy and Corporations

Finishing up my first visit to USCR and driving back to the USF campus, I am still pondering what I saw and heard: the touch, the smell, the interior of the USCR offices, the surroundings of the USCR office building, the appearance of the Chinese expatriates from SINOCHEN, their diversified personalities, my earlier exploration of their intercultural work environment, my discovery of their unique “after-work” life, and the many untold stories of their family members. All these make me fascinated with
this project, but I also feel uncertain as to how this journey will go and how challenging it will be for me as a doctoral student researcher trying to explore a multinational corporate world.

I get back to campus at 4:00 p.m., but I want to get hold of Chai in his office before he leaves for the weekend. I dial his number and then the extension. After two rings, Chai’s radio voice appears. Recognizing it’s a call from me, Chai asks: “How was your visit today?”

“It was really good!” I respond. “Thanks for your permission to let me visit USCR. I got a good sense of how to start my research.”

“Glad to hear that!” Chai keeps being a succinct speaker.

“Did I interrupt you from your work or a meeting? Can I talk to you a few more minutes?” I probe because I hear typing sounds in the background.

“Go ahead,” Chai stops typing.

I tell Chai that after much thought in the past few days and especially after today’s visit at USCR, I feel more ready than before to provide him the current scope of my ethnography project. I present to him what I have presented to Ming earlier in the day, including the duration and the subject of the research I plan to conduct in his company. I tell him the reason I want to devote my time to ethnographic research in SINOCHEN subsidiaries. The rationale of conducting this research seems to be convincing to Ming. I hope it can have the same effect on Chai so that Chai can better understand my research motive. I also include examples of the interview questions I showed to Ming. As I keep my presentation going on the phone, I don’t realize Chai has been in a deep silence for a while.
“So, I wonder if I can conduct an in-depth study in your company, to be able to observe the working culture, interview your employees, and attend one or two routine staff meetings. I’d also like to have a few visits to USAC in Forte Meade because I heard your factory is doing very well there. It will be very interesting to know how Chinese expatriates work together with nearly 270 local American employees.” I end my presentation with a further research request, eagerly expressing my thoughts without taking a breath. I can still feel my enthusiasm even after I stop talking, but not until this moment do I realize Chai’s silence is getting deeper.

“Ms. Wang, this is impossible!” Chai speaks up after the long quiet of listening to me. His voice gets serious and a little bid cold.

“Impossible…,” I repeated and am a little stunned.

“It’s impossible for you to conduct an in-depth study in my company like what you described!”

With my hand holding the phone and trembling a little bit, my throat becomes dry. It’s my turn to be silent and Chai to get going.

“We don’t have any sort of a previous policy to let outsiders in and do this kind of in-depth research. It’s impossible for you to attend any of our employee meetings! Who will be responsible if the work routine gets interrupted?” Chai’s tone is very calm yet very firm. I feel deeply hurt by the word “outsider.” But Chai is right. Though we come from the same home country and speak the same native tongue, I am indeed an outsider. All my work experiences in either China or the United States are in the academic field, except for my short-term work experiences at AT&T Optical Fiber in Beijing. I never considered myself an insider of the corporate world. As a doctoral
student researcher, I am not contributing to the company’s business strategy, management philosophy, or operation efficiency directly. My motive is to make sense of how special it is for a Chinese state enterprise to go to multinational status, especially at the end of the twentieth century when globalization has become ubiquitous and happens in a small, quiet place, like Forte Meade, Florida. My Chinese origin drives me to understand what it means for Chinese expatriates to work and live in the United States. The acculturation experiences that Chinese expatriates go through are identifiable with what I have gone through and what I may go through in the future. Maybe Chai considers me a doctoral student researcher is on a totally different path from corporate workers who are restrained by corporate rules and the pressure of profitability.

My thoughts move fast and I can barely concentrate on what Chai continues to say, but I hear his supplement: “Even though the ownership of USAC Holdings, Inc. is by our parent company SINOCHEN in China, ninety percent of the employees in our subsidiary here in Florida are Americans. I think we also need to get permission from American executives.”

I am silent and my brain is frozen.

“We are willing to be as supportive as we can to our surrounding communities including your university, but again, we cannot allow outsiders to do research like this,” Chai continued on the other side of the phone. “If I let you start, what will I do when more people want to do research? At least let me consult President Du. He is in China right now. If he says no, then probably you will have to give up the project.”

“Give up?” I take a deep breath, feeling very discouraged.
I don’t know how I hung up the phone. I guess I did express thanks to Chai again for his help so far, and I probably told him I looked forward to hearing from him after his talk with President Du, who will be back in Florida in February.

The weekend starts, and my graduate students colleagues say good-bye to me in the department’s computer lab. I still feel deep regret. I sit in my chair and think really hard. Is my research plan not strategic enough to approach USAC Holdings, Inc.? Do I look too naïve in front of “them” — SINOCHEM people? Should I prepare myself to be more corporate- savvy by reading more multinational corporation literature? Is it because I did not explain well to them what an ethnography project does? Is it realistic for me as a doctoral student researcher to conduct an in-depth study in a corporation? Normally I see scholars conduct surveys in corporations, and the research results often claim to be adding values to the management strategy or operation. I see fewer student researchers conduct long-term observations and interviews inside the corporate world, especially a multinational corporation that has strict and established rules. If there is a case in which a scholar sits in the corporate world for long-term research, this scholar is most likely sponsored by institutions, or is a more experienced professor/consultant who has more official entrance to the organization, whereas my situation is that I am a “freelance” doctoral student who wants to get into a multinational corporation just because of my passion for studying first generation of Chinese expatriates from a pioneering Chinese multinational corporation.

Does that mean it is more difficult to conduct “freelance” social science research like mine? Does that mean that ethnography is not easily applied to a corporate research setting? Can I conclude that most of the “successful” and “acknowledged” academic
research about multinational corporations is more likely instrumental to improve operation efficiency or business strategy? Does that mean the research like mine, focusing more on the human side of the corporate world is marginal in scholarship? Or perceived as dangerous or threatening to the corporation? What is the relation between the academy and the corporate world? Is it different from discipline to discipline? For social-science scholars, are we confined in the choices for a research site? How can I, as a social-science researcher, apply what I learn from the academic world to the “real world”? Is there a “cultural difference” between academia and the corporate world? Does this “cultural difference” cause Chai as a corporate gatekeeper to obstruct me from conducting my research? Is it just a personality difference between Chai and me? Is it because he is a more rule-oriented person, while I am driven by passion for research? Or is it because both Chai and I are very persistent? Am I determined to conduct this ethnographic research in SINOCHEN’s subsidiaries, while Chai is determined to be a faithful organizational gatekeeper? Is there any “internal cultural difference” that I overlooked? Should I redefine the concept of “intercultural communication”? Coming from the same country and speaking the same mother language does not mean there is no cultural difference. Corporate culture and academic culture can be totally different systems. Did I hold assumptions that my research would go smoothly due to my Chinese origin? Did I show too much enthusiasm about this research? Am I moving too aggressively and too fast? Should I be more patient? What happens if I find out in February that President Du won’t provide me access to the organization? Does that mean I will fail my ethnography class because one-third of the
time would pass by mid-February? Will that be too late for me to find another research subject?

The night curtain falls. I am extremely exhausted after the whole-day visit to USCR as well as the ups and downs of my emotions. I don’t feel hungry yet, thus I use my phone card to call my husband, who works in a telecommunication company on the West Coast. I briefly describe the latest challenges I confronted in my research. I ask how he would look at this from a corporate employee’s perspective. As an engineer who deals a lot with modules and parameters, my husband advises me: “You have to be more patient.”

When I feel low, I go to the library to hide myself for a while. Further library research results regarding Chinese multinational corporations cure my “temporary depression.” The research material says the rapid acceleration of China’s foreign investment in the 1990s has fostered the advent of China-based transnational corporations. Generally, four kinds of Chinese entities operate in the United States (Einhorn, 1996, p. 42-45): (1) State-owned enterprises — such as SINOCHEN, CITIC, and COFCO — which are regarded as affiliates of the central government. As the largest direct Chinese investors in the United States, they are now active in real estate, manufacturing, and finance. (2) Provincial and city companies that have acquired their own American-based trading, manufacturing, investment, and financial companies. (3) Military-owned companies that have a network of American affiliates that import Chinese-made consumer goods, toys, auto parts, and medical equipment. (4) Hybrid companies with blended funding from the Chinese government or military entities with Hong Kong capital, thus blurring their identity (Einhorn, 1996, p. 43).
The reading distracts me from my sense of failure. I tell myself: This is not a bad start! I should keep going. I can still visit Ming’s wife, Jing; I can do further library research; and I can chat with my graduate-student colleagues and my professors for advice.

Driving home from the library, I remember a few months ago someone told me a Chinese student in the Chemical Engineering department did a “co-op” in a chemical fertilizer firm in Forte Meade. My thoughts suddenly click: The chemical fertilizer firm they are referring to could be USAC! The first thing I do after I arrive home is to make phone calls to the several Chinese graduate students who might be able to verify the information. Yes, the company is USAC! The name of the Chinese graduate student who is doing the co-op is Guangyan. Unfortunately, he has left Florida. He finished his master’s degree in late 1996 and went to a university in Louisiana for a Ph.D. program.

It takes me additional weeks to find Guangyan’s current contact information. After speaking with several USF graduate students who had been Guangyan’s friends, I have refreshed my memory about him. I met Guangyan a few times in the library’s cafeteria when he studied at USF. He’s a six-foot-tall young man from Shanghai. Someone told me that he came to the States by himself when he was a teenager and he’s extremely hard working and self-sufficient. He didn’t have a student loan or rely on his parents financially. All the income he had come from a part-time job, a scholarship, and co-op opportunities in USAC. It’s amazing how he managed to finish college, get his master’s degree, and then get into the Ph.D. program.

On February 26, I call Guangyan and introduce myself and explain my desire to conduct research at USCR and USAC. Since my visits to USCR and USAC might be
pending for one or two weeks, I want to interview him to get additional information before I get permission for re-entry to the organization. He immediately agrees to help. Part of the interview script is as follows:

Guangyan: “I had a co-op with USAC twice. The first time was July to December in 1994. The second time was from May to August in 1995. After my graduation, I worked on another project for USAC from May to July in 1996. As a matter of fact, I just had a formal on-site job interview with USAC on January 17.”

January 17! That’s the same day I paid my visit to USCR and then got the rejection from Chai for my request to conduct long-term research in his company! Too bad I missed seeing him. “How did your job interview go?” I ask.

Guangyan: “The interview went very well, however, I am not sure if I will get the job.”

June: “Why?”

Guangyan: “Two reasons: First, they are looking for a chemical engineer who has five to ten years of experiences in phosphate fertilizer. It’s not that easy. It’s the third time they have posted this job advertisement. Their HR manager Chai scheduled the interview for me.”

June: “Which area of this job position are you applying for?”

Guangyan: “It’s a project engineer position to handle projects to improve the productivity. This position reports to one of the vice presidents of USAC.”

June: “What’s the second reason you think you might not be able to get this job?”
Guangyan: “The second reason is just my guess. You know, the USAC factory is totally operated by an American management team, and along with USCR, they report to President Du of USAC Holdings, Inc. The Chinese management team is more involved in marketing, finance, accounting, legal, and human resources, but is less involved in engineering, operations, and production. If I were hired, that American vice president might consider me an ear for the Chinese expatriates in operation area. Well, this is just my guess. Actually, my previous supervisor and the colleagues whom I have worked with during my co-op terms all would like to see me go back.”

June: “If Chinese management wants to get involved in production and operations, why doesn’t SINOCHEN in China send expatriates who have a strong chemical-engineer background and experience in the chemical fertilizer production?”

Guangyan: “It’s not that simple. I am sure they can find senior subject experts from Nanjing or Shanghai Chemical Engineering Institute. But this person might not be young enough to adjust to the local operation, life change, English environment, and long hours in the workshop. It might make more sense to hire someone locally.”

June: “Interesting. Though USAC is a subsidiary of SINOCHEN, it seems that the American management team in USAC has a relative independence and authority in daily operation.”

Guangyan: “Yes. This is because the American management team is more experienced in local operations and production than the Chinese expatriates. The local laws, environmental regulations, and public relations with local media are very complex.”
June: “It would be nice if USAC Holdings, Inc. could sponsor some of the expatriates to get a green card so that they can work here long enough to be the expert on local operations.”

Guangyan: “That’s hard. You know in China’s state multinational enterprise, overseas assignments to West Europe or North America are considered great learning opportunities and generous compensation package. I can imagine there are employees in-line who want to have this kind of opportunity. It won’t be fair to let particular people stay forever and cut off other people’s opportunities.”

June: “That’s probably why the Chinese expatriates feel strongly attached to SINOCHEN due to career growth opportunities. By the way, can you tell me more of your co-op experiences? Did you attend their meetings very often?”

Guangyan: “No, unless there are critical issues that my supervisors want me to know.”

June: “Are these meetings weekly?”

Guangyan: “Yes, the majority of them are. The meetings can be either departmental or interdepartmental including production, maintenance, electrical, etc. The funny thing is there are some ‘special meetings’ just within or among American employees such as the ‘Tuesday afternoon meeting.’”

June: “What is it? A happy hour?” I am curious.

Guangyan: “No. These meetings are not necessarily required by the factory, instead they are the ones volunteered by some medium-level American managers who get along very well. They would often have ‘meetings’ outside the factory.”

June: “You mean in restaurants?” I smile.
Guangyan: “Yeah, or during these people’s fishing activities. Many information are exchanged in those ‘meetings.’” Guangyan laughs too and continues: “My personal feeling is, in a factory like USAC, the engineer’s role is not that important.”

I am a little perplexed by his comments.

Guangyan: “I think the critical part of being an engineer in a company like USAC is to understand how to fit yourself in.”

June: “Huh… Why do you say so?”

Guangyan: “In USAC — I guess this is true everywhere — normally who or whose department has financial power, has the final say. Normally the department heads or superintendents control the budgets, submit their business cases, and get approval from the board of directors. My previous supervisor, a chemical process engineer whose level is similar to superintendent, doesn’t control the budget at all. If he has some great idea for production volume improvement, he has to persuade his peers such as superintendents or plant managers to buy into his ideas.”

*Interesting observation of power issues from a graduate co-op student’s perspective!* I tell myself.

Guangyan: “June, I don’t know how much this is related to your research subject, but my company is very committed to environment protection. Environmental protection is a key for a chemical fertilizer plant that wants to survive in Florida. If I were a chemical engineer at USAC, I would want to focus more on these issues.”

It’s interesting that Guangyan claims USAC as “my company” though he was just a co-op student there. So I say: “Guangyan, I can tell you still feel attached to USAC.” I think I have pushed his hot button by saying so.
Guangyan: “Yes, indeed. USAC provided my very first professional experiences in my field. I tried hard to do a good job! I didn’t tell you at the beginning of our conversation, I was very hopeful to get the PE job but eventually didn’t get it.”

I feel that listening to Guangyan’s story is like peeling onions and now it’s reaching the core.

Guangyan: “Chai called me last Friday. He prepared an offer letter for me a week after my interview because everyone who interviewed me thought me a good fit, except for the vice president whom I would report to if I were hired. Chai handed the offer letter to that VP to get his final approval. That VP said he didn’t observe any leadership ability during my co-op year. That frustrates me. As a co-op student, I was not even required to attend regular staff meetings or to participate in daily decisions, though I had taken my best initiatives for innovations.”

June: “Maybe he didn’t see you providing documentation for these innovations? Don’t feel too bad. Seems everyone else thinks you are well qualified.” I sense Guangyan’s frustration and try to encourage him.

After pausing a second, Guangyan continues: “Honestly, I was indeed a little sad that I didn’t get the job. Accumulatively I spent a year and half in USAC while I was a graduate student, and I had been hoping to build up the opportunity to work in USAC while I did my co-op there. It’s sad to see I was so close to getting this job, but eventually I didn’t. It is so difficult for an international student to find the right job!”

Guangyan’s statements touch my heart. I have a similar feeling too. As a Chinese doctoral student in social science in an American graduate school, it’s not easy for me to find the right research subject for my dissertation. The impact from Chai’s
rejection is no less intense than the rejection Guangyan got from that USAC vice president.

Wrapping up the interview, I wish Guangyan best of luck for his study in his Ph.D. program and career.

**Anticipating the Re-Entry to USAC Holdings, Inc.**

February 4, about three weeks before I interviewed Guangyan, I visited Ming’s home at an apartment complex on Memorial Highway in west Tampa.

Ming rents a nearly fifteen hundred-square-foot, two-bedroom apartment with his wife, Jing, and daughter, Alice. Since I have met Ming, who looks in his mid-thirties, I am very surprised to see that Jing looks as young as an undergraduate student. I praise her young looks. Jing says she actually got her bachelor’s degree in economics five years ago in China, so I estimate she is about twenty-six. Jing is a very pretty and petite woman, about five feet and two inches high. Her beautiful almond-shaped eyes give her a pleasant and bright look. Her infant daughter, Alice, looks a lot more like her father, with a similar forehead, eyebrows, and eyes. She crawls all over. Jing and I have to follow her from the living room to the home office. There is a Pentium PC on the computer desk in the home office. The French glass door generously allows Florida sunset to radiate into the room and makes the content on the computer screen hard to discern. During my first semester in the United States, I was afraid to see either a sunset or an airplane flying across the sky. For some reason, they made me homesick. As time goes by, I have been insensitive about these little triggers, but the sunset color in Jing’s home office suddenly refreshes my nostalgic feeling. Jing prepares for the GMAT exam here in her home office every day, while she takes care of Alice at home. Across the
The hallway of the home office is Ming and Jing’s master bedroom. There is a den outside the master bedroom, and Alice’s crib is put there.

“Ming has wanted to purchase a house since I was pregnant, but I didn’t agree. That’s why we have been renting,” Jing says.

“Do you have concerns in purchasing a house?” I ask.

“Yes, because I don’t know how long we will be here in Florida. Things can change very quickly. We cannot really control the duration of our stay. Ming says, ‘Let’s just purchase a house and enjoy it as long as we can,’ but I am a rather conservative person and don’t know much about the real-estate business. Maybe time will prove me wrong that I don’t purchase a house.” Jing smiles at her self-doubt.

We follow Alice, who crawls back to the living room. Ming is not home yet. I brought a take-out dinner from a Chinese restaurant so that Jing doesn’t have to prepare dinner for all of us. Jing thanks me for being so thoughtful, but she says I don’t have to bring anything when I come to visit again. I smile and tell her not to worry. We put the food in the containers on the dining table and walk back to the living room.

Jing offers me a seat on a leather couch, and also offers a cup of green tea on the coffee table. The green-tea fragrance permeates into the whole living-room area. It gives me a very peaceful and relaxing feeling. Alice is amazingly well behaved as a nine-month-old baby. She entertains herself with various toys on the loveseat next to her mother. Jing also offers me some snacks. They are Chinese cranberry made into the shape of mini fruitcakes. They used to be my favorite snacks when I was a child, but this is the first time I have seen them in cake shape and wrapped in such a nice package. Jing explains to me that President Du brought the green tea and haw fruitcakes from
China. Du travels back and forth between China and the States for face-to-face meetings. Du does the reporting on behalf of USAC Holdings, Inc. to SINOCHEN International Fertilizer Trading Co. Ltd. After he returns from China, he stops by to pay short visits and bring gifts to employees and their families. Mrs. Du, who is a president of another company, is President Du’s spouse, but she also visits sometimes. Jing mentioned that Mrs. Du offers a lot of advice and help especially after Jing delivered baby Alice. It seems that Du and other Chinese expatriates interact fairly closely, like extended families, even though President Du is the boss.

Including President Du, there are eleven Chinese expatriates working at USAC Holdings, Inc. Chai and five other Chinese expatriates live in Lakeland. They commute each day to the factory at Forte Meade. The other six Chinese expatriates (including President Du) live in Tampa. Most of the expatriates are in their early or mid-thirties except for President Du and General Manager Xu. Some families consist of young couples, and some families have young children like Ming’s. General Manager Xu’s twin daughters and Chai’s son are in grade school already. President Du has a teen-age boy. The expatriates who live in Tampa rent homes, but for expatriates who live in Lakeland, SINOCHEN purchased nine houses with a clubhouse so that each expatriate’s family pays very minimum rent to have a single-family house.

Jing heard that Chai rejected my request to conduct ethnographic research at USAC Holdings.

“Don't worry,” Jing tries to comfort me, “Chai is a careful person. As a matter of fact, he’s very easy-going and warm-hearted.”
Everyone (Guangyan, Ming, and Jing) whom I interviewed so far says Chai is nice and warm-hearted. That confuses me because Chai always sounds very distant to me. He subtly builds up his authority as an organizational gatekeeper.

“We sometimes visit Chai’s family. Ming always plays golf with him. Chai always organizes some potluck dinner in the clubhouse over there. Sometimes Chai brings his family to Tampa and they shop here in the malls,” Jing says.

“What does Chai like to shop for?” I am a little curious.

“Name-brand outfits, like Polo’s. Sometimes after shopping, we have dinner together.”

“In addition to the activities among all the expatriates, do you guys interact a lot with local people, both Americans and Chinese, here in Tampa or Lakeland?” I ask.

“No, not very often. I used to go to parental school before I delivered Alice and knew some mothers there. That’s pretty much it. Most of the time, I call Yanming, whose husband, Chen, is the accounting manager in Ming’s company. Chen and Ming received the overseas assignments in Florida about the same time. Yanming and I arrived here at the same time too. We call each other and chat on the phone sometimes.”

It seems that the expatriates and their families prefer to socialize among themselves based on their ties with SINOCHEN. I wonder if this “group orientation” makes them semi-isolated from the rest of American society; and makes a student researcher like me more like an “outsider.”

The challenges of doing ethnography at USAC Holdings, Inc. make the research mysterious and me increasingly curious. A day before I visited Ming’s family, I faxed President Du a letter with a brief research proposal along with a reference letter from
my professor, Dr. Neumann, because I heard President Du was back in Tampa from China as scheduled. I hoped President Du would read my request as soon as he returned.

Ming arrives at home. At the moment he saw me, Ming says: “I went to President Du’s office this morning. He told me he did receive your fax. I don’t know if he’s too busy to read your research outline, but he seemed to have read your letters already. He said he had asked somebody else to take care of your matter. But he didn’t tell me whom you should contact. I didn’t ask him for more details because he was truly busy today. You might wait and be more patient. Sooner or later somebody will contact you.”

Mr. Ming looked tired. It seems unusual because each time I spoke to him on the phone or I met him, he was very energetic. There must be something going on. Does his help on my research add an extra burden on top of his daily burden? Reading my mind very well, Jing is cheery and positive, explaining that Mr. Ming has been swamped with heavy responsibilities. He was depressed about losing a contract with old customers he always trusted like friends or family. This loss reflected badly on Ming.

Ming is rather quiet at the dinner table. Jing does most of the talking: “You know, most of the Chinese contracts between these family-like connections are in oral form instead of in written papers,” Jing says. “Some Western businessmen cannot bear this, but we Chinese depend more on connections and do not want to hurt these old connections. Ming is persuading this customer to resume the oral contract. One ship is about 30,000 tons of DAP (diammonium phosphate) and valued at about $600,000 so you can see that losing a shipping contract means a loss of a lot of money. Ming always
did a good job on domestic sales. President Du appreciates his capability a lot. Now Ming is concerned that President Du would be disappointed. I guess it’s probably why he couldn’t offer you more help to persuade President Du this morning.”

“Yes. I totally understand.” I nod, look at Mr. Ming, and begin to worry for him too. I am trying to figure out what to say to encourage Ming. Ming smiles and says: “Don’t worry. I will figure that out.” (A week later, I called Ming. He says he has persuaded the customer to resume the contract. Ming feels quite relieved then because President Du will never know this had happened. Mr. Ming kept the bad news quiet about ten days until the problem was solved.)

After dinner, Ming starts to feed Alice baby food. He is extremely patient and gentle, as if he feeding a little bird. Peace and joy appear on Ming’s face, and the look of worry fades away. It’s very touching to see a father acting gently. Jing told me one time that Ming had been short-tempered when he was in the same master’s degree program with Dr. Peng many years ago. He broke a nose of his classmate’s when playing soccer. For some reason, both Jing and I thought the story was amusing. Life changed Ming quite a bit, especially after he became a father.

To assure me not to be too concerned about my research, Jing comforts me again: “Don’t worry. I am sure President Du will have somebody respond to you. He just had too many things to take care of: the trading firm, the factory, the chains of command from New York and Beijing. You probably don’t know that the New York office is superior to ours in Florida.”

Seeing me still look uncertain, Jing continues: “I think President Du is a nice person and nice manager. He takes care of employees and families very well. This time
he came back right before the Chinese New Year because he planned to celebrate the holiday with us instead of his relatives and friends in China. Before our annual party, he let Mr. Chai prepare surprising gifts for all the expatriates here and the family members: wives, children, and even parents who come to the U.S. for temporary visits. This year, I received a gold bracelet, and my daughter got many lovely toys. He did this for everyone. When my daughter was born, President Du’s wife paid several visits. She is a very kind, caring, gentle person too. I wish you could also meet her some time later.”

I was very impressed with how personal President Du is and how supportive his wife seems to be. “Did you know President Du before you came to the U.S.?” I inquire, seeking to get more information about what President Du is like.

“Yes, as a matter of fact, my previous supervisor and I had several lunches with him when I worked for the Department of Commerce in China. Back then, I was working in the Agri-Chemical Division, the Farm-Industry Commerce Bureau. At that time, I often joked about my leadership with my family because my organization was hierarchically higher than Ming’s,” Jing smiles and glances at her husband.

I was impressed by Jing’s career in China.

Jing shows me her photo albums. I saw the pictures taken by groups that include Ming’s family, Mr. Chai, President Du, other SINOCHEM employees, and some officials from the Chinese Department of Commerce. The president and CEO of SINOCHEM, Mr. Zheng Dunxun, and his wife were also in Mrs. Ming’s family photo album.

“But now, I am just a housewife,” Mrs. Ming sighs. “It was a rather painful decision to resign my job after Ming was sent to the U.S. Ming couldn’t predict how long
he would work in Florida. So, a year after we were apart, we made the decision that I
would come here to join him. It was not just me who has to make such a difficult decision.
A lot of Ming’s colleagues, their spouses have stories similar to mine.”

“Jing, maybe I can schedule some other time with you. I would love to listen to
your stories and other expatriates’ spouses’ stories. If you don’t mind, I would love to
know them through you,” I request sincerely.

“Sure. I will be glad to help as much as I can. I am sure they want to know you
too. I have mentioned you a few times to some of them already. They would love to
go to graduate school like you do,” Jing says.

“I will try my best to help.” I say and take out the China Florida Linkage
Institute Scholarship application from the School of Business at USF and hand it to
Jing. “Feel free to share this application form with your friends. This is a good tuition
scholarship if you don’t get assistantship from your department.”

Jing and I spend some time filling in the application form before I leave her
home.

Official Permission for the Research

A weekend passed. On February 10, I decide to call President Du myself.
Because I was very uncertain about his reply, my throat became dry again. On the
phone, I hear President Du’s voice: “I reviewed your letters. Yes, you may conduct your
research in the company. I have already made arrangements for you. You may
immediately contact Mr. Helms in our Fort Meade office. American ways of
management are different from the ways of our Chinese.” Mr. Du’s tone was pleasant
yet decisive. People in power know how to cut back the undesired bargaining. He
doesn’t mention anything about the trading firm USCR in Tampa, but I feel I have no chance to ask him why. I assume he prefers me to have more contact with the USAC factory in which the executives and employees are predominantly Americans. Before he hangs up, he provides me a “1-800” number to call Fort Meade in order to save me some long-distance cost. I sense that President Du is indeed a thoughtful person. I express my appreciation for his support, but I don’t want to abuse his consideration and generosity.

Four days later, I received a letter from my new contact person, Mr. Helms, the vice president of USAC, the manufacturing part of the Holdings, Inc. The letter read:

February 14, 1997

Re: Doctoral Paper — "Ethnographic Research"

Dear Ms. Zhong:

Your letter dated January 22 to Mr. R.L. Du, president of USAC Holdings, was forwarded to me for consideration and response. Let me first congratulate you on your accomplishment at USF and your interest in our SINOCHEN family of companies.

I regret, however, that we will not be able to grant your request for a semester-long study of cross-cultural organizational issues at this Chinese-owned subsidiary of SINOCHEN. We are willing, however, to meet with you to discuss your research of this topic and particularly our experiences at USAC Holdings and subsidiaries since their formation, or acquisition in 1989 by the China National Chemicals Import and Export Corporation.

I would like to suggest that you call me at your earliest convenience to set up an appointment for this interview. I am very interested in your topic and confident that we can contribute greatly to your research. Based upon the details covered in this initial interview, I may be able to recommend other interviews, as appropriate, that might help you complete your semester requirement for this paper.

I look forward to meeting you, and please feel free to invite Dr. Neumann, or any other associates you think may contribute to your research. Like-wise, I will invite Mr. Chai to join us. Until then, I remain,

Very truly yours,
I immediately make a phone call to Mr. Helms. When he hears my voice, he stops me: “Wait, let me guess — this must be Ms. Wang. See — I am right. I have been expecting your call. Is this the first time you called me? What? Third time? Oh, what a shame. I’ve had consecutive meetings since Wednesday. So, you received my letter… That’s good. When is the earliest time you can meet with us? How about lunch time next Tuesday? Is that OK?”

Mr. Helms’s openness welcomes me. I feel encouraged to inform him of my situation: “Yes, Mr. Helms, I look forward to meeting with you soon, but my best day is Friday. This semester I have school commitments every weekday except for Friday afternoon. But my schedule does not discourage my interest in visiting your company.”

I feel that Mr. Helms is listening attentively on the other side of the phone. It seems that my enthusiasm and difficulties gain his sympathy. He offers: “Ms. Wang, I think I can drive to your campus next Tuesday during lunch time. I hope that helps for the beginning.”

“But, there would be a three-hour round trip from Fort Meade to the campus! Are you sure?” I ask, a little bit overwhelmed by his unexpected support.

“I know. Don’t worry about it, Ms. Wang. You may send me a fax for directions. And I will meet you Tuesday at noon.”

“Thanks!” I am surprised that an organization executive would go out of his way for a researcher, which is not a typical case if it were in Chinese society.
On February 25, a bright, warm Tuesday morning, I mentally prepare for my meeting with Mr. Ernie Helms and Mr. Chai while grading students’ exams in my office. Before the day, I had forewarned my graduate-student cohorts and the department secretary, Connie, that I would have VIPs visiting. The graduate students in my ethnography class already knew about my relationship with my visitors. Since Chai referred to me as an “outsider” to their company, my classmate, doctoral student Emmett Winn, humorously said to me: “Don’t worry, June. I will let you know when they arrive here. It will be easy to tell they are ‘outsiders’ to our department. If President Du is also coming to visit, you can use my truck to tour him around the campus.” I laughed and appreciate his humorous support, but meanwhile I was hoping my second entry to USAC Holdings, Inc. would go more smoothly.

When Mr. Helms and Chai show up in the department’s front desk, two graduate students stop by my office to report: “Hey, June, they are here!” My office is only ten feet away from the department front desk. I walk out quickly. Mr. Helms and Chai stand there and look rather friendly. Mr. Helms shakes my hands warmly: “Hi, Madame Wang, we made it!” Chai shakes my hands very courteously. Chai has a meticulous appearance. He dresses like a manager who works in a big bank in the places like Hong Kong or Japan, with a pair of very fine spun-gold glasses, hair combed neatly, and shirt ironed without one wrinkle. Chai seems to be in his mid-thirties and looks younger and thinner than in his photo in the USAC Holdings, Inc.’s brochure. Jing says Chai has lost a lot of weight recently since he was working hard to practice golf under bright sunshine during the weekends. Chai doesn’t look as solemn as he sounds on the phone,
but he’s definitely not as outgoing as Mr. Helms, who looks in person exactly as he does on the company’s brochure. He might be in his mid-fifties, with a bit of gray hair and a fair complexion. Since they need to leave in the early afternoon, we decide to have lunch together while we chat.

We sit down in the fourth-floor restaurant at the University Center. The waiter provides us a quiet corner table. I prepare a stack of questions and notes I wrote the night before, with the hope that better preparation would help me gain more subsequent visits and interviews. Before I start my questions, Mr. Helms pulls out a folder. I glance at it and find my letters are neatly paper-clipped with other unfamiliar documents. Mr. Helms removes my letters from the top and passes me two pamphlets of USAC Holdings, Inc. One is in Chinese and the other is in English. I got the English one from Ming, but this is the first time I have seen the Chinese version.

“Look at this, Ms. Wang,” Mr. Helms says as he opens the pamphlets and compares the first pages in the two languages. “They say the same thing, but obviously, the Chinese language occupied a smaller space. You can tell how efficient Chinese is compared with English.”

“Yeah, that’s right, I never thought about this before,” I acknowledge Mr. Helms’s observation. Mr. Chai adds: “There are about five thousand Chinese idioms. Every idiom represents a classical story in Chinese history. Ernie, you have to read pages of translations in order to learn only one.”

“That will take me forever! Chinese culture is incredible!” Mr. Helms says in sincere admiration. “By the way, Madame Wang, would you please pass the pamphlet back to me, there is important information I need to point out for you.”
“Which one? The Chinese or the English?” I ask purposely.

“Oh, I wish my Chinese were that advanced!” Mr. Helms bursts into laughter, so does Chai.

I smile too, look at them and think Mr. Helms seems easier to talk to than most Chinese executives at his age (about fifties). Most Chinese officials consider silence and efficiency of words to be in direct proportion to power. The more seniority (age and position) you have, the more silent and efficient in talking. Mr. Chai, who is in his mid-thirties, having both Chinese and American upbringings, has been acculturated in knowing how to appropriate tacit-ness and articulation. Raised in China, I even have to drain myself in order to understand people from the same culture. Being able to communicate in both a high-context and a low-context communication requires sophisticated knowledge and technique. Hall (1976) differentiates between low-and high-context communication. High-context communication occurs when “most of the information is either in the physical context or internalized in the person, while very little is in the coded, explicit, transmitted part of the message” (Hall, 1976, p. 79).

Mr. Helms is very proud he is one of the people who may provide a lived history of USAC Holdings, Inc.: “I witnessed the acquisition process of USAC Holdings, Inc. In 1989, SINOCHEN acquired U.S. Steel to build up U.S. Agri-Chemicals Corporation (USAC), which is now a three-hundred-people chemical fertilizer factory. I was an executive of U.S. Steel. Two years later, I saw USCR (U.S. Chem Resources, Inc.), a trading subsidiary, formed especially to satisfy China's domestic demand for diammonium phosphate and to market the USAC’s finished products internationally.
Madame Wang, when you come to Fort Meade next time, I will be glad to provide your more details.”

Mr. Ernie Helms’ comment gives me an opening to tell my research interest. I tells Mr. Helms that in addition to the acquisition process, I will be interested in doing research on the following questions: (1) After SINOCHEN took ownership, how was the transitioning of management and operation going in the company? (2) How are the Chinese expatriates doing in their American colleagues’ eyes? (3) How difficult do the Chinese expatriates find it to adjust to the new work environment and cultural context? (4) How does communication (top to down) work in USAC Holdings, Inc.? (5) How does communication between the companies (USAC and USCR) within USAC Holdings, Inc. work? (6) Can I interview some working-level people including secretaries or blue-collar workers? (7) Can I attend one or two routine business meetings just to observe how the decisions have been made in a culturally mixed group?

To my surprise, Mr. Helms agrees to provide me all the information except for my last two requests. He says human resources can answer my first five questions and he will be glad to help arrange interviews for me. For my request of number 6, he needs some time to consider it, as he may have to limit the number of blue-collar workers I can meet. For request 7, his answer is no, but his rejection is very subtle. He says it would be very inconvenient for me to attend the appropriate meeting(s) because I have doctoral-level seminars and teaching obligations almost every day. Then, I propose that I can visit them once at the beginning of March, and again a few times during the week of spring break when I have more free time for conducting the research. Mr. Helms seems very willing to consider and accommodate this schedule.
Toward the end of the lunch meeting, Mr. Helms grants me subsequent visits at USAC. While we are discussing the exact time for interviews, Mr. Chai quietly pays the lunch for the three of us. I thank Chai for doing that and tell him I should have paid for it. He says, “Don’t worry.” The first meeting with Chai confirms all the impressions I have had when communicating with him on the phone — very knowledgeable, extremely professional, always appropriate, subtly thoughtful, constantly righteous, yet very distant too.

On February 27, Chai sent a fax to my department. The fax was filled in a standard fax form. The italicized parts (with my contact information and the message to me) were hand-filled by Chai. I have to admit that Chai’s handwriting is the neatest I have ever seen.

U.S. AGRI-CHEMICALS CORPORATION
3225 STATE ROAD 630 WEST
FT. MEADE, FLORIDA 33841
941-285-8121

This message is intended only for the use of the individual or entity to which it is addressed and may contain confidential information. If you have received this communication in error, please notify us immediately by telephone and return the original to us at the number listed below.

FACSIMILE TRANSMITTAL COVER SHEET
Date: 2-27-97

Please deliver the following one pages (including this cover).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>To: Zhong (June) Wang</th>
<th>FROM: Chai</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Co. U.S.F.</td>
<td>U.S. AGRI-CHEMICALS CORPORATION</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DEPT.</td>
<td>PHONE #: 941-285-8121 EXT 102</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fax#: (813) 974-6817</td>
<td>FAX #: 941-285-9654</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Original Documents will ___ will not √ follow by mail</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Message:
Hi, Wang Zhong,
We have received your letter. It was nice talking to you Tuesday afternoon. We will be expecting you next Monday at 1:30 pm in our office. I am sorry I will not be around. But Mr. Helms will have the information you need and may include a
few other people in that meeting. I will be back next Thursday and will be happy
to set up another meeting for you if necessary.
Let us know if you need help for directions.
Have a nice weekend.
Chai

First Visit to Factory — USAC at Forte Meade

Mr. Helms agreed to let me pay three visits to U.S. Agri-Chemicals in March.
For my first trip, I got permission bring one of my graduate-student colleagues, Shane
Moreman, who taking the same ethnography class.

On March 3, we depart the USF campus at 10:00 a.m. in order to arrive at Forte
Meade before 11:30 a.m. I plan to have a quick lunch at Forte Meade so that I can have
some buffer time before the 1:30 p.m. meeting with Mr. Helms.

Leaving the front exit of the USF campus at East Fowler Avenue, we take I-75
south and then get onto FL-60 east. After an hour drive, we reach Bartow. It gets more
and more rural when we drive closer to our destiny. By the time we pass through
Bartow, I have already seen several chemical fertilizer plants on the sides of the road.
At the time we approach State Road 630 W, we can barely see any commercial or
residential areas anymore. Now I understand why SINOCHEN purchased nine houses
for Chinese expatriates and their families in Lakeland. Before we turn west onto State
Road 630 W, I look around. There is only one obvious restaurant on the road. It’s
Hungry Howie’s Pizza. I apologize to Shane for not being able to treat him to a nicer
lunch for his companionship. Shane laughs: “That’s fine!”

The size of the inside of Hungry Howie’s Pizza is humble, about 10 x 10 square
feet. Shane and I place our order. Then we hold two big cups of soft drink and sit on an
old wood bench outside. Next to the bench is an unmatched old wood table. Neither
Shane nor I can tell the original paint colors on either of them. Our pizza is finally ready. Shane picks one slice and has a bite: “It’s not bad.” I laugh and promise to compensate Shane with a better lunch later. After lunch, it’s about 12:30 p.m. I straighten my back and say: “OK, Shane, let’s take some rest. Hopefully in front of the nice people in USAC, we won’t look as if we just got out from Hungry Howie’s.”

At 1:15 p.m., Shane and I drive on the long driveway toward the entrance of USAC. One hundred meters away from the entrance, there is an 8- x 11-foot sign on the side: “BUCKLE UP. GOOD EMPLOYEES ARE HARD TO FIND.” Thirty meters away from entrance, there is another sign, about 6 x 6 feet:

“NOTICE: ALL VESSELS AND CONFINED SPACES IN ALL U.S.-CHEMICALS CORP. FACILITIES ARE SUBJECT TO REQUIRE PERMITS BEFORE ENTRY. DO NOT ENTER ANY SUCH SPACE FOR ANY REASON WITHOUT THE ENTRY PERMIT.

FOR QUESTIONS AND DETERMINATION OF CONFINED SPACE ENTRY PERMIT REQUIRED, SEE THE APPROPRIATE DEPARTMENT SUPERVISOR.”

The USAC offices are located in a one-story building, behind which, in the distance, is the huge chemical plan infrastructure equipment including pressure tanks, vessels, process reactors, storage tanks, surge tanks, pollution-control equipment, and electrical power lines, etc. We enter the lobby of the office building. A set of three-seat sofas is on the east side of the lobby. Above the sofas, there is a wall carpet weaved of the image of China’s Great Wall. The west side of the lobby has a receptionist’s desk. Since the meeting starts at 1:30 p.m., I wait on the sofa after I sign in.

Mr. Helms punctually calls the receptionist at 1:30 p.m. Learning we’ve arrived, he immediately shows up in the lobby and leads Shane and me to his office in
the west wing of the office building. The offices of the factory in Fort Meade are spacious, one-story architecture. The Human Resources Department and Mr. Helms’s office are close to each other. Then there are the other functioning offices including USAC president’s office, offices for accounting, engineering and technique services, chemical operations, and business management. After getting us seated, Mr. Helms steps out to order Chinese tea for us. I look over my notes quickly and then scan Mr. Helms’s office. The wood-paneled office walls have a few Chinese art crafts and some SINOCHEN and USAC plaques on them. On one side of the wall there is a framed Chinese calligraphy dedicated to Mr. Helms. In the frame, Mr. Helms’s name was translated into Chinese: “洋姆先生.” On the other side of the wall there is a big world map. The country facing us is China instead of the United States. A paperweight globe sits on the table too. Mr. Helms makes his office symbolically “global.” Behind his office chair on a windowsill sit pictures of his family. His daughter (he points her out to us later) is posed with her husband and children. Shane whispers to me: “June, the photos look like the package deal offered at Kmart for $19.99 …” I stop Shane. I am worried that his sense of humor will lessen the respectful atmosphere I want to create for my interview with Mr. Helms.

Mr. Helms comes back with a middle-aged woman whose name is Beverly Bridgeman. She offers cups of tea to Shane and me and quietly closes the door for the three of us.

**Stories of Acquisition**

Mr. Helms starts our conversation by showing the organization chart of USAC Holdings, Inc. The chart is more detailed than what Mr. Chai explained to me before.
USAC (U.S. Agri-Chemicals Corporation) and USCR (U.S. Chem Resources, Inc.) report to USAC Holdings, Inc., which President Du is in charge of. USAC at Forte Meade has a few main functions: human resources, accounting, engineering and technical services, chemical operations, and business management.

“Well, before I joined USAC’s fertilizer business, my job was in the steel-making business, and I was director and general manager for labor relations. This area of specialty here,” Mr. Helms points to the organization chart under the human-resources domain and continues: “I negotiated with labor unions all over the United States for U.S. Steel Corporation. Just before joining their fertilizer division, I was the chief spokesman for the United Mine Workers. I would negotiate the contracts between the industry and the United Mine Workers mining coal throughout the United States, a fairly large union. My role was representing the interest of the companies. I finished that assignment in 1996 and, in the earlier part of 1997, U.S. Steel decided to get out of the coal business, and I later ended up in the fertilizer division.”

June: “What was the size of U.S. Steel Corp. at that time?”

Mr. Helms: “While it’s much smaller than what it had been in the 1960s and 1970s, it’s still a very large corporation. It ranks at the top-20 largest corporations in the U.S.”

June: “So you were one of the earliest founders of USAC after SINOCHEM acquired it from U.S. Steel! What kinds of differences on operational practices do you see in this American-based Chinese multinational corporation compared with the purely American company you worked with before?”
Mr. Helms: “When SINOCHEN acquired USAC, they were adventuring in foreign soil — purchasing a foreign asset that was going to be run not as a Chinese company but as an American company under American law. It’s important that they have a company that is run impeccably clean under laws governing corporate stature in this country: according to financial standards and our labor laws with respect to non-discrimination of any kind: race, sex, age, nationality, religion, veteran status, handicapped status, etc. In addition, for a fertilizer business here in Florida, you must abide by all the environmental regulations. Literally, the Chinese have adopted our operation philosophy here in the United States.”

June: “In adopting an American philosophy of operations, what did you see as the most difficult part for Chinese to adapt to at the beginning?”

Mr. Helms: “The Americans who have always been the senior executives of this company (including when it was a division of U.S. Steel) are all Americans who have capitalist hearts and whose decisions were made by economic considerations — profit, profit, profit, and pay to the stock holders. SINOCHEN, on the other side, is the government-run company that has an entirely different philosophy. Money and making money are important, but for SINOCHEN located in China, making money seems less important than at its manufacturing subsidiary here in Florida. In fact, in China, one of the things that is changed and reformed is that the state-run companies have been cleaned up. They are being modernized, globally influenced, and infused by more and more well-educated young managers. Facing global competition, state-enterprise employees have to work and produce. At one time at the state-owned company in China, you couldn’t get fired or laid off. If you were not productive, or were slow at
your job, you would not be promoted, but you might still have the job. For Western enterprise in a capitalist society, that will never do. If you don’t produce, you are gone, and you’re fired, or you will be disciplined. You need to understand that we don’t owe you a job; what you owe is a good day’s work for a fair day’s pay. That’s how a company succeeds here. It took SINOCHEM a while to gain insight of this. With meetings I have to go to, I would say that ‘I have a discipline meeting to go to. I have employees who are not performing in accordance to our rules, and we are going to decide what forms of disciplines are appropriate.’ Now, let me go back one step, I don’t want to make this sound too harsh. We don’t discipline very often. Our employees in a teamwork atmosphere don’t have to be disciplined, but there are occasionally infractions of regulations and rules that do require discipline.”

Seeing me intrigued, Ernie continues: “Now stop and think about what you read in the paper day in and day out about the Chinese government’s philosophies giving human rights. I don’t prefer to know one way or another how things were carried out there in China. Seems to me it’s worth questioning if our Chinese owners at SINOCHEM had difficulty with causing an employee to lose his job because he wasn’t working up to some standard that was considered acceptable. The Chinese management was very uncomfortable with this American management philosophy from the very beginning. It took much debate, then discussion. SINOCHEM believed what they need to do is to have a representative of SINOCHEM in the top position of this company. Mr. Du is currently that top person.”

June: “When did Mr. Du arrive?”
Mr. Helms: “Mr. Du has been here about five and a half years. He came over in February 1991, and USCR was formed in November of 1991. He and I staffed this company and recruited different people. He recruited people from China, and I recruited people from the U.S. He’s been the president of USCR too. Again the Chinese philosophy is that the top person of each subsidiary would be a China man. However, for the factory here in Forte Meade, SINOCHEM does not feel comfortable running it because SINOCHEM overall is a huge trading firm and does not necessarily have expertise in manufacturing and production in the U.S. So we have hired an American who has much more experience in the phosphate business. It was my job to hire him. We had three presidents in USAC one after another. The last one came in October 1991. That’s Mr. Malcolm Scott, and he has been here since then.”

“The person who hires senior people here is me,” Ernie uses a pencil to point to the organization chart when he says “here.” “I am not here. I am somewhere up here in between,” he points to the white space of the organization chart. “I am hiring those folks. That’s the nature of my corporate job,” Mr. Helms sounds like not only a founder of USAC Holdings, Inc. but also a liaison between the Chinese and Americans. Shane later reminds me about my professor Dr. Eisenberg’s joke about organization charts: “All the important stuff is in the white spaces.”

Mr. Helms’s pencil stays on the organization chart: “Mr. Du is my boss. But below that part of the organization, there is a blend of Chinese and Americans. In our factory, the majority of the Chinese expatriates are young cadres of well-educated businesspeople who are coming over to learn these particular functional areas: human resources, accounting, chemical processing, manufacturing, transportation or logistics.
These young Chinese expatriates are top performers chosen from SINOCHEN and they are expected to be the future executives of SINOCHEM. I believe one of the reasons that SINOCHEN acquired this company is to have a solid training base.”

June: “I would love to learn more of Chinese expatriates’ learning and working experiences here in a new cultural context, but before reaching there, I will let you continue your thoughts of the two different ‘philosophies’ of the Chinese company and the American company. How do you see the ‘entirely different philosophies’ reflected in decision-making?”

Mr. Helms: “At least from the beginning of 1989, SINOCHEN didn’t have the ‘tried and trued’ management philosophy. Since SINOCHEN is a government enterprise, they are used to having the decisions made by some hierarchy and approved by different levels of structures down at MOFTEC (Minister of Foreign Trade and Economic Corporations), and they carried out and implemented them. SINOCHEN is very much controlled by government wishes and a centralized plan. On the other hand, in the American corporate structure, the higher authority is stockholders’ wishes carried out by a board of directors and passed down to the chief executive officers and chief operating officer. The entire decision-making process is totally free of government control.”

June: “How do SINOCHEN people compromise the government-owned nature of the parent company and the free-enterprise nature in this subsidiary?”

Mr. Helms: “Traditionally, SINOCHEN is a trading company with a government hat; there are no manufacturing experiences abroad, so it’s impractical to say that SINOCHEN came here with an already well-incorporated Western way of
operation. SINOCHEM came and said: ‘We are the owners and want to do business in a Western society; we don’t have a lot of experience but we’d like to learn. We are going to hold you Americans responsible for running the business in accordance with the laws in your country, and with a goal in mind to make it successful for both yourself and SINOCHEM.’ That’s the link and the bridge. They recognize it wouldn’t work if they tried to change and modify western business folks in a Western free-enterprise environment. Therefore, they allow the western folks to run the business in a free-enterprise capitalist society and they study it. They take the rewards from that. The profit we make has paid off the debt they had when they purchased this company. They take some of the capital back to China for the good use of other SINOCHEM adventures. So when you look at your question of what some of the cultural differences are that I see here, what I look at more than anything else is what the Chinese ownership has meant to this American company, say from other foreign ownership of American companies. The Swedish came over, they are free enterprise; the British, Canadians, the Mexicans came over, they are all free enterprise. Even to this day in the U.S.S.R. [At that time Ernie still used USSR instead of Russia] there is a sense of reform and a free-enterprise system to be developed there. SINOCHEM has an entirely different ideology, but they are wise enough to understand: ‘We are not trying to change your way of doing business, we want to learn from that and retain what we believed in our system.’ And that worked.”

June: “It’s fascinating that Chinese people are learning and adapting the capitalist environment here. You mentioned that SINOCHEM let an American president
run USAC, but are there any Chinese expatriates involved in the operation and production side?”

Mr. Helms: “Yes. You probably heard about Chen Ming-Lei. From the Chinese side, he is the vice president dealing with technical operations here in USAC. He joined SINOCHEN in the late 1980s. Before that he had been working in the Shanghai Institute of Chemical Research (I believe this is the correct title). He’d been the senior research engineer in chemical processes in fertilizers. SINOCHEN recruited him around 1992-1993 to ask him to come to this operation (USAC) to further his research techniques, to understand the chemical process, and to make whatever contribution he can make here. In the longer scheme of things for SINOCHEN, the Chinese understand they need to have a presence in China and sell products they can manufacture in China.”

“What do you see the biggest challenge the Chinese ownership has to deal with here day to day?” I ask.

Mr. Helms gently pats the table: “Good question. Let’s talk about that.”

**Challenges on Environmental Preservation**

Mr. Helms sips tea and continues: “Remember I mentioned to you about the ‘Domestic Fertilizer Distribution and Manufacturing Plan’ in China? Chen Ming-Lei is the person from SINOCHEN who has worked on this. By retrofitting the Nanjing fertilizer plant as their joint-venture partner, SINOCHEN can receive the products we make here and further process them to make refined fertilizers in Nanjing’s plant. Chen Ming-Lei is able to implement this ‘domestic plan.’ In addition, Chen Ming-Lei’s primary responsibility here is to engage in research on process control and refining the chemical process that is inherent in our operation to make sulfuric gas.”
When touching this chemical process subject, Mr. Helms seems enthusiastic in talking about it. “The research on chemical process is not sparkling. There are not a lot of new discoveries that give a company some edge over competitors. The process has been well known, well studied, and engineered, but one critical thing is how to treat the by-products. I wonder if you heard about phosphogypsum?”

“Phosphogypsum?” I must show a perplexed look.

Ernie explains: “It’s a calcium sulfate dehydrate (gypsum) produced by the reaction of phosphate rock with sulfuric acid during the process of producing phosphoric acid, the major ingredient of phosphate fertilizers. Gypsum is a common inorganic compound with many uses, e.g., as a low-grade, cheap fertilizer for truck farmers for tomatoes, strawberries, potatoes, beans, etc., but the term phosphogypsum is used to specify the particular gypsum by-product arising from the acidulation of phosphate rock. Phosphogypsum forms an acidic leachate initially as it absorbs moisture, and it contains trace amounts of many mineral impurities that accompany phosphate rock, including radium. Currently the EPA (Environmental Protection Agency) conservatively limits the uses of phosphogypsum (e.g., for the agricultural use I just mentioned) to material with radium levels less than 10 pCi/gm. This has preempted the use of the hundreds of millions of tons of phosphogypsum that have accumulated in hundreds of acres of gypsum stacks over the last 50 years, many over 200 feet high. People call them the ‘tallest mountains in Florida.’ I am going to show you them. Let’s walk out a little bit.”

Mr. Helms, Shane, and I walk out of the office building. Mr. Helms points to one gypsum stack in front of us: “These are the by-products from manufacturing
sulfuric gases. The process of refinement is Mr. Chen’s expertise area. He made minor refinements to the process, which increases the amount of phosphate retained in the acid manufactured in the products. For the materials you see here, there are currently 20 stacks like this in Central Florida. It’s a source of much controversy among the state government and most environmental groups.”

As we speak, President Du appears at a 50-foot distance. President Du looks hurried and a bit befuddled. Mr. Helms is waving: “Hello, Mr. Du! I want you to meet with Madame June Wang!”

President Du comes near, and I can see that he looks thinner than his portrait on the USAC Holdings, Inc. brochure. His hair is wind-blown, and it seems he’s been outside on the factory’s grounds for a while.

“Hi, Mr. Du, how are you?” I shake President Du’s hand.

Shane: “Hi, I am Shane Moreman, June’s classmate.”

Mr. Helms: “We were just talking about the by-products, and I want to show them the gypsum stack. Were you coming to see me?”

President Du: “No, I have to go for a meeting in USCR in Tampa. Will you be here the next few days?”

Mr. Helms: “Just this afternoon. I am leaving for Idaho tomorrow morning. I will see you when I get back.”

“All right.” President Du pulls two business cards out of his coat pocket. The card he hands to me has the Chinese side facing up, and the one he hands to Shane has the English side facing up. Shane later tells me he is fascinated by President Du’s subtlety on details.
Mr. Helms explains that he and I will talk more in the afternoon and that I will come back next week to meet other people. I express my thanks to Du in Chinese and tell him that I appreciate all the support he has given. Shane looked intrigued when I spoke Chinese with Du. He later tells me that my vocal pitch is higher in Chinese compared with my vocal pitch in English.

President Du seems to be truly in a hurry. He shakes hands again with both Shane and me, and he wishes us luck for the research and leaves.

Mr. Helms, Shane, and I walk back to the office. Mr. Helms continues: “As I mentioned, these stacks, once taken out of service, the state has regulations on them. The gypsum stack has to be covered by a geosynthetic liner so that no water can penetrate. The EPA is concerned that the acid there can contaminate Florida drinking water or allow air-borne emissions from the gypsum stack, so it has to be covered with earth so that it can be a green mountain instead of being a gray mountain. After reclamation, there is no air-borne emission and no dust. How long have you been here in Florida, Shane?”

“Since last August,” Shane replies but is not sure why Ernie asks.

Mr. Helms: “Well, you probably didn’t hear about this before. There was an incident here. In 1994, one of the stacks in a competitor’s plant, IMC Global, a very big company, had a sinkhole in the ground under their gypsum stack. Sinkholes are prevalent in Florida — a sinkhole could drop you to 200 feet, —and the whole stack collapsed into it.”

Shane: “There must be a big public-relations situation there…”
Mr. Helms: “Yes. These are the sorts of things we have to deal with day in and day out in our industry. This is a basic industry not an attractive industry. What we do to the earth is we dig it up and make it like a moonscape. It used to be nice pastoral land with citrus products, but when we bite it and get phosphate, it winds up being a very ugly piece of property. We were asked to return it back into a green pastoral land, a cattle ranch, or a recreation facility, like fishing lakes, etc. But between the time we bite it and return to that, it’s a public-relations nightmare, and it’s quite a battle day in and day out. Actually the *Tampa Tribune* today (March 3, 1997) has a feature story on the phosphate industry in their business section, on the ‘slaying pot,’ what they called gypsum waste material.” Mr. Helms raises his voice a little bit: “Those press people just called two things we deal with day in and day out by very negative names!”

A pause ends Mr. Helms’ upset feeling about the press. “I can see the environmental preservation is critical for you to survive in the industry,” I comment.

“Yes, without building that new gypsum stack, we would have shut down the operation, which is a USD 250 million complex, and 300 people would have lost their jobs. We gained the permits and spent USD 22 million to build up the gypsum stack within our property so that we can continue our operations. This USD 22 million is one of the costs that SINOCHEM has to invest.

The environmental concerns that Mr. Helms talked about help me to understand one of the multiple challenges that SINOCHEM people have to face in having this manufactory in Florida. However, for the controversy of the by-product treatment of the fertilizer business, it could take another whole dissertation because of the length of the discussion. I say to Ernie: “Now, I can see your point. Local environmental regulations,
pressures from media, and financial complexity are all issues that SINOCHEM expatriates have to face in their daily operations. Those challenges must be the part of their acculturation experiences.”

**Chinese Expatriates’ Entry to New Workplace and Community**

Now I come to one of my favorite questions: “How do Chinese expatriates at the working level adapt themselves into the American workplace and community?” I ask.

Mr. Helms seems to like the slight switch of the subject too. Below is his story of how the Chinese expatriates and their families got settled in the Lakeland community:

“You know, Madame Wang, from the beginning of this subsidiary in 1989, SINOCHEM realized clearly they were foreign owners coming to the areas where they had little or no experience. They wanted to take a quiet and passive role in the community. One of the early decisions they were faced with was that they expected to have a small group of Chinese expatriates in society here. That group might grow in numbers, as I said, anywhere near twenty-five today, but initially there were only four to five.

One of their early decisions was where to house this growing group of Chinese expatriates who came to this country. Where should they establish residences and what types of residences? Should it have close confinement like a commune? Or should it be in the countryside with all the other residences here in Polk County? Someone said that maybe we should take some of the land that SINOCHEM now owns and build a small community for the existing and incoming expatriates. If you feel that you are ‘the outsiders’ in this country, you would be most comfortable in or among your own kind. We sat to talk about this for a while, and I happened to be one of the decision-makers. My input was
(I believe my input leads to the right decision today): Don’t build a wall around yourself. Your culture is too rewarding, too enriched, there is something to be shared, move out into the community. We can take a community where new homes are being built with a school system and shopping areas, and we can buy several houses and disperse the Chinese expatriates throughout that community.

In this way, the Chinese expatriates’ group can be together and also can be part of the American community. My input got accepted. We bought nine pieces of property. We currently are using six of them, but at one time we used all of the nine. The area where Chinese expatriates live is called Island Walk, located in south Lakeland. Their children go to the Lakeland public school system. They ride school buses, just like everybody else. A number of children who grew up here are going to college. Some of them went to USF, and one of them graduated from Boston University while their parents were assigned here. They really moved out into the community. It’s interesting. You can drive through Island Walk to Mr. Chai’s house. His next-door neighbor is a World War II veteran who flies American flags every day. They play golf together. You know, it really becomes a melting pot of one civilization or culture with basically Southern redneck citizens. I don’t mean that in a derogatory sense, but that’s exactly what happened. We felt it would happen. There was a reaching out by both cultures. It’s common when you send people out to a foreign place that they are comfortable among themselves and remain clannish or communal. We don’t want to see this. Instead, we encourage them to assimilate into the inhabitants or the residents of the area. That works beautifully.”

Mr. Helms is very proud of the decision he made years ago. His interest in working with Chinese and caring for Chinese expatriates sounds genuine. It gives me a
warm feeling as a Chinese doctoral student and interviewer. I am intrigued and want to go further with this topic: “So, Mr. Helms, when you mentioned it is a ‘reaching out by both cultures,’ can you tell me more about how Chinese expatriates and their American colleagues reach out to each other?”

Mr. Helms: “As I mentioned, one reason that SINOCHEN acquired USAC is to utilize it as a solid training base for future SINOCHEN executives to acquire the skills of global enterprise. Currently here at USAC, we have about a half-dozen Chinese expatriates coming here to learn the free-enterprise system, accounting, engineering, chemical production, and personnel. Those Americans who have made their life career in the fertilizer business can impart their knowledge in their own way — sitting down over lunch, coffee breaks, and social activities instead of using classrooms or textbooks. For example, right now we have what is called ‘maintenance turnaround’ here in the factory. We do that every eighteen months. Mr. Chen Ming-Lei, as a Chinese vice president responsible for technical areas, can find opportunities to go through these units and to see these units from the inside out. During the maintenance window, he’s been spending weeks out of his office where he was engaged in other duties. He would go to each unit for at least half a day each day during the maintenance turnaround. He meets with his American counterparts during lunch and comes back with stories that he learns from his American counterparts on technical operations. It is this kind of communication and exchange that goes on that is furthering the meshing of these two cultures and completing the on-the-job training.”

June: “How do American colleagues find the Chinese expatriates’ learning speed and performance at work?”
Mr. Helms: “The Chinese expatriates are indeed top performers chosen from SINOCHEN. If Chai were here, I would probably embarrass him when I say this, but I think Chai has been by far, in my estimation, one of the fastest learners in the field of human resources. He’s extremely intelligent, extremely quick in learning, and extremely good at his job. He is now hiring different levels of people at our organization. Not long ago, Chai recruited a candidate for project engineer from Louisiana. We had this candidate here Thursday and Friday a few weeks ago for an interview.” When Mr. Helms mentions this, I immediately realize the candidate he referred to is Guangyan, whom I interviewed not long ago, but I hesitate to bring this up. Mr. Helms continue: “Now Chai is responsible for the important function of human resources. You will get more details of his experiences when you meet him again next week. When you interview the Chinese expatriates, you should not expect typical cultural-shock experiences. These are SINOCHEN’s top employees. For some of them, there might be some language adjustment, but they come to us and are able to make contributions almost from the beginning.”

It seems that Ernie considers “cultural shock” to be primarily a language gap. To me “a cultural shock” constitutes much more than a language barrier. The unfamiliarity with local environment, food, social norms, network, laws, rules, and challenges at a foreign workplace, all could be part of a cultural shock and a feeling of displacement. That is something I want to explore from the narratives of both Chinese expatriates and their American colleagues. Therefore, it is also my interest to see how the American co-workers socially construct their work relationship with the Chinese expatriates.

So I ask: “How do your blue-collar workers feel about the Chinese ownership?”
Mr. Helms: “I am glad you asked this question, Madame Wang. We don’t talk about politics here, but I would like to remind you that the acquisition of USAC was made by SINOCHEN in March 1989. The fermenting of the Tiananmen Square incident started February till May. On June 3 or 4 it was an uprising. Here was a group of very traditional Southern American workers in Florida who were just acquired by a branch of the Chinese government; on CNN, there were images of China’s internal turmoil and repression of the uprising in downtown Beijing. I was very concerned because of the world debate of what happened in Tiananmen Square in 1989. However, it worked out among the blue-collar workers here in the factory. It was refreshing to know that these Southeast United States American blue-collar factory workers were very global in their perspective of this. They are very humanitarian, and their comment was: ‘Look, that’s their country and their internal business when it comes to the politics of that country. What we can do best for everyone in China is to continue to provide them with good-quality fertilizer to help to feed their many people.’ So they looked at their ownership by a Chinese company as just an economic matter, and what they were doing was providing a product that a 1.2-billion-people nation needed, not for the leaders in government, but for the Chinese people in the farming community. I remember one worker said: ‘The Chinese investing in a foreign land allows us to have a business thriving here. We’ll take the good people they send to us and work together and make the investment pay off for the Chinese.’ When they think and do that, they are giving the rewards to the profits, to the fertilizer goods, and to the free-enterprise system. They are valuing something very valuable. From this perspective, there has been success behind this marriage of two entirely different cultures. We move the
different ideologies uncluttered into the background, and just deal with the day-to-day
global economics of fertilizer production and sell the product with pride. That’s what
we have agreed upon."

It is interesting that Mr. Helms uses “marriage” as a metaphor for the cross-
cultural operations and encounters in this American free-enterprise company owned by
the Chinese government. It seems to be an appropriate “metaphor” since the successful
marriage partners still have totally different “in-laws.” Before I comment, I hear Mr.
Helms continue: “I think the blue-collar workers’ cooperativeness also shows a maturity
in our relationship developed with our unions here. Union experiences in China are
definitely different from the union experiences here in the United States. Unions in
China are loose affiliations of employees for a company that looks after things like
employee benefits and welfare. They are not separated from the company; instead they
are part of the company’s organization. The union president in SINOCHEN is actually
a staff member of SINOCHEN. Here in the United States, the federal government has a
mandate that there must be a separation between the union’s philosophy and the
company’s philosophy. What we have developed in the last twenty years, is saying,
‘OK, the law mandates you should be separated from the company, but our interest is
common, which is the success of our business.’ So it was very interesting to see
SINOCHEN’s reaction to the history of the union movement here and how we have
developed a much more amiable relationship with the representative of our hourly
workers. Despite all of these organizational differences, SINOCHEN has been truly
good to our workers here. For example, each year SINOCHEN funds a USAC
delegation that includes blue-collar workers to tour China. When you come to visit us next week, Ms. Irene Dobson can provide you more details on this.”

I am fascinated by Mr. Helms’s observation on these cultural differences but both Mr. Helms and I realize that time went too fast, and we have to wrap up for the day and arrange my next visits. “Geez! It’s ten after four!” Mr. Helms looks at his watch.

June: “When are you leaving for Idaho?”

Mr. Helms: “I will be leaving tomorrow. Next week I will be away, but Mr. Chai will be back. I will leave him a note of what we have discussed today.” As he speaks, Mr. Helms dials his desk phone: “Let me see if Ms. Dobson is here and if she’s available next week.” After he calls Irene, Mr. Helms turns to me: “What is a good day for you to spend a day with us next week?”

June: “Any day, because next week is during spring break.”

Mr. Helms: “Oh, that’s right. You have no classes and you won’t be teaching. We can get you here at 10:00 in the morning so that you don’t have to fight the traffic. Well, actually you may have to leave at 8-ish as it’s at least an hour twenty minutes driving. You may spend the whole day here for your next two visits.”

Ms. Irene Dobson comes in. She is an amiable, middle-aged, white woman.

Mr. Helms: “Hi, Irene, would you please share your business cards with them? I would like you to get involved in meeting with Madame Wang. Can you check your next-week’s calendar? Also, would you please find some copies of the recent USAC newsletter for Madame Wang?”
“Sure,” Irene answers pleasantly and steps out. I start to read her business card: Irene Dobson, Director of Human Resources. “Oh, I thought Mr. Chai is the director of HR here in USAC.”

Mr. Helms: “No. He’s the manager of personnel. He works for Irene. Irene took my place when I was promoted to be vice president. Irene and I will go to the same meeting at Idaho, but she will come back next week, and I will be on vacation after the business trip to Idaho.”

Irene comes back with the newsletters, and she says she will be available every day after next Tuesday.

Mr. Helms: “What I’d like to do is to let Ms. Irene Dobson and Mr. Chai spend a couple of hours with you in the morning. After lunch we’ll make an arrangement to let you talk with a representative from USAC, maybe one of our factory workers, Frank Dempsey, let’s say, and then you can finish up with Chai by the end of the day.”

Both Irene and I respond: “That will work.”

Mr. Helms turns to me: “It will be good if you speak with a few Chinese expatriates as well. Chen Ming-Lei might be the best person, but he is going back to China on Thursday. Maybe you can meet with Li Wei, who is an accountant. So you will have opportunities for long interviews with an American factory worker and a Chinese expatriate other than Mr. Chai. You will get perspectives from both sides.”

“This is great. I appreciate that,” I thank him. Mr. Helms seems spontaneous about this, but actually I can tell he remembers and has rendered careful thoughts to all the requests I made to him when he and Chai visited me at USF on February 25. He handles it very professionally and makes it look very natural.
Mr. Helms: “Let me know if you still want to visit the trading firm USCR After your visits to USAC. You’ve talked with Mr. Ming in the past, right?” They know everything I have done so far!

“Well, the official interview with Ming at work was only once,” I say. I pause and don’t get a chance to extend the details of my interactions with Ming and Jing outside work. My intuition tells me that Mr. Helms won’t mind, but my failure to get Chai’s accepting me as a researcher makes me very cautious. I don’t want to lose or constrain my opportunities for talking with the Chinese expatriates and their family members outside work. “Madame Wang, would you like to chat with someone in USCR?” Mr. Helms asks.

“Yes, I would very much want to know how communication works inter-departmentally between USAC and USCR,” I answer.

Mr. Helms: “Sure, that’s very important. Mr. Ming is working with us in the Nanjing fertilizer company. He is the person who is trying to sell the products we manufacture here, not only to our joint venture in Nanjing, but also to find other markets in China when our joint venture in Nanjing cannot take as much as we can produce. He has been working closely with our production and logistics department. Anything else I can help you with today, Madame Wang?”

June: “Can I have the USAC mission statement and a copy of the orientation package for the new hires?”

Mr. Helms pauses. “Well, I don’t know if I can get you one of the orientation packages, but I can get you a mission statement.”
Irene: “Here you go. I figured Ms. Wang would like to have it. These mission statements were developed in a joint SINOCHEM-USAC meeting.”

“Thank you, Irene!” I am amazed that she knew what I needed.

Mr. Helms says: “I am sure you will enjoy talking to Irene next week. Madame Wang spent way too much time with me today!” Everyone in the room laughs. Irene says: “Ernie just loves to talk!”

Mr. Helms laughs too and turns to Shane and me: “I understand that you and Shane have to rush back to take your Organizational Communication class at 6:00 tonight.” Amazing he remembers the name of the class I took today! I only brought it up once a week ago.

Shane and I thank Irene and say good-bye to her. Mr. Helms walks us out. “I wonder if I can walk around your factory next time?” I ask Mr. Helms when we step out together. “Yes, I will ask Chai to drive you around in the company’s vehicle to see the plants. Please feel free to take pictures.” Passing through the lobby, I notice again the wall carpet that has the Chinese Great Wall image on it. Ernie says he brought it from China in 1991 and donated it to USAC. It strikes me that people who have been with USAC for a long time (no matter that USAC belonged to U.S. Steel in the past or SINOCHEM now) must have a strong attachment to this place.

It’s a pleasant good-bye.

Factory: Community as Surrogate Family

USAC Holdings, Inc. seems more approachable and less mysterious after my first trip to its factory at Forte Meade. The fear of losing this research opportunity gradually fades away, yet there is still uncertainty about how the research might go.
During a morning with a cool breeze and clear sky on March 12, I return to USAC at Forte Meade. As scheduled, Chai and Irene are expecting me. Before Irene joins the meeting, Chai invites me to his office. He looks refreshed and in good spirits. I assume the training he took in New York went very well.

Chai is being trained to be a certified benefit professional. The certificate is issued by the American Compensation Association of Professionals (ACAP) where Chai has been focusing on learning employee benefits and compensation planning. I imagine Chai is happy that he will get the Certificate of Compensation Planning (CCP) soon. If he goes back to SINOCHEN headquarters this year, he will be the first certified benefit professional in China. The certificate is an internationally recognized one. Using Ernie’s analogy, it’s as significant as “CPA” (certified public accountant). The CCP program is taught in Asian countries like Thailand, Japan, etc. Chai can use it to work everywhere in every country for SINOCHEN and will be recognized as an international compensation expert.

Chai came to USAC six years ago with little background in human resources. Before that he had been in public relations in SINOCHEN and was an English-Chinese interpreter for Mr. Dengxuen Zheng, the CEO of SINOCHEN. His earliest assignment to USAC was assisting the work in the human resources area. Six months later, he became a supervisor in the personnel office and was engaged in hiring workers for USAC.

In addition to his responsibilities of personnel hiring, he is working on and learning about benefits, pensions, insurance, etc. Normally in most companies there are respective persons responsible for personnel hiring and employee benefits because they
are quite different areas and the workload can be overwhelming. I can imagine how busy Chai can be. I later hear from Chai’s colleague that Chai used to come to the office at 3:00 a.m. to get work done, but during my conversation with Chai, he doesn’t mention one word of the workload. Chai just says he is grateful for all the support his wife has given him. His wife, Yan (Diane), used to be a tenure-track assistant professor in the English Department at Beijing Economics and Trade University. In order to support Chai, she put her career on hold and joined Chai three years after Chai started working for USAC. It must have been a hard decision for her to leave her beloved job. Whenever I meet with Chai, he is always well groomed and his shirt is nicely ironed. I wonder if Chai has a superb dry cleaner, but Jing later tells me that Chai’s wife does all ironing and put her whole heart toward supporting him.

As always, Chai is a calm and succinct speaker. He is very eloquent when I ask him any questions about the company but hard to get him to share his stories of transitioning from SINOCHEN headquarters to USAC Holdings, Inc. When I ask if he can talk more about his personal experiences of his career growth at USAC, he raises his eyebrow: “Personal experiences?” A question mark appears on his face. Chai grew up in a very collectivist environment, like many other Chinese in the same generation who always speak of the group’s view instead of their personal views, and he might consider personal experiences less legitimate.

I start to ask some questions that Chai may feel comfortable answering. “Maybe you can give me examples of how information is shared among employees and how the company’s vision is informed or shared among departments,” I request.
Chai seems more relieved. He feels more comfortable addressing questions straightly related to the fact at work. The goals’ setup normally starts from the executive level. There are three Americans and three Chinese forming a committee for goals review. The committee takes a global approach and builds up a business plan. The business plan is reviewed weekly to see if we meet the target on production, prices, equipment repair, and the commitment to ship the product away. At the executive level, this information is well shared. President Du is a common thread between the trading firm (USCR) and factory (USAC). He meets with the executive committee in the factory, and the very next day he meets with the executive committee at the trading firm. The trading firm reviews how many products are available for them to sell, how many will go to China, where to warehouse them, and when the ships show up to ship the products. At the lower working level, the trading firm is communicating with various functional groups in the factory, e.g., the international traders work with the shipping department over here in the factory, and they ensure the products are shipped from Forte Meade to the buyers from the rest of the world.

“The communication is constant and not prohibited.” Chai draws a conclusion: “The financial officers from each company (USCR, USAC) work with each other in arranging financing, letters of credit, and commercial checks to make sure the customer is financially sound and can pay for the products. The account payables will communicate among themselves to figure out how the bills get paid, how to furnish independent auditors, and how to apply the accounting rules, tax laws, accounting standards, or regulations.”
Chai pauses and thinks, and tries to provide more examples of how communication within USAC flows horizontally and vertically. One unique tool that USAC has is called the “Quarterly Tape.” Each quarter, USAC president Mr. Scott circulates a tape among the employees. On that professionally recorded audio tape, he will explain to all the employees (no matter who they are, white-collar workers or blue-collar workers) what’s going on in the international market, where the company is standing with regard to our business plan, what has been the major accomplishment so far in the year, and what is the next step in terms of completing our goals. The information is abstracted from board meetings. The Quarterly Tape is played on a regular basis in each plant and department, such as the phosphoric acid plant, the sulfuric acid plant, the engineering department, and so on. It is listened into small groups by workers with their supervisors. The length of the tape is about five to ten minutes. The employees can take it home if they want.

“How about the employees’ opinions, suggestions, or proposals? How does their voice get heard?” I ask.

Chai seems to be expecting a question like this at this moment, and he is ready to explain: “We have an employee committee making proposals for improvement. The management will review the proposal and will award the employee if the proposal gets accepted. In order to collect suggestions from lower-level employees, we set up different boxes at the different locations throughout the company. The committee can review those suggestions and send feedback to the employees whether their proposals are of value or not. The executives are obligated to respond in no later than thirty days. For everyone who provides suggestions, there will be a personal communication letter
to inform him about the status of his suggestions: ‘accepted,’ ‘not accepted,’ or ‘will be implemented in six months.’ If a proposal is accepted, the employee will get an award, such as a gift certificate, etc. The proposals can be a process improvement or technical projects. For technical projects, we will form an engineering team to look at it and evaluate it. If the project is approved, the technical VPs will make sure the project is completed without interruption of the production. Our team is very multicultural, that is, it consists of Chinese, Americans, Indians, Vietnamese, etc.”

“It’s interesting that quite a few process or improvement projects happen ‘bottoms up’ at USAC. I believe this is a positive sign.” I can’t help making a comment, though I told myself not to do that too often during the interview. “How do you measure whether you’re successful in your operation?” I ask.

Chai responds without hesitation: “We have different measures, but as a business entity, the key measure is profitability or the bottom line.” Chai’s quick reaction surprises me a little bit, but it is also the reaction that I am expecting. Chai, a young expatriate sent by SINOCHEM as an elite who will be a SINOCHEM future executive, must fit into that Chinese-government multinational corporation well, and in the meantime he is very susceptible to the core value of capitalist free enterprise in the United States. I imagine there is juggling of multiple core values in a very special cross-cultural environment like this.

“In addition to profitability as a key measure, the care of the environment is another, due to the nature of the industry.” Chai continues. “We have five thousand residents nearby our plant. What we deal with every day is phosphate rocks, gases, dust, radiation, and care of air and water, etc. Therefore, we have responsibility not only for
the plants but also for the five thousand residents who live three miles away from us. Community is a very global concept here. It’s not only the plant, but also Forte Meade and Florida. We need to be environmentally sensitive, and meanwhile we need to be profitable.”

“How about the employees’ satisfaction? Is it a key measure of success as well?” I ask.

“Yes, we try whatever we can to make our workplace be the one that everyone enjoys and is willing to work for,” Chai says.

“How do you achieve that?” I ask.

“By different sorts of things: open communication, treating people as a member of the team, and forming a benefits committee to care for their well-being, etc. With regard to open communication, in addition to the quarterly tape, we also have newsletters. Our first issue of USAC’s newsletter started in June 1996. The purpose of this newsletter is to become the employees’ own newsletter, to let them contribute the articles, and to make them feel their interests and concerns are well shared,” Chai explains.

“What about the benefits committee? Are you the chair of the committee since you are getting your benefits specialist license?” I ask.

“Yes, I am chairing the employee wellness committee,” Chai subtly shows a proud feeling. “There are six members in the committee, and they are volunteers from different levels, blue-collar workers, supervisors, and professionals to review health insurance carriers.” As an enhancement of the existing employee wellness program, the company sponsored its first employee health-risk appraisal program in summer 1995.
The purpose of this program is to provide employees and their spouses with a better understanding of the impact of their lifestyles on their health. Over 250 people participated in the program including employees, retirees, and spouses. Following the medical screening, each participant received an individual report on his or her overall health condition. The report also pinpointed areas in which people may experience health risks and recommended simple and easy steps to prevent or correct those risks.

This year we plan to conduct a second Health Risk Appraisal again in the summer.”

I am interested in Chai’s explanation and would love to hear more about it:

“How about treating employees as family members? Any stories?” I ask.

Chai smiles. For the first time I see Chai’s smiling obviously. Chai says: “Yes, there are good stories, but let me stop here and leave some stories for Irene and other people to tell you. Let’s see if Irene has come back from her meeting.” Chai says and stands up.

I was intrigued by the family metaphor Chai used and I can’t wait to see how Irene interprets it.

Chai invites me to Mr. Helms's office. Mr. Helms is out of town today. Obviously, Mr. Helms authorizes Chai to use his office during his absence. This is in contrast to my memory of Mr. Ming's hesitation to enter President Du's office. Chai’s relationship with his American boss’s boss seems more relaxed.

Ms. Dobson comes in and Mr. Chai introduces her to me: “This is Ms. Irene Dobson, the director of human resources. She is my boss.” Ms. Dobson briefly waves her hand in objection to the word “boss.” She warmly greets me: “Hi, Ms. Wang, nice to meet you again!” She turns to Mr. Chai. “Ms. Wang and I had already met last Wednesday.”
She sits down in Mr. Helms’s chair and jokes: “There is indeed a different feeling to sit in the vice president’s chair.”

“Ms. Wang, I probably didn’t tell you that I went to China last October,” Irene says. “This was our factory’s fifth employee delegation to go to China.” I am fascinated that this is a good story to continue the interpretation of the family metaphor or how to treat employees as family members, especially because the story is about an employee delegation to China. It particularly increases my interest to listen to it.

Irene continues, “On an annual basis, we will select a group of employees, factory workers, some managers, some professionals, and clerical personnel, and we’ll send them on a delegation to visit China. They have an opportunity to visit the parent company and tour other attractions throughout China.”

“How many people can go every year?” I ask.

“Well, typically five to seven,” Irene says. “This past year, we had six delegation members and one host from our staff. And each member took a spouse, so there were thirteen in total who traveled over to China.”

“Are they coming from different departments, or are they different levels of employees?” I ask.

“Yes, two of them were factory workers in chemical operations here. One was a maintenance supervisor and he went to China too. I come from Human Resources. In addition, one of six delegation members is a manager who came from the engineering area. The last one is a clerical person from accounting. She is the clerical person from the payroll department. She is not the manager, but she went as well.” Irene explains very patiently.
“How did they get elected?” I ask.

Irene says, “What we have done over the years is this: The first-year delegation was in 1990 and was selected from senior management members. We decided it would be an inaugural trip. Mr. Helms asked the president of our local Union 377 to be part of the delegation trip so that he can meet USAC’s parent company and meet his counterpart, the union president of SINOHEM in Beijing. He and some of our salaried managers were the co-leaders of that delegation. They met with different functional groups in SINOCHM or SINOCHM subsidiaries, met with their counterparts, made presentations, exchanged gifts, and built friendships.”

Irene looks at me and smiles: “You probably feel it’s dear to hear these city’s names in China. The employee delegations normally would go to Xi’an, Beijing, Shanghai, etc. We in fact encouraged our hourly paid workers to participate in this cultural exchange for their own betterment, and for them to better understand the new foreign ownership (SINOCHM). If you remember, 1990 was only a year after SINOCHM bought U.S. Steel’s fertilizer division and built up USAC. Frank Dempsey, whom you will interview today, was one of my companions on this trip. Everywhere we went, the warmth and kindness of the Chinese people was evident. China is a country whose rich history and culture would take a lifetime to explore. We truly feel we are employees of the SINOCHM family — we’re part of a global team that is ever dependent on each other’s success.”

I have become sensitive to the “family” metaphor. I ask, “Irene, what surrogate words can you choose for ‘family’?”
“Hmm — ‘team,’ ‘community,’ in which everybody feels equally included and
would like to contribute for the whole.”

I was more intrigued: “Irene, would you mind saying something more about
this? Do you have time now?”

“Oh, sure! My pleasure. I am glad you are interested in this.” Irene replies
delightedly. I take out my notebook while she starts: “Like Mr. Helms, I have been
working in this factory for thirty years. I know what has changed through these years. I am
glad that in my fifties, I began to experience being special, being a part of the firm. I feel
safe and supported. I often thought, ‘Was this change brought by SINOCHEM? Some
totally brand-new things were generated in the company recently: Focus Group, Drop Box,
Quarterly Tape, newsletters, employee committees, and multicultural teams, etc. — more
than you can count! Chai has probably given you a lot of details.

Irene passionately continues, “A new concept appearing at the workplace is
‘teamwork,’ in which each team member is included in decision-making. So decision-
making is not just a manager’s business but everyone’s share, mutual help, and
contribution. The senses of family and community are highly advocated either in the work
place or outside the factory. For instance, each year, volunteers from our factory
participate in the community Paint Your Heart Out project. Several needy elderly citizens
in both the Fort Meade and Bartow communities have benefited from having their home
painted by USAC employees. Frank Dempsey is one of the painters. You would enjoy
talking to him later.” Irene stops and looks at her watch. “Ms. Wang, let’s go to lunch and
you can meet Frank afterward. By the way, where did you have your lunch when you first
came here?” Irene was a little curious.
“Hungry Howie’s!” I can’t help laughing when I recall the scene.

“Oh, my! Our employees here normally go to another place to eat. It’s much better! I will drive.” I already like Irene’s being warm and straightforward.

After Irene brings me back from lunch, I see an elderly worker standing in front of Mr. Helms’s office. This is Mr. Frank Dempsey, a worker in the maintenance department. He is about six feet, two inches tall. He has a wrinkled, friendly face and kind, smiling eyes. Frank introduces himself. “I am fifty-nine years old.” He looks a little bit older than fifty-nine. His hands are large, strong, and dark. They show the trace of a hardworking life.

Frank continues: “I have been working in this factory for thirty-nine years. Before SINOCHEN purchased this factory, I had experienced four owners. All were Americans. They closed the factory quickly because they didn’t make money in the first few years. We workers had been aggravated by the frequent shutdowns. The four years before U.S. Steel closed, my life was like hell. I didn’t know what my tomorrow would be like. I had no idea where I was going if the factory was closed again. I became old. It was harder to change to another job at my age. At that time, I would feel shame to tell someone that I worked for U.S. Steel. Now I am proud of telling my neighbors that I work for SINOCHEN.”

Frank is not rhetorical, but his story is especially touchingly told in Southern accents. I see his eyes turn red. I lower my eyes and let him compose himself. Then I sensed joy in Frank’s voice: “Now I feel very safe. I will not worry about losing my job tomorrow. SINOCHEN takes good care of me. What can be more of a blessing than this at my old age?”
“How do you like working with your Chinese colleagues?” I ask.

Frank responds: “I feel that Chinese are good to make friends with. They are humble and they are very patient. They consider their investment a life-long commitment. During the first couple of years when they bought this factory, they didn’t make the expected amount of money, but they stuck with it. And now the factory is very profitable. I receive very good pay. Everybody seems happy. You know, there are a couple of elderly workers who are Korean War veterans. They thought the Chinese were enemies. Now they never think that way anymore.”

His sincere statement of enjoying working in USAC’s environment touches my heart. “Are you in Chai’s Employees’ Wellness Committee?” I ask.

“Yes,” Frank says. “I truly enjoy it. Mr. Chai is a nice guy. I am glad I am well informed by what is going on in the factory. I like the Quarterly Tape. Before, in U.S. Steel, we were told nothing. We felt we lived in the dark. Now, I feel I am a part of the factory. I truly feel happy to contribute. This is like having a new family. When I painted the people’s homes, I felt I was helping my family people. We have a grievance committee for us to tell our complaints to, but we don’t have anything to complain about now.”

Frank stands up. “I have got to go back to work now. It is so nice to talk to you, Ms. Wang. I wish you well on your career.” Frank picks up a brown lunch bag from the office floor. Feeling rather bad, I say to him: “Frank, I didn’t know you hadn’t eaten your lunch. You should have told me. How long did you wait for me before I was back?”
“No, no, Ms. Wang. This is something for you. It’s a little gift. Irene told me you would come today, and she told me you were from China too. I feel you are just as dear as my Chinese co-workers.” Frank passes the brown bag to me.

“McDonald’s?” I ask.

“No, no, no. This is some little thing I brought back from your country when I visited China last year. I hope you like it.”

“Frank, you are so sweet. You really didn’t have to do that!” I open the lunch bag. It contains a mini-flower vase made of Chinese porcelain with fragrant silk roses. “Frank, thank you so much. This is a great gift.” I am indeed touched.

“I wish you well, Ms. Wang. I am so glad to meet you.” He hugs me before he leaves.

After finishing up the second round of interviews at USAC, I compare the different feelings I got from both USAC trips and USCR trips. My memory of the USAC factory includes warm greetings and reception, and a strong family atmosphere. Despite the chemical plant facilities, I remember the clear sky, the pearl color of the plant’s gilt by sunshine, the smells of the fresh green grass, and the spring moments of the countryside, all of which are irresistible for photo-taking.

The USCR office building in Rocky Point is tall, stylish, and metropolitan, while the Forte Meade office is flat, plain, and country-like. As a first-time guest, one could easily get lost within the USCR building, while it is easier to get acquainted with USAC. Although people in the trading firm need to abide by the strict dress code on certain weekdays, people in the factory enjoy casual dress.
I look at the first issue of the USAC Newsletter that Irene located for me before I had wrapped up my second trip at USAC, and my eyes are caught by a small column of announcements: Under the headline of “New Hires at First Half of 1996,” there are fourteen names listed. Under “Retirements,” there is Jim Marshall, who completed thirty-two years of service. Then there are three names under “Twenty-Five Years of Service” and six more names under “Thirty Years of Service.” The headline that warms my heart most is “Congratulations, New Parents!” and the proud parents are Yu Lei, Thomas Mason, and Li Wei. Two of them are young expatriates sent by the SINOCHEN home office.

The family atmosphere at USAC makes me want to go back to USCR to get a stronger feeling from there again.

**Revisiting USCR, the Trading Firm**

After my several visits to the factory USAC at Ford Meade during March, Vice President Mr. Ernie Helms suggested I go back to USCR, their trading company, to conduct the rest of my interviews.

Stepping out of the elevator on floor ten, I almost knocked down a person who was about to enter the elevator. *It was President Du!* He looks surprised to see me. “Hi, Mr. Du, I sent a fax to Mr. Ming the other day and told him I was coming to interview people in your trading company today,” I explain to him immediately. “Mr. Helms also knew this.” The question mark on Mr. President Du’s face disappears. ‘Hmm, nobody told me this,” he mumbles to himself in Chinese. Perhaps I also should have kept him in the loop.
Instead of taking the elevator down, President Du escorts me to the company’s suite. He opens the front door for me and leads me to the conference room. Then he brings in a pamphlet and an album with a red silk cover imprinted with gold Chinese characters that read: “Forty-Five-Year History of SINOCHEM.”

“This is the only album we have here about our home office in Beijing and other subsidiaries all over the world.” President Du introduces the book to me and says: “You may read these while waiting for Mr. Ming. I think he is on the phone. Oh, by the way, the annual pamphlet is yours. We have more than one copy of this.” Even though our previous contacts were short, President Du treats me with kindness and courtesy. However, neither Mr. Ernie Helms nor Mr. Ming had encouraged me to interview President Du. Therefore I took Ming’s and Ernie’s quietness as an implied guideline not to bother President Du too much. I express my appreciation to President Du for all the support he has provided to me. That means a lot in a Chinese state enterprise in which there is a particular power-respect cultural environment. I can’t think that Mr. Chai will provide the green light to let me keep returning to the field without the passport that President Du granted to me.

President Du is not intimidating at all. He seems to be very friendly to me as an outside student researcher. Before leaving the conference room, he even chit-chats a little bit and asks some questions not related to my research such as: “When did you come to the U.S.?” and “Did you come here first by yourself or come over with family?” When I tell him that I received a full assistantship from USF for graduate studies and my husband received his three months later and resigned his job at Motorola in China to join me, President Du sincerely expresses his respect for our courage. I
thank him for his kindness. Du steps out of the conference room. Though I don’t know Du very well, it seems that the expatriates and family members hold high regards for him. President Du manages one of the biggest overseas enterprises owned by China’s state multinational corporation, and is working hard to make sure it’s both profitable and culturally fit.

Mr. Ming comes in. He glances over the questions I have prepared for my interview with the following two people: Mr. Lixing Xu, USCR’s president (reporting to President Du, who is the president of USAC Holdings, Inc.); and Mr. George Stratton, the general manager of International Marketing. Ming says: “Let me speak to Mr. Xu to see if he has time right now. I will be right back.” A few minutes later, Ming comes back and has a frustrated look. Mr. Xu declined my interview request. I comfort Ming: “Don’t worry. Mr. Xu must be very busy.” Ming seems half embarrassed and half upset. I continue: “I hope I didn’t bring too much trouble for you.”

“No, no, it’s not because of you … sometimes I feel I have to get approval from someone who doesn’t know much about the products, business, pricing, and market competition before I can sign a contract.” I am silent but I assume he is referring to Mr. Xu. Maybe Ming discussed business with him in addition to my interview request.

So we leave the conference room and go to the office of Mr. Stratton, who is my next scheduled interviewee. Walking across the main lobby, I notice that all the office walls facing the lobby (including that of President Du) are made of tinted glass. President Du’s office is in the center and has a somewhat panoptical function. I glance at Du’s office and see Mr. Xu standing there talking to his boss. From Stratton’s office, I can easily observe what’s going on in the main lobby and other offices.
Mr. Stratton looks in his early fifties, with quite a gentlemanly aura and is very friendly: “Call me George, please,” he says and shakes my hand.

George joined SINOCHEN in October 1991, two years after USCR was built up. Before that, he had been working for Farmland Industries for twenty years in Kansas. Farmland is also a huge and distinguished company.

“Ming says you are very seasoned in the agri-chemical industry and very savvy on its international marketing,” I say. “I bet you must have brought your experiences and insight to USCR.”

George smiles: “Ming is exaggerating. But I did write a letter to President Du before I physically joined USCR. In that letter, I reviewed with him several things that have enabled Farmland Industries to develop a strong international market. I felt these key points could also fit into USCR’s operations. One issue I brought up was ‘to have open communications within the staff.’ As I experienced later, there were indeed some communication issues within USCR. Probably because SINOCHEN is a state-owned firm,” George pauses and examines my reaction before he goes on, “I felt USCR still lacked the teamwork concept. Are you familiar with this term?”

“Yes,” I nod. I heard this term very often when I visited USAC, its sister company at USAC Holdings, Inc.

“For teamwork, it is important that all members of the staff be fully informed of what is going on in the organization so that they may feel they are a part of the firm. If there is secrecy about overall information such as finance, or the profitability of a certain project, employees will feel in the dark, and fragmentation is inevitable among co-workers. What else? Yeah, let me see if I can find a copy of this letter.”
I appreciate George’s honesty in bringing up the communication and “teamwork” concept. It makes me wonder why in the factory the teamwork idea is highly appreciated by American managers and workers while in the trading firm it doesn’t get much attention. Both being part of USAC Holdings, Inc., why is it so different? Is it because the trading firm predominantly consists of Chinese expatriates while the factory primarily consists of Americans? If this is the reason, does that mean Chinese and Americans do have tremendous cultural gaps on perceiving what “corporation” means? When both Chinese and Americans use “family” metaphors to describe corporate life, do they experience the “family” concept in the same way?

I recalled that Mr. Helms mentioned that SINOCHEN added one more hierarchy over the factory and the trading firm in order to enhance Chinese leadership. However, he seemed doubtful of the competitiveness of the Chinese leadership over the factory’s management. Does that mean that the Chinese way of doing business was incompatible with the American context? Do the problems and doubtfulness expressed by Helms and Stratton manifest the frustrations of Chinese state entrepreneurship?

Thinking about this, I probe another “communication question” to George: “So, how does the communication flow within USCR? For instance, are the employees informed well and clearly about their responsibilities? As you have both Chinese and American co-workers, I am curious about how the tasks are assigned, performed, and evaluated.”

George stops searching for his letter. “Actually, there are no clear job descriptions,” George says, looking a little embarrassed. “But you know, all of us four
Americans working in this group are professionals. We know what we are supposed to do."

I don’t mean to give George hard time. At the moment, through the glass wall of the office, we see President Du walking out of his office, talking to the secretary, Carolyn, and then entering the copy room. President Du appeared different from the way I saw him last time in the manufactory. In the factory, he seemed relaxed, talked faster, and even made some jokes. But here in the trading company, he looks serious, and he talks and walks in at a slower pace. His “slower pace” makes him seem more authoritative.

Both George and I are distracted a few seconds by Mr. Du’s movement in the lobby. When we get back to our conversation, George hands me a neatly typed document.

“Ms. Wang, this might be helpful to answer your research questions. I highly appreciate if you just keep it for research use only,” George says.

The paper was a survey that George finished for SINOCHEM in January 1997. I read the seven questions quickly and am attracted by George’s response to question three: “What do you think are the major problems facing SINOCHEM?”

George wrote: “I feel that the major problem facing SINOCHEM is their inability to take advantage of their world-wide system to improve the communications and coordination of business units. There is too much fragmentation of responsibility within business units. We all know that Madame Shi is in charge of the overall fertilizer operation. But it is hard to identify who is responsible for specific products when you
have fragmented purchasing and marketing. Also, as with most government companies, there is a lack of trust and cooperation to share information within the system.”

Reading George’s reply, I feel that my thoughts are clearer yet also confused. My thoughts are clearer because I know there seems to be incoherence in the communication practice between the trading firm and the factory. I am more confused, because I wonder why President Du and other Chinese executives seem to have not reacted to the feedback from George and maybe other employees. Maybe they do see the differences and issues and yet they can’t solve the problems. Maybe the collectivist culture norms are harder to alter no matter how frustrated each individual is.

So far the interviews with the co-up student, American management team, blue collar workers, Chinese expatriates, and their family members have provided me a portrait of a dynamic and complex culture in USAC Holdings Inc. Different individuals provided different perspectives, angels, and interpretations. The uniqueness of everyone’s interpretation motivates me to move further and deeper into my research.
Chapter Four: Part II: Getting to Know the “Insiders”

After several long days spent in both USAC and USCR, I am drawn closer and closer to my research subject. I often think of the people I interviewed and the scenes of the interview. In the group meeting with Irene and Chai during my visit at USAC, Irene and I did most of the talking while Chai sat quietly beside us. Later I asked Chai why he was being so reticent. He replied politely in English: “Irene is my boss. I am not supposed to interrupt.” Mr. Chai seldom spoke with me in Mandarin Chinese, the same mother tongue we shared, even when there were only two of us in the conversation. However, I heard him talking with other Chinese employees in Mandarin all the time. Those signs reminded me that I was still “an outsider” though I shared the same nationality with them. With a strong urge to gain cultural insight into this group, I want to know my informants better by knowing their family members and how they feel about their relocation, and I want to know my informants’ new work environment better and how the geographical relocation impacts their personal life in addition to their careers.

Ming and his wife, Jing, turn out to be the first Chinese expatriate family I got acquainted with. I became a frequent guest to their home between March 1997 and May 1998. The conversations with them became more in-depth as time went by. From Ming and Jing, I got to know more Chinese expatriates and their family members: accounting manager Chen, his wife, Yanming, and their baby son Tianbo; a previous USAC executive’s daughter, Tong; legal council Yu, his wife, Li, and their baby daughter,
JenJen. Yu later became the human resources manager of USAC Holdings, Inc., after the first human resource manager, Chai, finished his assignment and went back to China in late 1997. Their experiences, stories, and friendship were dear to my heart during the time I conducted this dissertation research.

Ming, Jing, and Alice

As I described in my first story session, Ming was my first point of contact at USAC Holdings. The first few impressions Ming left with me were his extroverted personality and athletic look, probably because he was a soccer player and a golfer. He seemed not to hide his emotional ups and downs. As time went by, I discovered other sides of Ming’s personality: he could be shy, not that social, and quiet too. In May 1997, invited by Jing, I brought my roommate to visit Jing and Ming’s home. My roommate went to the same graduate school in China as Ming did. After greeting us, Ming hid himself in his home office, played with his personal computer, and never appeared again. Jing stepped into his office and I could vaguely hear her scolding him for not being a good host. A few minutes later, Ming dragged his feet out.

“Sorry if I don’t appear to be a warm host today,” Ming apologized to us.

“I understand. You are probably tired. It must be a long day. Your staff meetings are always on Tuesday afternoon, aren’t they?” I asked.

“Yes. Good memory,” Ming said.

Normally Ming’s staff meetings review the company’s financial situation — the payment collection from the customers, the shipping, and the contract execution status, etc. In addition, they review the markets together, such as “Which customer may need more particular types of fertilizer? Does USAC have the inventory for customers’ needs?
Shall USAC sell the goods at this moment? How shall USAC adjust prices since fertilizers are a seasonal business?” Ming sometimes has to stay on top of shipping issues as well. The shipping method USCR is using is FOB (Freight on Board). It signifies that the seller loads the goods at its own risk. This means that the seller is responsible for loading and may be held responsible for damages resulting from negligent loading. The buyer would check the quality, quantity or weight before accepting them at the destination. If there are discrepancies between the shipped products and what was specified in the contract, then the seller and buyer have to go through an arbitration procedure. Therefore, there is a long process from presale, to purchase order, to shipping, and then the payment. Ming tells me there are “Three Guidelines” in SINOCHEM as an informal directive for employees doing business. They can be nicely chanted in Chinese (合法经营; 合理赚钱; 和气生财) because the first character of each guideline sounds the same phonetically. I translate them into English: “Operate businesses by legitimacy; get contracts with decency; gain profits via harmony.” SINOCHEM people combine contemporary business ideology with traditional Chinese philosophy.

I share with Ming my English translation of the “Three Guidelines.” He likes the way I translated it and thinks my interpretation is precise. Ming’s master’s degree is in English literature, but his businessman talent and acumen amazes me.

The first time I met with Ming, I learned that he was ranked number one among all the employees in the economist certification held by the Ministry of Foreign Trade and Economic Cooperation (MOFTEC) in 1992. At that time he was the youngest certified economist among all the employees in the entire MOFTEC (around several
hundred thousand employees at that time). I bring up Ming’s achievement in the conversation again and ask Ming how long he studied before he took the certification exam.

“Eight hours, I guess,” Ming answers lightly. I know Ming doesn’t exaggerate. As I remember, the sales quota he achieved the past two years is about thirty million USD. Ming is a high achiever at his company.

“Ming, do you have some plans in mind for your career in the next few years?” Given Ming’s talent in the chemical fertilizer business, I am interested in knowing what he thinks about his future.

“I am not a very ambitious person. As long as I have a job I enjoy doing, I will be happy. I am not too crazy about making a lot of money. It will be fine if what I make can let my family live a comfortable life. Well, Jing is smart. As I told you before, I will let Jing be a breadwinner five years later.” Ming turns to his wife and puts her on the spot.

Ming had made this joke a couple of times before because of the history when Jing worked for the Farm-Industry Commerce Bureau at the Department of Commerce in China. Back then, Jing’s organization was hierarchically higher than Ming’s. Therefore Ming always says Jing is his supervisor.

“How did you know each other?” After many visits to Ming and Jing’s home, I feel more comfortable asking personal questions.

“OK, you tell June,” Ming says, passing the task to Jing, and then Jing has to be the spokeswoman for the family: “The first time we met was when Ming and I were the co-leaders of the delegation constituting Agri-Chemical Division members at the
provincial level. The members belonged to the government system of the Department of Commerce, but they were Ming’s customers. We visited several European countries including France and Austria. At that time, both Ming and I were single of course, so the members in the delegation often teased us. We started to date after that trip.” Jing tells the story in a simplistic way. Ming quietly listens and seems to enjoy refreshing his memory of those interesting moments.

“So the result was the big diamond on your finger.” I smile.

“Yes.” Jing shows me her beautiful platinum engagement and wedding rings. “Ming bought the engagement ring in Hong Kong. It’s very pretty isn’t it? Because the diamond is so huge, it did not only surprise me but also impressed his colleagues who saw the ring. The news traveled so fast, and very soon my colleagues in the Department of Commerce all knew the story about the ring. Ming’s company and mine work so closely together and there were hardly any secrets you can keep.” Jing’s “complaint” is filled with some joy.

“Where did you spend your honeymoon?” I ask.

“Ming and I went to my home city, Cheng-Du in Sichuan province. We spent some time with my parents. I am the only child in my family, and I am very close to my parents. It was a relaxing and fun time. In Cheng-Du, there were still a lot of rickshaws around. They were not for transportation but for fun when you tour the city. Ming hired a rickshaw guy, but instead of letting the rickshaw guy do the work, Ming dropped me on the seat and started to ‘‘drive’ me around. He ran so fast, and even the rickshaw boy couldn’t catch up with him. My parents were so amused.” Jing is obviously very loved and adored by her husband.
“I imagine you couldn’t wait to join Ming after he was assigned here in Florida,” I say.

“It was true,” Jing admits. “I joined Ming a few months after he started his work here in the Tampa office. As I told you, because I hold an L-2 visa (the visa for multinational corporation expatriates’ spouses), it is illegal for me to work in the U.S. When I first got here, I didn’t have much to do except for staying in my apartment most of the time to study the GMAT. At that time I didn’t have friends nor did I have a local driver’s license yet. If Ming was not too busy during the weekend, he would accompany me to go to the beach, do some shopping, and have some sightseeing. When I was in China, I used to be very busy at work, as busy as Ming. I never knew staying at home with nothing to do was such a painful experience. During the first months in the U.S., I couldn’t sleep well at night, partly due to the jet lag, the twelve-hour difference between Tampa and Beijing, and partly due to the fact I felt insecure without a clear picture of my future. Ming also couldn’t sleep well because I couldn’t. He understood my feeling of loss. So, we didn’t enjoy the joyfulness of our family reunion as we were supposed to. I even thought about going back to China to resume my position, but it would be very hard to separate from Ming again. Several months later, I was pregnant. So I decided to stay here till Ming finishes his assignment.”

I look at Jing and Ming’s baby daughter, Alice, who is concentrating on playing with her Fisher-Price baby toys. She is twelve months old and is able to walk. Jing caresses Alice’s hair and continues: “I studied the GMAT while expecting Alice. I am so glad you helped me apply for the MBA program at your university. By the way, there
is good news! China Florida Linkage Institute offered me the scholarship! If you hadn’t provided me the information, I would never have been able to get it!”

“Congratulations! So you will start school in the summer.” I am so happy for Jing, because I know she had looked forward to that for a long time.

“I feel so much better now. At least I am not wasting my time just wandering around. Thank you, June, for your help,” Jing says sincerely.

“You’re not wasting time at all. You are a devoted mother and supportive wife. Think about how happy Ming is because of you and Alice.” I protest the way Jing underestimates herself.

“I know what you mean,” Jing sighs, “however, you have no idea how uncertain I am when I stay at home twenty-four hours a day.” She gets a little bit emotional: “I am so disconnected from what’s going on in the outside world. Sometimes I even don’t have the motivation to brush my hair or put on a little makeup. I often remembered the time when I worked in the Department of Commerce back in Beijing. Sometimes, I took out my old outfits from my wardrobe. They were my favorite suits and clothes I bought when I had business trips in Southeast Asia and Europe. I wore them again, stared at myself in front of a mirror, and recalled the interesting moments and rewarding experiences during my first three years at work. You probably think I was funny, but that’s really how bored I was at home.”

I pause for a second. Jing’s story touches my heart. I see flashbacks to my lonely experiences during my first three months in the United States — staying up until midnight to finish school work, getting to learn more local cultural norms and the language, feeling homesick, and being in tears almost each time when calling my family in China. I
remember several times I wanted to get an airline ticket to fly back to China immediately, but I was able to survive the homesickness when I told myself: “June, it was your decision to come to the States for graduate school. This is your goal. You can’t regret it.” Jing’s situation is a bit different. Though she has Ming around, her staying in the United States is due to her commitment to husband, who has a job change, and she might not be ready for the suspension of her career and changes in her life at that moment.

“I am sure Ming appreciates your sacrifice. Since he enjoys his work very much, you added incredible value to his career, his company, and your entire family,” I say.

Ming nods his head and adds: “We actually don’t have complaints about SINOCHEN. It’s a great company to work for. A lot of smaller companies in China cannot even sponsor the expatriates’ spouses to go overseas yet.”

I believe Ming means what he says. Two months ago, I interviewed another Chinese expatriate, Wei Li, who works as an accounting manager in USAC. Before coming to Florida, Wei worked in South Africa for a short time. To his knowledge, SINOCHEN has tried its best to provide family reunions to expatriates. Not many Chinese multinational companies could do that in the early to mid-1990s due to financial concerns and the complexity of visa applications.

“Why do you think SINOCHEN is doing better than most other multinational companies in treating expatriates?” I ask Ming.

“I believe if a company is doing well on its business and financial side, that indicates the company is doing well at overall management, and thus reflects on their treatment of the employees.” Ming says. “USAC Holdings, Inc., is currently ranked by MOFTEC as the best Chinese state-owned enterprise overseas. Mr. Lan-qing Li, the
State Council vice-premier, Madam Yi Wu, the head of MOFTEC, and Madam Xiu-lian Gu, the minister of the chemical industry, all think highly of what we are doing here in Florida.” Ming is very proud.

I laugh and tease him a little bit: “Ming, the tone you just had sounds like a CCTV (Chinese Central Television) newscast.”

“No, no, I am serious. I think SINOCHEN and USAC Holdings are doing very well,” Ming says. The company’s great prospects can be a source of pride and a strong motivator to employees.

The sales quota Ming achieves indicates his hard work and dedication. Ming often receives phone calls between midnight and 4 a.m. because these are the normal office hours for his Chinese customers, who are in different time zones on the other side of the globe. Ming’s emotional ups and downs are very much tied up with how business goes. He told me he would be very worried or anxious if some contract execution didn’t go smoothly, and he would feel genuine relief after the payment got collected. Ming flies internationally quite often for business. One time he was in the air for practically a whole month without a single day’s rest. I am struck by his saying that “the best vacation is not going somewhere but staying at home.” Ming and his coworkers’ responsibility has been interpreted in a generous way — they are working to meet the needs of Chinese farmers who are faced with the challenge of “producing enough food to feed a population of more than one billion people (twenty percent of the world’s population) on approximately seven percent of the world’s arable land” (USAC Publication: Feeding the Future, p. 9).
In March 1998, Ming had to leave for another business trip to China. Before his trip, he realized his L-1 visa would be expired in a month. If he didn’t get it renewed in the United States, he would run a risk of not being able to come back to Florida from China. Nevertheless, there is time pressure for him to close the deal in Beijing and he has to leave anyway. One evening, Ming calls me before his departure.

“To be honest, I don’t know if I can come back within a month. If not, Jing will be very worried. I have to rely on you if she needs some help,” Ming says.

I am very moved by Ming’s and Jing’s trust. “Not a problem. I will do what I can to help if Jing needs me. Wish you the best of luck for this business trip. I am sure SINOCHEN can hire the best attorney to get your L-1 visa properly renewed if your returning day happens to be delayed.”

After Ming leaves, I meet with Jing a few times during lunch at the cafeteria in the college of business at my university. Jing looks stressed out. She is enrolled for four graduate-level classes and is studying for midterms this week. Meanwhile, she has to drop off and pick up Alice at the day care every day. Each night, Jing prays that Ming can finish customer meetings on time.

“What happens if Ming cannot get his L-1 visa renewed? Does that mean I have to be here by myself until I finish my MBA?” Jing shows her worries. Since Jing changed her L-2 visa (as a dependent of an expatriate employee) to F-1 (as an international student), if she goes back to China she will risk not being able to come back to the United States to finish school.

“Did Ming call you yesterday?” I ask.
“Yes, he did. He said if he can’t come back, he would go ahead and work in the SINOCHEM office in Beijing. I asked him if I should go back immediately if he can’t get his visa renewed. Ming said he would still want me to finish school before bringing myself and Alice back to China.” Jing looks even more depressed.

“You both worry too much, I think.” I am trying to sort out the positive remarks to Jing: “I understand the visa issues are very complicated, but there are so many global companies nowadays. I am sure Ming is not the only person who is too busy to get his L-1 visa renewed ahead of time. Plus, SINOCHEN is a company with a great profile. I can’t see that there will be a problem for Ming to get his visa renewed soon.”

Jing is quiet and still thinking.

“Maybe after you finish your mid-terms this week, we can get together for dinner and bring Alice to the park,” I propose.

“You are very thoughtful. I appreciate you, June.” A light smile appears on Jing’s face.

Three more weeks pass by. In late April 1998 when I am writing the first draft of my dissertation prospectus, Ming is still stuck in China. The upshot is he won’t be able to come back to Tampa to work or to join his family until May because the visa renewal involves both the U.S. Consulate in Beijing and China’s Ministry of Diplomacy. SINOCHEN is a government-owned company, and thus the process takes longer than with a foreign-owned, free enterprise company. When I spent time with Jing to pick up her daughter from day care and run chores for her house, I came to understand how Ming’s work reflects the subtle sacrifices he and his family had made.
These details are lost behind the prevailing narrative of multinational corporations’ profits.

Many people may think business travel is glamorous. To visit exotic locales and be wined and dined on the company dime sounds like fun, but for a married traveler with a family the reality can be quite difficult. Responding to a survey, half of married business travelers admit that long trips away from home increase their guilty feeling about shirking responsibilities including housework, raking leaves, maintaining the house, and paying bills (Industry Week, April, 1999). The traveler may feel guilty and left out of the day-to-day intimacy of family life while the at-home spouse may feel neglected and dumped on with the total weight of family responsibility. All of these emotions multiply exponentially when the family is an expatriate one.

Yanming and Chen

In the fall of 1997, Jing starts her second semester in the MBA program at my university. She introduces me to another expatriate family, Yanming and Chen. Chen works as an accounting manager in USCR. His office is next to Ming’s. Yanming has a twelve-month-old son, Tianbo, who is as cute as a little cartoon character. Since Yanming’s son and Jing’s daughter Alice are only six months apart, Yanming sometimes baby-sits Alice when Jing has to go to her evening classes. I go out with both Jing and Yanming for lunch a couple of times with their children. Later Yanming agrees to be interviewed.

Yanming is 28 years old, soft-spoken, calm, pale, and thin. It’s the early afternoon when I first visit her home. She has a bright and cozy two-bedroom apartment. The room closer to the entrance served for a home office, and the apartment
also has a dining room, living room, and master bedroom. Her son Tianbo’s pictures in
time are all hung on the walls. Obviously he is the heart of the family.

I realize there is a twin bed in the home office. Yanming explains: “My husband
is very obsessive in stock markets, days and nights.”

“The American stock market?” I am surprised.

“Yes,” Yanming says. “He would be on the Internet at midnight and then the
first thing in the morning. He is so obsessed with it and seldom takes care of Tianbo or
spends little time with us. I talked to him a few times, and each time ended up in an
argument.”

Given Yanming’s soft and gentle appearance, I am not quite prepared for her to
be so frank. For a few seconds, I don’t know how to respond. “Oh, I am sure Chen is
very concentrated on work during the day;” I say.

We sit in front of the dining table. I ask if she would mind if I tape our
conversation.

“No, that’s fine,” she says. Her son starts to giggle and extends his little hands
when he sees the tape recorder’s microphone pop up. Yanming asks Tianbo not to touch
it. Amazingly, he seems to understand the request. It’s hard to believe that a one-year-
old boy is so smart. I suddenly have a wish to hold him and give him a big kiss. I
admire Yanming’s being a very loving and patient mother. I am thinking: “It will be a
long way for me to have my own baby if I want to graduate and establish my career
first…”

I gently probe Yanming, “If you don’t mind, maybe you can tell me a little bit
of what you did before you came to the U.S.”
“Sure. It feels like a long time ago though.” Yanming sighs slightly: “I got my bachelor’s degree in statistics from People’s University in 1991 in Beijing.” People’s University is one of the top schools in China, and their statistics department is the well-established program in the field. Jing also graduated from People’s University, but with a degree in economics.

“After my graduation, Industrial and Commercial Bank of China (ICBC) offered me a job at its headquarters,” Yanming says. “At that time, the ministry of education in China had a policy that college graduates should get hands-on experience before they took the managerial types of work at the ministry level of organizations. Therefore I worked in ICBC’s branch office for two years prior to working at ICBC headquarters. ICBC is China’s largest commercial bank.” I later check out ICBC’s Web site, and toward the end of 2002, ICBC’s total assets had occupied a quarter of the sum of domestic assets owned by China’s commercial banks. As was true for most of the expatriates’ spouses, Yanming had a promising career in China.

Yanming continues: “The work at the branch office was a little bit frustrating. The local branch manager considered my presence ‘temporary’ because eventually I would be working for ICBC’s headquarters. Therefore I was not given solid tasks nor did I gain much valuable experience. The job became more interesting and challenging only after I started to work at the international settlement department at ICBC headquarters. I was extremely busy in the next two years.”

“When did you and Chen meet each other?” I ask.

“In mid-1994. After we dated six months, Chen proposed to me. I was a little bit shocked. As a matter of fact, Chen knew that he would receive a long-term overseas
assignment to work in Florida for several years. I was hesitant to accept his proposal because I thought I still didn’t know him too well. He tried to convince me that we would get along well and there shouldn’t be any problems after we married, yet I couldn’t make the decision. One day Chen said: ‘Yanming, we won’t be able to see each other very often after I move to Florida unless we get married, because it’s almost impossible for you to get a fiancée visa to visit me. What shall I do? Our relationship wouldn’t be developed further.’ I knew Chen would love to take this overseas assignment because it’s an incredible career opportunity for him. I thought it over and over, and eventually I persuaded myself to marry him. That was before Chen moved to Tampa in early 1995.”

“When did you come to Florida? In summer of 1995?” I ask.

“Yes, good guess,” Yanming admits. “For some reason, when I first got here, I didn’t feel that Chen and I were a family yet, probably because the time we were together was too short. Looking back, I think we both made a rushed decision. My visa on my passport says I am a dependent. I know what it means. It’s a provisional qualification of me as a resident within the borders of the country where my husband is residing. My presence here is dependent on my husband’s work permit and official status. I am not here for reasons of my own, only for reasons related to him. Honestly speaking, these thoughts depressed me quite a bit. Since my visa status does not allow me to work here, the first thing I decided to do was to go to graduate school. This time I was in a hurry again. I didn’t get a chance to think through which area I was truly interested in and what I really wanted to study. I just wanted to go to school as quickly as possible, so I applied for the MBA program in Tampa University.”
“It’s a private university, and the campus is beautiful!” I say.

“Yes, I like the campus, but after one semester I didn’t feel the program was fit me. I like dealing with numbers and don’t mind doing tedious work either, but I am not good at doing presentations. All of my American classmates in MBA programs are great presenters. They truly enjoyed presenting, but I didn’t. I should have gone back to my old field in statistics or pursued a computer science degree. I know your university has an excellent bio-statistics program in the College of Public Health, but this time I have to carefully evaluate if my interest is in bio-statistics or computer science.”

“So you didn’t finish your MBA program in Tampa University.” I feel it’s a pity.

“No. I feel sorry for leaving the program, but I just couldn’t continue something I didn’t enjoy. My academic records were excellent though. All my grades for the six classes were A’s.”

Yanming takes a breath and sips some tea. Then she says, “I guess another reason I rushed to apply for the MBA program in the first place was because it’s a fashion nowadays in China to have an MBA degree. Even my parents thought it would be a good idea to get an MBA degree in an American graduate school. A couple of years ago in China, MBA was still a myth, a new concept, a new curriculum imported from Western countries.”

I agree with her. I guess the fashion of having an MBA among Chinese white-collar workers is just another phenomenon of globalization. The social and cultural values in China have been changing so fast. From the late 1970s to the early 1980s, being a scholar and working in academia had been an honorable “fashion,” but now
doing international business becomes another popular act. Globalization changes the
dynamics of the economy and people’s career development in China.

Yanming unfolded more details: “Another personal reason that I suspend my
MBA program in Tampa University was my decision to live in Long Beach in the Los
Angeles area for awhile.”

“Why? Don’t you want to spend more time with Chen since you two were just
reunited?” I can’t understand.

“Well, it’s part of my problems, I mean my self-esteem. Being a dependent is
what frustrates me about living overseas. It means that I am no longer a fully functional
adult human being. Whenever Chen consciously or subconsciously indicated I was his
dependent, I would be very frustrated. One example was to learn how to drive. I didn’t
drive when I was in China, so learning how to drive was one of the first skill sets I
needed to comprehend here. Chen was not that patient when he coached me driving. I
understood he was probably tired after a full day at work, but I was very vulnerable to
his lack of patience. I would always interpret this as due to the fact that I am ‘depending
on’ him. After several arguments during the sessions of learning how to drive, I quit
practicing with him. I told him I would ride a bus to go to school instead of driving.”

“Yanming, those little disagreements seemed not against the principles of life.
Maybe you two can try some small talks and take it easy?” Having said so, I know
communication among intimate relations is not necessarily easy.

“Theoretically I know, but when we are face to face, it’s very different. I suspect
we don’t have the chemistry to get along…” Yanming sighs.
I stop her: “Please don’t say that, Yanming. I bet you miss him when he leaves for business trips, don’t you?”

“Yes. Actually, you are right. During my first few months here, he went back to China on a business trip. Boy, that was a long business trip, about four to five months! Because I had quit learning to drive already, my life here became very isolated and difficult especially after Chen went on his business trip. During the daytime, I could ride a bus to Tampa University, but at night, it’s very dangerous to walk around. Also during the weekend, I have to ask Chen’s colleague to take me grocery shopping. During these four to five months, I indeed experienced all the inconvenience of not having him around. When we called each other, I always asked him: ‘When will you come back?’ Chen would say: ‘Don’t worry, maybe next week.’ However, it’s over four months!”

“Why did it take so long for a single business trip?” I am surprised by the duration.

“Because SINOCHEN is a trading company, chasing down payments from customers is a big challenge. It can take very long,” Yanming explains.

“So you must be glad that Chen eventually came back from China,” I say.

“For the first few weeks, yes; then there were more arguments — most of them are for little things — so after I finished the second semester at Tampa University, I finally decided to fly to Long Beach in California to visit my aunt and uncle for a period of time. Chen and I seemed to be OK for a long-distance relationship. He missed me, so he flew to Long Beach five times, especially during the long weekend while I was there.”
“How was your life in Long Beach? Did your aunt and uncle persuade you to come back to Florida?” I ask.

“Life in Long Beach was fine,” Yanming says. “Since I was not able to work legally, I just helped my aunt and uncle with things at home while they went to work. They did persuade me to come back to Chen. They didn’t understand why I felt a long-distance relationship was easier. In order not to let my aunt and uncle worry, I did come back to Florida eventually. That’s almost the end of 1996.” Yanming paused to think.

“A few months after I came back, I was pregnant.”

“Was the pregnancy helpful to your relationship?” I ask.

“Seems not, though I was hoping so,” Yanming shakes her head slightly. “In my late stage of pregnancy, probably because of hormones, I was not able to remain calm when Chen and I had arguments. Sometimes, I couldn’t help yelling at him, and then I could feel my son was startled in my womb. At that time I didn’t know it’s better that a pregnant woman really should stay calm and joyful. You have no idea how regretful I was.” Yanming’s voice is trembling a little bit. “Fortunately, my son is such a happy and healthy boy. I am very lucky!”

“Your son looks a lot like both of you. He’s such an angel.” I was amazed how quiet and well behaved her son was during our entire conversation. “Chen must be very happy to be a daddy.”

“I am sure he is, but he seldom held the baby and spent time with him. As I said, most of his time after he came back home was spent on stock markets. But now I have my son who he is my company. I will never feel scared or lonely anymore, for the rest of my life,” Yanming says.
For some reason, I am struck by Yanming’s statement and her emotional change after becoming a mother. It touches my inner sense of motherhood that will awake someday. I can’t help extending my hands and holding Yanming’s son. He is giggling at me. He has his daddy’s eyebrows and mother’s eyes. “You must have fallen in love with this little baby once he was born!” I actually admire Yanming’s motherhood.

“Yes!” Yanming’s face is brightened up with joy. “When he was delivered, the nurse handed him to me. He was so soft and tiny. For a moment, I had a feeling that he was a little strange thing, but that feeling only stayed for one second, and then he became my entire world!”

“While taking care of your baby, you should take good care of yourself.” Yanming looks a little bit underweight, and I gently remind her.

“I am OK. I was just not used to the food when I first came to the U.S. I think I am doing better after I gave birth. I am ninety pounds now,” Yanming says.

“But you look about five foot six tall. You should try to eat more,” I command.

It’s almost 5:15 p.m., and I am about to leave when Yanming’s husband Chen, came back home early. He is glad to see me again and sincerely invites me to have a simple dinner with his family. He seems to be a nice and friendly person. I thank him and agree to stay for dinner. I watch their son while Chen and Yanming are preparing dinner together. It seems to be casual and natural, as if old acquaintances are getting along.

At the dinner table, Chen and I chat a little bit about school since he goes to the graduate accounting program at the business school in the same university I attend.
“It must be very easy for you since you’ve already got a master’s degree in accounting in China,” I say.

“No, not really. The rules are very different. So it still takes me a lot of time to study. I feel I am too old to go to school and work full time. It’s a little bit tiring,” Chen says.

“You probably are still in your early thirties. How can you say that you are too old?” I object. “Actually, I should congratulate you for having a very nice family and good career. Your son is lovely!”

He sighs with emotion: “I came a long way! … I was born into a not-so-fluent family in Hunan Province. My parents worked very hard and supported me to finish college and graduate school. I went through a lot of hardships before I got a good job offer from SINOCHEM —”

I was waiting for Chen to expand his story, but he stopped. “Well, let’s not talk about that. These are all the things in the past,” he said.

Yanming is very quiet while feeding her son, who sits on the high chair beside the table. Since I had a long conversation with Yanming in the afternoon, I don’t feel comfortable to push for another interview during the dinner. Therefore we have some more light chat after dinner and I thank them for the hospitality. I need to leave.

At the door, Yanming says: “It was nice to chat with you. Feel free to call me, and you’re very welcome to visit us at anytime.”

I nodded my head: “Sure.” I have only met Yanming three times, but I already feel very close to her and her family.
I think I understand Yanming’s frustration very well. Not only the internal family power structure changes after an expatriate’s wife moves overseas, but also the external environment imposes challenges to her. When a woman leaves her homeland, she experiences a loss of the familiar, of continuity, of connection to her surroundings. The loss alters her sense of identity. Once she lands in the new country, she plunges into a culture that is very different from her own. She has to learn quickly how to navigate in her new surroundings, make new friends, and figure out a new path for herself. In addition, she faces many days without structure, no one to call, nowhere to go, no workplace to find a social value, and no cultural circle for her to identify with.

**Chai and Yan**

I kept in touch with both Jing and Yanming between 1998 and 2005. In spring 2005 when I had almost finished the draft of my dissertation, I came cross a book called “A Moveable Marriage: Relocate Your Relationship without Breaking It” (Pascoe, 2003). I read the introduction briefly and decided to purchase it. It reminded me of both Jing and Yanming and made me think of them and wonder how they were doing. In that book, Pascoe (2003) describes the dilemma some career women confront when they become spouses of expatriates: When a career woman was still in the safe cocoon of her full-time job and the warm, familiar community of friends and family, she did not realize the challenge of an enforced sabbatical, a move to a place where employment for her will be difficult or impossible. After the relocation, suddenly she becomes an expatriate spouse, the “wife of” or a “dependent of” her spouse. “Seeds of resentment are planted almost immediately as the new power structure in the relationship becomes obvious” (Pascoe, 2003, p. 9). With time on their hands, they might be asked by their
husband to take shirts or suits to the cleaners, to wait in for the cable guy or the
electrician, or to raise the baby, to cook, and to clean the house. Many women find “the
first of many resentment-filled shocks to come: the realization that once moved, the
marriage of equals now has a less-than-equal partner” — the husband has all the
“meaningful responsibilities” and the wife has the “day-to-day nonsense” (Pascoe,
2003, p. 9).

The mention of “meaningful responsibilities” vs. “day-to-day nonsense” also
reminds me about Chai and his wife, Yan. To me, Chai seems to be a mysterious person
because he seldom exposes any of his personal information including his education,
work experiences, and family members. There is always a distance between Chai and
me, a distance that makes me feel I can never draw close to him to understand the
challenge, frustration, and excitement he experiences at his career and in his life.
Sometimes I think this is a distance Chai created on purpose. Every subject matter he
discussed with me seemed to be like a press release and contained no personal opinions
at all. I can imagine it takes a lot of skills to be able to do that – to avoid the personal.
Every time I communicate with him, he makes me feel I am an outsider of SINOCHEM
or the corporate world. My observation on Chai’s orthodoxy always challenges the
legitimacy of my ethnographic research in my mind. It makes me think that
ethnographic research is the last thing to be accepted by the “real corporate people.” In
the spring of 1998, when I get a copy of USCA Holdings Inc.’s newsletter issued in
June 1997, I find an article that narrates an interview with Chai before he finishes his
six-year overseas assignment in Florida and goes back to SINOCHEM headquarters in
Beijing, China. That article altered my impression about Chai, not entirely but partially.
And the article talks about the roles he and his wife play regarding “meaningful responsibilities” and “day-to-day nonsense.”

The interview took place on May 16, 1997. USAC Newsletter contributors Brigit, Jack, and Helen invite Chai, his wife, Yan, and son Jerry to a local Chinese restaurant, Peking House in Lakeland. Chai is hesitant about being interviewed, and Brigit believes this is due to his quiet modesty. Here is a short transcript of part of the interview:

Helen: How can you describe your stay here in the United States? Chai: Memorable! Upon entering Los Angeles Airport, Jerry said it looked just like Beijing. He saw very many Oriental people.
Yan: There was very little cultural shock for us.
Chai: My wife taught English in China, so language was not a problem. She has been on a long vacation since coming to the United States. I work hard and she stays at home. Maybe we can switch.
Yan: I do the cooking, cleaning of the house and the clothes. I take good care of Jerry.
Brigit: Maybe you should switch! Chai has the easier job. (At this point it becomes a battle of the sexes, with lots of laughter.) Yan, how long before you joined Chai?
Yan: Three years. I was able to come for short visits before that.
(USAC Newsletter, June 1997, p. 2)

It’s interesting that Chai considers Yan’s leave of absence from her job to be “a long vacation” though Yan has been busy taking care of house chores every day and her only reason to be in the U.S. is to support Chai. That makes me wonder if Chai appreciates the nature of Yan’s sacrifice. Chai’s statement seems to represent the mentality of both expatriates and their spouses – only assuming public responsibilities is considered a real job. Being a housewife and a mother is to be on “a long vacation.”

Seeing Yan’s comments that “there was very little cultural shock” because she taught English in China, so the language was not a problem (USAC News & Views,
1997, p. 2), I can’t help asking the questions in my mind: How did she feel staying in the United States for three years and suspending her teaching career? Since this change is involuntary, how did she adapt to switching her social role from a full-time English lecturer at a prestigious Chinese university to a full-time mother and housewife in the United States? How did she negotiate the relationship between securing her own career and supporting her husband and family? Before she joined her husband for his last three years in America, how did she manage to overcome the inconvenience of being geographically separated from her husband for the first three years? Though I never got a chance to discuss these questions with Yan and Chai, I believe that they are part of legitimate inquiries in my research.

In all of my communication with Chai, the only words related to his personal life he uttered was a statement that he is very grateful for all the support his wife has given to him. I heard about his experiences through bits and pieces when I spoke with other expatriates and their family members. Chai was an interpreter for the president and CEO of SINOCHEN and served on short-term assignments to other countries, especially European countries. The assignment in Florida was his first six-year long-term assignment. Chai’s wife, Yan, used to be a tenure-track assistant professor in the English Department in Beijing Economics and Trade University. In order to support Chai, she suspended her career and joined him three years after he had started working for USAC. Though during the first three years, Yan paid a few short visits to Chai, it must have been very hard to commute between the United States and China. “Three years!” I exclaim in my mind. I have already been thinking of joining my husband after one and a half years commuting, and my situation is much easier because both my
husband and I live in the United States. Yan joined Chai in 1994. She has been a full-time mother and housewife. Compared with Chai’s “meaningful responsibilities,” Yan’s housewife job can be easily labeled as “day-to-day nonsense” as described in Pascoe’s book (Pascoe, 2003, p. 9). As I mentioned in an earlier part of this chapter, Chai is always well groomed and his shirt is nicely ironed. I imagine his wife puts her whole heart into supporting him. Yan waited for three years to join Chai, and I can imagine it must have been a hard decision for her to suspend her career. Upon returning to China at the end of 1997, Chai became the head of human resources of SINOCHEN headquarters, and Yan was fortunate to be able to resume her teaching position in her university.

In the summer of 1998, I moved to San Diego, California. When my husband and I were purchasing our new house, I incidentally found out that our broker, Joan Shen, was a classmate of Chai’s back in the early 1980s in the English Department at Beijing Foreign Languages University (BFLU). As a matter of fact, Joan Shen introduced Chai and Yan to each other. Yan later became Chai’s wife. Joan remembers that Chai had a full sense of humor and was so much fun to be friends with. She is surprised to hear me say Chai looks serious most of the time. After having a few chats with Joan Shen, who wants to say hello to Chai, I write a brief letter and mail it to Chai’s work address at SINOCHEN in Beijing. I have never gotten a response from him.

I read Brigit’s last paragraph of the interview with Chai back in the summer of 1997: “There were times when our insensitivity to cultural differences wounded Chai deeply. He chose not to become bitter. He worked even harder to gain our acceptance. Chai remained tolerant and compassionate. This article does little to show the true
picture of Chai and his sincerity … I will miss him a lot. To Chai, I can only say:
Farewell, my gentle friend, farewell!” (USAC Newsletter, June 1997, page 4). Even
today, I still ask myself: Why does there seem to be a cultural distance between Chai
and me though I was always so careful and tried to be as sensitive as possible?

**Tong — Daughter of an Executive Expatriate**

Tong’s mother, Madame Wanzhi Deng, was a president of USCR before
September 1996. She was involved in several high-profile meetings including the
discussion with the U.S. Phosphate Industry Delegation to Beijing headed by Florida
Senator John Grant in 1994. When I first met Tong at the beginning of 1998, Madame
Deng had retired from SINOCHEM and gone back to China from Florida.

When Madame Deng first arrived in Florida, Tong and Tong’s father came over
as “dependents.” Though Tong’s father was also an executive of another trading
company under MOFTEC, he came over as a spouse of an executive expatriate to
support his wife. In the expatriates’ world, males accompanying partners are called
“trailing males,” who are estimated to be proximately twenty percent of all
accompanying partners of expatriates (Hues, September 20, 2000, pp.1-3). Not feeling
offended by this label, Tong’s father became a strong anchor for the family, offering
emotional and intellectual support to Madame Deng, who was very busy at work,
initiating good times among his wife, his daughter, and himself, endowing the entire
family with a positive view for the future. Tong loves her parents very much. As the
only daughter, she is glad that everyone is so close to each other in her family.

In spring 1998, Tong was a second-year student in the MBA program at my
university. Though she had been in the United States for three years, she terribly missed
her home city, Beijing. Similar to Jing’s situation, because Tong also changed her visa from L-2 (a dependent of an expatriate) to F-1 (an international student), she can’t go back to China because she would risk not being able to come back to finish her degree here in Florida. Tong is still in love with her boyfriend in Beijing. She and her boyfriend have known each other over five years, since they were freshmen in the same class in the University of International Business and Economics, a university directly sponsored by MOFTEC. The majority of the graduates from that university are working for MOFTEC. When they were juniors, Tong’s parents moved to Florida for their overseas assignments. Tong’s mother really wanted Tong to join her so that Tong would have her educational experiences in the United States. Tong obeyed. During her last day before leaving Beijing, she and her boyfriend walked around the campus where they had met and had developed their relationship. Their schoolmate, an amateur photographer, took eighty-six photos for them. Tong told her boyfriend that she would look at those photos every day after she came to the United States.

Tong shows me these photos in her apartment in Florida. I enjoy seeing two young people who have such pure hearts and faith in their love. Tong believes that sooner or later they will get married and be happy ever after. I also enjoy refreshing my memory of the university campus in Beijing. They all are smaller in size compared with most American universities’ campuses, but they are like the gardens in metropolitan Beijing.

“Can’t your boyfriend take the Graduate Record Exam and apply for graduate school here so that he can join you?” I ask Tong.
“He personally has no interest in coming to the U.S. for graduate school, but for my sake, he did take the English exams. However, you know it’s not that easy to get a full scholarship and thus not easy to get a student visa to come over. Right now he is working in a company under MOFTEC after he got his bachelor’s degree,” Tong explains. “Sometimes, I was frustrated, and I told him if he loved me enough, he would have got a full scholarship to come to join me. Then I realized that I hurt him deeply because it was I who decided to obey my parents to come here for school. So afterwards, I would apologize to him.”

“It’s not easy to have a long-distance relationship,” I say.

“Yes, it’s been three years!” Tong sighs. “We maintain our relationship through international long-distance calls, e-mails, letters, packages of gifts, and the faith we have in each other. Sometimes, I wonder how much solidity remains in our relationship because we haven’t seen each other for over three years. A few times I ask him on the phone: ‘Do you think we will be all right?’ Then I hear his very firm response: ‘Yes, we’ll be all right.’ That comforts my heart and gives me more confidence.” When Tong tells me how much she misses her boyfriend on the other side of the globe, I share with her my experiences in commuting with my husband who works at west coast.

Tong is a few years younger than I am. Though I am married and a third-year Ph.D. student, I am still in a graduate-student mode, like Tong. We find that we are kindred spirits. After school exams, we go to Barnes & Noble on North Dale Mabry Highway during the weekend and then have cups of coffee or tea together. Sometimes we go and eat not-so-healthy fried seafood at Long John Silver’s. Occasionally Tong and I cook together. One of her specialties is lemon chicken, which is her own invention
and very different from what you find in “Americanized” Chinese restaurants, which we refused to go to for fake Chinese food anyway. When she cleans and peels off lemons’ skins and dices them carefully to marinate chicken strips, we chat about her parents, her romance with her boyfriend, and our common memory about our “old life” in Beijing. We missed the time we went to the People’s Art Theatre where I watched all of Shakespeare’s work played in China by the Chinese artists; we missed the time we went to the China National Fine Arts Gallery where there had been an exhibit of oil paintings from the Italian Renaissance age; we missed the time we went to the performance of the China Youth Symphony Orchestra of the Central Conservatory of Music where the beauty and the passion of the music filled our souls; we missed the time we met fans of the Peking Opera in tea houses; we missed the Great Wall and the Forbidden City where I normally went before it was closed by the end of the day so that I could appreciate the emptiness and mystery of the architecture. When we chat about those things together, I feel there are Schulman’s Traumerai or the Chinese classic music “Spring Night with Moon and Flower at Yangtze River” playing softly in the background of our conversation. The melody is peacefully spread into each corner of the living room. It soothes the nostalgic feeling we have toward our home city and our home country. It relaxes me but I feel a little bit sad. Tong and I easily became confidants.

Tong has earned her scholarship throughout her undergraduate years both in China and in the United States and then her fellowship during her first year in the MBA program, but she is a strong believer that family comes first. Her parents and boyfriend are more important than her future career opportunities. I view some black-and-white
photos of Tong’s parents when they were young. Tong kept her favorite ones in her apartment in Florida.

“How did your parents know each other?” I ask. My mind is filled with a lot of curiosity about Madame Deng as a former president of USCR.

“Mom and Dad were both in the University of International Business and Economics thirty years ago.”

“Wow, so you, your boyfriend, and your parents are all alumni! That’s why three of the four of you work for MOFTEC.” I am amazed.

“Yes. Mom was a beautiful and intelligent undergrad at that time. She was academically excellent in all areas except for English, because she had a Russian curriculum first and thus was a little behind on all her English courses. As a schoolmate, Dad volunteered to be her tutor. Of course, Dad’s intention was much more beyond just tutoring my mom’s English. Then the result is Mom accepted Dad’s proposal after their graduation. Then years later, there was me.” Tong is very proud. “I am not so interested in either my undergraduate program or my MBA, but since my mom and dad want me to excel academically, I did it and got my scholarship and fellowship.”

I am amused by Tong’s rationale for pursuing academic excellence. I ask: “So what would you like to study and be doing in the future?”

Tong pauses and thinks: “I like art crafts. Maybe I should go to art craft school. I also like cooking. Being a chef is not a bad idea.” Then she laughs and she knows these are not her parents’ dream career for her. “Actually, I believe my parents want me to work for big financial corporations,” she confirms.
“Would you like to stay in the U.S. or to go back to China after you graduate?” I ask.

“Most likely I will go back to China. It’s hard to imagine that my boyfriend and I will break up. Neither do I want to be geographically distant from my parents.” Tong’s short-term goal seems to be very clear. “However, I will miss being here. I actually like the lifestyle here. It seems that each individual has a lot of freedom to decide what she wants to do in her life, and it’s not anybody else’s business. I also like Florida very much. It’s beautiful, green, and peaceful. I am sure my life will be more hectic after I go back to China.”

Tong’s answer touches how I feel inside my heart. I miss China when I live in the United States, but I know I will truly miss the United States if I decide to move back to China permanently. That’s the dilemma people will face after moving to another culture for an extended time. You feel you cannot completely identify with your new country while your sense of belonging is not completely part of your old country anymore either.

Tong came to the United States when she was nineteen. I wouldn’t consider her a kid anymore, but as an executive expatriate’s daughter, she does have the paradoxical world that “the third-culture kids” experience (Pollock & Van Reken, 1999). The third-culture kids have spent a significant part of her “developmental years outside the parent’s culture” and build relationships to all cultures while not having full ownership in any cultures. With the changing scenery and an emotional minefield, it will be hard to answer the question of which cultural environment she really feels she belongs to. To
them, life could be restless, though the enriched experience caused by mobility may enhance her independence and adaptability to change.

During spring break of 1998, I invited Tong to join my trip to visit my husband, who was on a business trip in Atlanta, Georgia, and Chattanooga, Tennessee. Since Tong has made up her mind to go back to China after her graduation, she likes the idea of touring a few cities in southern states with me. When we stand at Lookout Mountain viewing the beautiful springtime in Chattanooga where there are hundreds of waterfalls, Tong says she feels there is some emotional connection she has with that peaceful country. She wishes she could purchase a little cottage someday to spend some really peaceful time here. Leaving Chattanooga, we drive up to Nashville. Set amid the gentle hills and fertile farmlands of central Tennessee, Nashville attracts Tong and me, immerses us in country music, and makes us easily abandon our detachment as foreign graduate students. When we head back to Atlanta and sit down at the night-lighted Centennial Olympic Park in downtown, with the CNN building not far from us, and after a day tour at Peach Street that signifies the story of “Gone with the Wind,” we are amazed by how modern and historical this big southern city is. Tong tells me that she knows she will miss all this so much when she goes back to China, just like we miss so much about Beijing when we live in the United States.

Tong graduates with her MBA degree in December 1998. At the time, I have moved to San Diego and joined my husband. One day I receive a phone call from her and she says she is selling her car and furniture, and cleaning up her apartment to prepare for her return trip back to her home country of China. She is both excited and sad. The excitement is she can’t wait to spend Chinese New Year with her parents and
boyfriend. They haven’t celebrated Chinese New Year together for over three years. The sadness is that the Christmas preparation and sentiment surrounding her in Tampa tell her that she will have very little chance to come back to enjoy her liberating graduate-student life again. Life has to go on, and she moves on with her life with a nostalgic feeling always accompanying her heart.

On February 22, 1999, one of my graduate-student colleagues, Shane Moreman, gets a summer job teaching English in one of the universities in Beijing. I write an e-mail to Tong, who has already settled back in Beijing, to ask if she can help Shane to get around when he arrives.

Hi, Dear Tong,

How are you? I miss your e-mail messages already. Shane is in Beijing now. Hopefully Shane will bring you the remembrance of Tampa and our school, USF. He is a little bit nervous for this trip because this is his first time to travel to Asia. I believe your intelligence and acquaintance with both cultures will bring comfort and courage to him. You will find his e-mail address in the cc: field (shane@dontmesswithtexas.com). I hope you will not mind that I have already provided Shane your home phone number (actually your parents’ phone number in Beijing) without consulting you first. I apologize if you would mind.

Tell me more about your life back in Beijing. Somehow, I believe, if you think your life after returning to Beijing is very happy, I am sure I won’t feel dread for the re-adjustment when I eventually go back to China in the future, because we have kindred spirits, thoughts, and views of these two cultures we have experienced.

Look forward to hearing from you. I am sure Shane will bring you some laughter. Please give my best regards to your parents and your boyfriend.

All the best, June

On February 25, 1999, I am thrilled to receive Tong’s e-mail back. It’s the first e-mail I received from her after she returned to Beijing. Tong’s e-mail read:
Hi there,
Sorry that I didn’t check my e-mails for a few days. There are constant
disconnections when I log on to the Internet. Friends say it’s because the
telephone cable has signal problems, especially during peak hours. I probably
need to log on more often after midnight.

I just saw your e-mail and Shane’s. I didn’t realize that he’s already in Beijing
until I read yours. I am sure we can hook up soon once he calls me at home. I
like his e-mail address. Did you ask him where he got it?

I think I have eaten so much since I came back. Chinese people really know
how to make delicious foods (please do NOT laugh at me). I am sure you will
feel the same when you come back. But I still make some American-style food
whenever I get a chance. The other day I was going to make a potato pie. It
didn’t happen because there’s no Mozzarella and sharp cheddar cheese in the
supermarket that I went to. I don’t know why, but sometimes the hard-to-find-
ingredient part makes the whole cooking experience much more fun!

You probably think I’m getting weirder and weirder talking this much about food.
OK, I will change the subject.

Oh, every time I read your e-mail, I wish that I could write as beautiful English
as you. I really mean it. Oh, I almost forgot: Could you ask your lovely husband
to take some pictures of your new home and post them on his web page so that
I can have a chance to browse them? Of course, if you don’t mind. I think it’ll be
fun for both of you to do so, although you both have a busy schedule.

I gotta go. Take care and take it easy.

Tong ☺

I read her e-mail letter and really hope she finds herself re-adjusted well. There
is so much I would like to know: How does her relationship with her boyfriend go after
they have been geographically separated for more than three years? When will they get
married? Will she feel comfortable to be “well protected” by her parents again after
she’s been independent overseas for extended period of time? Will she find her U.S.
MBA degree very helpful for her to find a job in Beijing? Will she like the work
environment in China after her Western education? I look forward to asking her these
questions in person when I go back to Beijing next time.
Request to Revisit USAC

In May 1998, five months after I passed the comprehensive exam for my Ph.D. candidacy, I write a letter to Mr. Yu, the new human-resource supervisor. Mr. Yu replaces Mr. Chai, who finished his six-year assignment and went back to SINOCHEN headquarters before December 1997. In my letter I express thanks again for all the help I received on my research from USAC people. I tell Mr. Yu that I would like to expand my previous ethnographic studies at USAC Holdings to be my dissertation, and thus request more onsite visits to USAC.

My purpose in revisiting USAC is to better understand the context where the Chinese expatriates work and live on a day-to-day basis. In my first few visits to USAC in 1997, I was trying to answer the following questions: “What does this workplace look like through Chinese expatriates’ narratives and through their American co-workers’ narratives? What does this workplace mean to Chinese employees?” Especially after knowing some Chinese expatriates and their family members, I have a wish to revisit USAC to explore further the following inquiries: “How do Chinese expatriates involve themselves in the local work environment? How much have they contributed to the local community? How well are they accepted by their American co-workers? Will it be possible that they become local, or will their destiny be global?”

Since I started to build up or have established friendships with some of the Chinese expatriates, their experiences become more vivid in my heart. The closer my relationship with them becomes, the more endearing this research is to me.

On evening in late May 1998, when I get back home from the library, I notice Yu’s voice mail on my answering machine. As Tong described, Yu has a nice voice, as
nice as Chai’s, but Yu’s tone sounds warmer. If I hadn’t known Yu’s background as a person who was born, educated, and worked in China, I would think Yu a native English speaker. It’s hard to imagine he has been in the United States for only three years as an expatriate. Yu introduces himself on the voice mail and tells me he also faxed me a letter regarding the schedule and agenda for my further visits at USAC. He asks me to call him back to confirm if I feel the time arrangement is all right.

I pick up the two-page letter from my fax machine. On the letterhead there is the company’s logo with the words “US Agri-Chemicals, A Sinochem Company.” Yu’s letter reads:

May 22, 1998

Alex Yu, Supervisor – Personnel,
U.S. Agri-Chemicals Corporation
Phone: (941) 285-8121 ext 102
Fax: (941) 285-9654

Zhong (June) Wang
Fax: (813) 971-5134

Dear Ms. Wang,

On your proposed interviews at our company, I was able to make some arrangements on the interview schedules as follows:

May 26 (Tue)
(10:00 am-11:00 am) Meeting with Mr. Steve Susick, General Manager – Engineering & Technical Services
- Procurement
- Purchasing and warehousing issues
- Environmental issues
- Community service

May (Wed)
(8:30 am-9:30 am) Meeting with Mr. E. Helms, Vice President and secretary
- Overall analysis of organizational effectiveness
- Organizational communication
- Management team evaluation
- Work group assessment
• Organizational changes
• Chinese employees’ participation in local management and business operations

(9:30 am-11:00 am) Meeting with Irene Dobson, Director of Human Resources
• Work/job assignment, performance evaluation, employee job training
• USAC’s employee wellness committee
• Employee benefits programs
• USAC newsletter

(11:50 am-1:00 pm) Lunch with Mr. Helms, Ms. Dobson and Alex Yu
(1:00 pm-2:30 pm) Meeting with Alex (Xuesong) Yu, Supervisor – Personnel
• Foreign deployment system

(2:30 pm-3:30 pm) Meeting with Alan Murkerson/Paul Sutton, Combination Repairman, Forte Meade Chemical Plant
• Interested topics

Ms. Wang, you will be expecting to spend a whole day on May 27 at the plant. I tried to put all interviews on the same day so that it would save you another trip to travel from Tampa, but Mr. Susick’s schedule doesn’t have any room for Wednesday; however, I think I will also be available Tuesday to talk with you on any other topics you are interested in.

I feel very glad to be able to assist you in any way with your research project. Should you have any questions or concerns, please do not hesitate to give me a call.

Very truly yours,

Alex (Xuesong) Yu
Supervisor — Personnel

Yu seems to have put a lot of effort in accommodating my request. Having not met Yu yet, I am already touched by his open mind and positive attitude in supporting me as a student researcher. The agenda provides me an opportunity to accomplish my goal to revisit USAC. The following narratives generated from my revisits are not necessarily written in the sequential order of the interviews listed in the agenda compiled by Yu, but are a result of the trips to USAC in late May 1998, when I was able to get a more in-depth view of the Chinese expatriates’ journey from Beijing to Florida, from the crowded Chinese capital to a quiet countryside in the United States, from a Chinese state enterprise to an American corporation. I am getting closer to the
view of how they feel about their journey and experiences, and how they interpret their
day-to-day work and life and give meanings to their American co-workers.

Yu and Li

It is Tong who recommends that I contact Mr. Yu for my revisit to USAC. Tong
thinks highly of Mr. Yu, who is her alumnus. Yu and his wife, Li, studied at the law
school of the University of International Business and Economics in Beijing, the same
college that Tong went to. A few years older than Tong, Yu was a student star due to his
academic excellence and multiple talents. Yu is a tenor and used to be the number-one
singer at the university, therefore almost every student in each department outside the
law school knew him. Tong believes Yu is a good person with a warm and kind heart,
and a sense of justice, and is the right person to pursue a law degree. As Yu is both nice
and professional, Tong says Yu can be either a good friend or a work partner.

All of Tong’s wonderful comments about Yu relieve my uncertainty and pave
my way to revisit USAC. Compared with my first approach and visits to USCR and
USAC, I feel I have come a long way.

In addition to Tong’s recommendation, Dr. Miriam Stamps, whose class I took,
also extends help. She calls Mr. Yu prior to my revisit to USAC and introduces me.
Since Yu’s wife, Li, was applying for the MBA program at the University of South
Florida (USF) and a China Florida Linkage scholarship, Yu had contacted Dr. Stamps,
who is both a professor in the Business College at USF and a board member of the
China Florida Linkage Institute. The reference Dr. Stamps provides endorses my visit.

The countryside of central Florida in late May 1998 has not stepped into humid
summer yet. The gentle breeze with bright sunshine and fresh green in Forte Meade
make the USAC facility full of youthful spirits. In 1997 and 1998 SINOCHEN and its subsidiary USAC Holdings, Inc., are doing well. SINOCHEN was amazingly not affected much by the Asian financial crisis that occurred in 1997 and early 1998 when the currency and stock market collapses were experienced by Hong Kong, Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, Singapore, South Korea, Taiwan, and Thailand. In September 1997, USAC celebrated “One Million Safe Hours” accumulated between November 1995 and June 1997. The employees are confident to reach the “Two Million Mark” by December 1998. On February 20, 1998, Mr. Zheng Dunxun, former president and CEO of SINOCHEN, paid a surprise visit to USAC. He met briefly with the senior staff and expressed his appreciation for the excellent work that USAC employees are doing. Though quite a few American employees have worked here for forty years, the new Chinese ownership and the recent capital investment energize this chemical plant previously owned by U.S. Steel for decades.

Yu’s bright and tidy office is filled with this positive and youthful energy as well. Because Yu recently became HR supervisor from a corporate attorney background, his shelf is mixed with books in different areas: legal, human resource, economics, business management, and miscellaneous, such as COBRA Handbook, Employee Benefits Answers Book, Donald H. Weiss’s “Fair Square and Legal: Safe Hiring, Managing & Firing Practices to Keep You & Your Company Out of Court,” Cheryl D. Block’s “Corporation Taxation,” Joseph W. Glannon’s “Civil Procedure,” and John Naisbitt’s “Megatrends Asia.” I had heard about “Megatrends Asia” but hadn’t taken an opportunity to read it. In that book, prognosticator Naisbitt predicts that the West and even Japan will be left behind by the countries of Southeast Asia, led by
China and a collaborative network of “overseas Chinese” entrepreneurs in Indonesia, the Philippines, Malaysia, Thailand, Hong Kong, Taiwan and Singapore. Above the shelf, there is a miniature horse statue imitating pottery crafts from the Tang dynasty (about 1,300 years ago) and a miniature knockoff statue of Emperor Qin’s Terracotta Warrior (around 220 B.C.). The most distinguished decorations in Yu’s office are two portraits of his wife, Li. One of them is an artistic black and white photo in which Li has silky long straight hair, sparkling eyes, and a dazzling smile. The other one is a colored photograph but looks like an oil painting, very elegant and classical. You must spend time on her portraits to appreciate them. Tong has already told me that Yu’s wife has been a beauty since her college time. It’s obviously true.

Mr. Yu is like a young scholar and has a gentle and modest attitude. Before talking about his own experiences, he introduces the six Chinese expatriates in the Forte Meade office. The new president of USAC Holdings, Inc., Mr. Zuming Shen, replaces former president Du, who finished his six-year assignment in Florida and went back to China in September 1998. In the Accounting Department, the Chinese expatriate is Wei, and in the Procurement Department the young manager sent by SINOCHEN is Lei. In the technology area, Mr. Chen Minglei is assigned by SINOCHEN to be the vice president of engineering locally at USAC. In my previous story session, Ernie Helms introduced him once in early 1997. Mr. Chen Minglei is an expert on phosphate fertilizer and very authoritative in chemical processes. At last, Mr. Yu introduces himself — he had been a corporate attorney and is now newly assigned to be personnel supervisor at USAC.
“Which department at SINOCHEM did you work for before coming to Florida?” I ask Yu.

“In the Legal Department,” Yu says. “When I first joined SINOCHEM in 1991, there were three people initially working in the Legal Department, but one of us transferred to another organization. Soon there were only two attorneys including myself. We were affiliated with the general manager’s office. As in-house legal councils, we were in charge of all the legal affairs of SINOCHEM. These affairs included contracts review, processing lawsuits, disputes, arbitration, participating in investment and negotiation, and providing advice from an attorney’s perspective. If there were cases that could not be resolved by the two of us in the legal department, we would invite outside attorneys to help. After four years working for SINOCHEM headquarter, I came to Florida in 1995 to replace Mr. Yu Lemin, the previous legal advisor assigned here at USAC between 1991 and 1995. When I first got here, my title was legal advisor, and I dealt with cases like worker’s compensation claims, environmental issues, etc. Because USAC Holdings, Inc., has a lot of deals in China, and I am familiar with Chinese law, I was able to contribute my efforts when there were a few cases going on two to three years ago. In the meantime, being a legal advisor, I was also assigned as the assistant secretary for the Board of Directors here at USAC Holdings, Inc. The secretary is the vice president, Ernie Helms. That job had a relatively high visibility. Specifically, I worked as an assistant for President Du because Du spent most of his time in USCR in Tampa and only came to USAC twice a week for executive meetings. Therefore, he needed my assistance to operate certain things here at USAC when he was in Tampa.”
“Were you offered some training before you came to Florida? How did the job transition go?” I ask and try to follow the chronology of his experiences.

Yu: “No, I didn’t take training before my departure. I consider coming here to be a good training opportunity and valuable experience. Regarding the job transition, it’s relatively easy because I was very clear about my responsibilities and what I would take over. Mr. Yu Lemin and I had a detailed discussion before he left. He told me about the daily routines here, whom I need to report to, and several examples of the cases he dealt with. He also did the transition of the historical records and other files to me.”

June: “Before you left SINOCHEN in Beijing, were you required to set up goals for your assignment here in Florida?”

Yu: “Yes, the director of human resources (instead of my immediate supervisor) at SINOCHEN talked to me. He introduced the situation here and set up some high-level expectations, primarily on gaining work experiences here so that I can bring greater value after I go back to SINOCHEN headquarters in the future.”

June: “Is the director of HR in SINOCHEN changed periodically?”

Yu: “No. Normally, the company prefers to have a stable HR lead. I guess it’s like in the U.S. — the judge is normally a permanent position so that he or she knows the entire history of certain cases or files.”

That’s an interesting analogy made by a person who obviously has a legal background. I continued with my questions: “I know that normally the duration of your assignment is three to six years due to the nature of the L-1 visa. But do you have internal transfer for overseas assignments? For example, after you work here in USAC
for a few years, can you transfer to the Huston office if there is an opportunity there appealing to you?”

Yu shakes his head: “Normally, we need to go back to SINOCHEN headquarters first to report and summarize our work before accepting another assignment and going to another place or another country.”

“How did you get into your current human-resources responsibility?” I ask, with my continued interest in the chronology of his experiences.

Yu: “July 1997, Chai finished up his assignment and prepared to go back to China. SINOCHEN headquarters was not able to find an appropriate replacement, and they did not want to add additional headcount here, thus they asked me if I was interested in taking over the job. Since there were fewer and fewer legal disputes I needed to handle here in USAC, I eventually agreed to accept this new responsibility. There was a lot to learn. One advantage I have is, because I am secretary of the Board of Directors, I know corporate operation strategy, the goals, and the bigger pictures. Therefore, it’s helpful for me to do resource allocation and do a better job in HR areas, but my background is international trade, and disputes, and I didn’t really know much of the details of HR management. I have been on this job for six months now, but I don’t think I have gained full competency yet. I am an HR supervisor and I got paid more, but I do not necessarily know more than my secretary, who has worked in the human-resources area for 15 years.”

I am struck by Yu’s honesty and modesty, and I come to my general and favorite question: “It must feel very different when you work at USAC Holdings, Inc., than at
SINOCHEM headquarters. What is the primary difference you experienced at both places?”

Yu pauses briefly and says: “I feel that the pressure level is very different. I went back to China last September and chatted with Mr. Chai about a similar subject. Chai said that though he had an equally busy schedule both at SINOCHEM in Beijing and USAC in Florida. He felt much more pressured working in the U.S. I feel the same way. Here the job description is more clearly defined, and of course the efficiency is higher. In SINOCHEM Beijing the responsibilities were more blurred. Not every group has a clear reporting structure as well as goals and evaluation criteria. In addition, punctuality, accuracy, deadlines, multitasking, and accountability are all highly demanded here. Most important of all, you need to abide by the law that provides detailed requirements of when, where, how to proceed with your tasks, and what you can do and what you cannot do. For example, once we hire someone, we must report to the Department of Labor within fourteen days. Also for an hourly worker, the company needs to provide health insurance within 60 days after he or she is hired. If a worker resigns, you need to remove him from the company’s insurance and inform the worker within fourteen days to enroll in COBRA. It’s a law passed in 1993. All these are clearly stated, but in China, there is no such well-defined labor law yet.”

Some scholars describe this characteristic (lacking well defined boundary) as a “diffuse culture” (Trompennaars, 1994, p. 93-97). Of course China is changing fast. I am sure corporate culture in China is moving from a “diffused culture” to a “clearly defined” culture. I move on to my next question: “What kind of work ethic from your American coworkers impressed you most?”
Yu responded without hesitation: “Their strong sense of responsibility! This offers me a good influence. Right now, I am just an HR supervisor, but all the three hundred employees are my clients and I feel pressured. I am responsible for my boss and my clients — employees — and I also deal with external business relations with suppliers, such as outside health-insurance providers, consulting companies, benefits consultants, hospitals, and employment offices. Of course, we are their customers, but I need to respond to these external service providers in a timely fashion for certain information such as insured headcount, etc. I believe this sense of pressure at work is a positive thing. It’s critical for doing a good job. The higher you are in the corporation, the more pressure and responsibility you may assume. Of course, I think this sense of responsibility has something to do with the system — the system of clearly defined responsibility and a well-developed reward system.”

“Agree,” I nodded. “It’s all because of the reward system. In China, the state enterprises and Western free capitalist enterprise are still different. They both hired local Chinese employees, but the work ethic demonstrated by employees are different due to the different systems.”

Yu continues: “USAC has two types of rewards: financial awards (with money), and non-financial awards (without money) for people who did a good job such as achieving the best production or safety records for the quarter or for the year. There are leadership awards, individual awards, and special recognitions, etc. Here we have performance evaluations each quarter to review group goals achieved, efficiency, productivity, work relationships, and behaviors, etc. In China, relationship is more important to succeed, but in the U.S. completing jobs in quality and on time is the more
important criterion for promotion. The pay system here is relatively more consistent too. Our salary is kept at a competitive level. We keep our offer attractive but also try not to lose money.”

I remember seeing the big sign in front of USAC’s entrance: “Buckle up! Good employees are hard to find.” I ask Yu: “In addition to good compensation, what else does human resources do to motivate people?”

Yu says: “As I said, there are rewards (not necessarily monetary) to increase morale, such as the employee delegation, i.e., selecting American workers who have good achievement to tour China and meet with the SINOCHEM management team. I believe Ernie and Irene told you a lot about this last year. To my understanding, Americans also appreciate honor, not necessarily money. Also, we try to make the workplace more interesting. We issue newsletters, initiate more team buildings and community events.”

Yu looks at his watch: “Oh, it’s 11:30 a.m. now. Mr. Shen is back from the meeting. I need to speak to Mr. Shen quickly, if you don’t mind.” “Of course not,” I say. Yu is dialing Mr. Shen’s extension. “Hi, Mr. Shen, can I stop by quickly? I need to give you some briefing...”

About 10 minutes later, Yu comes back: “Shall we go to lunch while we talk more?” “Sure,” I agree.

The restaurant is a bit noisy, but it is a good opportunity to chat about “light subjects” such as where he and his Chinese colleagues live, his opinions on the predominant work value he observed in American corporations, and what Yu likes most about the day-to-day mundane life here in the United States. Unlike Chai, Yu is very
much willing to share these opinions with me. I was concerned that a corporate human-resource supervisor would think these subjects silly, but Yu responds earnestly. “Don’t worry, June. No question is a silly question.” Yu gains my sincere appreciation, not only because of his respect, support, and acknowledgement of the value of my research, but also because of his honesty and sincerity. Currently SINOCHEN uses a “localization” policy: The expatriates are paid the local salary and are responsible for their own housing, transportation, and living expenses just like other local United States employees. SINOCHEN sponsored USAC to purchase seven houses in the Island Walk community at Lakeland. The six expatriates who work in Forte Meade live in these houses and pay the rent to USAC or SINOCHEN. Since USAC Holdings, Inc., is a Delaware company and registered in Florida, Chinese expatriates pay federal income taxes and Social Security taxes, though most of them are not going to retire in the United States.

“What is Americans’ dominant work value as you observed?” I ask and think it will be interesting to see how Yu interprets the question.

“Bottom line or profitability! The success of the competition,” Yu answers without hesitation. It’s been on the top of his head already.

“In this case, do you see that most Americans put work as their priority?” I ask.

“Not necessarily,” Yu says. “I used to chat with Phil White, an engineer in our company, and he graduated from the University of South Florida. Before he was married, he was fully devoted; but after he had a family, family comes first. Unlike Japanese, I believe Americans put more attention on life and family. Work is a way of making a living. Of course doing a good job provides a sense of achievement.”
When asked what he enjoys most about his day-to-day mundane life here in the United States, Yu says: “The social courtesy. I think people here are very nice. Even the government clerks are very friendly. The small talks among neighbors and co-workers are very pleasant. When people say hello to you and you respond nicely, and then you gradually become a really pleasant person too. We lack that in China. This seems to be a small matter, but I think I will miss that most if I move back to Beijing.”

Neither Yu nor I ate much lunch because of the conversation and Yu’s meeting schedule in the afternoon. I feel sorry, but Yu is very kind and supportive. He is going to pay the lunch bill, but I stop him and pay ahead of him. On our way driving back to the office, I congratulate Yu on very soon becoming a father. I heard this good news from Tong, of course. Yu is very delighted: “Yes, my wife, Li, will be due in a few weeks. We’re very prepared for that!” I can feel Yu’s excitement through his voice. “It’s not very easy for her. During my wife Li’s eight-month pregnancy, she was still driving from Lakeland to Tampa, taking classes and final exams. She is in the same MBA program which Tong and Jing are in.”

Li’s beautiful portraits I saw in Yu’s office reappear in my mind. Li will be a beautiful and happy mother. I heard from Tong that both Yu and Li wanted to have a child very much. I can imagine they will be loving parents. “Please tell Li to take care. Don’t worry about studying too much. Baby and her health come first,” I say.

“Yes,” Yu agrees. “But finishing her MBA program is the goal she wanted to achieve after she moved here with me. You probably know that from Jing and Yanming. They don’t feel right to be housewives.”
I feel I understand Li’s concern very well, just as I understood Jing and Yanming. Some of those who don’t have English proficiency and are not yet ready for school have to accept the change of their role and environment, but for expatriate wives who are determined to be financially independent and have their own career, what Jing, Yanming, and Li are doing becomes the appropriate path for them to reach their goals.

I would love to visit Li and Yu’s residence in Island Walk, but I don’t want to disturb them before Li’s due day. Unfortunately, I have bought an airline ticket to California in June. “Feel free to visit us when you come back to Florida next time!” Yu invited sincerely. Yes, that’s the plan.

Further Interpretation of Chinese Ownership

Before and after the interview with Mr. Yu, I meet with several American employees at USAC. They include executives, middle-level managers, and factory workers. The purpose is to understand from multiple perspectives how American employees translated the Chinese ownership of USAC, how American co-workers perceive the Chinese expatriates’ roles and functions, and how USAC is interpreted not only as a workplace but as part of a community.

In May 1998, I met with Steve Susick, the VP of Technical Engineering Service, who has been with USAC for seventeen years. Steve is the second American executive I have interviewed after Ernie Helms since 1997.

U.S. Steel had a fertilizer division to diversify their business because a lot of companies are conglomerates, so when certain segments of the industry are not doing well the other segments may perform fine. In the late 1980s, U.S. Steel decided to concentrate on their core business of steel making. “Therefore,” Steve says, “our
fertilizer division did not fit into U.S. Steel’s business strategy anymore. That’s when SINOCHEN decided to buy us. SINOCHEN is a conglomerate and has multiple segments of business. From this sense, U.S. Steel and SINOCHEN have some similarities. However, chemical fertilizer is one of SINOCHEN’s core businesses, so this division is a good fit for SINOCHEN.”

“If you consider that the conglomerate nature is the primary similarity between SINOCHEN and U.S. Steel, what are the primary differences you see from an operation perspective?” I ask.

Steve says: “In terms of day-to-day business, SINOCHEN recognizes USAC is an American-run business and it will continue to be that way. They are coming here to learn, and I am sure they will have the freedom to do that. Therefore, the operation procedure didn’t change much after SINOCHEN took over. U.S. Steel was very much into safety issues and evolved the safety issues as regulatory; however, SINOCHEN is more concerned with employees’ safety issues compared with the previous owner.”

“Based upon your observation, what is the major cultural difference in communicating to each other at work between your Chinese co-workers and American co-workers?” I am interested in his answer.

Steve smiles: “This is the first time I dealt with people from China. They are very nice but very sensitive people. The whole thing about ‘face’ is very educational and I learned a lot from it.”

I am amused. “Any examples of this ‘saving face’ characteristic?”

Steve smiles too: “I don’t know if I can give you any specific stories outside the facts. As we conduct our business here, typically, I think in the U.S., people tend to be
more aggressive and ask questions, perhaps even pointed questions like why you are
doing such things in a certain way. What I observe from our Chinese owners is, they
want to absorb and learn but they do not necessarily ask questions, only because they
might be afraid the question they ask will embarrass the person who has to answer the
question."

I laugh: “What’s the positive and negative side of this?”

Steve: “Well, positive side: they may get information without having to ask a
pointed question. That’s beneficial for everyone. The negative side is the
communication and actions may get slower, but I don’t think that will change the
process. To me the difference between Western civilization and Eastern civilization is
the amount of time allowed to make things happen.”

June: “That seems to be a good observation.”

Steve: “Yeah, the Western civilization is so hurried to finish up the current thing
and get onto the next one, while Eastern civilization, which has been around thousands
of years, seems to take time to do the right thing. It’s mutually educational, and
probably more so to us than to them.”

June: “It’s very kind of you to say so.”

Steve: “One of the strengths of this country is we are so multicultural. Anyway,
it’s been educational for us.”

June: “Do you feel comfortable to ‘wait for things to happen’ and be more
patient about the decisions?”

Steve: “Well … that’s fine … but it becomes an issue when you realize that you
are trying to do that and also you are in a Western culture where we operate. If we get a
contract and decide to build up a facility, we will do it quickly. I didn’t mean that Eastern culture can’t do that, but we Western-culture people are typical in rushing to get things up and running. I think by having American culture and Chinese culture merged, we can have the best results.”

“Steve, you don’t have to worry about ‘saving my face,’ and please feel free to give me an example,” I say.

Steve laughs and seems encouraged: “For example, we may have a large ‘earth-moving’ contract (contouring the land, fill it back in with trees, etc., to protect the environment). Well, there are a lot of folks in this industry doing what we do. These activities fluctuate from time to time. It depends on the company’s need at different times, either large demand or small demand for that. So what may happen is that the earth-moving company may not have enough contracts to work on during certain times. At this moment we may get a very competitive bid by having a low cost to get our project done instead of waiting for the earth-moving company to get busier again. We should make this decision quicker instead of waiting half a year later when budget approval allows us to do so. That’s the dynamic of the work decision in Western culture.”

Steve pauses and tries to justify more: “Of course, the strength to take time to analyze things is a good one, otherwise the return on investment is diminishing. However, bigger companies are relatively slower in decision-making anyway. If we were still under U.S. Steel, we would still have to go through offices in Atlanta and Pittsburg. In bigger companies, we always have to explain what we are doing and why we are doing so.”
June: “I appreciate your honesty. After SINOCHEN bought USAC, did you have concerns at that time since this is your first time to work with Chinese?”

Steve: “No, not really. China is the country with the largest population in the world. It’s an opportunity to do fertilizer business with them and with their government. The only difficulty that Chinese expatriates might have was the 1989 Tiananmen Square students’ uprising. Being a smaller group of Chinese here in USAC, the expatriates might think they are representing China, but American people here understood why and how it happened regarding the incident of Tiananmen Square, in terms of government control of the press, etc. We had college students uprising here in the Untied States too. At least I am not too concerned in that regard. As a matter of fact, for a long time U.S. Steel had already decided not to invest money in us. After SINOCHEN bought us, the Chinese owner invested a lot of capital on people. That’s a very positive thing for this division.”

June: “What kind of investment did SINOCHEN put on people? Salary increases?”

Steve: “Yes, they made adjustments of the pay, rewards, and recognitions because they want to make sure we are competitive in the industry and in Florida. I think all these are very well thought of by employees.”

“In terms of salary increases, is it a relatively bigger portion compared with a hypothetical situation in which an American company bought this division?” I ask, but I know Steve probably can’t answer.

Steve: “Well, I really don’t know. However, one thing I can confirm is that because SINOCHEN doesn’t have other chemical-plant assets here in the States, most
of the resources in this division were being kept; if there had been a big American chemical fertilizer company that had bought us, there would have been more people identified as redundant and got laid off.”

At this moment, Mr. Ernie Helms steps in: “Hello, hello — Madame Wang! Welcome back! You found your way back here. I hear from Mr. Yu that you are heading for San Diego to join your husband. I am glad you come to visit us before you go.” Ernie turns to Steve, pats his shoulder, and says to me: “Steve closely works with Mr. Minglei Chen and other Chinese expatriates. You were put in good hands today for the information you want to know. I know we’ll meet tomorrow. I look forward to talking to you!”

* * *

Described in my earlier story session, Ernie is the first American executive I interviewed at USAC. During my first visits to USAC, he provided me his interpretations of “why” and “how” SINOCHEM acquired USAC and what challenges the Chinese expatriates faced in protecting the environment, increasing production volumes, restructuring organizations, and making cultural adaptations both at work and outside the workplace.

When I interviewed Ernie again in May 1998, I asked him if he ever had concerns when SINOCEM purchased this chemical-fertilizer division from U.S. Steel in 1989. Ernie nods: “Yes. Honestly, I was wondering if the new owner would bring a whole bunch of people to replace all of us. God knows, there are so many people in China and the labor rate is much lower!” He laughs. “Also, I knew there were a lot of well-educated ‘business elite’ in SINOCHEM, and I wasn’t sure if they could get along
with what we called deep-South ‘rednecks’ here, who drive pickup trucks, with their agricultural roots, are very proud in their speech, habits, food selections, and their choice of recreation activities. No offense, but I want to be honest. We have people who are in a very traditional Polk County and central Florida upbringing.

“In addition,” Ernie adds, “I didn’t know if our factory people would like to work for a subsidiary of a government enterprise from China, because you know that Tiananmen Square incident was reported on CNN twenty-four hours a day in summer 1989. As a matter of fact, I imagined the Chinese expatriates might have quiet concerns that what’s going on there in China could impact the life of their loved ones. Well, as I described to you in our interviews last year, everything worked out fine eventually. We changed corporate headquarters from Atlanta to Forte Meade. That was right after June 4, 1989.”

“So, during the entire acquisition process, we can say there was no resistance from American employees at all,” I say.

“Well, actually the old president, Mr. Shields, was ‘let go’ because he didn’t like the new ownership very much. We had another president, Mr. Williams, till 1992, and then in 1992 we hired Mr. Scott, who has a lot of experience in operating a chemical-fertilizer manufactory. The nice thing is, China doesn’t impose their corporate culture and management style on us; instead, they let our Americans operate the factory every day and they learn from us how to run a free enterprise in a market-driven environment. Chinese expatriates who come here are very nice and polite people, and the capital investments they brought over keep our factory people employed. Our workers here
appreciate the Chinese ownership and don’t really care about ‘ideological differences’
between the two governments.

“Speaking for myself,” Ernie says, “I had a lot of experience working with the
Japanese steel industry before. This is my first time working with Chinese, and I
consider it an opportunity to broaden my international experience, my own education,
and my own globalization. I believe it is true for other people here in the factory. We all
have the opportunity to relate, day in and day out, with Chinese expatriates who seek
out our advise, knowledge, and experience.

“As I mentioned to you last year,” Ernie continues, “SINOCHEM also allows us
to send a group of employees to China periodically. Many of us had an opportunity to
visit the treasure of your nation. We have done that year after year. The first delegation
was in 1991. For the first delegation, we had to pick people. We sent Joy Peevy from
my staff; we sent the president of the local union; and we sent some high achievers
including supervisors and workers. Later on, we sent our executives over there to attend
board meetings. That’s 1992. Then we had the 1994 political delegation; we took some
politicians from the state of Florida who could better understand the most-favored-
nations issues. We sent a few educational delegations several times. Meanwhile, we
always had enormous Chinese delegations visit us. In the early stages, we would almost
have one every week or every two weeks, from all the different levels of government
representatives, from provincial agricultural leaders to central government leaders,
including Minister Madame Wu Yi and Premier Li Peng — we had all different levels
of delegations here.”
It’s interesting and impressive that USAC holds a high profile among Chinese government officials, I think.

“In addition to the cultural exchange above, I made some proposals,” Ernie continues. “Of course I couldn’t dictate to SINOCHEM headquarters, but I made some proposals in their personnel management area, such as what I think were good ideas of recruiting and retaining key personnel, especially the key personnel they sent here. Those are the brightest young people, who would be future SINOCHEM executives. According to Chinese leader Deng Xiaoping’s philosophy, there was an important intention to have these young future executives trained in a Western free-enterprise environment and let them go back to China to continue the economic reform. So it would be vital to have good personnel policies, whether they would be compensation, benefits, housing, or promotion. In the early days, the policies were very rigid on overseas assignments — for instance, you couldn’t bring your spouses, families, etc.”

June: “When was that?”

Ernie: “That was in 1989 or early 1990. I am just loosely interpreting these rules that you had to be in the second assignment before you could be considered to bring your family. If it was the first assignment, you had to be at a certain organizational level, a relatively senior person in order to bring family along. That was not just the policy of SINOCHEM. It was the policy of the Chinese government for sending expatriates and the emigration policy of the nation of China. It would be difficult to be productive for Chinese expatriates if they were not allowed to bring their families with them here. Eventually, SINOCHEM saw the benefits to allow families to join the
expatriates. Of course the risk is when entire families are here, certain expatriates may end up staying in the U.S. instead of going back to China.”

Ernie is proud that USAC serves as a training site for the Chinese expatriates who will be the future executives at SINOCHEN. When bringing up this subject again, Ernie suddenly remembers something: “It’s 9:00 p.m. right now in China. Let’s say hello to Mr. Chai. You still remember him?”

Before I respond, Ernie turns on his desk phone speaker and dials. After several beeps, Chai’s radio voice appears: “Hello…” Chai greets in English. Obviously, he realizes the phone call is from the other side of the globe.

“Hi, Mr. Chai, how are you?” Ernie greets him.

“Great! And you?” Chai’s casual response indicates the frequent contact between him and Ernie after Chai went back to China.

“Hey, Mr. Chai, guess who is here… it’s Madame Wang! Remember? She’s from the University of South Florida,” Ernie says with excitement.

Chai is quiet on the phone for a few seconds, and says: “Hi, Ms. Wang, thank you for your textbooks you prepared for my wife.” I explain to Ernie: “Chai’s wife, Yen, resumed her teaching position in China and thus wanted me to gather some good textbooks from the U.S. The books were already shipped to them.”

Ernie: “That’s good. How is your son, Mr. Chai?”

Chai: “Jerry is doing OK. A lot of pressure from school — the Chinese curricula are relatively more advanced than the grade school there in the U.S. It takes Jerry some time to adjust.”
Ernie: “I played golf with Mr. Du last week. He got 89 and I got 90.” I thought Mr. Du, the ex-president of USAC Holdings Inc., had gone back to China. Maybe he returned for short visits.

Chai: “That’s great. I haven’t played for a long time…”

The little chat on the phone ended up with them offering best wishes to each other.

Ernie explains: “I am glad you chatted with Mr. Chai a little bit. He is now the general manager of human resources in SINOCHEN headquarters after he went back to Beijing. Please take a look at this magazine, you will find the discussion of the new Social Security system in China.”

“In China!” I am surprised.

Ernie: “Yes. Chai was selected by SINOCHEN to be a representative of a Chinese government committee to implement a Social Security system in China. Why? Because while he was here, he experienced first-hand the Social Security system, and became a compensation and benefits expert in the U.S., and he carried this back and provides valuable insight to that committee to help implement the forms of sponsored private-company pensions to supplement the government Social Security system in China. So Chai’s experiences here are vital to the evolution of the concept for SINOCHEN. In short, those are some of the successes we have enjoyed in our ownership relationship with SINOCHEN. Clearly the Chinese owner needs the products we manufactured; clearly, they value the organization they have here; and I have to say our people are very perceptive in learning as much as they can about the Chinese expatriates and the Chinese culture. So it’s been a very good marriage.”
“That’s an interesting metaphor!” I comment. Ernie is probably not aware that he had used that metaphor several times when I first interviewed him in 1997. It just reinforces to me how much he relates USAC as a family structure.

Knowing I am interested in more details of how Chinese expatriates adapt and grow in this work environment and community, Ernie encourages me to talk with Human Resources Director Ms. Irene Dobson.

**Chinese Expatriates’ Interactions with Community**

Before our discussion in her office, Ms. Irene Dobson shows me the newly approved benefits package at USAC: “From this January, we changed our insurance coverage from Mutual of Omaha to MetLife. The reason is simple. MetLife is a well-known company providing quality, and it’s cheaper with the same coverage. The nice thing about MetLife is having the program called ‘Progression,’ which is a free service to help employees to look at their daily finances, retirement arrangements, and also the planning of what they leave behind after they pass away. Of course, these benefits are probably more useful for American employees. To Chinese expatriates, the primary service they can take advantage of is the financial-investment consulting — for instance, how they open an account to buy stocks and bonds. I know you have a Merrill Lynch office in China now, and that investment information will be useful whether these Chinese expatriates are in the U.S., Singapore, or Beijing.

“Mr. Yu has helped me to make these benefits presentations. He is so bright!” Irene compliments him sincerely. “But I’d like to share with you a story, and Yu might be a little embarrassed to hear this. At the time Yu was asked to take over Mr. Chai’s job, he was hesitating to accept the offer. I guess he was afraid the HR job would divert
him from his attorney background, so I took a different approach. I told him the HR job would add value to his career experiences no matter where he goes in the future. I just kept showing some of things in HR while discussing it with him, such as the alternative benefits programs we would choose and how we would negotiate, etc. Then I saw there was a transformation in him. He started to get involved and realized this was not as boring as he thought.” Irene smiles.

June: “I perfectly understand Yu’s first reaction. Here is some background information: HR management in China was not as developed as here in the U.S. Many people in China still think they need no training to do this job. In addition, quite a few HR people in China had bad involvement in political movements in China between 1966 and 1976. The HR function in China had different connotations from the ones in the U.S.”

“That’s why!” Irene says: “One time I spoke to Yu that once he completely took over the HR job he would have to leave his legal advisor job and his assistant secretary of the Board Directors position because his new HR responsibilities would be very time-consuming. Yu said he believed he could handle both the HR and the legal advisor job well. At that time, I thought he probably didn’t know how demanding the HR job could be, especially when he needs to be involved in all recruiting, retaining, benefits, compensation, and internal communication. But, hey, if you talk to Mr. Yu nowadays, he probably would tell you: ‘First, I can’t do both HR and Legal jobs; second I don’t even have enough time to just do one HR job!’ ” Irene laughs.

Now Yu realizes that the HR job is not just to let people fill out forms and get enrolled in the benefits program, so he accepts Irene’s proposal to go to several training
series. One of them was what Mr. Chai has had before at the American Compensation Association. That program will take about two years. “I just hope he will be here long enough to finish it, because sometimes you just don’t know when they will need to go back,” Irene says. “If Yu can get a certificate, it would be beneficial to his career even though he may go back to the legal field again. I am sure you have read the article that Ernie gave to you. China now is developing a Social Security system. Trust me, it won’t be long before it develops a medical-care system,” Irene predicts.

“Yes, I called my family in China, and they have already started the medical-care system reform there.” I confirm Irene’s prediction and insight. “In addition, since more people like Chai went back to China, I hope my fellow countrymen will change their view on human-resource management. I would imagine it’s important to have a strong HR department in an organization where human beings are the most complex and dynamic entities.”

Irene: “Absolutely, and organization is always changing!”

Irene and I gradually change our subjects from benefits and HR management to how well the Chinese expatriates develop competencies in other functional areas at USAC.

“One function that is critical to our operation is procurement, which the Chinese expatriate Lei is involved in. In order to make our products, we primarily rely on three raw materials: rocks, ammonia, and sulfur. Lei focuses on purchasing these raw materials from the suppliers and signs contracts with suppliers on a quarterly basis to get the materials for our production. His manager William is a senior director in procurement who is also responsible for the entire assets of the company. Lei’s
counterpart is the Traffic Department, and he works with trading company USCR in Tampa as well. If Lei cannot get the right price for the raw materials, our operation will cease to exist. So Yu works with his American colleagues to learn how to communicate with people ‘inside’ and bargain with people ‘outside.’ He sometimes has to talk to suppliers from other countries. You can imagine the challenges he went through. Here we have this young man who has been here NOT very long but he has been doing an excellent job. After Yu became a full-time personnel supervisor, Lei also replaced Yu to be an assistant secretary of the Board of Directors. He wears two hats: to assist the new president of USAC Holdings, Inc., and also to work with the rest of us.”

June: “These two jobs are completely different directions!”

Irene: “That’s right. No overlapping at all. He’s been juggling these two jobs very well. Another person you met before is Wei. He is right among his American co-workers in the Accounting Department. He first came in as a management trainee and we were teaching him, but now I heard from the finance manager in his department that Wei is an important contributor in his group! Wei has grown to be an experienced accountant who well understands both Chinese and American accounting principles. If he goes back, he will add great value to SINOCHEM as an international business enterprise.”

“Yes. Wei feels he has learned so much since he worked here,” I say. I supplement that with feedback from Wei: “Wei says Americans have a totally different accounting system. At the beginning it was almost another planet to him; not only the policy and process are different but also the tools used for bookkeeping are in different
software programs. He likes the budget system here, it’s very strategic with clearly defined procedures. He prepares to bring these methods back to China.”

Irene’s glad: “That’s great to hear. As you see, we have Chai, Yu, Wei, and Lei, they all became great contributors to our workforce here. That’s how the multicultural team works. They bring their knowledge from their home country and learn new work knowledge from us and then contribute back to us. This is an exchange. We learn from each other and understand how to work with each other and be productive.”

June: “I guess this is what we call ‘cultural synergy.’ ”

Irene: “Yes! That’s right.”

June: “Another subject interesting to me is how USAC interacted with the community! Does this interaction provide a positive work climate where the Chinese expatriates enjoys living in?”

Irene: “I recommend you speak with Joy Peevy. She is responsible for both our labor relations and public relations. Let me tell you something about Joy, and you make sure to ask her to tell you this as well. She started her job as a clerk in the shipping department. When we had an opening here in HR, we said to her, ‘Joy, why don’t you go back to school to finish your degree. We have tuition assistance here to help you finish your degree.’ She stayed in my house for two years when she had to go to school during the weekends because she lives so far away, and she had to drive more than two hours one way to school. She just graduated last year. Now she has a four-year bachelor’s degree in business administration. It was very hard for her when she did that. She has a full-time job, she is a single mom who has been divorced many years, and she finished her degree. This is someone who has a lot of drive. Not only that, she never
neglected her job. You want to talk to her. She is really a good example of someone when they put their mind to something and who have their company to back them up. I am telling you I am very high on this company. I know there are a lot of good companies out there, but I know what I see every day here. The company is not necessarily perfect, but all and all, I put my company against everyone else out there.”

June: “Because of your passion to this place.”

Irene: “Oh, yes, I heard our employees who went to work somewhere else and came back. They said it’s just not the same. The feeling was different.”

June: “This is very touching. A strong sense of community, to us Chinese, is an admirable value.”

Irene: “Joy is back from a business trip and vacation on June 8. Please feel free to make an appointment with her. I will also tell her to expect your call. You will get so much information from her on how much this company has done for the community. The Chinese ownership and expatriates are very supportive of community involvement.”

I am very glad. This gives me a natural permission to come back again, and I’d love to spend as much time at USAC as I am allowed.

“Oh, June, I have to go to a meeting now. If I am not able to see you when you come in after June 8, I wish you a smooth trip to move to California. You are going to write to me. You promise.” Irene hugs me before she leaves.

* * *

On June 10, 1998, I meet with Ms. Joy Peevy two days after she gets back to the office from her business trip and vacation. She has straight blonde hair with anchor
Diane Sawyer’s cut, a gentle voice, a calm demeanor, and an intellectual look. Her dress is simple yet professional, and it highlights her refinements. I can tell immediately she is a woman of substance by the way she looks and how she greets me. She begins:

“My current primary responsibility is labor relations. One thing I dealt with is the Grievance Committee. Most of the time, the problems come from misunderstanding. When the company and union don’t agree, we invite third-party arbitration. Most likely we would invite Ms. Cohen, who teaches labor relations at the University of South Florida. When there is a third party involved, the company and union will have to share the cost. I have been here nine years, and we have only three arbitration cases involving third parties. I normally present arbitration cases to the company. We discuss cases with management, maybe something we’ve done wrong, such as not calling the right person to do the right job. We are not necessarily right all the time. In this situation, I would tell the Grievance Committee: ‘OK, you are right; we are wrong; what should we do to fix it?’

“I didn’t experience the ownership transfer from U.S. Steel to SINOCHEN. I started to work here in March 1990, a year after the acquisition. I first came to work in the Traffic Department, and then there was an opening here in Human Resources. Because my background was in personnel and labor relations before I came to this company, I got the job. Therefore, I had been in the Traffic Department only for six months before I transferred to Personnel. It’s been a very pleasant experience for me to work for a Chinese company. When I first started with Human Resources in October 1990, one of the tasks I was assigned to do was to deal with the Chinese delegations that came to Florida to visit, so I have had a lot of exposure to Chinese nationals. When they came over, I would greet them in the airport and then be responsible for their accommodation, dinner, and be with the delegations the
entire time when they were here. I did it about three years. I went to Disney
dozens of times a year. One time we had a delegation land in Tampa. Next
morning, when I came downstairs, the interpreter of the Chinese delegation
talked to me and said the delegation wanted to go to Disney instead of going to
Busch Gardens. So I said: ‘Let’s do that.’ Of course I needed to make sure the
delegation returned from Orlando back to Tampa at 7:00 p.m. sharp because
we had a large dinner reception pre-arranged by USCR. I need to be as flexible
as I can because I understand people from these delegations are normally here
for a one-time visit, and they need to enjoy what they have heard about Florida.
It was my opportunity to have exposure to Chinese culture. Through chatting
with them during the delegation members’ visits, I know a lot of things about
China, such as usually how old people are when they get married, etc. I heard
that people in metropolitan areas normally would not have a child until after
twenty-five. (June laughs, and Joy does as well.) Since a lot of these
delegations want to see as much as possible, we were trying to do too much
during the day. Most of the delegation members are gentlemen, and they are
very polite and always asked me if I was too tired. It’s good to see this side of
them.

“Starting from 1993, I began to work on building up relationships with
the community. Most of the time, I need to find out what the community needs
from us. It’s about going to their meetings, civic meetings, providing funds or
other help for their needs. I got involved in what they called the Forte Meade
Chamber of Commerce. They look at how we can develop this community. Can
we go out to solicit new business to come in? Can we create a brochure of the
information of our community that might be appealing to large industry, such as
motion pictures, etc. I represent USAC and attend these meetings to
understand what Forte Meade needs from our company. Forte Meade wants to
stay small, and they don’t want to be huge. They want to stay with roots. They
want to remember who they are, and they want to stay in this quiet country town. They are very appreciative to the phosphate industry around them because they have generations of people work and live here. So I got involved with them.

“The project I am doing right now is to help the school’s Chemistry Department to upgrade all the chemicals and the stuff they need to make the experiments. We are working with a few other companies to provide the money for them to be able to do that. We also bring the students to our company for tours, and they will observe what we are doing and they go back to their school lab with some sense of how their lab work related to the real practical world. So my goal is to build goodwill and trust between the community and our corporation. You ask if Chinese expatriates are involved much in these activities. Yes, Mr. Chai is involved more than other Chinese expatriates in working with me to help schools. Mr. Chai did presentations to schools. The last presentation Chai made before he left was the presentation he made to the group of students who came here for a tour. Chai talked about what kind of skills would be expected to apply for certain jobs here and how you should dress when you come here for an interview. It was fantastic. He did a great job of telling the students how important it is to stay in school to develop the skills needed in their future workplace. Mr. Chai was very easy to understand and he could reach different levels of students.

“Before 1994 we had a facility in Miami to mine phosphate rocks, and we shut down the facility over there and started to purchase the rocks from suppliers. During that time, we had employees who had to find jobs, and we opened a building to invite those employees to come over for the GED (General Education Diploma) so students can get an alternative to a high school diploma. He helped them to be able to go to school, and he worked with them on how to prepare interviews and resumes. In my heart, Chai is a unique and
special person. The nationalities are not barriers. We are just friends. He also went to elementary school to do presentations like how different nationalities work together. Chai chose to go out to interact with hourly workers very often. They came to Chai for problems, and Chai took care of them. He made each person feel that each of them was an important person. When people heard he was leaving, they asked and begged to have a chance to say goodbye to him in person. We finally had an open house so that everyone who wanted to say goodbye to Chai could come in and give him the best wishes. People here still talk about Chai after he left. That’s a good thing.

“We just recently had an event — a golf tournament. The purpose of the event is to raise money for “Florida Shares Youth Rages.” These places have them all over Florida. The one we are supporting is located in Bartow. This is for the children who might get abused and can’t live with their parents, or who get in trouble with the law, or who run away from home. This is the place they can go. It’s a supervised living. USAC has been involved in that for thirty-six years. Our new Chinese owner has also kept this legacy. We locally have eight sponsors of this event. Employees in our company come over and donate their time to help this three-day event. It’s good to see people donate their holiday to support this type of event.

“Another thing Chai was also involved with was ‘Paint Your Heart Out, Bartow.’ We have done this for eight years since SINOCHEN bought us. Employees donate their Saturdays to help paint homes for Forte Meade residents who haven’t got their house painted for years. On March 14, 1998, USAC made the eighty-fourth house in Bartow to be painted since the inception of ‘Paint Your Heart Out.’ Next year the committee will try to paint sixteen houses so they can top one hundred houses. Mr. Chai had been here for five years. He spent a lot of time to get involved in our relationship development with the community.
"In addition to the community involvement that USAC officially supports, we have factory workers representing themselves to relate with the world outside USAC. You probably have met with Paul Sutton, who is our former local union president. Mr. Merkerson is the vice president of the union and the treasurer. These are people in their early forties and very idealistic young men. They discovered that giving of their time and effort to others is a very heart-warming endeavor. Paul Sutton, a combination repairman with twenty-three years of service, for many years now has spent part of his vacation helping others throughout the United States and Central and South America, repairing churches and housing projects for local people. Through a project that originated with Paul's church, Riverview Heights Baptist in Wauchula, in association with the Macedonia Mission Service, multiple lives have been touched and helped.

"I agree with you. I think we really shouldn’t label America as an ‘individualist’ society while China a ‘collectivist’ society. You mentioned that in China, parents have strong authority. When I was a child, it was the same. Dad’s no is ‘no’ and that’s it. In the 1960s we went through some revolutions in this country, and there were student demonstrations. We had what is called the Flower Child period, which rejected the established culture and advocated extreme liberalism in politics and life style, but a lot of us were still raised with values. The media have done too much talking about the differences, such as how we like or don’t like our government or your government, but there are not a lot of differences. Family is a lot more important to me just like it is to you.

Joy must notice my intrigued look when she talks about the similarities vs. differences in cultural values between two distinct Chinese and American
societies. I comment that intercultural communication should focus on both cultural differences and similarities. Joy smiles and nods. She continues:

“I grew up in a culture in which we would take care of our parents. When I was little, my grandparents who lived on a farm couldn’t take care of themselves, and my parents moved them to the city where we lived and got them a place a few houses away from us. As I grew up, I bought my grandmother groceries. I brought her to doctors when I learned how to drive. When I worked, I sometimes went home during lunch to make sure my grandparents had the right thing to eat, and my mother took care of their dinner each day. So I grew up in this kind of culture just like most of the Chinese families. I would not send my grandparents or parents to a nursing home. Unfortunately, my parents passed away and I won’t have an opportunity to take care of them anymore. I still live in the house where I grew up. To me, roots have been really important. I was born in Wauchula. The house I lived in is the property that belonged to my grandparents. My parents built a house over there. To me it was a home. I went back to live in that house which is my home.

“I think here in the South, people so highly value their roots and family, and they bring these values to USAC. Probably different from what you see from other big companies in other places, where people would seldom consider the company is like a family. There is a Union Committee member who has been working in this factory for thirty years and hurt his back. The doctor put him on bed rest for several weeks. We went to visit him, and even the VP made a phone call to him to ask how he feels. When I interview people I tell them sincerely, this is a nice place to work. We are small enough that we know each other, and we are big enough that we provide really good benefits.

“Speaking of USAC as family-like, I have another story to share with you. As I mentioned to you, I started to work for them in October 1990. By
March 1991, Irene started to talk to me about the opportunities to go to finish college. It’s always something I wanted to do. In August 1991, I went to Saint Leo University. I started out with two classes and both were on Saturdays and Sundays. It’s a beautiful Catholic university, but I was nervous because I didn’t know if I could do it with my full-time job. The first two classes I chose were 300 level. The professor, Dr. Joyce, is wonderful and he is always in my heart. I made A’s, so from there I knew that I could do it. Starting from the second semester, I took a full load, 12 credit hours for one semester while working full time. I stayed in the hotel Saturday night after finishing the class and then studied on Sunday and then took Sunday classes and then went home. When I got back home, it was always 7:00 p.m. Next morning I had to come back to work … At that time, I didn’t have a computer. You know I am a single parent, so I don’t have a lot of money — (June interrupts: ‘Joy, I have a lot of respect for you!’ ‘Oh, thank you!’ Joy says.) Ernie allowed me to use the computers at work. So I always stayed after hours till midnight to finish all the papers and assignments. During my second year, Irene said to me: ‘Where are you staying during the weekends? Come to stay in my home!’ So I stayed in Irene’s house Friday nights, using her home computer to do my schoolwork, and then going to school on Saturdays, and then going home Sunday nights. So I did that over a year. But during the last two semesters, my granddaughter came to live with me. She was born in March 1994, so she was six months old. I got a babysitter to live in from Friday to Sunday and I went to school. I graduated in 1995.”

With a joyful sigh of relief, Joy stops her story at the point when she got her bachelor’s degree. I didn’t know she had a granddaughter already. I thought she was only in her mid-thirties. “Oh, yeah. I have a granddaughter already. I can’t tell you how old I am.” Joy laughs.
“Congratulations for completing school! If you can do that, you can accomplish anything!” I say wholeheartedly.

Joy: “Thanks! Let me tell you, I was so glad to graduate! My major is business administration. I took many math, statistics, and finance classes, but I love literature classes. I almost made a double major. Ernie and Irene are so supportive. They would read my school papers and provide feedback. For the first paper of my first English literature class, I wrote a story about my dad and my home garden. My dad loved to work in our backyard. My mom always prepared dinner for the family. My mom passed away unexpectedly when I was thirty. At that time, she was fifty and she was just a baby. It was very hard for me. That ended my dad’s gardening work too. After my mom passed away, we all went back home and had a family gathering. We prepared the dinner that my mom normally prepared. To me, that was all what it is about: My dad grew the vegetables and my mom put them up. So that day was the celebration of everything they have ever worked for.” Joy’s voice was trembling and tears were coming out: “So that’s what it is … I guess that’s why when we talk about the family and value, I know those things will never go away. All the values they taught me were about a sense of responsibility.”

My eyes get wet. Joy’s story reminds me about the stories and the paper I wrote about my parents, who are my role models as I try to be a loving, kind, compassionate, unselfish, hardworking person who always has integrity, affection for dreams or goals and yet is down to earth. The memory flashes back. With the touching end of the interview that is beyond my expectation, I find out that although the initial purpose of my dissertation was to study intercultural differences, the research leads me to find
common ground and values with those who have had different lives and career experiences and even with those who come from different nationalities.
Chapter Four: Part III, Becoming an Insider

From Tampa to San Diego

In December 1997, I passed the comprehensive exam to be a Ph.D. candidate. I spent another semester continuing my field research in both Lakeland and Tampa until June 1998. Feeling I had gathered a sufficient field data, I decide to leave my beloved department, school, and friends in Tampa and move to San Diego, California, to join my husband, whom I had commuted to see for more than two years.

I experienced a complex feeling in saying goodbye to my five-year, full-time graduate-student life, which was my first five years in the United States. The Department of Communication had become like a second home after I left China. On the other hand, leaving Tampa thrilled me because it would end my commuting life and separation from my husband, who had been working on the West Coast for more than two years. While I was excited about reuniting with my husband and about the new house we had purchased, there was an indescribable feeling of uncertainty hidden deep in my mind -- “What would my life be without the friends and friendships I had built up over the five years in Tampa? How should I deal with the specific challenges of writing a dissertation without timely communication with my major professor? What would I have to cope with as a full-time dissertation writer without immediate support from my graduate-student associates, my committee members, and other faculty members? How can I get alternative access to academic libraries nearby?”
I had visited San Diego on dozens of occasions, but this time it would be a complete relocation. I was encouraging myself dozens of times: “It’s OK — I can do it!” but anxiety and uncertainty were still there. For the first time as an adult, I had no financial independence. Though I wanted to write a dissertation instead of being a “stay-at-home housewife,” the feeling of unease was irremovable. My decision to leave Tampa for San Diego had been a tough decision and a compromise between my academic goals and my family life. I imagine that when the spouses of SINOCHEM expatriates decided to leave their jobs to join their husbands in Florida, they faced similarly complex feelings and dilemmas.

On my way to San Diego, I detoured to North Carolina, Texas, New Mexico, and Arizona to see the places I had never visited in the United States. In the green, moist, and breezy Smoky Mountains at North Carolina, among the groups of tourists from all over the world, I ran into Mr. Yu, who accompanies his in-laws touring along the east coast. They stop by the Smoky Mountains before flying to New York City and Washington, D.C. Yu’s wife, Li, delivered a lovely healthy baby daughter, JenJen, a month ago, and Li’s parents flew from China to visit and help take care of their granddaughter for a couple of months. Li thoughtfully let her parents take a vacation while she stayed at home in Lakeland, Florida to take care of the newborn herself. The happiness shown on the faces of Yu and his in-laws tells me how much joy baby JenJen brings to this family. What a coincidence to meet Mr. Yu and his family among an immense crowd of people in the boundless universe! The incident of meeting with them at this moment hints to me that my life is strongly bound with my dissertation research, probably by fate.
Once I settled down in my new home in San Diego, I got a library card from the University of California at San Diego. Entering into the resourceful but unfamiliar UCSD Geisel Library, I notice how much I miss my school in Tampa, the handy communications with my professors, and the unconditional support I received from them. For the time being, I have limited access to the USF support network. Going to the library in the day and returning home in the evening to do further research becomes a routine. Day after day, I realize I have not spoken with anyone except for a few hellos to library assistants. At the beginning, I enjoyed my solitude and concentrated on my research and writing, but gradually I came to feel I had lost the immediate belonging to a social group. At this time, I was still working on the draft of my dissertation prospectus, and I was not sure exactly how long it would take me finally to finish the entire dissertation and therefore to end my “isolated” situation. Maybe one year, I tell myself. “One year?” The thought startles me. Now it seems like such a long time because each day goes by slowly. Contrarily, time had elapsed so fast when I was full time in graduate school in the past five years! Tempus fugit!

The awareness of needing a sense of belonging makes me vulnerable to the subject of career and occupation. One day when I go out to open a new bank account and renew my auto insurance, the agents ask my income and occupation information. “Homemaker?” They glance at me. For the moment, I realize how much I dislike this title to be associated with me. After I go back home at the end of the day, I feel tired. It’s funny that I never felt exhausted at all when I was taking full-time graduate school classes, working as a teaching assistant, concurrently holding offices as a student chairwoman at the Association of Chinese Communication Studies, and submitting
papers to national and international conferences. I was always full of energy, though
there were only a few hours to sleep each day. Now I don’t have this demanding
schedule anymore, but suddenly I feel defeated.

There are flashbacks of painful experiences that Yanming and Jing shared with
me. After they resigned their jobs in China to join their husbands in the United States,
they were not able either to go to school or to work for a certain period of time. They
felt they suddenly had lost the sense of independence and identity they had before. I
remember how much they disliked being “a stay-at-home housewife” and how
frustrated they were when they felt they were losing self-confidence, being
disconnected from the past, and failing to predict their future. Maybe my life path
determines that I will experience what my research informants had experienced,
including relocation, displacement, and uncertainty.

To avoid being too isolated in the new city, I agree with my husband to attend a
party held by his colleague’s friend. Feeling low in spirits, I am quiet among the crowd.
A few young women come over to chat with me. They appear to be in their late twenties
or early thirties. One of them is a scientist in a pharmaceutical company, and the other
two are engineers in the high-tech industry in San Diego. When I explain that I don’t
work but write my dissertation full time at home, they seem to be very sorry for me.
“The job market is getting much better now and maybe you should try again,” one of
them kindly suggests, assuming I was not successful in finding a job in the past. “I can’t
stay at home. I would be so bored,” the second one says. The third woman seems to be
the most sensitive and thoughtful one. She comforts me: “It’s not a bad idea to take a
break at home. At least you don’t have to get up early. I wish I could sleep till noon
sometimes.” Though I actually get up early each day to go to the library, for some reason I don’t feel I want to explain this to them. I keep quiet, and I wonder if among all the people in this big house there is anyone who understands my situation better and can send me positive energy and be my new friend here in this city. Unfortunately, all the young couples in the party have dual incomes, and they converse about each company’s benefits package, house prices in San Diego, how to find better deals to refinance your house, and the way to review mutual-fund portfolios and invest in the stock market. The conversations are so materially oriented that I can barely contribute to the subject.

It occurs to me that in southern California the parameters of defining one’s identity are very different from what I have experienced before. On the surface level, your self-worth seems to be determined by your occupation and how successful you are in managing your assets. This ordinary party challenges my value system and disturbs my simple and peaceful academic mind. I stay up the whole night after that evening. I think really hard and question myself: “Did I wrap myself in an academic cocoon and not expose myself enough to reality? Did my years of academic and full-time school life make my experiences not diversified enough so that Mr. Chai always felt I was an ‘outsider’ to his group? Will my existence and value get recognized only if I have a ‘competitive’ occupation? Shall I indulge myself in the job market immediately to test whether I am ‘marketable’? If I start to search for a job, will I still have time for my dissertation? If I don’t spend time on the job search, will I still be able to keep a peaceful mind on my writing? If I am not able to find a job in the short term, will my self-confidence get hit really badly? If I decide to search for a job, can I find one that can utilize my training and strength, and also benefit my dissertation?” I sit in front of
my computer and think these thoughts over and over. When it is dawn, I stand up and decide: I will update my resume and go on the job market.

From Student Researcher to Corporate Employee

I sent resumes and applications for two types of career opportunities in San Diego: number one, an adjunct professor to teach at local universities; number two, a professional position in a multinational corporation based locally. I believe either job experience will enrich the content of my dissertation. The first person responding to my resume is Dr. Carol Logan, the chair of the Communication Department at the University of San Diego. She spends nearly two hours meeting with me to learn my background, training, research interest, dissertation subject, and my current situation. She shows great compassion and understanding for my dilemma of trying to balance dissertation writing, family life, and a sense of independence. Since the deadline for applying for an adjunct teaching job has passed for fall of 1998, she encourages me to apply for the similar position in her department next semester. She also sends a follow-up letter several days after our conversation.

Immediately after I received Dr. Logan’s letter, a gentleman from Qualcomm Inc. in San Diego contacted me. “Hi, Ms. Wang, my name is Samuel Pochucha, heading a Technical Publication group in Qualcomm.” “Hi … yes…” I am a little surprised. Mr. Pochucha continues: “I got your resume, but the position you applied for was just filled.” I hold my breath and hear him saying: “It’s a great resume. If you don’t mind, I will forward it to other departments who might have openings now.” I thank him and feel a bit flattered and encouraged. I am fortunate to encounter nice people like Dr. Logan and Mr. Pochucha.
Two weeks later, I get a phone interview from the Marketing Department at Qualcomm’s Infrastructure Division. Soon afterwards, the hiring manager invites me onsite to be interviewed by seven other people inside and outside his department. The onsite interview runs through an entire day. A week later, I receive a job offer, to work on bid or proposal development in the Infrastructure Marketing Department.

The next step is painful and more intense. The complex feelings on deciding to accept this job are overwhelming. I know it will not be an easy return to the academy once I accept a corporate job. Working full time in an intense, high-tech industry will certainly jeopardize my timing for completion of my Ph.D. degree. Taking the job seems to be a betrayal of my academic goal, my major professor, and my committee members. However, the two months staying at home alone in San Diego falls like almost two centuries. The feeling of uncertainty without a sense of social belonging, the lack of financial independence, the distance between my background and the material environment in southern California, and the fear of being detached from the outside world not only let me further understand the harsh situation experienced by SINOCHEN expatriates’ spouses but also made me feel more connected with them than ever before! From this standpoint, I want to take this job so that I am able to understand how it feels to work in a multinational corporation, as it does for SINOCHEN expatriates. In this case I can better interpret my evolutilonal relationship with my research subject and research informants.

My instinct also tells me that I need to take this job to repair my self-confidence. As calm and intact as I look at the surface, my self-worth was hit by a different type of value system in a different social context. If my “I” that has been brought up in both
Beijing and Florida is the “I” purely with academic upbringings, my sense of “I” now is lonely and exposed among the groups of people who have been used to the corporate life and mindset. My academic status quo is not strong enough to make me ignore these non-academic influences. My vulnerability drives me to react fast to prove my “market value” by quickly finding a job.

The internal debate in my mind makes me go through a disturbing anxiety that is brought into the beginning of my corporate adventure. My feelings in the first six months of corporate life can be described by two words: “stress” and “uncertainty.” The responsibilities I have are to complete infrastructure proposals that respond to a telecommunication operator’s Request for Information or Request for Proposals. The proposal documents include end-to-end solutions, such as product specification, dimensioning, services, pricing, and a compliance matrix that answers a customer’s commercial and technical concerns “clause by clause,” with information from both internal and third-party alliances, from features to warranty. The turn-around time for completing these proposals is always within a few weeks or within a few days. The short deadline makes almost everyone in the department work thirteen hours a day on average. One of my co-workers jokes that the way we work is “rat racing.” I cannot agree more. Once I am on track, I don’t want to fail and thus “race” as fast as I can to excel. After closing each day’s work, I drive back home, telling myself I can only use this position as an entry to gain experience and knowledge of the market, products, technology, and industry. I do not want to work at this position forever. The company’s policy allows internal transfer after someone works at the position more than a year.
Though I don’t know if I can move up somewhere else within the company or somewhere else outside the company, I know I need to get out sooner or later.

Accompanied by the pressure of each deadline at work, rumors spread regarding the company-wide lay-offs that will happen for the first time in the company’s history. The result becomes public on February 2, 1999. At the end of that day, the company completed a work-force reduction of approximately 700 jobs, including 200 temporaries at all divisions and levels. Most of the reductions were in my Wireless Infrastructure Division, which had been reduced by approximately 35 percent since the beginning of fiscal 1999. Over the next few days, each division manager communicates with individual employees with specific information about how these changes impact their division or function. Reading the e-mails from the top management of the company, hearing all the rumors floating around, and seeing the anxieties and uncertainties shown on many of the employees’ faces, I understand what it means when my research informant Frank narrated how miserable he was when U.S. Steel had constant work-force reductions, and how happy he was when he saw SINOCHEN bringing in stability for him.

With increased rumors and speculation in “hallway conferences” during the first three months at Qualcomm, both CEOs of Qualcomm and Ericsson finally announce agreements in a press conference in New York City on March 25, 1999. For quite some time, there has been ongoing litigation between Ericsson and Qualcomm, as well as disputes over the direction of third-generation wireless technology. The agreement settles the litigation and provides cross licensing of intellectual property rights for all the Code Division Multiple Access (CDMA) technologies between the two companies.
As a result of the acquisition, I transition from Qualcomm to be part of Ericsson’s Business Unit of CDMA Systems based in San Diego. As Ericsson’s only Business Unit residing outside Stockholm, Sweden, CDMA Systems foreshadows all the challenges the industry will confront and the ups and downs I will go through over the next seven years. The cutover time of formal transition from Qualcomm to Ericsson is planned for June 30, 1999.

I associate this dramatic transition from Qualcomm and Ericsson with the story of SINOCHEM acquiring the chemical fertilizer division from U.S. Steel to build up USAC and then USAC Holdings. This acquisition amazes me, and it seems to be another prophecy indicating that my fate and experiences will be closely tied with what I have researched in my dissertation. Ericsson’s acquiring Qualcomm’s Wireless Infrastructure Division involves different industries and different ownerships, and is caused by different historical reasons, but the acquisition event itself makes me soon experience the similar corporate historical drama that I discussed with my research informants in my ethnographic research and interviews. During the acquisition, some of my colleagues act very resistant to the change, while some are excited about the new ownership. Ericsson’s number-one status in providing infrastructure is supposed to give the newly acquired division abundant resources and the stability to grow the business.

Despite the chaotic situation and ongoing long hours in the proposal department, I have been keeping my schedule of dissertation writing. Each day, I finish my work in the proposal department and go home at 8pm. After I eat dinner and take a shower, it’s usually 9:30 pm. I normally need half an hour to “warm up” and get myself into the writing mode till midnight. Next morning, I go to work as normal. At the time when
Qualcomm and Ericsson issue the press release about their agreement, I complete the last draft of my Dissertation Prospectus, for which I correspond with my major professor, Dr. Bochner several times to revise. With the excitement of being ready to defend my dissertation prospectus, I inform my boss and peers in the department that I will take a week off for travel to Florida. After I send out “Out of Office” e-mail, a colleague replies to me immediately: “Good luck, or should I say, ‘Break a Leg!’ Either way, have a great time!” I smile and am glad I have reached a new milestone of my dissertation research and writing.

The Third Return to USAC

The trip back to school is fruitful and endearing. After six months of dramatic and disturbing corporate life, my heart is touched and warmed when I interact with my major professor and committee members, whom I can always trust and respect. I see the smiles in their eyes, which say much more than, “Glad you are back to defend your dissertation prospectus,” but rather, “We encourage you and support you. On your journey, we are always there for you.”

After successfully defending my Dissertation Prospectus, I arrive at the department’s computer lab to check my e-mails. At the moment I enter the lab, I hear a surprised voice: “Look! This is June!” Before I can react, I am thrown into the air. A few graduate students rush up and give me big hugs. This is something I miss tremendously: No power structures, only pure friendship.

Invigorated by the fresh air on campus, I am ready to make my third return to USAC in Forte Meade. The first visits to USAC were in spring 1997, the second three visits to USAC were in spring 1998, and now it’s spring 1999. After my numerous
visits in the past three years, that place becomes very special to me. Before I left San Diego, I wrote letters to Yu, Ernie, and Irene, and told them my plan to meet them again.

The green countryside along State Road 630 at Forte Meade looks the same as I remembered. USAC offices are filled with friendly faces and exuberant spirits, as I had observed before. Ernie and Irene are thrilled to see me again. The atmosphere in the meeting is more like an old-friends’ reunion rather than an informal research interview. They catch up with what went on with me after I left Tampa: my life, my new full-time job, and my effort to juggle among dissertation, family, and work. “It’s hard to prioritize!” Ernie exclaims. “I used to be in the Ph.D. program in economics when I was young, and then I had a family and started to work full time, and was never able to finish my Ph.D. degree.” Ernie sighs. I was very surprised to hear that. In all the interviews I had conducted with Ernie, we never touched on his personal experiences when he was younger.

“Try to finish it! I will be so glad to receive a copy and read it,” Ernie encourages me. His words strike me heavily. *I know I will never have a peaceful mind if I don’t get my dissertation done.*

Irene has to rush to another meeting. She gives me a hug and asks me to keep in touch. I stay in Ernie’s office and continue to chat. Since our conversation brought up Ernie’s earlier life experiences from school to workplace, naturally I ask him when he actually moved to Florida.

“I came from U.S. Steel’s office in Pittsburgh to Florida in 1987, less than two years before SINOCHEM acquired USAC from U.S. Steel. At the beginning of the
acquisition, both American and Chinese management teams were located in Atlanta. We decided to relocate the management team to the same site with the factory here.”

June: “I remember you said the first Chinese executive expatriate sent by SINOCHEM was Mr. Yuke Zhang.”

Ernie: “Good memory! Yes, Mr. Zhang had an engineering background. He is a very private, quiet person and a very traditional Chinese person. Mr. Zhang proposed to have a communal system via which SINOCHEM invests in a property for expatriates to share, i.e., a common eating area and common recreation area, etc. The American management consultant Jim Lowe, the president at that time, Mr. Williams, and I participated in the discussion with Mr. Zhang. I believe it’s better to let the expatriates live in a developing community in Polk County so that the Chinese expatriates can bring their families to fully integrate themselves into the American school systems and local culture. To let them live in an American local community is also very vital for them to better understand the free-enterprise system. It’s one of the first critical decisions we made.” Ernie pauses and suggests: “If you have time for this trip, I recommend you visit Island Walk community where the Chinese expatriates and their families live.”

“Yes, that’s what I am planning to do,” I say. “I visited a few expatriates’ families in Tampa many times before, but I never got a chance to visit the expatriates’ houses in Lakeland. Before I came back to Florida this time, I contacted Mr. Yu. He and his wife, Li, invited me to his home.” I am a little excited.

“That’s great!” Ernie is glad. Then he sighs with emotions: “Time flies! Since the time SINOCHEM acquired USAC, I have known numerous executives sent by
SINOCHENG over the past seven years. Different executives have different backgrounds and personalities and thus brought in different contributions and changes to this workplace.”

Seeing me showing deep interest in listening, Ernie continues: “After Mr. Yuke Zhang, the second chief executive was Mr. Fuzhong Li, who was an international business executive. He had a successful business of his own in Australia, and his replacement was Mr. Zhang Ruoming, who was Senior Vice President of SINOCHENG and came here at 59 years old. Being very seasoned and having had many other international assignments prior to coming to Florida, Zhang was certainly knowledgeable about SINOCHENG’s overall strategic plan. He’s a quick study and was interested in learning manufactory operations and the economics of buying and selling chemical fertilizer on a global basis. Mr. Fuzhong Li brought Mr. Ruliang Du, who became the President of USCR in September 1991 and later became the President of USAC Holdings Inc.”

Having met with President Du a few times, I am especially interested in knowing his role in the history. Ernie says: “President Du’s assignment has been the longest one. He was here six years and stayed till September 1997. He has an international trading business background and knows how to buy low and sell high to make USCR successful. Before 1991, we sold our products 50%-60% within the United States, 35%-40% overseas. Since SINOCHENG buys so much fertilizer, we changed our strategy. We get a volume discount at the open market and sell our products in the highest market opportunities around the world.”

“How about the current President, Mr. Zuming Shen?” I ask.
Ernie: “Oh, Mr. Shen was a chief economist of SINOCHEN prior to coming here. From an economist perspective, he understands the supply, demand, and the pricing at a very macro-level. He plays an important role in foreseeing the long-term goal for USAC. In order to perpetuate the USAC entity for SINOCHEN, certain key economic decisions have to be made to allow USAC operations to have life for the next 20 to 30 years in the name of SINOCHEN. Mr. Shen has to consider all the capital-intensive issues that economists wrestle with.”

It amazes me that frequent leadership change still makes this place prosperous and never interferes with its stability. Their operation and business strategy must work well. Having gone through an ownership change myself in the company I work for, I became more sensitive to the subject of change at the workplace, especially the change of ownership and company’s structure.

From my previous interviews, I know there are two types of expatriates sent by SINOCHEN: one is the seasoned executive, and the other one is a younger management trainee. Generally there are two reasons to send them to Florida. Number one, SINOCHEN needs their expertise to manage this overseas enterprise or to learn how to manage it and bring knowledge back to China; number two, SINOCHEN wants to use the long-term assignments as compliments to their best cadres, who are either seasoned or relatively younger. Abiding by the local compensation system in the local company in the U.S., the expatriates in Florida are better compensated compared to their gross income in China. Therefore, the chosen expatriates sent by SINOCHEN always consider overseas assignments to USAC Holdings Inc. to be a compliment to them both financially and for career development.
In my various interviews with expatriates and family members before, we
touched on compensation issues, but I didn’t push for more information on this aspect
unless my informants volunteered information. When I bring up the subject this time,
Ernie seems not to mind providing me explanations I never heard before.

“There is a very convenient four-page synopsis of the compensation of our
employees.” Ernie tries to find the document for me. “It doesn’t make any difference if
you are a foreign international or if you are an American. I will tell you, however, there
is an entirely different issue under Chinese law that allows expatriates to be in
accordance with the Chinese compensation system.”

Noticing I am a little puzzled, Ernie explains: “For example, you and I work on
the same job, get the same pay under American law. Because I am an expatriate from
China and you are American, then Chinese law may say, because the compensation law
in China is different, part of my earnings must be used in a communal approach to share
the cost of assigning you and others to this foreign country. So, while the pay is similar
among American employees and Chinese expatriates here, for these Chinese employees,
part of their pay will be put in the common pool to be used for other kinds of benefits,
like travel, entertainment, housing, furnishing, food, etc. Our foreign internationals
(Chinese expatriates) will regularly take from that pool of money to plan for a weekend
visit, to see different parts of the United States, or travel internationally.”

That seems not surprising to me, but I don’t know how long this communal
approach will last after Chinese expatriates get more and more used to the
compensation system in the U.S.
Ernie continues: “Chinese expatriates could not enjoy some of the things they could have enjoyed at home. One of the disadvantages of taking overseas assignments is that they will celebrate the holidays of the countries to which they are assigned. They won’t be able to enjoy the long break of Chinese New Year, Chinese Labor Day, and Chinese National Independence Day as they did in China. When previous Chinese leader Deng Xiaoping passed away and the whole nation was in a six-day mourning period, they worked over here too. Of course, they mourn on their own very privately."

“It makes sense that expatriates follow the local systems,” I say.

Ernie tries to summarize: “In short, there are some advantages and disadvantages to foreign assignments. Clearly the overriding advantage is the experience they gain and then how they can put the experience and knowledge to use when they go back to China.”

I know, by far, most of the expatriates sent to Florida went back to China after they finished their overseas assignment, including the top-level executives to younger first-line managers. Among the younger expatriates I’ve met or heard about are HR Manager Mr. Chai, Legal Advisor Mr. Lemin Yu, and Logistic Manager Mr. Lei, etc., they all went back to SINOCHEN headquarters in Beijing.

There was a bit of office folklore I heard in one of the interviews with Jing and Ming in spring 1997. About two years before, several employees left SINOCHEN branch offices in the U.S. because of the more favorable compensation package offered by American firms. In 1995, this type of leaving was considered a “betrayal” to the company, especially when SINOCHEN had financially invested so much on career training for those “betrayers.” Since globalization has become so forceful and
ubiquitous, the younger generation of expatriates will get more exposure to the free-enterprise system in Western countries, the compensation systems, the corporate cultures, and life environment outside their company. I wonder if they will be more influenced by the “free will” employment relationship between the employer and the employees in the United States, and thus this type of leaving will not simply interpreted as a “betrayal” anymore.

After wrapping up my third return to USAC and saying bye to Ernie, I am looking forward to meeting with Mr. Yu’s family to see how they are doing.

Visit to Island Walk Community

Departing from Tampa, driving through I-75, I-4, and SR-570 and towards Lakeland Highlands Road for about fifty minutes, I reach Clubhouse Road. It is a nice, quiet suburban residential area with full growing and nicely trimmed bushes on the sides of the two-lane road. Turning left into Island Walk community, I park in front of 5281 Montserrat Drive.

I look around. It’s a quiet neighborhood with well-maintained, one-story, single-family houses. I can also see that the community clubhouse is not too far away. Jing and Yanming told me that the expatriates and visitors from SINOCHEM have given this community the nickname “SINOCHEM Village.” It’s actually a typical American middle-class community, but it gets this name because of the seven houses purchased by SINOCHEM right after USAC was acquired. These seven houses have been utilized by all the “generations” of expatriates in the past nine years. Unlike the UCSR expatriates, who were widely spread out in the Tampa area, USAC expatriates living in “SINOCHEM Village” have had closer touch as neighbors in addition to being
colleagues. When Chai was here, there were always SINOCHEN expatriates’ gatherings. Jing’s and Yanming’s families always drove from Tampa to join the weekend parties chaired by Chai here. In my interviews with Jing, Yanming, Yu, and Ernie, they have mentioned this place many times. Finally I get a chance to see it.

Before I ring the doorbell, a young woman opens the door. I recognize her immediately. That’s Mr. Yu’s wife, Li, who is just as young and beautiful as in her pictures. “Hey, June, I heard the sound of a car stopping and figured it must be you!” She shakes my hand and takes the fresh flowers I brought to her: “You didn’t have to do that, but thank you, June!” She smells the fragrance: “How did you know that I always like fresh flowers? Oh, thanks for the photos you sent to me. I really like the one you took in the flower field at Carlsbad.” Li and I had chatted on the phone several times after I moved to San Diego, and we have written to each other, thus we feel we have known each other for a while. While speaking, Li leads me to the living room. Yu walks out of his home office and shakes my hands friendly and warmly. Li’s mother holds Yu and Li’s baby daughter, JenJen, to greet me as well. She still remembers seeing me at Smoky Mountains. “There must be a predestined luck around us,” Li’s mother comments joyfully, “otherwise how come we ran into each other in that particular spot at that particular moment considering we are among an immense crowd of people in the boundless universe?”

“I feel the same!” While I’m looking at this happy family surrounding me, smiles are generated from the bottom of my heart.

What I hear from Ernie and Irene is that Yu has been doing a great job at Human Resources at USAC. Watching Yu playing with his one-year-old daughter, JenJen, I see
his content feeling of being a daddy. He looks mellow and peaceful, but when chatting about one of his Chinese friends who became a very successful attorney recently, I can see the subtle hint of his passion towards his old job. My instinct tells me that Yu may go back to that career area again sooner or later.

Li carries a stack of photo albums and sits next to me. These photos are good conversation material. Some of them were taken when Li was working at the Ministry of Foreign Trade and Economic Cooperation (MOFTEC). There are photos in her office, conference rooms, and at outdoor teambuilding events with her ex-coworkers. Her smiling face was filled with pride and confidence, and her outfits were all professional and fashionable. I can tell that just like other expatriates’ spouses, Li had a very successful career back in China. Right now she seems still very nostalgic about that experience. I compliment her good taste on her outfit. She laughs, “Actually all the expatriates’ spouses here have really good taste.”

I smile. I remember that both Jing and Yanming told me that whenever they drove their families from Tampa to come over for weekend parties, they often felt underdressed because the expatriates’ spouses in “SINCOHEM Village” always dress fashionably and look very metropolitan in this quiet country area. I heard some of them joking to themselves that because their everyday life was monotonous, they had to dress up to do some self-entertaining.

“As a matter of fact, most of us start to dress so casually after we moved to the U.S.,” Li says. “We don’t go out socially very often, except for some of the weekend gatherings, and these weekend gatherings are still among SINOCHEM expatriates. Oh, the company’s Christmas party is the only time I really dress up in a year.” Li flips the
photo albums to the pages of the most recent Christmas party at USAC Holdings Inc. I see Wei’s family, Ming, Jing, Chen, Yanming, President Du, Mrs. Du, Yu, Li, Ernie, and Irene. And then we see Joy happily sitting with a fifty-ish gentleman in a suit. The gentleman has an intelligent look and a friendly smile. “This is Joy’s…husband…” Li tries to figure out the proper way to introduce him.

“You mean her boyfriend,” I say.

Li pats my shoulder and smiles. “Yes, you’re right. I am still a very typical old-fashioned Chinese. You are probably more Americanized and more open minded than I am…”

“I guess boyfriend is an official relationship here and it’s OK to bring a boyfriend to an occasion like a company’s Christmas party,” I say.

Our conversation triggers Li’s association with other reflections. She suddenly sighs: “June, I admire the way you are. You made your own decision to come to the U.S. for graduate school, and now you are starting to work in a great company. You are traveling alone domestically and internationally. Like today, you rented a car and drove about an hour to find a way to visit us. Are you scared when you travel to a place you’ve never been?”

“I am always scared,” I confess, “but if I overcome a little hurdle each time, I feel I am making a little progress each day.”

“I became less and less assertive after I moved to the U.S.,” Li says. “The first occurrence that I felt my self-confidence got attacked was right before I came to the U.S. That was the time I announced my leave of absence from work to come here to join my husband, Yu. On the shuttle bus to work, my colleagues asked me: ‘What will
you do after you go to the U.S.? Will you be able to support yourself? Or will you totally be depending on your husband?’ At that moment I felt so ashamed and really wanted to find a place to hide. They were right. At that time, I had no idea about what my near future would look like in the U.S.”

This strikingly resembles what I have heard from Jing and Yanming. It’s also the same reflection I had when I first relocated to San Diego. Though our situations vary, isn’t it coincidental that we all struggle between career and family, a sense of dependence and interdependence, whether it is in China or in the United States?

Our conversations naturally move to the subjects of what Yu’s and other expatriates’ families’ social life looks like after work, and what cultural differences Yu and Li observe both at work and in life here in Polk County. I am very curious about what kind of social recreation or intellectual stimulation Chinese expatriates have in their Lakeland community.

“Among us, we have different tastes,” Yu says. “Some of us are more familiar with Western culture including sports, symphony, etc., but some of us are more passionate for Chinese culture. So it varies, but generally speaking, ‘while in Rome, do as Rome does.’ Of course, most of us consider our duration in Florida will be three to six years, thus for TV news, we pay less attention to topics such as the congressional budget, Social Security bankruptcy, privatizing Medicare, etc. We probably pay more attention to what are the latest in China-U.S. relations, the dispute on nuclear-weapon technology transfer issues, etc.”

Yu thinks and continues: “It takes a long time to get deeply involved in the U.S. culture, to understand the history, the Constitution, government structure, politics,
social problems, school systems, etc. It’s very natural that sometimes we like to watch
Chinese movies instead because it touches what we are familiar with. We still feel there
is a distance when we watch American movies because we cannot fully understand all
the subtleties.”

“How do you feel about your adaptations after you came to the U.S.?” Li asks
me, showing a great interest.

“Cultural-wise, I think the biggest difficulty for me is to understand the humor,”
I say. “When I first arrived in the U.S., a lot of times I was not able to laugh when my
American schoolmates or friends made jokes. Since I couldn’t laugh very often with
them, it was hard for me to be a part of them. As time went by, I was getting better and
gradually established a great friendship with my American schoolmates, and then made
friends outside school too. Now I have some good friends at work, but it’s a different
network.”

Yu nods: “Understood. Our social circles are still pretty much colleagues here in
USAC. I am a basketball fun, but I don’t quite get baseball and football. It’s hard for me
to become buddies with my American coworkers in this regard. We don’t discuss local
politics either. Thus I still feel more at ease when talking with Chinese expatriates.
Sometimes I tell myself it’s OK, since our focus in coming here is to get on-the-job
training and to get our work done. Eventually we’ll go back to China. Therefore, as long
as we can get along with our American coworkers, it will be fine. Of course, it will be
another story if some of us decide to stay permanently.”

I ask Yu if there was much cultural shock for him when he first arrived here. Yu
shakes his head: “Not much at work. I learned international economic laws when I was
in Chinese law school. It was the same content except that the class was delivered in Chinese. The international trade class was delivered in English, almost the same as American law schools.”

However, Yu admits there are a lot of things he has to “adapt” at a detailed level both at work and in everyday life. At his workplace, the work routine is different from what it was in China. The way to interact with bosses and peers is different than what he experienced in Beijing too. Generally speaking here he uses more oral and written communication than he did in China. In everyday life, there are many little things he had to learn and go through step by step after he moved to the United States, such as: where to get a driver’s license and Social Security number, how to receive phone, water, and electricity service, where to get the car and air conditioning repaired, how to go to a hospital or urgent care, where to go for sight-seeing during the weekends. Everything that local people take for granted, to him had to be learned. He used the Yellow Pages extensively during his first few months in Florida. Yu feels he fortunately has a friendly neighborhood. Though they don’t go to each other’s houses for parties very often, the American neighbors do offer a lot of help and information on the maintenance of the house, backyard, cars, etc. “They are very warm and kind-hearted,” Yu says. “They know we are new here and have lived here only a few years, so they provide us a lot of local assistance. Sometimes we invite them over to make Chinese dumplings together. During Chinese New Year, we prepare little gifts for them too.”

While Yu and I chat, Li prepares a very elaborate Chinese dinner: tomato soup, home made papaya desert and five main dishes: stir-fried mixed vegetable, minced pork, onion beef, kung-pao chicken, and ginger shrimp. She holds her silky long hair
into a ponytail, and then puts her baby daughter into a high chair. Li’s mother is feeding her granddaughter. As a one-year-old baby, JenJen can eat solid food now. While we eat and chat, we realize that both Li’s parents and my uncle and aunt actually work in the same research institute under the Chinese Academy of Sciences. What a coincidence to have another tie among us! The world is small.

“June, sure we’ll keep in touch,” Yu’s family says when I leave after dinner.

The day after next, I fly back to San Diego, proud to be ABD with approved dissertation proposal.

**Transition from Qualcomm to Ericsson**

After I returned to work in San Diego, rumors say there will be another round of layoffs before the actual transition from Qualcomm’s Infrastructure Division to Ericsson’s CDMA Business Unit. The morale is low at the entire division. For some reason, I don’t care about the rumors, probably because part of my emotional focus is on my dissertation. Though I am still working hard and am extremely dedicated to my job, I try to tell myself that the corporate world is not my entire world. The dissertation helps me to be reflexive about my work experiences. Once I feel my day-to-day experience is a part of my research, my work life becomes more meaningful.

During the process of Ericsson’s acquisition of Qualcomm’s infrastructure, there are also rumors that Ericsson may relocate everyone to Richardson in Texas, but finally the rumor is cleared up. The new ownership decides to continue to stay in San Diego. During the months of big uncertainty about layoffs and transfers, many employees started to look for other jobs. I mentally prepare for the worst because I am the newest addition to my department and very new to this industry, and I never spent any effort
interacting with upper management to make good impressions. I could be the first target to be laid off. If this happened, it would indicate that I had not made the right decision to join Qualcomm or to choose corporations as a context of my career path. However, after the result is announced, I am surprised to know that I am among the five people in my group to be selected to go to Ericsson, and the other six “unselected” are let go to find internal jobs at Qualcomm within the next two months before they are off the payroll. Amazingly I survived 60% workforce reduction within my own department.

At the end of the day, after the announcement, the marketing department VP stops by to tell me that she had heard a lot of great comments about me from everyone who worked with me in my department and she thinks my job performance is great. It’s amazing that even though she seldom interacted with me at work, she knew all these details.

Finance Manager Humberto, who wasn’t chosen by Ericsson, came to my office and chatted with me. He told me that he has been struggling to get a Staff Financial Analyst position within Qualcomm. He moved himself and his family from Boston to San Diego due to the job offer from Qualcomm a year ago. He didn’t expect that Qualcomm had already planned to sell its infrastructure at that time. As long as another division at Qualcomm offers him a job, he wouldn’t mind taking demoted title. What he needs is a job, because he has the responsibility to support his family. I tell him I had been thinking of quitting my job when the proposal department worked me long hours many times. His eyes open widely, looking at me as if I were crazy. He warns me that I should know that I am in a situation that many people envy, and he says I would regret it if I quit at this time. As a matter of fact, he’s probably right. Every morning, I come to
my office and I see that my colleagues (whose offices are next to mine) are looking for jobs, and I feel sad. One office neighbor tells me how frustrated he has been because he had gone through lay-offs several times the past few years. He jokes that his ego has been brutally attacked and crushed. This is what it is like to work in a battlefield in the so-called “high-tech” industry and to deal with these ups and downs all the time. It’s depressing to see colleagues struggling, worried, and sad, but it is also stimulating when you have to motivate yourself to face visible, invisible, predictable, and unpredictable challenges.

When I think of the American employees whom I interviewed at USAC, I feel I can better identify their feelings of uncertainty when SINOCHEN purchased their factory. I also identify their feelings of relief when SINOCHEN kept all the workers after the acquisition was completed. Now I understand better how Chinese expatriates deal and cope with undesired and involuntary changes, such as top management change, organizational structure change, geographic relocation, and the change of assignments/positions/titles at work. Now I know how these changes impact these employees and their families. I can understand how demanding it is to endure and to cope with these changes.

I have a very conflicted feeling about my own situation as well. I am motivated to finish a draft of my dissertation as soon as possible. My dissertation is part of who I am, and it will lead to who I will be in the future. I know I would not forgive myself if I didn’t do a good job on it. Besides, I still have not given up the dream that some day in the future I will find where I fit in the academic world and be able to honor and work with the professors whom I have held in high respect. For my current job, I both like it
and hate it. I like it because it is challenging; I have learned both technical and business knowledge; it let me gain an insider’s insights about corporations; it makes me more sensitive, reflexive, and sharper; it provides me deeper understanding of my research and inspires my writing. However, at the same time, I hate it when it devours too much of my energy to work on proposals for days and night to catch up with deadlines, and it squeezes my personal thoughts and space to a minimum.

June 30, 1999, is the cut-off date to officially transition from Qualcomm to Ericsson. I pack up the documents, books, office supplies, and personal photos I took with my family members and my professors. I move to Building Q – it used to be the headquarters building of Qualcomm, which is now leased by Ericsson and renamed as Building E. During the move, our proposal group is still generating proposals without stop. Because all the other proposal specialists and supporting staff were laid off, there are only three proposal managers responsible for each region (North America, Latin America, and the rest of the world). Each proposal manager can take a break after they finish their region’s work on a periodical basis, except for me, because I am supposed to support all the regions. I wish I had a boss to talk to regarding this matter, but my boss was also laid off. I had to work more than fourteen hours a day, and several times around o’clock. One time, I think about quitting again, but then I remember what my ex-coworker Humberto told me. I calm down and tell myself: never quit, just try to get out of the group and move up. I know it will happen.

During the office application, including an e-mail system change from Eudora to Outlook, I suddenly find out that my major professor sent me an e-mail April 30, which was over two months ago. I open the e-mail. I read it with joy, eagerness, and a faster
heart beat. At this moment, messages from my school in Tampa are particularly dear to me. Whenever I finish my day and drive back home, I always have flashbacks of my five years of full-time graduate school life in Tampa. It’s five years filled with memories of dear people, school friends, and faculty who influenced me most and whom I would forever respect. The department, the school, and Tampa are always identified in my thinking with intelligent minds, creative thinking, supportiveness, kindred spirits, compassion, kind hearts, energy, and youth. The memory of school and Tampa softens my heart at this difficult time and it accompanies me through my subsequent years of corporate life.

My professor’s e-mail is below:

Dear June:

I am writing to you as the last thing before packing to go to Sanibel. We will be gone until May 17th. Like a dessert, I save the best for last!

I am very proud of your accomplishments at work and know you must be too. You are so good at everything you try — even blackjack (ha)!

Are you finding any time to work on your dissertation? Please write and let me know so I can respond when I return.

I have been SO BUSY since returning from Michigan! Being gone a whole week probably was too much. I was concerned if my courses would be recovered. Nevertheless I had a wonderful time in Michigan. One of the highlights was talking to a class of Taiwanese graduate students, 22 of them in an M.A.-level course. I introduced them to "Personal Ethnography." The instructor of the course told me that they were excellent students, but that I should not expect them to interact with me in class since they were very shy and not confident of their English. I winked at him knowingly and proceeded to introduce myself and to tell them how humbled I was to have the great honor of talking to them and that I hoped they would honor me by sharing some of their stories about what it was like to come and live in the U.S. for this short period.

I kidded with them about "the secrets" I knew they had and they laughed, and soon they were interrupting each other with stories about their fears and difficulties and surprises and how no one had really ever asked them about
their experiences the whole year. One of the funniest stories was about how upset they were when they discovered that McDonald's in the U.S. does not serve pork as it does in Taiwan. And, of course, I told them about you and how fond I was of the Chinese cultural way, at least as far as I understood it through my experience with you and that I was really going to ask you to teach me your perspective on Taiwan. I found it so interesting that they consider themselves Chinese from Taiwan, though in the U.S. we often think of Taiwan as so separate from China. I have lots to learn. When I got back, one of the students sent me an e-mail and told me he had some connections at his university in Taiwan and that it might be possible for me to arrange to teach there in a few years — a very exciting possibility to me.

Well, I better go now, because Carolyn is ahead of me and already is packing the car, and our precious little doggies are so excited and I really need the rest.

Please take care of yourself. Don't work too hard — life is short and precious. Smell the roses!
Art

The e-mail brings tears to my eyes and melts my hardened heart in my corporate reality. My mind is being refreshed. My graduate-school friend Shane told me that one time he mentioned to my major professor and a committee member that he had spoken to me on the phone from time to time, and he found “there was a twinge of jealousy” in my professors’ eyes. I know that a special group of people over there cares about me very much. I want to call them very often, but most of the time I prefer e-mail correspondence with my major professor and committee members because by saving their e-mails in a particular folder, I am able to read them again and again. The e-mail folder reminds me about a world I am longing for — warm, gentle, intelligent, and safe. I feel my appreciation for my professors and my ties with them go deeper after my geographical move to California and working in corporate culture for a while.

Right after the transition from Qualcomm to Ericsson, I had an opportunity to help host five business, product, and technical managers from Ericsson’s office in Beijing. They are Chinese nationals who have a strong sense of belonging to Ericsson’s
Market Unit of China. Contact with them revitalizes my memories about the SINOCHENM Chinese expatriates in USAC Holdings Inc. The five young managers are very group-oriented as well. After finishing one morning meeting, my American co-workers and I invite one of the five guests for lunch. He says he needs to inform his other four cohorts about his lunch plan. The other four are still in different meetings, so we end up waiting until everyone finishes his meeting and go to lunch together.

I am very impressed by these Chinese guests’ technical knowledge, English speaking skills, and achievements in their careers at their young age. In the meetings, they are always good listeners and care about what other people think. Their politeness and humility are such a contrast to the way that some of my American colleagues present themselves. One manager in our division thinks the Chinese nationals are here for training, i.e., “We in the San Diego office” educate them in both CDMA technology and business processes. I say: “Hey, don’t you think we can learn from them too? They are doing great in GSM business.”

Through the conversation with the five managers from China, I learn about the tension between Chinese domestic and foreign direct investments in the telecommunication industry in the Chinese market. As an employee of Ericsson, I face the reality of working against Chinese competitors Huawei and ZTE, which, in my colleagues’ eyes, are more “fierce” than North American competitors like Lucent, Motorola, and Nortel. Five years later, in January 2005, Huawei used a cheaper price to beat Ericsson and win the contract at the e-auction held by the Communication Authority of Thailand. My American and Swedish colleagues said to me: “Those Chinese are incredibly aggressive in getting CDMA market share! We have to do
something . . .” They probably forgot my Chinese origin or didn’t think it a problem. Of course, as an Ericsson employee, I have the responsibility to make sure my company survives in the growing competitive telecommunication market. In this situation I have to ignore my cultural roots. If my company does well and meets its sales target, it may help to eliminate another round of headcount reductions and get bonus and salary increases for our division. Subtle cultural conflicts exist in my day-to-day work and become part of my work life, yet they are much overshadowed by my daily responsibilities, whether demand-driven or routine. There are always identity questions of whom you represent, whom you work for, and which culture you actually belong to.

The First Business Trip to China

On August 10, 1999, two months after I officially transitioned to be an Ericsson employee, I receive a phone call from Jing, whom I have been in touch with and talk with on the phone during weekends after I moved to San Diego. After graduating from the MBA program in the University of South Florida, Jing has been working for a company called Sealink in Florida. The company provides accessories for mobile phones. The reason Jing calls me to say bye!

“Ming’s finishing up his overseas assignment in Florida, and we have decided to move back to China to work for SINOCHEN headquarters in Beijing again,” Jing says. I knew this was coming, but I still feel shocked that time goes so fast!

The major reason for the move back is that Ming believes his career will still be based in China. In addition, SINOCHEN provided their family a spacious, brand-new, three-bedroom apartment in Shang-Long West Division in Beijing. That provides them a stronger affiliation with SINOCHEN.
“A mixed feeling,” Jing sighs. “On one hand, I am excited to go back to China! I haven’t had a chance to go back at all after I came to the U.S. in 1995, because I switched the L-2 visa to F-1 and then H-1 visas, my status changed from ‘expatriate’s spouse’ to ‘international student’ and then to ‘a foreign employee.’ So I couldn’t risk leaving the U.S. without a guarantee of returning when Ming and Alice are still here. Now I am glad I can finally go back home to be with my parents and old friends again!”

“On the other hand...” Jing’s voice turns a little sad. “I just realize how much I will miss Florida. Now each day I am just more in love with central Florida: the all-year-around green grass, the clear blue sky, cotton white clouds, and beautiful beach areas on the Gulf of Mexico. I have taken them for granted for four years, and now I realize I won’t have them after I return to Beijing.”

“I know what you mean,” I respond gently.

Jing sighs: “I guess we can’t have everything we want. We have to live and cope with that. What I am worried about is, though I am so happy to go back to my homeland, I am afraid that I’ve already become ‘foreign’ to my own country after four years away.”

Yes, repatriating can be tough. I can sense Jing’s anxiety, so I try to cheer her up. “You will be excited to see so many great changes each year in our home country. Everyone has to keep up with them. I will visit you if I go to Beijing for a business trip.”

* * *

In late November 1999, Ericsson sends me back to Beijing to work for three months in Ericsson’s Market Unit in China. Staying in Beijing and working closely with
accounting teams is indeed rewarding because I learned a lot of first-hand knowledge about the China market. Especially, I feel I can get things under more control when I speak my native language. Nevertheless, there are a lot of inconveniences that make me feel I am a guest in my own home country. For three months, I will live in a five-star hotel but won’t have access to my own kitchen to make myself a bowl of homemade soup. I have to call a taxi to go anywhere. I don’t recognize a lot of places. I am not sure about the subtleties or the norms of interpersonal communication at the Chinese workplace, which may take months to observe and learn. Both China and the U.S. have great attractions to me, though both places make me feel “displaced.” This is the consequence of a decade of life in the U.S. – to feel displaced in both “homes”!

For this trip, I hope to get a chance to meet several SINOCHEN employees and family members who had already returned to China. It’s very important to see how they feel when they return to their motherland after several years of staying in central Florida in the U.S.

Coincidentally Jing and Ming’s move from Tampa to Beijing is scheduled at the same time. A month before their move, Jing called me and was concerned about the difficulty in finding a temporary place to live in Beijing while the brand-new apartment that SINOCHEN gave to them was still being remodeled and upgraded. I talked to my sister, who happens to have two extra apartments in addition to her main residence. My sister generously offered to let Jing’s family stay for free until their apartment is ready.

Three days before my leaving from Beijing for Hong Kong, Jing and Ming bring their daughter, Alice, to fly back from Tampa to Beijing. Despite jet lag, Jing would like to see me before my departure. My family treated her family to dinner at A-Fan-Ti
restaurant with Arabian-style food. My sister reserved the table before we all arrived.

When I see Jing, Ming, and Alice, I am so excited. We first knew each other in Tampa, Florida, and now we get together again in our home city, Beijing. I understand that once Ming’s family returns to Beijing, there might be fewer opportunities for them to go back to the United States for either personal or business trips. Therefore, the excitement in meeting each other is also mixed with a little bit of sadness.

Jing looks very tired. It’s an unbelievable effort to move a family overseas. Ming had been busy with transitioning his responsibilities at work, so Jing spent a lot of time packing, selling two cars, selling furniture, and giving away stuff to other SINOCHEN expatriates’ families who were still in Florida. Jing still keeps her job as a finance controller at SeaLink. She is assigned to interface with the satellite office in Shanghai after she moves back to Beijing. Ming will go back to SINOCHEN to continue to work in his previous division. Only their daughter Alice, who is now close to four years old, looks very energetic and happy. She doesn’t believe that the places she has been to eat are called Chinese restaurants, because in her memory, all the Chinese restaurants in Tampa are dark and small, but here in Beijing, every restaurant she’s been to is huge and bright.

More than half of the people who dine here are “foreigners” from outside China. Some look like tourists, and most look like business people who are expatriates working in multinational corporations in China, similar to the role Ming performed in Florida. Though I have been to this restaurant many times with Ericsson colleagues and Ericsson customers, I am still amazed all the time by how diversified the nationalities and cultural backgrounds are of the people who dine here. It always gives me the illusion I
am in Los Angeles; similar situations can be seen in other places in Beijing such as
Hard Rock Café and of course most five-star hotels. China, especially its metropolitan
areas, has become very global and international. It is no longer the China that I knew in
the early 1990s before I moved to the United States.

Noticing Jing’s facial expression when she looks around in the restaurant, I
know she is amazed too. Even as tired as they are, Ming and Jing appear calm and
pleasant, and have no complaint about the moving process at all. I respect their way of
accepting realities and coping with changes in a peaceful manner. The great news is that
the remodeling and upgrade of their new apartment is done, so they can move in right
away instead of finding a temporary place. Before coming back, Jing was concerned if
her daughter Alice would be able to adjust easily. This is Alice’s first visit to China
after being born in Florida. Jing is surprised that Alice has been in a great mood since
she boarded the airplane. She has been even more excited after arriving at Beijing
because this is the first time she has seen so many people around. Jing feels relieved.

Jing also considers herself very lucky to have kept her existing job with the
company in Florida even after she moved back to China. It seems that her job function
is portable. Because Jing is a career-minded spouse who supports her husband’s moving
back and forth, I imagine she wants to have a good career upon returning to China. With
an existing job at hand, she doesn’t have to send out resumes immediately.

At the beginning of January 2000, after I returned from Hong Kong and
Thailand, I was immediately involved in another bid for a Chinese government
operator. I had been thinking of reconnecting with Tong, who left Florida and came
back to Beijing in early 1999. After intensive meetings with internal and external
customers, I finally get a chance to call Tong’s home phone number. Tong’s mother picks up the phone. After she learns that I had been in the same university with Tong in Tampa, Florida, she is thrilled and immediately gives me Tong’s current work number.

I try the number, and Tong’s voice appears. What a surprise! She is working for an American company that is located in the same Hanwei Plaza as the Ericsson China office. I almost jump up. I tell her I will meet with her in the main lobby of the building’s entrance. After we both run to the first floor, we are very excited when we see each other.

Tong has married her boyfriend, whom she has known since she was a freshman and whom she missed so much when she had been in Florida for three years, and finally came back to China for him. I apologize to Tong that I didn’t even get a chance to buy them a wedding gift. The little prince and princess finally got together after they had dated for eight years! Tong and her husband live in the same spacious apartment with Tong’s parents. Tong’s parents, especially Tong’s mother, really like their only daughter is still around after she is married. Another reason is that Tong is not financially ready yet to buy a separate high-quality apartment. “Housing in Beijing is incredibly expensive now!” she says. I wonder, after years living in the United States by herself, if she still feels comfortable living with her parents, especially after she married. However, I hesitate and finally decide not to ask. The meeting is short because we both have to go back to work and meetings, but I can vaguely tell that Tong is not happy with her current job.

Before I can arrange another gathering with Tong, I get an urgent call from my coworkers in San Diego, indicating they need me to go back to help respond to another
big proposal as soon as possible. After I return to the U.S., I call Tong at her home again. She tells me she just resigned her job and plans to take some time off and think about what she really wants to do next. I had sensed it would happen. I encourage her and tell her I trust her making the right decision. We give each other a virtual hug through the phone and promise to keep in touch. I assure her I will come back to Beijing in the summer of 2000 for another business trip.

Work keeps me very busy after I return to San Diego. When I return to Beijing for my next business trip, I hear that Tong decided to move to Canada. I called her home phone number that is actually her parents’ home phone number several times, but no one ever picks up the phone and there is no voice mail. I send Tong several e-mails again, but all get returned. Until 2005, I keep trying the same home phone number and the e-mail address, with a slim hope that I will find her again. I search in the White Pages of bigger cities such as Vancouver, Toronto, and Montreal in Canada, but I have no luck in finding Tong’s name or listing. When I view some of the old e-mail correspondence between Tong and me, and the photos we took together in Tampa, Chattanooga, Nashville, Atlanta, and Beijing, my eyes get wet. I think: Tong, Where are you? Hope you are doing well.

**Leave of Absence from School and Move Up in the Corporation**

In October 2000, I finally leave the Proposal Department and move to be a Product Manager in the Product Management organization at Ericsson’s CDMA Business Unit. I am thrilled that I don’t have to work unreasonably long hours anymore and finally get into the core function of the company.
However, I feel burned out after nearly two years working in the Proposal Department. The writing of my dissertation has stalled and taking on a completely new role and responsibility makes me uncertain whether I can get recovered and devote myself completely to the dissertation again anytime soon. I have communicated with my major professor, Dr. Bochner, and committee member Dr. Ellis, and they thoughtfully suggest I take a leave of absence from school till I am ready to reinstate myself into dissertation writing again.

In November 2000, Yanming calls me and tells me her plan to bring her son to visit me in San Diego for over a week during her winter school break. She has been pursuing a master’s degree in computer science in California State University at Long Beach. She finally decided that computer science is what she wanted to pursue for her future career, and she’s already half way through the program. I have been in touch with Yanming through phone calls and e-mails. At the beginning, I was wondering why she had to leave her husband, Chen, in Tampa and bring her son to live in southern California while she pursued a graduate degree. “Because that’s the only university I found that doesn’t require me to complete ten undergraduate core courses in computer science before getting into the computer science’s graduate program,” Yanming explained to me. “And you know my undergraduate degree in China was statistics.”

Whether in Florida or California, Yanming has to pay out-of-state tuition because she hasn’t got her green card yet. By coming to the graduate program at Long Beach, she could save herself a year to complete her master’s degree in computer science and of course an entire year’s tuition. However, I still feel that she and Chen shouldn’t be geographically separate just because of school.
In early December 2000, Yanming drives her new Nissan Maxima into my driveway. She hasn’t changed much at all. She is still very slim and gentle, with a soft voice, but her son Tianbo has grown to be a big boy. He is almost four.

I am very happy to see her at my home in San Diego. During dinner, Yanming opens up. She feels that coming to southern California is half accidental and half of what she was hoping for. Of course saving one year’s tuition and time in school is the major motive. On the other hand, she wants to see if it makes sense that she and her husband, Chen, can live separate for a while. She discovered that whenever she and Chen were together every day, they would have non-stop quarrels, but if they were far away from each other, they would be able to talk to each other in a more rational manner.

“It was strange,” Yanming sighs. “I still think we were probably too rushed to get into marriage. Of course it was under special circumstances at that time because of Chen’s long-term assignment in Florida. Recently, I often thought we both are better off if we separate… I know it’s a scary thought….”

“But Chen is such a nice guy! You are such a kind person too! Don’t even think about breaking up,” I say. For this matter, I am firmly holding my traditional Chinese principle: you’d rather ruin ten temples than one marriage.

“Two nice people together do not necessarily mean they are happy,” Yanming says. “I was scared whenever I thought this marriage couldn’t be maintained anymore, and I was indeed afraid to be alone, but after I had Tianbo, I was no longer afraid. Tianbo will be my little company.” Yanming seems already prepared for the worst.
“It’s very hard to be a single mother,” I comment gently. “You and Chen are still legally bound, but you’ve been like a single mom in the past year. I always wonder how you made it — to go to graduate school full time and take care of Tianbo by yourself.”

“It’s difficult indeed,” Yanming admits. “I normally send Tianbo to day care during the day, but sometimes I have to find an additional babysitter if I go to classes in the evening. Tianbo is very cooperative. He is amazing. He always tells me, ‘Mom, now I am small and you take care of me; when I grow big, I will take care of you.’ He cheers me up so much!”

Yanming’s words strike my heart. Being a mother means a complete change of one’s life, in both responsibility and in mentality.

While we are chatting, the phone rings. It is Chen. He would like to know if Yanming arrived at my home safe and sound. I pass the phone to Yanming and I walk upstairs to let Yanming have private moments talking to Chen on the phone.

After I believe that Yanming has finished talking with Chen, I come back to the family room downstairs. “He still cares about you very much!” I say to Yanming.

Yanming is quiet, then she apologizes that Chen called my home phone to check up on her and disturbed our dinner. “Not a problem. He just wants to make sure you and Tianbo are all right after your three-hour drive,” I respond gently. Seeing that both Yanming and Tianbo are a little tired, I suggest: “You probably need some good sleep now. After you feel fully rested, we can go to La Jolla beach over the weekend.”

Yanming and Tianbo relax at my home when I go to work during the day. Yanming catches up on some reading, while Tianbo watches cartoons. In the evenings,
we have dinner together or do some shopping; during the weekend I accompany them for sight seeing. I am hoping Yanming finishes her degree soon and reunites with Chen as soon as possible.

**Visit to SINOCHEN Housing Complex in Beijing**

In January 2001, I am able to see Jing’s family again during my trip to Beijing, China. It is a special trip because Jing invited me to visit her home at Shang-Long West Subdivision, the housing complex built by SINOCHEN. There are several high rises with over twenty stories in each building in the subdivision. Security guards are at the entrance. The parking space is obviously too small, because most of the residents in the building own their own private vehicles. Outside the housing complex is a very crowded commercial area just like elsewhere in Beijing. Mr. Chai’s family and Tong’s parents both live in the same complex. Unfortunately, I lost touch with Tong after she moved to Canada. I tried Tong’s parents’ home phone number, but no one ever answers.

Jing and Ming’s apartment is more than 140 square meters large, with an upgraded cherry wood floor, spacious living room, and two bedrooms. There is a fifty-two-inch upright piano placed in one side of the living room. Alice is five now and old enough to be able to practice piano. The three-person family is very content living in this cozy home while they rent out the other luxury apartment they bought in the center of Beijing.

Jing is still working for Sealink, a mobile-phone accessory company in Florida. Sealink allows her to work from home and go on business trips to Shanghai from time to time. It fit Jing’s schedule nicely at the beginning, when she helped the family make the life transition upon re-entry to their home country. At the time, Ming was
continuously on business trips. Jing spent more time with Alice, sending her to kindergarten in the morning and picking her up after 5:00 pm, and she worked from home during the day. She did all the unpacking, organizing, and decorating. When she was too tired to prepare family dinners, the three of them would go out to eat. The overwhelming pace of life has stopped Jing from recalling the lonely and hectic moments she had in the sunny and rainy days in Florida. There have been many people in the family’s life who used to be strangers, then friends, then close friends, and then had to say goodbye; and now there is a home where she needs to take the next steps to create a new life.

Upon returning to China, a career-minded Jing had hoped to get herself established again on a meaningful career path. Some of the alumnae from her college who never had career interruptions have become very successful in China’s Ministry of Commerce, the Bank of China, and the National Economic Reform Committee. China is no longer the same country it was before Jing went to Florida. Nowadays, China is filled with various career opportunities, and the competition has increased too. Instead of becoming an energetic, power-suited person, with new business cards, a mobile phone, and laptop briefcase in hand, Jing has been spending a lot of time working from home in the same job she inherited from Florida. Working from home can be a dream to a lot of people, but to Jing, it seems to be a legacy indicating her career has been stalled ever since she went to Florida as an expatriate’s spouse. Though she has a full-time job, working from home all day triggers her memory of her being an L-2 visa holder when she couldn’t go to work or go to school, but had to stay home. For that particular year, life seemed to be choice-less.
To rid herself from this memory, Jing desires to change her job. She wouldn’t mind the pay cut, as long as she can come out of her home to work in a team-oriented environment where she can interact with coworkers daily. She says she misses the dynamics of the workplace. Except for hooking Jing up with someone I know in Ericsson’s office in China, I can’t extend more help as I had hoped. However, with her credentials, degrees, and experience both in China and the U.S., Jing should be able to get a very good position.

Ming has already left SINOCHEN to work as a chief representative for ICEC (International Commodities Export Corporation Beijing Representative Office). It’s a big decision to leave SINOCHEN, but Ming wants to try something new especially after the exposure of working in Florida for several years. He wants to make decisions in a more autonomous manner. To a lot of experienced professionals in sales, marketing, and operations, being a chief representative for a foreign directly invested company can be an ideal position.

Upon my visit, warm-hearted Jing makes a proposal to have dinner together with Mr. Chai’s family, who live in the same apartment building. Jing suggests Ming give a call to Chai to check his schedule and availability; nevertheless, Chai excuses himself for not being able to make it. I am OK with Chai’s reaction, which is what I expected. I cannot tell how Chai makes the excuses, but Ming looks a little upset by Chai’s response on the phone. I express my gratefulness to both Jing’s and Ming’s initiative to invite Chai for the dinner gathering. I tell them that it’s quite all right not to meet with Chai and his family this time. Chai remains the most unique and mysterious person in my research.
Jing and Ming insist on treating me to dinner in one of the restaurants close to their home. Though I know I will still be able to see Jing and her family whenever I come back to China, the Pacific Ocean makes this gathering a precious one.

Visit to Tampa in 2003

In November 2003, on my way from attending the National Communication Association convention in Miami, I stop by Tampa and visit Yu’s and Yanming’s families again in Tampa Palms.

Yanming has moved back to Tampa after getting her degree in computer science in Long Beach. It’s a great achievement to finish school while raising her young son, Tianbo. Her perseverance convinces me that I lack the excuse of not having enough time to write my dissertation.

Yanming must be an outstanding student, because she found a job in Tampa immediately after her graduation in Long Beach. That’s incredible, especially considering the IT industry had a downturn in 2001.

I am glad Yanming made an effort to reunite with Chen to try a new family life. They bought a brand-new four-bedroom, single-family home with a swimming pool in north Tampa in 2002. Chen is working as an accountant in downtown Tampa. Tianbo is six years old and plays soccer. Chen is as friendly as he has always been. He and my husband seem to be having a good conversation while I am chatting with Yanming. Their son is a very smart boy who is very polite yet can’t hide his mischievousness. All the voice mails in Yanming’s home and mobile phone were recorded with Tianbo’s sweet and funny voice. Yanming looks joyful and peaceful. The family seems to be reaching harmony. I am so glad.
Yu resigned from USAC Holdings Inc. in 2001 and started his study at Levin College of Law at the University of Florida. Though he received a law degree in China, it has always been Yu’s dream to get a JD degree in an American law school too. Based upon what I know about Yu, especially his sense of loyalty to SINOCHEM, I can imagine what a difficult decision he had made when he left SINOCHEM. He had been very dedicated to his assignment in Human Resources while he kept his dream of going back to his attorney career. In 2001, he reached the point that he had to choose between two options: (1) finishing up his overseas assignment in Florida and going back to SINOCHEM headquarters in Beijing, or (2) resigning his position and staying in Florida to pursue his degree in an American law school.

Yu chose the latter. I didn’t articulate my support for his decision, but in my heart, I was totally for his choice. I admired his courage and genuine passion to pursue his goal. Leaving SINOCHEM to be a full-time student again meant losing all his financial security and all he had established at his job. He had to rely on his years of saving to pay tuition and living expenses. At that time, his wife, Li, had already started her full-time job as a financial analyst at Citibank (later changed to Citigroup). After being enrolled in the law school at University of Florida, Yu had to commute between Tampa Palm and Gainesville each week. Li was new to her job and barely had the time and energy to take care of her baby daughter by herself. As a result, Yu and Li made a sad decision: to send their beloved baby daughter, JenJen, to her grandparents’ home for at least two to three years until Yu finished school and Li got more settled down to her work.
During JenJen’s absence, Li got depressed because she truly missed her daughter. The couple took turns traveling back to China to visit JenJen. The grandparents kept sending photos and videotapes to Yu and Li. Finally, Yu and Li decided to get JenJen back to the U.S earlier than planned. When Li got swamped by her full-time job and taking care of JenJen during weekday evenings, anxiety bothered her stomach and she hoped Yu would finish his JD degree as soon as possible. In 2002, Citibank considered providing Li a better opportunity by re-locating her to the office in New York City or sending her to Shanghai, China, as an expatriate. To avoid the separation of the family members again, Li had to reject both offers. One time when she chatted with me about this, she comforted herself: “It’s OK, I will let Yu get a high-paying job after his graduation.” I know from Li that Yu is an exceptional father and husband. He is the only one I know among the SINOCHEN expatriates who is willing to work as a part-time waiter to earn a little bit of family income while he goes to law school full time. He maximizes every minute he saves on his wife and daughter. He tells JenJen bedtime stories and brings her to a park each weekend. JenJen is very close to Yu, though he is only able to see her two days a week.

November 28, 2003, a day after I spent Thanksgiving with my major professor, Dr. Bochner, and my committee member Dr. Ellis, my family is having a dinner with Li and her daughter. Li also invited Yufei, who is the only son of Mr. Du, the ex-president of USAC Holdings Inc. Mr. and Mrs. Du had traveled to China in November. Before their departure, they sent me an e-mail wishing me a good visit in Tampa and advising Yufei to treat my family to dinner. However, I quietly pre-paid the dinner before the bill arrived.
Yufei, who was a teenage boy when I first started my dissertation research in 1997, is now a college graduate. Mr. Du finished his tenure at USAC Holdings Inc. and went back to China in late 1997 and then returned to Tampa and retired there. It’s a pity that I missed meeting with Mrs. Du on several occasions. From all my interviews with expatriates’ spouses or family members, I learn that Mrs. Du is an incredible woman who is successful in all aspects: a great mother and wife as well as an intelligent career woman who can be either a friend or good work partner. In one of the e-mails Mrs. Du sent to me, she wrote: “I am very ordinary, but I trust we can become very close friends. I wish we lived close by so that we could have time to meet very often.” I am hoping one day I will finally meet her, and I don’t mind if the time is after I finish my dissertation.

Unfortunately, Yu can’t make it to the dinner. He has classes each Friday afternoon this semester, and it would be very late after he drives from Gainesville to Tampa.

Next morning, when my family and I are on our way to the airport, Yu calls my mobile phone and says he will bring his daughter along to meet us at the airport. When he arrives, he apologizes that he couldn’t drive back to Tampa earlier last night and says he had hoped to catch up with us before our departure. Though Yu’s family and I keep in touch all these years, we don’t meet each other very often due to the distance from the west coast (California) to the east coast (Florida).

The long law school program exhausts Yu, but I believe his passion towards his goal still strongly encourages him to finish. He plans to graduate within a year (by December 2004). Because of the anxieties Li shows occasionally, Yu has felt guilty for
not being able to relieve the stress and uncertainty that exist in the family. Li and Yu have thought about buying a house for two years, but because they are not sure where Yu’s job will be located after graduation, they are hesitating to invest immediately on a new single-family home. However, for the sake of JenJen, who needs to go to a very good school, they are paying high rent in Tampa Palms.

Yu feels extremely bad that he can’t provide stability and financial comfort to the family, and that almost makes him wonder if he made the right decision to go to law school for more than three years. I firmly tell him that whatever he goes through is necessary and it’s natural that he has to overcome a lot of challenges before reaching his goal.

**Reinstated into Dissertation Writing in 2005**

After I left the Proposal Department in 2000, I started working in the Product Management organization at Ericsson. I moved from the service management to the product management group in 2002, and was promoted to be a Senior Product Manager at the beginning of 2004. In summer of 2003, I had Andric Li, a baby son of my own. Having completed “one task after another,” I realize that I still have one more — my dissertation. I can’t agree more with what my major professor points out: I won’t have a peaceful mind unless I finish my dissertation. By not completing it, I would feel I owe my research informants, who provided their stories to me, my major professor and committee members, who give unconditional support, and myself — whose first goal in coming to the United States was to get a Ph.D. degree. By not completing it, I won’t be a proud mom who can tell my son what “commitment” means when he grows up. In a nutshell, I must finish it!
In fall 2004, I am fully ready to reinstate myself into dissertation writing though my schedule is still hectic. Despite a full-time job and three major trips to China, Malaysia, and Canada in the last quarter of 2004, I start to refresh my library research and revisit my field notes. After eight years of ongoing research, preparation, and meditating, I come up with the story line of my dissertation, a story of evolitional identities: the shifting identities of my research participants in this rapidly changing global environment, and the growing identity of “me” who was a student researcher or “an outsider” (of the corporate world) and then became “an insider” (of the group of people I studied). Of course, the relationship between my participants and me is evolitional too - our friendship grows.

The writing itself is both a joy and a pain. Finally I find a peaceful mind after I sit down to write and let my thoughts out. It is a therapeutic exercise to make sense of my own identity when I write the stories of my research informants. I am working in a corporate world on a daily basis, but part of my emotional weight is in academia.

I know I will continually be in that limbo: my identity fully belongs neither to the corporate world nor to the academic world. Having left my full-time Ph.D. program for more than seven years, and having left the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences (the highest academic institute in China in the social science area) for twelve years, I wonder if I am courageous enough to go back and start all over again after I worked hard and established my experiences in the corporate world.

At the same time, I don’t feel I totally belong to the corporate world either. Though I have moved up from an entry-level telecommunication professional to an experienced product manager who is considered to be involved in the core functions of
my corporation, none of my degrees are in engineering, especially electrical engineering, a field that could be instrumental for more opportunities in the technical environment. Though in the past seven years I have accomplished a lot and become a very well rounded person who has either interfaced or focused in areas such as Marketing, Business Development, Sales Support, Operations, Engineering Research Development, and Product Management, I don’t ever feel my effort can be evaluated in the way that academic publications are. For instance, if I have run extra miles in the past seven years to gain the experiences that are equal to someone’s ten plus years, how can that be assessed and obvious like someone who is very productive in academic research deliverables?

When I started my role in product management and was later promoted to be a senior product manager, I had a strong urge to go to school for engineering courses on top of my previous degrees. It would better support my work, day-to-day problem solving, decision-making, and growth in the product-management track. However, I couldn’t afford the energy for engineering training when there was still an incomplete dissertation tugging at my heart. Though I never got a chance to write during my leave of absence from school, the thought of completing my dissertation was always in my mind, residing heavily there.

When I was on a business trips to Boca Rotan, Beijing, or other places in the world, I took detours in my spare time to visit with my research informants after I took care of business tasks. It was hectic. I reached the point where I felt my dissertation and my full-time job were mutual benefits yet mutual burdens too, I knew I had reached my “mental deadline” to finish my dissertation.
I felt relieved after I decided to reinstate myself into my writing, but I faced many challenges. After finishing each day’s work and going home in the evenings, my mind often was preoccupied by the details of product roadmaps, technical specifications, and business cases, and I felt exhausted. I had a hard time beginning another huge job — dissertation writing, which demanded deeper emotional involvement than the tasks in the corporate world during the day. Normally, I needed to clear up my “leftover thoughts from the day” and warm myself up and then concentrate on writing each night after my son went to sleep. I often worked past midnight and then had to go to work again the next morning.

I felt I had dumped too much family responsibility on my husband and even on my mother, who was visiting, when I feel I do not spend enough time with my two-year-old son, and when I feel too exhausted to go to work the following day after staying up late at night for my dissertation. I realize it is hard to do well in all aspects — to be a loving mother, a productive employee, and an efficient dissertation writer.

I had moments of thinking of giving up one, either my job or my dissertation, but I had a hard time deciding. The job helps me gain self-confidence, financial independence, and respect from friends including SINOCHEN employees and their family members. I am not ready to give up my job yet. Nor can I give up my dissertation, which literally contains my eight-year journey. I can’t give up either because both lead to where I am and who I am today, and reflect the dual identity of a Chinese American.

Yet, challenge hasn’t stopped. When I finish the draft of my first three chapters of writing, my company, Ericsson, announces it will close down its office in San Diego
and move CDMA2000 Business Unit functions to Montreal, Canada, after six plus
years of operation in San Diego. Since my husband also works in an established
company in San Diego, and my entire family is in San Diego, I can’t consider relocating
with Ericsson at this time, nor can I consider other internal opportunities within
Ericsson elsewhere. Having had a quick job search outside Ericsson, I accept a job offer
from Kyocera, where I will also be a senior product manager responsible for defining
software features for mobile phone and device applications.

I still think Ericsson is a good company where I learned the technology, the
product portfolio, and the management methods. I received a lot of international
experience when traveling in North American, European, and Asian Pacific countries.
The people, especially my Swedish colleagues, are incredibly knowledgeable,
dedicated, and respectful. In a farewell lunch with Ericsson coworkers, I expressed my
regards to those who have spent years in the industry — some have worked over twenty
years for Ericsson. Many of them are experts in standards, technology evolution, system
management, and radio or core network product areas. I tell them how special they are,
and they say: “June, you are very special too, and everyone is unique and special.” The
network with these coworkers is invaluable, and I will treasure their friendship. At this
point, I can imagine what an emotional strike it was to Yu when he had to leave
SINOCHEM years ago.

It seems my life situation didn’t allow me to have a non-interrupted path in
either area — academic world or corporate world. This situation is not dissimilar to
what my research informants (Yu, Li, Ming, Jing, and Yanming) have experienced.
Like them and like me, everyone has to accept and cope with voluntary and involuntary
changes in career and life. As a matter of fact, our efforts at trying to find “where we fit best” are strikingly similar to each other. The limbo situation I have today is something I have to accept, to deal with, to cope with, and to treasure. On one hand, I indeed live a fragmented life in which I try to juggle my role as a corporate employee, a mother, a wife, a daughter, and a dissertation writer. On the other hand, I feel blessed that I have these diversified experiences that enrich my mind, heart, and soul.

**Closure of the Ethnographic Story**

When I move my story line here, you may want to know where SINOCHEM expatriates and their family members are and how they are doing.

When I went to Beijing in 2004, I found Jing had accepted a job offer as a financial controller in Michelin’s Beijing office a year before. Ming still works as a chief representative in ICEC and enjoys what he is doing very much. Their daughter has entered grade school.

Yu graduated with his dreamed JD degree from the law school of University of Florida. Yu and Li were so happy and sent me a Christmas card they made with a photo of Yu’s graduation commencement. When I received the photo, I was touched by their contagious happy smiles: Yu’s, Li’s, and their precious daughter JenJen’s. It was such a big encouragement to me, especially because it was the time I reinstated myself into my dissertation writing. Yu accepted a job offer as an attorney at the Bales Weinstein law firm in Tampa right after his graduation. The family bought a beautiful home in Tampa Palms and has been enjoying decorating their new home.
Yanming received a great job offer from JP Morgan in Tampa and resigned from her old company. She is enjoying the new start of her career.

Mr. and Mrs. Du still live a peaceful and joyful life in Tampa, and their son Yufei works as a global sourcing person in a company in Sarasota. To Mr. Du, I forever appreciate his support on giving me a green light to conduct my ethnographic research in his company back in 1997.

Chai resigned from SINOCHEM, and his wife, Yan, resigned from her university. They disappeared, and none of my informants knows where they are.

I do think of several American employees at U.S. Agri-Chemicals Corporation, whom I interviewed between 1997 and 1999, especially Ernie, Irene, Joy, and Frank. I want to visit them again after I complete my dissertation defense.

I found an article published in the local newspaper in Lakeland, Florida on Tuesday, August 9, 2005 (Kennedy, 2005), saying USAC is planning to cease phosphate operations at its Bartow and Fort Meade facilities, a move that will likely precede the company’s exit from Polk County. USAC’s departure would leave Mosaic Co. as Polk’s last standing phosphate giant. Mosaic Co. announced on August 9, 2005, that they had a tentative agreement to pay USAC $84 million for the early termination of a phosphate rock contract. USAC will halt phosphate operations once it exhausts its current inventories of raw materials, according to the Mosaic release. An industry insider estimated it would take about three months for the company to deplete its supplies. Mosaic was formed when chemical-fertilizer industry big players IMC and Cargill merged in 2004. IMC had entered into the phosphate-rock sales agreement with USAC in 1994 and was supplying the company with about two million short tons of...
mined phosphate rock per year. The contract was extended to 2014 in 1999, and in 2000, USAC paid IMC a $57 million advance. IMC last year exercised a contractual right to terminate the agreement early in October 2007 in exchange for $84 million. Mosaic officials said the move would allow the company to retain the phosphate rock normally reserved for USAC.

The article (Kennedy, 2005) says:

“Although USAC officials have yet to confirm any plant closings, Mosaic Vice President H. Gray Gordon said his company has no plans to acquire USAC’s Bartow and Fort Meade facilities. Gordon said he was unsure of what prompted USAC’s decision to cease operations.

“It’s probably strictly just a business decision,” he said.

The planned transactions between USAC and Mosaic will be subject to board and regulatory approval.

USAC, a subsidiary of Sinochem Corp., which is owned by the Chinese government, has about 280 employees at its Bartow and Fort Meade sites.”

It is a bit of a shock to read this, but having experienced acquisition, merger, closing down, and a new start myself, I understand that this change has been common for multinational corporations, especially nowadays with global competition, regardless of the industry. Unfortunately, changes like this always have a big impact on each individual employee and their family members. The story of the struggles of expatriates of SINOCHEN, their family members, and their co-workers will never end, but it is time for me to conclude my dissertation.
Chapter Five: Analysis: Leaving Home and Struggling to Belong

In this ethnographic research, I try to make sense of a wide range of my experiences, not only the eight years of my dissertation research but also the thirteen years of living in the U.S. I am using this dissertation as a way to portray “leaving home” and struggling toward an understanding of a sense of belonging after various sorts of dislocations.

The people I studied are multinational corporate expatriates. The difference between an expatriate and an immigrant is that immigrants (for the most part) commit themselves to becoming a part of their country of residence, whereas expatriates are usually temporarily placed in the host country and most of the time plan on returning to their home country (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Expatriates, 2005). In this case, expatriates who initially had not planned to stay in the host country permanently might not be in the mode of fully adopting the culture in the host country. They have a choice of going back home or staying in the U.S., but the choice probably makes it harder to decide where they want to be and who they want to be. The expatriates and family members, no matter they stayed in the U.S. or repatriated back to China, they both experience the redefinition of home and reorientation of the career.

As my major professor, Dr. Bochner, points out, “home” is a metaphor of space, whereas family is one of relationship, though there are similarities between them since family is space insofar as it falls along a closeness/intimacy dimension. Clearly location is an index of social identity. “The metaphorical connection between existence and the
earth may be universal. All over the world, people objectify their sense of being and belonging in images of place” (Jackson, 1995, p. 19). To my research participants and me, home is not only the place in which you were born and grew up, symbolically it is a place you feel you “belong to” and “best fit in.” In our minds, we are constantly trying to sort out “Where do I belong?” or “To what sort of work do I attach my identity, and to what family, and what homeland?” The people I study (as well as myself) may be thought of existentially as “rootless.” Working through what home means is a process to work through what one’s identity can mean. I use an ethnographic method to portray this type of inner turmoil innocently yet evocatively.

In this dissertation, I structured my stories in a chronological way to write the evolution of my interaction with Chinese expatriates from SINOCHEN, their family members, and their American co-workers. There are two dimensions in this chronology:

(1) In appearance, the story line constructs the evolution of my relationship with my research participants;

(2) In nature, it is an evolution of my understanding of what my research informants experienced at work and at a foreign land; it is a social construction of “who they are” and “who I am.”

“Outsider” or “Student Researcher”

At the beginning of 1997 I discovered the local presence of SINOCHEN in central Florida and I became intrigued by it. Following my first interviews and visits, there was a rejection from the Chinese HR manager Chai, who declined my request to conduct ethnographic research in his company. He labeled me “an outsider” signifying
the boundaries between the academic world (represented by me as a student researcher) and the corporate world (represented by him as an organizational gatekeeper).

Chai’s refusal challenged my assumption of being a cultural “insider” of this group of expatriates. Though we spoke the same home language, we belonged to different worlds (academic vs. corporate). Chai, the organizational gatekeeper, had a completely different sense of belonging from mine. There was an “internal cultural difference” between him and me. This also raised an interesting debate in my mind about my identity as an ethnographic researcher and my questioning “Who am I?” As the only “non-North American” graduate student at the time, I considered myself very Chinese in my department. But in some of the SINOCHEN expatriates’ eyes, I was “a sort of outsider” to their world. “Sort” of indicated the uniqueness of my identity at the time. Due to my Chinese origin, I was not as much of “a complete outsider” as an Anglo-Saxon American student researcher might be to SINOCHEN expatriates, but at the institutional and experience level, I was an “outsider.” Institutionally, I was not employed by SINOCHEN, thus American employees who were hired by USAC Holdings Inc. were actually the legal insiders of the company, although their cultural origin might be different from SINOCHEN expatriates. At the experience level, I was viewed also as an outsider to the particular situation that SINOCHEN who work on overseas assignments.

After writing a letter to Mr. Du (the president of this SINOCHEN local subsidiary) to fully express my sincere interest in doing in-depth research at USAC Holdings, Inc., I received support from him. Though being authorized to conduct more interviews and visits, I noticed the importance of becoming an “insider” of the group of
people I studied. I started to realize that getting to know the expatriates’ family members was an important channel to identifying and understanding important aspects of these people’s life in the U.S. — what they have gained and lost in moving themselves and their family members from China to central Florida for an extended time. The initial failure of getting into the organization reminded me to draw a demographic feature of this particular group of Chinese. Chinese are different, just as Americans are different: rich, poor, urban, rural, and as my major professor joked: “people with four dogs, people with no dogs…”

In addition to that, interviewing their American employees in USAC Holdings, Inc., also helped me to understand how they were perceived by their American peers, and how they were helped by their American colleagues to settle down and live among the ordinary American middle-class community. When I interviewed American employees, I was also interested in seeing how the Chinese ownership was interpreted, what this cross-cultural workplace looked like and meant to the Chinese expatriates, what kind of community events they attended in Bartow, Florida, and how they adapted themselves in the day-to-day work and day-to-day life in Polk County, Florida.

**Expatriates’ Challenges at Work**

As described by Ernie Helms, an American executive of USAC Holdings Inc., the group of Chinese expatriates experienced several challenges after they made the acquisition from U.S. Steel.

The first challenge the Chinese expatriates confronted was impressions arising from the twenty-four-hour a day CNN reporting on the Tiananmen Square incident in 1989. The acquisition of USAC was made by SINOCHEM in March 1989. The
fermenting of the Tiananmen Square incident started in February, and the protest lasted until the beginning of June 1989. As Ernie described, here was a group of very traditional Southern American workers in Florida who were just acquired by a branch of the Chinese government; on CNN, there were images of China’s internal turmoil and repression of the uprising in downtown Beijing. He was very concerned whether the Chinese expatriates had relatives or friends who were affected by the repression of the student uprising, and he also worried whether the world debate on the Tiananmen Square incident would put additional pressure on the Chinese expatriates. However, the reaction from these blue-collar workers is very humanitarian, and their comment was: “Look, that’s their country and their internal business when it comes to the politics of that country. What we can do best for everyone in China is to continue to provide them with good-quality fertilizer.” Ernie felt relieved and said, “It was refreshing to know that Southeast United States American blue-collar factory workers were very global in their perspective of this.”

So most of the Americans looked at their ownership by a Chinese company as just an economic matter, and what they were doing was providing a product that a 1.2-billion-people nation needed, not for the leaders in government, but for the Chinese people in the farming communities. In addition, the Chinese investment in a foreign land allowed a thriving business in the Bartow community.

On top of the “ideological differences” between the political cultures of two different countries, the second major challenge that Chinese expatriates confronted was to adapt to the local cultural norms of work, local law, local operation, as well as to follow the regulations on environmental issues due to the nature of their chemical
fertilizer business. In addition, most of the expatriates from SINOCHEN were international traders and had little knowledge and experience on manufactory operations; therefore, SINOCHEN hired a seasoned American president from the local area to run the USAC factory and to take care of day-to-day operations including production, quality control, and maintenance.

In Ernie’s narrative, the environmental issue is one of the big things that both Chinese and American employees have to deal with. In order to survive in the industry and to thrive in Florida, both Chinese and American employees worked hard to comply with environmental regulations, to take care of the surrounding communities, and to manage the critiques from the media. All these issues are the challenges that the Chinese expatriates confronted at the workplace. In this situation, the Chinese expatriates were no longer just international traders. Instead, they became part entrepreneurs or industrialists. In my Chapter 4 Story II, Steve, an American executive, mentioned that the Chinese management seemed to be more conscious of both environmental protection and employee safety issues than USAC’s previous owner, U.S. Steel. That was evidenced by the greater amount of capital that SINOCHEN was willing to invest in the local subsidiary.

In addition to the challenges of adapting local laws and regulations at the workplace, the Chinese ownership made some subtle changes to the “power structure” to enhance the Chinese leadership in the local subsidiary. As a chemical fertilizer plant, USAC operation was taken care by an American president and a seasoned management team. In 1991, two years after USAC was acquired by SINOCHEN, a trading firm called U.S. Chem Resources (USCR) was formed to reduce the cost and procedure of
selling and shipping the finished products either to the international market or to the domestic market in China. The Chinese expatriates who had a strong background in international trading were sent to USCR to be responsible for sales activities. In 1991, USAC Holdings, Inc. was formed as “the strategic planner and corporate parents” of USAC and USCR. Mr. Du was appointed the president of USAC Holdings, Inc. at the time when I started my dissertation research. USAC Holdings, Inc., adds one more level of organization separating SINOCHEN’s headquarters and its subsidiaries, USAC and USCR. In Chai’s words, it was a strategic improvement on managing the production and trading flow, but in Ernie’s interpretation, “the Chinese enhanced their leadership and ownership” in their local presence by building up this reporting structure. American employees were more open than Chinese expatriates to talk about the subtlety of the political structure and felt it a natural thing that Chinese ownership gradually enhanced management control on their local presence.

The third major challenge Chinese expatriates confronted was the learning curve on running a free enterprise in a market-driven economy environment. Coming from China, which had a centrally planned economy at that time, the Chinese expatriates were sent to central Florida to learn how to operate a free enterprise in the United States. Purchasing and building up this subsidiary in central Florida served the purpose of providing a training site for the future executives of SINOCHEN. The young Chinese expatriates were sent to work in different functional areas in USAC Holdings, Inc. such as Accounting, Finance, Sales and Marketing, Legal Advice, Human Resources, Logistics, and Chemical Processing. After an extended period of time working in Florida, they were expected to go back to SINOCHEN headquarters to be a
management team in the future. Therefore, coming to Florida was considered a special career opportunity to these expatriates. For example, Mr. Ming-Lei Chen, the Chinese Vice President of Engineering, brought back all his research results and experience back to China for the domestic joint-venture efforts between SINOCHEN and the Nanjing Chemical Fertilizer Plant. Mr. Chai, the Chinese HR Manager who received a certificate offered by ACAP (the American Compensation Association of Professionals), went back to SINOCHEN headquarters in China after his six years of service in Florida. At that time, he was the first person who had an ACAP certificate among the government enterprises in China, and after his return to Beijing, he soon got promoted to be a General Manager of Human Resources at SINOCHEN.

Every Chinese expatriate whom I interviewed went through a learning curve in their professional areas. Wei, Chen, and Shulang spent efforts to learn strategic planning and American accounting systems. They not only needed to learn the methodology, tools, and processes, but also needed to learn the way of thinking and planning in American free enterprise. Even for a “less technical area” such as Human Resources, Chai and Yu spent a lot of long hours getting to know the local labor laws and benefits policies. In Chapter 4 Story II, Yu’s descriptions of his learning curve were vivid and honest. His dedication, modesty, frankness, and honesty gained my trust and respect.

Mutual Cultural Influences at Work

The subtle migration of seamless control under Chinese ownership was even more mitigated by the “unassuming personalities” shown by the Chinese expatriates. Among American exempt and not exempt employees as well as blue-collar workers,
there were many who interacted with the Chinese expatriates on a day-to-day basis. In my interviews with Irene Dobson, Steven Susick, and Joy Peavy, I heard stories that portrayed their Chinese counterparts as very humble, friendly, and thoughtful. One blue-collar worker, Frank Dempsey, especially expressed his fondness of Chinese patience in waiting for profits after their capital investment. At the time I interviewed Frank, he had been working in this factory for thirty-nine years. Before SINOCHEN purchased the factory, he had experienced four different owners. Each owner had closed the factory quickly when they found they didn’t make money in the first few years. He had been aggravated by the frequent shutdowns. Four years before, when U.S. Steel was about to close down, he was very concerned because it had become harder and harder to find a job at his age (he is in his late fifties). At that time, he felt ashamed to tell someone that he worked for U.S. Steel. After SINOCHEN’s acquisition, he was proud to tell his neighbors that he worked for SINOCHEN.

What impressed American employees was the Chinese owner’s generosity in creating a warm, intercultural, “family” atmosphere. Different levels of employees, including working-level managers, clerks, and blue-collar workers like Frank, would have a chance to be selected as a part of the “annual employees’ delegation to China” to visit SINOCHEN headquarters in Beijing and tour some famous cities and historical sites. Of course, as a part of the government entity under MOFTEC (the Ministry of Foreign Trade and Economic Cooperation), USAC Holdings, Inc., also hosted numerous delegations that belonged to other organizational entities within SINOCHEN, or MOFTEC, or the entities that had business relations with SINOCHEN. (See my interviews with Joy in Chapter 4 Story II). As the most profitable overseas enterprise
under MOFTEC in the mid-1990s, USAC Holdings, Inc., won a special recognition from Chinese government officials. Both Chinese and American employees at USAC Holdings, Inc., felt very proud to be a part of SINOCHEM.

In USAC, there was not only a Chinese delegation, but also Chinese classes offering learning opportunities about Chinese culture. Besides, there was a constant improvement on internal communication led by Human Resources. Chai, Irene, and Ernie all introduced their efforts on the Quarterly Business Tape and Employees’ Proposals’ Drop Box to increase the communication between the working level and top management. There was also an Employee Wellness Committee chaired by Chai. The senses of family and community are highly advocated both inside and outside the factory. Each year, volunteers from our factory participate in the “Paint Your Heart Out” project. Many needy elderly citizens in both the Fort Meade and Bartow communities have benefited from having their homes painted by USAC employees. As described in the Chapter 4 Part II section “Chinese Expatriates’ Interactions with Community,” Joy, Chai, and union leader Paul also led other countless volunteering activities to serve the surrounding Bartow community and school district. At USAC, both Chinese and Americans were willing to produce the best from their company’s cultural heritage.

Of course, there were some counter voices I heard during interviews on other occasions that were not congruent with the “family and community” cultural theme I revealed. One was the interview with the co-op student Guangyan, who provided me some conservative sides of American Southern culture that he observed in USAC (in the Chapter 4 Part I section “Rejections — Insider and Outsider, Academy and Corporation”). In USCR, the sister company of USAC, the work atmosphere was a little
bit different. The communication was not as transparent as at USAC. The job
description and reward system were not clear according to American employees who
worked at UCSR.

In summary, Chapter 4 Part I “Outsider” and “Insiders” and Part II Getting to
Know “the Insiders” focused on my experiences of initiating my research and getting to
know my research participants. Because I am an “outsider,” an interviewer, an observer,
and a student researcher, my entry and re-entry to this organization remind me of how
authority, power, and the “family” style of entrepreneurship are perceived, practiced,
experienced, and interpreted differently by Americans and Chinese. By the traditional
Confucian ideology, “family” is an extension of the state, and so is “the corporate family.”
In such a family, the sense of interdependence is strong. Personal achievement and
individual excellence are not particularly acknowledged. Corporate success is considered a
collective effort by colleagues (perceived as surrogate “relatives”) and leaders (perceived
as images of fathers or older brothers).

Here the “family” metaphor not only represents the collectivism in Chinese
corporate culture but also illustrates “high-power distance.” It is true that the collectivist
“family” metaphor does promote a humanistic approach to relationships. But in the
management practice, the Chinese leadership style can be seen as authoritarian. In the
trading firm of USAC, where the employees and executives are predominantly Chinese,
there is much secrecy about performance evaluations and overall information on finance.
The secrecy is seen as a private (family) preserve. In workplace interactions, the family-
type enterprise culture seems negative because of its draining of subordinates’ energies and
loyalties to buoy up the leader. A large part of the reason for working, performing well,
and resolving conflict in this corporate culture is the pleasure derived from a “family” relationship: “To please your supervisor (or an elder brother) is a reward in itself” (Trompenaars, 1994, p. 155).

The “family” metaphors were also frequently used by the American executives of USAC Holdings, Inc. However, they interpret the “family” metaphor quite differently from their Chinese partners. They regard “family” as a surrogate word for “community.” In the family/community, a cooperative relationship is also highly appreciated just as it is appreciated in Chinese culture, but the father/older brother figures perish.

**Expatriates’ Challenges in Life**

The cross-cultural adaptations were vividly described by Yu’s accounts. It took a long time to get deeply involved in the U.S. culture, to understand the history, the Constitution, government structure, politics, social problems, school systems, etc. In the earlier stage of moving to the United States, there were indeed some specific adaptations that needed to be made, such as getting a local driver’s license, a Social Security number, understanding how to use medical systems or go to doctors, knowing where to get the air conditioning fixed, where to get cars maintained, and how to get their children into the local school system. Getting this type of mundane knowledge could be a part of an earlier stage of cultural adaptations too. At the workplace, the Chinese expatriates adapted very well and learned fast for their overseas assignments at USAC Holdings, Inc. Their quick study and productivity received respect from their American peers. However, cultural adaptations were not as simple as the mundane life knowledge of “where to get the car fixed” or work routine adjustments such as the “norms of the staff meetings.” There were other aspects of daily life to which it can be
more difficult to adapt and caused a longer time of feeling culturally displaced. For instance, after years of living in central Florida, some expatriates still liked to watch Chinese movies because they touched on what they were familiar with. They still felt there was a distance when watching American entertainment, of which they couldn’t fully appreciate all the subtleties. After a few years in the U.S., they still struggled with “how to fit in” and being part of the local culture and community, appreciating the sense of humor contextualized in the local culture, just like what I experienced in my first few years in the U.S.

The Chinese expatriates had annual Christmas parties held by the company. They joined other social events occasionally; they had friendship with American coworkers and neighbors; and they gradually adapted to the local food and the norms of daily communication. But these Chinese expatriates still liked to get together among themselves and they intended to socialize more with Chinese. They arranged family vacations and travel in groups and had weekend barbeque parties mixed with both Chinese and American dishes. For Americans, family vacations and traveling could be a very private thing, but for the group of Chinese expatriates, family vacations were sometimes a group event. They went shopping together in malls or particular stores like SYMS to purchase outfits to wear at work. They gave each other ideas and feedback on the merchandise they bought, and they became very close since there were only a few of them in central Florida. Compared to noisy, colorful, diversified, metropolitan life in Beijing, Lakeland and Tampa seemed to be too quiet and reminded them of their loneliness and their “living far away from home status.”
Yet, there were more serious challenges that the expatriates had to face with regard to their family members. Most of the expatriates’ spouses had very successful careers in China. They were well-educated and bright young women who had ambition about both their careers and personal life. The sudden move to Florida disrupted where they were in their career path. SINOCHEM expatriates’ spouses experienced the painful transition of being successful career women in China to a no-choice full-time housewife status mainly for two reasons. (1) Their coming to the U.S. was a decision to support their husbands, who were sent overseas by SINOCHEM. In order to maintain the marriage and family, these women quit their jobs to reunite with their husbands in the U.S. (2) Holding an L-2 visa (the visa for expatriates’ spouses) they were not legally permitted to work in the U.S. regardless of their qualifications, education, and experience.

In this situation, some of these expatriates’ wives became full-time wives and mothers; some of them started to prepare graduate school entrance exams (GRE, GMAT, and TOEFL, TSE etc.) and to transfer their visa status from L1 to F1 (international student visas), which would lead to their independence again. Regardless, the forced stay-at-home status hurt their self-worth and confidence. As they worked towards their independence, I informed some of them about my school, the University of South Florida, and China Florida Linkage Institute, which sponsor students like them.

Liberating women from family to workplace had been considered one of the big achievements of the centrally planned economy in China from the 1950s to the 1980s. The Chinese were proud to see that “full-time housewives” almost disappeared in Chinese society. Since the 1950s, Chinese government policies and federal laws fully
protected full-time career women. Career women were given high regard and were considered to be a great value to the society. However, career women in China lost the freedom of choosing their life style while they were gaining financial independence and a respectful status.

In the late 1990s, full-time housewives reappeared in Chinese society. This indicated the growing freedom of the social system based upon the market-driven economy. It also indicated the increased awareness of individual choice, though quite a few of those housewives stayed at home because of the conflict of raising a child and going out to work, which is a similar situation faced by women in the rest of the world. However, the SINOCHEM expatriates’ spouses I interviewed came to the United States in the mid-1990s, and the full-time housewife was still a shameful concept in their minds based upon their cultural upbringing.

Most current research on the expatriate’s spouse is based upon the examples of those who are sent abroad by North American corporations or government agencies. Their focus is on women from English-speaking countries arriving in non-Western countries (Alder, 1997, p. 264; Baker, 1975; Black & Gregersen, 1991; Black & Stephens, 1989; Thompson, 1986). Few of these studies give voice to the experiences of women from Asian or other non-Western cultures arriving in Western countries.

Having earlier multinational-corporation practices than people in most other Asian countries, Japanese researchers have produced a few studies on the adjustment of “the wives of Japanese corporate sojourners” (Isa, 1997). Nevertheless, even the experiences of Japanese corporate sojourner wives are different from the ones of most Chinese multinational-corporation employees’ spouses. For many Japanese families, it
is a norm for a wife to stay at home to take care of children and support her husband. However, among urban Chinese families, the dual-career couple is common. In P.R. China, women and men remain in the labor force throughout their working lives. Educated women have made inroads into demanding professional, administrative, and skilled manual occupations (Ngo, 2000). With the market reforms, successful professional and skilled workers increasingly earn high incomes, rewarding women for remaining on the job (Meng & Kidd, 1997). To many Chinese women, having one’s own career is important not because it will bring more family income but for the cause of having one’s own sense of belonging. Therefore, the Chinese expatriates’ wives confronted an extreme dilemma when they went overseas.

Several spouses of the SINOCHEN employees I interviewed reported feelings of isolation and helplessness while being away from “home” in China. These feelings grow from the experience of coming to the U.S. and staying at an American “home” without being able to do anything related to their former careers. This paradox is even more painful than learning a new language and local norms.

In my dissertation, I focused on three young women who were very successful in China and then quit their jobs to join their husbands, start a family, and became full-time wives and mothers, and then went to graduate school, and became career women again. I have tremendous respect for their goal of being both a good wife/mother and a successful career woman.

During the transition from being successful career women in China to housewives in the U.S. and career women again either in the U.S. or in China, they went through a geographical move, cultural differences, having few friends and a
limited social support/network in a foreign land, and uncertainty about the future (who she will be and where her family will be, the next step of her husband’s career, either going back to SINOCHEN’s headquarters in China, or going to another country to receive another overseas assignment). This uncertainty impacted her stability and her decisions about her life and career. At the time of moving to the U.S. these women typically were in their late twenties or close to thirty, and it was time for kids, for another degree, and for new career.

I observed two main reasons that the expatriates’ spouses prefer to have their own careers instead of being a full-time wife/mother. First, since they had already had white-collar experiences in China, it was hard for them to accept the evaluation of their value only from one source. To be more specific, the evaluation system at the workplace is from multiple perspectives: from your supervisor, your peers, or your direct reports. The feedback or praise can be monetary (salary-related) or material rewards, or the pleasure generated from recognition of self-improvement and growth. However, a full-time housewife could not get rewards similar to those above. The only feedback for her hard work came from her husband or her child. This single source of evaluation could easily cause psychological distress, especially to the women who were career-minded.

Second, women who had good educational backgrounds like the SINOCHEN expatriates’ spouses need a deep level of interpersonal communications. Full-time housewives’ social networks are more likely constituted by other housewives, or full-time mothers whose topics centered on the matters related to running a household or raising children. The emotional satisfaction of such type of communication is low.
Throughout my years of knowing Jing, for example, she had always been a very calm and peaceful person, but one time (when she was a full-time mother taking care of Alice in Tampa), she couldn’t help complaining how sloppy she became each day and how slow she was with her thoughts, because she was seldom involved in intelligent conversations anymore. The expatriates’ spouses needed a deeper level of communication and exchange than her family was able to provide. Lacking external, intelligent conversations outside the family led them to suspect that they were losing social and work skills.

The fourth SINOCHEM expatriates’ family member I interviewed was an executive expatriates’ daughter Tong. Young and single, she had to decide to join her parents and go to graduate school in the U.S. and separate from her boyfriend, whom she had an established relationship with for three years. Loving both her parents, her boyfriend, American culture and her home country China, she had to choose one. She chose to go back to her parents and marry her boyfriend and work in China. However, two years after going back to China, she immigrated to Canada. She again left her home country where she felt she had not settled down or was at home anymore.

**Constant Change and Choice of Life**

In 1997, several employees I interviewed expressed their willingness to go back to China either to work for their parent company in Beijing or to accept other overseas assignments if there is a need in the company. There was a bit of office folklore I heard from local Florida subsidiaries. Several years ago, a couple of employees left SINOCHEM because of the higher rewards offered by other foreign firms. When interviewing the current employees, I implicitly asked for their personal reactions
towards this kind of leaving. Unanimously, they considered this leaving as some kind of “betrayal” especially when SINOCHENM had financially invested much on career training for those “betrayers.”

Life is never dull. When Ming-Lei Chen and Chai went back to Beijing after they finished their overseas assignments, it was time for Ming and Yu to decide to stay in the U.S. or go back to China. Ming chose to go back to SINOCHENM headquarters in Beijing, but finally left SINOCHENM a year after he returned. Yu had been one of the faithful employees of SINOCHENM, but had to resign in order to pursue his dream of getting another JD degree to become an attorney again. Among those changes, they had all felt fear, there was a struggle for positive changes, and there is always hope and projection for a better future.

Therefore, my dissertation reveals the following tensions:

Tensions between home and foreign lands;
Tensions between cultural roots and a foreign value system;
Tensions between the academic world and the corporate world;
Tensions between family and work;
Tensions between personal desires and collective needs;
Tensions between a sense of loyalty and betrayal;
Tensions between wanting choice and having no choice;
Tensions between gain and loss;
Tensions between change and stability

Ritivoi says that “the enthusiasm of the ‘global village’ makes us more eager to concentrate on adjustment and assimilation” and “we might forget too hastily that
stepping outside the boundaries of one’s culture is a complex and challenging experience, one that involves a loss of familiarity, of confidence, of spontaneity, a destruction – temporary or not – of private lives” (Ritivoi, 2002, p. 12). The displacement explored by Hannah Arendt (Finkielkraut, 2000, p. 100) is to a certain extent similar to the experience of my research participants:

We lost our home, which means the familiarity of our daily life. We lost our occupation, which means the confidence that we are of some use in this world. We lost our language, which means the naturalness of reactions, the simplicity of gestures, and the spontaneous expression of our sentiments. (Finkielkraut, 2000, p. 100)

My Growing Identity and My Research

When I first approached SINOCHEN in 1997, my awareness of its uniqueness still resided at a surface level. The most appealing factor to me was that SINOCHEN was one of the first Chinese enterprises to become multinational. Nowadays, we have more and more Chinese entities like this in the global market, including several telecommunication vendors, but in the early 1990s, SINOCHEN was the multinational pioneer in China. Eight years later, in 2005, when I looked at the whole history of my research, I realized that the unique aspect of SINOCHEN was its creation of one of the first generations of China’s international business professionals. Whether they decided to stay in the United States or to go back to China, they led the way for the next-generation Chinese white-collar workers’ mobility and explorations of their identities. Moreover, whether SINOCHEN expatriates decided to stay in the United States or to go back to China, they could not avoid American local cultural influence after their years of assignments in Florida.
For instance, the Chinese human-resource manager at USAC Holdings, Inc., Mr. Chai, decided to go back to SINOCHEN headquarters in Beijing after he completed his six-year overseas assignment in Florida because he believed the experiences he gained in the American workplace could bring positive influence to his parent company, SINOCHEN. Mr. Chai considers himself the first Chinese to become a certified benefits professional. The certificate is offered by the American Compensation Association of Professionals (APAC). He believed that what he learned in the United States could add tremendous value to China’s human-resource management. Account manager Ming is another expatriate who brought himself and his family back to his home country. However, Ming left SINOCHEN shortly after his return. He joined a U.S. company that opened a subsidiary in Beijing. After his years of working experience in the United States, Ming found himself more interested in working in a privately owned U.S. firm rather than a Chinese state enterprise that is going through privatization. Having finished their assignment in Florida, the majority of SINOCHEN expatriates resigned their jobs at SINOCHEN and stayed in the United States because they found they liked their second home better. Some of them preferred their children to receive an education in the United States. Some of them stayed because they really want to get their desired advanced degrees and training in the United States and pursue other career opportunities.

When I conduct ethnographic research for my dissertation, I neither imply that “globalization” renders only a negative impact to human individuals’ identity, nor think globalization always suggests a cultural hegemony that particularly refers to Western (or more likely, U.S.) culture overpowering the cultures of “others.” Globalization to
me is a dynamic concept. My first globalization experience can be traced back to the late 1980s when I was a college student listening to a guest speaker, Harvard sinologist Tu Weiming, who visited my university. His subject associated a lot with what Peter Berger discussed as “Easternization” (Berger & Huntington, 2002, p. 14), with which Europeans and Americans are influenced on the levels of belief (reincarnation, karma, and the mystical connections between the individual and nature) and levels of behavior (meditation, yoga, and tai-chi, etc.) from Asian culture. If my earlier discovery of “Easternization” included how the American Imagist movement was much influenced by Chinese and Japanese classic poetry, then my later finding was the genuine interest my professors Dr. Arthur Bochner and Dr. Mark Neumann showed in Zen Buddhism when I started my graduate program in the United States. Asian philosophy and religious culture seemed to be more popular among Western intelligentsia than I was aware of before I came to the United States.

When I was a young editor in the China Academy of Social Sciences before I came to the United States for graduate school, I attended a meeting with Fredric Jameson. I was probably one of the first young Chinese to get informed by postmodern thought as well as various other critical theories imported from Western scholarship. Though my particular action of coming to the United States for graduate school is a direct result of academic globalization, it seems that “globalization” is two-way communication. In addition, globalization always happens concurrently both at the elite level (such as academia) and in popular culture (including multinational corporations, international business, and consumer products such as Polo shirts, Nike shoes, McDonald’s, Disney, MTV, etc.).
Both elite and popular vehicles circulate the impact and artifact of globalization. What I am trying to reveal is that no one is immune from globalization. The impacts of globalization are not only on our perceptions but also on our values, choices, decision-making, and our everyday existence in mundane life. My determination in conducting ethnographic research on shifted identities in the globalization era is directly the consequence of globalization. My interpretations toward my informants’ and my own experiences are largely influenced by the academic theories and research methods I have been taught in my American graduate school. Human beings do not use language innocently. Every language carries with it “a cultural freight of cognitive, normative, and even emotional connotations” (Berger & Huntington, 2002, p. 3).

My dissertation is a personal interest. I am not representing any institutions. All my passion towards this research is my interest in listening to individual voices instead of institutional talking. My dissertation is subjectively focused on how globalization impacts an individual’s sense of belonging. This is due to who I am as a researcher and what I experienced as a researcher.

As my story line revealed in my dissertation, I first approached SINOCHEM as a student researcher (labeled as an “outsider” by the organizational gatekeeper). As time went by, I started to establish friendships with my research informants, the expatriates, their family members, and their American co-workers. The big transition of my research was my relocation from Florida to southern California in summer 1998. I experienced an identity shift from being a full-time Ph.D. candidate to a full-time employee also working in a multinational corporate environment. This was described in Chapter 4 “Part III Becoming an Insider.”
In 1998, I wrapped up my field research and moved to San Diego, California where my husband worked. For the first two months after I moved to San Diego, my peaceful academic mind was stirred up by several social occasions in which my self-worth was challenged. In those social occasions, I was no longer with my immediate academic network. Instead, most of the new people I met were working in the corporate arena where they were more interested in chatting about how your career and personal life achievement could be measured by your financial success. Since I was a stay-at-home Ph.D. candidate and dissertation writer, I experienced painful self-doubt not unlike what SINOCHEM family members had suffered when they first came to the United States. I was terrified by the thought that I would fall into the same darkness as they did before — the powerless and choiceless young women who were well educated and had vigorous minds but had to live without friends, financial independence, and self-confidence. I related myself more with SINOCHEM expatriates’ family members’ situation.

After becoming a full-time corporate employee, I myself experienced acquisition, merger, re-organizations, a change of job functions, getting promotions, evaluating career priorities and family priorities, downsizing, a company’s branch closing down, and getting another job offer. My later relocation and corporate experiences helped me better understand what my research informants had gone through: feeling displaced and isolated, struggling to get into the best career fit, and coping with work environment changes. My domestic and international travels at work also helped me to revisit my research informants in both Florida and China. In Chapter 3 Research Methodology, I discussed how my growing identity and experiences
affected my understanding of my research. When I re-listened to the twenty audiotapes I recorded during my interviews years ago, my interpretation became different and my interpretation of my field notes became different too. I was more sensitive to certain details that I overlooked, or not heard before, especially their struggles of dealing with various voluntary and involuntary changes.

So this grew into a reflexive autoethnography portraying my research evolution and my journey first as a student researcher, then as a full-time employee of a multinational corporation: How I started my research. How I discovered the gaps between my academic student experiences and their corporate experiences, how I explored the identification between my cross-cultural experiences and my research informants’ cross-cultural experiences, how I grew from an “outsider” and then an “insider” of their world, how conversations with my participants came to affect me, changing my outlook and opening my eyes and heart to new understandings of “them” and me.

My ethnographic stories showed how I started this research, how I approached my research participants, what failures I experienced, what experiences I lacked, what lessons I learned, what was possible to do and what was impossible to achieve in my research. As a reader, you may use your imagination to see how you might have approached this research alternatively. In addition to the lessons I learned, I still struggle to solve remaining mysteries; even today, I still don’t have an interpretation of why it is like this (President Du’s subtle hint for me to conduct my research primarily at USAC instead of USCR; Mr. Chai’s constant distance and resistance to reveal his own
expatriate experiences). Those mysteries added to the charm of this research and continue to intrigue me to explore my experiences further.

Throughout my dissertation research, I experienced a growing sense of discovery. My understanding of my research participants grew in a gradual and slow way. The foundation of this understanding started not only from the time of my first meeting with them in 1997, but also from my own “landing” in the U.S., my own cultural displacement, reticence, anxiety of being silent to my emerging confidence about my academic ability to conduct my dissertation research in this SINOCHEN subsidiary. In 1998, the need for a reunion with my husband took me away from Tampa to southern California, where my empathy was strengthened and grew for SINOCHEN expatriates’ wives who gave up their careers to be wives in the U.S. I did not want to be identified as one of them after I moved to southern California to be with my husband. Having listened to their stories, I was alert to what I did not want to be, and thus my research reflexively changed me. I knew I was risking the possibility that I would never finish my dissertation on time when I took a job offer from Qualcomm and became a Chinese employee of an American global corporation, but I had no real idea that this new world of work would increase my inner conflict by fragmenting my identity: doctoral student/candidate, corporate employee/manager, Chinese American, mother, and career woman.

Over the years, my instincts and my emotional tie with my research kept me in close touch with my research participants and provided me an internal drive to meet with them in southern California, Tampa, Lakeland, and Beijing, China. Eight years of friendship! Eight years had gone by! The past continued to tug at me — what about
what I owe the people whom I knew at SINOCHEN? What about their stories that needed to be told? What about my stories of becoming a Chinese employee in an American company in contrast to those I studied? What about my unfinished business as a doctoral candidate without a completed dissertation? What about the future? Is my legacy to work for an organization, making more and more money and not being able to leave the security that gives me? Or am I drawn to other values? Do I have a message and a story worth telling that can help Chinese people who do not have my advantages? Narrative is told in the present but is also about making a story that I can live with in the future and thus making a future in which I can live with peace of mind (Bochner, 1994).

When I shared with my major professor, Dr. Bochner, the experiences of my growing identity as a researcher, he was struck by how much I was influenced by various reference groups and “conversational communities.” I rely on the insights in *The Social Construction of Reality* (Berger & Luckmann 1966; 1989) in which Berger and Luckmann believe that after primary socialization one must be very careful about others with whom one converses. When I was a full-time graduate student at the University of South Florida (USF), I conversed with graduate students and faculty, and they inspired me to be a scholar. Once I left USF and moved to California, I was exposed to materially oriented conversations with local corporate employees. I became doubtful if I was worthy somehow in a material and economic way in their world, as if being a scholar meant being economically dependent and not sufficiently autonomous. That perception also coincided with what I observed from the expatriates’ spouses who were frustrated by losing their financial independence during their earlier years in the
U.S. I tried to convince myself and prove to myself that I could also be an insider of the corporate world and achieve economic success and be productive according to the standards and criteria indicated by some of my research participants as well as the corporate people I knew in California.

In my ethnographic stories, I posed the dilemmas and showed how betwixt and between I was under the social influence of different reference groups. Yet in the final analysis, I still have not reached a resolution to the question, who am I? What do I really want? What can fulfill my desires and dreams? Money? Power? Authority? Productivity? Recognition? Or is it love? Generosity? Kindness? Knowledge? Inspired by my major professor, Dr. Bochner, I contemplate what it means to me to complete my dissertation. Finishing the dissertation means graduation and perhaps a new beginning; finishing the dissertation may relieve and resolve any Chinese guilt about letting down my major professor and other faculty members. Yet more significant to me is this: finishing the dissertation means I went through the process to make sense of my identity/self that is a work in progress. Completing the dissertation didn’t bring to an end the choice between paths of life where one always lives (in a capitalist and global society) within the tensions of the corporate world and the academic world. I still have not resolved who I “really” am and where I “truly” belong, however my dissertation writing brings me more awareness of the influences and conflicts in which I am immersed but willing to live, with hope and faith in the possibilities of living a meaningful life.

My research educated me and made me who I am today. In the past eight years, I went through a journey, a journey in which I became a more peaceful person, from the
stage when I was eager to be accepted, recognized, and defined by people other than me, to someone who is trying to make more sense of who I am. I was ready to go back to my dissertation after seven plus years of full-time work in a corporation. It’s impossible to describe the everyday details I experienced in the past eight years, but the highlights provided in the ethnographic stories in this dissertation are an attempt to show their meaning to my life and to the lives of the people I studied and befriended.

Therefore, in this final analysis, this is my story, though it is also a story that involves other characters — the people I met and interviewed at SINOCHEN in the context and background of my school in Tampa, my professors, my graduate-student cohorts, my co-workers at Qualcomm, Ericsson, and Kyocera, my friends and family. It is my story, but it reflects an identity work that any Chinese educated woman might have to experience and work through as an expatriate or repatriate.

When I started my dissertation, I vaguely knew what I was looking for, but then as time went by, my research theme got clearer and clearer. The theme I was exploring was “What does it mean to be a native Chinese person who is not living in China, or what does it mean to be a Chinese person who is working in America, especially in a changing and globalized world?” The entire dissertation is also about changes and the senses of displacement: the change of life and career path of my research informants, the change in my identity as a researcher (from student to corporate employee), the change in the global workplace and life environment that ordinary people like SINOCHEN employees and I both experienced.

I came into this research looking for cultural differences, but meanwhile, I found a lot of the common struggle for belonging and a sense of home in a globalized world
that both gives and takes away choices. This particular group of people’s experiences (in their social construction of family, self, and workplace), and experiences could be different among different ages, genders, and nationalities, but there can be a common experience in coping with changes. Change is inevitable, but the experiences of coping with the changes are various. Changes make both ethnographic research and life meaningful.
References


354


358


About the Author

Zhong June Wang, born in Beijing, China, received her bachelor’s degree from Beijing Normal University and then worked as an assistant editor in the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences before she came to the United States for graduate studies in 1993. She received her master’s degree from the Department of Communication at the University of South Florida (USF) in 1995 and her Ph.D. candidacy in the same department in December 1997. She was a teaching/research assistant in the Department of Communication at USF while she was a full-time graduate student there (1993-1998). She worked full time in the Wireless Infrastructure Division at Qualcomm Inc. between 1998 and 1999, then worked as a senior product manager at Ericsson Wireless Communication between 1999 and 2005. From 2005 to the present, she is a senior software product manager at Kyocera Wireless Corp.