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## Socializing in the Halls? Chinese First-Year Experiences of Residence Climate

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# SOCIALIZING IN THE HALLS? CHINESE FIRST-YEAR EXPERIENCES OF RESIDENCE CLIMATE

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## ABSTRACT

*Composing the largest nationality of international students at American universities, Chinese undergraduate students in the United States have dramatically increased over the previous decade (Institute of International Education, 2014). Despite the extensive research on the challenges facing Chinese students in the American classroom, in-depth research on the residence hall socialization process for Chinese students remains lacking (Briguglio & Smith, 2012). This mixed methods study assessed first-year Chinese students' perceptions of racial climate and community in residence halls at a mid-sized Midwestern private institution. Quantitative data indicated that the students' attitude toward floor acceptance and racial harmony correlates with their perceived ability in diversity and interpersonal learning outcomes. Qualitative data identified the impact of high school preparation for Chinese student assimilation into residential hall living, their perception of American peers, and factors improving social adjustment. Results suggest that perceptions of a positive racial climate directly impact student personal and social outcomes.*

**Keywords:** Postsecondary, Residence Life, Chinese College Students, Social Climate, Acculturation

## INTRODUCTION

The numbers of Chinese undergraduate students in the United States increased by about 40,000 students in the 2013/2014 academic year, accounting for a 16.5% increase from the previous year. For the fifth year in a row, Chinese students composed the largest nationality of international students at American universities, and made up 31% of international students in the U.S. (Institute of International Education, 2014). Due to this dramatic growth, researchers have examined the challenges facing Chinese students in the American classroom (Briguglio & Smith,

2012; Stevens, 2012; Xie, 2010; Yan & Berliner, 2009; Zheng, 2010). However, in-depth research on the socialization process for first-year Chinese students remains lacking.

For first-year college students, friendship forms a vital foundation, serving as a source of emotional support, practical information, and social companionship (Sovic, 2009). With international students, positive peer interactions have been shown to lead to better academic achievement, faster social adjustment, and less psychological health problems (Ramsay, Jones & Barker, 2007). Despite facing acculturation challenges, Chinese students' experiences are not all negative, as many laud the American education system and consider their experiences in the United States rewarding (Yuan, 2011). In Wang et al. (2012), less than a quarter of Chinese students experienced severe psychological distress during their initial cultural transition to the United States; the majority reported minimal fluctuation in the psychological distress immediately before and after their transition to the U.S. These findings challenge studies on international student adjustment that focus heavily on psychological distress such as depression and anxiety (Dusselier et al., 2005; Frey & Roysircar, 2006; Poyrazli & Grahame, 2007). An investigation into the factors contributing to Chinese students' social adjustment may thus provide insights on how they might perceive a positive living and learning experience.

In light of the multifaceted transitional needs of Chinese students, residential living communities are optimal starting points to initiate cross-cultural interactions when compared to other campus locations due to the ample chances to interact with American students (Paltridge et al., 2010). This is not without challenges, however (Razek & Coyner, 2013). American students can resent the integration process, claiming that Chinese students dominate the classrooms or the residence halls (McMahon, 2011). Moreover, while providing a sense of security and support for other Chinese students, a large Chinese student body fortifies the cultural barrier that makes it difficult for Chinese students to befriend American students (Montgomery, 2010; Spencer-Oatey & Xiong, 2006). Therefore, a holistic approach is warranted to support international student transitions taking into account the students' multifaceted experience and development. This explanatory, mixed methods study examines the factors influencing the overwhelmingly positive response from Chinese students' experience in residence halls (Chong & Razek, 2014). With insights on social and cultural influences in the acculturation process, both academic and student affairs professionals may offer better support for these sojourners.

## **OBJECTIVES**

An initial phase of the study investigated how first-year Chinese students' perception of racial climate affected their level of engagement in the residence halls (Chong & Razek, 2014). The study revealed that students who considered themselves as benefitting from diverse interactions were more likely to perceive that their living experience positively impacted them as a whole. There were two major limitations with this study. First, the majority of the Chinese students responded positively on each of the questions, which posed issues in interpreting the

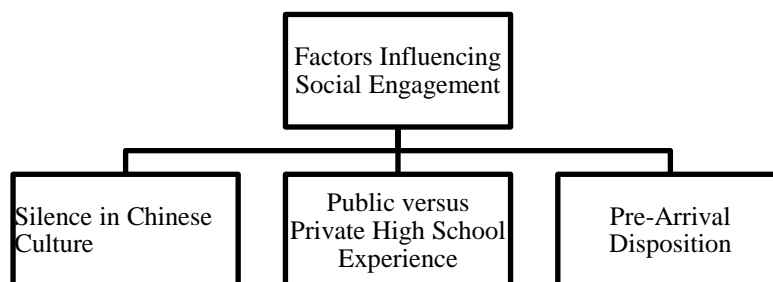
results. Secondly, the survey instrument could not adequately address variables influencing students' perceptions about their residential living experience. The present study employed the sequential explanatory design, which is characterized by the collection of quantitative data in the first phase of research followed by qualitative data in the second phase (Creswell, 2005). The quantitative study seeks to understand how first-year Chinese students perceive their on-campus living experience, with a particular focus on hall climate, environment, peers, and community. The initial quantitative results inform the qualitative phase of the study, which investigates social and cultural factors influencing Chinese students' perception of the residence hall climate. Therefore, this study poses the following research questions:

- What are Chinese students' perceptions of the residence hall living environment, community, and diversity?
- How do these perceptions impact their level of engagement on the floor?
- What are the social and cultural aspects influencing Chinese students' perception and attitudes regarding their living experience?

### BACKGROUND AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

International students with positive peer interaction experiences have reported better academic adjustment and less psychological health problems (Sovic, 2009). Through intercultural friendships, Chinese students build stronger language skills and overall adjust better to their new environment. Arguing for the importance of social satisfaction, Gareis (2012) claimed that the need to cultivate relationships with American students is even more pressing for East Asian students, who he argued were the least satisfied with the number and quality of their close friendships with Americans. McMahon (2011) found that Chinese students struggled with non-academic aspects of their college life. Among these were isolation from American students and lack of intercultural awareness. Students also described the failure to develop meaningful relationships with American students as a disappointment representing the most problematic aspect of the acculturation process (Spencer-Oatey & Xiong, 2006).

Figure 1



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## **Factors Influencing Chinese Student Social Adjustment**

Chinese students often face acculturative stress while adjusting to the new culture (Wei et al., 2012). McMahon (2011) found that language difficulties and cultural differences inhibited Chinese students' interaction with American students, an essential component of the educational experience. Chinese students reported limited interaction with U.S. students, expressing that they wished to befriend them, but found it difficult to develop meaningful relationships, identifying few shared interests (Yuan, 2011). Further, the students expressed interest in chatting with American students but could not find a mutual topic of discussion. Another barrier is the group boundary for Chinese students whose sense of support and security are found within a large Chinese student community. Breaking out of the group required "great bravery" (McMahon, 2011, p.407).

Fontaine and Todd (2011) argued that barriers of student adjustment are intensified for students from non-Western backgrounds due to linguistic and cultural factors. English language competency is essential for social and economic security in an English-speaking country (Marginson et al., 2010). Moreover, Chinese students face more challenges coping with American culture compared to students from other Western countries, due to the significant cultural distance between China and the United States (Yan & Berliner, 2009). Chinese students reported that communicating with cultural others was not as easily managed as they had hoped (Holmes, 2005). They also found that the communication patterns they possessed were largely challenged or misunderstood in the new host culture.

### **Silence in the Chinese Culture**

Chinese students have often been portrayed and perceived as silent and reticent in class (Bartlett & Fisher, 2011). They are seen as reluctant to participate in class discussions and as seldom speaking up about their opinions, offering terse replies if they did answer questions (Xie, 2010). This 'silent Chinese' phenomenon is culturally conditioned, as part of Confucius' 'maxims of modesty' is to avoid dominating the discussion and being seen as prideful by one's peers (Liu & Littlewood, 1997). Carson and Nelson (1996) further asserted that Chinese students engaged in extensive self-monitoring to avoid disagreeing with the perspectives of their peers (as cited in Ping, 2010). Additionally, group harmony is achieved through maintaining one's face or image (*mianzi*) to preserve the relationships (*guanxi*) that are already built (Hwang, 1987). While silence might be a strategy Chinese students use to maintain harmonious relationships with others, this cultural disposition could be misinterpreted by their American peers. Practitioners will thus need to consider and understand the complexities undergirding the silence of some Chinese students.

### **Chinese Educational System**

High school experience has a substantial influence on freshmen adjustment in college (Hudley et al., 2009). In order to better understand the social and academic adjustment of Chinese

students during their first-year of college, their high school landscape is worth examining. For over a millennium, the Chinese government had direct influence on the public school system, including the curriculum, course content, textbook selection, teacher recruitment, and student behavior (Cook, 2008; Pan, 2007). Even today, many Chinese classrooms and curricula are still based on respect for authority, classroom obedience, and strict discipline. A very limited number have superficially begun to integrate individual expression in their classrooms recently (Neuby, 2012).

Since 1979, China's open-market-oriented economy has resulted in robust economic growth (Ho, 2010) and a major shift of emphasis to English teaching and learning in China (Zhong, 2011). Over the past three decades, English language learning has become hugely popular in China. The benefits of mastering the language are clear, such as more frequent and effective economic and cultural exchanges (Zhong, 2011). Neuby (2012) argued that China's drive to modernize and become a major world player propelled it to educate more citizens to advanced levels, causing students to flood American and European universities due to the perceived superiority and high status of Western universities. Regardless of the place of study, a stringent work ethic and studying at the expense of extracurricular activities constituted a significant part of the Chinese student learning experience (Thakkar, 2011).

### **Emergence of private schools**

Private primary and secondary schools in China today enroll a substantial number of students following the passage of the *Minban* Education Promotion Law in December 2002 (Lin, 2007). These schools are completely or largely funded by private entities, and have more decision-making power than public schools, such as the ability to determine their curriculum, administrative structure, and educational goals (Lin, 2007). Private education institutions in China can be categorized by their tuition fee, the clientele they serve, and the services they offer to students. With China's rapidly expanding middle class comes the means and incentive to secure a high-quality education for their offspring. A popular option is sending Chinese students to elite private schools that charge an annual fee of more than 10,000 *yuan* (approximately \$1,650) and offer high-quality instruction in English. These schools often feature extracurricular activities and dormitories as part of the curriculum to help build a sense of community among students (Lin, 2007).

### **Pre-arrival Disposition**

The pre-arrival disposition of international students may affect to their ability to manage acculturative stress. In Wang et al. (2012), well-adjusted students reported the most positive pre-arrival problem-solving appraisal and the highest level of coping effectiveness. Students in the well-adjusted group believed strongly in their coping ability prior to studying abroad, and were able to employ effective coping strategies to manage their stress. Further, intercultural competency of the Chinese students impacted their level of open-mindedness toward U.S. culture. Lack of prejudice helped them initiate friendly contact with people from various cultures (Long, Yan, Yang

& Oudenhoven, 2009), particularly for the Chinese students coming from a culturally homogenous country.

Chinese students' high school experience plays a role in determining their ability to adjust to life in the United States. Elite private schools, for example, promote extracurricular activities to stimulate the social, cultural, and creative skills growth of the students, with particular attention to helping students cultivate a sense of community (Lin, 2007). Also, students at key schools – institutions that are given priority in the assignment of teachers, resources, and funding (You, 2007) – are exposed to creative learning initiatives that alleviate test anxiety. The allocation of additional learning resources is particularly useful for students when preparing for the National Entrance Examination, (commonly known as the *gaokao*) which is a rite of passage for students wishing to enter into college in China (Pine, 2007). Despite the potential of perpetuating class difference, private schools arguably prepare more well-rounded students due to the availability of resources. This accessibility of resources at private schools are especially attractive at a time when government funding is inadequate in China to fulfill its current demand for educational services (Lin, 2007).

## DATA SOURCES

Both quantitative and qualitative data were collected at Parish University (PU), a mid-sized, religiously affiliated institution with approximately 7,000 undergraduate students and a population of 1,900 international students. Approximately 350 Chinese students live in on-campus housing. Quantitative data were collected in two rounds; one in the spring of 2013 and the second in the fall of 2013. A quantitative, cross-sectional paper survey was conducted on first-year Chinese students living in residence halls in the spring 2013 and fall 2013 terms. Respondents were students enrolled full time in the university on international student visas. With a response rate of 57%, the spring survey had 86 respondents out of a total of 150 first-year students who lived on-campus. The fall survey had a response rate of 56% with 57 respondents out of 101 Chinese students. Later in the fall semester, seventeen first-year Chinese students voluntarily participated in semi-structured interviews.

### The Survey

The researchers adapted the survey instrument from Chong and Razek (2014) as a follow up study, and Johnson's (2003) Perceptions of Racial Climate Questionnaire. The questionnaire consists of three main sections: demographic, perception on hall staff, peers, and climate, and interpersonal and intercultural learning. The questionnaire was presented in a Likert-type scale ranging from 1 (Strongly Disagree) to 4 (Strongly Agree). To avoid social desirability bias (Furnham, 1986) and to provide an additional level of anonymity, the survey was written in Mandarin and distributed through the resident assistants (RAs). Twenty questions relating to Chinese students' perceptions of the residence hall living environment, community, and diversity

were factor analyzed using principal component analysis with Varimax (orthogonal) rotation. The analysis yielded four factors explaining a total of 47.14% of the variance for the entire set of variables. Content validity on the components for the racial climate perception was established through literature review, a review of the items by residence hall personnel and the university's assessment director, and information gained from two previous studies on the Perceptions of Racial Climates in Residence Halls Questionnaire (Johnson-Durgans, 1994; Johnson, 2003).

### **Qualitative Interviews**

The primary researcher interviewed Chinese students at Parish University in the fall of 2013. Volunteers were recruited through the residence life email list. Seven volunteers were self-selected and no students were directly asked to participate. Each student participated in a semi-structured face-to-face interview that lasted between 30 to 60 minutes. Most of the interviews took place in the residence hall lounge or study area. The interview protocol was developed based on literature review and initial conversations with a few Chinese students. Questions concerned students' high school living experience, and their perception of the floor community, environment, and racial climate in their current residence halls. Interviews were conducted in Mandarin to encourage participation. The researcher periodically asked probing questions, and clarified as needed. Each interview was audio-recorded and translated immediately into English using a standard word processing package. The transcriptions were printed out and analyzed thematically.

### **QUANTITATIVE STUDY RESULTS**

Male students represented 64% of the 143 respondents and female students 36%. Respondents identified 91% of their RAs as White; the other ethnicities represented on the hall staff were African American (3%), international (3%), Latin American (2%), and Asian (1%). The initial data analysis examined the dimensionality of the 20 survey questions using principle component factor analysis. The factors are labeled as: (1) hall environment; (2) hall staff; (3) floor acceptance and (4) racial climate. The learning outcomes were sorted into two main factors: learning from diverse interactions (such as interacting with diverse others, respect of other race or ethnicities) and learning from personal interactions (such as ability to meet other people, improve interpersonal relationships and communication skills). For the purposes of this study, the term "learning outcomes" refers to co-curricular student learning outcomes. As the student affairs role in and contributions to student learning have evolved, so too have the purposes of learning outcomes assessment in this field. By investigating students' lived experience and gathering evidence of students learning and growing through the residence life services provided by student affairs, educators can then measure as well as demonstrate how their work contributes to student learning (Schuh and Gansemer-Topf, 2010).

The results were overwhelmingly positive. Between 34% and 64% of the students "agreed" with each statement; 23% to 66% of the students "strongly agreed" with all of the questions.



Similar to the study of Chong and Razek (2014), all of the respondents unanimously agreed that they respected people of differing races and ethnicities. Questions with notable levels of disagreeing responses were: there are enough non-Whites on the hall staff (21%), the students do not mind being on the hall staff (26%), the staff relates well to diverse students (16%), students feel like a part of their floor (13%), and students are very satisfied with their living experience compared to high school (17%). Independent-samples t-tests were also conducted to determine the relationship between different variables and learning outcomes. There was a significant difference in how male ( $M=3.44$ ,  $SD=.44$ ) and female students ( $M=3.58$ ,  $SD=.44$ ) perceived racial climate on the floor ( $p=.05$ ). There was no significant difference in how first-year or students in the Intensive English Program (IEP) perceive any of the learning outcomes.

### Relationship between Climate Perception and Interpersonal Growth

A standard multiple regression analysis evaluated how well the four main factors predicted students' perceived learning from their living experience. The multiple correlation coefficient was .77, indicating that the linear combination of the four factors can account for approximately 60% of the variance in learning outcomes. Researchers computed a Pearson product-moment correlation coefficient to assess the relationship between the four factors and learning outcomes. There was a significant correlation between student perception of hall environment and floor acceptance, and diversity learning outcomes. Students' perception of their RAs moderately correlated with their learning of interpersonal interactions.

**Table 1**  
**Correlations between Climate Perception and Learning**

		Learning Outcomes	Hall Environment	Hall Staff	Hall Diversity	Hall Community
Learning Outcomes	Pearson Correlation	1	.608**	.518**	.789**	.777**
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.000	.000	.000	.000
Hall Environment	Pearson Correlation	.608**	1	.664**	.648**	.676**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000		.000	.000	.000
Hall Staff	Pearson Correlation	.518**	.664**	1	.680**	.584**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	.000		.000	.000
Hall Diversity	Pearson Correlation	.789**	.648**	.680**	1	.740**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	.000	.000		.000
Hall Community	Pearson Correlation	.777**	.676**	.584**	.740**	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	.000	.000	.000	

\*\* Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

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## Hall Environment and Intercultural Learning

Students' sense of welcome when they first moved into the hall moderately correlated with their perception of their hall as welcoming to persons of all races to live, ability to meet other people, and ability to live cooperatively with others. When students felt welcomed into their community, they were more likely to perceive that they have learned in their interpersonal interactions, supporting findings that international students value social companionship support (Ramsay, Jones & Barker, 2007). Further, students' perception that their hall programs served diverse audiences moderately correlated with their belief that the hall staff relates well to students of all races and the students' learning in personal communication skills. Residents who were satisfied with their RAs' efforts to know them also felt like they benefited from diverse interactions.

Conversely, there was a low correlation between the availability of multicultural hall programs and students' respect of diverse others, indicating that students might benefit from interactions with peers in different settings. Even though students were satisfied with their hall staff's efforts to get to know them, they were not motivated in turn to become resident assistants. Generally, students' perception of their hall environment had a low correlation with their desire to become an RA. Hence, the Chinese students did not perceive their hall staff as directly influential in their perception of interpersonal and intercultural learning outcomes.

## Racial Climate and Intercultural Learning

Racial climate was closely associated with students' perception of floor acceptance, particularly when students perceived no racial problems on the floor and that the staff was fair and consistent in discipline matters. Similar to the residents' perception of hall staff, their perception of having unbiased RAs or encountering little racial problems had low correlation with whether they were interested in joining the staff. Students' perception of a positive racial climate on the floor moderately correlated with their perceived diversity and interpersonal learning outcomes.

## Hall Staff and Interpersonal Learning

It is worth noting that compared to the spring semester, there was a slight increase in the number of respondents who felt that the hall staff was diverse and that they did not mind being on staff. This finding is not surprising, as a significant number of the RAs are White. At the same time, students who felt their RAs related well to people of all races were more likely to perceive the hall programs as diverse as well. Moreover, the Chinese students' satisfaction level with their RAs played little role in how they compared their high school living experience with their current residence halls. This finding indicates that students might not necessarily realize the full role of their RAs in impacting the hall environment (for example, by organizing hall programs).

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## **Floor Acceptance and Interpersonal Learning**

Students who felt like everyone got along well regardless of race were likely to perceive their hall as a great place to live. When they appreciated their living space, they were more likely to interact with residents who were different from them and more interested to meet new people. Conversely, students' sense of welcome when they first moved into their hall had perceivably little bearing in how much they felt a part of their floor. Chinese residents who perceived their hall peers as friendly and open felt more confident about their ability to live cooperatively with others. Generally, students' sense of floor acceptance strongly correlated with their perception of racial climate and learning outcomes. Thus, when students felt accepted by their peers, they were more likely to perceive a strong sense of floor harmony.

## **QUALITATIVE STUDY RESULTS**

The students' overwhelmingly positive response on the quantitative study appears to contradict studies that highlight the strife of first-year international students (Frey & Roysircar, 2006; Dusselier et al., 2005). Based on the findings, one main research question emerged: What are the social and cultural factors influencing the students' perception of hall climate and diversity? For example, how might the students' high school living experience impact their first foray into the American campus? A qualitative approach was thus used to further investigate the quantitative findings, and to develop a more robust understanding of the Chinese students' perception

Seven volunteer participants were interviewed over the course of a month. All of the Chinese students were first-year undergraduate students or were enrolled in the Intensive English Program. None of the students had been to the U.S. prior to their college experience. The interviewees were asked to share about their high school living experience, first impressions upon moving into a residence life, and social adjustment during their first semester in college. Open coding, axial coding, and selective coding were employed in the analysis process. Open coding highlighted concepts such as social activities and other events that emerged from the interview data. Axial coding was used to sort the concepts into sub-categories and determine the directions of influence. Selective coding helped interpret the categories into the broader student living and learning experience, perceptions, and support system. A thematic approach to data analysis yielded the following themes: high school life in China, adjustment to residential living, perception of American peers and culture, and social adjustment.

### **High School Life in China**

Most of the interviewees lived extensively on-campus at their high schools in China prior to their time in the U.S. Only one student commuted from home. David and Ziyi shared that they had lived in "military-type" dorms from primary school until high school. David would be away from his family for up to a month for "military-type training" offered by the school, while Ziyi

was accustomed to the strict cleanliness and disciplinary rules of living in the dorm. Ziyi said, “[Dorm life] was super strict. My sheets had to be folded in a certain way and I had to clean every day.” The interviewees often shared a small room with four to eight students. Most of the rooms came with private bathrooms compared to the community-style bathrooms in their current residence halls. Keira and Wang attended international high schools that instituted curfews and lights out at a certain time. Each student abided by a similar schedule and woke up at the same time each morning. Similarly, John added that the RAs were mainly there to “manage” the students’ lives,

“They didn’t help out with academic or personal problems...they are a lot stricter; they’re higher ranked. They would make sure that we abide by the curfew, clean ourselves up by a certain time. Once lights are out, you cannot do anything. You cannot play with your phone or leave the light on. You will need to sleep and not do anything else.”

Students who lived on-campus extensively throughout their high school career felt prepared for their residential living experience. For example, John shared that he was mentally prepared to come to the U.S., “I was already independent. I only went home once a week, so I had to do everything by myself.” The high schools that Keira and Wang attended were preparatory institutions for students who wanted to study abroad. Keira said, “Compared to college, I don’t feel like there’s a huge difference because I’m used to living on-campus since I was in elementary school.” Wang said that she was even “nonchalant” about coming to the U.S. because she had known that she would be studying abroad since she was fifteen.

### **Adjustment to Residential Living**

Spencer-Oatey and Xiong (2006) found that most Chinese students were very satisfied with the physical conditions of their accommodation, and many talked about the sharp contrast with the conditions they had experienced in China. Their findings largely correlate with the interviewees’ general satisfaction with the physical environment of their residence halls. The students’ only dissatisfaction concerned having to share a public bathroom with their floor mates. Apart from their physical environment, the students reported a sense of freedom, newness, and an easy adjustment to campus life. After a semester of living on-campus, they had generally developed social support, although the depth of their relationships with American students was largely limited. While a few interviewees shared that they felt isolated and homesick, they maintained that they were satisfied with their current experience and would recommend first-year Chinese students to live on-campus.

### **Initial Adjustment**

The interviewees’ living experience contradicted findings in Spencer-Oatey and Xiong (2006) that younger students struggled with living independently, especially when they experienced language barriers. Interviewees relished their sense of freedom living in the residence

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hall, especially compared to their high school experience. David described, “I think there’s a lot of freedom here...it doesn’t feel like a jail and it’s okay if you came back late.” The interviewees appreciated their level of independence in college, as they did not want to depend on their parents. The respondents unanimously expressed that their adjustment had been “very easy” because the residence hall living was very similar to the dorms in China, and they were satisfied with the amenities in the rooms as well as dining options. As Ziyi described, “It wasn’t hard to adjust because everything is here.” A few of the interviewees shared that although they were initially not used to life in the U.S., they gradually became accustomed to it as they talked to their family members every day.

Additionally, all of the interviewees reported positive relationships with their roommates, all of whom were Chinese students they had not previously met. Four of the interviewees reported some conflict earlier in the semester due to different sleeping habits and communication styles, but they were able to resolve them in time and with the mediation of their RAs. Their adjustment was also made easier because their RAs had established themselves as friendly resources. Most described their RAs as “friendly,” “nice,” and “helpful.” One RA spoke conversational Mandarin, which the students found welcoming; another RA celebrated Chinese holidays as part of hall programs. The interviewees attended most of the hall programs, particularly when there was free food involved. They viewed programs as an opportunity to meet new people. Further, because the responsibility of the RA is so vastly different from that of their high school, the interviewees did not hold high expectations of floor programs.

### **Language Barriers**

For non-native English speakers, the language barrier may be a strong inhibitor of relationship building (Marginson et al., 2010). In Spencer-Oatey and Xiong (2006), students were reluctant to interact with American students due to their lack of confidence in their English language ability. Such was not the case among the interviewees. While some of the interviewees were IEP students, they expressed that they were able to communicate with American students, although they did struggle initially. The interviewees expressed particular discomfort regarding humor. David described, “Sometimes I don’t understand the jokes. I can understand the general idea, but if they joke about cultural things, they will all laugh and I won’t be able to because I just don’t get it. I don’t know what the funny parts are.” It is important to note that the interviewees felt more restricted due to the lack of cultural understanding of the U.S. For example, John described his lack of knowledge about the American culture as his biggest challenge in making American friends. After switching from majors from business to education, Keira struggled in her classes because she was unfamiliar with the state’s academic standards and was frustrated that her American classmates seemed reluctant to help her.

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## Perception of American Peers and Culture

Similar to findings in Spencer-Oatey and Xiong (2006), the interviewees did not systematically distinguish between American and international students, and tended to refer to Americans simply as ‘foreigners’ or ‘outsiders’ (wai guo ren) in their response. They had a strong tendency to use just two categories, Chinese and ‘foreigners.’ Nonetheless, the interviewees expressed their desire to meet more American students, and openness to learning about the new culture. Their level of exposure to American students largely shaped their perception of the country’s culture. For example, Yue shared that she did not have anything negative to say about the American culture because she has only been in the country for a limited time: “I haven’t really discovered anything bad. Maybe I’m still at a stage where everything seems positive to me.” Keira felt like her American classmates were selfish and unwilling to help her, “I think that Americans will appear to be very close to you in the beginning, but they won’t really, genuinely help you...they’re selfish.” Ziyi and Kai were embarrassed that they were not able to differentiate between the Caucasian students or remember their names, while John felt like American students seemed to not understand Chinese students, particularly in how they socialized.

## First Impression of American Students

The social support the students developed among co-nationals and the American students on their floor contributed to an easy adjustment. The interviewees all shared that the American students had been “very helpful, very friendly” towards them and that they felt “comfortable.” They generally perceived themselves as having “good relationships” with the American students; some even expressed surprise with the level of approachability they perceived of the American students. As Wang shared, “Before I came here, I thought Americans would not interact with you if you were an international student, or they would not treat you nicely. But when living here, the Americans are all very nice to me.” John appreciated that the American students would greet him: “Whenever they see a stranger, even if they don’t know you, they would smile at you or say ‘Hi!’ That feels very friendly and warms my heart.”

A few external factors contributed to the integration between American and Chinese students. For one, due to the small size of the residence hall rooms, a lot of the students would spend time chatting in the hallway. Keira described, “You’ll meet people as soon as you open the door, so it’s very fun. The students like to hang out in the hallways and sometimes I would join them and chat with them. I’m quite happy.” For another, the RAs frequently hosted floor programs that allowed students to socialize with each other such as movie night and cultural events. Four of the interviewees shared classes with their floor mates, which provided them additional opportunities to socialize and seek academic support. Wang described, “We had three classes together in a week, so we saw each other in class and in the residence hall. When I first came here,

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there were a lot of things that I didn't know, and many times I would just ask them questions, so that was good."

### **"Not Quite in the Circle"**

While the interviewees generally appreciated the friendliness and warmth of their American floor mates, they felt the depth of their relationships was largely limited. In terms of socializing, Chinese students perceive home students as more gregarious, confident, and expressive (Holmes, 2005). Yet, other students viewed this socialization as 'casual' or even 'artificial' compared to their understanding of friendship (Holmes, 2005; Spencer-Oatey & Xiong, 2006). Only one interviewee mentioned having close American friends in his support group. Ziyi described that she was still at the "talking, chatting stage" with her American counterparts, and had made more friends with her IEP peers. Kai felt like he had not made a lot of good American friends because of limited interactions, "I feel like I'm not really in their circle yet, mainly because my time here hasn't been too long." Yue felt like she did not know how to befriend American students, "...beyond the first two sentences, I just don't know what to say to them. I don't know how to carry the conversation. I just greet them." At the same time, there was generally a sense of optimism among IEP students in regards to building strong relationships with American students once they become fully enrolled in a degree study. The interviewees also conceded that many of the American students were friendly and it was also up to them to open up and extend their friendship.

### **Partying Lifestyle**

Chinese students have been found to be dissatisfied with the social environment of their residence halls, particularly with noise, such as loud music and shouting by inebriated neighbors (Spencer-Oatey & Xiong, 2006). The interviewees expressed similar sentiments, as they unanimously found the underage drinking and partying culture to be problematic and even "shocking," partly because Chinese students preferred to socialize differently. Kai said, "The Chinese don't think partying is particularly fun, but the Americans seem to enjoy it." The interviewees also associated this lifestyle as part of the American culture and described it as the only major cultural difference between China and America. Kai said, "[The Americans] party hard. On Friday nights, they would party until four in the morning and then go to bed, and then they wake up at 4pm the next day and party again." The partying in the residence hall has been detrimental to their adjustment due to the noise level and vandalism, but the interviewees have largely tolerated this behavior as part of their life here. The interviewees' negative reaction toward the drinking and partying of their American floor mates reveal the perceived cultural differences between Chinese and Americans students. John said, "For Chinese students, it's more about leading a normal, simple life. We would only celebrate during special occasions." Kai expressed

that he did not want to go out because there were “beer, wine, and sex in those parties” and he described himself as “more traditional.”

### **Social Adjustment**

Compared with their experiences of interacting with American students, Chinese students appeared to be more satisfied with their experiences of interacting with international students from different countries (Spencer-Oatey & Xiong; Montgomery 2010). This phenomenon was particularly noticeable among IEP students who did not often have the same classes with American students. Kai, for example, said that he had made more friends through his IEP classes compared to American students, with whom he would chat casually in the hallways. Apart from friendships built in classrooms, the interviewees reported varying degrees of social adjustment, although at first glance most of them were very satisfied with their current living experience. They maintained close relationships with a select group of co-nationals and to some extent, had developed relationships with American students. All of the interviewees said they would recommend first-year Chinese students to live on-campus because of “rich living experiences,” convenience, and safety reasons. They all felt that living in a residence hall had helped with their integration into the American culture.

### **Closest Friends and Help-Seeking Behavior**

Similar to Spencer-Oatey and Xiong (2006), the most developed social network for all the interviewees was with Chinese co-nationals, and they attributed it to proximity and cultural similarity. Ziyi described, “You get to be much closer with those you live with than the ones you meet in class, so I’m closest to my floor mates.” All of the interviewees felt supported by their peers, family members, and seniors, and they were able to seek practical guidance. John was quick to seek help through the Chinese student association when he first arrived; other interviewees largely relied on their floor mates for help. In floors where Chinese students were the largest demographics, there was a strong sense of community. Interestingly, three of the participants made friends on their flight to the U.S., and ended up being in the same classes and residence hall, thus developing a stronger bond. However, despite the emotional and practical benefits of having a large group of Chinese students on the floor, the interviewees were aware of potential disadvantages. This finding is similar to McMahon’s (2011) study where some Chinese students were keenly aware that being part of a large Chinese student community made it more difficult to interact with home students. For example, having too many Chinese students on the floor was seen as taking away from their study abroad experience. Subsequently, the interviewees made conscious attempts to enlarge their social group to include American students while simultaneously juggling their need to remain faithful to their Chinese group of friends (McMahon, 2011).



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## **Acculturation**

Yuan (2011) found that at a deeper level of fundamental beliefs and values, Chinese students differed from each other on whether or not they needed to adapt to American culture. This sentiment was not apparent to the interviewees, partly because their time in the U.S. was limited to four to five months. Nonetheless, interviewees reported varying degrees of blending into American culture. John reported the lowest percentage of acculturation, because he felt he had not really experienced American culture. Kai was optimistic about “catching up” to American culture after another semester in the U.S. and making more friends. Yue expressed similar sentiments, but she did not feel she could fit in to the U.S. culture at all in her current state, “I feel like I just cannot fit in. When you cannot fit in, you will want to be closer with your Chinese friends...I think there’s a need to maintain some suitable distance.” Interestingly, Keira felt like she does not blend well with American students at all beyond the residence hall, “Once I leave the dorm, I feel like I can’t blend in at all because I didn’t grow up here. I can try my best to be acculturated but I cannot completely do that.” Wang felt similarly in that there is a glass ceiling in how much she could become acculturated due to differing interests, “You cannot be fully like [the Americans]. If you were, then you would like to party and watch basketball or football games. I don’t really like those.”

## **RESULTS INTERPRETATION**

### **Impact of Resident Assistants in Student Perception**

Survey findings suggested that students’ first impression of the residence hall environment impacted how they subsequently perceived the sense of community on the floor. This perception showed an impact on how much students perceived they have gained from living among American students. RAs impacted the learning of Chinese students in different ways, by how well they related to multicultural students and the type of hall programs that they organized. Residents who felt their RAs took efforts to get to know them were more likely to perceive a personal benefit from engaging in intercultural interactions. Subsequently, students who perceived their RAs as open and welcoming were more likely to perceive that they organized hall programs for people of all races. Interestingly, even when there were diverse floor programs, the Chinese students did not necessarily perceive them as a learning opportunity for ethnic inclusivity. Instead, they benefited more by directly interacting with their hall peers, perhaps in more casual settings.

### **Relationship between Racial Harmony and Social Skills**

Racial harmony on the floor was a strong predictor for whether Chinese students perceived their hall as a great place to live. When they felt like everyone got along well regardless of race, students were more likely to engage in intercultural communication and meet new people. Students who felt accepted by their hall peers were also more likely to positively rank their ability to live

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cooperatively with others. Generally, the Chinese students' attitude toward floor acceptance and harmony correlated with their perceived ability to meet new people, live cooperatively with others, improve their communication skills, and respect diverse others.

### **Relationship between High School and College Experience**

The interviewees' high school experience had a significant impact on their subsequent adjustment into living in residence halls. Although they did not specifically state that they attended elite private schools, their living and learning experience contributed to a generally smooth transition in college. Because the students felt restricted with strict disciplinary regulations and curfews in high school, they were quick to appreciate their newfound independence and freedom. Interestingly, all of the respondents roomed with co-nationals, with the exception of one student who lived in a single room. They generally reported positive relationships with their roommates despite experiencing some initial conflicts. All of the interviewees developed close relationships with mainly Chinese students due to linguistic and cultural similarity. Parental influence was also apparent among the interviewees, as they reported a constant reliance on their parents for support and advice. This motivation may be in part culturally influenced, as there is an "all-or-nothing quality" to the Chinese quest for education, with parents and children alike aiming for success (Pine, 2012). Based on the responses, having this support system could have offset acculturative stress that new international Chinese students typically experience.

### **Relationship between Chinese Students and Local Students**

All of the interviewees felt positively about their American peers and they perceived having "good relationships" with their floor mates. The Chinese students also view their RAs as a resource and typically attended floor programs to meet new people. This finding correlates with the quantitative data that the Chinese students recognized, albeit not fully, the impact of their RAs in their intercultural learning. The survey data revealed that perceived racial harmony correlated with whether the Chinese students perceived their hall as a great place for diverse students to live. The interviews suggested similar findings, as students unanimously regarded their peers as friendly and helpful.

The language barrier did not appear to deter students from communicating with their American peers. Instead, the interviewees attributed their communication challenges to perceived cultural differences. Notably, the partying lifestyle every weekend was frustrating for the students due to noise and vandalism. A closer examination of the relationship between American and Chinese students revealed that the interviewees felt like the depth of their relationships were limited as they were "not quite in the circle." Despite being able to establish a friendly rapport with home students, the interviewees felt unable to understand jokes in conversations or engage in deep conversations. At the same time, because the students had already established strong social groups with fellow Chinese students, there was no apparent urgency for the interviewees to rectify

that. The IEP students, for example, were confident that they would be able to build better relationships with American students once they become fully enrolled into an academic program.

### **Forbearance Coping and High Context Communication Style**

Because cultural knowledge and exchange is a foundation for engagement, this section will briefly discuss the cultural factors that may have contributed to the findings. Forbearance coping refers to the minimization or concealment of problems in order to maintain social harmony and not burden others and is a common Chinese coping strategy (Moore & Constantine, 2005; Yeh, Arora & Wu, 2006). In collectivist cultures, conformance to socially expected behaviors is valued within a strong desire for harmony, unity, and loyalty (Hwang, Ang & Francesco, 2002). People are also often encouraged to endure their distress and put others' need first, thus sacrificing their own (Marsella, 1993). As such, Chinese individuals may be reluctant to share personal problems with others so as to avoid interpersonal conflicts, burdening others, or causing others to worry about them (Wei et al., 2012).

While forbearance coping may influence Chinese students' willingness to share negative evaluations (Chong & Razek, 2014), it serves as an effective coping mechanism among Chinese students, as they can recognize each other's need for support even when those needs are not verbalized (Wei et al., 2012). The interviewees in this study all found strong support among students who shared their cultural heritage. They also preferred to participate in social activities with those friends. As David shared,

I would make efforts to spend time with the American students, but it depends on the situation. For example, I'll be going to Chicago with some Chinese friends. It's easier that way and there are no barriers. We can just chat and let go of ourselves more because there's a sense of commonality among us.

Even though Chinese students may conceal their problems in order not to burden others, their friends may likely be aware of each other's difficulties and are able to provide comfort and support (Wei et al., 2012). These available resources thus prevent Chinese students from experiencing severe psychological distress as they adjusted to college life in the U.S.

Additionally, Chinese students typically demonstrate high context communication patterns, where little information is contained in the verbal transmission of the message. According to Hall (1976), in this communication style, the receiver must interpret the speaker's intent without direct reference to what is spoken; information may also be conveyed in the physical context (as cited in Holmes, 2005). Nonverbal is often used in high context cultures to denote implicit communication, as the meaning resides in the unspoken message. Further, maintaining silence during a conversation denotes a form of respect and willingness to listen (Holmes, 2005). The Chinese students in this study may have inadvertently perceived their American peers and the culture by the way they interpreted the action, rather than the specific things that were spoken

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about. For example, they largely attributed the partying lifestyle as part of the American culture, and made other conclusions about American students based on how they socialized.

### IMPLICATIONS

The study offers insight into how Chinese students perceive their living experience in residence halls during their first college semester. Despite experiencing initial challenges, study participants were quick to recover with the support of peers, family, and floor mates. In addition to support structures, findings from the quantitative study suggest the importance of students feeling welcomed when they first move into the community. Indeed, as students' perception that they matter on campus is one of the most important issues of retention among first-year students (Schlossberg, 1989).

After a semester of living amongst American students, the students reported mixed degrees of blending into the culture. Although the Chinese students positively regarded their American peers, the students also perceived cultural barriers that inhibited them from forming deep relationships. Additionally, Chinese students appreciated the social benefits of living on-campus and having resources readily available to them. However, they may not have fully understood the experiential and reflective learning opportunities that are intentionally offered by their RAs through hall programs. Programs could include conversation groups or coffee hours in the hall, host family programs, or a communal potluck.

The study results suggest that Chinese students perceive learning as a process that occurs mainly inside the classroom, and see the classroom as an avenue to befriend local students. Subsequently, faculty members may support Chinese students' acclimation to the American classrooms by encouraging group work and discussion. Xiao (2006) found that Chinese students have a positive attitude toward a student-centered approach, small group activities, class discussion, watching videos, and being active learners. Faculty members may consider adapting and exploring their teaching styles in order to enhance the student learning experience.

Consequently, intentional collaboration between student affairs and academic affairs can provide more integrated learning opportunities for students (Frazier & Eighmy, 2012). Residential learning communities will allow students opportunities to interact with faculty members both at a formal academic level and informal mentor level (Garrett & Zabriskie, 2003). The increased interaction will particularly benefit Chinese students as they navigate their first-year in college and in a new country. Student participation in a learning-living community may also increase student engagement in areas such as diversity experiences, collaborative learning, and having a supportive campus environment (Pike, Kuh & McCormick, 2011). Findings in this study suggest that a robust and integrating learning environment both in- and outside of the classroom will be fundamental in engaging Chinese students throughout their college experience.

## LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

This study revealed important factors influencing Chinese students' perceptions of the racial climate in the residence halls as influencing their learning experiences. The quantitative survey results showed homogeneous perceptions which cannot possibly be true. Therefore, a more sophisticated instrument might have revealed the expected differences with more clarity.

Moreover, the qualitative interviews revealed various constructs contributing to the lived experiences of Chinese students in the residence halls. However, the small number of the interview participants limited the findings to the group of self-nominated students. Future research may be conducted to ascertain whether similar findings emerge with other cohorts of Chinese students (at different levels of study, having attended public or private high schools) and whether students of Eastern Asian origins display similar patterns of adjustment. Longitudinal research may be helpful to measure motivation to adjust and the long-term impact of on-campus living for Chinese students over time. The relationship between social adjustment and academic performance would be particularly helpful to explore as well, as the findings suggest that the respondents appeared to be more concerned about academic performance than their learning experience in the residence hall.

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