

INFLUENCE OF ROOMMATE AND STAFF RELATIONSHIPS ON  
UNDERGRADUATE CHINESE INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS' SENSE OF  
BELONGING IN RESIDENCE HALLS: A PHENOMENOLOGICAL  
QUALITATIVE STUDY AT BOSTON COLLEGE

By

Haishan Yang

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## **Abstract**

A record number of incoming international students from China are studying in universities in the United States today. It is important to understand this group for several reasons. Chinese students compose the largest group of international population in U.S. Higher Education and learning about them assists with better institutional practice including internationalization strategies. It is also important to assess their well-being in a foreign environment to improve student services. This research explores students' perceptions and feelings in residence halls. It investigated factors that affect first-year undergraduate Chinese international students' sense of belonging by exploring their experiences at Boston College. Using a qualitative and phenomenological approach, this study examined feedbacks from international Chinese students and provides important insights into their daily experiences.

This study focused on exploring Chinese international students' relationships with their roommates, and residential staff, to find out if these relationships influenced their sense of belonging of the community. As a partial replicate, partial follow-up study of Yao's (2014) research, both guided by Hurtado (2013)'s framework, findings suggested that multiple elements serve as barriers and bridges to Chinese international students' adaptation process, which include the influences of language, cultural difference, staff professionalism, and institutional internationalization plan. The study concluded with implications for practice at Boston College which may potentially be of interest to other institutions. Suggestions for future research are also identified. The study indicated a critical need for university staff to assess, examine, and explore the diverse campus culture by paying more attention to sense of belonging to continue with the facilitation of internationalization for the overall success for international students.

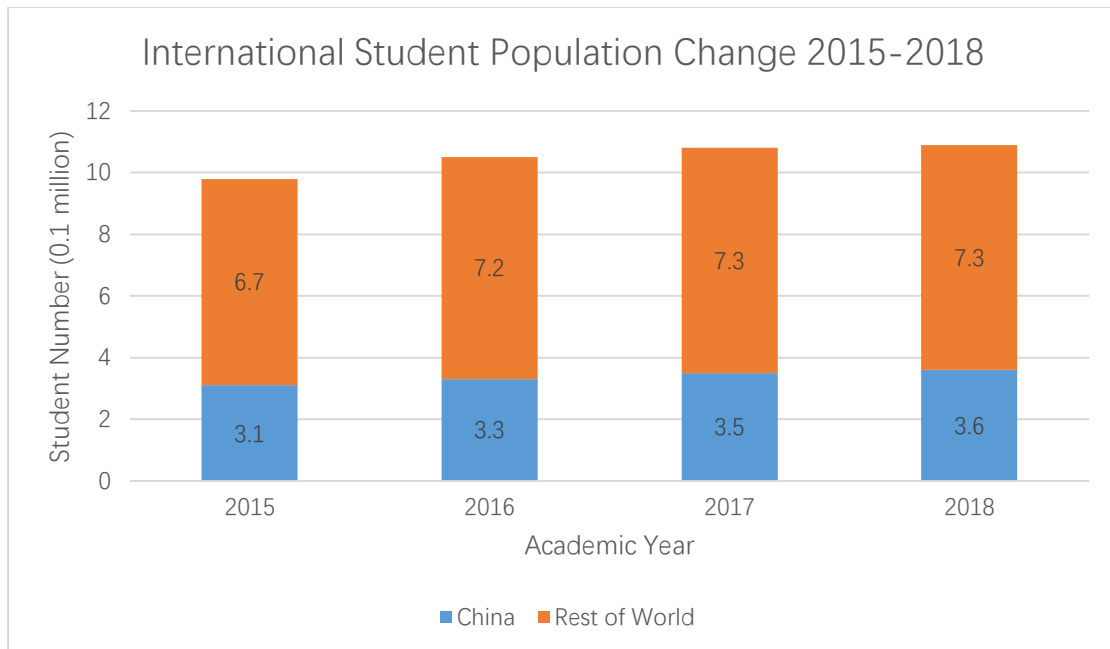
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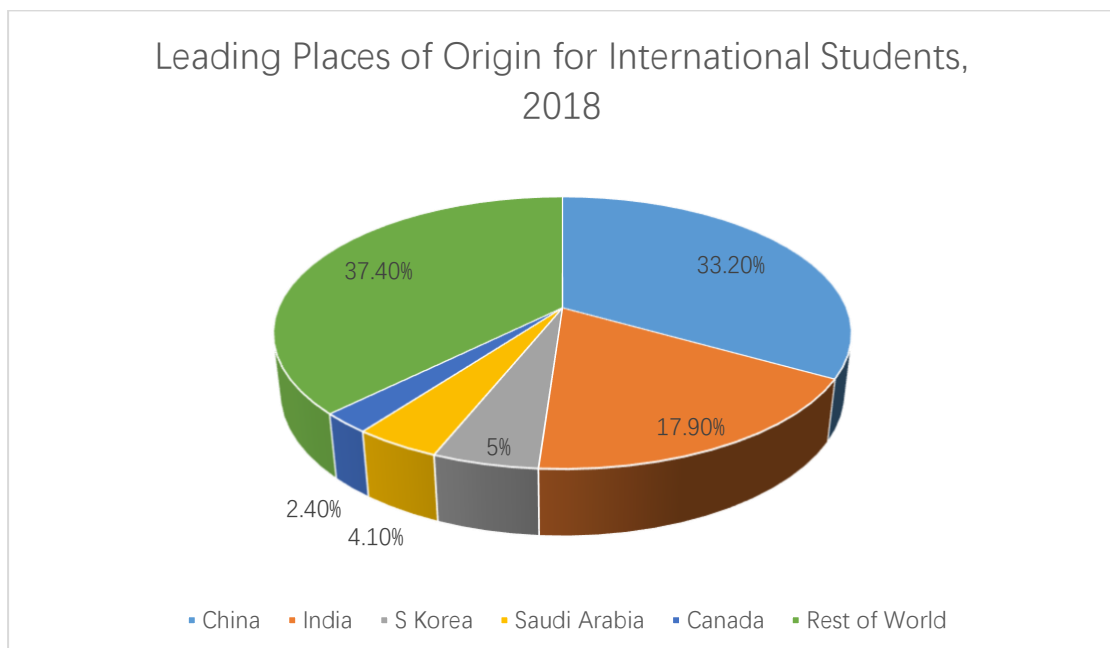
## **Introduction**

The international student population has grown consistently in twenty-first century American Higher Education despite relatively slower paces in recent years. (Institute of International Education, 2018; UNESCO Institute for Statistics, 2014; Yan & Berliner, 2010). This is due to the increasingly heavy emphasis on internationalization by Higher Education Institutions and the larger picture of globalization which accelerates student mobility. Growth in the multicultural and international student population has real and potential benefits for universities and communities in the United States. Maximizing those benefits requires increasing global competency in the US, home to a highly massified tertiary education system and a mature knowledge economy (Yao, 2014). A focus on Internationalization of the Curriculum and Internationalization at Home, provide a mechanism to systematically integrate the development of intercultural competence into higher education and improve the quality of education provided to all students which will ultimately benefit local and national communities (de Wit & Leask, 2017). Part of the internationalization strategies on college campuses stressed the importance of providing proper service to international students both in academics and student life.

Although the trends in enrollment vary year by year, students from Mainland China have been the largest group of international students coming to the United States over the last decade (Yan & Berliner, 2010; IIE, 2018). In academic year (AY) 2017-18, international enrollment in U.S. colleges and universities increased 1.5% from the prior year, the slowest growth rate since 2002-03 (In 2003 the number was 0.6 %) and was a significant decrease compared to a growth rate of 10.0% in 2014-15.



*Table 1.1: International Student Population Change in the United States from 2015-2018, with Chinese student population depicted fractionally.*



*Chart 1.2: Leading Places of Origin for International Students in United States in 2018. Source: IIE Open Book*

The overall growth in international student enrollments is attributed to the large number of Chinese undergraduate students whose numbers increased 3.6 percent in AY

2017-18. Their representation among all international students can be found in the charts shown above (Institution of International Education, IIE, 2018). A total of 271,738 new international students enrolled at U.S. institutions in AY 2017–18, about 20,000 fewer than in AY 2016–17 (Migration Policy Institute, 2018, IIE, 2018). Multiple factors contribute to slowed enrollment, including the rising cost of U.S. higher education, student visa delays and denials, and a political environment increasingly marked by rhetoric and policies that make life more difficult for immigrants. However, the United States continues to be the largest receiving country of international students, currently totally 1.2 million, of which one-third (363,341) are Chinese (Migration Policy Institute, 2018) (IIE, 2018). Given the recent decreases in growth rates, the significance of this group is magnified.

Universities are striving to internationalize which included actively accommodating and catering to the needs of international students to promote acculturation and overall well-being (Knight, 2015). In the United States today, Chinese students are a unique and increasingly important group of students.

Despite Chinese students attending American institutions of higher education in record numbers, especially at the undergraduate level, very little research has been done on the first-year experiences of Chinese undergraduate students, particularly in relation to student services and specifically with respect to their experience in their residence halls, their new collegiate home (Yao, 2014) Most of the recent literature focuses on academic experiences or approaches to teaching Chinese students rather than on student services. Very few studies examine the interpersonal experiences of Chinese international students in residence halls in the United States and especially the effect on their sense of belonging. The justification calling for more such studies is based on

the significant difference between Chinese and American cultures, as these two are identified as having the maximum cultural distance, in areas such as beliefs, political ideology, customs, language, and other daily norms experienced in the context of living in university residence halls (Samovar & Porter, 1991, in Yao, 2014, p.02).

In American Higher Education, residence halls are considered secure spaces for students to live and learn (Yao, 2014). Community building and intercultural interactions are often at the heart of residential programs, since the proximity and intimacy among residents and structured learning opportunities promote student engagement. Residence halls are viewed as the ideal setting for building intercultural relationships amongst students from different backgrounds (Blimling, 2010, in Yao, 2014). Student services are a key component in discussions of internationalization at home. Student affairs professionals including residential staff members are responsible for creating a comfortable space for international students. It is important that their practices ensure student wellness in residence halls. Residence halls are sub-environmental contexts in higher education shaped by larger external and internal (institutional) context (Hurtado et al., 2012). Racial and political climate, multicultural awareness, and interpersonal relationships in the residential environments are an important aspect of the sub-institutional culture that has a direct impact on international students' sense of belonging. Peer relationships, especially those with residential staff members have been identified as important factors in the college experiences of undergraduate Chinese international students that serve as a basis for fostering feelings of either belonging or exclusion on college campuses. Also, The first semester at university tends to be the most critical in ensuring students' success and persistence (Astin, 1993; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005, Yao, 2014), especially for international students who must navigate a completely foreign educational and societal culture



(Marginson et al., 2010) It is thus critical to examine the residence hall experiences of undergraduate Chinese international students at Boston College within the institutional context in order to understand the realities they face. This leads to implications for improved practice in student services (specifically residence halls) for the increasingly significant international student population at Boston College.

This study focuses on full-time, first year undergraduate Chinese international students at Boston College. Chinese students here are classified as full-time students in their first year of study who come from the People's Republic of China, which make up over half of all international student population at BC. To avoid ambiguity, all Chinese international students mentioned in this study are on a foreign visa status of F-1 and reside (or have a home) back in China.

**The primary research question for this study is framed as follows:**

What is the influence of relationships with roommates and staff members on first-year Chinese international students' sense of belonging in the residence halls at Boston College?

- To what extent do American and/or Chinese roommates of First-year Chinese international students assist them with adaptation of the life in Halls of Residence at Boston College?
- To describe and assess first-year Chinese international students' experiences in relation with performances of Resident Advisors and Resident Directors at Boston College.

## Chapter 2: Literature Review

The literature review identified several themes of relevance to the research question: the concept of sense of belonging, the theory of internationalization at home, the interaction between Chinese international students and their domestic counterparts and other general student experience literature concerning Chinese international students in the United States. Contextual pieces, archival literature, and policy documents from Boston College were also reviewed.

The review touched on the major issues around the questions of the research: sense of belonging, challenges to adaptation, and residential life regarding Chinese international students. Among them, sense of belonging was the overarching construct in this study, and it was important to understand its nature before examining how it affects roommate relationships and Chinese students' experiences in residence halls. This is followed by an overview of literature focusing on Chinese students in America with the topic of adaptation and challenges they face. Finally, institutional documents are reviewed to see how Boston College are administering the international population inside residence halls.

Throughout the study, Strayhorn's definition is used to frame sense of belonging for Chinese international students.

**Sense of Belonging** normally refers to a feeling of connectedness (Rosenberg & McCullough, 1981, Strayhorn, 2012). It is a construct that was raised by Maslow in 1954 and later amended for the context of higher education. Strayhorn defines sense of belonging as students perceived social support on campus, a feeling or sensation of connectedness, the experience of mattering or feeling cared about, accepted, respected, valued by, and important to the group (e.g., campus community). A sense

of belonging typically leads to an affective and cognitive response or behavior. (Strayhorn, 2012, p. 03) Without sense of belonging, students feel a sense of alienation. Both Strayhorn (2012) and O'Keefe (2013) have stressed the importance of having a strong sense of belonging. "The creation of a caring, supportive and welcoming environment within the university is critical in creating a sense of belonging" (O'Keefe, 2013). Student success, retention, and satisfaction with their collegiate career depend on sense of belonging.

International students' sense of belonging comes from the establishment of a welcoming community and a familiar environment. Tinto (1993) stated that the importance of interactions between individuals and the campus community as students arrive to integrate into the social setting is critical to forming sense of belonging. It takes time for students coming from other cultures to gain sense of belonging. Tinto (1993)'s theory also suggested that international students' assimilation with the dominant campus culture could be problematic, due to the difference in language and cultural practices.

Another literature by Astin (1993) argued that student success, an important beneficiary of sense of belonging, is affected to some extent by peer group characteristics, which lead to increased likelihood of retention and stronger sense of belonging (Yao, 2014). However, students from underrepresented groups usually had a difficult time integrating with the dominant group because of huge differences in cultural gap, and because of hardship navigating differences between their prior expectations and the reality of their experience. The findings relate to international students given the fact that they come from farther cultures.

Feelings of belonging often serve as a motivation for positive behavior (Strayhorn, 2012). The need to belong is particularly relevant to Chinese international students since they are immersed in a completely foreign and unfamiliar environment. According to Yao (2014), college students' sense of belonging includes "students' perceptions of institutional support and relationships with others, all of which combine to elicit feelings of connectedness and affiliation with the campus community" (Yao, 2014, P. 22). Sense of belonging improves academic success and serves as a factor in enhancing interpersonal relationships in residence halls. Berger (1997) found that living on campus had a positive relationship to underrepresented students' enhanced sense of community. Another similar study by Johnson et al (2007) examined the sense of belonging in first-year students from different racial/ethnic groups and found that students of color perceived a lower sense of belonging on their campuses than White students.

Although all these studies had implications on sense of belonging for international students, most of them were conducted only with domestic students and did not touch on the effect of language and cultural difference, and how these factors might become barriers for international students in residence halls. Overall findings did indicate greater sense of belonging when more interactions, institutional support, and faculty/staff interactions were present.

**Challenges and Adaptation:** Early literature on international students' adaptation and barriers to adaptation such as language, explore issues related to socio-cultural challenges. Very few recent studies have focused on undergraduate students. However, given that the Chinese international student population has reached record-highs every academic year recently, several institutions have started to examine the potential challenges these students face. In a study conducted in 2007 in the United

States, students from different countries including China reported feeling of isolation and lack of connection with university community members, with those from Asia expressing the most significantly (Sherry, Thomas, & Cui, 2009) The two major factors were language and financial issues.

Other studies also found that international students experience higher mental distress due to the perception of insufficient cultural and social resources on their campuses. A study by Wilton and Constantine (2003) concluded that extended length of stay in an institution had a significant positive influence on participants' sense of belonging and called for colleges and universities to build better support systems for international students as soon as they enroll for better retention rate. Some of the distress students experienced was the result of difficulties with socializing and the pressure to get used to social norms. Another more recent study indicated that students experienced differences between their pre- and post-arrival perceptions of the United States, encountered various forms of acculturative stress, and sought support from multiple available campus sources (Bertram, Poulakis, Elsasser, and Kumar, 2013) The importance of early support for newly arrived international students is also highlighted in a study by Yan and Berliner (2011). The authors found that newly arrived students tended to have higher levels of anxiety related to language, academic challenges, and cultural differences, which forced them to either seek support, or to retreat to their own culture, thus influencing their social interactions with domestic students. Another study shows how lack of social interaction may cause higher distress and anxiety while adapting to a new environment. Participants in this study typically experienced challenges learning to independently manage their everyday life in the United States, such as getting used to food and housing and learning new laws and regulations. The adjustment took longer than expected (Chui, Zhu, Zhao, Zhang, Lia, and Miller, 2019)

**Language Barriers** also pose a major challenge for international students during adaptation to campus. This finding is supported by several studies from the U.K, Australia, and the United States. Li, Chen, and Duanmu (2010) found that social and language barriers exceed and carry over into other aspects of international students' daily lives including their participation as well as the lack of confidence in social settings. Another study by Edwards, Ran, & Lie (2007) suggested the same. Chinese international students' lack of English proficiency created high stress and anxiety, especially since language skills are tightly tied to the overall socio-cultural challenges that Chinese international students face on college campuses. In the meantime, a study conducted in Australia indicated the emphasis on speaking and listening skills which international students reported they needed to improve. Lack of proficiency in these areas was seen by students as hampering their active participation in class, leading to lack of confidence in approaching Australian students, and resulting in their inability to benefit from the Australian experience (Briguglio and Smith, 2012)

The recurring theme from these studies indicates that English language proficiency plays a huge role in Chinese international students' social relationships and educational progress (Yao, 2014) It is thus interesting to examine how international Chinese students at Boston College conform to language issues with regards to influencing sense of belonging.

**Institutional Policies** play an important role in creating a strong support system or network for international students. How administrators and especially student affairs professionals care for the international population's well-being requires meticulous attention to planning and implementing the institution's internationalization process. According to Knight (2015), internationalization is the

process of integrating an international, intercultural, or global dimension into the purpose, functions or delivery of postsecondary education. Institutional policy on the other hand, concretely reflects the level of institutional commitment to diversity. This is readily seen in university policies, programs and services which must be tied to institutional mission (Clayton-Pedersen et al. 2007). The organizational dimension of campus internationalization is not often examined across campuses because it requires a good deal of information about various structures and practices within institutions and across many institutions to understand impact on outcomes for diverse students and services.

Internationalization at Home is defined as the purposeful integration of intercultural dimensions into the formal and informal curriculum for all students within domestic learning environments (Beelen & Jones, 2015, p. 76), which suggests an increasingly robust role for student affairs professionals with global perspectives on providing services that promote international student community building, cultivate friendships between international and domestic students, enhance international student transition consulting services, and provide guidance in communication, language, and cultural acquisition (McFarlane, 2015) However, many institutions are not fully geared on the student affairs level to prepare them for the increasing international student population on campus. A 2014 study in Ohio suggested that half of the student affairs professional felt unprepared to work with growing numbers of foreign students, and 64 percent of surveyed professionals said their offices were not doing anything specifically to accommodate the international student population (ACE, 2012) There is a sense between “them” and “us”, and student affairs professionals other than the Office of International Affairs mainly serve international students based on their previous experiences. An International

Association of Student Affairs and Services research report in 2014 indicated that Counselling Services, Housing Services, and Senior Student Services are the three largest functional areas that have the highest exposure to international students, yet their professional development have been limited largely to a horizontal expansion with an emphasis on larger sizes of student population in general, rather than a vertical expansion with a focus on a diversified student population with significantly different needs (IASAS et al., 2014) Not many institutions have developed a full-scale internationalization strategic plan, as the implementation and blueprinting include having a clear definition of diversity that influences practice, working with multiple elements of organizational culture, creating shared responsibility for assessing, planning, and improving the climate, and having comprehensive evaluation and assessment systems (Clayton-Pedersen et al. 2007)

In the meantime, to enhance and cultivate international student sense of belonging, institutions must also consider promoting intentional encounters for multicultural interactions to happen on campus, especially between international students and domestic students. Regardless of students' demographics and representation, they should be deliberately involved in a campus community and engaged in dialogues and interactions around diversity and inclusion.

Internationalization at Home cannot only encourage constant integration of cultural differences but must also allow for programs that re-create "home" and comfort zones (Agnew & Kahn, 2017) There is also the need to integrate the curriculum for domestic students to acquire global and intercultural awareness to create more inclusive campuses and residence halls. Leask (2009) suggests that "the development of intercultural competencies in students is a key outcome of an internationalized curriculum, which requires a campus environment and culture that motivates and



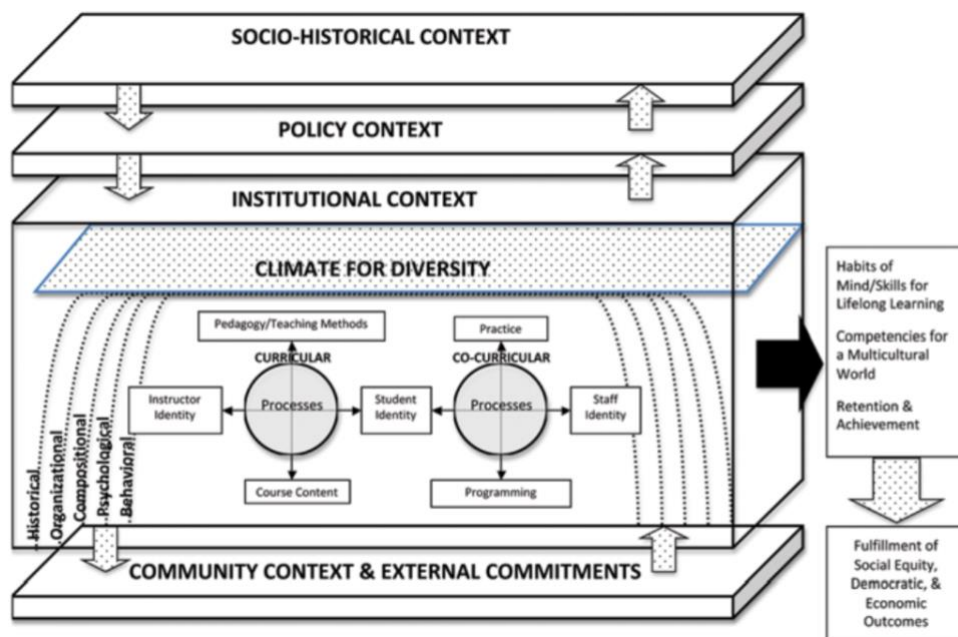
rewards interaction between international and home students in and out of the classroom". A range of people across institutions needs to engage with the internationalization agenda over time to improve encounters of difference (Agnew & Kahn, 2017). High quality intercultural contact is not only beneficial to international students, it also enhances the intercultural competency of native students in the global market place. (Yu and Moskal, 2018)

Boston College's internationalization policy documents and files related to residential life, include adequate information on matters related to diversity and inclusion on campus, but little that specifically addresses international student needs and perspectives. Boston College does not have a full-scale multi-office internationalization initiative or strategic plan, rather, individual departmental efforts to cater international population on a need-base. The Office of Residential Life, for example, has an online Resident Advisors training platform with 37 training modules covering every topic a resident can encounter, RA training protocols also utilized the learning of Engage, Assess and Reflect model which focuses on positive dialoguing techniques in encounters with students with mental health concerns. However, there is no module related explicit interactions with international student population or students from other cultures in residence halls, which reflect a lack of emphasis internationally. There is limited coordination between offices at Boston College when it comes to knowledge of internationalization, as only senior officers and office of international students' services have a good sense of internationalization. In summary, internationalizing institutional policy may create the opportunity for an inclusive campus where students from other cultures are bonded by effective community building and successful acculturation with the domestic population but it takes time and effort.

## Conceptual Framework

The literature suggests that Chinese international students' experiences are influenced by contextual factors such as institutional support, as well as personal factors, including language and cultural practices. With sense of belonging as a central theme and an overarching concept for this study, Hurtado et al's (1999) multi-contextual model of diverse learning environments is a useful way to better understand the overall residential experiences of international Chinese students.

Hurtado et al. (1999) developed their framework to assist understanding of the different dimensions of campus culture. The original framework was updated in 2012 with a more sophisticated model of diverse learning environments. This updated framework included multiple contexts, with three major parts relevant to this study: *historical legacy of an institution, compositional climate of an institution, and behavioral dimension of an institution*. The behavioral dimension of the framework further incorporated the processes of curricular and co-curricular efforts under the larger picture of diversity, as shown in the diagram below.



*Fig. 2.1 Multi-contextual model for diverse learning environments. For this study, only the behavioral dimension was used. Author's own based on Hurtado et., al, 2012,)*

Hurtado et al's (2012) simplified organizing framework provides a useful way to conceptualize the important factors affecting Chinese international students and their sense of belonging in a residential environment for this study.

In the framework the historical legacy of a university set the background and lay the foundation for the contemporary outlook. In this study, the historical legacy includes Boston College's mission statement and goals relating to international education, as well as its history with international students. In the framework the historical legacy frames the institutional and residential support for international Chinese students. The compositional dimension of the campus climate has been well-documented and is an initial step in the creation of a diverse learning environment (Hurtado et al. 2012), which referred to the numerical representation of individuals from diverse social identities among students, faculty, staff, and administrators (Hurtado et al. 1999) The compositional climate looked at the current anatomy of the institution, including an overview of international student populations and available resources for them, which matches the objective of this study to look at residential staff relationships and the support network that international students have. The behavioral dimension, on the other hand, referred to the context, frequency, and quality of interactions on campus between social identity groups and their members (Hurtado et al. 2012). Categorizing interactions into formal and informal interactions helped educators to understand those interactions they may have control over, as opposed to chance encounters. Two aspects, informal, and formal interaction, composed the behavioral dimension. Formal interactions are defined as campus-facilitated interactions that occurs in the

classrooms and are the results of intentional educational practices; informal interactions then refer to everyday encounters between individuals outside of campus-designed activities. They can be socializations or student organizations. It is believed that those three dimensions best serve and are most relevant to this study; thus, the contextual background and the findings of this research will be outlined specifically utilizing and focusing on this framework.

### **Chapter 3: Methodology**

This section provides a detailed overview of the research approach and the research design of this study. It starts with a review of a prior research study which was partially replicated in this study. It continues with a discussion of the research methodology for this study which was qualitative and used interviewing as a primary tool, then there is a review of the data collection process and analysis, which finally concludes with the perceived, foreseeable limitations of the study itself.

#### **Nature of the Research**

This research study is inspired by Yao's 2014 research: "Being and Belonging: A Critical Phenomenological Study of Undergraduate Chinese International Student' Sense of Belonging in Residence Halls" (2014), which was part of her doctorate dissertation. She examined the Chinese students' sense of belonging in residence halls at Michigan State University in 2013 and was able to pioneer such research with scholarly approach as well as methodologies. Her findings contributed

to and inspired this current study, which partially adopted and replicated Yao's framework and methodologies to be used on another institution with similar target population. Similarities include the implementation of recruitment, definition of research population, emphasis on roommate relationships, and discussions on sense of belonging as a critical framework for the study. However, taking some of Yao's previous research implication for research and practice and building up from the literature since 2014, this study was conducted with complete independence while implementing some extended aspects and perspectives of student services which are specific in institutional contexts and time-sensitive in educational trends. The differences lie in the focus of research questions not only looking at roommates, but also residential staff when it comes to impacting students' wellbeing and sense of belonging on campus. Furthermore, this study also sought feedbacks from students on their knowledge of student affairs and campus resources by tailoring interviews to cater institutional needs at Boston College. A cross-comparison of findings from both this study and Yao's research would be discussed later.

### **Research Design**

This study used a qualitative approach. Non-numerical data were used to answer the research questions. Non-numerical data are narrative data such as words. (Bui, 2011, p15). Qualitative methodology is also considered and justified as the most appropriate way in answering the study's research questions:

- What is the influence of relationships with roommates and staff members on first-year Chinese international students sense of belonging in the residence halls at Boston College?

- To what extent do American and/or Chinese roommates of First-year Chinese international students assist them with adaptation of the life in Halls of Residence at Boston College?
- To describe and assess first-year Chinese international students experiences in relation with the performances of Residential staff at Boston College through the lens of Internationalization at Home.

### **Qualitative Approach**

The justification for the qualitative approach used for this research lies behind the specific institutional context and the nature of the target population that this study wishes to examine. This qualitative research started with a specific situation, a question seeking to find out patterns or themes in the data from Chinese international students' residential life experiences in an institutional context. Data in a typical qualitative research studies are collected through extensive and detailed observations, interviews, and focus groups with the participants in a neutral setting so that the researcher does not control or manipulate the environment (Bui, 2011, P. 15). At Boston College, this study has a relatively small sample size, which gave me the time and opportunity to extensively interact with the participants, make detailed observations and deduce adequate meaning from the responses and observations. Overall, some of the strengths of qualitative research methods include the unique depth in which a topic can be investigated, justified, and interpretation of the outcomes based on the participants' perspectives, which, in desirable in this study for Boston College.

Out of the commonly found qualitative research approaches including narrative research, phenomenology, grounded theory, ethnography, case study, and participatory action research (Creswell & Clark, 2007; Bui, 2011), this study found it most

appropriate to adopt a mix of phenomenological and critical method. The combination of both methodologies enabled the researcher to understand the experiences of the participants through a critical lens that situated their experiences within a specific context (Merriam, 2009 in Yao, 2014, p. 46).

Phenomenology is a qualitative research approach that focuses on the similarities and commonalities of lived experiences within a specific group. The fundamental goal of this approach is to arrive at a description of the nature of the phenomenon (Creswell, 2013). For this study, the participants were asked about their specific experiences in residence halls in the form of oral data and observations. Phenomenological approach thus aligned well with the objectives of this research to examine the lived experiences of undergraduate Chinese international students within the BC environment. Additionally, to the critical nature of this research, it is imperative according to Yao (2014) to explore the interactive relationship between students and the larger institutional, cultural, and societal context they are in since the participants were from a marginalized, minor group in this study.

The context in this qualitative research served as the foundation for me to be able to examine, at a higher education institution, how people “construct their words, interpret their experiences, and what meaning they attribute to their experiences” (Merriam, 2009, p. 05). The institutional context together with the qualitative approach also allowed me as the researcher to analyze the content of specific policies implemented by BC with regards to internationalization at home to better comprehend their effects, strengths and weaknesses on participants’ sense of belonging.

Phenomenological researchers focus on individuals rather than on context (Merriam, 2009). In this study, the qualitative phenomenological approaches had values

assisting the research since the interactions between experiences from individuals (undergraduate Chinese international students) and the context (environment in residence halls, residential policies by Boston College) played a vital role in generating participants' responses.

### **Site Selection and Research**

A single higher education institution was the research site for this study. The institution, Boston College is a medium-sized private research institution that is one of a small number of elite Jesuit colleges in the United States. Boston College has a relatively large residential facility and Office of Residential Life. Boston College Office of Residential Life encourages all first-year, non-commuter students to live on campus, which means that most undergraduate Chinese international students have had a similar experience of living on campus during their first year of arrival. Many would continue to live on campus. BC's mission statement, residential requirements, and emphasis on internationalization provide valuable contextual significance for exploring and examining the lived experiences of Chinese international students.

The site selection was pragmatic and practical given that there was a potential mutual cooperative interest between the Department of Vice President of Student Affairs (VPSA) and the researcher. The expiring strategic plan of VPSA provided multiple reasons and called for such a study. First, BC had a significant number of international students especially on the undergraduate level. With 1 in 10 undergraduate students coming from overseas, it has seen a rapid rise in Chinese undergraduate students in the recent decade (from 26 in 2008 to 469 in 2018). Secondly, as a leading Jesuit institution in the nation, BC's context was important in this study, particularly when it comes to the racial and cultural climate. BC is known for its Jesuit nature and



mission and is working hard in acculturating and acclimating the increasing international students on campus as part of a larger internationalization plan. Finally, all first-year students were strongly encouraged to live on campus, thus the residential environment and policies of BC bring some implications with them since Chinese international students normally live on campus without many other viable housing options around BC campus.

Although the selected site was very specific and context-oriented, the implications and findings of this study should be and could be relevant for other higher education institutions. There are many universities and colleges that have similar contextual settings geographically and culturally around the New England Area, and there are also a number of institutions that share similar Jesuit backgrounds with BC nationwide. More importantly, many college campuses in the U.S. are growing with regards to internationalization and international student population as a result of increased interconnectedness and 21st century globalization. Thus, other institutions could draw reference and learn from Boston College's results of study going forward. The transparency of the site selection will aid in other institutions' understanding of how context matters.

The contextual information and other site-specific data about Boston College with regards to internationalization and international student population was researched via Boston College Burns Library Historical Archive, online database from Boston College Office of International Student and Scholars (OISS), and Boston College Office of Residential Life (BCORL) with the Office of Vice President of Student Affairs (VPSA).

### **Sampling**

This study uses purposeful sampling as the selection method of participants. This is often used when the investigator wants to discover, understand, and gain insight and therefore must select a sample from which the most can be learned (Merriam, 2009, p. 77 in Yao, 2014, p. 51). The use of purposeful sampling enabled me to get informative interviews from participants as intended. The target population was Chinese international students in their first year at BC who lived in the residence halls. The justification behind this was that these participants have lived on campus in the United States long enough to be able to reflect upon their residential experiences and think about their sense of belonging in the residence halls, yet not too long that they had sufficient time to recall, adjust and completely acclimate.

Boston College Institutional Review Board (IRB) approved this study as exempt on November 27, 2018 (See Appendix A). In late November of 2018, a drafted email was sent through the Office of Residential Life at Boston College to all students who fit the previously described profile for this study: First-year international students from China (with an F-1 visa) who live on campus in university owned residence halls. Ethnic Chinese students with US residency, US citizenship, or any other identification other than Chinese citizenship are excluded. In order to ensure the legitimacy of participants and recruiting population, Boston College Office of Residential Life helped with the sampling process by sending out an email to all students within the first-year undergraduate international student listserv. It included information about the study and the requirement for valid participants. The email also included information about the incentive for each participant, which were five \$10 gift cards to Amazon.com for selected participants via a draw. A link was embedded to an online initial survey through Boston College Qualtrics Software and asked that all interested students should submit their information through the online platform. The Qualtrics form gathered the

following participants information: Full name, phone number, email address, residence hall, gender, class year, roommate demographics (domestic or international), and preferred method of contact and time availability. A total of 28 responses were recorded, in which 19 of them were valid. The researcher got in contact with 17 of them who agreed for an interview and conducted 16 interviews in total. One interview was invalid after the researcher found out the participant was in fact a sophomore student. All participants were first-year students from China who were completing their first or second semester at Boston College (The interview period spanned from November 2018 to January 2019, which lapsed across a Christmas break). The number of participants in this current study fits within Creswell's (2007) recommendation that five to 25 individuals who have experienced the phenomenon being studied should be interviewed for one study. The participants included six men and ten women. All interviews concluded before January 31st, 2019.

### **Data Collection**

This study was structured with in-depth interviews that were conducted with each participant in person. Interviewing was a beneficial data collection method in that it allowed me to personally observe, hear and record participants' stories and experiences and revisit their stories after the interviews as I analyzed the transcripts. The ideal data collection method in this context was a semi-structured interview which included broad and general questions related to sense of belonging and residential staff in the residence halls. The aim of semi-structured interviews was to create an environment for the participants that was obligation-free and less stressful. Also, since every participant's experiences tended to be different in the residence halls at BC, this type of interview allowed for some flexibility in order of questions and wording formats. This enabled the researcher to be interactive in response to the emerging situation of

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each participant's storytelling process and be more responsive in rephrasing wordings should confusions occur, sometimes due to language issues. The broad and general questions in interviews were helpful in getting a textural description and structural description of the experiences and provided an understanding of the common experiences (Creswell, 2007, p. 61; in Yao, 2014, p. 53) Semi-structured interviewing also allowed follow-up clarifications and elaborations.

One pilot interview was conducted in advance to the start of actual data collection process in early November 2018 and the valuable feedbacks the pilot participants provided was used for the revision of interview protocols as well as improvements in general word choice in questions. The pilot interview therefore assisted participants to better understand what the researcher asked for and resulted in more reliable data.

A private space was reserved in Mal Hall at the Office of Residential Life to interview participants and each interview was scheduled to last no more than 30 minutes. To initiate the data collection, I began by introducing myself and openly share my ethnicity as a Chinese international student. I explained briefly the general purpose of the study and the interview before asking for permission to audio record the interview and have each interviewee sign the consent form, reminding the interviewees of the anonymity built into the study. Interviews were audio recorded using a smartphone with audio-recording function for those interviewees who consent to be recorded (See Appendix D). The consent form had all the contact information of the researcher as well as a brief description of the study, in which I verbally walked some participants through upon their request. During interviews, I followed up with additional questions where appropriate or applicable, or when I needed clarification of certain phrases and issues. Upon conclusion of the interview, the participants were notified that they would be

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hearing back regarding the gift card by the end of Spring 2019.

### **Data Analysis**

The most important part of the research was the analysis of the massive amount of raw data received and generated through the interviews and making meaning of the participants' words. This study focused on participants' verbal descriptions recorded on audio, and observations from me to develop deeper analytical categories. Data gathered was sorted, organized, and transcribed upon completion of collection, including all information such as date, time, pseudonyms, personal information and more. A thorough word-by-word transcription allowed the researcher to generate meanings and find trends for richer information. Transcription data was then de-identified, meaning most of the identifying information that could link the data back to participants' real identities was stripped. This identifying information included pseudonyms, names of residence halls and other institutional features. These transcripts were then uploaded onto Dedoose.com, a web-based application used for qualitative research analysis. This website allowed the researcher to effectively analyze data using codes and descriptors, such as pseudonym, age, gender, residence halls, high school background, and roommate demographics. The descriptors were linked with excerpts which included codes and allowed the researcher to conduct more quantified analysis of the participants in detail.

### **Coding Schemes**

The need for coding is simple but important in a qualitative research like this. Creswell and Elliot (2015) state that "Text data are dense data, and it takes a long time to go through them and make sense of them" (p. 2851). Coding is described as "the process of analyzing qualitative text data by taking them apart to see what they yield

before putting the data back together in a meaningful way” (Creswell, 2015, p. 156). The mapping of data built up meaningful findings, providing an overview of disparate data that allowed the researcher to make meaning of them with regards to their research questions. I was able to reflect on the data and conduct a deep analysis and interpretation of the data. Both inductive and deductive coding schemes were used in this study.

**Deductive coding.** In order to effectively and efficiently analyze all data acquired, the researcher had to pay attention to the detail by repeatedly reviewing all the transcriptions and excerpts on DeDoose so that it created a sense of familiarity with the data. When screening through notes and texts, certain words and phrases were caught as they consistently emerge and appear uniquely from all the different excerpts. These words were then categorized and summarized into topics, or codes, to represent one or more set phenomenon participants stated they have experienced. Often, these topics aligned with the research questions and the conceptual framework. This was the beginning of deductive coding round, typically conducted as the first step of analysis in phenomenological research studies (Rossman & Rallis, 2003, in Yao, 2014, p. 56). Meanwhile, based on the questions asked and the anticipated trend of answers, a list of codes to start the analysis with was created. It was then clear that messages and words from large chunks of data started falling into their respective fields of descriptive codes consistently upon identification when reading through the excerpts repeatedly.

**Inductive coding** allows codes which were not in the initial starting list to emerge progressively as data was analyzed. When examining excerpts, certain vocabularies or themes stood out and brought necessity to add extra codes along the way. The codes captured and lifted from the texts then turned into sets of themes to represent larger trends in responses. Yao (2014, P 56) considered the emergence of

codes through inductive coding of particular importance for phenomenological, qualitative research studies. The key is the search for themes that represents participants' experiences which concentrated and came together during analysis. Also, because of individual differences, values coding was appropriate in the study since it was often used to "reflect a participant's values, attitudes, and beliefs, representing his or her perspectives or worldview" (Miles et al., 2014, p. 75 in Yao, 2014, p. 56), which could have a differentiating impact on the responses to same questions. Values coding appeared frequently in this study because this method of coding is normally used to examine interpersonal experiences and cultural values.

#### Pattern coding

The final round of coding was pattern coding, a method of gradually grouping the summaries into a smaller number of categories, themes, or constructs (Miles et al., 2014, P. 86 in Yao, 2014, p. 57). Pattern coding was used in order to better make meaning and organize the codes, seek and identify an emerging theme. It was done by clustering multiple codes under common topics or patterns that came from the interview data. These topics were then refined and recon structured continuously to the extent where the final categories of themes shown were accurately representative of the participants' experiences.

The most critical part of the analytical process was to interpret the codes and themes emerged and organizing them into certain categories of findings connecting text, participants, researchers, and social circumstances with the research objectives.

#### **Limitation**

Certain limitations applied within this study. First, the participants were interviewed between the end of their first semester and the beginning of their second

semester of their first year on campus. This time frame might have not given them enough time to further simmer and fully reflect on their first year as a whole and make meaning of it summative. Also, only 5 of the 15 participants identified as men. This study could potentially benefit from having a more balanced gender representation that reflects the percentage of men in the general student body at Boston College. As a researcher with similar cultural and educational background with the participants, I recognized that my own lived experiences influenced my role in interpreting the participants' experiences. Despite the systematic data analysis process, because "every form of human awareness is interpretive, and all description is always already interpretation" (Van Manen, 2011), the interpretation of the data may be incorporated and thus serve as a partial reflection, to some extent, my perspective of understanding of the participants' experiences. Finally, all interviews were conducted and recorded in English, which was not the first language for any of the participants. This might have resulted in biased word choices which may have not truly reflected or indicated the exact meaning of their experiences. However, questions were often repeated and rephrased in order to better assist in their understanding.

## **Chapter 4: Context**

In order to better assist the finding and the research process, it was significant to scope not only the institutional context, but also the structural diversity of the institution, which helped in framing understanding of elements affecting international students' experiences at Boston College. Racial/ethnic diversity in the college environment is one of the key factors that contribute to student development, and that the nature of interracial contacts among peers is key in the education of students from



various backgrounds. (Hurtado et al., 1999; Orefield and Whitla, 1999).

This chapter elaborated on the context of the research site and the participants of the study. For institutional context, the focus was on Boston College's historical legacy and structural diversity especially with international students. This section included the mission of the university and its history with international student population and a brief overview of its internationalization strategies. Participants profiles were then provided for each of the 15 undergraduate Chinese international students.

The University first brought out the strategic focus on internationalization in 1996 when the mission statement in the fact book cited: "Boston College strives to foster ethical and personal formation of its undergraduate, graduate and professional students in order to prepare them for citizenship, service and leadership in a global society." (Boston College Fact Book, 1996) Boston College valued diversity and inclusion as they emphasized in its newest mission statement. "(We are) an institution and community that welcomes and respects all." (Boston College Mission Statement, 2019) Moreover, one of the four strategic directions pointed to increase the "University's presence and impact in the City of Boston, the United States, and around the globe." (Boston College Fact Book, 2019)

### **Historical Legacy of International Students**

Boston College has welcomed international students since 1958, when the then President, Michael J Walsh, S.J, first proposed to introduce and bring in foreign students to BC for further Jesuit education, in which he justified: "Boston is one the internationally recognized educational centers of the world....there is a need to explore the relevancy of a university-wide program initiative related to international students

and international affairs, where mutual advantages are clear.” (Boston College Archive, 1996) The early international student population consisted European students and other short-term international program participants, most of who were graduate or higher degree-seekers. Over the years, the number of international students on BC campus continued to grow. In 1970, the Office of International Student and Scholars was established as the Foreign Student Office, then the Office of Student Programs and Resources (OSPAR), a part of the Vice Presidency of Student Affairs (VPSA) to regulate and provide service for the international population on BC campus. A total of 172 international students enrolled that year. The population continued its steady rise and reached 300 in 1981 with 135 undergraduate students and 164 graduate students. (Boston College Archive, 1981) The Foreign Student Office held its first international student orientation in 1984. By 2000, the international student population had reached almost 800, representing 100 countries worldwide. Although experienced a sudden drop of international enrollment after 2001-2002 Academic Year, Boston College’s international population topped 1,000 in 2010-2011 Academic Year and 1,500 in 2016-2017 Academic Year. In the newest release of Office of International Students and Scholars annual statistics report and the Boston College fact book, the combined international student population rose from 1,606 in 2017 to 1,751 for 2018-2019 Academic Year, eclipsing the University’s previous record for most foreign enrollees. Over the decades, the percentage of international students had risen from merely 8 % to almost 20 % in 2018.

There has not been any notable case of discrimination and harassment against international students throughout the archival research, and Boston College commits to maintaining a welcoming environment in its policy documents For example, the BC Office of Institutional Diversity has issued a Notice of Non-Discrimination stating that

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the University prohibits all discrimination based on a person's race, color, nationality, sex, religion, age, or any other status.

However, diversity-wise, there have been a couple of racial incidents fueled by discrimination against minorities that sparked rage across campus and triggered series of conversations between the students and the administration. In October 2017, students walked out of classroom to protest the incident of a few "Black Lives Matter" posters being defaced and a racist post circulating around social media. In December 2018, a residence hall was vandalized with racist comments by a BC student, leading to protests to demand the University to take more action on the racial climate of the campus.

### **Internationalization at BC**

Boston College has prioritized internationalization in the recent year but has had a focus on bringing in multicultural perspectives to Chestnut Hill to cultivate an elite Jesuit institution since the late 1950s. As mentioned in the previous section, in 1958, President Walsh S.J. pushed through the decision to welcome international students to BC as the first step of internationalizing the campus, making BC the third university in Boston to accept foreign students. Boston College worked with the Institution of International Education at the time for the early emphasis on student mobility and recruitment of students which laid the foundation of institutional internationalization. In 1967, following a new round of strategic planning and institutional assessment, the committee appointed by President Walsh S.J. deemed necessary to establish an international program within the organizational structure of BC, which included development of courses with international nature, and the assessment of experiences of faculty in international programs as the first ever step of internationalization at home. With the assistance from various institutions such as Harvard University, Boston

College was able to organize, coordinate and facilitate programs relevant to the international role of the University. The strategic plan of 1967 stated:

*“What is possible at Boston College is the combining of the highest qualities of scholarship with human concern as a force for change, for bridging barriers of racial, ethnic, and international prejudices. In the international field there is a challenge to bridge barriers through intercultural understanding by initiating studies and organizing the curriculum in ways that other universities have not.”* (BC Administrative Vice President Archive, 1981)

Boston College would continue to refine its path to internationalization with a Jesuit touch and put the emphasis on “producing citizens who are sensitive to the needs of people throughout the world, and who can communicate with sensitivity and knowledge both at home and abroad. The Office of International Program, functioning in providing study abroad courses, was established in 1981, and the number of intercultural clubs and organizations doubled in the 1980s. The “Junior Year Abroad” has since become a BC tradition. Curricular-wise, a total of 408 students majored in four areas of international studies as of 2019. (BC Fact Book, 2019) In the meantime, Boston College has kept focusing on internationalization at home especially with research capabilities, in that it stated in the University mission:

*“(The University) need to serve the society by producing nationally and internationally significant research that advances insight and understanding, thereby both enriching interculturalism and addressing important global societal need.”* (BC Fact Book, 2019)

Boston College has been working to establish a campus-wide internationalization initiative over the last decade. Scholarly speaking, it has taken an activity approach as well as elements of a competency approach, as categorized by Qiang (2003). The activity approach promotes research, curriculum, student mobility, and international population on campus. This results in increasing existence of international dimension in terms of activities and programs. The series of them are prone to be considered as distinctive programs regarding operation, which often leads

to a rather fragmented and uncoordinated approach to campus internationalization, where by the relationship and benefits between different offices are not taken into much consideration. (Qiang, 2003, p. 250) Boston College, with an international initiative called the Global Engagement which heavily emphasized on teaching, research, and formation, touch on the competency approach which exploring the development of knowledge and values in the university body as it helps institution personnel to become more internationally knowledgeable and interculturally skilled, but with limited implementation at this point.

Boston College envisions the strategic implementation in the next decade to increase the presence through creative partnerships on the local and national levels, increased outreach to international students, recruitment of faculty with international backgrounds, and the development of programs that promote global cooperation with the help of Division of Student Affairs and Lynch School of Education. Specifically, the university pursues additional ways of partnering with local and international entities to expand opportunities for experiential education in and out of the classroom. The mission states:

*“To develop a more effective structure for promoting and integrating the University’s international initiatives, Boston College’s international aspirations and current activities require greater clarification and coordination. Current and future investments in programs must also be managed more strategically.”* (BC Mission Statement, 2019)

### **Structural Diversity**

Structural diversity refers to an institution's numerical representation of racial and ethnic groups on campus. It is often considered the “first important step in the process of improving the climate for diversity” (Hurtado et al., 1999, p. 19, in Yao,

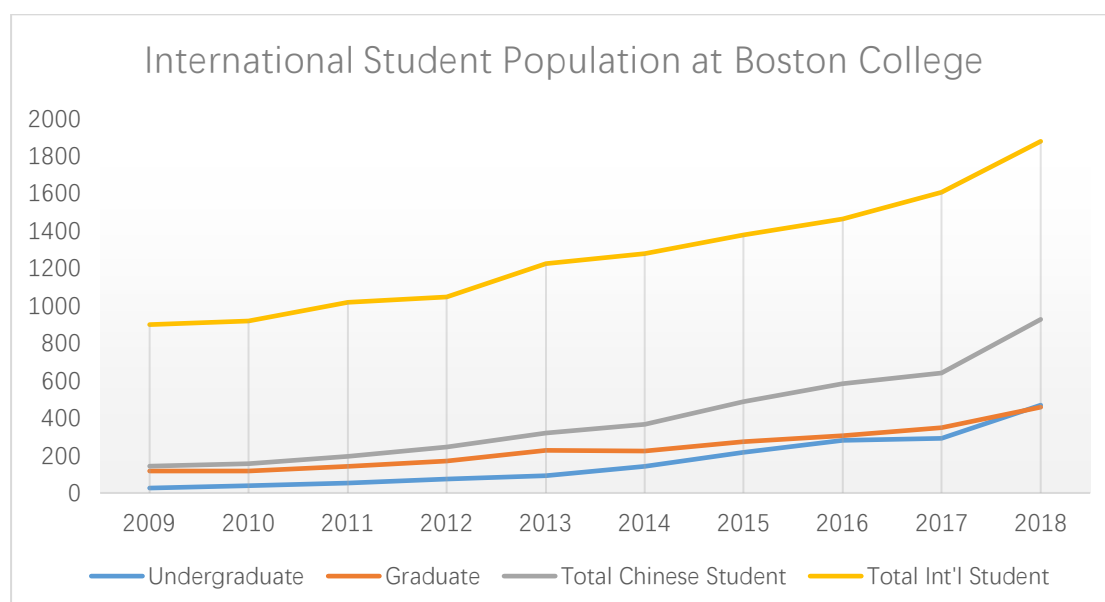
2014, p. 69), based on the idea that a statistical representation of historically underrepresented groups helps with improving the experiences for them. In this study, Chinese international students may only have minor issues with structural diversity since they are, in numbers, underrepresented on BC campus. Yet understanding Chinese international student experience is critically relevant to structural diversity of Boston College. They are considered a minority population in every way since they are in a historically white institution. Hence stretching to a larger picture and looking at the overall student demographics would assist in understanding the current situation Chinese international students are in at Boston College.

Boston College has a full-time undergraduate student enrollment of over 9,300 in Fall 2018, the starting year for the participants in this current study. The overall enrollment in 2018-2019 Academic Year is 14,513, which includes a freshmen class of 2,327 students, slightly smaller than the previous year. International freshmen make up almost nine per cent of the class. Demographically speaking, Boston College has a condensed student population from Northeastern United States and remains white-dominant. According to the Office of Institutional Research, Planning and Assessment 2018 data, 67.4 percent of the student population is white, with Asian students and mixed-ethnicity students following with 11.6 % and 13.5 %, respectively. Since the Higher Education Opportunities Act of 2008 mandated a report of race/ethnicity data collection and report for college campuses, this percentage of white students has remained largely the same with minor fluctuation. In the meantime, African American students and Hispanic students combined for 17 percent of the total population.

### **Demographics of International Chinese Students**

Students from Asia started dominating the international student demographics

in early 2000s, contributing 65 figures cumulatively to the record-setting figures. (BC OISS, 2018) Chinese students were first seen on the record in 1971 as 26 students from China enrolled that fall. By 1992 there were 2 undergraduate Chinese students as well as 63 graduate counterparts. Both the undergraduate level and the graduate level saw steady growth stepping into the 21st century especially with a sudden increase, when the undergraduate Chinese student population went from 9 in 2008-2009 AY to 100 in 2013-2014 AY. In the meantime, the total Chinese student population experienced a 700 percent increase from 2008 to 2018.



*Table 4.1 International Student Population Change at Boston College from 2008-2018. There was a sharp rise in Chinese student representation since 2014. Source: Boston College Office of International Student and Scholars*

Currently, more than 900 Chinese students—a 24 % increase over last year, attend Boston College today (BC OISS, 2018 & 2019). The increase in international Chinese students at Boston College far surpassed the national trend of 3.6 % increase (Institute of International Education, 2018) Out of the 469 undergraduate Chinese students, 16 % of them are freshmen, which rounds up 40 % of the international freshmen population.

(BC OIRPA, 2018) In 2017, China was the top country of origin for all international students in the United States, and this was consistent with the enrollment of Chinese at Boston College.

### **Demographics of Residence Halls**

The Office of Residential Life at Boston College houses students in 28 residence halls. (BC OIRPA, 2018) In Fall 2018, a total of 7,689 students lived on campus, including 2,144 freshmen students, indicating that 92 % of freshmen stayed in residence halls. 108 Chinese students in the academic year lived in residence halls, making up just 3 % of the total first-year residential population. 4 Chinese did not live on campus due to various reasons including off-campus accommodations. (BCORL, 2019) Out of all first-year Chinese students who lived on campus, 75 of them had American roommates or are living in a mixed environment (triple room and quad room with both Chinese and American roommates). Although the research data did not reflect the same distribution of roommates, it did indicate a deep integration of multiculturalism within residence halls.

Residence halls at Boston College are divided into three neighborhoods: Lower Campus, Upper Campus, and Newton Campus. (BCORL, 2019) Freshmen can only live on either Upper Campus or Newton Campus. Both campuses housed around half of the freshmen Chinese international student population. The relatively low representation of Chinese students in residence halls immersed them into an American living environment, including with roommates and floormates from American background, thus making it interesting to see how the freshmen Chinese international students accommodate.

### **Participants in the study**



## **Nicole**

Nicole is an 18-year-old female student from Shanghai China. She is currently a freshman majoring in Finance and lives with her roommates in Upper Campus. Boston College was not her first choice, yet since she got rejected by Carnegie Mellon University, she ended up at BC. She thinks BC has a nice campus. Nicole attended a high school back in China offering traditional 9-12 courses. She resides with a Chinese roommate who she chose with each other during the pairing process, and another two American roommates who were randomly assigned. She is having a terrific time with the Chinese roommate but is having some issues with the American roommates which cause the atmosphere to be a bit intense in the room. Nicole is less a social person, likes spending time in the room, and will consider moving off-campus as the only option for next year.

## **Rebecca**

Rebecca is a 19-year-old female student from Shanghai, China, which is the largest city in China. Her roommate is a Chinese student, and they have become close friends with each other, as they met online the prior summer and decided to become roommates via housing selection process. Rebecca got into Boston College as her safety choice and via Regular Decision. Rebecca went to a public high school offering Advanced Placement courses in Long Island, New York and has been in the United States for three years. Rebecca lives with her Chinese roommate in a double room in Upper Campus, and she enjoys the life so far, although it is not as comfortable as home. She primarily socializes with other Chinese students on campus. Majoring in Economics, Rebecca hopes to find a good job in the United States after graduating.

## **Elena**

Elena is a 19-year-old female student from Shanghai, China and is majoring in Economics at the College of Arts and Science. She got into Boston College as Early Admission and was more than happy to be here considering this University is one of her top two besides Georgetown. Elena lives with her Chinese roommate in a double room in Newton Campus and is absolutely loving the residential experience especially with relationships with her roommate. She met her online the prior summer and ended up pairing with each other for housing. Elena went to a small private day school in Baltimore, Maryland, and the residence halls at BC is familiar to her. Next Year, she hopes to either get a decent housing accommodation at Main Campus or move off-campus with other close Chinese friends.

### **Zedd**

Zedd is a 19-year-old male student from Hangzhou, a large city in Southeast China, and is currently an Economics major freshman. Boston College was not his initial target school, but he decided to apply for it after finding out the quality and reputation of the institution. Zedd thinks that living in a residence hall grants him much more freedom than at home where he attended an international high school offering Advanced Placement courses. He lives with two roommates, one Chinese and one American whom both were randomly assigned to him. Zedd chose to go for random assignments because he anticipated a single room in the best possibility and would be “fine living with anyone on earth, to be honest.” The multiculturalism in residential setting makes him feel welcomed and accepted in the community. Next year, Zedd plans to either move to Lower campus or off-campus for housing accommodations.

### **Annie**

Annie is a female student living in Newton Campus and she is from Nanjing,

China, a large city in the Southeast Jiangsu Region in Eastern China. As one of the few Chinese freshmen in the School of Education, she majors in Psychology and Human Development. Annie got into BC because she is interested in the education program and is drawn to the vast educational resources BC has around Boston Area. Boston College is her top choice, and she attended an international high school offering Advanced Placement courses back in Nanjing, China. Annie thinks the residential experience is largely just as expected, except for the parties and the outgoing nature of American students. She also expresses concerns over adaptation and language as a barrier early in the semester. Because Newton Campus is too far, she and her roommate, who she met online and chose to pair with, decide to try to move to Lower Campus next semester.

## **CD**

CD is a freshman, male student who holds a triple major in Finance, Accounting, and Mathematics. He lives in Newton Campus with his Chinese roommate, but unlike most of others, he and his roommate got randomly assigned together, as CD was hoping for an American one. CD went to a private Jesuit high school in Maine for four years and is very familiar with the American culture. He chooses BC because of the University's Jesuit nature. CD is not all satisfied with the residential experience but is fine living there because he only spends time sleeping in the room. CD is exclusively grateful for all the campus organizations and clubs as he joined five of them, and he plans to live off-campus next year. After graduation he hopes to continue in the Law School.

## **Kerry**

Kerry is a female freshman student who is currently undecided in majors at the

College of Arts and Science at Boston College. She has vast interested in the Boston Area, applying to multiple institutions including Tufts, Harvard, and Northeastern University. After only Boston College accepted her, she paid a school visit and committed to BC. Having gone to an American high school in Missouri, she experienced two years of American culture and education settings. Being not so much a social person, she enjoys staying in the hall with her roommates, who she met online with the help of Chinese Student Association and connected before filing for roommate pairing. Spending most time alone or with roommate, she feels isolated at times but admits the community as a welcoming one overall. Next year, she plans to find an apartment off-campus with the same roommate who will be purchasing a car.

### **Choi**

Choi is a freshman, female student with a business major in the School of Business, who she thinks is quite the hassle after a semester of hard work. She is from China but is half Korean. She applied for BC aiming to enroll into the business program, and BC is in her middle range. Choi attended an all-girl private boarding school in Raleigh, North Carolina, so living with others in a dorm is not news to her, although she did spend a year living alone. The small size of the high school and the large community at BC surprised her at first, but because she enrolled into a special leadership residence hall program in Upper Campus, she is feeling welcomed and accepted. She randomly got assigned an American roommate and so far, they are getting along just fine. Being new to the campus, Choi hopes to open up more to the community and interact more with her floormates despite language and cultural barriers she mentioned. Next year, she hopes to secure a residential spot in Main Campus.

### **Jane**

Jane is a female freshman student living in Upper Campus and studying in the College of Arts and Science. She comes from Xiamen, China, a southern provincial seaside town. She grew up attending a traditional Chinese high school and did not consider going abroad until junior summer when she attended a summer college program at Harvard University. She justifies choosing BC as the right choice because “pretty much everyone is middle class and has similar backgrounds, which makes communication easy.” She found her Chinese roommate online the prior summer and connected with each other, before getting randomly assigned another two American roommates. There are some disputes and tension between the two Chinese residents and the American roommates, according to her. Feeling comfortable in the social setting of BC, Jane intends to stay another year on campus housing.

### **Rick**

Rick is a female student who is a freshman at Boston College, and she is from Jiangsu Province, China. She chose the pseudonym because her favorite show is “Rick and Morty”. Rick went to a high school in Salem, Massachusetts, just thirty minutes outside of Boston, which gave her access to visit BC multiple times and every reason to love the University. However, she is still surprised by the heavy schoolwork and the slight alcohol issue when she got here. Living in a force triple with voluntary random room assignment, Rick thinks it is better to live in Newton Campus which is “inconveniently” 1.4 mile away. Rick has no problem socializing and adapting to the college campus but wished BC to upgrade and improve its residential facilities as soon as possible. Rick plans to move off-campus with a couple of friends next year.

### **JP**

JP is a freshman female student majoring in Communications, and she is from

Shanghai, China. She got to know about Boston College when she visited the campus during the summer of her junior year. JP attended a Catholic all-girl boarding school in North Carolina offering Advanced Placement courses, as she also took AP honors classes. Being able to attend her dream school, JP is pretty satisfied with the current condition and environment she is in. she thought about random roommate assignments but ended up finding a Chinese roommate online who matches her personality closely. They too live in a double room in Newton where they have a perfect relationship with each other as best friends. JP wishes to talk to her floormates more and overcome the difficulty of attempting to initiate a conversation.

### **Morty**

Morty is a male freshman from Beijing, China, the capital city, and he attended an international high school where Advanced Placement courses are offered. He is currently undecided but wants to pursue biochemistry in the future. Morty got into BC because this is the best offer, he has gotten in the application season. He lives in Upper Campus with one Chinese roommate who they met the prior summer and linked up, and other two American students who were randomly assigned. Morty enjoys the freedom of college but also stressed the importance of socialization with people from all cultures. Thinking back, he thinks she should have connected more with the community rather than staying in the comfort zone with other Chinese students. Morty plans to live on campus next year through the housing selection for an apartment in Main Campus.

### **Summer**

Summer is a freshman, female student who comes from Beijing, China, and she was drawn to BC because of the mission of the University to care for the better

formation of individuals rather than general education. Admiring BC's humanity approach on education, she got into the University after attending an American private high school in Miami, Florida. BC's residential environment is just as expected, and Summer was surprised to find out all the networking opportunities she has with faculties and employers. She feels pretty welcomed in the residence hall and has a genuinely healthy relationship with her Chinese roommate in the double room where they paired each other up in the housing selection process. She is noticing some cultural shock and is trying to adjust to it. Summer plans to move off-campus next semester.

### **ACE**

ACE is a male, freshman student from Hunan, a major southern province in China. He feels lucky because Boston College is the best ranked school, he received admission from, and he felt in love with it after finding out BC's heritage in sports. ACE attended a traditional Chinese high school back at home and had little knowledge of American colleges before arriving on campus. He is having a frustrating first semester with multiple difficulties to adapt to the campus, the most primary one being the academics, such as class participation and assignment styles. ACE is also having a tough time socializing. Overall, he is not satisfied with his residential experience. ACE lives in a forced triple with a Chinese roommate who was his high school friend, and another American Born Chinese.

### **Barry**

Barry is a male, freshman student from Beijing, China. He attended an international high school offering International Baccalaureate Diploma Program. He first became interested in Boston College after attending summer college program at Cornell University, where he learned about humanity and political science. Currently

he is majoring in sociology. Barry lives in a triple room in the special leadership residence hall which is also Choi's program in Upper Campus. He and the Chinese roommate who he selected the prior summer, and the American roommate who was randomly assigned, are having a great time in the residence hall. Barry spends a lot of time within the community and gives positive feedback on the support and attention BC gives to international students. However, he does point out some potential cultural barriers that are preventing Chinese students from further joining the community. Barry wishes to pursue a law degree in the future and wants to live on campus for another academic year.

A detailed table of participant data is shown below in Table 4.1.

<b>Participants*</b>	<b>Age</b>	<b>Gender</b>	<b>Residence Hall/Neighborhood</b>	<b>High School Type</b>	<b>Roommate</b>
Rebecca	19	Female	Loyola/Upper	International (U.S.)	Chinese
Elena	19	Female	Duchesne/Newton	International (U.S.)	Chinese
Zed	19	Male	Xavier/Upper	China	Both
Kerry	19	Female	Loyola/Upper	International (U.S.)	Chinese
Nicole	19	Female	Gonzaga/Upper	China	Non-Chinese
Jane	19	Female	Gonzaga/Upper	China	Non-Chinese
Summer	19	Female	Kostka/Upper	International (U.S.)	Chinese
Ace	19	Male	Claver/Upper	China	Both
Barry	18	Male	Shaw/Upper	International (China)	Both
Rick	18	Female	Fenwick/Upper	International (U.S.)	Both
Morty	17	Male	Fenwick/Upper	International (China)	<b>Non-Chinese</b>
CD	19	Male	Duchesne E/Newton	International (U.S.)	Chinese
Choi	18	Female	Shaw/Upper	International (U.S.)	Non-Chinese
JP	19	Female	Duchesne W/Newton	International (U.S.)	Chinese
Annie	18	Female	Keyes S/Newton	Chinese	Chinese

\*Pseudonyms to protect confidentiality of participants

*Table 4.2: Participants Data of the Study, Generated February 2019, Boston College*



## **Chapter 5: Findings**

This chapter presents the findings from the study of Chinese international students' sense of belonging in residence halls at BC with the focus on roommate relationships and staff relationships as two key determining factors. The context of the institution and the participants were discussed previously for a better understanding, on an historical and policy level, of the racial climates and the environment of diversity and inclusion at Boston College. This chapter of findings utilized Hurtado et. al (1999, 2012)'s framework for understanding various elements affecting an institution's racial climate (Yao, 2014). The multi-contextual conceptual model of Diverse Learning Environment (DLE) incorporates a wide range of aspects within the higher education realm to construct a clearer picture of diversity and inclusion on campus, as explained in the literature review in Chapter 2. Using a simplified version of his framework which took only the key components necessary for this study, Chapter 4 addressed, in the individual-level dimensions of climate for diversity, the historical, organizational, and compositional context of the research site.

This study demonstrated findings from participant interviews under a primary category of behavioral dimension. The curricular and co-curricular dimensions of campus diversity were also discussed with regards to staff relationships and programming. All three dimensions echo back to the discussion of students' sense of belonging in residence halls, so the concept of sense of belonging serves as a determining, overarching theme throughout the findings from the study.

### **The Behavioral Dimension**

The behavioral dimension of the campus racial climate refers to the context, frequency, and quality of interactions on campus between social identity groups and

their members, which, in this study, the Chinese international students and everyone else. These interactions are categorized into informal and formal interactions (Hurtado 2005; Hurtado et al, 2012) Informal interactions occur in the everyday social interaction between individuals outside campus-designed educational activities. These include roommate and floormate relationships and that between Chinese international students and their counterparts, which is a powerful form of peer-to-peer learning that affects student assessment outcomes.

Formal interactions are often referred to as campus-facilitated interactions that may occur in the curricular or co-curricular settings as the results of intentional educational practices, which include the level of professional and student staff training. Most common formal interactions in this study are initiatives such as residential programming, involvement in student activities, and integrative learning such as learning and living communities. Participants in this study were asked about their experiences with residential staff members and their involvements with campus activities.

Both informal and formal interactions have been captured by assessments of individual behavior in relation to developing sense of belonging, which focuses on making connections.

The findings in the behavioral dimension including a refined and merged high-frequency theme of Cultural Differences which serves as a major factor participants think affect their sense of belonging within the residence hall. The role of language appears both as a barrier and a bridge to adaptation process for Chinese international students. The role of roommates is considered and discussed with an emphasis of how their relationships serve as a culturally First Point Of Contact or a comfort zone (as to

Chinese-Chinese roommates). An overview of other mentionable cultural gaps relating to Chinese students' lived experiences with domestic students were also examined. All these factors contributed to the sense of belonging among Chinese international students.

## **Informal Interaction**

### **A. Role of Languages**

#### **a. "I Get Nervous": Language as a Barrier to Adaptation**

The role of language as a barrier to adaptation continuously rose as a central theme in Chinese international students' experiences. Most participants considered English a top tool and a priority coming into college. Effective English speaking and sometimes writing skills became a huge burden for Chinese international students in the first semester of their college careers. The pressure to speak out, communicate, and use English as an essential everyday skill set in an all-English learning and living environment troubled most participants to some extent. Only a few expressed confidences in their English skills or courage to try overcoming the fear of not speaking good English; conversely, participants show discomfort in communicating effectively with native English-speakers.

Among the 15 participants, 5 attended traditional Chinese high schools offering domestic secondary programs, and the rest of them attended either an international high school with Advanced Placement courses or an American high school with full-time English learning environments. All but one Chinese high school graduates mentioned difficulty with English language. However, even graduating from an international educational setting, some participants, who have been in the English language environment for more than one year, still expressed concern over speaking English with

native speakers. Kerry, who went to an American high school in Missouri, said:

“Sometimes when I am in a big class with many (American) students, I get nervous because I fear I might not speak the best English when answering a question, so there is a pressure on me of not speaking fluently and nicely, and I would stutter at times. And when I do, I feel like the entire auditorium looks at me, and I don’t feel welcomed by this class.” (Kerry)

Also, for participants graduating from international programs in China, the difficulty in language presented pointed to the listening task. Although these participants have prepared themselves with English skills in learning settings by taking courses in English, they were shocked by the total change of percentage of language use in everyday college life and thus had a slow adjustment period in the fall semester:

“I can handle English well in my high school in academic writing and taking AP exams, but when I first got here, I was just completely surprised how fast people speak English. It was really, fast, and I couldn’t catch them at all, no one. I had to pay close attention to lectures and discussion sessions. The language environment really is something you have to sit down and let it sink in... there is no way around it.” (Annie)

Other participants focused on language in the social setting and how the lack of speaking skills slowed and even prevented them from effectively and smoothly making connections with roommates and floormates. Moreover, they mentioned the lack of common topics or subjects of conversations as one of the biggest challenges speaking with domestic students. One participant explained:

“It is really hard to initiate a conversation...I think the only two ways of making friends with American students is either take the same class or have activities together, otherwise you don’t even have common topics to talk with them. Like in Chinese we can talk about hometown and food and stuff.” (JP)

Another participant expressed the same concern, yet from the perspective of popular culture. In her opinion, the lack of common topics of conversation comes from

the large gap in cultural influences, making successful social connection almost impossible:

“The first week we had a floor meeting, and everyone was new to each other, the RA wanted us to share our favorite song and favorite food and favorite movies. I have never heard them before, how am I supposed to react to it? And no one knows mine either, so we tended to gradually refrain from each other’s social connections for sure.” (Annie)

Most commonly, participants indicated the lack of courage to passive speak out because of negative experiences they have had with English when it comes to communicating with domestic students. Barry, who himself was excellent in English language skills, shared an experience of his roommate who was a traditional Chinese high school graduate, having trouble making American friends: “My roommate was not very good at English and he speaks slow and has difficulty composing complex sentences nicely. So sometimes what I feel like is that guys (American students) were a bit impatient with him.” (Barry) Barry then stated that this is not uncommon for Chinese students in their first year to lose confidence after feeling pressured speaking to native speakers and failed to express what they meant to say.

Similar situation happened to ACE, a participant who found himself in extreme difficulty to sustain relationships with American floor-mates even after putting in efforts befriending them. He credited it to him unable to consistently join the chats and American students unwilling to accommodate his language skills during conversations. “At first, I tried to talk to them, and it felt hard to catch up with them. We would still talk, but then eventually it turned into very short conversations and sometimes just saying what’s up. I feel like when they found out you are not that good in English, they will not treat you as nice. They will still be polite, but never asking me to hang out or go to parties.” (ACE)

He continued to state that he has been passively initiating conversations as well, yet the American roommates seldomly comment back, making him also gradually refraining from talking to them at all.

**b. “Just Be Confident”: Language as a Bridge to Adaptation**

Although it may not be uncommon for most Chinese students to face hardship speaking English and thus finding it a barrier, some, in fact, experienced the opposite, that is, using language as a bridge to adaptation to the college campus. One participant, Jane, who attended a traditional Chinese high school, shared that she had no problem connecting with American students and making friends with them: “I did not speak perfect English, but you just got to hang out with them. Hang out with the white girls, don’t be afraid to ask questions, it is not stupid at all. Some of the Americans don’t speak perfect English. Learn from them, there is no harm no foul. Once you tried speaking English like them successfully once, you will become one of them.” (Jane) Jane indicated that being confident is the key of socializing and effectively adapting to the campus culture. She now has a fairly close relationship with most of her American friends. Another participant, Choi, echoed with Jane’s experience in being confident and not fearing making mistakes, saying:

“I live with two American girls and they have American friends everywhere...So when they talk, they use slangs and puns a lot from basically anywhere, but I couldn’t understand so I can just smile at first. I finally decided to ask, and luckily they were nice enough to patiently explain to me everything, and that is some gold experiences.” (Choi)

When Chinese international students faced hardship using language effectively to connect with American counterparts, understandably, most of them turned to their own Chinese community to step into a comfort zone of language and culture. Interestingly, some found it an unconventional way to adapt to Boston College faster.

Chinese language and the community built around it. Almost half of the participants interviewed indicated that they have consciously attempting to get to know other Chinese students in both academic and residential settings, only to find the connection accelerating their mutual adaptation to the University. JP explained,

“When we had our first class, normally everyone sits everywhere, then we would see other Chinese students in the auditorium, and we would start talking in Chinese, then there is no going back...Speaking Chinese in an all-English environment gives you a sense of safety. We would form study groups and share information whenever, which actually helped me know the campus and some general dos and don'ts better.” (JP)

When asked about the degree they hang out with floormates, almost all participants responded that they generally had more interaction with Chinese floormates, only because of one factor: language. Rebecca, a first-year student, stated that “It just feels better when you are speaking the same language in the same hall or studying for the same class. You don't have to pretend to be a Chinese student at BC, you are just a Chinese. And if you meet another Chinese with great English, trust me you will be making American friends as well because you learn faster in your own comfort zone.” (Rebecca) Comfort zone will be continuously mentioned as one of the core vocabularies relating to students' sense of belonging and sense of community at Boston College.

Overall, language was a theme that consistently emerged when participants discussed their interactions with domestic students at BC. English language proficiency was repeatedly mentioned as either a bridge or barrier to the participants' engagement. Participants' mother language, Chinese, also helped with participants' adaptation process by forming comfort zones within academic and residential communities for Chinese international students. However, it is undeniable that the interpersonal

dynamics between Chinese international students and domestic students were heavily influenced by English language skills and ability.

## **B. Role of Roommates**

Roommate relationships are the core issue of this study; thus, it is important to examine and determine the role of roommates among participants in order to justify the actual difference an American roommate or a Chinese roommate can make along the transition into college life. Out of 15 participants, 7 had Chinese roommates, 4 had American roommates, and 4 had both. Many Chinese students indicated that they were assigned American roommates even after they chose Chinese counterparts online already. This is due to the office of residential life distributing residents through the online system and the limited living spaces on campus. The office strived to ensure the best diversity and equality of the pairing and assignment process by having students fill out profile surveys and sort them based on living habits and personal preferences, such as quiet hours and guests. In other words, this residential situation provided a perfect platform for the participants to justifying the question of which roommate assisted their transition to college more, and whether choosing roommates has advantages over random roommate assignments. There are instances where a student may have chosen a roommate, but still got assigned another and end up in a triple room. 66 percent of participants expressed frustration over the living conditions such as the size of the living quarter, meal plans, Air-Conditioning, Heat, and distance from campus. However, most participants were affirmative towards the statement that living in a residence hall with roommates and floormates has had, to various extent, a positive influence on their adaptation.

### **a. American Roommates as a First Point of Contact**



Of the 4 participants who chose to randomly get assigned roommates, all of them indicated the interest to immerse themselves into American culture. They view American roommates as a First Point of Contact (FPOC) for them in the United States which accelerates their comprehension and cognition of American society, culture, and customs. One participant justified that “if you live with American roommate, you will be automatically forced to talk in English, you will know each other’s habits, you will know what he says facetimeing his parents, you will be introduced to his friends as his roomies...you just have to live with him and you will become close with American culture. It’s good because the culture and the community is brought to you. It’s worth the try.” (Morty) Some participants chose to have random assignments because they consider it as a meaningful start of their college career:

“I have never lived with someone in my high school (single room), so I want to get a sense of what it feels like to live with a roommate in a community...I anticipate it to be fun.” (Choi)

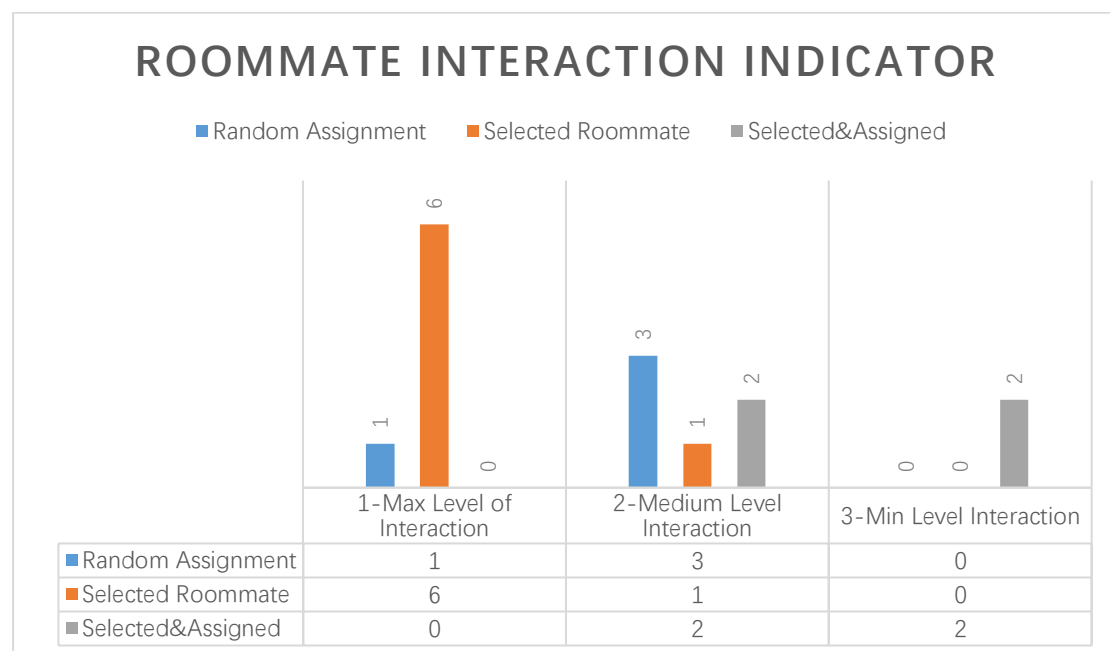
“I have lived in a host family for three years. I can finally get to live with someone my age and experience life in a residence hall, so I went random just to see what surprise I get.” (Rick)

Overall, participants with American roommates experienced a positive assistance on their transition, and they did not experience any mistreatment regarding stereotypes or discrimination. Interestingly, those who chose random assignments and ended up with American roommates would stay with the same choice again, knowing they had the option of pre-selecting a Chinese roommate. Some cited the potential situation of Chinese roommates as barriers against successful and speedy adaptation. Zedd, who lived in a triple room with two roommates, indicated that there are enough opportunities to engage with other Chinese students on campus via other means.

“It would be the best to live with Americans, because you are already in the U.S., why not just embrace the culture? I mean, a Chinese roommate will get

you some familiarity and all, with no buffer time, but getting to know someone new is the real growth here.” (Zedd)

His comment represented most of what participants who chose random assignments think: The hands-on live-in experience with American domestic students builds up a decent sense of belonging by immersing themselves fully with the campus culture. During the interview, every participant was asked to give a Roommate Interaction Indicator: No.1 indicated maximum level of interaction with great relationship, No.2 represented a medium level of interaction with generally good relationship, and No.3 meant a minimal interaction level with a genuinely negative relationship. Results were shown in the table below. Three random assignment participants chose 2, and one chose 1, which reflected a relatively successful roommate relationship with domestic students.



*Table 5.1: Roommate Interaction Indicator*

However, there was a tendency of lack of improved relationship, as cited by one participant. Rick moved in with two American girls, anticipating a great relationship,

yet she found out that their interaction was maintained at a neutral level with no hostility nor improvement. Similar situation happened to Morty as well. They both acknowledged that cultural difference, especially lifestyle, played a pivotal role in causing this situation. Morty cited that “Eventually, we will just be in our room doing different things, we won’t talk much but we are polite to each other. I guess that’s it, but I’m fine with it, because I can hang out with the Chinese students. It is just not as fun as I assumed.” (Morty)

#### **b. Chinese Roommates as a Comfort Zone**

Interestingly, unlike participants with domestic roommates who has begun to see the “relationship ceiling”, those with Chinese roommates were generally having a better experience within the residence hall, and code analysis showed even more positive response of sense of belonging than other participants in the study. 7 of the 15 participants chose to select a roommate also from China, and 6 of them provided a Roommate Interaction Indicator score of 1, which inferred terrific relationships between almost all of them. The key theme consistently and extensively mentioned with regards to having Chinese roommates is the comfort zone of familiarity and the increased sense of belonging caused by similar habits, as most shared their experience positive and justified.

Annie asked herself last summer when the applications were open for roommate selection, and the answer she had for choosing a Chinese roommate is the similarity in living habits. “With Chinese roommates, we are more likely to have the same habits. I don’t like to stay up late and usually go to bed early, and I can accommodate that and negotiate with her, knowing she might have the same sleeping schedule. I fear that with American roommates, we grew up in two different cultures, so there might be larger

differences in that kind of lifestyle, also negotiation and communication over general rules can be hard. I won't even know how to complain about my day properly to an American roommate." (Annie) She further implied a state of harmony can be reached via rooming with students from the same culture, such as agreement on terms within the room. After almost a semester, Annie is feeling "safe and chill" in her room with the roommate, as they would socialize daily and even "invite friends together to my room, play board games and enjoy some Chinese takeout food while having a hearty conversation. Most of these friends are American." (Annie)

Rebecca has gone through the same thoughts and made up her mind choosing a Chinese roommate and had since enjoyed her choice. When pairing up, she specifically looked for Chinese students:

"We look similar and I want to find someone that I want to spend time with. I don't really want an American roommate knowing our lifestyles are not gonna accommodate each other as comfortable as a Chinese roommate does. I went to an American public high school, so I know the differences in lifestyle." (Rebecca)

Similar feedbacks were presented by JP as she stressed that having a Chinese roommate allows for more understanding and less difficulty with general communication. Moreover, similar ethnic and background experiences created an extra layer of trust and rapport.

"In high school I have also lived with an American roommate. I think that with Chinese roommate, we share a similar lifestyle, and because I like to talk a lot, having a Chinese roommate is more comfortable for me. With American roommates I cannot usually have a deep conversation. Also, food is a big thing for me, so with Chinese roommates we can order food together. I mean it's not that American roommates are bad, I am perfectly fine with them, it's just the matter of comfort and familiarity with Chinese roommates that gets you when you are abroad." (JP)

JP followed up approving a great semester with her Chinese roommate, as they spent time together and developed a close relationship in which they two cared for each other and “had each other’s back”. (JP)

Understandably, shared commonalities became important traits for Chinese international students when they justify seeking other Chinese students to be roommates, and such qualities create, according to some participants, sense of belonging and safety within close living quarters and environment, making residence hall rooms second homes. This came not only from participants coming from Traditional Chinese high schools, but also from those who had spent time in the United States already. Elena responded that she intentionally wanted to find a Chinese roommate who also attended an American High School so there is one more thing in common.

“I wanted a Chinese roommate so that besides studying during the day, I can have someone to talk to in Chinese and to communicate when I am back in my room. When the door closes, I don’t have to pretend to be an international student, I am just a Chinese hanging with another Chinese, no pressure, no boundaries.”

According to Elena, she and her Chinese roommate were able to maintain a healthy and close relationship with mutual respect, where commonalities enhanced the sense of belonging, making the living quarters closer to home. The positive experiences with having a Chinese roommate among participants of this study were normally associated with increased sense of safety and trust built by similar lifestyles and background. Noticeably, Chinese roommates did not prevent participants from socializing and bonding with domestic students on campus. With only 108 first-year Chinese students living on campus comparing to the total number of freshmen resident population which tops 2,800, most participants cited that due to the relatively small

international population at Boston College, their level of exposure to the American culture maintained incredibly high. Overall, Chinese international students with Chinese counterparts reflected slightly more positive experience than those with American roommates.

### **c. Mixed Roommates**

Although participants with random room assignments had relatively positive experiences with their domestic counterparts, those who, as previously mentioned, chose a Chinese roommate and yet still got randomly assigned an American roommate, provided and cited relatively negative experiences overall with their residential life on campus, contrary to the two categories of relationships described above.

Findings suggested that a major reason for discomfort and conflicts occurring in mixed roommate situations might be the gap between expectations and reality and the cultural shock that followed in such environments. 3 out of 4 participants in mixed rooms expressed their frustration arriving on campus and getting accustomed to living with two or three roommates from both random assignment and housing selection. Jane, who lives with a Chinese and two American roommates, cited that she was not sure what to expect at first. She did not know the domestic roommates, and neither did they know her.

“We were just put together, so we just had to live with it. We two moved in a bit earlier, and so when they moved in as well, there was a sense of slight insecurity and uncertainty, like, **who are you two?**” (Jane)

Jane’s two American roommate later proposed to put a curtain across the room to split the two Chinese students from them, which further isolated the Chinese students and intensified the hostility between roommates. Jane felt that she would not necessarily call it a discrimination yet claimed that her American roommates has not had any

positive impacts on her regarding adaptation and creating a welcoming environment.

Another participant, ACE, who lived in a forced triple room with his chosen Chinese roommate and an American roommate, indicated that limited physical space and living quarters might have been the issue with discomfort in between roommates of different cultures. “The room is too crowded, so none of us actually stay in the room. I mean, what is comfort when you share a bunker bed with someone?” (ACE) He also expressed frustration over difficulty of balancing interactions between Chinese and American roommates. The more he hangs out with his Chinese roommate, the more distanced his communication with the American roommate tends to get. Although there are not any foreseeable potential conflicts and the status quo of interaction remain on a neutral level (meaning just essential conversation and greet and meet), for Chinese students who were eagerly looking to whole fully adapt into the campus environment, the mixed roommate situation is less of assistive towards fostering a positive sense of belonging.

### **C. Formal Interaction**

Provided that many of the formal interactions according Hurtado et al (2012) are considered as part of international practice in curricular and cocurricular spheres, it is thus of great importance to examine how Chinese International students are affected by co-curricular initiatives around residence halls. Formal interactions also relate back to partly to the institutional policies, reflecting its commitment to diversity. This study worked with BCORL and seeks to find out how the practices of on-site residential staff influence their relationships fostered with Chinese international students, thus affecting either positively or negatively, their sense of belonging on campus.

#### **a. Resident Advisors/Resident Directors**

Participants of this study were asked how they relate to their resident advisors, resident directors, and to mention specific accounts where they felt the residential staff members made a difference in their adaptation process at Boston College. Findings suggested that several practices by residential staff members resulted in positive feedbacks and effectively enhanced Chinese international students' sense of belonging in residence halls. Those practices centered around the theme of community-building and included appropriate availability and approachability; passive outreach; effective diversity and inclusive programming, and finally but fundamentally, clarity and responsibility of residential policies. On the contrary, this section also samples a number of ineffective practices and how they contributed negatively to international students' living experiences.

**b. “Let me know”: Availability and Approachability**

Out of 15 participants, only 2 have had negative experiences or encounters with the residential staff, which they specifically wished the professionalism could improve. Most of the participants considered residential staff, especially the live-in resident advisor in their residence hall a pivotal first point of contact and a reliable source of support when it comes to life on campus. Many accounts and excerpts pointed to RAs being highly accessible, available, and approachable during daily encounters. One means of showing availability is the establishment of online platforms such as social media groups and contacts. JP lived in a double room and once had some concerns over roommate issues. When she messaged the RA on GroupMe, she instantly replied and made an appointment with her for a one-on-one, which eventually resolved the issue the same day. JP commented:

“I talked to her about room and school and expressed my concerns, she was quick to react and very helpful...ever since then, whenever I felt like I had some



difficulties, I feel safe reaching out to her.” (JP)

Other participants like CD and Rick, observed that their RAs were “around all the time”, which made them feel secure and safe. RAs’ availability can also be shown by going the extra mile when international student is in need. Both Morty and Nicole mentioned their RAs’ kind assistance upon their early arrival in the summer of 2018. Morty arrived on campus three days earlier than the orientation date and had to check-in to the residence hall during RA training sessions, he recalled:

“He was kind and helped me set up everything here, and even gave me a pre-orientation orientation, walked me around the campus, and introduced me to other RAs in the complex...He is the reliable guy I actually feel good talking to and I count on him.” (Morty)

Participants agreed that during the first month of the academic year, it is pivotal for RA to “show up” and be around to address issues and resolve concerns. As both a residential staff and an upperclassman student, increased and enhanced availability created a strong sense of safety for international students, sending them a message that indicate they belong.

### **c. “Let us talk about it”: Passive Outreach**

What might be the most important traits or practices demonstrated by RAs and RDs that had international Chinese students’ approval and affirmation was the actively and passively reaching out to residents via multiple platform to make sure their voices are heard, and needs addressed. Some participants particularly mentioned check-ins for personal, behind-the-door conversations. Annie cited her RA as being very caring because,

“Every two weeks, she’d check in with me, sometimes a quick online chat, sometimes in person. I will meet her in her room and express my feelings, and

she would give me some constructive advice.” (Annie)

The positive attitude shown by the RA to actively reach out for a quick conversation resulted in Annie’s trust and now she passively asks the RA for a conversation when she feels like there is an imminent problem. Another participant, Kerry, also had her RA reach out to find out the need for a private chat about academic and social life at Boston College to destress. (Kerry) A male participant, CD’s RA was also described by him as being incredibly “active”. The RA would check in personally with him twice a semester to make sure everything is going on smoothly around him.

The act of professional passive outreach from the residential director, a supervising position in residence life, could also bring about positive feedbacks which result in a higher satisfaction of Chinese international students’ residential experiences. Both Barry and Elena expressed their praise to their respective RAs, saying the frequency of emails sent out by the residential staff is informative and professional; Barry specifically indicated that “Our RD bombs us with emails, which is very good. Emails keep us residents on the line, aware of what’s going on.” Ultimately, the attitude of passive outreach fostered a welcoming and encouraging atmosphere within the residential community, affecting Chinese international students positively. By letting the residents know “I am here” and “let’s talk about it”, it constructed an inclusive environment for those who were vulnerable to sudden, unaccustomed cultural shock.

#### **d. “I attend every week”: Effective Programming**

Participants of this study expressed strong interest towards the residential programs hosted by one or more of the residential staff members and a majority of them showed approval and appraisal to the execution of the programs. Inclusive, meaningful, and fun floor or building programs draw residents together and build a sense of

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community with mutual understanding. Barry, a resident in a small hall, thinks the RA gets really creative when doing floor programs.

“They really think out of the box...one program he hosted is writing a letter to future you, where we would write a letter to ourselves and open it two years from now. This program really got us thinking deeply and I am excited to see what two years of college here can change me.” (Barry)

Elena and 4 other participants enjoyed intercultural programming very much. At times, RAs hosted potluck dinner, inviting residents from around the world to share their cultural and cuisine heritages. In November, many residence halls in U Campus hosted pumpkin carving competitions, which were new to Chinese international students who never celebrate Halloween. They felt like these inclusive programs promoted diversity among residents, both international and domestic, and RA's creativity and care to attention deserves credit. Again, with those programs, a community was built for everyone for better interpersonal interactions between students.

On a side note, participants also mentioned general programming hosted by RAs that has become a BC tradition, including HOOT, Hang Out On Tuesday, and HOWL, Hang Out Wednesday Late, a series of program where residents gather, enjoy snacks or late night food, and talk about life in general. Many Chinese international students were fond of that because most times that is a terrific chance to practice speaking English as well as socialize with other American students in the community.

#### **e. Residential Policies**

One of the most distinctive international Chinese students anticipate coming into college was the restrictions and limitations of residence halls, some most of the participants have never comprehended before. This created a barrier between international residents and successful implementation and enforcement of residential

policies. During RA and RD training at Boston College, RAs were instructed and briefed on how residential policies should be introduced and made aware. Some participants cited and credited RAs for understanding the residential policies well and explaining them with patience to international students, while a number of participants disapproved their RAs' lack of effort enforcing policies in the hallway, such as quiet hours and alcohol consumption.

JP shared her encounter last semester where a red tab securing the window screen was broken in the room, posing a potential safety hazard. According protocols and policies of the hall, both roommates would be fined and mandated a conversation with the RD. JP had a wonderful experience during the conversation and understood most of the protocol from RD's patient explanations.

Some other participants feedbacks revealed residential staff's professional knowledge could play a role in building a positive image among first year international students. Zedd was particularly impressed by his RA emphasizing during their first several floor meetings, the importance of consent in a healthy relationship. "This is very nice, as I never learned it before. The RA really cares about our safety and happiness." (Zedd)

However, in some instances, complaints also came from international Chinese students citing residential staff members' unsatisfying effort enforcing some of the dorm room protocols, one of them being breaking up social events such as parties, which generated loud noises. Morty thought that RAs need to "do a better job stopping parties", as well we Elena, who cited "Sometimes the RA do not really break up the parties in the lounge until 2 am". Another example mentioned by participants which they thought negatively contributed to their living experience on campus is RA's

mediation and reconciliation of roommate issues. Jane, who encounters a roommate curtain issue, said that she reached out to the RA but “she doesn’t really do anything but to suggest us dine together more...she doesn’t even bother taking a look or having a conversation”. (Jane) Overall speaking, the performance of residential staff, from all perspectives, including professionalism, practice, programming, and policies, were all magnified living together with the residents, and could really strongly influence international students’ feeling of community and belonging in their first year.

### **Summary of Behavioral Dimension, Informal, and Formal Interactions**

This chapter examined the participants feedback and perspectives of their lived experiences in the residence halls at Boston College campus. Overall, participants in this study had a little, but not critical, difficulty adapting to living on campus during their first year compared to Yao’s previous study. The pivotal role of language was a major factor in that it was the determining factor of most barriers to most participants and contributed to several themes that emerged from this study. On the other hand, cultural differences in everyday life also became an overarching topic of participants’ discomfort. Most participants had a relatively quick and successful adaptation into Boston College. Formally, residential staff’s presence and practice also helped build a strong sense of community positively.

Using a simplified DLE framework by Hurtado (2012) to apply to BC institutional context, this study found that language affected interpersonal relationships in informal interactions and was both a barrier to social and academic adaptation, and a bridge for intercultural connection in the residence halls. Most participants who cited language as a barrier expressed their concerns of unfamiliarity with English especially in the speaking aspect and the fear of making mistakes, and the lack of confidence

promoted by unsuccessful encounters with domestic students largely affected participants' sense of belonging on campus. Given this situation, some turned to the Chinese student community where they shared the same language and found that immersing themselves in the BC Chinese community helped accelerate their adaptation process. By studying and learning together, participants created a comfort zone which led to quicker pace of familiarization with the campus culture. Because of the relatively small Chinese student population proportion wise, no participant expressed any dissatisfaction with the Chinese community on campus. Instead, small social groups shared enhanced interconnected sense of belonging, which indicated similar rationale when it comes to roommate relationships.

Roommate relationships centered around whether having a Chinese roommate or an American roommate better assisted with the adaptation process. Some participants cited the importance of having an American roommate to assist in the transition to college, and those who choose randomly to assign an American roommate did see improvement in their language skills and communicative capabilities. They justified as a way to conform to the norms of American culture faster. However, most participants still choose to have a Chinese roommate selected because they foster a stronger sense of belonging by creating a private, close-proximity home-alike space with shared commonalities in language, culture, and lifestyles. These participants cited this comfort zone as a major influence on their increased sense of community and belonging. The only negative impact of participants' sense of belonging came from the situation where Chinese roommates and American roommate reside in a mixed environment. Incidents of stereotypes and microaggression were mentioned and, as a result, less satisfying feedbacks from the participants. The overall trend at BC pointed to a positive connection between both Chinese-Chinese roommate and Chinese-American

roommate relationships, only the former slightly stronger than the latter regarding sense of belonging.

Participants from this study also pointed out the importance of residential staff in enhancing the sense of belonging. RAs and RDs at Boston College strived to foster an improving relationship with international students. Their professionalism in practice are cited in four major areas: availability, outreach, programming, and residential policies. Participants experienced increased sense of belonging brought by the community. However, certain lack of multiculturalism or mediation of roommate issues were also mentioned by participants as an area for improvement for the residential staff.

At the end of interviews, participants were asked to assess a score from 1 to 10 that best described their overall residential experience at BC. The score chart indicated that those with Chinese roommates reflected a slightly higher score. Similarly, those who attended international secondary schools also cited higher scores than participants who attended traditional high schools, as seen in chart 2.2 and 2.3 below.

All the findings above have implications for policy and practice, including recommendations for residential life professionals and student affairs staff in general. The findings also have valuable implications for future institutional research on the Chinese student population, which are discussed in the next chapter.

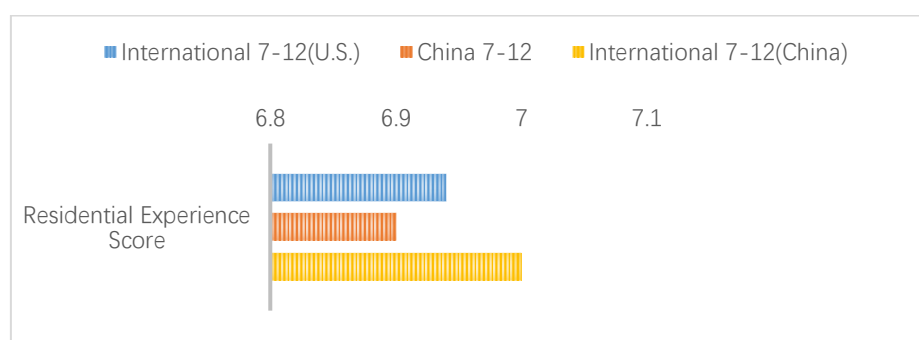
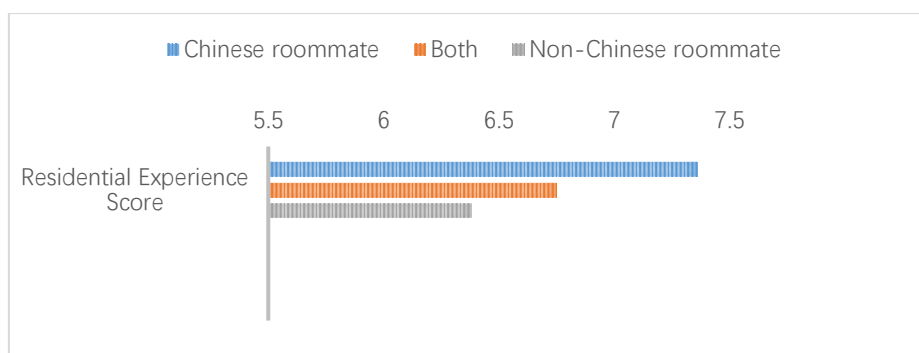


Table 5.2, Residential Experience Score with participant high school background.



*Table 5.3, Residential Experience Score with participant roommate demographics*

## **Chapter 6: Discussions, Recommendations, and Concluding Thoughts**

The purpose of this study was to examine Chinese international students' sense of belonging in the residence halls at Boston College. The study focused on the expectations and perceptions participants have of their interactions with domestic students on college campus. The relationships with their roommates and with staff members were examined to discuss the sense of belonging and factors that affect it. Sense of belonging is an important concept to examine since it often lead to success and persistence in college (Haustmann et al., 2007; Strayhorn, 2012; in Yao, 2014, p. 132) The findings contributed to the existing literature on campus racial climates as well as intercultural interconnectedness, however, the inclusion of international Chinese students is an unique focus for this particular study. An overview of discussions that stem from the findings was provided in this chapter as well as some implications for practice and policy for the institution. It also addressed recommendations for future research, while concluding with a summary of this study.

The results of this study were covered with an overarching theme of sense of belonging and factors that affect it which includes language barriers, cultural differences, roommate relationships, and residential staff relationships. Language



continually appeared as both a barrier and a bridge to participants' sense of belonging and community on campus due to the lack of proficiency in speaking and listening. This is consistent with other studies about the influence of language skills on international students' adaptation and acculturation (Briguglio & Smith, 2012, Li, Chen, & Duanmu, 2010, Yao, 2014, p. 134). Two participants felt isolated from the residential community because of their inability to initiate or follow conversations. Some others found meaningful interactions with domestic students to be extremely limited, which created barriers and a sense of disconnection when residing in the halls. All statements correlate with literature from Li, Chen, and Duanmu (2010), which reported that language barriers affect all parts of Chinese students' lives in American universities (Yao, 2014).

Other participants, like Kerry and Barry, indicated the lack of interactions came from the pressure and fear of making mistakes in academic settings. In other words, the anxiety of "not speaking good English" led to a lack of confidence to approach native English speakers, which were existent, yet not common, in residence halls, which partially affirmed with a previous study done on Chinese international students (Yao, 2014), where its findings suggested students expressing concerns over not being able to speak to American students socially confidently enough in residence halls that led to withdrawal in campus life.

Cultural differences also served as a major barrier when it came to influencing students' adaptation process in residence halls. One significant finding related to cultural difference was that participants who chose to live with American roommates at BC experienced relatively few cases of having trouble connecting with domestic students, claiming that befriending them was not a difficult task but took time. However, a small number of participants still expressed the feeling of a cultural ceiling where

communications with American students maintained at a moderate level because of lack of common conversation topics. Several participants who chose to live with Chinese roommates also cited the importance of deep conversations as a tool for improved roommate relationships. Annie thought that living with an American roommate prevented deeper connections from being established, and cultural difference would eventually only lead to an intermediate level of relationship which does not contribute to adaptation much. Asian international students tend to have more difficulty adjusting to the new campus environment and connecting to domestic students when compared to students from other countries, primarily due to larger cultural gaps and social norms (Sherry et al., 2009; Yan & Berliner, 2011; Yao, 2014)

Microaggression was a topic of interest in this study because of its alarming appearance in the interviews. Microaggression is among one of the issues that relates to Title IX on college campuses. There were two examples of potential microaggression on campus, mentioned by participants which had created a feeling of humiliation and insecurity. Kerry mentioned when she was at a social scene and consumed some alcohol, and the American students were surprised by the fact that she knew how to drink, before starting to call her a “Party Girl” every time since. Another count by Zedd indicated that his roommate assumed him to be inherently wealthy because they were able to study abroad and get well-dressed. These two counts are typically categorized as environmental microaggressions which relates to previous conceptualization due to lack of intercultural awareness and stereotypical background (Kim & Kim, 2010; Houshmand, Spanierman, and Tafarodi, 2014)

Another finding pertained to the Chinese community at Boston College. As in Yao’s (2014) study participants in this study spoke openly about social interactions and

interconnections with Chinese students on campus, a familiar cultural community in a foreign environment. Yao's finding suggested Chinese students at Michigan State University were deeply attached to the larger Chinese community to an extent where they locked themselves in the ethnic circle in residence halls in order to find sense of belonging on campus. However, while participants' sense of belonging was associated with the larger Chinese community at Boston College it was not always, linked closely with it. Many participants expressed normal socialization with American students as well as with their Chinese counterparts. It was as though the Chinese community was a factor but was not determining and critically enough to solely foster their sense of belonging.

This indicated that the promotion of understanding between different student groups does not necessarily depend on structural diversity, a numerical representation of diverse groups on campus. Rather, it depends on individual institutional and personal encounters. All but two participants had explicitly negative experiences with domestic roommates, all other participants had somewhat positive interactions with domestic students and staff members. This finding is different from the finding of Yao's (2014) study. She found most participants in her study struggling with negative roommate encounters that had created burdens for quality relationships throughout the schoolyear.

This study showed that participants at Boston College generally felt a good sense of belonging regardless of the roommates they lived with or the communities they interacted with. There was only a slight difference between residing with American roommates and Chinese roommates, which was much less severe than the results found by Yao (2014). The reason for this difference in finding may be that individual, institutional and contextual variations played an important role in determining students'

adaptation and sense of belonging. Also, it is possible that the relatively sparse representation of Chinese students in residence halls (only 3 percent among freshmen residents), meant they were involuntarily exposed to the environment which sped up their acclimatization.

As a partially replicated study from Yao (2014), there were differences and similarities in findings which might have been caused by various reasons. Similar results, such as language barriers and cultural differences, might be caused by the commonalities of Chinese international students, whilst differences in sense of belonging and gap between different roommates might be caused by context-specific conditions, which suggests the need for institutions to collect data respectively and individually. International student experiences prior to higher education may also have played a role in shaping and students' adaptation skills.

There is one final take-away from how the residence hall can be a “compelling environment for shaping students' sense of belonging” (Johnson et al., 2007). Residence halls support students' socialization and sense of community, as participants stated. All participants felt extremely safe in the room and on the floor, some felt comfortable, and the two participants who had negative roommate experiences tended to enjoy the sense of community less. Overall, participants conform a strong sense of belonging with the University and, if not, the residence halls. Understandably, all participants spoke about their adjustments from expectations and anticipations pre-departure, to reality on campus over the first few weeks and months. This is aligned to the findings of other recent studies. As first year students, the participants in this study are particularly vulnerable. The first semester at university tends to be the most critical in ensuring students' success and persistence (Astin, 1993; Pascarella & Terenzini,

2005, Yao, 2014), especially for international students who must navigate a completely foreign educational and societal culture (Marginson et al., 2010)

In the end, sense of belonging is an individualistic construct that requires self-reflection on one's interactions with other students, where many other factors also play important roles. Thus, institutions and offices, for example, office of residential life, ought to consider meticulously, what policies and practices they can implement to provide a positive living environment for all students, including those from other cultures.

### **Implications for Practice**

Based on the findings, four specific suggestions for Boston College, as the context-specific location of this research, that could improve the campus and residential climate for Chinese international students were developed for further discussion within the institution. These suggestions were:

- Changes to housing assignment infrastructure,
- Introduction of intercultural training for staff,
- Assessment and promotion of campus resources, and
- Modifications to first-year experience and orientation.

Many of the suggestions are based on both the findings of this study and the current global trend of two mainstream theories of internationalization: internationalization at home (IaH) and internationalization of curriculum (IoC). The recommendations for practice are presented in a broad manner so that they are applicable at other higher education institutions beyond Boston College.

### **Improvement of Housing Assignment Infrastructure**

Boston College Office of Residential Life runs a housing assignment infrastructure that is web-based and choice-based. Random assignments are generated to be fair for every first-year student coming in. Students who choose to select roommates also have the option of cancelling or opting out. Most of the participants in this study went for this option while a number of others chose random assignments.

Tolman (2017) introduced a roommate pairing program to enhance international students' satisfaction, where American roommates who are voluntarily trained with multicultural awareness are intentionally paired with Chinese students. The intervention resulted in international students' positive feedback. Boston College could consider initiating such program on campus. Although Boston College has a system of applicant profiles available for freshmen students to fill out so that their roommates will be the ones who match their preferences to the largest extent, it is still suggested that the office improve the profiling scheme. For example, adding an option of whether a student wants domestic roommates only. Also, for students who had already chosen a roommate in hope to be assigned to a double room, make sure to still have them fill out the roommate profile, so that in the situation of having to place students in triple or quadruple rooms, the preferences can assist with the final decision. Also, the Office of Residential Life should consider refining and improving the section in the profile where students answer lifestyle questions. For example, Jane and ACE had a negative living experience due to differences in domestic student lifestyles and habits such as quiet hours and social frequency. This type of configuration is likely a beneficial method to ensure that Chinese students live with roommates that share similar lifestyles. Finally, office of residential life should consider distributing Chinese students evenly and sparsely across the campus if applicable, so that the concern about large Chinese community within one hall is minimized.

## **First-Year Experience and Orientation**

Language skills continuously surfaced as one of the most pivotal factors in the participants' experiences with domestic students. Thus, there is a need for Chinese students to learn about American culture and practice languages via interactions as early as possible, so they are exposed to the linguistic environment. The coordination of first-year experience as well as orientation with the office of residential life can bring international freshmen a better kickstart and a buffer zone for the switch in language, and these programmatic efforts should come both in formal and informal ways.

Informal efforts should begin prior to the international student arrival on campus, early in the summer for the academic year and Thanksgiving for spring semester. The first-year experience team could, for example develop an outreach program introducing American culture and university-specific terms to incoming Chinese students. Social Media, especially collaboration with senior-class Chinese student organizations are pivotal in promoting the efforts. For example, Chinese student Association and the university can cooperate on the popular social platform of WeChat to push and post interesting cultural facts and videos containing vocabularies and norms that incoming students may need to know. In the meantime, it is suggested that the on-campus transition programs should work with higher level Chinese students as mentors could be paired with freshmen students so there is an informal first point of contact upon arrival. At Boston College, the Chinese mentoring program has been established by the Chinese Student and Scholars Association, but not with a joint institutional effort with neither the office of first-year experiences nor the vice president of student affairs.

Formal measures should take place during and after orientation. It is suggested that extra sessions on American culture be held during orientation. Some participants

had suggested a lack of confidence befriending other students due to travelling and unfamiliarity with the campus and indicated that most American students had known friends from their orientation sessions in the summer. The orientation program team could potentially merge dates or potentially facilitate the orientation so that international and domestic students are able to interact with each other during this initial period when new friendships are being established. George Kuh (2015) suggested the use of Student engagement Data at multiple points throughout their first year to determine their college readiness and change of mental status, which could be applied to international students. Both Beginning College Survey of Student Engagement (BCSSE) and College Student Expectations Questionnaire (CSXQ) could be tailored to first-year Chinese students for assessment, which potentially promote high-impact practices to enhance sense of belonging for this group.

### **Intercultural, Diversity and Inclusion: Staff Training**

Residential life staff members are the first point of contact with international students and perhaps a most frequent, closest relationship with them on campus. Meaningful peer interactions also require well-trained residential staff members who are committed to creating intercultural interactions with all of their residents (Yao, 2014). Training on intercultural awareness, inclusion, and diversity thus became imperative for all residential staff, especially the resident advisor/assistants.

All participants were asked on their relationships with the staff members, and most of them reflected a positive image by residential staff at BC. they highlighted the RAs for being caring and available. As current standards and practices are encouraged to maintain, one cannot assume that professional staff are prepared to work specifically with international students. Staff members ought to go through extensive and



intentional training based on the needs of international population campus in order to better understand them. They must be trained with cultural sensitivity, particularly with cultural norms, social behaviors, and residential policies. BC has a series of RA training manuals and courses which focus on inclusion and diversity, which mentioned racism and microaggression. However, they did not specify guidelines of interacting with students from another distinctive culture. It is also suggested that staff training incorporates programming designs for heavier emphasis on multicultural awareness, in which some programs promote diversity in the residential community. One possible measure is inviting former Chinese students who were residents in halls to share their experiences and inviting veteran staff members to guide novice RAs to generate ideas of treating international students equally, respectfully, and inclusively. Another measure is to extensively adopt the Intercultural Development Inventory model (IDI, Hammer, 2015) in staff training. IDI is theory-based assessment which provides practical information and actionable results for staff's intercultural competence and allow for professional development, it is well-adopted by higher education institutions, and Boston College could use its support for wider organizational use.

### **Assessment and Promotion of Campus Resources**

During the interviews, most participants indicated that they knew little to nothing about available campus resources regardless of their functions and services. Even if the study intentionally asked about their knowledge of resources on campus for mental health issues, most still expressed a total confusion. This phenomenon could be caused by multiple reasons. First, the effort to promote these resources, such as the Career Center, the Office of Health Promotion, the Campus Activity Board, the University Counseling Center, and the Women's Center, were not reaching out

extensively to the international student population, so that many were unaware of the services they could have provided. Only a few participants had heard of the counselling center because one or more of their American friends had had encounters with it. Secondly, a reason might have been that residential staff members had not been transparent or clear enough in explaining the functionality of those offices and departments, which calls for a better effort to promote them. Lastly, many international students could think that asking for help with regards to emotional or mental issues is something that's shameful. In this case, the University should put forth extensive educational outreach efforts, positively influencing international students through programs and peers by ensuring them that mental and emotional distress should not be something disgraceful and embarrassing.

### **Recommendation for Future Research**

There are three areas recommended for further research on understanding the sense of belonging of Chinese international students and their relationship with roommates and residential staff members. These recommendations include extending the research into a potential intervention or longitudinal study. Examining across different institutional types and exploring the perspectives of domestic students and staff.

These recommendations come from the limitations of this research study. Due to the restriction in length and time frame, only first year students were in the range for participants. This study could hence be extended into an intervention research that observes changes in control and variable groups. Initially, sense of belonging is recorded. With the implementation of programs within the residential setting, the researcher then comes back to examine the changeover groups to determine if an

intercultural program, for example, has been effective. Another alternative is conducting a longitudinal study to examine the change of sense of belonging over a longer, extensive period, preferably over one to two years. According to other studies, Increased length of stay at host institutions positively influenced the students' psychological well-being (Wilton & Constantine, 2003; Yao, 2014, p. 161)

This study was done at a mid-sized, private research university with Catholic affiliations in a suburban setting. The institution itself has its unique demographics, financial situations, as well as other determining factors that could influence and change participants' feedbacks. A similar research study was done in 2014 by Professor Christina Yao at Michigan State University, a large, land-grant, public research university in a relatively rural setting with a significantly larger Chinese community. The findings from two studies are somewhat different. It would be interesting to see further replica studies involving international students' psychological well-being conducted at another institutional type, even in another national setting, for better cross-comparison and cross-referencing.

A final possibility for future research points to the participants' floormates, roommates, and residential staff members, which this study did not cover. The perceptions from their angle could tell a very different story, and additional information could explicitly help better understand the nature of interactions between Chinese students and domestic students, as an extra lens of observation and analysis to examine Chinese international students' experiences.

## **Conclusion**

This study identified factors that influence international Chinese students' sense of belonging in residence halls at Boston College. The research was focused

specifically on roommate relationships and residential staff engagement. Sense of belonging is a basic human need to fit into a group or a community and is especially relevant for first year Chinese students who are particularly vulnerable as they navigate through a completely foreign, unfamiliar environment with potential challenges and barriers. This study found that language barriers exceed all challenges as the primary problem international students face both formally in classrooms and informally in social settings. At the same time, cultural differences create disconnections between Chinese and American roommates. However, participants in this study reflected that their adaptation process was not as hard as they had anticipated, and extreme discomfort cases were individual. In Boston College residence halls, most gained a satisfying sense of belonging and formed relationships with their peers, Chinese or domestic. Living with Chinese roommates assisted participants' adaptation, and positive residential staff practices helped to create a sense of community and belonging for students. The findings of this study have important implications in a climate of fast-growing international student populations. Universities, each individually and independently, will need to develop and adapt their support structures as well as their strategic planning of internationalization to better cater the needs for diverse campus culture, serving both 21<sup>st</sup>-century domestic and international students' population on the steady rise.

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ZHA QIANG Ontario Institute for Studies in Education, University of Toronto, & Canada. *Internationalization of higher education: Towards a conceptual framework*

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