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Behind Closed Doors: How Roommate and Staff Relationships Shape Chinese International Students' Belonging in Residence Halls

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ABSTRACT: *This phenomenological qualitative study examines the impact of both structured and unstructured interactions on the sense of belonging among first-year Chinese international students (CIS) in U.S. residence halls. Guided by Hurtado's (2012) diverse learning environments and Yao's (2014) literature on international student belonging, this study focuses on roommate relationships and residential staff engagement. Fifteen interviews revealed that belonging was more influenced by interactional processes than by the nationality of the roommate(s). Common patterns included cultural proximity, interaction quality, and opportunities to resolve conflicts. Staff who were visible, approachable, and responsive strengthened their sense of belonging through outreach and policy. Language was a cross-cutting factor affecting participation in and perceptions of residential experiences in both contexts. Situated in a post-COVID-19 context of social fragmentation, the study reframes belonging as an ongoing, context-dependent process influenced by peer relations and institutional climates. This study highlights how everyday support and clear expectations from staff can transform challenging moments into connections and engagement in residence communities for CISs.*

Keywords: Chinese international students, residential life, sense of belonging, internationalization at home, roommate relationships, student affairs

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INTRODUCTION

International student enrollment in U.S. higher education has steadily increased over the past two decades, despite recent slowdowns caused by geopolitical disruptions and global health crises (Institute of International Education, 2023; Yan & Berliner, 2011). This trend reflects the ongoing emphasis of higher education on internationalization, which aims to enrich campus diversity, promote intercultural competence, and strengthen global engagement (de Wit & Leask, 2017). International students have become crucial to the higher education ecosystem, contributing an estimated \$43.8 billion to the U.S. economy during the 2023--2024 academic year (Open Doors, 2024). Supporting their academic success and cultural adaptation has become a strategic priority across institutions.

Among the 1.13 million international students in the U.S. during the 2023--24 academic year, those from mainland China constitute one of the largest groups, totaling approximately 277,400, despite a modest year-over-year decline (Open Doors, 2024). They continue to represent nearly a quarter of the international student population. This demographic prominence amid shifting global mobility patterns, rising tuition costs, visa challenges, and increasing geopolitical uncertainty highlights the urgent need for more nuanced scholarly research and adaptable institutional practices that go beyond enrollment numbers to understand Chinese international students' (CIS) lived experiences.

Despite this growing presence, Chinese international students (CIS), usually referring to individuals from the People's Republic of China enrolled in U.S. undergraduate programs on F-1 visas, remain underrepresented in research on first-year residential experiences in U.S. higher education, with scholars cautioning against predatory inclusion or tokenism (Kwadzo, 2014; Yao, 2017). Many existing studies focus on formal curricula, such as academics and pedagogies, while paying limited attention to the hidden curricula of student life, campus services, and community building (Zhou et al., 2008; Li, Chen, & Duanmu, 2010; Leask, 2001). This gap is especially noticeable given the critical role of on-campus residence halls in shaping students' integration and well-being. CIS's daily social and emotional experiences are often oversimplified or overlooked, despite the significant perceived and lived cultural distance between Chinese and American norms, including beliefs, political ideologies, customs, norms, and daily practices (Gore, 2020; Malay, 2023). These differences are particularly evident in shared living environments, where interpersonal dynamics and unspoken expectations can strongly influence one's sense of belonging.

Residence halls in U.S. higher education are not merely places to live; they are designed as developmentally rich environments that promote peer engagement and intercultural learning (Blimling, 2015). *Residential life* refers to the system of personnel, services, and experiences related to living in university-operated on-campus housing. It includes community programming, housing policies, student conduct, health and safety protocols, and support services aimed at student development and belonging. Resident advisors (RAs) are student leaders who live in halls, whereas resident directors (RDs) are full-time professional staff. For first-year students, residence halls often serve as the most immediate site of

intercultural contact and present both risks and opportunities for adjustment (Yang, 2015). Residential life professionals play a central role in shaping inclusive and supportive communities.

However, for many international students, transitioning into such communal spaces creates cultural, linguistic, and emotional challenges (Yan & Berliner, 2010; Yao, 2014). These tensions often surface in close-quarters interactions with roommates or navigating institutional systems through residential staff. These microenvironments are further shaped by broader institutional and sociopolitical dynamics, such as a racial climate and multicultural awareness (Hurtado et al., 2012). During the first semester, peer relationships, staff support, and residential spaces on campuses are especially influential for international students' adjustment, engagement, persistence, and development of institutional belonging (Astin, 1993; Marginson et al., 2010; Yang, 2025). In turn, a stronger sense of belonging is associated with greater academic engagement and motivation and improved academic performance, and recent intervention work shows that staff-led practices can bolster well-being (Glass, 2014; Hsieh & Watson, 2025).

This study explores how first-year undergraduate CISs perceive and navigate their residential experiences in U.S. higher education. It focuses on two key domains, (1) roommate relationships and (2) residential staff engagement, as influential factors in shaping their sense of belonging. We distinguish structured interactions (e.g., institutionally sanctioned efforts, staff-led programs, scheduled check-ins, and misconduct hearings) from unstructured interactions (e.g., casual conversations, shared spaces, and spontaneous socialization) to describe the varied contexts in which belonging is built or strained. Through a qualitative phenomenological approach, this study explores the day-to-day realities of residence and how cultural identity, institutional dynamics, and power structures shape these experiences. The research draws on in-depth interviews with students at a private, predominantly white institution (PWI) in the northeastern United States. It captures how participants make meaning of their residential experiences, negotiating cultural differences, language barriers, and institutional support while encountering moments of connection, disconnection, community, and isolation.

To align theory and contribution, this study is guided by Hurtado et al.'s (2012) diverse learning environments (DLEs) framework and Strayhorn's (2012) concept of a sense of belonging to situate climate and behavior in residence settings. We extend the frame with international student belonging literature that criticizes integration as belonging and emphasizes heterogeneity among Chinese students (Yao, 2014; Heng, 2019). These framing positions represent roommate relations and staff interactions as microecologies that can reproduce or resist assimilationist expectations and thereby influence belonging.

This study focuses on the intersection of student affairs, international education, and residential life in a post-COVID-19 context marked by social fragmentation, geopolitical tension, and evolving communication norms (Bista et al., 2021; Glass et al., 2022; Martirosyan et al., 2022). It illuminates the relational and structural forces that shape international student adjustment in residence halls and contributes to current conversations on belonging and well-being in international higher education (Mohamad & Manning, 2024; Hsieh & Watson,

2025). Rather than treating belonging as a static feeling, we frame it as an ongoing, context-dependent process shaped by peer interactions and institutional climates. The study's originality and contribution lies in building directly on Yao (2014) to extend the residence-hall belonging frame by disaggregating it into two proximal contexts, unstructured roommate interactions and structured staff engagement, and by modeling language as a cross-cutting factor; taken together, these mechanisms specify how Chinese first-year students' belonging is shaped in U.S. residence halls. By centering one of the most visible yet vulnerable student populations, we offer scholars and practitioners actionable guidance for building inclusive, culturally responsive residential systems and for equity-minded engagement. In line with calls to move internationalization beyond recruitment toward shared institutional responsibility (Knight, 2015), this study is significant for theory, practice, and policy: it refines theory by locating belonging within the residence-hall microcontexts of the DLE framework; guides practice by identifying themes in roommate relations, staff engagement, and language-aware processes; and informs policy with post-COVID design principles for residence life and internationalization at home.

Research Questions

The following research questions guided this study:

1. How do first-year Chinese international students perceive their relationship with their roommates as shaping their sense of belonging in U.S. residence halls?
2. How do interactions with residential staff in residence halls support or hinder these students' belonging and adaptation?

LITERATURE REVIEW

This literature review synthesizes key themes related to the experiences of Chinese international students (CIS) in U.S. residence halls, with a focus on their sense of belonging and the institutional, social, and cultural factors that influence it. Drawing from U.S. and international literature, the review is structured around four key areas: (1) the sense of belonging, (2) the cultural adaptation of the CIS, (3) the role of student affairs, and (4) the impact of COVID-19.

Sense of belonging is a foundational element of student success, encompassing feelings of being valued, respected, and connected to the campus community (Strayhorn, 2012). Strayhorn defines it as "students' perceived social support on campus... the experience of mattering or feeling cared about, accepted, respected, valued by, and important to the group" (p. 3). The work of Tinto (1993) and Astin (1993) links social integration to student persistence, emphasizing the importance of interpersonal relationships and environmental support systems. Residence halls are critical spaces for cultivating belonging, as they provide informal peer engagement and direct access to institutional staff support (Berger, 1997; Johnson et al., 2007). In addition, scholars have noted that belonging is often inconsistently defined and detached from everyday contexts, calling for

clearer, actionable accounts tied to lived settings such as residence halls (Mohamad & Manning, 2024).

Recent research shows that students who feel a sense of belonging in residential environments are more engaged, report greater well-being, and persist at higher rates (Roberts & Ammigan, 2024). Moreover, evidence from a recent intervention study also shows that brief, staff-led practices can improve international students' reported sense of belonging and well-being (Hsieh & Watson, 2025). Among international students, belonging is an emotional state and a protective factor against acculturative stress and academic challenges (Slaten et al., 2016; Yao, 2017; Misirlis et al., 2020). These findings position residence life as a pivotal setting for understanding and enhancing the belonging experiences of Chinese international students (CIS) outside of academic settings.

CISs often face intersecting challenges related to language barriers, unfamiliar cultural norms, and limited access to social networks (Sherry et al., 2009; Yan & Berliner, 2011; Zhang et al., 2022). These challenges are compounded in residential environments where expectations around communication, behavior, and shared living can differ strongly from their previous experiences. Language proficiency plays a critical role in shaping both academic and social adjustment. Studies confirm that CISs with greater English fluency more easily build friendships and participate in campus life, whereas those with lower proficiency report feelings of isolation and marginalization (Yeh, 2010; Yao, 2014; Li et al., 2010; Briguglio & Smith, 2012; Fan & Maliborska, 2019). Similarly, CISs also experience cultural shocks of different levels caused by perceived cultural distance upon arrival and tend to self-segregate, develop conflict avoidance, and spend more time acclimating to institutional policies (Ward et al., 2001; Zhou, 2008; Moore-Jones, 2022).

Scholars such as Heng (2019), Ma (2020), and Zu (2022) challenge the assumption that Chinese international students (CIS) form a homogenous group, instead emphasizing the need for culturally nuanced and adaptive institutional approaches. They argue that newer CIS cohorts may exhibit distinct goals and coping strategies, highlighting the importance of longitudinal research and systemic support structures over individual-based explanations.

Residential staff play a key role in shaping the social and cultural environment of residence halls (Yao, 2014; Bastien et al., 2018; Miao & Yang, 2023). Conflict mediation, program engagement, and crisis response influence peer dynamics and students' perceptions of institutional support. However, many student affairs professionals lack formal training in intercultural communication or inclusive practices specific to international students (Seifert et al., 2014). As a result, support for the CIS often relies on informal peer systems or interventions rather than proactive, equity-minded approaches (Oramas, 2018; Wekullo, 2019).

The "internationalization at home" framework proposed by Beelen and Jones (2015) advocates embedding intercultural learning across all student experiences, including residence life, rather than limiting it to international offices or curricula. Clayton-Pedersen and Clayton-Pederson (2008) similarly emphasize the need to embed diversity and inclusion across cocurricular programming. Despite these frameworks, implementation remains inconsistent, especially in residential

education contexts, where strategic collaboration between international student services and residence life is often lacking (McFarlane, 2015; Kahn & Agnew, 2017).

The COVID-19 pandemic reshaped the international student experience, particularly in terms of belonging and resilience. Glass et al. (2022) and Martirosyan et al. (2022) reported that online learning, campus closures, and limited peer interaction disrupted the support systems critical to CIS adjustment. Many students experienced heightened academic stress, emotional isolation, and diminished access to intercultural experiences. Bista et al. (2021) emphasized the importance of adaptive communication strategies and institutional flexibility in mitigating these disruptions.

As institutions shift back to in-person learning, this recovery period presents an opportunity to reimagine support structures. Charoensap-Kelly and Punyanunt-Carter (2023) underscore the role of residence halls as primary spaces for cultural immersion and connection, particularly for first-year students. Renewed belonging can be cultivated through inclusive programming, thoughtful roommate assignments, and interculturally competent staffing (Whatley & Fischer, 2021), positioning residence life as a cornerstone of post-pandemic institutional engagement.

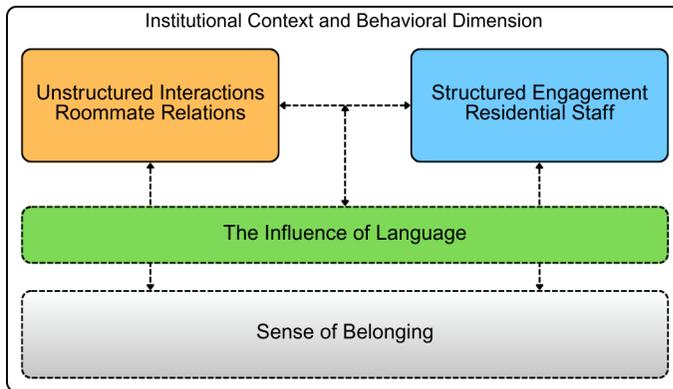
The literature reveals that peer interactions, institutional practices, and broader sociocultural contexts shape Chinese international students' sense of belonging in residence halls. While supportive environments enhance well-being and academic persistence, critical gaps remain in how institutions prepare staff, structure residential systems, and conceptualize internationalization (Roberts & Ammigan, 2024). These issues are particularly urgent in the post-COVID-19 era, which has heightened attention to equity, mental health, and student success. Addressing these challenges requires a more culturally responsive framework for understanding CIS residential experiences.

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

This study is grounded in Hurtado et al.'s (2012) multicontextual model for diverse learning environments, which offers a critical framework for analyzing how the institutional environment influences students' sense of belonging. The model outlines multiple interrelated dimensions and contexts in which they are situated, illuminating the structural and cultural forces shaping diverse student experiences. This research primarily emphasizes and adopts the behavioral dimension and the institutional context, highlighting the quality and frequency of interactions among students from diverse backgrounds (see Figure 1). Following Yao (2015), we treat belonging in residence halls as relational and context-dependent rather than simple outcomes of "integration," and we therefore analyze two proximal microcontexts represented in Figure 1: unstructured interactions (e.g., daily conversations with roommates) and structured engagement (e.g., the residential life curriculum), both of which play key roles in shaping international students' residential belonging.

The framework also depicts the influence of language as a cross-cutting layer that operates across both contexts, shaping conversational ease with roommates as well as the clarity and access of staff-led activities. The behavioral dimension and institutional context, including the campus's demographic makeup and representational equity, provide a valuable baseline for understanding how first-year Chinese international students navigate predominantly domestic residential environments. Finally, we use Strayhorn's (2012) concept of sense of belonging (mattering, fit, acceptance, respect, and social support) to define the outcome toward which these pathways point. Together, these dimensions frame how students experience campus life and how peer and staff relationships mediate their adjustment and inclusion.

Figure 1: Conceptual Framework of the Study



METHOD

This study employed a qualitative approach and chose phenomenological inquiry to investigate students' lived experiences and meaning-making processes, situating individual narratives within broader institutional and cultural contexts (Creswell, 2007). As Lichtman (2014) explains, "phenomenology examines the lived experiences of individuals who have experienced or lived through a particular phenomenon" (p. 29). Phenomenology is suitable because the research questions foreground first-year students' lived experiences rather than testing variables or causality (Merriam, 2009). The study draws methodological inspiration from Yao's (2014) research on CISs' residential experiences while extending the focus to include the role of residential staff.

Site and Participants

The study was conducted at a mid-sized, private R1 university in the United States with a residential requirement for first-year students and a rapidly growing Chinese undergraduate population. At the time of the study, the institution enrolled approximately 1,839 international students, including 640 undergraduate

CISs, which composed the largest national cohort. However, they represented only approximately 3% of first-year residential placements, often assigned to multicultural roommate pairings in rooms or suites. Participants were selected through purposeful sampling to recruit information-rich cases with direct, recent experiences, which is appropriate for depth and contextual understanding rather than statistical representativeness (Merriam, 2009; Patton, 2015). Eligible participants were full-time, first-year undergraduate Chinese international students on F-1 visas living in university-operated residence halls. Students from Hong Kong, Macau, or Taiwan or those living off campus were excluded. Fifteen participants were interviewed (see Table 1). All had completed at least one semester of on-campus living at the time of the interview. Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval was obtained prior to data collection.

Table 1: Participant Demographics

Participant*	Age	Gender.	HS	RN
Rebecca	19	F	U.S.	Chinese
Elena	19	F	U.S.	Chinese
Zed	19	M	China	Both
Kerry	19	F	U.S.	Chinese
Nicole	19	F	China	Non-Chinese
Jane	19	F	China	Non-Chinese
Summer	19	F	U.S.	Chinese
Ace	19	M	U.S.	Both
Barry	18	M	Canada	Both
Rick	18	F	U.S.	Both
Morty	18	M	Canada	Non-Chinese
CD	19	M	U.S.	Chinese
Choi	18	F	U.S.	Non-Chinese
JP	19	F	U.S.	Chinese
Annie	18	F	China	Chinese

Note. *M* = male, *F* = female, *HS* = high school, *RN* = roommate nationality.

*Pseudonyms were assigned to each participant to protect their confidentiality.

Data Collection

Semi-structured interviews were conducted in person in private campus spaces and lasted approximately 30 minutes. The questions explored students' residential adjustment, relationships with roommates and staff, perceptions of support, and broader campus integration. A conversational tone was used to encourage open responses, and interview prompts were adapted on the basis of participant comfort and language fluency. All interviews were conducted in English; if participants preferred to clarify a term in Mandarin, brief code-switching was permitted and noted in memos. All interviews were audio recorded with participant consent and transcribed verbatim. Pseudonyms were assigned to maintain confidentiality.

Data Analysis

After transcription, the analysis followed a three-stage sequence. First, deductive coding applied preidentified sensitizing categories from the conceptual framework, including belonging indicators, DLE climate/behavior, and residence-based processes, to international-student scholars (Yao, 2014; Heng, 2019). Second, consistent with two-cycle qualitative coding, first-cycle coding uses descriptive and value codes to elaborate and extend those categories and to surface unanticipated concepts from participants' accounts (Creswell, 2007). Third, second-cycle pattern coding consolidates categories into broader constructs, organizing them across the two focal contexts (unstructured roommate interactions and structured staff engagement); we then integrate code summaries and analytic memos to develop emergent themes (Saldaña, 2016).

Trustworthiness and Limitations

Steps were taken to ensure analytic rigor, including memo writing, codebook revision, and cross-comparison of emerging themes. As a researcher sharing similar cultural and linguistic backgrounds with participants, I practiced reflexivity to account for potential biases in interpretation. Credibility was strengthened through thick descriptions with fewer, longer quotations and brief member checks of translated phrases. Several limitations should be acknowledged. First, interviews were conducted during the students' first year, potentially limiting long-term reflection. Second, all the interviews were conducted in English, which may have constrained the participants' ability to articulate nuance. Finally, while the study focuses on a single institution, the findings offer transferable insights for similarly situated residential colleges with rising Chinese international student populations.

RESULTS

This study organizes the results around the two residence hall microcontexts identified in the framework: unstructured roommate interactions in rooms and suites and structured engagement with residential staff at the floor and hall levels. Table 2 summarizes the themes, subthemes, initial codes, and frequencies across the two microcontexts.

Table 2: R Themes, Subthemes, Initial Codes, and Frequencies (N=15)

Microcontexts	Themes	Subthemes	Initial codes	N
Unstructured Interactions	Language as a barrier and bridge	Anxiety in small talk, pop culture knowledge gap, fluency, clarification, social scenes, comfort	<i>nervous to speak, make mistakes, ask questions, hanging out, popular music, clarification, slang meaning</i>	14
	Room dynamics and cultural fit	Conational "safety space"; domestic-international "bridge"; mixed roommate "parallel/fragmented"	<i>psychological safety, culture brought to you, be yourself, forced triple, quiet hours, cleanliness, shared routines, crowded, misunderstanding</i>	12
Structured Engagement	Availability and outreach of staff	RA/RD visibility, approachability, responsive, scheduled check-ins, group chats	<i>RA replied right away, talk often, biweekly check-ins, group chat messages</i>	8
	Inclusive residential programming Consistency of policy enforcement	Activity-based, floor events, HOOT/HOWL, structured, culturally responsive Plain-language explanations; even enforcement, conflict resolution, heard and seen	<i>pumpkin carving, holiday events, write-a-letter, cooking together, activities, self-care</i> <i>explained why policy matters, party enforcement, inconsistency, advice, what happens next</i>	9 11

Note. N = Frequency of participants who yielded related codes

Unstructured Interactions

Across the interviews, *language proficiency* emerged as a salient and cross-cutting factor influencing how students interpret interactions, seek help, and make sense of belonging. Many described English as both an essential skill and a source of stress during their early months on campus. For students who graduated from international schools or had prior American high school experience, the adjustment was less about grammar or vocabulary and more about fluency in social contexts. As Choi explained, “Sometimes when I am in a big class with American students, I get nervous... I fear I might not speak the best English. I stutter and feel like the whole room is watching me.”

This apprehension extended into residential life. Several participants noted difficulty initiating conversations with domestic students, citing the lack of shared cultural references. Jane recalled, “We had to share our favorite music and movies in a floor meeting. I did not know any of theirs, and they did not know mine. That made it hard to connect.” Popular culture gaps and conversational discomfort contributed to a sense of social distance.

In contrast, students who approached language learning with openness and confidence described more positive peer relationships. Rick said, “You just have to hang out with [the roommates]. Don’t be afraid to ask questions... It’s not stupid.” Another shared that after deciding to ask her American roommates about unfamiliar slang, “They were nice enough to explain everything,” turning confusion into connection. In these cases, language served as a bridge to integration.

Many students, however, gravitated toward Chinese-speaking peers for comfort and familiarity, particularly in academic settings. Forming Mandarin-speaking study groups and living near other Chinese students helped ease the transition. As Nicole put it, “Speaking Chinese in an all-English environment gives you a sense of safety.” While not inherently isolating, this linguistic refuge served as a crucial mechanism for coping and adaptation.

Roommate dynamics and cultural fit shaped students’ daily experiences. The participants generally fell into three living arrangements: with another Chinese international student, a domestic roommate, or mixed arrangements involving both. Those with conational roommates often function as emotional anchors, citing comfort, ease of communication, and shared lifestyles as driving factors. Barry reflected, “When the door closes, I don’t have to pretend. I am just Chinese, hanging out with someone like me.”

While prone to becoming “self-segregators”—students who “socially interact only with conationals, excluding other nationals and host nationals” (Rose-Redwood & Rose-Redwood, 2013, p.419), roommates from similar backgrounds offered not only emotional support but also practical alignment in daily routines: study habits, quiet hours, and food preferences. This predictability was deeply valued. Importantly, the students emphasized that rooming with another Chinese student did not preclude cross-cultural interaction elsewhere on campus. Instead, it serves as a cultural and emotional anchor, offering familiarity and comfort after socially or linguistically demanding interactions. This sense of refuge gave

students the confidence to engage more broadly, given that they had space to decompress and recharge.

Domestic–international roommate pairings were described as opportunities for immersion. Morty explained, “If you live with an American roommate, the culture is brought to you.” These arrangements often resulted in neutral or positive experiences, although several noted that deeper friendships were limited. “Eventually,” Choi observed, “we ended up doing different things and building different networks, but it is eye-opening to crossover sometimes.” Cultural and lifestyle differences, such as socializing patterns or privacy expectations, sometimes led to distance, even when initial interactions were cordial.

Mixed roommate groups, particularly those involving three or four students from different backgrounds in a suite-style living environment, appeared to pose the most significant challenge. The students described these environments as confusing or tense. Zed recounted how his American roommates requested a curtain to divide the room from him and his Chinese roommate, creating an atmosphere of exclusion. Ace, placed in a forced triple, remarked, “The room is too crowded. None of us actually stay in the room.”

Across arrangements, students navigated a recurring tension between the comfort of conational living and the aspiration for cultural immersion. Several described a pragmatic strategy of using conational rooms to anchor recovery and confidence while seeking intercultural exposure in classes, programs, and clubs. This pattern suggests that conational pairing did not inevitably produce isolation; instead, belonging was stronger when students could use a conational room as a secure base and seek intercultural contact elsewhere on campus. In this respect, the accounts extend prior residence-hall work with Chinese students by showing that the value of conational living lies in comfort and enabling participation elsewhere when language fatigue and social risk are high. Taken together, the roommate patterns and language issues specify mechanisms through which the behavioral and psychological climate dimensions of the DLE framework are produced in rooms and suites, and they extend Strayhorn’s belonging construct by showing that perceived mattering and fit hinge on small, repeated acts of coordination and clarity in unstructured contexts.

Structured Engagement

The availability and outreach of residential staff, such as Resident Advisors (RAs) and Resident Directors (RDs), were frequently mentioned as essential sources of support during the students’ transition. Most participants described their RAs as accessible and approachable, often citing specific moments when staff stepped in to address concerns. Rebecca shared that after she messaged her RA about a roommate conflict, “responded right away and helped me fix it that day.” Others noted that seeing their RAs frequently in the building made them feel safer and more supported.

Several participants appreciated residential staff members’ proactive outreach efforts, especially at the beginning of their first semester. Scheduled check-ins, regular e-mails, or resourceful group texts helped foster trust. As Elena

put it, “Every two weeks, [my RA] would check in, sometimes online, sometimes in person. It made me feel like I could ask for help.” These touchpoints allowed students to express concerns about homesickness, academic pressure, or social adjustment.

The participants strongly appreciated *inclusive residential programming*, particularly events that celebrated cultural diversity or allowed for low-stakes socializing. Programs such as potluck dinners, holiday-themed activities, and “write-a-letter-to-your-future-self” nights were often described as stress-relieving and meaningful. Kerry recalled how a pumpkin-carving event helped her talk with domestic peers more naturally, saying, “It gave me something to do while chatting.” Institutional traditions such as weekly “*Hang Out on Tuesday*” (HOOT) and “*Hang Out Wednesday Late*” (HOWL) also received praise. These events offered a casual environment for intercultural engagement. For many CIS, they served as safe and structured spaces to practice English and connect with peers beyond their immediate social circle.

However, not all experiences with programming were positive. Some students described their RAs as inconsistent in enforcing residential policies, particularly around noise violations or parties. JP recounted, “Sometimes the RA does not truly break up parties until 2 a.m.” Others noted that mediation strategies felt superficial. When Jane sought support during a roommate conflict, her RA suggested that they “dine together more” without addressing the root causes of the issues. These mixed reviews point to variability in staff training and responsiveness.

The consistency of residential policies, particularly those relating to quiet hours, safety regulations, and shared responsibilities, was another area where staff involvement influenced students’ sense of belonging. Most participants appreciated it when staff explained the rules clearly and fairly. Annie recalled how a damaged window screen in her room prompted a mandatory conversation with the RD. “She explained the housing policy so patiently,” she said, “and I actually understood why it mattered.”

Conversely, a few participants reported confusion or frustration when rules were not consistently applied. While less common, these instances contributed to perceptions of uneven enforcement and made some students hesitant to seek help. They also commented on the importance of clarity and cultural sensitivity when explaining residential policies. JP appreciated her RD’s patient guidance during a conversation about policy violations. Zedd valued early discussions on consent in relationships, which he had not previously encountered in China.

Formal interactions with staff significantly shaped students’ sense of community and belonging. Effective staff demonstrated high visibility, responsiveness, cultural awareness, and inclusive programming practices. However, gaps in policy enforcement or conflict mediation hinder some students’ residential satisfaction. Students’ judgments about fairness and clarity map directly onto belonging as defined by Strayhorn, where acceptance, respect, and social support are perceived through the process. Within DLE, these accounts locate the actionable mechanism in the behavioral context: timely outreach, plain language, and transparent steps. Relative to Yao’s (2014) work that foregrounded

peer relations, these findings surface structured staff engagement as a second, distinct locus where belonging is built or strained for the CISs.

Summary

This study revealed that language and cultural familiarity are central to students' residential adjustment. Across both research questions, belonging in residence settings emerged from how people interacted and how communication was handled, more than from roommate nationality alone. Unstructured residential interactions set the tone for daily comfort. Structured staff engagement influences whether students trust the hall as a supportive environment. In both contexts, language shaped participation in and perceptions of these experiences.

DISCUSSION

This study examined how first-year Chinese international students experienced belonging in residence halls through two proximate contexts: unstructured roommate interactions and structured engagement. Language operated across both contexts as a tool and a challenge. Rather than acting independently, these elements intersect to enable or inhibit adjustment. The results build on prior work (e.g., Strayhorn, 2012; Yao, 2014) and position belonging as a dynamic, interactional process rooted in everyday residential life.

The findings extend Strayhorn's (2012) sense of belonging by specifying how perceived mattering, fit, acceptance, and support are produced procedurally. In unstructured settings, small talk and conversation with roommates shaped whether rooms felt predictable or respectful. In structured settings, students read staff visibility, scheduled check-ins, events and programs, and transparent policy enforcement as signals of acceptance and fairness. Within Hurtado et al.'s (2012) DLE model, these results identify concrete mechanisms inside the behavioral and psychological climate dimensions in residence settings. They also align with self-formation accounts that frame students as reflexive agents who manage participation and identity within institutional and cultural constraints (Marginson, 2024). In this study, students viewed conational rooms as safe spaces and selectively engaged in intercultural settings, illustrating agency that is shaped, but not determined, by residence-hall climates.

Two recurring tensions characterized the students' experiences. First, language emerged as both a challenge and a tool for connection. Many participants reported anxiety about speaking English in academic and informal settings, which at times led them to avoid social opportunities and feel disconnected (Briguglio & Smith, 2012; Li, Chen, & Duanmu, 2010). Others framed adaptation as growth, linking rising confidence to stronger ties with domestic peers. Mandarin-speaking peer groups often provided a transitional comfort zone—consistent with Yao (2014)—although some students perceived that reliance on these groups could slow broader intercultural engagement. The cognitive load of decoding slang, humor, and small talk sometimes prompts

students to conserve energy by withdrawing from shared spaces or spending more time with Chinese peers (Briguglio & Smith, 2012; Li et al., 2010).

Cultural differences complicate social navigation in shared living environments. Domestic roommates were frequently described as cultural bridges and opportunities to practice English, yet some relationships grew distant as interests and schedules diverged. Conational roommates consistently offered emotional grounding and predictable routines. However, nationality alone did not predict belonging; mutual respect, empathy, and clear communication were more consequential. Mixed group rooms that combined Chinese and American students were described as the most strained when expectations were not made explicit, highlighting the value of intentional matching and early mediation. These dynamics help explain the variation among Chinese first-year students without the assumption that roommate nationality determines outcomes.

Residential staff played a crucial role in the adjustment process. The participants valued their visibility, approachability, responsiveness, and consistency. Regular check-ins, culturally inclusive programming, and transparent policy explanations were cited as impactful. These findings align with work linking staff practices to inclusive climates (Hurtado et al., 2012). However, uneven enforcement and inadequate conflict resolution signal gaps in training and accountability.

The patterns observed here are consistent with post-COVID efforts to rebuild everyday connections and reduce social risk in shared spaces. Students responded positively to predictable outreach and brief activity-based programs during the early weeks on campus. These preferences align with the literature on international student adjustment following pandemic disruptions and emphasize the salience of language-aware practices for first-term engagement (Bista et al., 2021; Glass et al., 2022; Martirosyan et al., 2022). Ultimately, a sense of belonging is an individualistic and hegemonic construct that is not experienced as a singular moment, but rather shaped by students' daily interactions, institutional climates, and perceived care. Most participants described their first semester as challenging, affirming prior research on the importance of early support structures for international students (Marginson et al., 2010; Heng, 2019). Despite these barriers, many students gradually built connections through peer support and staff engagement.

Implications and Future Research

This study has important implications for student affairs professionals supporting international student communities. Universities prioritizing internationalization should pay attention to how residential settings shape the adjustment process for students from culturally and linguistically diverse contexts. Four areas merit sustained focus: roommate assignment, staff training, language-aware outreach, and transition programming.

Roommate assignments should be refined to be culturally responsive and lifestyle-based. The students in this study described mismatches in communication styles and expectations. Institutions can pilot opt-in pairings

where domestic students are trained with intercultural competence and conflict with international peers in the resolution room (Tolman, 2017). Housing forms can allow students to indicate interest in multicultural living or culturally compatible roommates and to flag routines such as quiet hours and shared space use.

Staff training for RAs and professional staff should address cultural adjustment, language barriers, and international student-specific needs. Tools such as the Intercultural Development Inventory can be used for guided growth (Hammer, 2015). Involve upper-class international students in training and consider hiring foreign-born or bicultural professionals to strengthen cultural affinity and relational trust (Miao & Yang, 2023).

Promoting awareness and accessibility of campus resources is also essential. Many participants were unaware of key campus resources or hesitated to seek help due to cultural stigma. Institutions should adopt multilingual outreach strategies, strengthen cross-unit coordination, and utilize restorative practices. Platforms such as WeChat, RedNote (小红书), peer mentorship programs (Yang, 2025), and residential curriculum content delivered via social media can enhance CISs' early engagement and service utilization.

Transition programming should integrate intercultural learning outcomes into orientation and early-semester events. Joint sessions for domestic and international students, global-themed living communities, and concise prearrival videos can normalize cross-cultural interactions. Brief pre-matriculation instruments such as the Beginning College Survey of Student Engagement can surface expectations and guide targeted interventions (BCSSE).

Longitudinal and intervention studies should examine how belonging changes across the first year and whether targeted strategies (for example, roommate pairings or enhanced RA training) improve adaptation. Comparative research across institutional types, including large publics and religiously affiliated campuses, can identify context-specific dynamics. Future work should also include perspectives from domestic students, residential staff, and peer mentors and address variation by gender, socioeconomic background, and prior U.S. educational experience.

CONCLUSION

This study examined how first-year Chinese international students develop a sense of belonging in residence halls, with a focus on roommate dynamics and residential staff engagement. Language and cultural differences challenge social integration, yet conational rooms often provide trust and emotional safety. Many, nevertheless, reported successful transitions into residential life. This comfort zone enabled navigation of intercultural spaces and retreat when needed, fostering resilience. Residence halls serve as dual spaces of adaptation and cultural grounding, where belonging is shaped by everyday interactions and institutional support. Since COVID-19 and amid shifting geopolitical tensions, international student transitions have grown more complex. Institutions must respond with proactive, inclusive strategies that treat belonging as an institutional

responsibility. Supporting international students is both a moral imperative and a strategic priority for campuses committed to engagement, student success, and campus cohesion in an increasingly globalized landscape.

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