An Exploration of Generation Z Chinese International Students' Sense of Belonging

by

Shengjun Yin

Bachelor of Arts, Shanghai Ocean University, 2011

Master of Education, University of Pittsburgh, 2013

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This dissertation was presented

by

Shengjun Yin

It was defended on

August 2, 2022

and approved by

Michael G. Gunzenhauser, Ph.D., Professor and Chair,
Department of Educational Foundations, Organizations, and Policy

Maureen McClure, Ph.D., Director and Associate Professor, Department of Educational
Foundations, Organizations, and Policy

George C. Tseng, Ph.D., Professor and Vice Chair, Department of Biostatistics

Dissertation Advisor: Linda T. DeAngelo, Ph.D., Associate Professor, Department of
Educational Foundations, Organizations, and Policy

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Shengjun Yin, Ph.D.

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Large number of existing studies employ acculturation as the framework to explore Chinese international students (CIS), which recently have been criticized from post-colonial perspectives (Spencer-Oatey et al., 2007; Tierney, 1999; Yao, 2015). With Gen Z Chinese international students step into American higher institutions, this study aims to expands the understanding of Gen Z CIS by learning their undergraduate experience and position them as part of the university members at the first place. Through the conceptual framework sense of belonging, which is defined as "the students' perceived social support on campus, a feeling of connectedness, or that one is important to others" (Strayhorn, 2012, p.16), I examined whether CIS's undergraduate experiences on-campus and their relationships with others help them feel belonging to their university community. Twelve senior Gen Z CIS were participated in the semi-structured two rounds of interviews using smallball and purposeful sampling (Patton, 2002). Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (Smith et al., 2009) were employed to generate the results.

Four key themes emerged from the data. First, Gen Z CIS place a huge focus on academic success, as well as the aspects that lead to it, including, but not limited to, devotion to their studies, faculty-student interactions, and research and internship opportunities. Secondly, the quality of interactions with their American peers, faculty, and staff is extremely crucial, as whether the feedback they receive makes them feel accepted and valued or like an outsider will end up influencing their perceptions of the community as a whole and affect the degree to which they

wish to engage and join. Finally, Gen Z CIS' were able to use the skills they had acquired from their previous experiences to make themselves part of the university community, while at the same time maintain their bond with the Chinese community.

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1.0 Introduction

For about two decades, Chinese students have accounted for the largest number of international students studying in the United States. The large influx of Chinese international students generates a question of how educational leaders, faculty members, and administrative staff should serve this unique population. However, this is made difficult by the fact that the needs and characteristics of Chinese international students are changing throughout the times. For example, students are now coming from more diverse backgrounds and are starting to study in the U.S. at much younger ages than before. Starting in 2013, higher education institutions began welcoming Generation Z students into their campuses. As more Generation Z students are attending colleges and gradually becoming the majority of students on campus, many reports and researchers have found that their unique behaviors and preferences are forcing colleges to change how their administrators should provide services to incoming students (Seemiler & Grace, 2016; Selingo, 2018). This has also been the case with Generation Z Chinese international students, as they are different from millennial Chinese international students in many ways.

Current understanding of Chinese international students' experiences is based on the research findings on their millennial counterparts, who are primary studying in STEM-related graduate schools (Liu, 2013). Additionally, the existing studies attempted to explore Chinese international students' experiences by using integration and acculturation frameworks, which focus on international students' adjustment and transition processes as sojourner experiences. These ways of understanding Chinese international students have recently been critiqued as having constructed Chinese students to be the "racialized non-Western inferior Other" (Suspitsyna et al., 2019, p.304) by scholars from a postcolonial lens. The idea of acculturation and integration also

leads to potential distress and conflict among Chinese international students (Yao, 2015). With the unique characteristics of Generation Z, the deteriorating U.S.-China relationship, and a global pandemic, it is even more important to shift our perspectives and consider how we can create a sense of belonging for current and upcoming Chinese international students. This study aims to understand Generation Z Chinese international students' experiences at U.S. higher institutions and to provide better understanding of how these institutions can improve their services to meet the ever-changing needs of this unique population.

In this study, three terms that will be used throughout this dissertation.

Generation Z (Gen Z): The generation that comes after the millennial generation. Even though there are slight variations in defining this generation, I define Gen Z as some prominent researchers do: as people born after or around 1995 and up until approximately 2012 (Selingo, 2018). Therefore, currently the youngest member of this dissertation's Gen Z will be around nine years old while the oldest are turning 26. Hence, the majority of the population in the higher education institutions should be Gen Z students. Throughout this dissertation, this population is referred to as Gen Z.

Millennial (Generation Y): a group defined as the subset of the CIS population who were born in the early 1980s to the mid-1990s.

Chinese International Students (CIS): In this dissertation, this population is defined as students coming from mainland China and who are not permanent residents in the United States. In this study, the literature quoted discussing CIS are all studying in higher education institutions in the U.S. Any exceptions are mentioned specifically.

1.1 A Glimpse of CIS Current Situation

In 1999, approximately 40,000 Chinese students were enrolled in colleges and universities across the United States, making them the highest percentage of all international students found in U.S. campuses (Choudaha, 2017). In the following years, the number of Chinese students attending higher education institutions in the U.S. continued to increase However, in Fall 2018, the total number of all international students in the U.S. began to decrease at a less steep rate, according to the latest Fall International Student Enrollment Hot Topics Survey conducted by the Institute of International Education (Baer, 2018). The same survey also indicated that 48.4% of the participant institutions reported a decrease in new Chinese students' enrollment in Fall 2018 (Baer, 2018). This turning point is believed to have started in Fall 2015, when "new international student enrollment slowed to 2.4 percent growth, and then exhibited declines in both Fall 2016 (-3.3 percent) and Fall 2017 (-6.6) percent" (Baer, 2018, p. 3). However, Chinese students still made up the largest portion of international students attending U.S. colleges.

There are a few reasons that caused these drops in numbers. Three of the major reasons are the slowdown of the Chinese economy, strong anti-immigration tones, and deteriorating U.S.-China relations (Choudaha, 2017), which has become more prominent since the 2016 presidential election. In his 2018 report, Baer indicated that 63.6% of institutions reported that their prospective international students cited the American social and political climates as potential deterrents to studying in the U.S. There was also a decrease in the number of issued visas and opportunities for post-graduation work in the country.

Due to the recent COVID-19 pandemic, the tensions between the Chinese and the U.S. government have significantly influenced CIS. There were only 1055 F-1 student Visas granted to

students from China-mainland from February to October in 2020. This number is much less than the 92,517 visas during the same period in 2019 (U.S. Department of State, 2020). Since the travel ban started in February, a large number of incoming students who were enrolled in the 2020-2021 academic year were not able to attend class in the U.S. In addition, many Chinese students who visited their homes during breaks were not able to travel back to the U.S. as originally planned. And because of the time zone differences, most students in China were, and are currently still, taking their online classes very late at night or in the early morning. For those CIS who remained in the U.S., many are experiencing racism towards Asians and xenophobia at rates that are rising as actively as the virus (Gover et al., 2020). These recent events further raise the urgency to understand how higher education institutions can serve and support their Chinese international students.

1.1.1 Generation Z Chinese International Students (Gen Z CIS)

This section focuses on the unique characteristics of Gen Z CIS. First, more and more Gen Z CIS are starting their education in the U.S. at the undergraduate level rather than at the graduate level. According to the 2019 Open Doors Report on International Students Exchange (IIE Report), the number of international students enrolled in the undergraduate level is more than their graduate counterparts since the 2011-2012 academic year. For example, Choudaha and Hu (2016) reported a dramatic growth of Chinese undergraduates at one university from only 37 in 2000 to 2,898 in 2014. Furthermore, there's a drastic growth, particularly students from China, of international students enrolled in the U.S. high schools since 2013 with the intention to remaining in the country to postsecondary studies (Farrugia, 2017). It seems that a quite amount of Gen Z CIS already had study abroad experience before entering into American college.

Secondly, more and more CIS are choosing rigorous non-STEM majors, such as the social sciences, liberal arts, humanities, and education (Yan & Berliner, 2011). In fact, the 2019 *Open Doors* IIE Report indicated that since the 2015 academic year, there has been a major increase in the number of international students who choose to study journalism, education, theology and religious vocations, multi/interdisciplinary studies, and history. The business field has also been attracting more international students, as noted by the approximate 60% increase in international undergraduates between 2003 and 2011 (Choudaha et al, 2013).

Thirdly, there is a large variation in learning abilities among Gen Z CIS (Zhang, 2018), with U.S. institutions recruiting more self-funded international students. This vigorous recruiting has led to institutions not having sufficient resources and plans for supporting these students with various backgrounds (Bista & Foster, 2016). Additionally, similar to Gen Z U.S. students, Gen Z CIS are more focused on seeking colleges with services that provide support for career development, often looking specifically for career and professional development mentoring programs (Ambassadors Magazine, 2018; Selingo, 2018;). Therefore, personalized guidance and mentorship are the resources that this generation is looking for during their college experience.

Moreover, this generation of CIS also has different learning styles when compared to their millennial counterparts. It has been noted that their learning styles do not consist of simply learning what authority tells them, but, rather, learning from their eagerness to explore the world through their own experiences and critical thinking. The interest in learning and the focus of learning is tied in more with their own personal interests and motivations (Ambassadors Magazine, 2018).

Lastly, as this generation was born with relatively well-developed technology, and because they prefer spending more time alone and in virtual exchange, they are "less seasoned" than previous generations in regard to social and life skills (Seemiller & Grace, 2016; Selingo, 2018).

This is especially the case for those who have moved away from their hometown to a foreign environment. And because many of them are an only child, they are not used to sharing and exchanging their personal lives with their peers (Ambassadors Magazine, 2018). In saying so, Gen Z CIS not only need guidance in adapting to college life, but would also tremendously benefit from one-on-one mentorship programs or role models in guiding their transition to a higher education environment in the U.S.

In general, Gen Z students have more complex and diverse backgrounds and have grown up in a different cultural environment than their millennial counterparts. As many news reports have revealed, China's Gen Z are more globally aware and adventurous. Many of them treat studying abroad as an opportunity to diversify their global experiences (Banta, 2018). They are no longer necessarily looking for the chance to pursue the traditional American Dream as their senior generations of CIS do. Yet, the majority of existing literatures on CIS target a millennial sample group. Seldom do studies solely study Generation Z Chinese international students. On the other hand, there are two emerging publications that are leading the exploration on Gen Z college students in the U.S. One was written by Jeffery Selingo (2018) to inform how colleges can recruit, teach, and serve Gen Z. Another book titled *Generation Z Goes to College* was written by Seemiler and Grace (2016) and has more details about how this generation have different motivations, learning styles, characteristics, skill sets, and social concerns than previous generations. Inspired by these findings, this study seeks to add to the body of knowledge regarding CIS, especially Gen Z undergraduate CIS, by understanding their lived experiences as the sojourners currently studying in U.S. higher education institutions.

1.2 Critique of the Current Frameworks Adopted to Study CIS

Early studies employ acculturation as the framework to explore Chinese international students' experiences. The two most pioneer conceptual frameworks addressing international students are John Berry's (1980) four-fold model of acculturation strategies and Vincent Tinto's (1992) student integration. In the early research, acculturation was defined as a unidimensional process in which a person released aspects of his or her heritage culture and, instead, acquired aspects of a new culture (Gordon, 1964; Smith & Khawaja, 2011; Fan & Ashdown, 2014). However, studies over the past three decades began to conceptualize acculturation as a bi-dimensional process in which a person could preserve his or her own cultural heritage while acquiring aspects of the receiving culture (Berry, 1980).

Recently, these frameworks have mostly been argued as having created neo-racist campus climates and treating international students as "others." As Hurtado and Carter (1997) pointed out, the "underlying the concept of acculturation is the assumption that the cultural difference of ethnic groups should be diminished and that to be successful, minority students must adopt the values of the dominant college environment" (p. 327). This assumption is harmful and problematic in practice, not only for those historically marginalized students (Hurtado & Carter, 1997) but for international students as well. Acculturation for international students basically means that they need to appreciate, accept, and adopt the norms of their host country. Criticism was also made on Tinto's (1993) integration model--the key to students' success and persistence. The failure to integrate into campus communities were believed to have stemmed from students' inability to depart from their past experiences and the challenges that come with adapting to a new environment. Tinto (1993) had even added that in order to better integrate with a university, students should voluntarily withdraw from the culture of their previous lives. Evidently, this could

lead to dire consequences. As Tierney (1999) states, this kind of integration or assimilation process essentially requires racial/ethnic minority students to commit a form of "cultural suicide" (p.82) as they completely separate from their culture.

Moreover, some scholars argue that both acculturation and integration models place the full responsibility on international students and neglect the role that institutions should play during the process. It is not only the international students' responsibility to integrate into the domestic educational environment; the transition and integration process also requires the host institutions and student communities to provide an adequate support system. Hence, Yao (2015), who devotes her research focus to CIS, made an important argument stating that "U.S. educators should seek to increase students' sense of belonging rather than their integration to campus, which will provide an effective and culturally sustaining way to help international students' transition" (p. 6).

Therefore, in order to emphasize embracing the unique characteristics of Gen Z CIS and also to acknowledge the significance of their differences in campus communities, this study looked at framework from a different perspective in trying to unfold the more colorful lived experience of Gen Z CIS.

1.3 Purpose and Significance of the Study

The complex background in which researchers study Chinese international students is created by the different mobility of Generation Z students when compared to their millennial counterparts and the unpredictable environment for studying abroad in the U.S. This complexity reinforces the importance of solely studying the Gen Z population. Yet, current research on CIS has been limited to studying graduate students from the millennial generation. With current

limitations in the acculturation framework, it is also hard for higher education leaders and practitioners to fully acknowledge and learn the differences between the different groups of CIS and to create a welcoming environment for students to feel at home. This study expands the understanding of Gen Z CIS by learning their undergraduate in position them part of the university members at the first place. The purpose of this study is to examine the experiences of Gen Z CIS in order to understand what informs or influences their belongingness to the university. Based on Strayhorn's (2012) defined sense of belonging as "the students' perceived social support on campus, a feeling of connectedness, or that one is important to others" (p.16), I aimed to explore how CIS's on-campus experiences and interpersonal relationships contribute to their sense of belonging to the university community.

1.4 Overview of the Study

This dissertation aims to discover how Gen Z CIS experiences in the classroom, residence hall, academic department, and campus at-large affect their sense of belonging, and extends to explore how to create an environment that improves their feeling of belonging. The following research questions will guide this exploration:

- How do Gen Z CIS describe their experiences as sojourners studying at a university in the U.S.?

- What experiences have influenced Gen Z CIS find their belongingness on campus?

  - What experiences of the COVID-19 pandemic has had an effect on Gen Z CIS belongingness?

Since this study seeks to understand how Gen Z CIS describe their experiences in terms of their relationships with the institution, their school, their domestic peers, and their faculty members as they learn to become members of the American academic community through reflection, phenomenology is an appropriate method to apply. I used interpretative phenomenology analysis (IPA) as the research methodology (Smith et al., 2009). IPA aims to illuminate and understand the lived experiences of the participants through an interpretive lens that situates their experiences within a specific context (Merriam, 2009). In saying so, this study asks students to think about their sense of belonging as a sojourner and to reflect on how their experiences may be establishing or destroying their sense of belonging. As Seidman (2013) pointed out, the phenomenology interview expects the participant to "reflect on the meaning of their experiences", including both "intellectual and emotional connections" (p. 22). Moreover, as the nature of IPA allows researcher also to participate requires me, a Chinese international student, to put aside my assumptions of CIS' feeling of sense of belonging in order to elucidate "what this particular learning experience" (van Manen, 1990, p.10) is like for them. I conducted one-on-one, semi-structured interviews with 12 Gen Z CIS who are studying at the MA University (pseudonym) in the Summer 2021 and Fall 2021 semesters.

In the second chapter, I explore the theoretical foundations that I used in this dissertation, including relevant literatures and studies that support this study. In chapter three, more detailed research methods will be discussed. Following that, I will present and discuss the findings from this study. Additionally, an appendix provides the research instruments that were used to perform the study.

2.0 Theoretical Foundations and Literatures

To create a solid foundation of the frameworks that help understand Gen Z CIS, the review begins with the theoretical foundations that shaped my path to choosing the conceptual framework for this study. To be more specific, I use the lens of a postcolonial perspective to discuss issues with previous frameworks and the shortcomings of previous study approaches. One limitation of applying acculturation and integration frameworks to study CIS is unconsciously creating "otherness" climates on campus (Spencer-Oatey et al., 2017; Yao, 2015, 2018). In order to dismantle the traditional ways and to better serve CIS, I argue that we should seek an inclusive environment that embraces CIS culture and community. Strayhorn's (2012) model of sense of belonging provides a framework to explore how CIS find belongingness in the university community and identifies elements that are important for CIS to create this inclusivity.

2.1 Theoretical Foundations

2.1.1 Postcolonial Theory

Postcolonial theory is largely used to refer to cultures affected by the imperial process from the time of colonization to the present time. It is often defined as the ongoing issues and debates between East and West since the colonial process started, and it has always been an overshadowing topic for students from Eastern countries traveling to study in Western countries. Edward Said, author of Orientalism (1978), was a very influential scholar in the area of postcolonial studies.

Originally influenced by Foucault's notion that "knowledge is not innocent, it is always operated by power," Said (1978) developed the idea of orientalism as a term referring to "the orient" as discovered, observed, described, and, in a sense, invented by Europe and the West. He also made connections between the production of knowledge and the exercise of power, which allows us to see how institutions regulate daily life. His overall argument is that orientalism, or the orient study, was ultimately a political vision of reality, and its structure promoted binary oppositions between Europe and the Orient (Said, 1978). Through the postcolonial perspective, this study critiques scholars who assume CIS as linguistically and culturally incompetent in U.S. higher education institutions.

Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (2010) is another scholar whose work is closely related to postcolonialism. Spivak's fundamental theory is the concept of subaltern, a military term which means of lower rank. For Spivak, knowledge is operated by western economic interests and power. Therefore, it is like any other commodity or product that is exported from the west to developing countries. She also agrees with Said's criticism of the way in which western writers have represented the subaltern world in their academic discourse (Spivak, 2010). Through her perspective, this study also critiques studies that made the presumptions that CIS are seeking assimilation and acculturation into American colleges, which resulted to the great challenges and stresses during the process.

In this sense, postcolonial theory as a concept greatly ties in with higher education. Suspitsyna and Shalka (2019) have concluded that postcolonial perspectives on globalization in higher education "raise critical questions about the production of subjectivities—American academics, foreign scholars, domestic and international students, global citizens, etc." (p. 291). They go further on to discuss how the dominance of English in academic practices worldwide

"reproduces structural global inequalities by privileging the wealthy and educated" (p. 291), while also producing an "inequality by creating subject positions that contribute to their own subjectification" (p. 291). As a result of colonial perspective, certain western-attributed higher education topics, operations, and methods obtain greater favoritism over those attributed to eastern countries and cultures. These perspectives end up not only affecting higher education administrators, faculty, and staff, but also their students, both native and international. The following section explores some of the concepts found under the postcolonial umbrella and discusses how they are applied in various studies.

2.1.1.1 Neo-Racism

Rooted in postcolonial theory, neo-racism, also known as "new racism," is discrimination based on culture and national order. This concept emphasizes cultural differences as a basis of discrimination that appeals to popular notions of cultural preservation (Barker, 1981; Spears, 1999; Lee & Rice, 2007). Spears (1999) defined neo-racism as follows:

> Neo-racism rationalizes the subordination of people of color on the basis of culture, which is of course acquired through acculturation within an ethnic group, while traditional racism rationalizes it fundamentally in terms of biology. Neo-racism is still racism in that it functions to maintain racial hierarchies of oppression. (p. 2)

Lee and Rice (2007) view this discrimination as "a reemphasis of cultural discrimination flowing from the ideas of natural cultural boundaries and protection of a way of life" (p. 389). Some have suggested that neo-racism allows for a new form of discrimination by using new categories instead of the earlier notions of biological race (Yao, 2018). In a higher education setting, neo-racism is a conceptual framework applied to any discrimination encountered by

international students in the higher education setting, such as the "rejection of admission, less than objective academic evolutions, losing or not being able to obtain financial aid, negative remarks from faculty or fellow students, and barriers to forming interpersonal relationships in the host society" (Lee & Rice, 2007, pp. 389-390).

Under this concept, Lee and Rice (2007) pointed out that underlying neo-racism are "notions of cultural or national superiority and an increasing rationale for marginalizing or assimilating groups in a globalizing world" (p. 389). Their qualitative study investigated perceptions of discrimination from the perspective of international students of color. The results of their surveys and interviews indicated that neo-racism manifests in three domains: feelings of discomfort, verbal insults, and direct confrontation, and that they can be found in all sorts of social interactions, including those with faculty and administration, as well as various off-campus interactions. It should also be noted that students of color from non-English speaking countries and/or predominately non-white regions reported feeling less satisfied than their European counterparts and faced considerably more discrimination and difficulties (Lee & Rice, 2007). Additionally, Lee and Rice (2007) concluded that neo-racism is widely applied to international students in various forms, such as rejection of admission, biased academic evaluations, losing or not being able to obtain financial aid, negative remarks from faculty or fellow students, and barriers to forming interpersonal relationships in the host society.

Very recently, Yao (2018) examined neo-racism by solely investigating the experiences of CIS on college campuses. She focused primarily on first-year Chinese students' perceptions of interpersonal interactions in residence halls. Her interview results revealed that first-year CIS had negative feelings towards domestic students because they displayed blatant acts of discrimination, which only strengthened their own awareness of being outsiders. Yao (2018) pointed out that the

major differences of culture and nationality between Chinese students and native students greatly affected interpersonal relationships, signifying that "neo-racism is pervasive because of the added layers of language and nationality in addition to physical characteristics" (p. 13). Overall, neo-racism is not only prevalent but, rather, rooted deeply in U.S. post-secondary institutions' campuses. Unfortunately, it is just one of many concepts that evolved from postcolonialism; neo-racism is also closely related to othering.

2.1.1.2 Othering

With deep roots in the postcolonial theory, othering has been used to understand the perceptions and interactions of westerners towards individuals of the East during the colonial period (Said, 1978; Spivak 2010; Laufer & Gorup, 2018). According to Weis (1995), othering is defined as "that process which serves to mark and name those thought to be different from oneself" (p. 17). In other words, if an individual was seen to be unfit to western norms, they were regarded as "others". Most of the time, those differences were marked in a biased and discriminating manner (Said, 1978). This conceptual framework was widely applied to understand different phenomena in various disciplines, such as education and social work (Laufer & Gorup, 2018).

In the context of higher education, othering has been used to frame power imbalances between minority student groups and the more privileged students, with differences noted in genders, cultural behaviors, and academic training backgrounds (Bilecen, 2013). In specific relation to the focus population of this review, Yao (2018) concluded that, according to the definition by Said (1978), CIS are the "objects" that are "stamped with an otherness" (p. 97), a designation difficult to escape even in modern-day perceptions, because othering is a "set of structures inherited from the past." (p. 122). Because it is so deeply rooted in western culture and perceptions, westerners are unintentionally but automatically giving CIS this stamp.

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Laufer and Gorup (2018) adopted the othering lens to explore international doctoral students and discuss their experiences with discontinuing their degrees. From their interviews, the authors concluded four types of othering: foreign, academic, financial, and social. Because these international doctoral students were outsiders to western culture and novices to western academic formats, they were unfamiliar with the system, culture, and language of their institution. This resulted in many cases of their disempowerment within the academic context and led to increased vulnerability to financial hardship and social exclusion (Laufer & Gorup, 2018). All of these barriers led to high stress and uncertainty which eventually led to many being unable to complete their doctoral education experience.

Suspitsyna and Shalka (2019) adopted postcolonial othering lenses to specifically understand the CIS population--a group often considered a response to globalization. As CIS can afford full-tuition, American colleges and universities have been more actively and aggressively welcoming CIS because they were considered huge capitalizing opportunities. Some schools have even gone as far to expand their operations by opening branch campuses in China and creating joint-degree programs targeted at CIS (Suspitsyna & Shalka, 2019).

Suspitsyna and Shalka (2019) further adopted a critical discourse analysis and semiotic chain technique to examine publications about Chinese students found in the Chronicle of Higher Education. Their findings revealed that CIS were found to always be viewed as different from western students, and that their norms were always different from western norms. These articles noted that the difference "bears a negative valence and had to be ameliorated in the articles by the students' mimicry of American norms and behaviors" (p. 302). Specifically, the Chinese students' "self-isolation from American students, poor English, lack of critical thinking, and struggle with U.S. classroom practices and academic norms" (p. 302) were coded as cultural otherness. Because

they grew up in a different culture learned their own culture's societal and academic norms, they were being discriminated against for their unfamiliarity with the American academic system.

2.1.2 Decoloniality

Different from post-colonialism, which emerged from the work of scholars from the Middle East and South Asia from the 19th and 20th century, decoloniality emerged as the consequence of the work of diasporic scholars from South America and starts with the earlier 15th century European colonization of the lands that came to be known as the Americas (Bhambra, 2014). One of the major conceptual moves that decolonial thinkers made was to critique the statement that "Western knowledge is to universalize its terms, to become all knowledge", because it internalizes elements of local knowledge that are compatible or useful, and "subalternizes" the others (Shepherd, 2018, p.6). The decolonial perspective focuses on untangling this kind of situation focusing on the importance that emotion, heart, body, culture, and so on are as equal as reason, head, mind, and nature, which form the knowledge (Shepherd, 2018). Decolonial thinkers also refrain from labeling decolonialism as a theory, rather, they consider decolonial thinking as a "multi-stranded project, existing among many other schools, strands of thinking and projects, in a world characterized by 'pluri-versality as a universal project'" (Shepherd, 2018, p.10). Hence, decolonialism provides a new perspective when considering the best way to study Gen Z CIS.

2.1.2.1 Decolonization and International Students

According to the Association of International Education Administrators, decolonizing is framed as:

a mode of global engagement takes a critical look at these powerful undertows of exploitation and demands new approaches that acknowledge both historical colonization and contemporary neocolonial projects and begin to dismantle them through tactics such as collaborative and critically informed programming. These tactics are needed both at home and abroad. (AIEA, n.d.).

In the globalization of higher education context, decolonizing is about rethinking, reframing, and reconstructing the university community to be more inclusive, recognizing that knowledge is co-created and that different cultures should be appreciated. Previously, international students have been part of the "assimilation plan" in that they have to leave their own cultures in order to integrate into the predominant western culture found on campus. Bardhan and Zhang (2016) used a decolonial view to explore how international students of color viewed themselves in terms of race and identity. Their findings showed that most international student who came from the global south indicated that they felt uncomfortable with "U.S.-centric race perspective" (p. 294), as they either came from a more racially homogenous context or they didn't center on race to understand diversity. Participants reported that feeling racism exists, but it was hard to explain. In saying so, it is the time for us begin to reflect the ways in which our program's "economic, ecological, and cultural footprints follow in the easy treads of colonial and neocolonial relationships" (AIEA, n.d., p. # or para. #). Decolonizing is a constant process—not a one-time job—for educational leaders, practitioners, and educators to reflect on their work throughout. However, few research studies employ the decolonial perspective when studying CIS. Therefore, this dissertation attempts to adopt a conceptual framework that fits the purpose of decolonizing post-secondary institutions in the U.S.

2.2 Conclusion

Just as Yao (2018) concluded, globalization, neo-racism, and othering have synthesized into an innate contemporary western perspective. Because neo-racist structures already exist in college campuses, "the influx of students from China has created an othering of a specific population" (Yao, 2018, p. 5). Campuses have been divided into "us" (domestic students) and "them" (international students), and tensions have developed both inside and outside the classroom solely because globalization and international student mobility are growing (Yao, 2018). The post-colonial perspective helped me to identify how some of the existing studies unconsciously reemphasize the neo-racist structures that already exist in college campuses--by categorizing CIS as "othering" and suggesting that they need to "acculturate" or "integrate" into the western culture to achieve better study abroad experiences. Decoloniality, on the other hand, provide a better approach when emphasizing creating an inclusive and shared community for international students to build belongingness

2.3 Conceptual Framework

In this section, I discuss how the conceptual framework of sense of belonging fits my study of exploring Gen Z CIS from a decolonial perspective--embracing the unique characteristics of Gen Z CIS while also acknowledging the significance of their differences on campus. Furthermore, I review relevant literatures to further illustrate the importance of using sense of belonging as a framework for studying CIS, as well as discuss some of the challenges as were shown in previous studies that might affect their belongingness to the university community.

2.3.1 Sense of Belonging in Higher Education

The term "belonging" originated from the work of Maslow (1970) and became popularized in the field of psychology by Baumeister and Leary (1995). Later on, scholars began to widely apply the term to university students, indicating the great influence that "belonging" has on students' psychological and academic outcomes (Hoffman et al., 2002; Hurtado & Carter, 1997; Pittman & Richmond, 2008; Slaten et al., 2014). There is no standard definition or model for a sense of belonging. Rather, there are many different meanings. One article refers to sense of belonging as "a feeling that members matter to one another and to the group, and a shared faith that members' needs will be met through their commitment to be together" (Osterman, 2000, p. 324). According to Tovar and Simon (2010), however, sense of belonging is defined as "an individual's sense of identification or positioning in relation to a group or to the college community, which may yield an effective response" (p. 200). There are also some articles that study the factors influencing students' sense of belonging. A solid support system, friendship, and social acceptance by peers have all been noted to positively influence one's sense of belonging (Freeman et al., 2007; Hausmann et al., 2007; Pittman & Richmond, 2008). Healthy relationships with caring faculty members, professors, advisors, and mentors have also been found to contribute to a sense of belonging (Freeman et al., 2007; Strayhorn, 2012). Scholars have also examined the importance of involvement in extracurricular activities in association with increased belonging, but results appear to vary by race. Strayhorn (2012) revealed that involvement helped African males to better fit in and acclimate to their campus environment, whereas Johnson et al. (2007) found that participation in extracurricular activities was significantly related to a sense of belonging for only Caucasian and Asian Pacific American students and not for other students of

color. Hurtado and Carter (1997), instead, found that extracurricular organizations outside of the school were associated with students' sense of belonging.

Sense of belonging is a term with multiple different meanings. The comprehensive definition that works best for this research study comes from Strayhorn (2017), based on his constructive review of the existing literature and theory related to sense of belonging:

a basic human need and motivation, sufficient to influence behavior. In terms of college, sense of belonging refers to students' perceived social support on campus, a feeling or sensation of connectedness, and the experience of mattering or feeling cared about, accepted, respected, valued by, and important to the campus community or others on campus such as faculty, staff, and peers. It's a cognitive evaluation that typically leads to an affective and/or behavioral response. (p.3)

Thus, this framework works as a construct in understanding how those interconnected elements in the campus context affect the overall experiences of Gen Z CIS. I unfold Strayhorn's (2012) framework into three elements—the social support international students gain from the institution, the connections they have with others on campus, and their experiences of feeling valued by their institution. This further guided me in building my research questions. Additionally, I interpret this framework as whether the social support provided helps students feel connected with others on campus, and whether this connection helps them feel they are important and even matters to others. As Strayhorn (2022) in his recent personal blog posted that: "belonging does not require students to 'fit in' or integrate or change themselves to assimilate to the norms, beliefs, and actions of others." He also suggests that "with so much diversity, colleges also serve as perfect training grounds for appreciating difference, learning acceptance, developing empathy, fostering inclusion, and learning in for understanding." In this sense, I focus on whether CIS find that the

campus creates a shared belonging environment for international students; whether their unique culture background and norms are being valued; and how their connections with others and the campus at-large made them feel they are part of the membership on campus.

2.4 Review of Relevant Literature

The concept of sense of belonging is becoming more popular in recent studies that target the diverse groups of students on college campuses. In this section, I review literatures that emphasize the importance of learning sense of belonging and discuss current studies that investigated sense of belonging and international students. In the last section, I review some of the challenges faced by CIS portrayed in the current studies which might hinder their feelings of belongingness towards American campuses.

2.4.1 Sense of Belonging and Academic Success

Sense of belonging is associated with academic success and motivation, which has been explored in multiple studies. For instance, it has been found to positively influence academic achievement, retention, and persistence (Hausmann et al., 2007; Rhee, 2008; O'Keeffe, 2013; Soria & Stebleton, 2012). Freeman et al. (2007) found that students' sense of belonging in the classroom was associated with self-efficacy and intrinsic motivation. Additionally, their sense of belonging at the campus-level was strongly associated with their social acceptance, derived from their social interactions and perceptions of acceptance by their peers. Moreover, Tinto (2017) recently reflected on the limitations of his famous integration model leading to student persistence and

success, and shifted his focus to the students. His new focus puts emphasis on students' needs and the support they expect from the university to boost their motivation or persistence. Sense of belonging is one of the three key dimensions, and "it is most directly shaped by the broader campus climate and students' daily interactions with other students, academics, professional staff and administrators, whether on-campus or on-line" (p. 3). Furthermore, the feeling of sense of not belonging or being out of place leads to a withdrawal from connection with others that further undermines motivation to persist (Tinto, 2017). It is very easy for international students to not feel belonging due to their different cultural backgrounds and temporary citizenship statuses. In conjunction, failure to feel a sense of belonging in educational settings has been shown to diminish students' motivation and contributes to their poor performance on tests and assignments (Deci & Ryan, 2000). This further results in difficulty sustaining academic engagement and commitment because these students find themselves in an environment where they do not feel personally valued and welcomed (Goodenow, 1993).

Even though sense of belonging has not been widely studied in the CIS group, some research studies have looked into sense of belonging with other minority groups. These studies form the foundation for my study. Hurtado and Carter (1997) captured Latino students' view of whether they feel included in the college community and pointed out that the key influence upon their sense of belonging was their perception of supportive campus racial climates. Extending to studies on the overall student of color (African American, Asian Pacific American, and Hispanic/Latino students), Johnson and his colleagues (2007) stated that overall, first-year students of color perceive a less strong sense of belonging on their campuses than do white/Caucasian students. Strayhorn and Terrell (2007) studied black male college students and concluded that

those who frequently engage in cross-racial interactions with peers have a higher sense of belonging than those who do not.

2.4.2 Sense of Belonging in International Students

In terms of studying international students in higher education institutions, the idea of sense of belonging has previously not been as widely used as the concept of acculturation. However, since sense of belonging is a concept based on the relational nature of individuals and groups (Yao, 2015), it is particularly relevant for international students who have entered into a foreign environment. Here, foreign signifies both the collegiate setting that is different from their high school settings and the fact that they are extremely far away from their hometown. Hence, it is very critical to help international students to build a sense of belonging, because it is their "psychological sense of identification and affiliation with the campus community" (Hausmann et al. 2009, p. 650).

With more attention put on creating a sense of belonging to better engage students, there also emerged studies focusing on a sense of belonging in international students. Slaten and his colleagues (2016) explored 11 undergraduate students who came from an East Asian or Southeast Asian country and found that social connection, acculturative stress, and academic success are the most important factors that influence on Asian international students' belongingness on campus. The study also mentioned that for these Asian international students, both relationships with students of similar nationality and friendship with those from the host country all benefit their sense of belonging.

Glass and Westmont-Campbell (2014) examined the effects of belonging on academic success and cross-cultural interactions among international students. This quantitative study

indicates that a sense of belonging increases cross-cultural interaction between international and domestic students, and these interactions help international students have higher grade point averages. In a later study, Glass and his colleagues (2015) examined how student-faculty interactions influenced international students' sense of belonging, and the results showed that faculty members showing care and concern for their international students and professors exhibiting intercultural competence were significant in helping them build a sense of belongingness.

Specifically focusing on CIS, Yao (2016) explored their roommate relationships in residential halls. Her findings showed that most of the participants living with domestic students indicated a low sense of belonging in their residence hall because of language barriers and cultural distances. These challenges that newly-arrived CIS face are significant because they affect their sense of belonging and hinder them from building relationships with their domestic roommates even though they are living in the same space. Chen and Zhou (2019) conducted a literature review aimed at exploring CIS' perceptions and experiences regarding sense of belong. They concluded that CIS' lack of sense of belonging is reflected in their actions and practices, such as:

> Impaired interpersonal relationship with local peers, preferred socialization merely with co-national fellows, limited participation in the host culture, academic uncertainties, communication obstacles, vulnerability to psychological issues such as anxiety and depression, discrimination, limited support, and insufficient information access to important issues such as course selection issues and tax information. (Chen & Zhou, 2019, p. 58)

These practices correspond to various factors (cultural distance, language barriers, campus characteristics, information availability) that deter CIS from developing a sense of belonging on

their college campuses. Heng (2021) in her most recent study concluded three dimensions of challenges faced by CIS, academic, social, and pastoral/emotional concerns (Heng, 2021). In the next section, I am going to review some of the problems related to these three areas, and discuss how they correlate with each other, because they might influence the degree to which CIS feel belonged to their campus.

2.4.3 Factors that Influence on CIS Sense of Belonging

Academic concern: Academically, CIS have to work on language barriers, different classroom norms/learning styles, dealing relationships with domestic peers and faculty members. Language difficulties are usually among the most mentioned issues in many research studies concerning the challenging Chinese students face while studying abroad (Henze & Zhu, 2012; Cheng & Erben, 2012). Since English is not the official spoken language in China, the emphasis of teaching English is placed on paper-based testing rather than daily real-life conversation. Besides the lack of emphasis placed on teaching English oral skills, CIS also have to deal with a cultural deficiency obstacle that exacerbates English listening comprehension difficulties (Yan & Berliner, 2013). Because CIS lack a proper understanding of American culture, including its people, history, society, and way of life, Chinese students struggle to understand conversation topics that come naturally to Americans, such as sports, politics, and entertainments. In the numerous published literatures reviewed, it appears that there is no tendency showing that language difficulty is decreasing as a challenge, suggesting that it is still one of the main challenges faced by Gen Z CIS.

Moreover, traditional Chinese culture places well-educated scholars in the highest social rank, therefore pursuing scholarships not only becomes a personal goal but also the cultural trend

(Yan & Berliner, 2011). While this cultural mindset may be a motivator for many Chinese students to study abroad, it has several negative consequences. In one study, Chinese students acknowledged that because of their own devotion to academic excellence, they were socially isolated and had few other interests or recreational activities (Yan & Berliner, 2011). The environment also leads to social pressure and high stress, as their parents have high expectations for their academic achievement.

External and internal expectations of personal academic success is just one aspect of the academic challenges that CIS face. Class participation, involvement, and engagement is also a big problem for CIS. According to Liu (2009), there are four communication patterns unique to Chinese and other Asian students when in the American classroom: total integration, conditional interaction, marginal participation, and silent observation. The similarity between these patterns is that they are all representative of low participation, which may be a result of the language difficulties mentioned previously. Chinese students especially mentioned that they nearly always feel lost when classroom discussions are dominated by native English-speaking students. Furthermore, the use of slang or inclusion of cultural and political topics strengthen their feelings of cluelessness (Sun & Chen, 1999). These factors end up defaulting CIS to minimizing their classroom involvement because they feel they are unable to provide meaningful input.

Although developing good relationships with academic advisors, professors, and peers has been identified as being important to their academic experience, they prove difficult for CIS to build and establish (Yan & Berliner, 2011). Many students acknowledge that because they are unsure of the norms pertaining to mentor-student and student-student interactions and relationships, they are deterred from initiating and building relationships (Heng, 2017). A recent study asking CIS to discuss how their college experience could be improved revealed that at least

18 first- and second-year students want their teachers and peers to "take an initiative to connect with them" and "remain open-minded and consider their backgrounds during interaction with them" (Heng, 2017, pp. 21-22). These students felt that if there was a greater proactive inclusion by their mentors and host peers, their motivation, self-esteem, and emotional well-being would improve along with their eagerness to maintain these connections (Heng, 2017).

Socio-cultural concerns: For many years, culture shock has consistently been considered a major concern for CIS. This is not surprising, since China and the U.S. have been identified as having maximum *cultural distance* (Yan & Berliner, 2013). C*ultural distance* is not only the differences of cultural values between countries or groups, but also an innate perception that one culture's values and communication styles inevitably differ from that of another's. This coincides with many studies that have indicated that the most reported challenge by CIS is the lack of social support while they are abroad in the U.S. (Yao, 2014; Sun & Rhoads, 2018; Sun & Chen, 1999). In her most recent study, Heng (2021) concluded that "a complex interaction of cultural legacies, prior schooling, and societal demands appeared to have contributed to participants' reluctance in participating in classroom discussions, unfamiliarity with group work and critical thinking, and discomfort with making independent decisions in the U.S."

A study conducted by Sawir (2008) and his colleagues focused specifically on a concept called *cultural loneliness*. Out of 200 interviewees, 130 students stated that they "find themselves missing their own cultural and linguistic setting" and "find themselves in cross-cultural relationships but at a lower level of empathy than same culture relationships" (Sawir et al., 2008, p.157). CIS were feeling lonely and lost because they were so far physically removed from their native culture, and unfortunately no amount of relationships with "foreigners" could make up for that. This feeling of *cultural loneliness* was further exacerbated by *cultural distance*.

This concept was examined by a study addressing CIS' level of satisfaction with their social integration and the barriers that hinder integration (Spencer-Oatey et al., 2017). They found that interviewees believed they held a different cultural norm compared to local students and were hence reluctant to build friendships with them. For example, one interviewee mentioned how she could not force herself to participate in the social norm of drinking and clubbing because she felt that it was "disgraced" and a "serious cultural conflict" (Spencer-Oatey et al., 2017, p. 12). Other interviewees expressed difficulty in trying to mingle into conversational dialogues of local students because they were not aware of local news, sports, or political issues (Spencer-Oatey et al. 2017). Ultimately, the lack of American cultural understanding not only affects CIS' English speaking abilities, as mentioned previously, but also their ability to properly integrate into a "foreign" society.

The major consequence of lack of good social support for CIS in the U.S. is self-segregation. Cui (2013) conducted a study that revealed that because of the collective culture, CIS tend to group with each other. This eventually resulted in CIS groups ending up being even more removed from non-Chinese student communities. While this inevitably provides no benefit for a better understanding of the culture they are living in, this "construction of 'Chineseness' alleviates the loneliness of Chinese students studying abroad and acquires them mutual support from other compatriots" (Cui, 2013, p. 23). One could conclude that the repercussions of *cultural loneliness* eventually develop into self-segregation. Yan and Berliner (2011) made similar conclusions when they stated that "Going abroad is supposed to provide an opportunity for broadening a person's perspective; however, it turns out that most Chinese international students confine their lives to a small circle of friends and activities" (pp.181-182). It should also be noted that the self-segregation of CIS may also be caused by the high density of Chinese students studying similar majors. Data

from a study of 20 interviews of CIS suggested that when campuses or majors reach high numbers of Chinese students, the accumulation actually ends up providing CIS with a source of academic, linguistic, and social isolation from other students (Su & Harison, 2016). The participants of the study came to the realization that they were taking courses where more than 50% of their classmates were CIS. The authors of the study even documented an extreme case that occurred at Ohio University - 90% of the students enrolled in their Master of Finance and Economics program were Chinese (Su & Harison, 2016). In essence, students from China, with similar goals and mindsets, are enrolling in similar programs and majors at their study abroad institutions, resulting in CIS concentrating towards the same courses. Before culture shock even has a chance to come into effect, major selection has already placed CIS on the path to self-segregation.

Wellness issues: More and more studies have begun to explore CIS' mental health issues and well-being. Back in 2009, Han and his associates (2012) conducted a survey on CIS enrolled at Yale University and found that 45% reported symptoms of depression while 29% reported symptoms of anxiety. Several studies reported a variety of mental health concerns related to the previously-discussed concerns, including social interaction and communication difficulties, social connectedness, social support, language barriers, homesickness, and financial difficulties (Glass et al, 2015; Harrison & Su, 2016; Lee et al, 2016; Liu, 2009). CIS were coming from a country where there are negative stigmas revolving around dealing with mental health issues, while the language barriers and culture differences made it even harder for CIS to seek campus-based mental health consultants (Liu, 2009; Lertora & Sullivan, 2019). Additionally, for most CIS studying abroad, many indicated that they wouldn't share their stress, difficulties, and depression problems with their parents because they didn't want them to worry and didn't want to let them down (Jin & Acharya, 2021).

2.5 Conclusion

In the context of internationalization of higher education in the United States, universities are always seeking better ways of serving large numbers of CIS. It is inevitable that CIS face many challenges during their study abroad experiences due to the culture and language differences, in addition to temporary citizenship statuses. This is why researchers should help higher education institutions find ways to lessen the burdens of identity struggles for students studying on campuses where they might be considered other than the predominant white culture.

Through the lens of a decolonial perspective, creating a shared belonging environment means that institutions embrace and cherish each individual in their community, and it places emphasis on the individual's shared belonging. This is especially important for Chinese international students, because the challenges they face are abundant when developing their sense of belonging, especially given the current social and political climate in the U.S., including the previous presidential administration's implementation of a xenophobic policy. Moreover, CIS also face a loss of shared identity, both culturally and linguistically. And although universities provide activities and events aimed at helping international students build a sense of belonging, the advertising and/or program itself are often not cu lturally receptive to international students. Hence, it is particularly important to further explore how universities can help these students build a sense of belonging.

3.0 Research Methods

The purpose of this study is to explore how Gen Z undergraduate Chinese International Students (Gen Z CIS) perceive their personal experiences in terms of building a sense of belonging towards the university community during their undergraduate study. This dissertation is not simply about learning CIS' study abroad experiences or simply assessing their "belongingness" levels. Rather, it aims to discover how experiences in the classroom, residence hall, academic department, and campus at-large affect CIS' sense of belonging. This dissertation further extends to exploring how these students make sense of their experiences of being a member in the university community. This study asks students to share about their experiences as a sojourner and reflect on how these experiences may be contributing to establishing their sense of belonging. Using phenomenology, I explore

- How do undergraduate Gen Z CIS describe their experiences as a sojourner studying at a university in U.S.?

- What experiences have influenced Gen Z CIS to find a sense of belonging on their college campus?

  - What experiences of the COVID-19 pandemic has had an effect on Gen Z CIS' belongingness?

According to Merriam (2009), "research focused on discovery, insight, and understanding from the perspectives of those being studied offers the greatest promise of making a difference in people's lives" (p.1). In that spirit, I interviewed Gen Z CIS to explore their lived experiences. By understanding students' perspectives regarding how their personal experiences influence their

sense of belonging to the American campus life, this research can assist programs in higher education institutions that strive to better serve international students.

For this study, I also considered the unique pandemic situation that my participants are facing, because it has likely provided unique influences towards their sense of belonging to the university community. In particular, taking into account the viral spread of anti-Asian racism and xenophobia that accompanied the COVID-19 pandemic since the end of 2019. From the travel ban from China to the U.S. issued since early 2019 to the strong anti-immigration tones brought about with the 2020 presidential campaign, numerous factors were considered when designing the interview protocol so that the participants' experiences both before and after the pandemic will be evaluated.

3.1 Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis

Phenomenology aims to seek knowledge of what it means to be human in the world. It is a philosophical tradition rooted in the study of psychology, sociology, and anthropology, and has expanded to human sciences studies including education, counseling, and nursing (van Manen, 2014). Phenomenological philosophers are interested in understanding the lived experiences and providing meaning to how study participants describe and understand this lived experience (Merriam, 2009; van Manen, 2014). To be more specific, phenomenology study uses both descriptive and interpretative approaches to explore lived experiences (van Manen, 1990). It is descriptive because "it wants to let things speak for themselves" (p. 180), and it is interpretive because both participants and researchers are engaging in interpreting the reflective meanings that resulted from the experience.

In this study, I adopted Smith, Flowers, and Larkin's (2009) interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) as I engaged with the data and with the framework of Strayhorn's (2012) sense of belonging. IPA allowed me to play dual roles, as an individual intertwined within the wider systemic narrative, but also as an interpreter, making meaning of Gen Z CIS' study abroad experiences and their perception of sense of belonging in college. Compared with earlier phenomenology approaches influenced by Husserl and presented by such researchers as van Manen (1990), the IPA approach allows for more flexibility and places emphasis on the interpretive process. Moreover, IPA employs a process that includes both discovery and interpretation of the meaning behind an experience, but at the same time still focuses on the individual and the experience itself (Pringle et al., 2011; Smith et al., 2009). Therefore, IPA, unlike the traditional phenomenological approach that focuses on commonalities, highlights the value of differences and not only identifies but also capitalizes on both convergent and divergent themes (Pringle et al., 2011). And so, for this study, the IPA approach allows for examining what is described by the participants, but also for exploring what those words and stories mean in the larger context of the experience. Since the main focus is the lived experiences of Gen Z CIS at a mid-Atlantic university with a reputable research institution, I examined how the participants describe their lived experiences and their influences on their sense of belonging to the campus community. Additionally, because the emphasis of phenomenology is placed on exploring the world as lived by a person and does not separate the world from the person (Valle et al., 1989), this study also examined the phenomenon of the relationships between the Gen Z CIS and the institution.

3.2 Research Site

For this study, data collection was conducted at a single institution, a public research university located in an urban setting in the mid-Atlantic United States. Therefore, throughout this study, this institution will be referred to as the following pseudonyms—MA University or MAU. MAU offers over 100 baccalaureate degree programs across over 10 schools and is a university rich in diversity, which is a component that is vital to this study. According to their Fact Book 2019, over 3,200 international students enrolled in the fall term of 2018, a number that makes up about 11% of the total student body. These students are also spread out over numerous majors and programs, including the School of Arts and Sciences, the School of Engineering, the School of Computing and Information, and the School of Business. Within this diverse international pool, China is one of the largest contributors out of over 100 countries, with over 1,900 (around 60% of the international student body) enrolled full-time students in the fall of 2018.

The university is also dedicated to helping first-year students connect with new experiences, supportive mentors, and its vibrant community. There are several programs provided that focus particularly on first-year international students, including international orientations, summer international associate programs, mentorship programs, and international student empowerment workshops. Although first-year students are not required to live on campus, about 97% of them choose to do so, according to MAU's data report. This signifies that most undergraduate CIS share similar living quarters *and* similar transitional experiences, which provides valuable context for examining how this crucial first-year experience influences their sense of belonging to the university community.

3.3 Participant Recruitment and Selection

Based on my literature review, Gen Z students are defined as those who were born after the year of 1995, and CIS are defined as those who were born and raised in mainland China. In total, I interviewed 12 full-time (i.e. at least 12 credit hours per semester) CIS in their senior year at MAU. I limited the participants to only senior students because they have about three years of university life under their belt when it comes to sharing personal stories and perspectives about sense of belonging. Additionally, many current CIS' university community experiences were and still are hindered by travel bans preventing them from returning to the U.S. from their summer recess in China. This is due to the pandemic that has been sweeping the U.S. since March of 2020. As these students were forced to attend their fall and spring semester courses online, there are the potential factors that may influence students' sense of belonging to the university. Senior students, at the very least, already had the opportunity to have a "normal" in-person first-year study experience along with one year of schooling during the pandemic.

3.3.1 Sample Recruitment

I started with purposeful sampling of sample recruitment, as suggested by the IPA method (Smith et al., 2009), and followed with snowball sampling to help fill up the interview participants. Purposeful sampling is the most effective use of limited resources for the identification and selection of information-rich cases (Patton, 2002). This involves identifying individuals who have experience with the phenomenon of interest (Cresswell & Plano Clark, 2011). In terms of purposeful sampling strategies, this study focused on how various participants make meaning of their experiences studying at a higher education institution in the U.S. In that, I started with four

Gen Z CIS as sampling seeds with balanced numbers by gender and majors (STEM and non-STEM). After conducting the first four interviews, I asked them to recommend one or two potential participants. These candidates were contacted to see if they wish to serve as research participants. These steps were repeated until the needed sample size was achieved.

3.4 Participants

The sample for this study included 12 Gen Z Chinese international students from MA University. Of the 12 students, 50% of them were female and 50% of them were male. They were studying various majors: 6 (50%) were in STEM majors and the other half (50%) were in non-STEM majors. 5 out of the 12 participants (42%) attended high school in the United States. Due to the 2019 COVID pandemic, 9 participants (75%) went back to China and attended online courses for their junior year. Table 1 shows the pseudonyms assigned to each participant to ensure anonymity. I include demographic information of age, gender, and whether they are studying STEM or non-STEM majors. I also include information of where they completed their secondary education and whether they returned to China during the COVID-19 pandemic, as these two factors are heavily discussed in the findings chapter.

The participant sample in this study turned out to have very similar experiences, considering 10 out of the 12 participants had their high school experiences in an English-speaking environment. Around 42% (n=5) of the participants earned their high school diploma in the U.S. Even though the research method of this study didn't intend to generalize the findings, it would be beneficial to know the percentage of the whole population of CIS earning high school diplomas in the U.S. This would help determine whether these high school experiences have any unique

influences on their college experiences that might differ from those CIS who attended high school in China. Unfortunately, according to IIE (2014), there's no data available regarding the percentage of undergraduate CIS who earned their high school diploma in the U.S. Currently, China is still the leading country of international students completing secondary education in the U.S., and most of them ultimately seek to enroll in higher education in the U.S.

Table 1 Participants Summary

Pseudonym	Age	Major	Gender	Secondary Education Location	Returned to China during COVID-19
Lynn	22	non-STEM	F	U.S.	Yes
Zoey	21	non-STEM	F	International High School	Yes
Yuzhe	21	STEM	M	International High School	Yes
Kexing	21	STEM	F	International High School	No
Yantong	21	STEM	F	International High School	Yes
Rui	22	STEM	M	China	Yes
Wenda	22	non-STEM	M	China	Y
Yoyo	22	non-STEM	F	U.S.	No
Tian	21	non-STEM	M	U.S.	Yes
Zikan	22	non-STEM	M	U.S.	Yes
Taylor	21	STEM	M	U.S.	Yes
Sophie	22	STEM	F	International High School	No

3.5 Data Collection

Semi-structured, in-depth, one-on-one interviews are also the most recommended formats for IPA studies. A semi-structured interview allows "the researcher and participant to engage in a dialogue whereby initial questions are modified in the light of the participants' response and the investigator is able to probe interesting and important areas which arise" (Smith & Osborn, 2007, p. 57). Moreover, it is a beneficial data collection strategy as it allows the researcher to "observe behavior, feelings, or how people interpret the world around them" (Merriam, 2009, p. 88). According to Seidman's (2006) interview protocols of phenomenology, which focus on the participant's history, experiences and reflections to make meaning to those experiences, I developed two series of interview protocols, each with a duration of approximately 30-40 minutes. I recorded each interview via Zoom and saved each audio recording to an external hard drive for long-term storage.

My design of two interviews is based on Seidman's protocol (2006) with some alternatives to fit this study. The first series of interviews focused on the participants' life history and details of experiences. My goal in the first interview is to situate the participant's experience in context by tracing their life history in detail. The second series of interviews focused on asking participants to "reflect on the meaning of their experience" (Seidman, 2006, p.18).

Based on Strayhorn's (date) definition of sense of belonging, I unfolded his framework into three elements—the social support international students gain from the institution, the connections they have with others on campus, and their experiences of feeling valued by their institution. I interpret this framework as whether the social support provided helps students feel connected with others on campus and whether this connection helps them feel that they are important and matter to others. Building from this framework, I developed the first interview

protocol to include two parts. The first part of the interview asked each participant to trace their experiences of transitioning from their hometown to America as well as their first-year college experiences, especially those regarding their residence life. I focused on the details about any support they may have received and their relationship with others on campus. The second part of the interview involved asking each participant to describe their most recent experiences in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic and xenophobic climates.

After conducting a first interview, I scheduled the second interview with the same participant within around one week, which allowed time for the participant to digest and reflect on the previous interview, but not too much time for them to lose connection between the two (Seidman, 2004). As for the second interview, I asked the participants to clarify some of the important experiences they shared from the first interview and also reflect on the meanings of the stories they mentioned. In doing so, I am trying to "address the intellectual and emotional connections" (Seidman, 2004, p.18).

3.6 Research Role

Research, as a process, represents a shared space that is shaped by both the researcher and the participants. As such, the identities of both the researcher and the participants have the potential to impact the research process. Moreover, linguistic and cultural asymmetry during the interview process are purely matters of inadequate resources in an increasingly globalized world and academy (Au, 2019). As the researcher, I am the "primary instrument for data collection and analysis" (Merriam, 2009, p.15). As a CIS, I share the same cultural background, F-1 student status, and native language as my research subjects. I believe that this made them feel more

comfortable and at ease to share their deeper feelings and their perspectives regarding their experiences. This correlates with the fact that, in the interview process, the researcher has to discover the language with which participants are the most comfortable, as suggested by Bogdan and Biklen (2007). They found that participants are more likely to disclose their experiences to a person who speaks the same language. It also helped to ease the conflicts caused by language differences and established trust between the interviewer and the interviewees. Bogdan and Biklen (2007) continued to state that getting to know each other and even building a relationship are important factors in interviewing. Rapport and trust are more easily established if the researchers have the same background as the participants. To better grasp their stories and feelings, I used Mandarin Chinese as one of the language choices when conducting my interviews. Additionally, this opened up the opportunity for participants who felt a need to express more complex feelings in his or her language of origin. Prior to data coding, I translated these responses into English. It turned out that English was the primary language used during the interview - only one student preferred to speak in Mandarin Chinese during the interview.

As previously mentioned, cultural backgrounds may influence how interviewees answer questions. Cultural differences are valuable data sources that expose how cultural norms affect the way participants think and form their response. Furthermore, "ignoring culture would ultimately play into a postcolonial impulse in the academy to ignore or repackage the cultures and experiences of subjects into narratives convenient for scholars" (Au, 2019, p. 59). As I share the same Chinese cultural background and international student identity as my interview participants, I believe it helped ease the power dynamics between me, the interviewer, and my interviewees. Moreover, during the data analysis process, my background helped me to more clearly comprehend their stories and the deeper meanings behind their experiences, since I was situated in a similar

environment as my research participants. Overall, I consider my positionality as an opportunity to present CIS' sojourner experiences and restore the truths, so that school leaders are able to learn the bigger picture about one of their largest campus community groups.

As a researcher, I recognized that my own life experience as a Chinese international student and my previous argument on acculturation framework affects my role in interpreting the participants' stories. Also, I started my Master's program at the School of Education in the United States in 2012. I noticed the differences between me as starting with a Master's program here and my interview participants who are currently completing their undergraduate studies here.

3.7 Data Analysis

IPA researchers are encouraged to engage in an interpretative relationship with the transcripts. IPA researchers are also expected to be interested in learning about participants' psychological world, which is not transparently available through the stories they described. Hence, it requires researchers to obtain through a "sustained engagement with the text and a process of interpretation" (Smith & Boden. 2007, p.66). As Zoom generated the transcripts, I went back to each of the video recordings to clarify those transcripts right after each interview. When all transcripts were available, I went through and de-identified all transcripts, including removing any identifiable information that could link back to participants' real names, university information, and the person they mentioned during the interview.

3.7.1 Analytical Process

Data analysis was conducted as an iterative process that included multiple times of transcripts readings, as well as three specific levels of coding to identify emergent themes and sub-themes. Smith and Boden (2007) suggest treating each transcript individually– "one needs to be disciplined to discern repeating patterns but also acknowledge new issues emerging as one works through the transcripts" (p. 12). In that way, I aimed to respect and recognize similar but also different experiences from each participant. Following four steps defined by Smith and Nizza (2021), I did data analysis with the first case through 1. reading and exploratory notes 2. formulating experiential statements 3. finding connections and clustering experiential statements 4. compiling the table of personal experiential themes. I repeated these steps with other cases, and do a cross-case analysis.

During the first reading of all transcripts, I kept memo writing of each participant, which was including their demographic information, their general feeling of the college experience, and major stories they mentioned. This helped me get the general idea of all my interview participants and then I moved on to case-by-case coding analysis. For the first transcript analysis, I put the exploratory notes in the right-hand margin of the transcript and put experiential statements in the left-hand margin as suggested by Smith and Nizza (2021). After having notes for the full transcript, I re-read the transcript and used the notes as input to formulate the experiential statements. The experiential statements were about the summary of what's happening in the part of the transcript. when all experiential statements were ready, I moved on to the next stage to structure the statements, in trying to see the connections or contrasts in those statements. After that, I made a table which has themes including those experiential statements, and the snap of quotes related to those experiential statements to keep me grounded in the original data. With the first case done, I

repeated the first two steps with the next case and then incorporate themes with the first case. By cooperating, I not only combined the similar experiential notes into the themes but also identified new emergent themes from the second case. I did the same for the rest of the transcripts.

When moving up to writing up the study, I concluded the data analysis into three areas with all the related themes and sub-themes under each area. During this process, I was "drawing on one's interpretative resources to make sense of what the person [was] saying, but at the same time one [was] constantly checking one's own sense-making against what the person actually said" (Smith & Osborn, 2008, p.72). I cooperated the original quotes from the interview and interpretation to support each theme and have coherent narrations in between.

3.8 Trustworthiness

To ensure the trustworthiness of this study, I adopted member checks, also known as respondent validation, to explore the credibility of the results (Merriam, 2009; Birt et al., 2016). Member checking is a common method of ensuring internal validity, and it also helped me to bracket my own presumptions interfering my interpretation of their lived experience, in that I am not making the judgement based on my own experiences and biases. After conducting the first interviews, all the participants were invited to review their experiential memo and comment on my understanding of their experience. I received their feedback and established any misunderstandings or confusions I needed to clear up during their second interviews. In addition to ensuring the internal validity and credibility when correcting my misunderstanding or misinterpretation on their experience, I also asked participants to provide more details about their experience in their second interview.

3.9 Anonymity

In order to maintain the privacy of the participants, they first and foremost were informed that the data will be collected anonymously and that any identifiable information will be removed or destroyed, as participants might not feel comfortable to freely and honestly share their experiences and feelings if they believe their identity would be revealed. This is because participants' honesty is crucial to explore their experiences in terms of sense of belonging. To keep the data anonymous, a pseudonym was assigned to each participant, as previously discussed (see Table 1). I also carefully selected and de-identified the quotations so that they will not disclose the identity of any particular participant. Data and documentation that contained the names of the participants were maintained in secure locations—print materials were locked in a cabinet and electronic materials were password-protected and secured in Microsoft OneDrive.

3.10 Reciprocity

One of the end goals of this study is to reveal the findings to the administrators, educators, and policy makers who have the responsibility of or are interested in engaging with international students. In addition, I provide recommendations for practice based on my findings. I plan to write up an executive summary of the findings and offer to meet with interested stakeholders, such as faculty members or student organization leaders to discuss the findings of this study and my recommendations.

3.11 Limitations

As with all research studies, limitations do exist for this study. First, even though participants' native language will be allowed during the interview, the main language used was still English. This may have posed a limitation because English is not my first language, nor my study participants'. Therefore, I believe some word choices may not have truly represented the exact meaning of their experiences. Secondly, as a result of COVID-19, the interviews were conducted via Zoom. This online interviewing might limit my capture on some of the nonverbal signals which might related to this study. Third, my participants turned out have homogenous experiences as 10 out of 12 had their high school experiences in an English-speaking environment. This might cause a bias as the findings show that they have relatively positive college experiences overall. The findings might not have been the same if the sample participants didn't have previous experiences of being exposed to English-speaking environments in their younger ages. Lastly, the research site of this study is located in a city where there is a structured Chinese community with numerous Chinese supermarkets and Chinese restaurants. This may have contributed to the positive experiences that the participants had when interacting with the larger Chinese community. Therefore, there is room for more investigation into the experiences of CIS studying in higher education institutions where there aren't any structure Chinese communities and a low percentage of residing Asian populations.

4.0 Findings

In this chapter, I present the findings from this study's participants in terms of Gen Z Chinese international students' sojourner experiences in higher education institutions in the U.S and what affects their feeling of belonging to the university community. Various themes emerged from the data under three key categories. Under the first category of Gen Z CIS academic life, three themes were found: 1) being an active learner; 2) valuing faculty-student interactions; and 3) participating in internship and research opportunities. The second category presents Gen Z CIS' interactions with Americans in the university community with the following three key influencing themes: 1) feeling accepted and valued; 2) feeling like an outsider; and 3) stepping out of comfort zone. In the last category, I report the findings under the category of how CIS make themselves part of the community. The following three themes emerged from this category: 1) making themselves feel at home; 2) valuing the Chinese community—a home away from home; and 3) making CIS's voice heard and influential. I discuss these categories and the themes that emerged from them in greater detail in the following sections.

4.1 Gen Z CIS Academic life

This section illustrates how Gen Z CIS describe their academic life experiences, as well as how they perceive the aspects that influence their sense of belonging within their academic life. In general, almost all participants from this study showed that they tried all efforts to engage in academic life to pursue better academic achievement. Three themes emerged related to this area:

1) being active leaner; 2) valuing faculty-student interactions; and 3) participating in internship and research opportunity.

In this study, students' academic lives during the COVID-19 pandemic were also examined. As all of the study participants were senior students, they had to experience complete virtual learning at MA University that started during spring break of their sophomore year and continued throughout their junior year. Among the 12 participants in this study, nine participants ended up returning to China. As for those three students who stayed in the United States, they needed to do so because they had on-going internships or research positions.

4.1.1 Being Active Learner

The participants in this study exhibited active learning in devotion to their academic studies based on two main qualities. First, many of the participants mentioned that they studied abroad to pursue better education, which was influenced by their parents or peers. Several of them mentioned that their parents had similar study abroad experiences and highly recommended them to follow in their steps. Second, as this study took place in the research site of MAU, which ranked 59 among national universities according to the U.S. News and World Report 2022 rankings, almost half of the interview participants stated that this university was on the top list of their dream schools. Combining these two reasons, participants in this study consider achieving academic success as their priority, and their previous backgrounds equips them to reach their goal. Almost all of them mentioned that they plan to apply for graduate school (mostly master's degrees) and have a clear idea of what they want to do for their future career.

Two sub-themes emerged when discussing academic life that demonstrated Gen Z CIS' determination to conquer various difficulties to pursue academic success. Firstly, CIS believe that

as long as they have devoted enough time and effort towards their studies, they would achieve better results. They also tried to navigate through the difficulties that COVID-19 provided and found positives with remote learning. Additionally, more Gen Z CIS were able to choose their majors based on their interests, and the more passion they had towards what they were learning, the more devotion they were investing.

4.1.1.1 Self-efficacy and Resilience

Many students described that they spent a lot of time studying by either going to the library or forming a study group with mainly Chinese international peers. They would seek out the resources from their school's Writing Center to improve their writing, as writing was a challenge for most CIS. They would also go to office hours or reach out to friends when having difficulties with assignments. For those who attended high school in the United States, all of them mentioned that they had to make some adjustments from the light workload of high school to the heavy workload of college. For example, Taylor said, "after the first quiz, I knew that now the library is my homebase. I couldn't just spend the same amount of time on studying as I did in high school anymore." As they realized the workload change, they took initiative to make adjustments towards focusing more time and energy on homework, properly digesting the course work, and preparing for quizzes and exams.

Yoyo was originally interested in going to medical school, but because many suggested that "it's hard for foreigners to get into medical school" and that "the tuition will be crazy," she opted to study nursing instead. Being one of only three CIS in the nursing program, she said that in order to "not let other people look down on us," they gave their all and tried their hardest. They encouraged and helped each other. One of them responded with "We kind of stuck with each other,

and trying (tried) to watch each other's back." When talking about the most challenging part of her academic life, she reflected upon her clinical experiences beginning in her sophomore year:

> We can't see ourselves as international students, because we have to do exactly the same thing as other domestic students do…We need to do something that we are not familiar with as well. So we can't just tell our professor or other clinical instructors, or other nurses that, "we don't want to do this because we are international students." So that's why we are trying our best to put ourselves in a position where other domestic students are…Everyone is facing the same issue, if we cannot take what the school gave us, we just need to change our major.

Her reflection was quite typical for those students who have strong academic backgrounds and were determined to pursue higher achievement. This also demonstrated their resilience in a foreign environment and unwillingness to lose, they wanted to prove that even though they were international students, they can achieve the same success as their American counterparts.

Gen Z CIS also showed initiative in reaching out for help when they encountered any knowledge gaps. They went to office hours even though some of them said "every time I go to meet the professor, my legs are trembling." They took English composition classes to strengthen their writing even though it's only required for those who didn't pass the ESL requirement. Kexin reflected that "I felt it's good to still take the composition class, writing is my weakest part and I don't want that to affect my GPA." They also have a common awareness of the importance of group study, because "we can learn from each other, review the course content, and you never know, you teach others while you learn stuff."

The more students actively engage in their academic life, especially in the earlier stage of their college years, the faster they establish their belonging to the university. Kexin shared her

academic life story as an example. As someone who was always good at math and science, she is studying bioengineering and planning to pursue a PhD program after graduation. Being very devoted to her academic studies, from her first semester, she put more focus on seeking academic success than building her social life. She went to the university's Writing Center in her first year "to improve my writing so that I can get a better grade." She also applied to several internships and got a research opportunity with her professor, "which helps me to get the idea of what research work looks like and probably strengthen my background to apply for a PhD program." During group projects, she would "push my teammates to finish the work by a certain deadline so that we can review the work and make some improvement before we submit. I know they are not happy about that, but I have to make sure they finish their part." Moreover, Kexin expressed that because she values the university's reputation, when the reputation grows, it contributes to her working even harder. For her, what she wants from the university is not more support systems but that the university continues to maintain and improve its academic reputation because it inspires her. She shared:

> I hope [MAU] can be strong in any aspect, be the top research university……and if [MAU] has any impactful breakthrough in the engineering field, I will feel proud to be part of the community, and I will work harder to make [MAU] better.

Kexin's thoughts replicate almost all the participants of this study. They all value the reputation of the university they're attending and prioritize their own academic achievement. Every time they see an academic breakthrough in their department or university, they feel encouraged to contribute to the university's rising status by working even harder; they feel proud to be a student in their university community. Their sense of belonging was built upon their dedication to their academic life and academic achievements.

CIS also shared their stories of remote learning during the COVID-19 pandemic. Overall, remote learning did not interfere with their devotion to their studies. Many participants indicated that they were still able to conquer the difficulties of remote learning and focus on their academic development. For example, Yuzhe shared that he had to stay on campus during COVID because he still had active work internships. Although this made it hard for him to maintain good study habits since there weren't a lot of peers around, he forced himself to go to the lab every day, even though "there's only me over there," because it helped him get away from the "no study mood at home."

Concerned about international students attending online classes at midnight, some professors offered to record their lectures so that students living abroad could listen and learn on their preferred schedules. Several participants expressed how these recorded lectures benefited their learning styles. Kexin said:

The good part of the virtual class is that I can always go back and rewatch the lecture recording, especially for some very hard engineering classes. In the in-person class, if I took the notes, it would be hard for me to focus on what the teacher is talking about; and if I focus on listening to the lecture, I can barely take the notes…and also the other positive aspect is that virtual classes give me the flexibility to arrange my time. If some classes were too boring or the speed was too slow, I could just speed up the video and still get the materials I need from the lectures.

Yoyo was one of the three participants who had to stay in the United States during the pandemic because she had to go to the hospital for her clinical work. Even so, she appreciated the recorded online classes because they allowed her schedule to be much more flexible:

Because in last semester I had to do like 12-to-14-hour shifts, it's kinda no way for me to finish my shifts and go back to school and take tests or go to classes. But because everything moves online and the professor needs to record everything, I don't have to be there in person (to) take the lecture, so I could sleep during the daytime and go to the clinic at night and catch up (on) all the lessons when I was free. So I really think for me, 'Zoom University' was pretty good!

Kexin and Yoyo's stories are representative of those who were still extremely devoted to their academic development during COVID-19. They made the best out of the online learning mode because it allowed them flexibility with their schedules and learning habits.

4.1.1.2 Passion for Their Studies

For many Gen Z CIS, the role of their college major or minors holds great weight in their academic life and sense of belonging to the university community. Several students from this study indicated that the more passionate they felt about what they were studying, the more they would achieve and fit in with their department. Therefore, they take choosing majors or minors more seriously and do so based on their own will and interests.

Tian said that because he saw many of his friends suffering from mental health, he decided to study psychology in order to "understand them and help them." Wenda considers himself an "observer and thinker," which is why he is pursuing a philosophy major. He even loves wandering around the campus to "immerse himself in this environment." Kexin was always good at math and science since middle school, so she was proud to be enrolled in engineering school in college. These are just a few examples of CIS who chose their majors based on their interests, and they show high self-efficacy and strong work ethic in their academic life.

There were still a couple of participants who chose their major based on parental suggestions or considerations for future career options. Yuzhe loved history and politics when he was younger, but learned that majoring in history might not secure a good job in the future. Therefore, he decided to major in applied math and computer science when considering his future career path. During his sophomore year, however, he took a political science class and discovered that he still "felt passionate about it," so he decided to minor in political science. He shared a few of his "proud moments" from doing a good job in group presentation and debate during one of his political science classes. Sophie was following in her parents' footsteps by majoring in computer science, but later decided to minor in Japanese and theater arts as that is where she found her passion. She compared her experiences in classes from both majors:

> I realized that I'm not really good at computer science, and I had quite a bit (of a) hard time doing assignments. So I don't really feel belonged or something when taking these courses. But I really loved theater arts, so even though I'm really shy to speak in English, every time there's a scripture reading or acting part, I really enjoy those moments and engage a lot in the class.

Yuzhe and Sophie's stories show how even though their choice of major was influenced by outside factors, they still decided to pursue their passions when the opportunity arose, even if they were just minoring in them. They found themselves more engaged and had more devotion towards their academic life. Almost half of the participants mentioned that they had double majors or added minors to either fulfill their interests, like Sophie, or strengthen their professional skills.

Three students also shared their stories of transferring majors. All of them expressed that no matter how hard they tried, there was always something wrong when they were in the wrong

program. But after they found the program they enjoyed, their sense of belonging to their department began to develop.

At first, Zikan studied bioengineering since MA University has a strong medical program, but later found that he was not a good fit for it. He shared his story of how he found a new program that suited him better:

> For my bio-engineering class in the first semester, I went to all the recitations, went to office hours but I still failed all exams. I struggled a lot in that class, and then I know I have to withdraw from the class. At the same time, I also participated in a student club which made me realize that I was interested in Econ and business, and I remember when I was in international high school back in China, I earned high scores in AP Econ and AP statistics. So I then transferred my major to Business school starting sophomore year. Ever since, I became more confident to(in) my study, kinda like find(ing) my spot in Business school.

Zikan's extracurricular experiences and high school experiences helped him find a major that he's good at and has passion for, which helped him find his sense of belonging in his academic life. Lynn had quite a similar experience in struggling to find the right major. She shared how she was "lost in her freshman and sophomore year as a psychology major student." She sought many resources to transfer into the right program for her:

> So after I switched to School of Ed, I had great conversations with almost every single professor, but I didn't have this great experience before in the psychology department, I just have to be honest cuz I didn't really get the content so I didn't know what to talk with professors before.

Lynn's situation indicates that once students become confident in what they're learning, they feel more engagement to their academic field through conversations with professors and

others. This is also echoed by Zoey who fought with her parents to switch into a program she liked. Her parents insisted that doing Business major would make her easier to find a job; however, her passion was working with kids and learning about their development. Following her own will, Zoey's transfer to a human development program enlightened her future academic life. She said she began to find her belongingness in this small program.

In summary, this discussion indicates that Gen Z CIS choose their majors based on personal interests and personal strengths. Once they find a major that they are passionate about, it becomes easier for them to build a sense of belonging to their department and academic community.

4.1.2 Valuing Faculty Student Interaction

Faculty-student interactions have been found to be critical to improving undergraduates' quality of academic life (DeAngelo et al., 2015), and it plays a crucial role in Gen Z CIS' college life as well. Being international students, they feel the need to be accepted and supported by their faculty members. In this study, there was one notable faculty-mentor relationship, shared by Yoyo. It was this professional relationship that helped her build more confidence as an Asian international student in the nursing program and continued to encourage her to pursue a career path in nursing. In her second year, every nursing student was paired with a nursing professor through a program called the "research mentorship program." She provided her thoughts on the mentor relationship:

> I feel like we are like a family instead of being a mentor or mentee, and she gave me a lot of inspiration and encouragement as well. Even I am not really prepared to pursue a PhD program and especially do the cancer stuff but because she was doing that so that's why I was like, maybe I could do that as well…I really appreciate everything she has done for me.

Because of her positive mentorship experience with her professor, Yoyo was encouraged to be involved in research from an early stage of her nursing studies. This helped her to find her interests and formed a clear career path in research. Additionally, she was emotionally supported by her mentor because she felt that the relationship was "like a family."

Even though Yoyo was the only participant who discussed having a formal and longtime faculty mentorship experience, around two-thirds of the participants shared their examples of having positive interactions with their faculty members. They especially showed their deep gratitude when they received attention from their advisors or professors because they felt "valued" and "important." For the rest of the participants, they didn't talk about any significant examples of faculty interactions.

Tian shared how his professors were all very caring about their students' academic studies, remarking "whenever you want to sign up an office hour with them, they were always there to help you." He continued to give an example:

> There was one professor teaching me psychology so whenever I asked a question in email like in three sentences, he would always reply in three paragraphs…. he's taking this too seriously, you know… and I realize how much they care about their students and their success here at [MAU]. That's why I'm proud of [MAU] because of all the faculty here.

Zikan also described his experience with an elderly professor who would take extra time before or after the class to answer his questions, saying "he is very old-school, but at the same time he is so willing to spend time with me just to make sure I fully understand the content." Tian and Zikan's responses were representative of students' valuing professors who showed their willingness to spend time on their academic successes.

For Zoey, faculty-student interactions helped her with her struggles in one of her required courses. Being "the only Asian in the class," she was nervous about talking in the beginning of the semester because of her "lack of vocabulary," and so she seldom made any comments or voiced her thoughts. She shared:

> The professors from the school of Ed. are super nice, they would encourage me to talk more, and they would ask me specifically if anything that needs to change so that I could feel more comfortable. And during one class, when we needed to discuss, the professor invited me to go to the blackboard to teach the class Chinese. I still remember that moment as it's a big step for me to talk in front of the whole class.

Since the language barrier is still one of the bigger challenges for CIS, especially in their freshman year, several CIS felt more comfortable talking with their professors or advisors in private after class. Yantong shared how her writing professor had two one-on-one sessions throughout the semester to ask her students about their experiences in the class and talk about their mid-term and final projects. These one-on-one sessions made her feel at ease and comfortable since "no one's around and I won't feel dumb to ask any kind of weird questions or stupid questions." By attending these sessions, Yantong was encouraged to be more active in discussions and felt more comfortable sharing her thoughts and doubts with her professors.

With 2019 came the COVID-19 pandemic, which made it more difficult for students to interact with their faculty. Conversations via email took even longer than before because of the time differences. However, several students mentioned that their professors were willing to place more attention on them and spent more time with them during the pandemic. Lynn recalled her interactions with some of her professors:

There were two of my professors who asked me if I wanted to meet with them, like every two weeks at a time that I'm available to do one-on-one meeting. Yeah so during the meeting they checked up to see what's my progress like, how's everything doing, and that was really, really nice with them.

Lynn's reflections show how professors kindly offered more help to students on a more regular basis during remote learning, and for the purpose of both academic studies and mental support. Students expressed they were really moved by their faculty members' caring actions. Sophie shared her experience of a self-care day where all university members take a day off to discover, define and develop self-care practices. and her advisor had a one-on-one zoom chat with her. She stated how she "wish(es) there were more of those kinds of self-care days as it made me feel really special and loved."

Because faculty were willing to spend more time and attention on students during remote learning, several students seized the opportunities to attend online office hours and had more one-on-one meetings than they did when the meetings were in-person. Tian pointed out his thoughts regarding doing so:

I would say during COVID, you could build good relationships with professors, but you have to make it, you have to go to office hours, otherwise there's no relationship. That's all on virtual but guess what, that's the best thing you can have, you have to make the most out of it.

Tian actively engaged in more conversations with his professors to not only keep up his grades, but to also maintain good social support from them.

In conclusion, the nature of remote learning pulled students physically away from the campus as expected, but did not hinder meaningful faculty-student interactions. In fact, it may

have provided more opportunities because many professors attempted to provide greater flexibility with their courses and office hours. These faculty-student interactions were seen as especially important in helping students engage with their academic life while receiving more attention and care.

4.1.3 Participating in Research Jobs and Internships

Gen Z CIS expressed great eagerness in finding internships or research opportunities during their undergraduate studies in order to enrich their experiences for future graduate school applications or career fields. Almost two-thirds of the participants had some extent of searching for internships or research opportunities in the United States, but some of their application processes were disrupted due to the COVID-19 pandemic forcing remote learning. For those who were able to find an internship or research job experience, they shared that the opportunities not only strengthened their skills, but also provided them with chances to have much deeper engagements with other peers, staff members, and the community.

For Yuzhe, research opportunities and internships are "a very important part of college life" because they "give you a chance to apply what you have learned into the real world." He further discussed his research experience:

> My feeling of belonging also comes from my research experience. I have two researchers right now, one is math research and the other is computer science research. I would say these two researchers help me a lot not only on the learning thing, but it also provides me the opportunities to connect with people. If you did a good job during the research, the professors and other lab mates will value you, you will feel that you are valuable and you are contributing something to the project.

Yuzhe articulated that his sense of belonging was built upon his connections and collaborations with others through his research, as well as a sense of accomplishment for being valued by others.

Yoyo experienced a deeper bonding with her peers and professors during her clinical work, as they were separated into small groups and were faced with the "same challenge to talk to the patients and other health care providers." Therefore, in their small groups, they were able to help each other. Regarding her clinical experience, she concluded:

I think this clinical experience is a practice experience, I need to expose myself to the patients more instead of just finishing everything and then just leave. I think also the research part pushes me out of my comfort zone. It's the practice process that I need to get more exposed to the things I'm not really good at in order to be more comfortable and confident in doing things like that.

Yoyo's research opportunity not only strengthened her professional skills, but also provided her with more chances to interact and connect with those inside and outside of her major. Zoey had the same experience during her internships. She transferred into the Applied Developmental Psychology program and began her internship in her senior year at a K-8 laboratory school affiliated with MA University. This internship provided her with an immersive experience of interacting with a diverse group of students:

When I first step into the classroom, I see that there are kids coming from all over the world, they have different identities, different racial backgrounds. Maybe white is still the majority, but it was such a diverse student body. This is one thing I really appreciate about my university. It's such a diverse environment. And I feel like those kids have no trouble or barrier interacting with people coming from different backgrounds or having different

identities, so when you start with an environment when you are very young, you would unconsciously learn to respect other cultures. And this internship also gives me the chance to interact with this diverse student group.

Through her internship, Zoey recognized the importance of interacting with people from different cultures, ethnicities, and backgrounds, because it allows for respect for others.

In general, more students were aware of the importance of internship and research opportunities during their college years and were actively searching for them. Even in the midst of the pandemic, four participants mentioned that they were able to find work internships during their stay in China. These experiences not only strengthened their practical skills but also allowed them the chance to have deeper connections with others and with the community at large, which influenced their feeling of belonging to the campus.

4.2 CIS Interactions with Local Culture and Community

For CIS, building social connection with American students, faculty members, staff members, and other American people makes up a big portion of CIS' connections with others. This section will discuss how CIS' respond to and feel about and respond to the social connections with different people in various circumstances. From this study, the majority of students articulated that language and cultural differences were not the biggest barriers to engaging in conversations or building connections; rather, it was more about whether they felt like they were welcomed into an American community or if they were perceived as different. Participants also exhibited their self-development of conquering their fears and stepping out of their comfort zone to make social

connections. Three major themes emerged related to this area: 1) feeling accepted and valued 2) feeling like an outsider, and 3) stepping out of the comfort zone.

4.2.1 Feeling Accepted and Valued

Three sub-themes have been generated under this overarching theme: when they first arrived at the campus, and support systems provided made them transition smooth and feel welcomed; and during their overall interactions, when other people showed interests and awareness of CIS's cultural background, it bridge the gap between people with different background and helped establish relationships; Gen Z CIS also found able to engage with more conversations in their small-sized non-STEM classes.

4.2.1.1 College Transitions Support

Many participants mentioned receiving help and information during orientations and in their residence hall life. This is not only helpful for them to smoothly transit into a foreign place, these supports also provide them the chance to build social connection in their early stage of college life. Zoey came here first to the regional campus and later transferred to the main campus in sophomore year. She shared that during the move-in period, both her senior Chinese students and campus staff helped them to get familiar with dormitory life and also take Chinese freshmen students to buy necessities. She further explained that her ESL teacher even took extra miles to help Chinese international students with orientation:

> She actually went a tour with us to [Main campus] city, because it's a big city and there's
> a Chinese supermarket there, so she drove us there and let us buy a lot of food…. she also

showed us a tour on campus…It really made me feel comfortable and welcoming. And for now, I am still keeping in touch with her.

Yoyo also shared her positive move-in program, as she mentioned there were some upperclassmen playing the role of school ambassador, reached out to her once she was accepted to the program, and picked her up at the airport which made her feel "safe and welcomed." "She also helped me to get my student ID and settle down in the dorm so that's why it wasn't a hard thing for me in the beginning and I was able to make friends with her." Both Zoey and Yoyo felt welcomed and accepted through these interactions, which made them comfortable to establish these relationships

Regarding the residence hall life, several students talked about their residence assistants (RAs) were very helpful to get them familiar with the new environment and engage in their first-year residence hall life. She recalled:

> I feel like she introduced me a lot about how to adapt (to) new life over here and got me familiar about the new stuff…She is really good at gathering everyone together to know each other and I feel welcomed in my residence hall.

With the help of these RAs in creating a welcoming environment, CIS were able to have more chances to make friends in their residence hall. The above cases were representative for those who received support during their transition period–the critical time for them to build connection to the university community. For Chinese international students, they especially need extra support to help them get familiar with the foreign environment. Students acknowledged various support systems provided by the university particularly for international students, they much appreciated any interpersonal support by staff members, peers or faculty members that made them feel accepted. And through that, they would also be able to build more social connections.

4.2.1.2 Cultural Awareness Bridges the Gap

Gen Z CIS from this study also pointed out the situations when American people showed any interests or talked about their cultural background, traditions and in general knowledges of China, they felt comfortable and easy to join the conversation.

Living in a residence hall, Taylor was surrounded by native English speakers. Therefore, how his peers initiated their interactions with him greatly influenced his willingness to communicate and connect. These interactions started during his first few days:

During the ice-breaking meeting, at first we all introduced ourselves and I said I'm from China, and they were like, 'oh, that's cool.' They seem like interested in my cultural background... and they also asked me how I feel about here, how do I feel about [MAU]. And later on, when we got more familiar (with each other), they didn't treat me like a foreigner or something. Sometimes we just ignore that (identity background), we just talk about things like movies, video games or complain about a professor or something like that.

Zikan related to Taylor's stories, as he shared how he became more willing to speak up in class when his professor actively attempted to engage in some aspects of Chinese culture:

One of my Econ class professors was really caring to us Chinese students, especially last year when I took the online class in China. Our professor wore a Chinese traditional costume and greeted everyone with Happy Chinese New Year in Mandarin. We only have three Chinese students in that class, and I feel really proud to be part of the community, and ever since I felt more comfortable to speak up in that class.

Because both Taylor and Zikan felt respected or accepted by their peers and professors, they became more confident in expressing themselves. And so, having someone or a group of

people show awareness of and express interest in their culture helped to begin bridging the gap between people of different backgrounds. And once a relationship is built, culture differences might not be as big an issue anymore. Positive feedback in the form of interest and understanding is an essential factor for CIS to feel accepted and affirmed communicating and building deeper connections with members of the English-speaking community.

4.2.1.3 More Engaging in Small non-STEM course

During the interviews, CIS appreciated MAU providing "respectful academic environment." Wenda mentioned how "it doesn't really matter if you are an international student or not, as long as you have great thoughts or opinions, people would value your voice." Moreover, several participants stated that they felt more comfortable communicating with American students in small group settings or one-on-one scenarios as feedbacks were given instantly. Additionally, they found that they would also engage in the dialogue more if they had interest and/or were familiar with the content of the discussion because often, their opinions were valued.

Moreover, many participants expressed that they felt more comfortable speaking up in smaller class sizes that allotted times for discussion. Lynn, one of the participants who transferred majors, compared two of her classroom experiences:

> I feel like every single thing I said in my class right now, it was valued by my professor and my peers. because we are such a small group, and then we do share decent thoughts, which is very great. However, I don't think I had that feeling during my freshman (and) sophomore year when I was in those huge lecture halls, and I didn't feel comfortable to talk in those big classes.

Even though Lynn exhibited excellent English-speaking skills during the study interview, she stated how she still felt reluctant to speak up in front of a large audience. However, in her smaller-sized classes, she found herself engaging in the conversations more and felt her opinions being valued by others. Several students mentioned many STEM courses were focused more on lectures, whereas most non-STEM courses consisted of discussions, group presentations, and other dialogue formats. Because Yuzhe majored in applied math and minored in political science, he was able to experience the differences first-hand. He felt more engaged in his minor core courses, "cuz it's small size classes, and there's a lot of discussion during the political science class, and I was very familiar about the topics." When talking about his experiences in his political science classes, Yuzhe was very proud that his opinions were mostly being valued, especially during the group projects or discussions:

> I think during the political science class makes me feel like a valuable student here at [MAU], because you have to talk; and you have to do the presentation; you have to do the group projects and cooperate with other students; however in the computer science or math class, it's kind of like each student are individual, and don't have too much communication between each other.

Both Lynn and Yuzhe's sharing represents the most CIS in this study that they participated in the conversation more during those non-STEM small sized class. As the nature of these classes often requires discussion, or presentations, this allows CIS to engage their voices more during the class. Once it yielded positive feedback from others, it made them feel more confident and comfortable sharing their thoughts.

4.2.2 Feeling Like an Outsider

Although we've discussed many positive interactions and stories regarding CIS interactions with American peers, faculty, and staff, there were situations where participants felt uncomfortable and not welcomed. Several participants recalled unfriendly and even hostile encounters on campus that made them feel excluded, as if they were outsiders.

Yuzhe and Zikan recalled poor relationships with their roommates/floormates that resulted from different living styles when they were living in first-year residence halls. They considered these as "terrible memories" for both of them, and both expressed how they were "not feeling at home" and "didn't really want to go back to the dorm." In addition to some broken relationships, Zikan also mentioned an instance when he felt discriminated against because one of his floormates put trash outside his room after they held a party in the dorm:

> I'm not sure that being targeted by them is because of my identity or what, but I definitely feel not accepted and welcomed there. Even though I got along with other people at [residence hall name] except for those two other floormates next door, this thing did make me feel not belonged to the residence hall family.

It is unclear whether the actions of that floormate is due to discrimination based on race or culture or resulted from more personal reasons. Nevertheless, being a CIS living in an American residence hall for the first time, the experience greatly impacted him and his sense of belonging to the school and community.

When discussing classroom experiences, all of the study participants said that they didn't personally experience any unfair or hostile interactions with their American peers or professors. However, two students did provide examples from their friends who were CIS. Taylor said that one of his Chinese friends complained about how he was being ignored and "feel not being

included" during a group project. Just this one experience greatly affected Taylor's friend's perception of American students and hindered him from attempting to build relationships with them. Yetong added that some of her CIS friends talked about a writing assignment from their English Composition class where international students were asked to write about the culture shock they felt from their study abroad experiences. Some of the students felt that the professor was making assumptions that "Chinese students must have cultural shock experiences, which is not always true." And because of these assumptions, they "really don't know how to write about this, and didn't want to talk to this professor anymore."

Besides interactions during classroom settings, three students shared hostile encounters they experienced outside of the classroom. Lynn shared an unfriendly interaction she had with a fellow classmate:

> It was the beginning of COVID-19, and I was wearing a mask and glove and walking on campus, I bumped into one of my classmates but he just gave a weird stare which made me really feel sick… I can tell that he was judging me.

After this experience, she ended any possible relationship or connection with this classmate and always felt uncomfortable when he was around. Two other students mentioned hostile encounters during the pandemic when they were yelled at by some strangers to "Go back to your country." One of these incidents happened on the bus in the campus area, and the other happened near the apartment where the student lived. For Kexin, her thoughts about the U.S. changed as a result:

> After that, I became clearly aware that yes, [MAU] is welcoming and friendly. But there are still some local people who make enemies of us Chinese. It made me rethink whether I

want to stay in America after graduation, and in which kind of community I should live if I stay here.

Even though these negative experiences were a very small part of their general interactions with Americans, it was devastating to them. Language, more or less, is still a barrier for CIS, but beyond the language difference is respect and acceptance. For CIS, and possibly all international students, being cared about and listened to is one of the biggest contributing factors to sense of belonging to the American community.

4.2.3 Stepping Out of Comfort Zone

Participants from this study showed various levels of confidence and comfort with speaking English. Nevertheless, all of them were willing to participate more in conversations and build deeper connections with others. Many participants demonstrated their self-development in building confidence speaking in English and extending their social networks.

Rui was a participant who exhibited the greatest struggles with speaking English among all the study participants. He shared that "I know my English is not that good, and I communicate with broken English. But when people showed their willingness to listen to me, that made me feel more comfortable to speak more." He provided an example from participating in a group presentation. At first, Rui was afraid of providing any input, but he tried his best to make his presentation part sound as fun as possible which received good feedback from his teammates. And he was encouraged to do so in the following group presentation projects. "That experience really helped me to build confidence in trying to communicate with others later on," he said. For Rui, he demonstrated his efforts to engage in conversations no matter his language proficiency level.

For Sophie, she claimed herself shy to speak in English in front of a large audience; however, she still tried her best to engage her voice more. She recalled:

Remember one time in Asian history class, and the teacher said something about Bing Ma Yong (Terracotta Warriors) that I [did] not quite agree with, and different from what I learned before in China, but at that time I wasn't brave enough to talk about my different opinion right in front of the class, so I shared my thoughts with the teacher after the class and she was very appreciated that I told her the different side of the story.

It was because of her motivation to "participate more in class discussion" and "let people know what China really is" led Sophie conquer her fear and found alternative ways to contribute her voice. Sophie was not a single case, several others shared that because of their eagerness to express their opinions especially from a Chinese students' point of view, they would step out of their comfort zone to raise up their voice.

Gen Z CIS in this study also showed their initiative to find a way to improve their English proficiency. Kexin shared her story of joining a rocket and aerospace club, in which she found common interests and discussion topics with other students:

I joined that club starting my sophomore year, and before that, I was really shy to join any dialogue with American students. But in that club, I was really interested in building rockets with others, and I also began to have great communication with others. This really builds my confidence in speaking English.

Kexin's engagement with an extracurricular club helped her build confidence in communicating with American peers because she now had something in common with them and received positive responses from them during their discussions and activities. Her experiences

were representative for those who participated in student clubs or extra curricular activities to extend their social network.

In addition, participants expressed difficulties when joining conversations with American peers about topics they were not familiar with, such as local politics, traditional American sports, and various TV series. Yantong expressed how "Sometimes I would envy those Korean students as you know K-pop right now is trending crazy in America, all my friends are talking about the Korean singers and Korean dramas." She wishes that China would have more such trending things to catch people's attention so that she could have something in common to talk about with her American friends. It indicated that CIS were willing to make friends with American peers, and for those CIS who were able to form relationships with their American peers, they felt they were able to do so because they had common interests, such as playing basketball, going to the gym, or playing videogames. Although it is difficult for them, CIS were eager to find common interests with their American peers outside of the classroom.

4.3 Gen Z CIS Make Themselves Part of the Community

The participants in this study did not appear to face situations where they had to sacrifice their cultural traditions in order to position themselves on an American campus. Instead, Gen Z CIS found their own place on campus where they can be who they are as a Chinese person, but also just be a student on an American campus. For many, they were able to make themselves feel at home with skills they have acquired but also maintain ties with the Chinese community and have a more active role to make their voices heard in the university community. And so, three major themes emerged when discussing how Gen Z CIS identified themselves on an American

campus: 1) making themselves feel at home; 2) valuing the Chinese community; and 3) having their voices be heard and influential.

4.3.1 Making Themselves Feel at Home

As Gen Z CIS, they now have more flexibility in choosing how they want to position themselves into an American college campus. If there are certain aspects of American culture that they like, they can choose to adapt it into their own, and they can maintain as much of their own Chinese culture as they wish. As Wenda pointed out: "We can still be who we are as Chinese students, but at the same time, we have to improve our language skills and try to be open-minded to American culture." Under this overarching theme, two sub-themes generated: Gen Z CIS's previous experiences prepared them to feel comfortable with being normal students on campus; their attitudes of enjoying study abroad made them easier to situate themselves as part of the university member.

4.3.1.1 Previous Experiences Prepared

In this study, out of 12 interview participants, five students came to the U.S. for high school, and another five attended international high schools in China, where English was one of the primary languages taught and spoken. A couple of students briefly mentioned that they had college preparedness summer school experiences in the U.S. before they went to MAU. For many of these students, their background prepared them to have the language ability and social skills to choose the way they wanted to live in college. Tian, for example, was very proud of his English language proficiency and his passing because many native English speakers considered him "Asian-American":

You choose your own language, you choose the way you behave, I think that is a talent, and that talent has served me well. It makes me feel like blend in, you know, you don't stand out because sometimes you don't want to stand out. You just want to blend into American society, and you also want to blend into the Chinese circle.

Tian's experience of attending high school in the U.S. allowed him to improve his English at a younger age than most. This language ability and confidence allowed him to pass as Asian American to varying degrees, moving back and forth between different outward identities as it suited him. This is also the case for Taylor, who got along well with both American and Chinese circles. He reflected:

When I'm with my American friends and professors, I'm trying to act like I'm part of them that I know your language and I know your culture. Not just pretending, it's kind like just another lifestyle. And with my Chinese friends, I'll just get back to what I would be in China…For me it's not hard to switching from the different mode. I will say they are mixed perfectly.

Just as Tian, Taylor's previous experience of studying high school in the U.S. also equipped him well, allowing him to switch back and forth between different lifestyles as he preferred.

Moreover, these American high school experiences helped these students to easily familiarize themselves with the campus environment and with building relationships with Americans. In addition to a smaller language barrier, these students already had experience in making friends with American peers and communicating with American instructors. Lynn's experience in choosing her friend network is representative of this. She reflected:

I already have some previous experience hanging out with domestic students, I feel like it wasn't that hard for me to also make some good relationships with American students once

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I came here (MAU). But I'm not necessarily looking for American friends to help me adapt into college life here, you know, sometimes you just want to hang out with Chinese you know.

Lynn's statements speak to Gen Z CIS in this study who are free to choose their social circles; they are able to decide when they hang out with their Chinese friends and when to blend into American circles. Because of their previous experience of immersing themselves in an English-speaking environment at a younger age, they did not feel the need to intentionally make friends with Americans in order to adapt to the host culture.

Overall, the unique backgrounds of many Gen Z CIS shaped their unique identities on American campuses. By having previous exposure to American cultures and environments, they were no longer in a state of extreme surprise, strangers thrown into a foreign land; they already knew, to an extent, what they were going to face. And as a result, they were able to bring more of themselves and their cultural identity and find their own place.

4.3.1.2 Enjoying Study Abroad

For those participants who came to the U.S. to attend college, most of them were excited about this opportunity and wanted to make the most out of it. As several explicitly expressed that this was their dream school to attend, it was easy for them to build connections and "felt in love with the campus" once they came here. Wenda described that in his first semester, every time he wandered around the campus, he felt in love with the campus buildings, and felt "great attachment to [MAU]." Sophie shared the same feeling that even taking the campus shuttle around the campus and talking with the driver made her feel "happy to be part of a student here." Many other participants shared the same enjoyment and positive attitudes towards their study abroad

experiences, which helped them easily build a sense of belonging, especially starting the beginning of their first semester.

Besides this great first impression towards the university, their enjoyment in study abroad also motivated Gen Z CIS to make new friendships and explore the fun parts of campus life. Some of them, like Zoey, Yantong, and Wenda, were actively interested in making American friends. Zoey reflected on how excited she was during her first year:

> It's your first year in a new place, it's like studying abroad for the first time and getting rid of your family. You got that excitement, and this excitement really helped me, I don't know, like get over all those language barriers. It was really like at that moment, you really want to make friends, you really want to talk to them.

Her positive attitude about studying abroad helped her take an active role in making friends regardless of language barriers. Yantong's experience resonated with Zoey for she was actively involved in residence hall life. She was very satisfied with her residence hall experience which was full of "freshmen and parties," and she loved just wearing "casual clothes or sometimes even sleepwear to hang out with her friends in the residence hall."

These two cases are representative of Gen Z CIS who are actively engaging themselves in the U.S. campus in order to explore the "fun" and "exciting" parts of college life. Yantong also said that "studying abroad gives me a lot of opportunities to travel around the U.S. with friends during spring break or Thanksgiving." For these students, they were open-minded to adapting to American cultural aspects that they liked while maintaining their Chinese identity.

When discussing their future life plans, some of them expressed interest in seeking job opportunities in the United States, while others mentioned exploring opportunities in different countries or going back to China. Hence, seeking integration into mainstream culture was not about

securing permanent legal status in the U.S. for these students, but rather, about discovering their preferred way of living on an American campus. Three participants coincidently articulated that: "I don't see myself international students; I'm just one of the students here on campus."

4.3.2 Valuing the Chinese Community—A Home Away from Home

Although many Gen Z CIS students positioned themselves more as a student instead of as an international, they still valued being a part of the Chinese international community. Many participants implied that the inclusive environment that MAU provided allows them to maintain their preferred living styles and social connections within the larger Chinese community. Although around two-thirds of the participants shared positive experiences of making friends with American peers, almost all of the participants' memorable moments occurred with their Chinese social circle. Two sub-themes generated: Gen Z CIS shared the same way of communication; and Gen Z CIS shared the same lifestyle

4.3.2.1 Sharing the Same Way of Communication

Several students talked about WeChat – the Chinese instant messaging app and social media app with the largest user population among both national and international Chinese. In fact, Chinese students prefer it for communicating over email and text messaging. Yantong shared her experience of connecting with other incoming Chinese international students as they helped each other during the college move-in period. She recalled:

> I met a lot of friends before I arrived at [the city name] because we had like a new students
> WeChat group. We flew together and we kind of relied on each other when we first came
> here. Without them, I would be freakout at that time…

As a newcomer to a foreign country, CIS were more comfortable seeking out Chinese international peers using a form of communication they were familiar with. Lynn shared a similar story to Yantong's because she received more information during orientation from one of her WeChat group chats than she did from the university's social media accounts and platforms. Sophie shared similar opinions about communicating with CIS friends regarding academics: "It's not necessary to have many Chinese students in my class made me feel comfortable, but having Chinese students in my class does make communication easier" as they were able to share any class notes and discuss the content via WeChat group chats.

Aside from bonding over a preferred social media platform, many of the participants also shared the importance of having Chinese international friends. Rui was not confident in his English-speaking skills. He was also shy about making friends with other Chinese peers. However, during his difficult times of "academic stress," "loneliness," and "feeling lost" that all hit him together, he reached out to another Chinese student who went to the same Chinese church as him. He recalled:

> He just spent the whole night with me, listening to my complaints and all the negative thoughts…and he prayed for me at the end. The problem didn't really disappear right away. However, I realized that there's always someone who cares about me when I am in need.

Taylor experienced a similar difficult period where although he had a busy schedule and both American and Chinese friends to hang out with, the feeling of loneliness was too challenging to deal with. As he put it, "every time you went back to your dorm and by yourself, I don't know, it's just the feeling came back." Although he hasn't quite solved the problem yet, he does have another Chinese friend with whom he can share these feelings and "sort of release the stress."

Both Rui and Taylor's stories were representative for students who felt that when the stress come, there's nothing like being with people who share the same cultural background as you and who can understand you. This applied to both those who valued social interactions and those who wished to focus more on their academics. And so, whether virtual or physical, these CIS still feel the need to have social interactions with those from similar cultural backgrounds. Whether it's for academic or personal purposes, having those connections remains a vital part of their sojourner experiences.

4.3.2.2 Sharing the Same Lifestyle

As discussed in many literatures, Chinese students love to gather together, and this is no different for the participants of this study. Participants from this study expressed that bonding with the Chinese community did not deter their engagement with the American campus. On the other hand, it helped them to feel part of the university community as they had someone who shared the same lifestyles with them. Wenda described how this gathering benefited his engagement with the community:

> There are a lot of Chinese people here, you can also go to Chinese restaurants and Chinese supermarkets here. For the living stuff, you can do anything here. For Chinese students, we really like to get together. We had a good relationship with each other. We formed a really big communication group and I love the atmosphere of Chinese students here in [City name].

From this quote, it is evident that the welcoming environment and the well-developed Chinese community where MAU is located allows students to keep their preferred living styles. Zikan shared similar opinions about the benefits of having a Chinese community to interact with:

You know, you just can't get used to eating burgers and pizza everyday; you don't have cars to drive around; and you don't have relatives here to stay with during the vacation. It's just this different lifestyle shaped me to bond much closer with the Chinese community.

These two testimonies show how CIS, as a big community, feel very comfortable spending time with each other as they share the same cultural background. Wenda and Zikan both explained that their bonding more closely with the Chinese community didn't affect their social circle with American friends. According to Zikan, "Hanging out with my Chinese people actually heals my homesickness, and it's really good for my mental health." This is also echoed by Sophie, whose "social circles were mainly built on Chinese students," and she appreciated how these friendships helped her build connections to the university. She reflected:

I was really thankful for meeting these Chinese friends at [MAU], and getting to explore the campus, getting to explore about ourselves and having them nearby I think it was the great experience.

Overall, participants from this study valued being part of the Chinese community, and they took care of each other as they conquered difficulties in their studying abroad journey. Moreover, the diverse and inclusive campus environment allowed them to keep some of their cultural norms and maintain their identity as Chinese students.

4.3.3 Making CIS's Voice Heard and Influential

In making themselves part of the community, the participants also expressed their awareness of the importance of making their voices heard. They achieved this through classroom activities, involvement in student organizations, and various social occasions.

When the subject of conversation is related to Chinese international students' cultural background, Gen Z CIS are eager to express their opinions and perspectives. Lynn concluded that there are two types of CIS: good listeners and those who desperately want to share their perspectives as both international and Chinese students. She noted that this was especially prevalent during social science courses and English composition courses. She observed that "They usually talked about cultural differences and social movements. A lot of Chinese students are very willing to share their thoughts." Sophie echoed Lynn's point of view that:

> Sometimes I really want people to learn what China the country really is, not what they think it was. So even though I'm really hesitate to raise my voice during the class, I choose to turn in a short essay to response what teacher said about the difference meaning of color in China and in Western culture.

Sophie's statement speaks to many CIS in that they were eager to share their cultures and opinions with their American friends. Several students talked about how amazing it was to see some Chinese decorations in their school buildings and see Chinese food served in the dining hall during the Chinese New Year. Yantong recalled:

> When I saw that, it really made me feel proud to be a Chinese student here. I also wish that there will be more these kind(s) of culture-related activities to let my American friends know more about our culture and our amazing food.

These testimonies indicate that CIS are enthusiastic about sharing Chinese culture and perspectives with the American community, no matter the occasion. They long for greater understanding of their culture and background. Additionally, more CIS showed their enthusiasm towards engaging with various student organizations on campus to make their voice heard. The

following three are those who are or were involved in leadership roles and want to have a positive influence on the CIS community.

In Tian's eye, he perceived that their generation is eager to express themselves which might very much influenced by the American culture. He said, "we are very active, we are getting cultured and we are becoming more Americanized than most people realized and that Americanized is in us, is to speak up." When talking about his participation with other CIS peers in the "Stop Asian Hate rally," Tian said:

> As CIS here in the United States, we have our own share of responsibility, because there are people fighting for your rights. It is true that there are some people who are discriminating you, but on the opposite, there are good people not from your group, but care about your rights. So we (Tian with other CIS friends) also film the documentary for the rally, trying to remind international students that you have the responsibility to speak up. Not always wait for others to do so for you, and at the same time, we also have to speak up for other things such as Black Lives Matter. People are speaking up for you, but next time, if you are not doing the same, who is there to speak for you? I believe civil rights is a shared responsibility at least that's how I learned in America.

Although CIS are usually stereotyped as not being well-involved in social movements on campus, Tian actively speaks up not only for his own CIS peers but also for other ethnic groups. He feels a strong responsibility towards making his voice heard so that it may have an influence on gradual change for the benefit of various different student groups. Additionally, he believes that speaking up for other student groups is a mutually beneficial way to gain attention and common ground.

Tian was also actively engaged in the university's student government board (SGB), which seldom CIS are involved in. He tried to "provide this kind of international perspective to the table, to the discussion." So, whenever there was a new event hosted by the SGB, he was there to remind them how they could engage with the Chinese student population in the event. Moreover, he wanted to inform them of how any policy made would affect the CIS population. As Tian put it, he was "there to make sure that they at least consider the potential impact on the Chinese international students."

Taylor, who currently serves as a vice president of the Chinese Undergraduate Student Association (CUSA), said that as he benefited from the organization's mentor-mentee program in his freshman year. He then applied to be a mentor in his sophomore year and joined the administrative team for his junior year. Now a senior, he shared his vision in serving as vice president:

> As a Chinese Student Association, most of our business is trying to help Chinese freshmen to get used to the life here at [MAU]....so we hold different events to help them meet new friends and build (a) connection to the campus…..it made me feel like you're appreciated, your existence is important at this campus as a lot of people are counting on you, it's kind like a sense of accomplishment.

Taylor felt that one of his greatest achievements was being recognized as someone important in which his efforts and work were appreciated. Meanwhile, he also received great satisfaction arranging events that benefitted other students.

Yoyo served as fundraising chair for the nursing student association. One of her main goals was for her American classmates and faculty members to have a good impression of Chinese

students and understand that they can achieve the same as their American counterparts. She shared her experience in serving as fundraising chair:

> Because we only have three Chinese international students, so that's why we need to let other people know us, know that Chinese students are not like what they may feel like before or we need to actually be the member of the board in order to let our voices being heard by other people… we have to try our best to act as best as we can, not only in our academic lessons, but also in clinical experiences, and just to let more people know that, 'oh yeah, Chinese student could also get through the whole four yeas nursing program.' I hope to set up a good model for future Chinese students.

As a CIS in a leadership position, Yoyo studied and worked hard, and tried to be a good model for future CIS. She was willing to correct any miscommunications or misunderstandings toward them in order to provide a better environment for future CIS students in her department. Yoyo hoped that her experiences and efforts would benefit future CIS by allowing them to be known better by the department faculty and staff and provide a better environment for them to thrive in the programs.

In summary, more Gen Z CIS are taking active roles in student leadership positions. This is because they are acknowledging themselves as CIS representatives to bridge the understanding gap, build relationships between students with different backgrounds, and establish better communication within the education institute.

5.0 Conclusion and Implications

The purpose of this study is to examine the experiences of Gen Z CIS in order to understand what informs their sense of belonging to the university. Through the conceptual framework sense of belonging, which is defined as "the students' perceived social support on campus, a feeling of connectedness, or that one is important to others" (Strayhorn, 2012, p.16), I examined how CIS' undergraduate experiences on-campus and their relationships with others help them feel belonging to their university community.

Three areas were reflected that shaped their overall lived-experience in the university community. First, these students prioritize academic success, as well as the aspects that lead to it, including, but not limited to, devotion to their studies, faculty-student interactions, and research and internship opportunities. Additionally, the quality of interactions with their American peers, faculty, and staff is extremely crucial, because it helps determine how they choose to communicate and connect with the American community. Whether the feedback they receive makes them feel accepted and valued or like an outsider will end up influencing their perceptions of the community as a whole and affect the degree to which they wish to engage and join. They also showed self-development in conquering fears and any barriers to make more social connections on campus. Finally, Gen Z CIS' were able use the skills they had acquired from their previous experiences to make themselves part of the community, while at the same time maintain their bond with the Chinese community. And by doing so, they were able to find that sense of familiarity on a foreign campus, a "home away from home." Going beyond that, as a member of the campus, they want their voices heard. They are hoping to create some positive change for the Chinese community and

the larger university community as they establish their position on an American campus community.

This chapter includes a broad discussion of the overall findings from this study, in answering the research questions in terms of Gen Z CIS' college experiences and in terms of their sense of belonging. It will also discuss connections to current literature and conceptual framework, which will lead to an examination of the deeper meanings behind the findings, as well as their implications for practice and future research.

5.1 Major Findings and Gen Z CIS Experiences

The key findings from this study draw the picture that overall, Gen Z undergraduate CIS enjoy college life and the many things it has to offer, including pursuing academic success, making valuable connections and friendships, and engaging in various campus activities. Based on the findings from this study, this generation also seems more resourceful when compared to their millennial counterparts in regard to college experiences abroad, as was shown in previous studies (Cheng & Erben, 2012; Henze & Zhu, 2012). Many of them prepared themselves for college abroad by being exposed to an English-speaking environment early on in their high school years. Some of them attended high school in the U.S., some of them went to international high schools in China, and several others attended summer school programs in the U.S. This helped them acquire skills in communicating and studying in English and building relationships with people from different cultures. This seems to have led to them having less adjustment periods at the start of their college careers, thereby allowing them to enjoy the "freedom" of choosing what they want

to study, who they want to hang out with, and what activities they want to explore during their campus life.

5.1.1 Academic Life

In this study, Gen Z CIS participants showed initiative in devoting themselves to their academic studies. They exhibited self-efficacy in spending a significant amount of time and energy studying, using different learning skills in various contexts. Although Chinese international students have long been discussed as passive learners on the American campus (Abelmann & Kang, 2014; Zhu & Bresnahan, 2018), I found Gen Z CIS actively sought out resources to fill their knowledge gaps and strengthen their professional skills. Because they had a clear goal of pursuing academic achievement since it would provide more opportunities for future career development, they positioned themselves in active roles as they navigated various resources. Findings from this study echo those of Heng (2020) who found undergraduate CIS showing agency and resourcefulness. In this study, Gen Z CIS also showed resilience and flexibilities in terms of the uncertainties of remote learning, which were brought about by the COVID-19 pandemic. Many of them exhibited confidence with their adjustment to online learning and studying. This might be due to Gen Z's unique characteristic of growing up with technology and being exposed to online learning when compared to older generations (Selingo, 2018).

Moreover, the Gen Z CIS in this study chose what they wanted to study based on their interests. Some even had experiences with transferring or adjusting majors - enrolling in double majors to diversify their professional skill sets or add a minor to fulfill their passions. This is quite different from their millennial counterparts, as many of them came to the U.S. for their graduate studies and tended to choose the majors with higher economic return and better employment

prospects in the domestic labor market (Liu et al., 2013). Additionally, Yan and Berliner (2009) found that millennial CIS often didn't match well with the field they chose to study. This led to significant academic struggles and, in turn, decreased their sense of belonging to their major's department. In this study, it was found that Gen Z CIS played active roles in placing themselves in academic fields that attracted them. The more they enjoyed what they were studying, the more they felt a sense of belonging to the department of their major.

Many Gen Z CIS also realized the importance of seeking resources that help them prepare for their future career. This is consistent with a report that illustrated how Gen Z college students are interested in professional and career development during their college years (Ambassadors magazine, 2018; Selingo, 2018). Participants in this study actively looked for and participated in internships or research opportunities on campus. Even though many of their internship application processes were interrupted due to the COVID-19 pandemic, they continued to search and complete internships in their junior year when they were still in China.

5.1.2 Building Social Capital

The Gen Z CIS in this study also showed an initiative to build their social capital, especially if it contributed to academic success. Overall, the findings demonstrated that Gen Z CIS expressed they were more comfortable engaging in conversation if they initially felt accepted and welcomed. They based this on other people's personal dispositions, intentions, and simple or subtle behaviors during their daily interactions with them. However, many recognized the importance of stepping out of their comfort zone to make connections with American people and therefore participated in class discussions and extracurricular activities. They also engaged in internships and formed their own social groups, all of which contributed to building their sense of belonging.

In this study, faculty-student interactions were found to be critical to improving undergraduates' quality of academic life, which correlates with the conclusions made by DeAngelo and her colleagues (2015). This study's findings extend the importance of positive interactions with faculty that include academic guidance, career support, and interpersonal care. Similarly to Glass and his colleagues' (2015) study on international students' sense of belonging, this study found that these interactions hold great significance in creating an inclusive campus climate for CIS to situate themselves as members of the community. In this study, when participants were talking about feeling accepted and included, they highlighted their professors' caring acts and behaviors, especially extra care and attention offered during the COVID-19 pandemic, which reaffirms Strayhorn's (2012) point of view that any act of care will be signified as a strong cue of inclusion by international students. Additionally, CIS also greatly appreciated it when professors intentionally engaged their opinions and voices, which underlines the importance of fostering cross-cultural interactions that connect students with diverse backgrounds (Glass, 2012; Glass & Westmont-Campbell, 2014). In addition, a long-term faculty mentorship relationship acquired through research or internship opportunities had a strong influence on Gen Z CIS' long-term career goals and provided opportunities for them to build deeper relationships.

Similar to Yao's (2016) findings, in regard to their social life, the CIS in this study no longer looked at American peers as cultural bridges for gaining knowledge, adapting to local culture, or improving their English. Instead, they made friends with American peers based on common interests. One contributing reason is that many CIS attended high school in the U.S. or attended international high schools, which provided them experiences of making friends with American peers at an early stage. This finding is consistent with Li's (2018) study on undergraduate CIS with secondary school experiences in English-speaking environments.

Moreover, this study found that many CIS showed confidence in seamlessly switching from American social groups to Chinese social groups. Gen Z CIS in this study showed English language proficiency, familiarity with American campus cultures, and a willingness to find common interests with their American peers. This is different from past research that mainly placed emphasis on language difficulties and discussed how culture differences made it difficult for CIS to make friends with American peers and join in on daily conversations (Cui, 2013; Sawir et al., 2008; Spencer-Oatey et al., 2017).

Similar to some previous studies that were mentioned, the Gen Z CIS in this study tended to group together and tended to bond with the larger Chinese community. However, those studies concluded that this bonding hindered their integration into American culture (Su & Harrison, 2016), whereas this study illustrated how CIS' bonding with each other helped them to build a sense of belonging to the university community. For example, because they shared a common social media app, WeChat, they were able to communicate with each other easily and share resources instantly. Additionally, they were able to support each other with peer mentors and interpersonal relationships because they were experiencing similar sojourner experiences and could relate to one another. This coincides with Yao's (2016) findings that "having a large Chinese population" through "strategic connections" could "positively influence students' sense of belonging." It should also be mentioned that the city where MAU resides has a well-established Chinese community of Chinese restaurants, supermarkets, and even Chinese churches, which provides an easy means for Gen Z CIS to position themselves as part of the larger Chinese community off-campus and provides them with a "home away from home." This continues to reaffirm that for CIS, finding a sense of belonging also means finding a place where they feel comfortable to be who they are as international Chinese students.

5.1.3 Social Support

The Gen Z CIS in this study mentioned they were easily building connections within the university because the support they received during their residence hall move-in made them feel welcomed and included in this new environment they just entered. Consistent with Johnson and his colleagues' study (2007), many participants in this study reflected that their first-year living experiences in the residence hall made it easier to access various on-campus resources and make new friends. This contributed to building a sense of belonging at an early stage in their college life, which was found to be true for Gen Z CIS in this study who entered a completely foreign educational and social culture. This was found to be consistent with a larger international student population as observed by Marginson and his colleagues (2010).

This study also found that the timely-offered social support during CIS' college transition and throughout their residence hall life is vital as it not only addresses their practical needs, but also creates an inclusive environment for CIS to make new friends with students from different backgrounds, which is consistent with the findings in Yao's study (2016). With the ongoing welcoming climate, many Gen Z CIS in this study were able to situate themselves as a member of their residence hall community. In particular, the residence halls at MAU specially reserved accommodation for international students during the COVID-19 pandemic. This reiterated to CIS that the campus and community continued to welcome them and tried to keep them safe, especially as the spreading xenophobic environment made them feel excluded and unsafe.

Moreover, many students appreciated that the university intentionally introduced and brought in Chinese traditions and cultural-related elements to the larger university community. The findings show that they felt moments of pride when their departments acknowledged Chinese festivals with decorations, as well as when the cafeteria served Chinese food. They were even more

surprised when some professors wore traditional Chinese clothing and greeted them in Mandarin Chinese. They also appreciated those who showed interest in their cultural background and were willing to build relationships with them. Consistent with Heng (2017), these findings demonstrated that Gen Z CIS longed for their cultural backgrounds to be accepted by their American professors and peers. Therefore, although cultural differences still exists, they can also alternatively serve as a bridge for CIS to build intercultural connections and improve their sense of belonging to the community. Thanks to the cultural differences and peer responses, the Gen Z CIS in this study were able to preserve their cultural norms and traditions while still maintaining a "regular" student identity.

Contrary to the stereotypical impressions of CIS being quiet and passive (Zheng, 2010), this study found that Gen Z CIS demonstrated eagerness to making their voices heard inside and outside the classroom, which greatly influenced their sense of belonging. At the same time, a welcoming and diverse campus environment allowed them and encouraged them to be more expressive. Moreover, several Gen Z CIS even demonstrated ambitions to make Chinese students' voices more influential on the American campus. They engaged in student leadership roles, participated in civil rights discussions, and made efforts to build bridges between CIS and the university community. Although previous studies provided evidence of students being involved in campus clubs, organizations, and committees tending to have a greater sense of belonging (Strayhorn, 2012), little is known about the international student population's involvement in student leadership roles. The finding of this study support Strayhorn's (2012) point in showing that Gen Z CIS who participated in student leadership roles received a sense of achievement and feeling of importance from doing so, which strengthened their feelings about being a valuable member on campus.

5.2 Major Findings Related to Sense of Belonging

I unfolded Strayhorn's (2012) framework as whether the social support offered helps college students' feel connected with others on campus, and whether these connections help them feel important and mattered. In this study, I found that the most significant forms of support that shaped an inclusive campus climate for CIS were support related to transitioning into college and in the residence hall, faculty guidance and care throughout CIS' academic journey, and special attention provided during the COVID-19 pandemic. These support systems helped CIS build and maintain social connections that brought about feelings of acceptance and being valued as a member of the campus.

Through the sense of belonging framework, I found that Gen Z CIS exhibit unique characteristics that helped shape a positive attitude towards actively finding a sense of belonging on an American campus. These characteristics developed from the skills they acquired before entering college, which is something that has been seldom discussed in previous studies observing CIS through an acculturation or integration framework. Improved English language proficiency, familiarity with American cultures, and confidence and resilience towards conquering difficulties all contributed to CIS finding a comfortable identity on a complicated and diverse campus. Additionally, an inclusive campus climate was found to be extremely vital, which affirms the importance of institutions creating a welcoming and accepting environment where CIS can bring and maintain their unique Chinese identity. These findings reflected Strayhorn's (2022) assertion that "belonging does not require students to 'fit in' or integrate or change themselves to assimilate to the norms, beliefs, and actions of others." From a postcolonial perspective, these findings also reflected that the sense of belonging framework no longer emphasizes the differences between CIS

and American students, unlike other frameworks, such as acculturation. Instead, it highlights embracing the diversity and creating a shared belonginess towards all.

This study also fills the gap of knowledge regarding the undergraduate CIS population and their sense of belonging. It is worth mentioning that this study found three factors that were significant for building Gen Z CIS' sense of belonging, and that these were rarely discussed in previous research. First, the more passionate CIS felt about what they were learning, the easier it was to find a sense of belonging in their academic settings. Secondly, the strong bonding of CIS with the Chinese community provided them with a home away from home in a foreign land. Lastly, CIS' engaged more in their academic fields and student leadership roles, which provided greater fulfillment for their work and more value towards themselves. Since sense of belonging is also a construct that examines the relationship between the individual and the group (Johnson et al., 2007, p.526), these findings also determined the importance of continuing to use sense of belonging framework to discover how the three previously-mentioned factors relate to the different areas where CIS looked for a sense of belonging. For example, the connection between passion for a field of study and establishing a relationship with their major's department, the influence of their bonding within CIS groups on their connection with the larger campus community, and the effect of their devotion to making their voices heard on their relationship with the area they wish to make an impact in.

5.3 Implication for Practice

Based on the findings previously discussed in this chapter, the university should create a shared belonging environment for international students where their unique cultural backgrounds

and norms are valued. Several implications for how we could better serve this generation of CIS will be recommended in the following sections.

As discussed previously, Gen Z CIS very much appreciated any opportunities to communicate and connect with their faculty members. Meaningful faculty-student interactions in this study and in past studies have also been shown to help boost students' sense of belonging and influence their academic success (Glass, 2012; Glass & Westmont-Campbell, 2014). Therefore, I recommend that the university should provide workshops tailored to introducing academic norms to international students, focusing especially on interacting with faculty and staff. Formal mentorship programs could also be beneficial since CIS are interested in furthering their professional development. In addition, because several CIS mentioned hostile and/or discriminating encounters that negatively affected their sense of belonging, the university should establish opportunities for positive intercultural communication and dialogue, including facilitated topics about race and racial differences (Quaye, 2012). This was shown to be especially important for these students during the COVID-19 pandemic. Professors and advisors, concerned for their well-being and mental health, reached out to Gen Z CIS individually, which subsequently countered the anti-Asian hate generated from the global pandemic.

As discussed several times in the findings, Gen Z CIS prefer to use WeChat (an instant text message and social media app) to communicate with each other and obtain information and resources related to the university. It is especially heavily used for information gathering when preparing to come to the U.S. However, American college students mainly use Instagram, Twitter, and Facebook, all of which are blocked in China. Therefore, I recommend that the university consider adding WeChat as one of their social media platform that can be easily accessible for providing and updating information for CIS or even the whole international student population.

Since this study demonstrated the importance of CIS bonding with each other and with the larger Chinese community off-campus, it is recommended that a formal program through which new incoming CIS can connect with their senior counterparts be constructed. Participants in this study discussed that the peer mentor program provided by the Chinese Students Undergraduate Association was beneficial to them. Based on this, the university should consider such programs that focuses on connecting new CIS with upperclassmen currently residing in the residence halls may be helpful for first-year CIS transitioning into college life. Additionally, each department should consider establishing a program that helps international students with searching for resources beneficial to their academics. The university or student organizations should also consider connecting with the local Chinese community off-campus to receive support for Chinese cultural events on campus, such as during the Chinese Spring Festival and the Chinese Mid-Autumn Festival.

Finally, the finding of Gen Z CIS participating more in student leadership roles implies that given the space and context, Gen Z CIS are willing to participate in leadership roles to make a meaningful impact. At MAU, as some student leadership programs already existed, seldom targeted international students. Based on the findings from this study, it's recommended that the university consider creating such a program tailored to international students, to expand their knowledge of student services programs, develop practical skills, and gain effective communication and presentation skills. It will also help them acquire knowledge of diverse cultures and cross-cultural communication.

5.4 Implication for Future Research

Previous research about CIS' experiences primarily focused on their acculturation experiences (see Batterron & Horner, 2016; Wang et al., 2012; Yang et al., 2004; Yeh & Inose, 2003). This has resulted in a monotone portrait of CIS that repeatedly focuses on the challenges they meet through acculturation experiences rather than exploring the unique identity and strengths they bring to university life. Because this study demonstrates that Gen Z CIS are active learners, resilient, flexible, and determined in achieving higher academic outcomes and better college living, consistent with this study, future research should use lenses beyond acculturation to fully understand their sojourner experiences. Additionally, various previous research used a postcolonial lens and acculturation framework, and constructed Chinese students as the "racialized non-Western inferior Other" (Suspitsyna et al., 2019, p.304). By not using these lens and frameworks, this study was able to find Gen Z CIS showing their initiative to position themselves as part of the campus member. Thus, future research should instead consider using this study's framework and add a decolonial approach when studying this population. Adding a decolonial perspective will help to further untangle the production of knowledge from a primarily Eurocentric episteme and critique what is seen as the perceived universality of Western knowledge and the superiority of Western culture. This decolonial perspective allows for the opportunity to explore how Gen Z CIS' identities contribute to diversity in an American college campus and explore how higher education institutions embrace the differences that CIS bring and benefit from them.

In addition, future researchers should avoid the presumption that CIS are linguistically incompetent in the setting of American higher educational institutions. Such an assumption reinforces the native speaker superiority fallacy (Canagarajah, 1999) and the "othering" undertone (Lee & Rice, 2007). From this study, CIS have shown an ability to actively improve their English

during their college life. A decolonial perspective might also offer a new lens to study how CIS prepare themselves linguistically for college. Moreover, the study found that what goes beyond the language differences is whether other people's attitudes provide a comfortable environment for conversing. Therefore, the decolonial lens may also show how professors, university personnel, and students can create a respectful context for interacting with CIS and larger international student groups.

This study also demonstrated that sense of belonging is a valuable framework to study Gen Z CIS. I suggest that future studies using this framework to explore the finer details of the framework, and its relationship to Gen CIS's experiences. For example, are there any differences between first-year CIS student and their senior counterparts in terms of their sense of belonging? If so, what are CIS looking for in terms of building a sense of belonging throughout their different school years? Future studies should also look at various types of universities and conduct a comparative analysis of the unique characteristics of each type of university and how they influence CIS' sense of belonging, as well as any causal effects behind them. In addition, studies using this framework need to be conducted in universities that are situated in areas different from MAU, which has a large Chinese community outside the university, to understand how the off-campus environment affects the construction of sense of belonging and if its aligned with Strayhorn's sense of belonging.

Much of the existing studies target millennial Chinese graduate students, and, comparatively, less of them target Gen Z undergraduate CIS. This study, as well as several recent studies (Heng, 2021; Li, 2018; Yu, 2022), have found that this generation of undergraduate CIS have more opportunities of being exposed to English-speaking environments from a younger age. This leads to better language skills, fewer social-cultural barriers, and more focus on self-

development in their college years. These experiences were seldom mentioned in the studies targeting millennial Chinese graduate students. In this sense, future research should consider separating undergraduate and graduate CIS' experiences and also take into account the different characteristics of Gen Z students.

As almost all participants from this study mentioned their plans to apply to graduate schools abroad, their future graduate school experiences might be different from those CIS who came to the U.S. directly for graduate studies. Considering this, future research should also consider exploring whether the length of time CIS stay in the U.S. for college have any influence on their experiences.

This study found that, overall, Gen Z CIS demonstrated strong backgrounds, positive attitudes, and excellent learning abilities when making their college career as successful as possible. Hence, it would be interesting to explore the learning outcomes of the larger CIS population. And because "sense of belonging" proved to have a positive influence on student persistence (Hausmann et al., 2007), future research should also target the CIS population and explore the possible relationship between their sense of belonging and their learning outcomes, such as retention rate and academic achievement.

5.5 Conclusion

To conclude this study, this study portrays Gen Z undergraduate CIS as ever-changing, with diverse backgrounds and unique characteristics. In using Strayhorn's (2012) sense of belonging framework, this study explored this population as members of an American higher educational institution, rather than as non-Western "others". The findings of this study reaffirm

the importance of using this type of lens to study Gen Z CIS' lived experiences in order to delineate more comprehensive knowledge regarding them. In doing so, faculty members, university administrators, and policy makers will be better informed when communicating when Gen Z CIS and serve them in more meaningful ways. It is, with a hope, that future studies continue on this path to explore how an institution can create a more welcoming and inclusive environment for this unique population. Because, in the meantime, they will most certainly discover what Gen Z CIS, with their distinctive characteristics, values, and identities, will contribute to the diversity of American college campuses.

Background/Warm-up questions:

1. Can you have a brief introduction about yourself?
   - what made you decided to study abroad in America? And what led you to Pitt?

2. What's your major? And what's your plan after you graduate?

Campus life experience:

3. Describe to me your experiences when you arrived on campus and how things were settling down?

   - Was there anyone who helped you throughout the process?
   - What's your first impression of Pitt? Anything makes you feel welcomed here?

4. How was you first-year residence hall living experiences?

   Potential prompts
   - How's your relationship with your roommates?
   - Who do you usually hangout with in the residence hall?

5. What specific experiences made you feel you are part of the residence hall member?

   - What experiences made you feel you are not welcomed?

6. Can you describe your academic experiences in your first year classes?

   Potential prompts
   - what kind of difficulties you met, and how did you conquer that?

7. How will you describe your classroom interaction with other peers in general?

   Potential probes

   - Is there any situations you feel your opinions were valued by your peers?
   - What kinds of situations made you feel comfortable to bring up your opinions to the class?
   - Do you prefer to see more Chinese classmates in you class?

8. Have you experienced or observed any situations that you'd describe as discrimination or unfair during any of your class?

9. Would you please describe your one-on-one interactions with professors outside of class?

    Potential prompts
    *   do you feel comfortable approaching your professors? Why or why not?
    *   In what ways do you feel the interaction was helpful or fell short in assisting you in reaching your goals?

10. Who are the people in your friend network?

    Potential prompts
    *   How do you know about them? And what experiences tell you that they are your close friends?
    *   Does this relationship help you build connectedness to Pitt? If yes, can you share your experiences about that?

11. Tell me your experience participating in any organization or club.

    Potential prompts
    *   How active are you as a member in that group?
    *   How does that help you build connectedness with others?

12. Is there anything else you want to talk about your campus life experiences?

Appendix B Second Round Interview Protocol

Warm-up questions:

1. Last time, you've shared a lot of your experiences especially during your first and second year school life. Can you tell me about your campus life experiences since COVID-19?

   - How's that different from before?

Recent Experience:

2. How's your relationship with others, especially you mentioned last time has been influenced because of the COVID?

3. In which way does COVID-19 changes your feeling of belong to Pitt community?

   Potential prompts
   Can you give me some detailed examples?
   And how does the university do to solve this kind problems?

4. Since the pandemic started, have you had any negative experiences interactions with domestic people?

   - Any situation that makes you feel not welcomed here?

Reflection:

5. Last time, you shared a lot of your experiences related to your feeling belonged to the university community, looking back on your campus life, can you describe how you began to build your connection or so called belonging to Pitt?

6. Can you share your most challenging time that makes you feel left out from the university community?

   - Language barriers? Culture distance? Lack of information? Less connection with domestic students?

7. Please describe your experiences as a Chinese international student at Pitt

   - Can you share an example that your identity as an international student influence on your being part of the member at Pitt?
   - Is there a time that your identity as Chinese international student was valued/appreciated by your peers or professors?

8. Given what you know now, are there any experiences that you wish Pitt would provide to you to help you feel more connected to the campus?

9. Is there anything else you want to share that you think is valuable for me to know about?

Appendix C Introductory Script

Shengjun Yin, a doctoral students from School of Education is doing her dissertation for this study.

The purpose of this research study is to study the undergraduate experiences of Generation Z Chinese International students in the U.S. higher educational institution. For that reason, Shengjun will be conducting two serious of one-on-one semi-structured interview with undergraduate students at the University of Pittsburgh, each lasts for around 45-60mins. All participants must be 18 years of age or older rising senior, non-US residents from mainland China. This study is looking for 15 participants. If you are willing to participate, our interview will ask about background information (e.g., age, race, years of education, majors, family background), your experiences at the University of Pittsburgh, as well as about your feelings about yourself and about other individuals.

The decision to participate or not to participate will have no impact on your relationship with the University of Pittsburgh. Your participation is voluntary, and you may withdraw from this project at any time.

The benefits to participation are: 1) The opportunity to share your story with academic professionals; 2) The chance to help educators learn more about the Chinese international students' college experiences; 3) Participating in an academic study and learning more about the research process.

As the interviews will be recorded, there is a risk of breach of confidentiality. However, while identifiers are collected all data will be recorded anonymously. Your response will not be identifiable in any way, and results will be stored on the universities secure servers.

You will not receive any payment for participating in this research. This interview is being conducted by Shengjun Yin, who can be reached at shy32@pitt.edu, if you have any questions.

Appendix D Consent Form

Shengjun Yin, a doctoral students from School of Education is doing her dissertation for this study.

The purpose of this research study is to study the undergraduate experiences of Generation Z Chinese International students in the U.S. higher educational institution. For that reason, Shengjun will be conducting two serious of one-on-one semi-structured interview with undergraduate students at the University of Pittsburgh, each lasts for around 45-60mins. All participants must be 18 years of age or older rising senior, non-US residents from mainland China. This study is looking for 15 participants. If you are willing to participate, our interview will ask about background information (e.g., age, race, years of education, majors, family background), your experiences at the University of Pittsburgh, as well as about your feelings about yourself and about other individuals.

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You will not receive any payment for participating in this research. This interview is being conducted by Shengjun Yin, who can be reached at shy32@pitt.edu, if you have any questions.

You will be given a copy of this information to keep for your records.

Statement of Consent:

I have read the above information. I have asked questions and have received answers. I consent to participate in this study.

Signature:

_____ Date: _____

Signature of Investigator:

_____ Date:_____

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