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Published in *Journal of The First-Year Experience & Students in Transition* 30:1
(Spring 2018), pp 87-101.
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“They Don’t Care About You”: First-Year Chinese International Students’ Experiences With Neo-racism and Othering on a U.S. Campus

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Abstract

This qualitative research study illuminates the experiences affecting first-year Chinese international students in the United States and gives insights as to how these students perceive interpersonal relationships at college. Participants shared reports of neo-racism and othering as negatively affecting their feelings of connection to other members of their collegiate community. Findings and implications from this study indicate a need for better support for first-year Chinese international students in college.

Students from mainland China comprise the largest international student group entering the United States in recent years (Yan & Berliner, 2010). In 2012, more than half a million students from China studied abroad, with the United States being the top destination (UNESCO Institute for Statistics, 2014). In Fall 2012, U.S. institutions enrolled 235,597 students, or more than 28% of the total international student population of 819,644 (Institute of International Education, 2013a).

Tensions between Asian and domestic students have coincided with this trend, with many international students reporting discriminatory incidents against them at historically White campuses (Jaschik, 2012; Redden, 2012). As the number of Chinese nationals at U.S. institutions rises (Institute of International Education, 2013b; UNESCO Institute for Statistics, 2014), those students tend to bear the burden of negative encounters (Yan & Berliner, 2010). Little research is available

specifically on the interpersonal experiences of first-year Chinese students at those institutions, however.

The early years of college are critical to ensuring students' sense of belonging and persistence, and institutional environment and culture correlate with students' collegiate success (Astin, 1993; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005; Tinto, 1993). The first year is particularly crucial as students, especially those from other countries, have little commitment to and integration with their institution because of their newness in the environment and thus are more susceptible to withdrawing (Tinto, 1993).

Yet, residence halls can be an important site for integrating to the academic and social environs of college. Most first-year students, including those from other countries, are required to live on campus. Residence halls are considered secure, comfortable spaces for students to live and learn. Community building and student learning are often at the heart of residential programs, and residence halls are touted as the ideal setting for building community and intercultural relationships among students (Blimling, 2010). Yet the experiences of first-year Chinese students in this new environment are understudied. Thus, this study, which emerged from a larger phenomenological research project, seeks to fill the research gap by examining the interpersonal experiences of first-year Chinese international students in residence halls.

The primary research question in the larger study was, How do undergraduate Chinese international students' experiences with domestic students in residential communities affect how they understand their sense of belonging? Findings highlighted in this study provide further understanding of how negative interactions in college may affect international students' overall experiences in higher education.

Literature Review

In interviews for the current study, participants reported discriminatory incidents when asked about their interpersonal relationships with domestic American students. To better understand the study's emerging themes, *neo-racism* and *othering* are used as the conceptual framework for further examining participants' incidents with discrimination and isolation. Literature related to discrimination against international students is also reviewed.

Discrimination Against International Students

Several studies have focused on discrimination against international students on U.S. college campuses. Lee and Rice (2007) introduced the concept of neo-racism, or discrimination based on cultural and national differences. The authors found a strong divide between the experiences of students based on nation of origin. For example, in their study, students with phenotypically White features from Canada, Europe, and New Zealand did not report any discrimination based on their culture or race, whereas students from countries such as Asia and India reported considerable negative experiences they attributed to skin color, language, and cultural backgrounds. The authors used neo-racism as a framework to analyze the discriminatory acts against international students, layering both skin color and national origin as the foundation for neo-racist behavior by Americans.

Other studies have also highlighted issues of discrimination based on country of origin (Hanassab, 2006; Lee, 2010; Marginson, Nyland, Sawir, & Forbes-Mewett, 2010), finding that international students from different regions perceived varying degrees of discrimination in college. Students from predominantly non-White regions (e.g., Latin America, Africa, Middle East, East Asia, South Asia, and Southeast Asia) reported less satisfaction and greater difficulty with their host institutions than did their colleagues from Europe, Canada, and Australia. Hanassab (2006) found that difficulties manifested in issues with perceived discrimination, unfair campus services and treatment, and negative interactions with domestic students, similar to Lee and Rice's (2007) findings. Overall, these experiences led international students from predominantly non-White regions to be less satisfied and less likely to recommend their host institution to others in their home country, particularly for students from East Asia, as Lee's study (2010) on international student experiences found.

The discrimination that international students from predominantly non-White regions face requires further thought: Why do these students have a marked difference in experiences compared to students from predominantly White regions? As a whole, major cultural differences between international and domestic students exist, including language, food habits, and communication styles; however, international students from predominantly non-White regions possess additional differences in the form of skin color and ethnic origin. Thus, while all international students are often considered foreign

and different in the United States, these additional factors add complex layers of identity. These layers require a deeper understanding of how international students from non-White regions perceive their collegiate residential experience within a racialized U.S. context. The problems that non-White international students face are particularly salient for Chinese nationals, who must navigate the complexities of living and learning in a campus environment vastly different from China's homogenous cultural climate.

Conceptual Framework: Othering and Neo-racism

Othering and neo-racism are offered as conceptual frameworks for better understanding Chinese students' experiences with discrimination in residence halls. Othering is defined as "that process which serves to mark and name those thought to be different from oneself" (Weis, 1995, p. 17) and is used by the dominant group to separate from and suppress the non-dominant outsider group (Luke, 2010). The concept stems from the notion that the Western world tends to view and situate the Orient (including the Middle East, Asia, and northern Africa) as backward and undeveloped (Said, 1978). *Orientalism* is used as "a way of coming to terms with the Orient that is based on the Orient's special place in European Western experience" (Said, 1978, p. 1). As othering relates to the present study, Chinese international students are the "object" that is "stamped with an otherness" (Said, 1978, 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)

Othering has its roots in earlier socio-historical perspectives that are complementary to more contemporary reflections on race in the United States. Balibar (2007) popularized neo-racism, then, as "racism without race" (p. 85), as it goes beyond earlier models of biological racism to include layers of nationality, language, and cultural practices rather than emphasizing physical characteristics alone (Balibar, 2007; Lee & Rice, 2007). Similar to Said's (1978) concept of Orientalism, neo-racism provides a "new racism" that often becomes a way to discriminate by using new categories (e.g., immigration) rather than earlier notions of biological race. In doing so, neo-racism enforces the structures of the dominant group and provides "an increasing rationale for marginalizing or assimilating groups in a globalizing world" (Lee & Rice, 2007, p. 389). In contemporary perspectives, the influx

of students from China has created an othering of a specific population within the neo-racist structures of college campuses. The globalization of higher education has divided campuses into “us” (domestic students) and “them” (international students), leading to tension inside and outside the classroom.

Method

I used both phenomenological and critical orientations for this study. Using critical phenomenology allowed me to understand the lived experiences (Van Manen, 1990) of the participants through a critical interpretive lens that puts those experiences within a specific context (Merriam, 2009). More simply, if phenomenology were the lens for viewing this study, then a critical perspective served as tint on the lens, making for a deep analysis of findings and implications. Although critical phenomenology is not commonly used, several studies in recent years (Campbell, 2008; Ray, 2008) have blended phenomenology and critical research in order to better understand the lived experiences of individuals within a context that has power differentiations between different groups in the study.

Using phenomenological methods, I examined how participants described their experiences on campus and attempted to determine what links all participants by reducing “individual experiences with a phenomenon to a description of the universal essence” (Creswell, 2007, p. 58). However, an added layer of a critical research perspective was necessary, given that participants in this study are part of a marginalized and othered group. Critical research “goes beyond uncovering the interpretation of people’s understandings of their world” (Merriam, 2009, p. 9) to include issues of power and empowerment in the analysis. The current study is critical in nature because of the interactive relationship between Chinese international and domestic students. As the findings illustrate, the layers of culture, language, and skin color influence the power dynamic between the two student populations.

Site Selection and Participants

For the study, I selected “Midwest University” (MWU), a large, public land-grant research institution in the Midwest with more than 33,000 undergraduate students enrolled in Fall 2012. MWU was ranked as one

of the top 10 U.S. institutions with high international student enrollment in 2012-2013 (Institute of International Education, 2013b), with about one in eight first-year MWU students originating from China. All first-year, non-commuter students are required to live on campus, and in 2012-2013, 96% of all first-year students lived on campus. Thus, the residential requirements and international emphasis at MWU provide valuable context for examining the residential experiences of Chinese international students.

To gain as much insight as possible from the participants selected, I employed a purposeful sampling technique (Merriam, 2009). With approval from MWU's institutional review board (IRB), I recruited for the study by e-mailing eligible participants from the institution's Office of the Registrar. Participants identified as undergraduate Chinese international students in their first year at the university who lived in the residence halls. All 21 participants (see Table 1) were completing their second semester at MWU; they included six men and 15 women. Each participant chose a pseudonym, and these are used throughout the study. All interviews were conducted in English. For clarification, participants used the term *American* to refer to those they perceived to be U.S.-born students; therefore, American is used interchangeably with domestic students throughout this study.

Data Collection and Analysis

I conducted in-depth, semi-structured interviews with each participant in a face-to-face format. Each participant completed a consent form beforehand, and I verbally reviewed contents with each student to ensure understanding. All first-round interviews, lasting about 45-75 minutes each, were conducted toward the end of the 2013 spring semester. Examples of questions included "Describe your relationship with non-Chinese students" and "Describe any experiences when you feel like you were treated differently from other students in your residence hall." Second-round interviews were conducted at the start of the 2013 fall semester, with each interview lasting about 30-60 minutes. I conducted these with 17 of the 21 participants; questions focused on refining and clarifying the first interviews. The remaining four participants declined a second interview.

For data analysis, I began with deductive coding, which includes a *start list* (Miles, Huberman, & Saldana, 2014, p. 81) based on the interview protocol and conceptual framework. I searched for broad

Table 1. Participant Demographics

<i>Participant</i>	<i>Age</i>	<i>Gender</i>
D	20	Man
Riverkid	19	Woman
Jack	18	Man
Sunny	19	Woman
Zoey	19	Woman
Mora	19	Woman
Lu	19	Woman
Waffle	19	Woman
Mike	20	Man
Peter	18	Man
Kay	18	Woman
Julie	20	Woman
Tom	19	Man
Shirley	21	Woman
Rachel	20	Woman
Gwen	19	Woman
Grace	19	Woman
Vicky	18	Woman
Camilla	19	Woman
Nancy	19	Woman
Derek	20	Man

categories and then developed themes that emerged from the participants' experiences. Themes were coded by "lifting appropriate phrases or by capturing in singular statements the main thrust of the meaning of the themes" (Van Manen, 1990, p. 93). In doing so, I followed Van Manen's (1990) thematic approach to systematically uncovering the essence of participants' interviews.

After concluding first-cycle coding, I moved on to second-cycle coding (Miles et al., 2014), organizing the first-cycle codes by clustering them by common themes or patterns. This was an iterative process of reflecting and clustering codes into code categories. I continuously refined the pattern codes until I felt they were representative of the participants' lived experiences. Several themes emerged, including issues related to discrimination, expectations of roommate relationships, and perception of language ability. For the purpose of this study, participants' perception of the interpersonal relationships in their residence hall is examined as the analytical sample from a larger study.

Trustworthiness and Credibility

Trustworthiness and credibility were established through triangulation, member checks, and peer review (Merriam, 2009; Patton, 2002). Triangulation of sources was employed to confirm emerging findings by examining the consistency of data from sources at different points in time. I conducted member checks via the two interviews with each participant, which provided feedback on emerging findings and interpretation from the first interviews. In addition to member checks, I triangulated data with peers proficient in qualitative research, who critiqued my findings and gave alternative viewpoints.

I employed several reliability procedures (Creswell, 2007), including personally transcribing all interviews and reviewing transcripts multiple times to reduce mistakes in participants' narratives of their experiences. I ensured reliability with a stringent coding process that included continuously comparing data with codes as well as keeping a codebook with memos. *Investigator's positionality*, or how one is positioned in contrast to those being studied, was also used as a form of reliability (Merriam, 2009), which was communicated to all participants prior to beginning interviews.

Researcher reflexivity is essential because of the relation between researcher and participants (Glesne, 2006; Patton, 2002). The essence of participants' experiences was interpreted through my lens as a Chinese-American scholar. English is my primary language, and this led many participants to view me as both an insider and an outsider during the interviews. In some ways, the language difference served as a barrier, particularly because of participants' accents and my own habit of speaking English quickly. However, my insider's perspective helped build rapport with most; sometimes they would talk about China and I could understand them because of my ethnic connection. Orienting myself in relation to the participants was necessary for conducting this critical phenomenological study (Van Manen, 1990), particularly because my study is an inquiry on the orientation and positioning of a specific population (undergraduate Chinese international students) within a particular space (a college campus).

Limitations

Interviews were conducted in English, which was not the primary language for any of the participants. I carefully chose the phrasing of my

questions to minimize the use of U.S.-centric colloquial terms. Questions were repeated and rephrased for participants' understanding. Another limitation was interviewing participants at the end of their first year on campus, when they may not have had time to fully reflect and make meaning of their first year. However, second-round interviews were conducted at the start of participants' second year on campus, which may have provided some time for reflection. One final limitation is in the study's methodology. As a phenomenological study on participants' lived experience, findings cannot be generalized, yet generalizability is never the intention of a qualitative study on a specific population. However, by better understanding the transition experience of the largest international student population in the U.S., higher education institutions can use a culturally relevant lens to adapt findings and implications for strategies to support students from all over the world.

Findings

Participants' lived experiences indicated that negative interactions typified their relationships with American students. Two themes emerged relating to participants' perceptions of interpersonal interactions in residence halls: blatant acts of discrimination and awareness of being outsiders, both of which led to negative feelings toward domestic students.

Blatant Acts of Discrimination

Many participants described feelings of discrimination and isolation at MWU, which were often rooted in issues related to nationality and culture. These issues emerged as consistent factors affecting all peer interactions with domestic students. Some participants gave examples of explicit acts of discrimination against them by U.S. students, although most reported more subtle discrimination in their interactions. D described a domestic student who made derogatory remarks about Chinese international students:

One time when I was walking to Main Street from [residence hall]. There is one guy from I think [different residence hall]—he came out, he saw me, and he just shouted, “F----- Asian people.” Just like that. We don't know each other.

D described the harasser as a White male and could not understand why that student felt the need to yell at him. While he did not respond to the student, D spoke about how the incident stayed with him afterward. This experience made him more defensive around White American students and more aware of negative interactions. D described another incident he experienced on campus:

One time that I ran into a guy, and he was unfriendly to the Chinese students. He pretends to be really friendly, and smile really quickly. But after a while, I noticed something is wrong. His friends smiled really strange, weird. They got away and I heard their discussion about me, about Asian, Chinese people.

Several participants had expected discrimination from Americans, having been warned by other Chinese international students who had attended U.S. institutions. Waffle heard from friends that negative things could happen to Chinese people in the United States and told this story to illustrate one such experience:

Some American people, they have discrimination about Chinese students. Example is that last Saturday, we finished lunch and then we came back. There was a car coming near, and there was a White man inside the car. And the White man did the “f--” gesture to us. There was only me and my friend who come from China.

Several participants told stories about Chinese friends who experienced discrimination on campus. Julie related how a friend felt “so bad” when domestic students told her “you should practice your English” because she “was in America.” Rachel spoke about a Chinese friend:

I heard from my friend that there is one day when she and her friend goes to the [bank], and they were waiting for a bus. A car passed by them, and the guy in the car threw the pop can at them. That’s really mean, I think.

Rachel’s story illustrates the blatant discrimination that several participants and their friends experienced on campus. As Waffle’s experience indicates, many participants were warned by other Chinese students who had negative experiences while studying abroad in the U.S. While they were prepared for negative interaction with domestic students, participants were less equipped to manage the subtleties of day-to-day tension and negativity that accompanied these interactions.

Awareness of Being Outsiders

Many participants described discrimination that was more nuanced and subtle. While they sometimes did not understand exactly what was being said to them because of their language ability and cultural background, they could sense tension from American students. Nancy explained, "I can feel it. They will just look at you like you're very weird." Several participants repeatedly discussed subtle acts of cultural and language dissonance to illustrate their lack of connection with U.S. students and culture.

For example, Rachel felt she was treated a certain way because she is Chinese. Asked to elaborate, she explained:

I think this stuff is hard to say. Because sometimes maybe it's just you are too sensitive. For example, I work here. There are two American girls that work with me. And sometimes they talk to each other more than to me. So you think, they just try to ignore me because I'm Chinese.

Rachel sometimes felt she was treated differently because of her nationality, but she recognized that it could be because her sensitivity was heightened to these situations. However, several other participants perceived that American students simply do not like Chinese students.

Kay said domestic students had no interest in engaging with Chinese students. Gwen agreed, saying, "I don't think all of them are willing to make friends with Chinese students." Vicky expressed a similar sentiment: "I have heard that before, that some Americans, they don't like Chinese." This perception was a common theme when participants recounted their interactions with domestic students. Waffle was even more specific about a population of students she felt discriminated against. Asked whether American students were open to meeting Chinese students, Waffle said:

It depends on different people. It's true that the U.S. is a very open country. There are lots of people who come from different parts of the world. But still there are some American people who think they are the best. And they are the White people.

As expected, negative interpersonal experiences led many study participants to feel isolated and removed from American students. Although Tom made an effort to befriend domestic students, he lamented a lack of connection with unfriendly Americans on his floor.

He felt several students had “a really bad idea about Chinese students” and described his feelings about his floor:

For me, I made friends with Americans because I really want to know them. But actually when we met each other, they don't really say hi. But the Chinese students always greet you every time we meet each other. I met more Chinese friends and yeah, I can't just spend time with American students.

Tom was initially surprised that American students were not as friendly as he expected. Reflecting on his experiences, he concluded that Americans did not want to be friends with Chinese students for cultural reasons. He explained:

At first, I felt surprised. But after time passes, I know some Americans just don't want to have friends with Chinese students. They have no benefits for making Chinese friends. They already have their social network, so they don't want to expand their social network. So they just don't want to have friends with Chinese students.

Although many participants expressed a continued desire for American friends, several said they did not want to expend effort to expand their current circle of friends. Several, including Peter, felt disillusioned about American students' friendliness and cultural competency, which affected his other interpersonal relationships on campus. Peter explained, “I recently ... don't like the Americans here. They just—I don't know, maybe it's because I'm Chinese, but they don't care about you. They don't help you, this kind of stuff.” Peter was representative of several participants whose experiences led to somewhat negative feelings toward domestic students.

Discussion

As first-year students, the participants in this study are particularly vulnerable. The first year of college tends to be the most critical in ensuring students' success and persistence (Astin, 1993; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005; Tinto, 1993), especially for international students who must navigate a completely foreign educational and societal culture (Marginson et al., 2010). First-year students from China may be at higher risk of attrition because cultural differences leave them feeling isolated from the rest of campus. Social and academic challenges,

particularly in the first year, can hinder success in college and persistence to graduation (Tinto, 1993).

Findings indicate the prevalent influence of culture and nationality on interpersonal relationships when participants recounted their experiences with domestic students, signifying that neo-racism is pervasive because of the added layers of language and nationality in addition to physical characteristics. To the student participants, national origin affected all aspects of their perceived interactions with other students, making these findings consistent with prior studies (Hanassab, 2006; Lee, 2010; Lee & Rice, 2007; Marginson et al., 2010). Participants had a heightened awareness of the cultural issues they face, primarily because of discriminatory acts or awareness of being an outsider who is othered on campus. Feelings of being othered led several participants, including Peter, to disengage from domestic students. Interestingly, this was in sharp contrast to participants' earlier desire to make many American friends upon arriving on campus. This indicated that when earlier expectations of friendship are not met, Chinese students may choose to disconnect from American students after negative interactions, whether explicitly discriminatory or more subtle in nature.

Several participants, such as D and Waffle, shared blatant acts of discrimination committed by American students. D's incident, which included the perpetrator using the qualifier "Asian" in his slur, was a direct example of neo-racist behavior from a domestic student. D also experienced a less obvious discriminatory incident in his residence hall with an American student who was unfriendly yet subtle in his interactions. The discriminatory acts D described were similar to the experiences of international students of Asian descent in Australia, who were abused and discriminated against by local community members (Marginson et al., 2010).

Similarly, Waffle perceived that the White man who made the rude gesture to her and her friend only did so because they were Chinese. As students from China, Waffle and D had similar experiences as participants in other studies, who found that Asian students often reported higher levels of discrimination on their campuses than did international students from Europe, Australia, or other predominantly White countries (Hanassab, 2006; Lee, 2010; Lee & Rice, 2007; Marginson et al., 2010). These experiences appear to be a result of othering and neo-racism. Waffle and D felt othered by the actions of members of the dominant group, who in this study were domestic U.S.

students. Their experiences indicated the pervasive nature of ethnicity, nationalism, and cultural background, all of which led to negative discriminatory encounters with domestic students.

One important consideration is that this study emerged from a larger phenomenological research project on Chinese students' sense of belonging in residence halls. Participants were asked how they establish a sense of belonging to their communities and how their interpersonal relationships affect their feelings of connection. Many participants answered the interview questions with stories about discriminatory incidents, demonstrating the pervasiveness of nationality, language, and cultural differences on their overall first-year experience. Findings from the study indicate that although residence halls are seen as positive environments for community and intercultural relationships (Blimling, 2010), participants' experiences challenge the notion that these settings are comfortable and secure spaces for all students. Thus, U.S. institutions must consider how they can establish safe and inclusive campus communities for Chinese international students.

Implications for Practice

As the participants' experiences with domestic students demonstrate, issues of discrimination and isolation are problematic for institutions in creating safe, comfortable spaces for first-year international students. One can assume the blatant acts of discrimination reported were isolated incidents; however, their effects appeared to influence many participants' interpersonal relationships with domestic students. For example, even the subtle acts affected Chinese students' campus experiences, as Peter, Rachel, and Gwen showed. Thus, university administrators should design and promote ways that international students, particularly those from non-White countries, can recognize and report bias incidents. Bias incident response plans exist at many colleges, but intentional training and marketing for international students, particularly those in their first year, would clearly demonstrate institutional commitment to a positive racial climate for all students. Also, international students would gain clarity on their options for reporting and addressing blatant and subtle acts of discrimination in their campus community.

In addition to creating a response plan, college staff must consider how to establish a positive climate in residence halls and throughout

campus. College leaders should intentionally create opportunities for positive intercultural communication and intergroup dialogue as a way to mitigate potentially negative interactions. As peer interactions have the greatest influence on the student experience (Astin, 1993), it is crucial that colleges provide an environment that leads to positive relationships through improved quality of contact among these diverse groups, whether through formal structures (e.g., facilitated intergroup dialogues) or informal processes (e.g., casual conversations in hallways and lounges). These programs should occur systematically throughout the academic year, but the foundation must be laid before students' arrival on campus and continued throughout the academic year.

Although programmatic interventions could influence the racial climate on campus, the participants' experiences in the study indicated a larger institutional problem. Many of the domestic students mentioned made discriminatory comments toward the Chinese participants, who reported being targeted because of their English language skills and foreign status. The perpetrators' behaviors indicated neo-racism and othering, which signifies a need for the university to address the stratification between Chinese and domestic students. Chinese international students have been "stamped with an otherness" (Said, 1978, p. 97) that is impossible to escape without larger institutional intervention. As such, they are defined within a racialized campus culture in which international students are considered outside the American mainstream. This culture constructs a negative environment for the study's participants, who have been designated as outsiders and not provided guidance on how to navigate their new environments.

Recognizing this racialized climate, institutions must be inclusive of international students in all diversity initiatives and campus climate studies. Institutions must consider multiple factors linked to historical, social, and structural components when attempting to establish a supportive and inclusive environment for international students. By addressing larger institutional and organizational climate issues, institutions will be able to fully support and include students from different nationalities and cultural backgrounds.

Recommendations for Future Research

As the findings in this study show, future studies on campus racial climate should include the perspective of international students, who are

an increasingly mobile and visible demographic on campus. Including the nuances of language, nationality, and cultural practices in studies on racism in college would add to the complexities of understanding race and difference in a global context. Additionally, future research could include a longitudinal study to evaluate changes in Chinese students' experiences throughout their collegiate careers. The participants in this study were interviewed as first-year students with limited exposure to the overall collegiate experience. Thus, a longitudinal study would give insight as to how longer residency in the U.S. may influence their interactions with domestic students.

Conclusion

Participants described interactions that indicate cultural tension between different student groups and a college environment that can be fairly negative for Chinese international students. As newly arrived members of the collegiate community, these students must navigate a foreign culture while attempting to create relationships with others. This study indicates the challenge of interpersonal relationships because of othering and neo-racist behavior from other students. U.S. institutions of higher education must take all these factors into consideration when developing strategic policies and practices to better support Chinese students within the campus environment, particularly during the critical first few years of college.

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