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To cite this article: Elsie Ong, Elaine Suk-Ching Liu & Samuel Chu (2022): Examining Intercultural Interaction in Hong Kong Residential Halls, Journal of Student Affairs Research and Practice, DOI: [10.1080/19496591.2021.1997756](https://doi.org/10.1080/19496591.2021.1997756)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/19496591.2021.1997756>



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Published online: 09 Mar 2022.



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Examining Intercultural Interaction in Hong Kong Residential Halls

Elsie Ong , The University of Hong Kong
Elaine Suk-Ching Liu, The University of Hong Kong
Samuel Chu, The University of Hong Kong

The integration of non-local students into their host environments and their ability to develop meaningful local relationships are concerns for researchers, educators, and policymakers. Given the increased diversity of higher educational settings, a deeper understanding of these topics can help residential halls better accommodate students from various cultures, improve students' residential experiences, and enhance their relationships with their peers. Research on these issues has focused mainly on Western universities; this study aims to explore the acculturation dynamics of residential education through focus-group interviews with 14 Mainland Chinese undergraduates living in residential halls in Hong Kong. The findings reveal that although the residential experience can engender interpersonal conflict, it can also foster intercultural interaction, help build a sense of belonging, and create the conditions for overcoming barriers and difficulties. The findings indicate that future programmes can improve adjustment outcomes in residential halls by creating a more welcoming environment for non-local students.

Universities are key institutes of higher education, and they are expected to teach both academic knowledge and life skills to their students. One way they fulfil this role is through *residential education*, a term used worldwide to broadly refer to the experiences of students at residential halls where they both live and learn away from their family homes. The hall activities and community service options afforded by residential education can give students opportunities for deeper social, cultural, and extracurricular involvement.

University campuses and residential halls are places where students from various ethnic and cultural backgrounds can interact freely. These interactions can be both beneficial and detrimental for non-local students. On the one hand, the immersion into an international environment may advance their critical thinking skills and their ability to put themselves in others' shoes (Antonio et al., 2004), promoting personal growth and the development of a global mind-set (Schenker, 2019). On the other hand, non-local students may face difficulties adjusting to their host culture, and they may experience various struggles, such as culture shock and homesickness

Correspondence to: Elsie Ong, Faculty of Education, Division of Information and Technology Studies, Room 541, 5/F, Meng Wah Complex, The University of Hong Kong, Hong Kong, Hong Kong. Email: e.ong@edu.salford.ac.uk

JSARP <http://journals.naspa.org/jsarp> doi:<https://doi.org/10.1080/19496591.2021.1997756>

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(Tian, 2019; Zhou et al., 2008). Difficulties related to language barriers, cultural differences, and feelings of loneliness may arise (Yan & Berliner, 2013; Zhang & Goodson, 2011). These difficulties may be exacerbated by the pressure to communicate in non-native languages and styles deemed to be appropriate in the host culture (Papatsiba, 2006). Consequently, many non-local students have trouble developing social networks (Min & Chau, 2012) and maintaining their networks at home (Yang et al., 2011).

A number of mental health problems experienced by students on campus have been attributed to struggles related to differences in communication and social norms between non-local and local student communities (Gopalkrishnan, 2018; Krendl & Pescosolido, 2020). Many international education practitioners and scholars have sought to explain the acculturation process. Spencer-Oatey and Franklin (2012) referred to acculturation as a phenomenon (including, but not limited to, verbal and nonverbal communication) that occurs when members of different cultural groups engage in joint activities.

Extensive research has already established how using acculturation strategies appropriately and gaining social support can help non-local students adjust to a new culture (Ng et al., 2013; Yang et al., 2011). However, most investigations on the topic have focused on Western contexts. The findings of such studies are not generalizable to Hong Kong, which has a distinct residential culture influenced by both Western and Chinese norms, encouraging students from diverse cultural backgrounds to be involved in hall activities (Ting et al., 2016). Despite the relative geographical proximity of Hong Kong and China, there are many cultural differences between the two locations (Ng, 2008), owing to Hong Kong's experience of British colonial rule from 1842 to 1997.

Mainland Chinese students constitute the largest proportion of the non-local population in Hong Kong (Yeung, 2012). However, the intercultural interactions between them and local students are an underexplored research topic. One related study was conducted by Ting et al. (2016), who examined the perceptions of university students living in residential halls in Hong Kong in 2008, 2009, and 2010. In each of the 3 years, a self-report survey was distributed to the students to assess their learning outcomes. The highest levels of multicultural and multi-disciplinary experience were reported by the students who scored the highest on measures indicating leadership. There was also a positive correlation between the students' level of involvement in residential hall activities and the extent of their multicultural interactions. In this longitudinal study, comparisons were made between the students across the years studied; however, the quantitative approach used by the researchers provided limited information about the quality of the experience that the students were having at their residential halls and the factors that contributed to the outcomes.

Theoretical Frameworks

An abundance of theories exist related to the phenomenon of acculturation in the higher education context, and one of the most well-established theories that is significant in understanding intercultural interaction is Wenger's (1998) *social theory of identity formation*. This theory sees the process of identity formation as having two parts: *identification* and *negotiability*. Identification refers to "the process through which modes of belonging become constitutive of an identity by creating bonds or distinctions with the aspect one has invested time and effort on" (p. 191). This is closely linked with individuals' sense of belonging (i.e., their social connections and sense of community) and with the various forms of support they receive from their membership in social groups (Baumeister & Leary, 1995). At the same time, Hogg (2012) argued that

social categorization can lead individuals to become depersonalized, as they may identify themselves and others “as having the attributes of a category” (p. 509). If individuals’ social identity in relation to their own group becomes stronger than their individual identity, intergroup behavior may be affected. In their study on identity change in a Chinese context, Fung and Pun (2021) suggested that individuals who had a Hong Kong identity could be opposed to people who identify as Mainland Chinese because of the historical relationship between the two places. For example, many Hong Kong citizens identify themselves as “Hong Kongers” rather than “Chinese” when asked about their nationality. Members of each group often view the other group as an out-group rather than an in-group. Consequently, individuals from Hong Kong may hold certain prejudices toward Mainland Chinese, which can make it difficult for Mainland Chinese visitors located in Hong Kong to completely integrate into the host society (see Skeldon, 1997).

Given that intercultural interaction is a vital topic of investigation especially for educators (Flowers, 2004; Holdsworth, 2006), this study aims to explore these variables among Mainland Chinese students living in a residential hall setting. Although a quantitative approach would have allowed a large amount of data to be collected in a short time frame, such an approach has its limitations. Leach et al. (2020) noted that a quantitative approach often fails to explore the reasons behind certain behaviors, interactions, or the ways individuals make sense of what is happening in unpredictable situations. Shek (2020) suggested that the use of a qualitative research approach, such as focus group interviews, may be a better way to explain, address, and plan improvements for the mental health support systems for students. Such an approach allows group interaction to be evaluated and gives participants the opportunity to discuss the reasons for adopting particular behaviors during such interactions. This study thus uses focus group interviews to investigate how the residential experience could help foster intercultural interaction and overcome the barriers and difficulties of such types of interaction.

Investigating issues related to acculturation and intercultural interaction could indicate ways that residential halls can improve adjustment outcomes in the future, thereby engendering a more welcoming environment for the non-local students in Hong Kong universities and better accommodation of their needs. In light of this, the overarching aim of this study is to gain an understanding of students’ intercultural interaction in residential halls. This is achieved by critically assessing students’ narratives through an interpretive analysis of focus group interviews. This study concentrates on the following research questions: (1) to what extent are Mainland Chinese students socially engaged with local students in the residential halls of a university, and (b) how do residential hall experiences affect their sense of belonging and their self-identity?

Methods

Researcher Positionality Statement

All three authors are multi-culturalists who grew up in one of the western countries (e.g., Canada, United Kingdom) and had opportunities interacting with multiple cultures. They were born and raised in Hong Kong, where Chinese and English are the official languages. They have either moved to an English-speaking country to continue their secondary and tertiary education, and had to adapt to new local curriculum and examinations. Living in a cultural hub has provided these authors with opportunities for intercultural interactions with people of different ethnic backgrounds. The first author has completed her Bachelor and Master degree in the UK, and then worked in China for 2 years where she learned about its language and culture. The other

two authors have gained similar and valuable experience by interacting with the people of their own culture after resuming their teaching posts at two different universities in Hong Kong. Therefore, all three authors had years of experience observing how students from different cultural backgrounds interacted with and learned from each other in the university campus. This has inspired their common research interest in exploring students' behavior and in the dynamics of acculturation.

Study Design

A qualitative paradigm was adopted in the form of focus group interviews whereby student residents from different halls and with varying durations of residential experience could share their experiences of living in residential halls. Each focus group interview involved three to four participants, who were asked to describe their behaviors based on their own perspectives (Lindlof & Taylor, 2011). Content analysis was then conducted on the interview data.

Participants

The inclusion criteria for the participants were as follows. The participants were required to (a) be enrolled as full-time students in the university at the time of the interviews; (b) be Mainland Chinese students who had lived in residential halls for at least one semester (3 months); and (c) have been born in China (i.e., excluding expats from other overseas countries) but not in Guangdong province because of its similarity in language and culture with Hong Kong. A representative balance was also sought in terms of the different residential halls from which the students came and the length of time that they had lived there. The participants were recruited with the assistance of the Human Resources (HR) department. The number of required interviewees requested was determined by the total number of participants who met the inclusion criteria until the data were saturated and no new topics were generated. The HR department first sent e-mail messages to residents who fit the criteria. Fifteen students initially responded, contacting the researcher individually. However, one of the students was from Guangdong province and shared a very similar cultural background and language with local students; this student thus did not pass the language criterion and was subsequently excluded. The final list of participants for the focus group interviews comprised 14 participants from 7 different halls, all of whom were full-time students at a local university in Hong Kong. At the time of recruitment, five had lived at the halls for less than 1 year, five had lived there for 1–2 years, and four had lived there for 2–3 years. The researchers had no prior acquaintance or relationship with the participants at that point.

After the first semester was completed, the 14 participants were interviewed in five focus groups, with 3 to 4 participants per group. Pseudonyms were assigned to the participants to protect their privacy. See [Table 1](#) for detailed information about each participant.

Procedure

Written informed consent was obtained via e-mail communication between the researcher and the participants. A questionnaire related to demographic information was distributed, which asked for information such as the participants' university, gender, faculty of study, cultural background, and hall of residence. After gathering the demographic information, the participants were informed that the interviews would be recorded for transcription purposes. The whole interview was conducted in English and each focus group took approximately 45 minutes to 1 hour. After the interviews, all of the participants were debriefed.

Table 1.

Demographic Information of the Interviewees

Name	Gender	Major	Age	Years living in the residential halls
Bai	Male	Computer Science	19	1–2 years
Chen	Male	Economics	20	1–2 years
Feng	Male	Finance	21	2–3 years
Li	Female	Communication	20	Three months
Qian	Female	Computer Science	19	Nine months
Song	Male	Computer Science	18	Three months
Wang	Female	Chemistry	23	2–3 years
Wu	Female	Diplomacy	23	2–3 years
Yan	Female	Education	20	Three months
Lin	Female	Education	22	3 years
Zhou	Female	Electronic Engineering	21	1–2 years
Zheng	Female	Diplomacy	23	1–2 years
San	Male	Business Administration	19	six months
Chiu	Female	Law	20	1–2 years

Pseudonyms were used in order to protect participants

Data Analysis

The qualitative data from the focus group interviews were analyzed using NVivo 12. All of the interview recordings were transcribed and translated into English if they were not already in English. Two independent coders who were fluent in both Chinese and English analyzed the data using a thematic analytical approach (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The coders and the transcribers were the same two people whereby the first coder/transcriber was a full-time postdoctoral fellow working full-time for this collaborated project. The second coder/transcriber was the full-time project manager and the first author of the current study. Neither of the two coders had contact with the participants during the study. All of the transcripts were checked by two independent transcription checkers to confirm that all of them followed the same format and that the content accurately recorded what the participants had said. The two transcribers then read and reread the interview transcripts to increase their familiarity with the data and to identify general themes. They independently coded the transcripts manually, identified key themes, and categorized them by research question. Representative quotations of each theme and category were also highlighted during this process. Coding was the fundamental process whereby the concepts or phenomena were named and were subsumed under the major categories. This process of data analysis involved constant comparisons between the categories (Walsh, 2014). Both of the transcribers continually coded and categorized the information until notable categories called “core categories” emerged and no further categories or subcategories were expected to emerge. The coding notes and summaries were exchanged between the coders to allow them to discuss differences and similarities. Through this continuing comparison, key themes that answered the research questions were identified, with representative quotations from the participants. The transcribed data were analyzed using the constant comparative method (Glaser & Strauss, 1967).

In other words, the data were collected and examined simultaneously as trends, themes, and patterns in the data were ascertained.

Ethical Considerations

The Ethical Review Board of the university approved the study (reg. no. 2018/098). All of the participants received oral and written information before the interviews. Participation was voluntary, and the participants were informed that they could refrain from discussing particular questions and withdraw from the study at any time. The data were de-identified.

Findings

Research Question (1): To what extent were Mainland Chinese students socially engaged with local students at the university residential halls?

Regardless of the length of time they spent at the halls, most of the Mainland Chinese students interviewed had similar views about their interactions with local students. Most of them agreed that the residential halls were a new opportunity for non-local students to discover the host culture and lifestyle, but Li, who had just started living at her hall in the first semester was surprised by her first impressions: “The majority of Chinese students spent most of their time studying and working . . . with relatively little time for interaction.” The atmosphere in the hall was harmonious and the locals were generally welcoming toward the non-locals. Lin recalled, “No matter where the non-local residents come from, they [tend to] communicate with someone coming from their ‘own kind’ [the same region as them].” This quotation demonstrates that the Mainland Chinese students distinguished between an in-group and an out-group. Lin also suggested, “I think it is more appropriate and friendlier if we interact with them voluntarily.” Chiu, a female law student who had lived in her hall for 1.5 years, explained the behavior of the Mainland Chinese students as follows: “Some Mainland students . . . think that the hall is just a place for them to live . . . not like they want to gain anything but just . . . a place to live.” Her statement was confirmed by other interviewees who pointed out that the students were not motivated to interact with others because they did not see the need to do so. For example, Chiu said, “Willingness is the most important component of communication . . . The impact will even become worse when we are forced to talk with local students, leading to a poor relationship . . .” Feng, a male student who had been studying finance at the institute for more than 2 years, said he had found it difficult to find close friends. He said he had struggled to connect with others partly because of cultural differences but more significantly because of differences in daily routines, such as bedtimes.

Almost all of the Mainland Chinese students ($n = 12$) reported that language barriers impeded their interaction with the local students. For example, one student (Zheng) tried to initiate conversations with local students but quickly found this to be problematic: “The hallmates communicated with each other only in Cantonese and it was hard for me to join in; I was unable to understand their jokes so I felt a bit embarrassed.” Similarly, Li said, “Although we also have a WhatsApp group in English including exchange students, we rarely speak in the group.” The language barrier caused the students to feel left out, and it was possible that some of the local students were not sufficiently fluent in their second language to speak with non-local students.

Clearly, experiencing such language barriers led some of the students to retreat inwards, leading in turn to difficulties in establishing interpersonal communication. Lin's view on this issue was typical: "I am not very happy . . . living in [the] hall, because I don't have many friends and I don't fit in with our hall culture, which makes me quite lonely." Yan also complained, "Mainland students are not able to join many hall activities, such as the Cantonese debating team . . . We, Mainland students, have thought about forming a club . . ." Overall, the students agreed that the local students were very cohesive and often engaged in activities together, such as eating out and playing sports. Consequently, it was hard for them to engage in deep communication with the local students.

To resolve the language problems experienced by the Mainland Chinese and other non-local students, language enhancement courses had been promoted intensely at the residential halls and on campus, but the effectiveness of these efforts seemed to vary. For example, Bai said, "There is a language class for locals to teach Cantonese to non-locals, and at the same time, non-locals can teach Mandarin to locals . . . Few people participate because they are not interested." Courses were not the only means to overcome language barriers. Chen, for example, said, "My first experience of learning Cantonese was from my hallmates. They taught me some basic Cantonese . . . My local floor mates were the first group of people who helped me integrate into Hong Kong . . ." This demonstrates that although the language barrier could pose a problem when the non-local students tried to interact with the local students, it could also be a motive for hall residents to interact with and learn from each other.

Research Question 2: How did the residential hall experience affect their sense of belonging and their self-identity?

A majority of the Mainland Chinese interviewees reported having their own sense of self-identity when they entered the university; many ($n = 11$) held a strong belief that there was a clear division between the local and the non-local students. For example, Wu, a female student studying diplomacy, said, "I think there is [a] distinction between locals and non-locals . . . especially last year because when we talk about Hong Kong and whether it belongs to the nation or not . . . some locals think that we do not respect their political beliefs . . . we are just visitors and we just come to study here . . . I think this is throughout the city, not just the residence." Her narrative clearly reflects her feeling of being an outsider not only at the residence hall but also in the broader city.

It was possible, however, for perceptions about the residential experience to change over time. Wang, a female chemistry student who was enthusiastic about sports, commented that the inter-hall sports competitions helped boost her sense of belonging to her own hall. Residents from the same hall enter competitions as a team, and hallmates cheer for one another at the events, celebrating the wins of the teams representing the hall and mourning their losses. Wang's hallmate Wu similarly said that she had felt left out at the beginning but that the situation slowly improved over time. She said, "I have a sense of belonging when living in [the] hall because there are also many hall activities where we bond with each other." Activities organized at the hall helped consolidate the self-identities of both the local and Mainland Chinese students. One example of this is the Mid-Autumn Festival celebration, which local and Mainland Chinese could co-organize to educate non-Chinese international students about Chinese culture. Chiu said, "I put Mid-Autumn Festival . . . a lot of game counters and stage performance . . . triggers a sense of belonging—treating hall as home." Apart from cultural nights, other events also helped the hall residents develop a sense of belonging. For example, Bai noted, "Through joining high

table dinner or orientation camp, I may generate a sense of belonging to my hall. In normal days I may only interact with people on the same floor, but through the activities mentioned above, I can be more active in the hall. Also, since my floor is a 'lady' floor, these activities can also help me to meet the opposite sex." San offered a different viewpoint, saying that the sense of belonging she felt was generated by the people around her: "My friends ... living here together like brothers and sisters in a family, rather than outside ... give me some sense of belonging staying [in] the hall."

Some of the students admitted that living in the halls changed the way they thought about their self-identity, as the residential experience allowed them to be immersed in an environment in which they could develop an understanding of other cultures. One type of event that allowed the Mainland Chinese students to be exposed to other cultures was the cultural night. This was a regular inter-hall event organized several times each semester, led by students from different cultures, with a different theme at each event. Wang commented, "Since there are local [and] non-local students in [the] hall, we can learn about each other's culture and observe the differences." These experiences encouraged the students to reflect on their identities and their relationships with others. For example, San suggested, "Living in [the] hall allows me to reflect that there are a variety of cultures in the world, and thus it means that no particular culture is superior than the others. We need to accept and welcome diversity and try to understand others." When they compared themselves to local students, they also observed commonalities, such as the celebration of common festivals; this experience allowed them to consider the possibility of seeing themselves as belonging to the same group as the local students when they were promoting Chinese culture among other international students.

When the students were asked how successfully the hall had built a sense of belonging, Yan noted the halls' potential to construct students' sense of belonging by identifying a community for residents to belong to. Yan had extensive experience at another university and made comparisons between the two; she commented that the hall where she currently lived "promoted no identity construction ... If one does not have a local identity or strong sense of belonging to Hong Kong, that will be hard to become an international citizen since they don't have roots." Overall, the participants' answers shed light on the process of identity formation and provided possible explanations for why peer interactions might not have significantly increased the Mainland Chinese students' sense of belonging. The students expressed their expectation for their residential halls to play a more proactive role in helping both groups of students interact harmoniously.

Some of the participants suggested that hall tutors played an important role in improving intercultural interactions. For example, Qian suggested that "the organisers of floor meetings or hall tutors should take the initiative to invite non-local residents in person to join the hall activities. If there is no such face-to-face invitation, merely relying on the poster promotion does not work." Lastly, Li and Wu further added, "Local, non-local students should be distributed equally on the floor ... Roommates should be from the same background, but the neighbourhood could be diverse." They further explained that although they would accept having a local floormate, it could be difficult to get along with a roommate who was a local student. As these comments indicate, although it was possible that some of them cherished the opportunity to broaden their cultural horizons by interacting with local students, some of them perceived having to live with them as a potential source of discomfort and even conflict.

Discussion

Based on the current scope of the literature, a residential hall not only provides students with a place to live but is also crucial for developing social interaction and social identity, thus affecting students' university experience (Paine, 2007). Building on this idea, the importance of the residential hall experience and its effect on the intercultural interaction between local and Mainland Chinese students were explored.

Interaction between Local and Mainland Chinese Students

Contrary to the findings of Ng (2008), a majority of the Mainland Chinese students did not encounter any problems with acculturation while living at their residential halls. It was not particularly challenging for the non-local students to adapt to the prevailing social culture, possibly because their new cultural environment (Hong Kong) shared a lot of similarities with their environment of origin (China). However, the students did not have much interaction with the local students. Despite occasionally switching to English for a topic or two during hall events and in communication groups, many of them felt excluded because of their hallmates' dominant use of Cantonese. Their insufficient language skills were described as the main barrier to interaction, which created experiences of stress, difficulties socializing in the halls, and feelings of inferiority. These results are comparable with those of previous studies (Tian, 2019; Zhou et al., 2008) that indicated experiences of cultural awareness, exposure to discrimination, language barriers, and difficulties forming new networks during the students' integration experiences. Such challenges may lead non-local students to experience increased levels of uncertainty and anxiety when interacting with local students. The findings also support those of previous studies (Papatsiba, ; Yan & Berliner, 2013; Zhang & Goodson, 2011) showing that the majority of Mainland Chinese students encounter difficulties adjusting to new environments.

Studies about Chinese students living abroad have found that their perceptions of the boundaries of the in-group and the out-group may change over time as they remain immersed in an overseas living environment, such as a residential hall (Min & Chau, 2012; Yang et al., 2011; Zhou et al., 2008). Zhou et al. (2008) also evaluated changes to students' self-identity and how their conceptions regarding the in-group and out-group changed in the process. The findings of this study were similar; however, unlike those previous studies, the Mainland Chinese students in this study were living in a residential hall influenced heavily by Chinese culture.

The current findings also mirror some of the patterns found in the adjustment of non-Chinese international students in the West. For instance, in a survey conducted at a university in the UK, Hendrickson (2018) found that the closest friends of non-local students were their co-nationals or those with whom they shared a linguistic background, rather than local students. The international students also had significantly more multi-national friends than host national friends at the beginning of the semester. It was reported that they enjoyed spending time with peers with whom they shared aims, interests, a sense of history, and the experience of being a "new member of the community." This friendship network helped form an international student community that students perceived as their temporary ethnic group. Importantly, their friendships with the multi-national students increased in strength over the course of the semester but hindered students' ability to make friends from the host nation. The findings of that study were consistent with the argument made by Gareis et al. (2011) that students' language

proficiency and intercultural friendship satisfaction are related. These studies have shown that regardless of the ethnicities of non-local students, they generally prefer to stay with those whom they identify as their in-group based on shared interests or common backgrounds, and they have less interaction with the out-group.

In this study, similar findings among the Mainland Chinese students were made despite their linguistic and cultural similarities with the local students. When language barriers were apparent, they seriously dampened the students' enthusiasm to participate in hall activities and interact with other students.

The interviews indicated that the students believed that local students had similar perceptions regarding the in-group and out-group, often describing themselves as "Hong Kongers." Consequently, the Mainland Chinese students preferred to either stay in their own rooms or stay with their own group rather than approach members of a group whom they perceived to be different from them. The limited interaction between the Mainland Chinese and the local students, as well as the former's low involvement in hall activities, may be explained by Wenger's (1998) social theory of identity formation. During the process of identification, active or passive categorizations of members in a social group may occur. Hogg (2012) also claimed that categorizations may result in labeling or stereotyping, through which similar and different attributes of various groups are identified. Such acts of categorization influence identity construction through how individuals perceive who they are and who others are in categorized social groups. In the this study, categorizations were made of local and non-local residents.

Although adjustment problems exist in different contexts worldwide, a noteworthy finding of this study is that the extent of intercultural interaction was highly dependent on individuals' characteristics. Some of the non-local students who were active, were socially skilled, and shared similar interests, values, and backgrounds as the local students appeared to have experienced greater intercultural interaction. This could be discerned from the comments that many of the students made in which they agreed that interactions could easily be initiated by taking the first step to break the ice through "small talk" and the search for common topics of interest. Many of the students said that the residence halls provided an optimal environment in which to build relationships this way, as all of the hallmates lived under a single roof and completed daily chores together.

The Importance of Hall Tutors and Hall Activities

The important role of hall tutors or residential activity organizers should not be underestimated. Based on the interviewees' comments, the hall staff, especially tutors who spoke the same language as the non-local students, played a crucial role in breaking the ice between different groups of students. This indicates that student affairs staff members are in a position to directly facilitate student interactions, such as by helping to organize students around points of similarity while allowing them to celebrate or explore their differences. In their study, Fung and Pun (2021) observed that many non-local students were relatively passive in foreign environments; they found it difficult to step out of their comfort zones to try new and unfamiliar activities, such as joining sports clubs or entering contests. However, they noted that this could change when event organizers proactively connected with these students and invited them to participate in such events. In this study, the interviewees cited culturally oriented hall activities (e.g., the Mid-Autumn Festival) as events that they found to be able to engender a sense of belonging with the other hall residents. Such activities could also enhance the development of acceptance and respect and the tolerance of cultural differences

(Fung & Pun, 2021). Participation in this cross-cultural learning community could provide students with a rich form of active face-to-face learning that may result in a deeper understanding of other cultures.

Within halls of residence, whether local and non-local students should be assigned to the same room remains a controversial issue. Some noted that such levels of interaction could merely exacerbate feelings of culture shock, and others expressed doubt that putting a local and a non-local student together in the same room could enhance social integration. Conflicting lifestyles, recognition of inequalities, and competition could all lead to discomfort and difficulty.

Implications for Practice

In Wenger's (1998) social theory of identity formation, *identification* involves an ongoing process of constructing the self through both participation and nonparticipation in daily social events. Applying this idea to the context examined in this study, this process could take place through the students' participation in hall events and activities. Indeed, living in residential halls could help residents form that distinct group identity, and the halls could be an optimal place for integration to happen. Participating in activities together could lead local and non-local students to let go of their initial self-identities and identify new sources of a sense of belonging, such as membership of a sports team. This could lead the two groups of students to unite behind a common goal, causing cultural disparities to become less apparent.

This study is among the first to use a qualitative approach to document the intercultural interaction of Mainland Chinese university students living in residential halls with Hong Kong students. Despite their efforts, residential halls have shown limited success in achieving their goals of building harmonious relationships among their residents, and more could be done to improve the situation. The results of this study have important implications for hall policymakers seeking to promote further intercultural interaction among hall residents. Student affairs practitioners should strive to mitigate the negative effects and maximize the positive impact of hall education. The findings also reinforce the importance of creating a harmonious living environment for resident students with opportunities for meaningful engagement with local students. The findings indicate that many Mainland Chinese students do not take a proactive role in integrating themselves in their host environment because they may not see the need to do so and they may consider the residential hall as merely a place to live while they are abroad. These perceptions about the role of the residential hall could be related to their weak sense of belonging to their host environment. Related to this, Lizzio (2006) identified five important feelings that can facilitate successful student transitions: a sense of capability, a sense of connectedness, a sense of purpose, a sense of resourcefulness, and a sense of academic culture. The focus group interview results indicate that the residential halls have generally provided a good sense of resourcefulness (e.g., through their provision of language enhancement programmes) and a sense of academic culture, but they have been less successful at providing students with a sense of connectedness and purpose. These could be achieved if residential hall tutors adopted more proactive rather than passive approaches in reaching out to non-local students.

Limitations and Future Directions

The constraints of this study are as follows. First, the study was case-based. Hence, although some of the implications of the findings may be adaptable to other situations, the findings should not be generalized to any other ethnic group, country, or situation. Second, the Mainland Chinese students in this study represented only a segment of the ethnic group, and their

experiences may not necessarily reflect those of non-local students from other cultures. Mainland Chinese students studying in other countries may have different experiences of and opinions about living in residential halls. In this study, it is not claimed that students from other countries or cultures are likely to have similar experiences. Another limitation is that the characteristics of individual students were not considered, which could help provide a more precise understanding of the factors that may affect the extent of intercultural interaction in residence halls. This study was conducted during the heated political climate related to questions about the sovereignty of Hong Kong; this may have heightened divisions within the student body.

Many of the interviewees gave comprehensive suggestions as to how the residential hall experience could be improved to strengthen peer interaction. For instance, organizing language enhancement courses could help students overcome the language barrier, a commonly cited problem, which worsened the categorization of the in-group and the out-group. Less formally, having floor tutors conversant in the languages of both local and non-local students could also help with this. Ultimately, the student interviewees agreed that the extent of intercultural interaction was dependent primarily on an individual's personal characteristics. What they deemed to be crucial was for each individual to take the initial step to leave their comfort zones and interact with peers from the other group, the opportunities for which were never lacking in the residential halls.

In relation to the debate about roommate pairings, further research may be helpful to explore students' process of adjustment to their roommates across different scenarios (e.g., having roommates come from the same culture as opposed to having roommates come from different cultures). Such investigations could help staff members plan hall activities and could help determine whether the feelings of discomfort that new roommates may feel toward each other lead to further division or eventual connection.

Conclusion

Many university residential halls aim to strengthen the intercultural interaction between individuals by having a mixture of culturally diverse residents live in close proximity. The underlying assumption is that this will allow students to get to know, understand, and like each other better, thereby building long-lasting cross-cultural relationships. However, the current findings indicate that no conclusion can be drawn yet as to which arrangement most effectively achieves this goal. The impact of such arrangements is highly dependent on the individual's perceptions of themselves and others. Beyond the involuntary assignment of student residents to halls where they must live with others, only voluntarily initiated interactions from both groups—that is, those from the host location and those from elsewhere—can overcome barriers to the establishment of relationships, such as language differences.

Frequent contact may not always help promote interaction, especially when differences in language create a communication barrier; frequent contact may instead lead to increased tension and conflict between individuals. Nevertheless, the interview results indicate that residential halls play an important role in strengthening intercultural interactions through activities and other arrangements.

Compliance with Ethical Standards

All of the procedures in the experiments involving human participants were performed in accordance with the ethical standards of the institutional and/or national research committee and with the 1964 Declaration of Helsinki and its later amendments or comparable ethical

standards. The experiment reported here was approved by the Local Ethical Committee of The University of Hong Kong.

Acknowledgement

The authors thank Dr. Laura Taylor from the University of Northampton for her time in proofreading this paper.

Disclosure Statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Funding

This work was supported by the Research Grants Council, University Grants Committee [007100009].

ORCID

Elsie Ong  <http://orcid.org/0000-0003-1676-4913>

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