

Understanding Stereotypes of Chinese International Students in a U.S. University: A Case Study

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Abstract

The recent coronavirus pandemic, combined with Trump's anti-China rhetoric, made the international students and scholars of Chinese origin the easy racist target. A qualitative case study with 34 undergraduate Chinese international students (CIS) and 10 of their chosen faculty members, the study examined CIS's studying abroad experiences in a U.S. university before, during and after the pandemic. Guided by the frameworks of neo-racism and model minority stereotype, this study showed that before the pandemic, there was implicit racism directed toward CIS in the academia while explicit racist attack was evident during and after the outbreak of the pandemic. Practical applications were discussed focusing on how the U.S. higher educational institutes could create a more inclusive environment for the CIS and the other international students.

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With the growing middle class in China in recent decades, U.S. colleges witnessed a rising number of Chinese International Students (CIS) on campuses who grow up in China and attend the U.S. colleges with F-1 student visa. These students contributed to the U.S. higher educational institutions with full tuition, globalized views, human resources and hence a young generation of work force. In return, CIS reported broadened visions and better job opportunities upon graduation. These benefits of studying abroad, however, were accompanied with challenges and hardships facing CIS, who tended to struggle in both their academic and personal lives while living in a different land from home (Heng, 2018).

The recent coronavirus pandemic, combined with Trump's anti-China rhetoric, made the international students and scholars of Chinese origin the easy racist targets. A case in point that became newspaper headlines was that five Chinese researchers were arrested for visa fraud charges in 2020. The cases were later dropped in July, 2021 after being criticized as racially biased (Lee, 2021). According to the "Stop AAPI Hate Research Group," in the year of 2020 alone, the anti-Asian hate crimes increased 149% in 16 of America's largest cities while the overall hate crimes dropped 7%. Reported incidents were verbal harassment (68.1%), shunning (i.e., the deliberate avoidance of Asian Americans; 20.5%), physical assault (11.1%), civil rights violations including workplace discrimination, refusal of service and being barred from transportation (8.5%), and online harassment (6.8%) (Jeung, Horse, Popovic & Lim, 2021). The situation hit a breaking point after the Georgia shooting which led to the death of eight people, including six Asian women. In response to the increased hate crimes against Asian Americans, many U.S. universities sent out

official messages to fight against anti-Asian American hate speech and violence, calling for the unity of the community, and showing their determination to protect Asian and Asian American students against hostility and racism (Choo & Diaz, 2021).

Caught in such a social context, CIS struggled to keep up with their study against all odds. CIS had to face hardships including but not limited to being isolated from their home community, difficulties acquiring a flight ticket to go back to China, being removed from the dorms that were closed during pandemic, and risking visa rejection when universities shifted to remote teaching (Law, 2020). Although many studies reported CIS challenges when they interacted with local communities or went through the process of obtaining and maintaining their legal status in the U.S., much less is known about their experiences on campus as a group of international students. Studies on the CIS experience in the Western higher educational institution before the pandemic reported CIS being excluded by professors, university staff, and classmates when comparing the academic experience of their European counterparts (Glass et al., 2015). CIS were often stereotyped as being passive and needy (Zhao & Bourne, 2011), reticent (Zhu & Bresnahan, 2018) and self-isolated learners (Suspitsyna & Shalka, 2019) by the western professors. They were also stereotyped as a homogeneous group sharing the same historical, cultural and social contexts (Heng, 2019). However, subscribing to a deficit model in understanding the CIS experience, the existing studies tended to treat such unpleasant experiences as an unfortunate result of cultural differences rather than discrimination (Ma, 2020).

With the current hostility against Asian and Asian American students in the U.S. society, it is high time to reexamine CIS's life and experiences in the U.S. universities. We wondered: is the academia truly a safe-zone that protects their CIS from the precarious world or is it also contaminated by the antagonism against Asian and Asian American students? This study aimed to understand the challenges CIS faced in academia before and during/after the outbreak of the pandemic using qualitative interviews with both CIS and their U.S. faculty members. It is our purpose to extend the previous research on CIS by investigating the CIS experience through the lenses of the neo-racism and model minority stereotype. The neo-racism framework helped us to interpret the CIS experience as that the burden to change is wrongly placed on international students to overcome their challenges rather than how the host countries make it especially difficult for them to succeed. Likewise, the model minority stereotype provided important guidelines to critically examine the stereotypes given to CIS in the U.S. academia and explore the consequences of CIS living with such stereotype.

Specifically, we asked the following three research questions: *How do U.S. faculty and CIS themselves perceive the positive attributes of CIS studying in a U.S. university? How do U.S. faculty and CIS themselves perceive the challenges CIS experienced when studying in a U.S. university? Do CIS perceive bigger challenges during/after the outbreak of the pandemic?*

Theoretical Framework

Neo-racism

Neo-racism, also known as cultural racism or differential racism, is a new kind of racism based on cultural differences, which states that besides skin color and biographic differences, cultural differences are naturalized and formalized as a basis for differentiated treatment (Lee et al, 2017). While historic forms of racism were rooted in ideas of biological difference, the new "racism" was rooted in beliefs about different groups being culturally incompatible with each other (Mukhopadhyay & Chua, 2008).

Balibar et al. (1991) developed the concept of neo-racism by observing xenophobia in multicultural metropolitan cities as the immigrants, “new threats” to Eurocentric ethnicity, surge. The concept of neo-racism can be elastic to combine a few prejudices of immigrant groups and form a generic neo-racist discourse (Wodak & Matouschek, 1993). The prejudices or discrimination against immigrant were not necessarily based on individual biases but rather the problematic portrayal of other cultures in the mass media formed over time which reflected society-wide perceptions and beliefs, such as ignorant about the social, cultural, economic and political development of other countries (Lee et al, 2017). The neo-racism framework is applied in educational studies to understand how people of certain nationalities or cultures are treated unfairly in education based on a hierarchy of cultural preferences (Lee & Opio, 2011). These unfair treatments include not having equal opportunities to join discussion in class, receiving insensitive comments about their cultures, getting less-than-objective academic evaluations from their professors, and facing difficulty in forming interpersonal relationships with their instructors (Glass et al, 2015).

Neo-racism was utilized in this study as it allowed us to conceptualize the challenges and difficulties CIS faced in the U.S. as a hidden form of racial discrimination due to their nationality, race and cultural backgrounds. Such racism adds a new barrier to the educational adjustment that is already hard for the international students (Yao & Viggiano, 2019).

Model Minority Stereotype

This research was also guided by the model minority stereotype, which addresses the uniqueness that Asian Americans hold in the conversation of race in the United States (Lee, 2015). The model minority stereotype states that unlike Blacks, Latinos, and other minority groups, Asian immigrants can achieve education, social, and economic success alone because of their prescribed characteristics specifically as following: 1) Quiet, uncomplaining, and hard-working, 2) excel in computer science, engineering and math, and 3) come from traditional family with a strict patriarchal father and dutiful mother.

However, this stereotype is problematic and thus, masks the systematic inequalities in politics, economy and education against Asian Americans in two ways. On the one hand, it sets the interests of Asian Americans as being at odds with the interests of Blacks and Latinos while protecting the interests of the dominant White groups (Yosso, 2005). On the other hand, by highlighting their success, it blinds the fact that after years of hard work after graduation from colleges and graduate schools, Asian Americans still meet with “glass-ceiling” or “bamboo ceiling (a term coined for Asian Americans),” that prevents them from gaining management and leadership positions in major corporations (Chin, 2016).

Although the model minority stereotype is generally used to describe Asian Americans, such characteristics of the Asian Americans are in congruence with the literature on CIS as being reticent, self-isolated, and hard-working (Lee, 2015; Lei, 2003; Trytten et al, 2012). Thus, we argue that it is appropriate to use it on CIS given the overlapping and intertwined experience shared by both CIS and Asian Americans. We understand CIS and Asian Americans have different citizenships and are entitled with different social and educational rights and benefits. As a matter of fact, to avoid the perpetuated “forever foreigner” stereotype, Asian Americans resisted themselves being put in the same category as CIS. After all, Asian Americans are part of American society, not foreigners at all. However, Asian Americans and CIS also share the Asian cultural heritage. Many CIS continue to stay in the U.S. after graduation and in time become permanent residents or are naturalized as American citizens, who are then identified as Asian Americans. While we are aware

that CIS is a unique group in itself, the shared cultural heritage with Asian Americans made it plausible to use the “model minority stereotype” to examine CIS as a group. By applying the same model minority stereotype to CIS, the study could potentially extend the extant literature on CIS and Asian Americans by testing, challenging or expanding the validity of the framework.

In short, the juxtaposition of neo-racism and model minority stereotype provided us with guidelines and useful lenses to fully understand the possible discrimination CIS receive on American campus. Neo-racism is the racism against immigrants on basis of culture, which allowed us to include CIS in the discussions on issues surrounding race. Likewise, the model minority stereotype is also racism in nature as it depicts Asians as perfect exploitable workers. Given that the previous paradigm of racism studies tended to focus on people with American citizenship, thus leaving international students out in the discussion on race in the U.S. We think it is important, and even urgent to study CIS using these two frameworks.

Literature Review

The extant literature on exploring CIS experience when studying overseas in Western universities revealed a few challenges CIS faced: a lack of language proficiency (Heng, 2018), difficulties in adapting to a student-centered teaching style (Zhao & Bourne, 2011), in academic writing, and in participating in class discussions and group projects (Ma, 2020).

Studies exploring the reasons for these challenges CIS faced focused on the following aspects in education: 1) Curriculum. Studies showed that curricular in U.S. higher education tended to have limited perspectives from Anglo-Saxon countries with minimum references to perspectives from international students’ home countries/cultures. The use of these curricular could isolate CIS in their academic participation (Heng, 2019; Guo & Guo, 2017). 2) Assessment. The western academia in general required students to demonstrate intellectual capacity for analytical and evaluative skills, in particular with verbal discussion and argumentative writing that CIS were not well prepared for or even aware of (Hirvela & Du, 2013; Turner, 2006). 3) Class interactions. CIS were generally found to be quiet in class interactions due to language and cultural reasons. Studies also showed that there was an evolving process for CIS to negotiate their class participation through conscious choices of when to participate (Zheng, 2010). 4) Cultural differences. Cultural differences were a big umbrella term used to explain the challenges CIS faced in the academic, ranging from values, outlook, history, tradition to the teaching and learning style and the academic expectations. For example, critical thinking skills are generally set as an important goal of education in western countries but not in many Asian countries like in China. This is a great contrast to that in Asian cultures, students are taught to value the interests of the group over the interests of themselves as individuals when it comes to expressing personal opinions in a group (Atkinson, 1997). These differences will inherently introduce challenges for CIS when studying in the U.S. which has a drastically different culture from that in China.

However, the previous studies did not analyze the “deficit” assumptions that inadequately consider racial issues when examining the CIS experience and thus, leave the question as how such assumptions fit into in the ethno-racial landscape of U.S. society unanswered. In the analysis of the complex cultural, educational and social contexts that might contribute to the challenges CIS experienced, we found it critical to look beyond the reported challenges that CIS faced to understand what, how, and why the U.S. higher educational institutions make assumptions about CIS (Lee, Jon & Byun, 2017). Hence, it was the purpose of the study to explore the “deficit” assumptions about CIS and highlight the implicit stereotypes on CIS in the U.S. academia using the neo-racism and model minority stereotype frameworks.

Method

Context of the Study

This study featured qualitative interviews to understand the educational experiences of CIS studying in the U.S. before and during/after the outbreak of the pandemic. Qualitative inquiry method was adopted to explore the life and voices of CIS. Specifically, this study used in-depth interviews with CIS and their U.S. professors as a tool for our inquiry. The data collection started off before the pandemic when the authors were interested in observing CIS and their U.S. professors' conceptualization of challenges CIS experienced. However, the pandemic broke out in 2020, during which the data collection was not completed. In other words, the data collection did not complete until after the pandemic occurred. The data collected after pandemic offered us opportunities to examine and understand CIS's intensified or even potentially traumatic experiences on campus during/after the outbreak of the pandemic, a time when there was a sharp downturn of the Sino-U.S. political relationship.

This project was conducted in a comprehensive research university located on the east coast of the United States. This university offers a variety of programs, majors and is renowned for its high academic and research standards. The undergraduate study body is made up of around 70% White, 8% Hispanic, around 6% Black or African American students. International students make up around 5% of overall undergraduate students. 75% of international undergraduate body were CIS. Of the faculty member, around 80% White, 10% Black or African American, and 7% Asian. The university does not provide a separate report for the percentage for professors from China or of Chinese origin. The university has a large pool of CIS, a trend that has been seen in the past decade. This was a part of the effort to increase the diversity on campus as the university has been historically serving the mainstream White student population. We think the undergraduate CIS, given their young age in comparison to CIS graduate students, would have more challenges living and studying overseas, and thus, appropriate participants for our study.

Participants

The study sampled 34 undergraduate CIS and 10 of their recommended faculty members before and during the Covid-19 pandemic. The student participants were recruited mainly through two methods: first we sent out fliers through the Chinese Students Association email list and recruited the ones who gave us consents. Then we used snowballing sampling method with the participants we first recruited, asking them to connect us to those CIS whom they knew and whom were willing to participate. Focusing on a small group of participants allowed us to explore their experiences with great in depth.

Of the 34 student participants, 19 were male and 15 were female. All of them were in their early twenties during the interview (between 21 and 25), ethnically Han (the major ethnic group in China), and from upper-middle-class families (i.e., the sampled CIS, when interviewed, described their parents as bank managers, university professors, or self-employed businessman company owners). The participants' demographic profiles (age, nationalities and family backgrounds) were typical of Chinese students studying in Western universities (Heng, 2018). Their self-reported GPA were defined as average or above average.

The U.S. faculty participated in this study were all recruited through students' recommendations. After students discussed their favorite professors, emails were sent to invite them to participate in the study. We chose the faculty purposefully based on the participating CIS

because we wanted to ensure that faculty and CIS talked about the same courses and the same experiences, but from two different perspectives.

Table 1 showed that our sampled faculty members came from diverse disciplines and programs also with a mean of 8.2 years of teaching experience as college instructors. Seventy percent of the faculty members were male and 30% were female. The professors who accepted invitations to participate in this study tend to have substantial experiences with CIS. For professors Ann (Economics), Wilson (Chemistry), Jones (Accounting), Nath (Mechanical Engineering), Clark (Mechanical Engineering) and Carter (Sociology), their classes generally had about 10% CIS. Professors Smith (College Study), Davis (College Writing), and Martin (College Writing) taught courses that aimed to assist international students in transitioning to life in a U.S. university. These professors taught classes that were predominantly comprised of CIS. Professor Young (Chinese history) taught a class with more than half of the student body from China while his course is open for all the undergraduates. These sampled faculty members came into contact with a wide range of CIS in their undergraduate courses, which may provide them with rich experiences and lead to insightful observations of CIS experiences.

Table 1. *U.S. Faculty Participants Demographic Information (N=10)*

Pseudonym	Gender	Discipline	Teaching Experience (years)	Ethnicity
1. Ann	Female	Economics	+10	Caucasian
2. Smith	Male	College Study	+10	Caucasian
3. Young	Male	Chinese History	3	Chinese American
4. Nath	Male	Mechanical Engineer	6	Indian American
5. Wilson	Male	Chemistry	8	Caucasian
6. Jones	Female	Accounting	+10	Caucasian
7. Davis	Male	College Writing	+10	Caucasian
8. Martin	Male	College Writing	+10	Caucasian
9. Clark	Female	Mechanical Engineer	5	Caucasian
10. Carter	Male	Sociology	+10	Caucasian

Data Collection and Analysis

Our data sources included the interview data with CIS and their recommended American faculty members. All the student participants received a semi-structured one-on-one interview lasting an hour on average. The interview protocols included: 1) demographic questions to collect participants' background information, which were used to help researchers to frame participant experiences for data analysis. 2) semi-structured questions about their experiences of studying abroad. The semi-structured questions focused on the following dimensions of their overseas academic experience: a) What were their educational experiences? b) Which was their favorite course and favorite professor? And Why? c) What is hard for them and why? d) Do they feel themselves victims of racial discrimination? e) Have you experienced any racial discrimination incidence after the pandemic breakout? All the student interviews were conducted in Chinese

language.

Once receiving consent, faculty were interviewed in their office that lasted from 40-60 minutes. The semi-structured faculty interviews centered questions around their impression on and experiences with teaching CIS. The interview questions were listed as follows: a) What is your impression of your CIS? b) Do you feel there's anything different between your CIS and other Western students? c) What do you observe are the typical difficulties and challenges facing CIS? d) How do you facilitate CIS in their learning through your teaching? All the faculty interviews were conducted in the English language.

Initially, the recorded interviews were transcribed and translated into English. Then the data was organized using Nvivo 10. Two researchers engaged in the first round of open coding. In this process, data were analyzed using a codebook based on codes emerging from the interviews. The codebook was also guided by the frameworks of neo-racism and model minority stereotypes, whose key domains were reflected in the majority of interviews. For example, an emerging code for *positive stereotype* was defined in our codebook as including faculty and CIS positive stereotype (i.e., "Chinese students are used to working hard"). *Reticent in classrooms* was coded for responses indicating the quietness or reluctance of CIS to speak up in classes (i.e., "They don't express their opinions as openly"). *Difficulty with argumentative writing* code referred to the comments on the challenging experiences CIS had with academic writing (i.e., "I don't know what to write about"). *Exclusion* code referred to CIS's discussion on how they felt excluded from their peers, or activities such as class discussions and group work (i.e., "Working with American students on group project is so hard."). *Difficulty with higher level thinking* were reflected in comments relating to the challenging experiences CIS had with creativity and critical thinking (i.e., "Compared to my theory-oriented class in physics, I do find Chinese students experience more difficulty with group project in the physics class that focuses on practice and application. It may be because they were not used to such projects in their previous education"). *Difficulty with language* code referred to the linguistic challenges CIS had in academics (i.e., "I couldn't read those big numbers in accounting classes"). Finally, *discrimination during and after the pandemic* code referred to the unjust or prejudicial treatment of different categories of people or things, especially on the grounds of race (i.e. "I really felt I was left with no choice, there was no right thing to do about wearing masks").

After that, the second round of analysis was conducted by the two researchers to extract the common themes on CIS's challenging experiences across all types of academic activities. During the analysis, several stereotypes emerged from the interview data. The final round of analysis identified four themes, which were: "positive stereotype," "difficulty with higher order cognitive thinking," "exclusion" and "overt discrimination." Throughout the coding process, the two researchers coded data independently and then codes were compared and discussed until interrater reliability approached 100% for all transcripts-, an inter-rater reliability of 81.25%–90% for the three rounds of coding was achieved.

Findings

In this section, we reported the themes emerged from the interview data analysis. Generally speaking, the CIS in this study did not perceive themselves as obvious victims of explicit racial discrimination when we explicitly asked this question in the interview. However, in the analysis of the interview, the implicit discrimination against CIS was evident through the emerging themes on the positive stereotype, unfair assessment standard for their cognitive thinking skills, feeling excluded along with incidences of explicit discrimination during and after the outbreak of the

pandemic.

Thus, a total of four themes emerged from the data analysis and will be discussed in detail. The first theme, *positive stereotype on CIS* emerged from answering the first research question regarding how the U.S. faculty and CIS themselves perceived CIS in terms of their positive attributes when studying in a U.S. university. The second theme and third theme, *difficulties with higher order cognitive thinking* and *exclusion* addressed the second research question about aspects of studying abroad CIS considered challenging. The fourth theme, *overt discrimination* answered the third research question on whether CIS experienced greater challenges since the Pandemic. Overall, guided by the neo-racism and the model minority stereotype frameworks, we found both the implicit and explicit discrimination against CIS when studying in the U.S. academia. The following section was organized by our findings to each of the three research questions.

Faculty and CIS Perceptions of Positive Attributes for CIS

Regarding the first research question, our data showed that when commenting on the general impression on CIS, professors reported such positive impressions on them as diligence, obedience, and excellent in math. Five out of ten professors in our dataset said that their CIS were very diligent. Such comments fit well the model minority stereotype that describes Asian students as handworkers.

Professor Ann (Economics) said that she was aware that sometimes, CIS turned in their work at midnight. For her, this was an indicator that CIS were diligent since they worked until late at night. She also noticed that CIS “took very organized notes” in class, and CIS asked her questions during the break between the two classes to “make sure they understood everything.”

Following was a quote from the interview with Professor Martin:

I mean sometimes I can be pretty hard because what I’m doing is I’m pushing kids. I’m pushing them to do their work. I’m pushing them to learn. I give them lots of work and homework and let’s face it, Chinese students are used to working hard. **So, they don’t resist too much.**

According to Professor Martin, CIS were diligent and obedient. Their diligence was reflected by their willingness to cooperate and meet professors’ requirements. Their obedience was showed when they didn’t resist routine work and the homework overload.

In addition to being diligent and obedient, three professors from the mechanical engineering and chemistry departments praised CIS for their excellent performance in math. This was also confirmed by the interview with CIS. Shuo (Chemistry Engineering student) remarked: “If a Chinese student is not good in math, he won’t be good at anything.” According to CIS, their strength and confidence in math might be partially due to the excellent math instruction they received early on in China, and partially due to the fact that there was less demand on English language proficiency for math. CIS in the engineering program confirmed that “CIS tended to do the math work when assigned in a group.”

Interestingly, CIS developed strategies to avoid being assigned the role for doing math when they desired to take a different role in the group work. Meanwhile, when they felt less motivated for the group work, they would purposefully choose the math role to fulfill the group project requirements. Linhao (Mechanical Engineering student) said that due to the different grading protocols across courses, in some cases, the instructor assigned the same grades to the whole group, then, he could get an easy A by doing math in a group project.

In some cases, Chinese students reported that they intentionally avoided doing math. Luo (Chemistry Engineering student) noted that he intentionally grouped with Chinese students to avoid doing calculations all the time. “In an all-Chinese group, it is easy to negotiate and rotate roles. I can do whatever I feel like to do. Sometimes it is calculation. Sometimes I do the design.” It seems that CIS were defined by the attribute of “being good at math.” They had to be motivated and strategic enough to be assigned other roles than doing math when working on science projects.

Finally, as a professor coming from China, Professor Young (history) offered a unique perspective on his observation of CIS’s challenges. In our analysis, he had internalized the model minority stereotype of being hardworking. He was proud of the work ethics as “the old generation” of CIS, thus blaming some challenges that CIS met as “not working hard enough.”

Compared to our generation, I found this new generation of Chinese students not diligent enough. They ruined the good reputation of Chinese in academia... Studying abroad is hard. Writing an essay in a foreign language is going to be hard. If you are not ready for that, and if you don’t have a time management skill that gives you hours and hours for reading and writing, it is going to be hard.

This example showed that the “model minority stereotype” is hurtful for two obvious reasons. For one thing, such as stereotype tended to depersonalize the Asian students and regard them as undifferentiated from other Asian students. Such stereotype also inherently forced Asian students to have high expectation for themselves and introduce unnecessary stress. As one of the interviewed CIS’ stated: “I probably adhere to the stereotype of Chinese students. I am quiet; I work hard; I am good with math; and I don’t participate in sports.”

When speaking favorably about the CIS being diligent, the U.S. professors in this study also perceived CIS as putting more value on the comprehension and the application aspect of learning, which is on the lower-level continuum of the cognitive skills rather than the higher order thinking skills such as creativity, evaluation or critical thinking (Bloom, 1956).

Faculty and CIS Perceptions of Academic Challenges for CIS *Challenges with Critical Thinking and Originality*

Although CIS tended to have good attributes such as diligence, obedience and excellence in math, in the interviews, U.S. professors were expecting more “expressing personal opinions or disagreement” as a demonstration of higher order thinking skills, with critical thinking skills in particular. Three professors in the interviews concurred on the impressions on CIS as not willing to express their disagreement (if they had any) when comparing to the American students. Among these three professors, one professor specifically connected this to “a lack of critical thinking.” Professor Wilson found “Asian students” tended to be “quiet” in class, specifically, Asian students did not like to express their disagreement.

One thing I found, the international students, specifically Asian (international) students, tend to be very quiet in class. Perhaps it is because not so comfortable with the language, **but they don’t express their opinions as openly, and if they disagree, they are not so quickly to stand up....** they do their work, and they listen to us, but they don’t raise their hands and say I disagree. Maybe that is a cultural thing. **They are taught not to criticize.**

Professor Wilson observed that Asian students (with Chinese students in particular) could work diligently but he was also expecting CIS to “express their opinions openly.” Similarly, in the following example, Professor Smith, an instructor in college study, made an observation of Chinese students being quiet and obedience.

I think they (the Chinese students) are not encouraged to speak out, they are not encouraged to challenge the authority. Here in the U.S. I **encouraged my daughters to challenge the authority**...That's the whole thing. You have to question the authority...You have to ask a lot of good questions.

The professors' observation that CIS tended not to contribute much in open discussions was echoed by the CIS in this study. That CIS feared to talk in public fits the model minority stereotype and Chinese tradition of filial piety, which emphasizes the virtue of obedience and uncomplaining. The model minority stereotype depicts Asians as good citizens and self-sufficient (Dai, 2006). This difficulty with "expressing personal opinion" was also confirmed by some CIS.

Author: Have you ever wanted to challenge your professor in sociology class?

Mei: Sociology class...first of all, I am not familiar with American society. I had never learned anything like that. When I have a disagreement with the professor, I tend to examine myself, maybe ask some classmates' opinion first before I directly go to the professor.

While model minority stereotype promoted a positive image of CIS being self-sufficient, it could act against CIS since it indicates a lack of attributes that are highly required and valued in the American academic setting, such as challenging the authority, asking questions and openly expressing disagreement. The western way of open debate is culturally different from China and is stressed and appreciated in the U.S. On the contrary, the quiet contemplation that is valued and stressed in schools by Chinese tradition is not valued as much in the U.S. universities (Atkinson, 1997). Neo-racism suggests a racial hierarchy based on cultural differences among nationalities as well as differences in ethnicity and phenotype (Balibar, 2005, 2007 as cited in Lee, 2020) that justif[y] discrimination toward an alleged 'underclass' (Lee, 2020). In the case of CIS, the personal attributes of diligence were rated as lower (not sufficient) on the hierarchy of the cognitive skills continuum in comparison to the attributes associated with the Western students, such as the ability to argue and challenge the authority in the academia. This can be a systematic discrimination against CIS when such stereotypes could led to different treatment and grades.

In the interview with an engineering student, Shuo detailed how he received an "A" from the class that was more theory-oriented but got a "C" from another engineering class that focused on practical application. In the practice-focused class, his peer-evaluation was particularly low because his peers thought "he only did some math."

I think the problem is communication (with my peers in the group). **I thought we split up the task so I would do the calculation part. I did all the calculation, and they drew the graph.** I finished early. I actually thought they were pretty inefficient because it took them several weeks to just draw the graph.

As expressed by Shuo, in a theory-focused class in mechanical engineering, originality (participating in a group discussion to generate original design) was valued more than the skills in doing math or calculation. Given the different attributes professors look for in students, the model minority stereotype depicts CIS in a negative way when comparing to how the mainstream White students tend to be described: creative, challenging, brave and critical thinkers.

The intersection of the model minority stereotype and neo-racism painted a complex picture of how Asian students' diligence and their strength in being self-sufficient, hardworking, and doing math could negatively influence their academic experience. The cultural backgrounds of CIS left them with an industrious work ethic and strong math skills, all of which were valued in some academic contexts but not others. Thus, the neo-racism made the critical analysis on this implicit discrimination possible: not all the knowledge and skills are equally regarded in academia.

Foreigners Ashore-Feeling Excluded

When the interviewed Chinese students discussed their challenges while studying in the U.S. before and during/after the outbreak of the pandemic, a prominent issue was the feeling of exclusion. CIS in our dataset found themselves rather quiet in class discussion and their personal knowledge and experiences were not valued as an asset.

A CIS from the Education department discussed that the different cultural backgrounds made the class discussions difficult for her.

I am often quiet in class discussions because I am not familiar with a lot of things discussed in the class. My class was discussing about Netflix the other day. The Turkish and Korean students in my class knew about it and could join the discussion with American students but I couldn't because we don't have Netflix in China and I have nothing to say.

Due to her unfamiliarity with the American culture, her identity as the outsiders of the academic community was reinforced by her inability to join the class discussion. A few CIS explicitly stated that they felt their opinions were not given due respect in classes largely due to the professors' unfamiliarity with China.

Author: Have you ever thought that those things (issues discussed in a sociology class) do not apply to the Chinese society?

Lin: I did, I said it in class once, but I was the only Chinese in the class, the professor did not know much about Chinese society. They gave me an impression that they only wanted to talk about the U.S. society and **they don't care about Chinese society**.

According to Lin, she felt shut down in the sociology class because she felt that the class was only about U.S. society and her voice was not valued. While her knowledge about Chinese society could potentially serve as resources for comparing Chinese society to American society, she was not able to do so in this class.

In the interviews with CIS, quite a few students mentioned that even when the professors were discussing issues about China, CIS were not allowed to use their personal experiences, knowledge and expertise. The CIS were very emotional toward those incidents and did not think highly of such classes.

The American professors like to critique China. They sounded like we are North Koreans, and living in some socialist society that personal needs don't exist. Last semester, we had this professor in sociology and she was talking and I almost wanted to wave my hand in front of her face and said: hello, didn't you see me? You have a Chinese sitting in your class!

Sometimes, CIS juggled strategically, or in their words "finding peace" between the expectation of being a talkative speaker in classes and their reality of being excluded from the class discussion. To many CIS, speaking out in classes was a calculated move.

I am not that kind of person that speaks all the time. I am satisfied with contributing to the discussion one or two times in one class session.

When we approached the faculty for interviews on their perceptions of CIS, we received emails from five faculty members saying that although they had CIS in their classes, they knew very little about them. Professor Nath said that he had three or four CIS in his class every semester. However, he knew "very little about Chinese students personally" because CIS did not often come to his office hour. According to Professor Nath,

The only way I can know a student by their names or just know them personally is that they come to my office hour. **Chinese students never come to my office hour.** For three years, very, very little. It may be that they can do the problems and they are really smart so that they don't need to come...But for the American students, after the exam, I gave them the exam paper back, sometimes students would come to me to argue or negotiate, such as why did you deduct some points here? They sat there and I would explain to them why. I had very, very few Chinese students come to me after the exam. Let alone negotiate points like that.

In Professor Nath's interview, CIS identity was mysterious. CIS in Professor Nath's class reported that occasionally they had disagreements with the grades assigned by Professor Nath in the interviews. However, they did not visit his office hour because they "did not know what to say." They found themselves lacking in the skills and knowledge about how to socialize with the U.S. professors (Ma, 2020). Furthermore, as some of the CIS stated earlier that because of the influence of Chinese culture, they tended to regard the professors as an authority, thus not feeling comfortable to visit the professors' offices for open discussion or challenging their grading (Will, 2019). The CIS were "strangers" on the campus although there has been a big increase in the CIS enrollment in the university. Such strangeness adhered to the model minority stereotype, which depicts Asians as "forever foreigners" and will never become part of the U.S. society no matter how long they've been living in the U.S. (Trytten et al., 2012). On the other hand, CIS were accused of "self-isolation" by the professors in this study, which was documented in literature (Ma, 2020). It put the burden on CIS for joining the U.S. academic community that tended to exclude them in the first place (Lee, 2020).

Overt Discrimination During and After Pandemic Outbreak

In our interviews, most CIS explicitly stated that they did not regard racial discrimination as an important issue for them. Nor did they report that Covid-19 pandemic negatively affected their academic experience. One girl jokingly said that the racial discrimination they may receive was as common as how a country girl was discriminated by a city girl in China. Such discrimination, though potentially exist, did not bring them much harm in their perspective. As to after the pandemic, CIS stated that they "took online class and turned in assignment just as usual." One CIS stated that being able to take classes online actually eased her pressure to socialize with the American peers and faculty. However, our data also included a few reported cases of CIS experiencing overt discrimination against them during and after the pandemic. While those cases did not cause direct and immediate harm, they certainly caused mental pressure and CIS did not know what to do with those incidences and had to choose to ignore them.

In three interviews conducted after the pandemic, CIS reported that they were yelled at by strangers while walking on the street on campus.

It was still very early on during pandemic, when most Americans refused to wear masks. So the other day I was walking on the street without my mask on. I wore masks before but was told by my American peers that in the U.S., only those who are ill wear masks. When I wore the mask, people around me gave me the look, so on that day I chose not to wear my mask. I was on my way home walking on the street, a middle-aged American woman yelled at me, saying that I am spreading the disease without wearing a mask. I really felt I was left with no choice, there was no right thing to do. That was the first time I start to feel so insecure and scared on campus...

There was another incidence of an overt discrimination directed from faculty.

One night, I was working in my lab. As I was the only person in the whole lab, I didn't wear a mask and I left the door open. At that moment, the dean of the lab walked by me and saw that I wasn't

wearing a mask. The second day, I received an email from the dean, CCed the whole lab that people should wear masks in lab. He didn't mention my name in the email but my advisor talked to me that I should wear mask. I felt hurt, you know. I thought he should have praised me for working hard. He could have talked to me privately that I need to wear mask. We've talked before. He knew me personally. I just didn't feel that he handled it right.

The pandemic affected CIS by intensifying the stereotype that China was backward and contagious. In many cases, they were considered by the media and the community as a threat to the public well-being. Such negative stereotype of China hurt CIS' sense of security when living on campus. Hence, they reported feeling a strong sense of fear throughout the pandemic as reported in other studies (Wang, 2020). The second case with the lab dean was an overt discrimination by university staff. CIS received unfair treatment because of his country of origin and felt excluded from the lab community.

Interestingly, during the pandemic when CIS constantly read news about anti-Asian cases on TV or in social media, along with the heated discussion on civil rights in the U.S. it seems that CIS started to be more cognizant of neo-racism. One CIS told us in the interview that the university her friend went to failed to issue a position statement after the Georgia shooting, which made her and her friend angry and frustrated. As a reaction to the irresponsible university office, the Asian students in that university organized a seminar on issues regarding anti-Asian American offences. This CIS confessed that she started to become involved in topics on anti-Asian American offences after the pandemic. This example showed that CIS were quite unaware of their rights in the U.S. universities. To some extent, this lack of awareness might also be due to the long-standing self-sufficient stereotype of Asians (Lee, 2015). CIS did not know what to do when they felt violated. Informing them about their rights would provide strong support for CIS.

Discussion

This case study explored the academic experiences of CIS on a U.S. campus before and during/after the outbreak of the pandemic. Our qualitative inquiry using the interview data yielded the following findings: Although the CIS did not identify themselves to be discriminated on U.S. campus until after the outbreak of the pandemic, our data showed that CIS were generally labeled with positive attributes aligned with the model minority stereotypes. Although many of them were positive, faculty interview data suggested that these stereotypes were indicative of lack of high-level intellectual capacity. Consequently, most CIS in the sample had a sense of exclusion in their academic experience, finding it hard to fit in. Overall, we argue that there is implicit discrimination for CIS on campus through the lenses of neo-racism and the model minority stereotype.

Before we talked about how our study fit in the extant literature in this line of research and what it meant for the U.S. higher educational institutions, it is important to admit the limitations of the study to caution our readers when interpreting our findings. First, it is important to understand the potential biases introduced by the authors' identities. Both authors of this study were once CIS enrolled in the U.S. doctoral programs with years of teaching experience at the U.S. universities. The authors' experiences could potentially bring some subjectivity when interpreting the participating CIS's experiences. However, it is arguable that the study could benefit from the authors' experiences as CIS and educators at the U.S. universities, where the authors developed a strong understanding about the cultures, especially the academic cultures in both the U.S. and China and the cultural knowledge in English and Chinese-speaking communities. This in-depth knowledge were the assets, allowing the authors as "insiders" to both communities, which inherently helped with interpreting CIS and faculty interview data from an "insider" point of view.

Second, the study could benefit from methodological improvements such as random sampling, following certain students over a period of time, and sampling more students and professors across universities. However, this study used volunteers as participants. It is highly possible that our self-selected participants could be highly motivated CIS in their studies (as evidenced by their self-reported average and above-average GPAs), and more supportive faculty members, whose view could be skewed or biased in comparison to other potential participants who did not give consent to the study. One thing to note is that our findings suggested that even with this highly motivated group of CIS, they still faced great challenges and implicit racial discrimination in their academic endeavors. It is probably that the situation can be worse with other CIS who struggled more with their academic performance.

With the limitations in mind, we still argue that the study made contributions to the extant literature in several ways. First, this study supported the application of neo-racism in the line of research on CIS by adding empirical evidence on the reported implicit racism toward CIS when studying abroad (Kettle & Luke, 2013; Abelmann et al, 2014; Heng, 2018; Heng, 2019). This study was unique in that it explored both CIS's positive attributes and the challenges from their own point of view and from the U.S. faculty's perspectives. Our findings suggested that CIS were commonly believed to share certain attributes of diligence, non-complaining and excellence in math by both the faculty and by CIS themselves. Although such attributes were traditionally viewed as helpful and important for promoting academic achievement among CIS (Dai, 2006), the study showed that they could lead to the stereotype that worked against CIS in their academic endeavors. CIS were viewed as lacking in higher-order thinking skills, making them feel the involuntary outsiders to the academic community. These challenges were observed in other studies on CIS (e.g., Zheng, 2010; Ma, 2020; Heng, 2018). The implicit nature of racial discrimination from these stereotypes was confirmed by the neo-racism framework adopted in the study. Neo-racism theory stated that students from certain backgrounds might be regarded as "disadvantaged" because their race or culture might inherently put them in a position where their strength was not valued and where they were considered as lacking necessary knowledge, social skills, abilities and cultural capital (Valenzuela, 1999).

Our study with CIS supported the implicit racism embedded in these seemingly positive attributes. When we examine the questions that were left unanswered in literature about where the challenges came from and why CIS faced these specific challenges, our study successfully showed support for the neo-racism framework by proving that one's national origin can explain challenges experienced by international students of certain country origin. We argue that "higher order cognitive thinking skill" was a form of implicit neo-racism that favored Western students and put Asian students, especially CIS as "underclass" by ranking cultures as better or worse and by prescribing the Chinese historical, social and educational cultures as "lack of critical thinking" or "not important to the U.S. academia."

This study also contributed to the model minority stereotype in two ways. To begin with, Lee (2015) wrote that the danger of model minority stereotype lies in that "It tells Asian Americans and other minorities how to behave" (p.125). This study suggested that the stereotype is indeed dangerous because it dictates what Asian students are good at, which may lead to assumptions about what they are not good at—higher order thinking skills and social skills to fully engage with the academic community. In addition, this study extended the application of the model minority stereotype to the Asian international students, specifically, CIS in the U.S. higher educational institutions. Studies on stereotypes about Asian American mainly focused on the 1.5 generations (Trytten et al, 2012) instead of the first generation. Asian Americans and CIS have different

identities and different aspects of model minority stereotype to battle. For instance, CIS has been lumped into “permanent foreigner” stereotype that Asian American students have been actively fighting against (Lee, 2015). However, the way CIS and Asian Americans were excluded from the American societies is different. CIS may feel excluded based on their connection with China or unfamiliarity with the academic conventions in the U.S. universities as is shown in the data, Asian Americans do not have such concern. This fundamental difference in how they feel excluded made our study unique and timely in understanding the racialized experience of CIS on campus, in particular during the time when the political relationship between China and the U.S. has gone downhill.

Finally, it is worthy to note that our study found explicit discrimination against CIS students only during and after the pandemic. This absence of explicit discrimination in the interview might be due to CIS’s lack of awareness of discrimination around them with their internalized stereotype of being passive and self-sufficient Asians. It is also possible that such finding can be explained by the limitation of neo-racism, which guided our interview question design and analysis. Neo-racism might not be sufficient to take such hostile international relationship into consideration. While neo-racism is based on the premises that the immigrants are inferior to the people in the host society. The host society worries about their ethno-centered identity being jeopardized. The hostile international relationship, which was fueled by Westerners’ increasing unfounded worries about China could jeopardize their power and privileged status in the global geo-political context. Thus, the hostility in the recent social contexts were not reflected in the study, even though we had some of the data collected after the pandemic.

Practical Implications

Our findings call for more actions to strengthen mutual understandings between the CIS and the U.S. higher educational institutions. Given that the CIS had a sense of exclusion and felt hard to fit in the American academia, the U.S. universities could take concrete actions to make the campus a more welcoming and supportive place for CIS or international students in general. The International Student Offices, the Counseling Centers and Centers for Diversity and Inclusion need to work together to provide safe spaces for CIS and other international students to speak up. Support groups can be created for them as well. In addition, faculty, staff and administrators need to be educated about the international students (including CIS) and the implicit racial discrimination existing on campuses. For example, the curriculum and assessment tools can be made more culturally inclusive. One way to do so is to prepare U.S. faculty with culturally responsive pedagogy (Ladson-Billings, 1995) that can help them involve CIS in discussions about Chinese societies, understand Chinese students’ quietness, appreciate CIS’s contribution to the classes. At the student level, symposiums can be held regularly to involve CIS to discuss their personal experiences, to educate the mainstream students about China. In addition, opportunities can be created by the faculty members or the Center for Diversity and Inclusion to work on projects that need substantial involvement with CIS or the international students. To make CIS’s academic experience more rewarding and positive, faculty members need to be well supported in increasing their knowledge about CIS and their intercultural communication (Heng, 2018). Faculty members can avoid making judgement of the CIS by how much he or she talks in the class. Written communication can be included during the course to allow for more space to voice disagreement or challenge the faculty among CIS. Given that CIS was regarded as lack of critical thinking skills, it will also help for the faculty members to make the assessment standard more explicit when assigning homework so that CIS will know the concrete expectation.

Likewise, CIS and other international students need to understand the challenges of studying in the U.S. and prepare for such challenges before and during the time when they are studying in the U.S. universities. Lee (2020) wrote that international students need to be aware of the discrimination laws and know the procedures for reporting relevant violations. However, international students tend to feel that their rights, as foreigners to the host country, are very limited. Knowing their right would allow international students to feel empowered and respected. CIS should also be educated with their rights as accepted students on campus, including but not limited to laws on discrimination and harassment, and procedures for reporting violations in the U.S. universities. Such knowledge will help them understand what they are entitled to. This can also help them recognize discrimination when it happens so that they will be in a better position in dealing with discrimination upon its occurrence.

Future Research

As stated earlier, this study has inherent limitations due to the self-selected participants. It will benefit the line of research to randomly sample participants across different universities. In addition, experiences of other minority groups including Asian American students, and international students from other nationalities could be explored to compare and contrast with the CIS experiences. Such comparison will be helpful in pinpointing what kinds of stereotypes or discrimination each group of Asian Americans or international students face, and what is unique for each group of minority students. More future investigations are needed to answer how model minority stereotype positions CIS against other minority students, which was insufficiently discussed in the current study. Future research can also adopt mixed method approach that combines survey questions with interview data from a randomly chosen larger sample size in order to obtain a more generalizable understanding of CIS's academic experience on the U.S. campuses.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this study examined challenges among CIS who studies at U.S. universities through the lenses of neo-racism and the model minority stereotype. Through a qualitative study of 34 Chinese undergraduate students and 10 of their recommended faculty members before and during/after the pandemic, it was found that the stereotypes given to CIS were implicit neo-racism in nature. These stereotypes favored Western students and put Asian students, especially CIS as "underclass" since these stereotypes were ranked as less sophisticated and less valued academic attributes. Our study also found that CIS reported experiencing explicit discrimination during and after the pandemic. In all, the study extended our understanding on the racialized experience of CIS in an American university due to their nationality, race, and cultural background as well as people's prejudices and stereotypes. The study offered practical guidelines for how American universities can fight against this implicit racism toward international students on campuses.

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