

Rethinking Chinese International Students in American Higher Education: “Raceless” and “Linguistically Incompetent”?

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Abstract

This commentary discusses the highly problematic situation in which Chinese international students are often misconceived as raceless and linguistically deficient in American higher education. It argues that these misperceptions are extremely harmful as they not only contribute to existing implicit biases, racism and racial discrimination against Chinese international students, but also diminish their educational rights and opportunities. It calls for future research to adopt asset-based approaches to understand Chinese international students’ cultural, linguistic, and racial differences and urge American higher education to provide better training and resources to support the needs of the growing Chinese international student population.

Introduction

To me, the phrase “Chinese international students” is both personal and professional. Years ago, I came to the United States as a Chinese international student. My lived experiences as once a member of the Chinese international student community have brought me unique insider perspectives to think critically about Chinese international students’ challenges, needs, and successes. Now, as a faculty member working closely with and conducting research on multilingual international students, specifically their translingual, transnational and transcultural experiences, my lived experiences have transformed into my research interests and my commitment to teaching for social justice. In this commentary, I discuss the highly problematic situation in which Chinese international students are often misconceived as raceless and linguistically deficient in American higher education. I argue that these misperceptions are extremely harmful as they not only contribute to existing implicit biases, racism, and racial discrimination against Chinese international students, but also diminish their educational rights and opportunities. I call for future research to adopt asset-based approaches (López, 2017), according to which Chinese international students’ cultural, linguistic, and racial differences are seen as valuable assets to their learning and identities and urge American higher education to provide better training and resources to support the needs of the growing Chinese international student population.

Chinese International Students: Large Presence, Yet “Raceless”

With the internationalization of higher education, American colleges and universities have become culturally, racially and linguistically superdiverse spaces (Benda et al., 2018; Poe & Zhang-Wu, 2020). As the top international student host country, the United States has witnessed substantial growth in its overseas student enrollment. American higher education institutions hosted approximately 1.1 million international students in the 2019–2020 academic year and those from China form the biggest ethnic group, representing 34.6% of the entire international student enrollment (Institute of International Education, 2020a).

It is worth noting, however, while Chinese international students are and should be defined as Asian by all means, they are often (mis)categorized and othered as “race-free” foreigners in American higher education. For instance, according to the data from the National Center for Education Statistics (2021) affiliated with the U.S. Department of Education, Chinese international students, along with international students from other countries and regions, are lumped together regardless of their races and ethnicities as “non-resident aliens,” a category in parallel with eight racial categories, including American Indian, Asian, Black/African American, Hispanic/Latino, Native Hawaiian, White, bi/multi-racial, and unknown race/ethnicity. In other words, despite their significant presence, Chinese international students remain largely statistically *raceless* in the United States.

Such a raceless status is detrimental to Chinese international students, who are already subject to existing anti-Asian racism due to their appearance, ethnicity and identity. For one thing, since “most non-Asians cannot distinguish between Asian ethnics and immigrants” (Tuan, 1998, p. 147), “discrimination received by international students is partially related to hostility towards immigrants” (Spencer-Rodgers & McGovern, 2002, p. 614). For another, xenophobia and the intense political relationship between the United States and China have further positioned Chinese international students and scholars in American higher education as foreigners and potential threats to national security, whose academic activities are prone to heavy scrutiny (Feng, 2019).

Chinese International Students: Forever Linguistic Incompetence?

The large presence of Chinese international students has not only brought substantial revenue (i.e., more than \$45 billion in 2018 alone) to American higher education institutions (Institute of International Education, 2020b) but also attracted significant educational research attention. In particular, given their nonnative-English-speaking status, Chinese international students’ communication experiences are often spotlighted in research. Zhang-Wu’s (2018) critical review of research on Chinese international students in the United States has pointed out that Chinese international students’ English proficiencies are often portrayed negatively across the literature as having language barriers, linguistically incompetent, or deficient in English. Zhang-Wu (2021a) has further argued that Chinese international students are often misconceived as forever English language learners instead of competent communicators whose multilingual identities and capacity to shuttle across different language varieties for meaning-making are largely overlooked. Analyzing 100 studies on nonnative-English-speaking students’ communication experiences, Mitchell (2013) noted that “there is no story about race” because “English-is-*all-that-matters*” (p. 339). In other words, Chinese international students’ advanced bi/multilingual literacy skills are often overlooked in previous research, focusing on their accents and grammatical deviations among other challenges in English.

Viewing Chinese international students as linguistic incompetent is highly harmful. On the one hand, overlooking their dynamic languaging competence and overemphasizing their deviation from the so-called “standard” English, Chinese international students are often associated with deficit perceptions (e.g., Chinese international students speak Chinglish; Chinese international students cannot understand the course content or participate in oral discussions due to their low English proficiency), making them prone to discrimination and microaggression. On the other hand, positioning Chinese international students as linguistically incompetent, forever English language learners can negatively impact their content-subject learning, preventing them from accessing equal educational opportunities.

For example, in Zhang-Wu's (2021a) book focusing on the multilingual languaging journeys of first-semester Chinese international students in American higher education, Matthew, one of the focal participants, was perceived as a struggling student by his mathematics professor. It turned out that Matthew understood all mathematics content and achieved full marks in written tests. However, his lack of oral English proficiency to engage in math discussions and explain his thought processes has led to deficit assumptions from his professor and classmates that he was unintelligent and slow. Such deficit assumptions alienated Matthew in class and diminished his right to access equal education opportunities. Towards the end of the semester, Matthew rarely showed up in mathematics classes, feeling very marginalized and discriminated. He lost his interest in improving his capability to meet the oral linguistic demands in mathematics. Unfortunately, Matthew is not alone in American higher education. To better support many Chinese international students like Matthew, educators and staff in higher education need to adopt an asset-based approach to understand the needs and challenges of multilingual international students, to value their funds of knowledge, and to provide healing spaces within the classrooms (for detailed strategies, refer to Zhang-Wu, 2020, 2021a, 2021b).

Concluding Remarks

Chinese international students are often dehumanized as raceless and linguistic deficient without acknowledging their racial identities and multilingual realities. These deficit perceptions tend to marginalize Chinese international students further and subject them to existing anti-Asian discrimination while also jeopardizing their educational opportunities. Future research needs to adopt asset-based approaches to understand the cultural, linguistic, and racial differences of Chinese international students and urge American higher education to provide better training and resources to support the needs of the growing Chinese international student population.

It is important to understand that Chinese international students are by no means raceless and nor should they be regarded as forever linguistically incompetent. Debunking these misconceptions is essential as it is a small step to promoting social justice. It is a big step forward pushing American higher education to rethink its aggressive international student recruitment and the need to establish culturally and linguistically responsive support systems to serve its growing multilingual international student populations.

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