

A Critical Study of Chinese International Students' Experiences Pursuing American Higher Education in the Age of Trump and COVID-19

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ABSTRACT

This article consists of two study areas, examining Chinese international students' experiences pursuing American higher education in the Age of Trump and COVID-19. Despite different issues explored in each area, these issues have a common theme of better understanding the current generation of Chinese international students against the backdrop of Sino-US tensions, the global pandemic, and anti-Asian racism in the US. Drawing on theories in international education, the first area stresses the role of human agency and demonstrates that Chinese students tend to live and study resiliently amid current heightened uncertainties. The other one focuses on how Chinese international students perceive race and racism in the US. Through semi-structured interviews and follow-up text exchanges at the climax of two anti-racist US social movements, the Black Lives Matter and Stop Asian Hate, the findings reveal that Chinese students held contrastive views on race and racism before and after their arrival, due to the disjuncture between

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ideological indoctrination in the home country and experiential exploration in the host country.

Keywords: agency, Chinese international students, race, racism, US higher education

INTRODUCTION

Internationalization as a concept and strategic agenda has grown its scope, scale, importance, and complexity over the past 30 years (de Wit & Altbach, 2021). Research on international student experience has always been the mainstay in the field of international education and study abroad. Exacerbated by the evolving COVID-19 pandemic and racially motivated hate crime targeting the Asian population in the US, there is a more pressing need to make sense of student agency as well as their perceptions toward race, racism, and race relations in the post-pandemic world.

A review of the literature shows an array of scholarships on international students studying and living in the US context, especially students from Asian countries and regions. However, the existing literature is overly reliant on cultural explanations to understand their behaviors, perceptions, and attitudes at US host universities (e.g., Heng 2021; Montgomery 2017), with less discussion on student agency and race from a transnational lens. Therefore, to avoid being trapped in the cultural-based frameworks and seeking simplistic solutions, we need to advance our research agenda by utilizing interdisciplinary knowledge, transnational perspectives, and intersectional analyses to present a comprehensive picture of the international student experience in the US context. My article takes a step toward this goal by interrupting hegemonic thinking and expanding the scope of diversity and inclusion, which is currently being heatedly discussed in the *Journal of Comparative & International Higher Education* (see Ghosh et al., 2021; Lanford, 2021). This study is guided by two research questions: 1) How did Chinese international students cope with the evolving pandemic and US-China geopolitical tensions? 2) How did they perceive race and racism before and after their arrival in the US?

LITERATURE REVIEW & THEORETICAL CONSTRUCT

By reworking culture- and nation-bound theories and practices, the theory of self-formation (Marginson, 2014) complements the existing literature on student security and agency in international education. It places self-determining agency at the center of the frame and prioritizes student security beyond the rigid conceptualization of national citizenship. The core of this emancipatory paradigm lies in the active role of human agency for becoming and self-reconstruction (Tran & Vu, 2018). Viewing international education as a continuous process of self-formation enables us to see international students as neither weak, fragile, dependent subjects, as framed by dominant discourses, nor a homogeneous group who all experience educational border crossing in the same way, as many university policies seem to assume. On the contrary, these Chinese students are active agents who take advantage of their global mobility as a tactic to broaden their career options and achieve transformational learning (Mezirow, 1991).

In addition, I center the construct of race in largely *aracial* literature in international education. To understand Chinese international students' perceptions of race and racism, I draw on theories of racial formation (Omi & Winant, 2015) and transnational racialization (N. Kim, 2008). Racialization involves a process of Othering, making use of various perceived phenotypical differences (such as skin color, physical build, eye shape, hair texture, and so on) to classify, amalgamate, and homogenize groups of people for the purpose of domination and exploitation. Racial formation theory proposes that race is not an objective reality but is socially constructed and reconstructed for particular political reasons. And transnational racialization theory proposes that long before Chinese international students' arrival in the US, the racialization process has already taken place through mediums, such as the mass media and the internet. Despite differences in family socialization and personal experiences, this generation of Chinese youth is heavily impacted by China's state political ideologies through the "Patriotic Education Campaign" of the early 1990s (Wang, 2008), so their perceptions of race and racism are more or less influenced by their upbringing in mainland China.

RESEARCH METHODS

The primary method is semi-structured Zoom interviews with 21 Chinese undergraduate students at a California public university in July 2020. For the exploration of student agency, I initially used unobtrusive online observation (Salmons, 2015) to track news related to Chinese students who were stranded abroad as well as Chinese netizens' comments in response to these news stories.

For Chinese students' perceptions of race and racism, I complemented the data with follow-up informal Q&A exchanges in April 2021. All the data were analyzed using a constructivist grounded-theory approach (Charmaz, 2006). In the preliminary analysis, evidence was first identified and coded in an open-ended fashion. Then, the various dimensions were grouped through axial coding into categories. Finally, core categories were developed as the conceptual lens to carry out selective coding and analysis of the data.

FINDINGS

As my findings indicate in the student agency piece, Chinese students actively exercise independent autonomy to facilitate plural identities, albeit under social circumstances beyond their control. Instead of being caught in the middle as framed by dominant discourses, this study shows that Chinese students' decisions about study abroad, choices about social adaptation, and career ambition and imagination are deliberate and conscious, confronting ever-changing social, cultural, political, and economic conditions.

In the racial knowledge piece, I found that Chinese international students' racial learning is jointly shaped by their upbringing in mainland China and by racial encounters in the US. Influenced by China's state ideologies and global media, Chinese students understand race through the paradigm of nationality and internalized US racial hierarchies. For this reason, they usually place themselves outside the US racial system and harbor prejudice against other people of color, particularly Blacks. However, their lived experiences in the US dramatically shifted their conceptualization of race from a nationality-based identity to the phenotype-based imposed category of Asian. They also revised their understanding of racist practices from mostly violent and explicit to mostly subtle and implicit. I argue that these changes can be attributed to the disjuncture between their ideological indoctrination in the home country and their experiential exploration in the host country. This study contributes to the broader literature on transnational racialization.

FUTURE DIRECTIONS

In short, in recent years, there have emerged researchers and scholars who critically reflect on internationalization (Brandenburg & Wit 2011; Stein 2019), educational policy (Guo and Guo 2017; Tannock 2013); and language teaching (Esch, Motha & Kubota 2020; Wu & Tarc 2016) in the field of international education. However, critical research on international students' lived experiences

is still largely underdeveloped and under-researched. Given escalating Asian hate crimes and uncertain global politics, it is urgent to make sense of these international students' specific needs and provide appropriate ways of supporting their study in US higher education.

The findings in this article have implications for concrete practices that can be employed by US institutions both to better prepare Chinese international students to confront US racial reality and to promote inclusion on campus. For example, open discussions of race and racism need to be included in institutions' orientation for international students. My findings demonstrate that there is a great discrepancy in understanding race and racism before and after students' arrival. It is necessary to equip them with basic racial knowledge, such as how to identify racist comments and where to seek help when discrimination and stereotyping occur. In a word, US institutions should take the shared responsibility to help international students succeed academically and, at the same time, make sure they do not drop into the complex racial milieu of the US without a meaningful support system.

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