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The Great Wall of Australia: Barriers for Chinese International Students in the Australian University Setting

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Abstract

Australia's much-vaunted reputation as a successful egalitarian, multicultural country has substantial merit, but it also has a chequered history, and the official narrative of egalitarianism and multiculturalism is experienced differentially by vulnerable, marginalised people and communities who bear the brunt of residual and new forms of racism and linguicism. One of the most vulnerable groups in Australian society is the cohort of Chinese international students, who face barriers of racism, linguicism, and exploitation. This paper presents the results of a study which consulted Chinese international students about their experiences in Australia. It found that while their experiences varied, a disturbing common thread of discrimination - from overt to more clandestine modes of aggression – occurred. Implications for Australian decision-makers are enormous, particularly for educational and governmental institutions, for whom Chinese international students seem to represent a commodity rather than real, often vulnerable, young people.

Keywords: Australian universities, Chinese international students, egalitarianism, multiculturalism, racism

1. Introduction

Popular perceptions of Australia as an "exemplary multicultural society in cross-national comparisons" (Busbridge, 2020, p. 263) align with the national cultural ideal of it being an egalitarian society (Clark et al., 2020; Mandisodza et al., 2006). Objective measures of successful multiculturalism and egalitarianism indicate that these perceptions are largely true, and this is supported by the fact that the nation attracts an ever-growing and increasingly diverse immigration and international student 'industry', with demonstrable successes in social cohesion and social mobility (Markus, 2016; Rajadurai, 2018). Across categories of "belonging, worth, social justice, and participation", statistics indicate that there is "more evidence of stability and social cohesion than of deterioration", although research also finds that "there are some negative indicators" of, e.g., racism and economic disadvantage (Markus, 2016, p. 1).

This is not surprising, given that, preceding the *official* promotion of egalitarianism and multiculturalism from the 1970s onward, Australia had an institutional history of racism, including the ethnocentric "White Australia" migration policy (Seet & Zhao, 2021; Tavan, 2005), established in 1901, and only abandoned in the 1960s (Walker, 2012). Australian multiculturalism, therefore, is comparatively recent in its enactment, and racism - against Chinese people, for instance - remains difficult to dislodge (Shi, 2015). This latent racism is potentially triggered by the fact that older, 'white' Australians are experiencing social-demographic change on an unprecedented scale. This indicates a disjunct between the official multiculturalism/egalitarianism narratives produced by influential elites (Hughson, 2001) and the daily *lived* reality of multiculturalism/egalitarianism in centres of diversity and disadvantage, where successes *and* tensions are more evident (Hale, 2022).

For some people, evidently, the increased presence of Chinese international students creates a 'visible' reminder of difference, and it represents for them a changing society that makes them uncomfortable. Indeed, this type of change is accelerating. In a globalised context, where transnational mobility has become easier for many people, international students are seeking greater opportunities abroad, and Australia is a favoured destination for study. This is highlighted from an OECD report which showed more than a threefold increase of international students between 1990 to 2011, so that around 4.3 million people were studying outside their home country in 2011 (OECD, 2013). A major beneficiary of this international student transnational mobility is the Australian education sector. In 2019, 23.4% of the Australian university population were international students (Australian Government, 2020),

who contributed nearly 10 billion Australian dollars in revenue to Australian universities (Parliament of Australia, 2021). Thus, how Australian universities, and Australian people, treat Chinese international students (as 'sojourners') has implications not just for the international student 'market', but also for Australian cultural ideals of multiculturalism/egalitarianism.

The setting of this study is particularly interesting, given the participants from this Chinese international student cohort are studying at a higher education institution in the Western and South-Western regions of Sydney. The demographics of this area comprise a higher proportion of people from Non-English-Speaking Background (NESB) with a lower socioeconomic background, in comparison to the more affluent areas of Sydney's Northern and Eastern suburbs. This backdrop should, in theory, provide an environment for which many Chinese international students should feel relatively comfortable in the cross-cultural adaptation (CCA) in the Australian context. Chinese international students were surveyed about their experiences in Australia, using the following research questions:

i. What are the perceptions of Chinese students regarding their interactions with Australian people?

ii. If there is any discrimination faced by Chinese students, how was it manifested?

1.1 Theoretical Framework

Host culture receptiveness is critical to the sojourner's engagement with, and integration into, their new societal environment (Kim, 2001). Berry (2005) proposes that sojourners employ an 'orientation strategy' which balances their need for relationships with members of the host culture while maintaining their heritage culture and identity. However, such a strategy is contingent on complementary strategies by the host culture to assist sojourners' meaningful entry into their cultural system. When members of the host culture resist the sojourner's attempts at engagement, an invisible wall may form, and a sojourner may feel either excluded or segregated. Indeed, the hostility encountered by Chinese international students compounds the generally dislocating, isolating experience of overseas study, with many reporting strong feelings of loneliness and discouragement, especially in their first few months of study and socialisation (Forbes-Mewett & Nyland, 2008; Sawir et al., 2008).

This experience of exclusion or segregation can be incrementally measured along a continuum between ethnocentrism or ethnorelativistism (Lukens, 1978). Ethnocentrism features include disparagement, avoidance, indifference, and apathy, while ethnorelativistism includes awareness, empathy, engagement, support, and integration. Chinese international students seeking cross-cultural adaptation (CCA) in the Australian context will encounter a range of people holding ethnocentric/ethnorelativist views as well as some holding highly intercultural perspectives. This links to the notion of egalitarianism, an ideology which is nominally espoused as a moral good, but which is inconsistently applied in encounters with real people – including Chinese international students. In other words, there is an inherent contradiction between the notional assertion of egalitarianism (as an aspirational form of ethnorelativism) by those who fail to enact it, because they ignore, or fail to notice, the unfair treatment of people (as a form of enacted ethnocentrism) – in this case Chinese international students – which then renders those people as an underclass. This creates an "apparent antagonism between those who want to prove the existence of classes and those who wish to deny it, thereby concretely revealing…a more important opposition about the…knowledge of the social world" (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 2013, p. 293). Indeed, even the commonly used term 'sojourners', referring to Chinese international students, suggests an underclass of people without full rights (Gunawardena & Wilson, 2012) in Australian society or universities.

2. Method

This paper was derived from a section of a mixed-method PhD dissertation relating to the CCA experience of Chinese international students in Australia, which consisted of two parts. The first part was a quantitative exploratory study (Study 1) conducted beforehand. This paper focused on Chinese students' optional feedback in an open-answered section of the questionnaire of how they perceived Australian society. The second part (Study 2) was a short-term longitudinal study examining Chinese students' CCA experience in the initial stages of their sojourn.

2.1 Participants

The quantitative exploratory study (Study 1) recruited 133 participants from the Chinese international student cohort from this university. Recruitment was conducted via a link to an online survey, which was sent out by the university administration. The participant's identity was hidden by pseudonym – coded by a letter followed by a number.

The participants for this primary study (Study 2) comprised 15 university students from the same Australian university (recruited separately from the quantitative exploratory study), situated in Sydney. Recruitment of these

participants involved advertisement on various campuses of this university, where the criteria for recruitment was based on: they needed to come from mainland China, Hong Kong, or Macau; they had resided in-country in Australia for less than one year (12 of the participants had been in-country less than 3 months), and they commenced their first semester of academic study. Pseudonyms were used to protect their identity, which differed from the letter/number structure used in Study 1.

2.2 Data Collection

The data collection from Study 1 consisted of a feedback section of the exploratory study related to their migratory intentions; their views on Australian culture, and other aspects of their CCA experience. However, there were no questions prompting them to respond to any racist incidents.

The voluntary disclosure by some Chinese students of experiences involving various forms of discrimination from Study 1, had resulted in the implicit framing of some questions in the primary study (Study 2), where questions relating to self-confidence and equality were asked. However, there was no explicit prompting of participants to disclose any events relating to racism. Participants in this study were involved in a short-term longitudinal study over a three-month period, where the instrumentation for data collection consisted of a writing task in a journal as well as three interviews conducted at the start, midpoint, and end of the three-month period. Participants from this primary study received a small financial compensation in-lieu of time spent participating in this longitudinal study.

2.3 Data Analysis and Ethics Approval

Recordings from the interviews were sent to a third party for transcription, where the researchers would compare the transcriptions against the original recordings and adjust any transcription modifications back to the authentic wording used in the interviews. The data analysis was conducted on NVivo 12 for which the themes were coded and analysed. The researchers individually analysed and critiqued the data to ascertain common themes that arose, to minimise bias.

Human ethics approval was received prior to commencement of the both the exploratory and primary studies. The dataset from this paper was saved as metadata at the university repository.

3. Results

The data revealed five prevailing themes relating to experiences of racial discrimination, which are explored in the following sub-sections: (3.1) Verbal abuse; (3.2) Institutional discrimination; (3.3) Non-verbal discrimination; (3.4) "Asian Fever", and (3.5) Racist humour. There was another subsection: (3.6) Host culture acceptance, that also highlights the positive aspects of Chinese students' CCA experiences.

3.1 Verbal Abuse

The first form of discrimination encountered is direct and confrontational verbal abuse delivered by strangers. One participant, 'Mulan', related an incident of verbal abuse.

Extract 1a: Mulan (Study 2, Journal)

Some teenagers shouted at [us] when we walked in the street, we ignored them, but it left a bad impression for us.

Extract 1b: Mulan (Study 2, Interview 2)

Uh, in the daytime I think it's safe, but at night…I'm not sure, so…I didn't come, come home so late because I…worry about, uh, security. And…last week, uh, my friend and I walk the street and some teenagers suddenly shouted at us and we, we don't know why…We just walked through them.

At this time, 'Mulan' had resided in-country for about 4 months and was adjusting to an unfamiliar sociocultural environment, leading to some trepidation regarding personal security. This trepidation was exacerbated when strangers shouted at her and her friend. Although Mulan did not specify what was said, it was apparent that the encounter had 'left a bad impression', creating anxiety about adjustment to a new environment. This phenomenon of strangers shouting at Chinese international students was not an isolated incident. Another participant reported verbal abuse from strangers, concluding that:

Extract 2: E12 (Study 1, Feedback)

Sometimes I met Australians who are very unfriendly and even racists, and it will largely influence my whole recognition of Australia, and I do not even know these people.

Another participant, 'Linda', observed and experienced verbal abuse. The first encounter was when she witnessed an Asian woman being abused by an elderly Anglo-Australian, because the woman was unsuccessfully trying to manoeuvre a pram into an elevator.

Extract 3: Linda (Study 2, Interview 3)

Yup…it's not targeted at me and my friends, just kind of issues that I've faced and felt a little bit comfortable…there's an old gentleman…inside the elevator and…there's a mum, which obviously she had a Asian look, and she brought her baby…trolley…little bit slowly. And that gentleman just said some really disrespectful words to that mum and used very…inappropriate, uh, expressions in…his face…That's the story but…this is the very beginning of my experience in Australia and that really give me a bad impression of, about the local, older, generations.

'Linda' explicitly noted the racial features of the people involved and concluded that the verbal abuse was racially motivated, and as a first impression, she formed the view that elderly Anglo-Australians are rude (at best) or racist (in the worst case). The second incident occurred when 'Linda' was working at a 'Milk Tea' shop, where most of the customers were 'local' (i.e., Anglo-Australians).

Extract 4a: Linda (Study 2, Interview 3)

I am serving as a waitress in the Milk Tea shop…the owner is Asian. But…maybe 90% of the customer, they are locals…sometimes they ordered a drink…and they came back and they say, oh this is not what I want. I want you to change that one. But I…did that drink exactly following…the recipe and…they have no reason, they just want another drink and they start to say some rude words to me, like, oh why you're so stupid, can't you hear to, to understand me, or things like that…And my boss will just say, oh…give him a new one. And that kind of experience really gives me bad impressions.

This verbal abuse targeted 'Linda' based on appearance and assumed language and cognitive competences. 'Linda' interpreted this verbal abuse as being motivated by customers' lower socioeconomic status, including poorer education levels, and racism:

Extract 4b: Linda (Study 2, Interview 3)

I [think] there are two major reasons. One reason…I'm working at the Blacktown, the economic environment is not so good…so maybe their emotions or their expressions just not so appropriate, because, due to different levels of their education. And the other reason is…the racial reasons because, ah, you can't really see many Asians in Blacktown. So uh, maybe at the very beginning my English is not so good and sometimes I can't hear the accent. They'll just say, can't you just hear me, or…those kinds of things. And I think it's kind of rude and it's kind of discrimination towards the, in regarding to the Asians especially for Chinese.

Chinese international students clearly felt that their experiences of verbal abuse were significant to their overall experience in Australia. As an enactment of "symbolic violence" (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 2013, p. 298) this verbal abuse made the participants feel less welcome and marginalised in the social space of Australian society. The next form of discrimination was of greater efficacy as it was institutionally-supported.

3.2 Institutional Discrimination

Chinese international students reported that they had experienced institutional discrimination, and they reported a sense of 'betrayal' at their treatment. The following extract outlines how 'Linda' felt her treatment by the Australian government undermined her attempts at socio-cultural adjustment, particularly since Australia frames itself as an egalitarian country with equal rights for everyone, but international students find many barriers to their exercise of rights.

Extract 5: Linda (Study 2, Interview 2)

You know even the Australian government, they claim that…we are an equal country [but] if you are just an international student or you're just the people who is the current Visa. You are not acceptable by this society to some real extent. Like if you want to go to the hospital, you can only…pay your like medical fees by the OSHC, the kind of insurance stuff. And if you want to drive here, it's a very common way that you want to get involved to the culture here but…you have to translate your driving license first. They have a lot of limitations…I don't feel they're treating us equal to the local person.

A dramatic instance of disenfranchisement was reported by one participant who sought permanent residency (PR) in Australia, only to find that the government made sudden changes to its 457-visa program that severely restricted the path towards PR, without any consultation with international students or their representatives.

Extract 6: Charles (Study 2, Interview 3)

The Prime minister…pull out this new policy. It's kind of not quite respect to the newcomer… to Australia. Because…there are really some people who want to work in Australia, contribute to Australia, and they also cut off

the opportunity for them to stay here and contribute to the society…Apart from the 457, they also extend the period to apply for citizenship, and it's kind of like, I just need your money to pay your tax, but I won't give you any benefits… If you don't like it, just go back to your country. That's what I feel from this attitude of that PM, which is, yeah, not cool…Australia keep saying that they are multicultural country, and always looking for new immigrants to contribute to their society or to enrich their diversity, but [this gives] me the feeling of the opposite.

This perception of institutional racism was supported by comments from an Australian prime minister who told international students that if they could not support themselves under their visa obligation they should go home (Gibson & Moran, 2020). The subsequent COVID-era closure of international borders created enormous difficulties for international students seeking to enter Australia (Xinhua, 2021; Young, 2021), and the situation continued for some time after this (Patty, 2021; Zhou, 2021). Perhaps unsurprisingly, Chinese international students will form the impression that the Australian Government does not genuinely represent the welcoming, egalitarian image that it projects. Such an impression is supported by visa/citizenship policies of the Australian Government which contradictorily allow migrant workers to enter Australia to temporarily cover positions where there is a skills shortage (Bahn et al., 2012; Jockel, 2009), with the premise of an official pathway to permanent residency and full citizenship, a scheme which is a strong motivator for international students in Australia and elsewhere (Gong & Huybers, 2015; Robertson, 2011; Tan & Hugo, 2017), only for these policies to be changed without any warning or consultation. Such breaches of trust and formal agreements not only present a contradiction of the 'contract' with Chinese international students, they display intercultural communication incompetence (Fantini, 2006), and also disrupt financial arrangements, longer term plans and create enormous stress levels (Stevens, 2019).

At the local institutional level, there was also a perception that university staff displayed intolerance and racial bias in attending to Chinese international students' needs. A participant, Queen, wanted to change her course, but administrative staff was seen as obstructionist.

Extract 7: Queen (Study 1, Interview 3)

When I was applying for [university] people in the international admission office always told me to wait for the emails and nothing else. If I showed any weakness that I was inferior to them, they would not help ensure the reply. Therefore I hired an agency…to help me. The person, who was also Chinese, argued strongly on just grounds, and supported my applying with an equal gesture. And that's how I got the admission offer. I am really grateful for the efforts of this Chinese guy. And I want an equal status.

Another participant (E11) shared some perceived biases that the Australian university system has against international students. One particular bias related to the perceived inequitable treatment of not having the same accessibility to an internship in comparison to the local Australian student. It could be argued that since international students study in Australia to increase their career and economic prospects, then any hindrance that is caused by government or business practices may be viewed as prejudiced treatment.

Extract 8: E11 (Study 1, Feedback)

Of course Australia is very wealth country everything is good. But I love my country. Sometimes I felt the uni not fair to the international student. [Local] student can get so much benefit, but international students can't. For example international student don't have discount labour on the students card. Also so much internship only allow [local] student to do it! How come international students don't have chance to try it! I didn't feel good. because that not balance! We pay more than others!

This bias was affirmed by another participant (E20) who compared his treatment by university administration and academic staff, with the treatment he saw given to local students. This student explicitly refers to the disjunct between institutionally-espoused egalitarian values and the realities of institutional discrimination by teaching and administration staff. These comments indicate feelings of financial exploitation and unjust treatment which international students are sensitive to (Song, 2020). This cash cow exploitation is especially infuriating, given the fact that international students pay their tuition upfront, instead of as a deferred loan enjoyed by local students, and they pay at twice the tuition fees that local students pay.

Extract 9: E20 (Study 1, Feedback)

Australian culture seems diverse and mixed, but it is really excluded…especially international students looking for assistance in the aspects of studies and job opportunities. It is represented by unequal marks for overseas students' essay writing from teacher, most of scholarships are awarded to native or local students. Based on my personal experiences, i was not welcomed and found staff had different attitudes compared with Australian students when i went to student center every time. They always show their impatience when international students speak not fluent

English. It is ironic and funny for teachers in uni, because they always emphasize there is no discrimination for every student in lectures and tutorials.

Another participant, 'Teegan', reported two incidents which were perceived as racial discrimination: the first was that local students are permitted to transfer degrees in their first semester of study, but this optionality was not conferred to international students; and the second was that a local Australian student had deliberately exited the seminar which consisted of international students.

Extract 10: Teegan (Study 2, Journal)

I have lots of classes this week, it made me a little bit tired. Why international students cannot change the subject major in the first semester? Why local students can? Is it a kind of discriminate?

In my seminar, one of a local student left our group. She told to the teacher that she's interested into another topic, but the fact is that our group had almost all international students. [this is what] local students [think about] international students.

The fact that the local student had exited the seminar, ostensibly for a different topic, but, as perceived by the international student, for racist reasons, is an instance of implicit discrimination. This type of discrimination is, as the participants assert, a subtle racism, and it is often expressed in non-verbal ways.

3.3 Non-Verbal Discrimination

Non-verbal discrimination is often subtle, but participants are alert to this form of unfairness, especially in the context of being in a country which promotes itself as egalitarian and multicultural. This dichotomy appears explicitly in the response by 'Chao', who cautiously mentions it as a mismatch between perception and reality.

Extract 11: Chao (Study 2, Interview 3)

Actually, I know in Australia it's always to emphasis equity, and…a multinational country…but sometimes I still find that in some context, some environment, and in some degree, you still can feel the discrimination of you on some unequal things exists here.

Another participant, 'Melanie', noted over the first 2 weeks of semester, that there was an 'invisible wall' which precluded social interaction with members of Australian society.

Extract 12: Melanie (Study 2, Journal)

There is an invisible wall (I assume it is culture difference or cultural rejection) between me and the local students here…I think I am still an outsider, because still feel difficult to socialise with the native Australians.

A subsequent response from the same student three months later, mentioned that while she felt her language and intercultural communication competencies had improved, she still noticed subtle exclusion from interactions with local students.

Extract 13: Melanie (Study 2, Interview 3)

It's not a, like, like, someone just stand and say, you, you… Um, pointing at you and say something bad, it's just a silent racist thing, it's, like…Not verbal but facial [laughs].

While the student was reluctant to identify the subtle exclusion as overt racism, she was still sensitive to its social meaning. Another participant, 'Lien-Hua', was offended after learning that in one of her business classes, international students were segregated from local Australian students. This fracturing of the social space in the academic context would make Chinese international students feel unease at this potential inequality.

Extract 14: Lien-Hua (Study 2, Interview 2)

I think this is not quite equal for, for us… sometimes one teacher do the classes, especially in the university we just separated from local students…Maybe the university have their ah, consideration from their perspective…I feel strange, I feel awkward a little bit, yeah, I feel uncomfortable. But I know that the good thing is because our English preference is not good enough compared with the local students, it's really matters the teacher's teaching quality. That is good thing. Even though we know this is fact we still, or let's change, I still think it's a little bit different.

The notion of a successful multicultural society is also challenged by students' experiences with othering by different ethnic communities within Australian society. This reinforces the notion that Chinese international students, especially females, have low social capital; essentially, they occupy the lowest tier in a hierarchy of ethnic communities. This is manifested in cross-cultural differences, e.g., protocols of eye contact. East Asian cultures exhibit shorter eye contact than many other cultures (Akechi et al., 2013; Krämer et al., 2013). However,

the cultural difference is exacerbated by gender differences, such that a female Chinese international student is more likely to experience "a multitude of negative consequences" (Calogero, 2004, p. 16). She expresses feelings of uncertainty, vulnerability, and fear.

Extract 15: Linda (Study 2, Interview 3)

I think that kind of incident really gave me a, some kind of impressions…you know when I'm walking in the road, you know, some people they just stare at you, from your feet to your face like, Okay, this Asian girl's blah blah blah. I think that kind of discrimination from some, Arabic communities. Yup. They, they, they do not have any actions or any words to you, they just stare at you.

The one aspect where non-verbal discrimination is different from other forms of racial discrimination is the uncertainty it creates in the minds of the international student sojourner. This uncertainty stems from whether they are being racially vilified or whether they may be misinterpreting the actions of the other person does generate a feeling of powerlessness, as they cannot counter such a clandestine act.

3.4 "Asian Fever"

A more nuanced form of racially gendered discrimination is colloquially known as 'yellow fever' or 'Asian fever', which is a sexual preference for female Asians (Zheng, 2016). This form of discrimination prioritises viewing the Asian female through an exotic and fetish lens (Mukkamala & Suyemoto, 2018) and it is "heavily encoded as sexual" (Yamamoto, 2000, p. 46). A female participant, 'Teegan', who self-described as 'short and cute', was certain about the nature of the male attention she experienced as being sexualised and racist. As with the 'male gaze', objectification theory frames the notion of female bodies in a sociocultural context where the projection of sexual objectification has an adverse impact on their emotional well-being and identity boundary (Cheng & Kim, 2018; Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997). This objectification of Asian females may lead to an increased risk of sexual harassment (Museus & Truong, 2013), and as 'Teegan' noted, this may have contributed to her overall difficult cross-cultural transition experience.

Extract 16: Teegan (Study 2, Interview 1)

I saw lots of Australian guys that have "Asian Fever" … cause I find they are flirting on me, yeah. So, after that, if you, if you just want help me, that's fine, but just please stop flirting at me … I think that's, ah maybe Australian special culture or something.

Possibly, this cultural dilemma is explainable by a feature of Australian society, framed by the Cultural Dimensions theory (Hofstede et al., 2010), which asserts that Australian culture prioritises a short-term orientation and hedonistic predisposition. The contrast between short-term sexual encounters rather than long term relationships, which is more prevalent in a Chinese context, appears to be particularly problematic at Australian universities, where in 2016 there was an orchestrated campaign by Australian universities, known as: "Respect, Now, Always", to eliminate sexual harassment and assaults of women at university campuses (Universities Australia, 2016). It is noted that while this form of 'fetish' racism was not a prevalent occurrence with other female Chinese students, it did cause issues with this student's CCA experience as she was disturbed by this behaviour from Australian men at a more sensitive time of her academic sojourn.

3.5 Racist Humour

Another indirect form of discrimination involves the use of racial humour by teaching staff which targets students. Indeed, research indicates that educators' use of humour is already problematic for students, given the power and knowledge differentials (Grigg & Manderson, 2015; Hale, 2016). The use of racialized humour, including humour which targets students whose first language is not English in the classroom, is even more problematic:

processing…humour, as with other expert-user demands of English, is simply very difficult and intimidating for many of these students [who are] likely to experience discouragement in pursuing study. This is because the student who generally feels excluded from the experience of university study will specifically resent the use of humour, which they cannot participate in, thus tainting the overall tertiary experience (Hale, 2016, p.26).

One participant, 'Wei', felt that her educators employed racialized humour and stereotyping 'in jest'. It was noted from the extracts below, that this form of racial humour stereotyping was not an isolated incident, but was more systematic that caused concern for our participant as this racial narrative persisted throughout the semester.

Extract 17: Wei (Study 2, Interview 2)

But another tutor said, um, that…there are some international students who are so rich that they don't go to the supermarket. They have servants doing their own work. So, they don't know what a supermarket looks like, they don't know what to do. And that's what made me want to say, like, hey! I'm going answer this question and answer

it correctly. Because I go to the supermarket, I buy my own stuff.

So, like, I'm internally debating whether or not to report these tutors. But I also don't want to go through the trouble. Like, is it really worth it in the long run, as long as I pass the course?

Extract 18: Wei (Study 2, Journal – Week 6)

One of my lecturers often makes racist and sexist comments – in jest of course – and I'm very trouble discerning if I'm actually offended.

Extract 19: Wei (Study 2, Journal – Week 11)

A course mate defended the racist tutor saying that the rest of the class was too young to understand his humour. I was pissed off at her ignorance.

The dilemma of power and knowledge differentials caused by educators' humour can be described as a form of symbolic violence (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 2013) which taps into deeper power structures, because international students may experience retaliation if they complain and thus trigger a disruption to the hierarchal order of the academic social space (Bourdieu, 1985, 1989, 1992). Humour can act as a unifying force in the classroom, but its potential for offence cannot be underestimated (Hale, 2016; Kuipers, 2015; Pérez, 2017). The polarising effect of humour, with one student defending it, while the Chinese international student was offended, indicates that the varied reception of humour can also illuminate different levels of intercultural awareness and empathy (Fantini, 2019), and further alienate the international student, since her feelings were not validated.

3.6 Host Culture Acceptance

While these examples serve to undermine the rather simplistic narrative of a nation which completely adheres to its championed values of multiculturalism and egalitarianism, there is, as noted previously, plenty of evidence to indicate that these championed values are highly influential and Australia's reputation as a successful, welcoming society is, overall, warranted. Indeed, the participants themselves furnish evidence that by the end of their period of study in Australia, they had a more positive view of the host society and they had achieved some success in cross-cultural adaptation. This does not minimise the negative experiences, but it does provide a greater context in which these negative experiences can be seen as detracting from the positive image that Australia seeks to promote. In other words, there is still plenty of work to be done in welcoming Chinese international students to Australia and to the university environment. So, for instance, Huang was able to view her Australian experience overall as more positive than her experience in Chinese society.

Extract 20: 'Huang' (Study 2, Interview 2)

I think it's more positive because here I would be greeted by even a stranger and it's quite common to smile at others and, yeah, like, everybody is polite and, yes, I can get help from so many people, like, even a stranger. That, that, that is unusual when I was in China. So, yes, up to now I have more positive thing than, rather than negative.

Likewise, Mulan was able to reflect on her overall experience in a positive way, also comparing it favourably with her Chinese social background, noting aspects of egalitarianism.

Extract 21: Mulan (Study 2, Interview 3)

I think if, ah, I want to choose a place to live for my, for the rest of my lifetime I think Australia is, ah, a good place because I feel the culture and the society here is simply and equal. Um, because most people they just, how you say, they treat you just like you, you are their friends and no matter how old you are or how young you are. So, it's the comfortable relationship.

Finally, 'Song' found that after an extended period in Australia, barriers were overcome and she experienced an openness to, and respect for, other cultures.

Extract 22: Song (Study 2, Journal)

Australian people respect people from other cultures and they are happy to learn other cultures and see how that's different …….

Australian people love to get together and have a chat over meals. And they also welcome people from other countries.

This is not to discount the experiences of racism and othering which students reported. It offers a more nuanced account of Chinese international students' experiences at university and in Australian society, and indicates that, over time, and with sufficient positive experiences, these students were able to adapt to the cross-cultural demands of a challenging study environment.

4. Discussion

It is noted that Australia has a robust intercultural-multicultural framework (Elias et al., 2021) that provides for a source of cohesion in an ethnically and culturally diverse Australia (Moran, 2011), while the counter-voice contends the weakness of Australian diversity with the exclusion of those who do not fit the narrative of 'Australianness' (Stratton, 2020). This view is supported by Markus (2016), who postulated that about ten percent of the Australian populace was in opposition to cultural diversity, and that NESB respondents living in areas of high immigrant concentration, reported lower levels of personal safety and a heightened cognizance of discrimination.

Indeed, as the Chinese idiom, "a rat dropping ruins a whole pot of porridge", expresses, discrimination can undermine the personal, emotional, and financial investments associated with the international student's experience in this context. Even when expressing positivity about Australian society, the discourse of Australia being a racist country is entrenched in the minds of Chinese international students. Based on the feedback from Chinese students, the prevalence for overt racial vilification appears to be random in nature, given the minority of Australians that adopt such extreme ethnocentric positions.

In all fairness, the Australian government instituted Section 18C of the Racial Discrimination Act (1975) (Australian Government, 1975), which provides a strong legislative framework against racial vilification, despite attempts by right wing politicians to water down the legislation (AAP General News Wire, 2016; Kissel, 2014). Given the strength of racial discrimination laws, there are some Australians who use indirect forms of racial discrimination, such as non-verbal communication, social distance, or racist humour to create an ambiguous zone, where a racist act could be instigated while providing facework cover to disguise the racist act (Pagliai, 2011). This face-saving action is also prevalent in other countries, such as Asian students' experiences in a US university (Sato & Hodge, 2009).

The sociological-psychological framing of racist oppressiveness (Operario & Fiske, 1998) is predicated on institutional power coupled with racial prejudice, and it is applicable to Chinese international students, as one of the more vulnerable groups of people in this society. In this context, this form of symbolic violence (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 2013), is in essence psychological bullying, for which these students feel no connection with Australian people either through direct abuse from the minority, or the clandestine, indirect forms of racism by a larger proportion of Australians. Indeed, the identification by one of our participants of an "invisible wall" seems to be a common theme amongst our participants, who report isolation and marginalisation.

5. Conclusion

This paper asserts that while Australia projects its claim of being a successful egalitarian and multicultural society, Chinese international students are far too frequently the targets of racial, linguistic, and sexist discrimination. While participants in this study did not report experiences of direct physical abuse, they did report ethnocentric experiences of abusive language, silence, avoidance, exclusion, and institutional marginalisation and unfair treatment at the university and governmental levels. The fact that these incidents were volunteered by the participants, rather than directly solicited, or prompted in the research study process, indicates that these incidents were highly significant to the students involved. Even though some reported an overall positive study experience, these incidents left lingering emotional damage and negative memories, which intensified their isolating sojourn in a country which uses a language they do not possess as a first language.

5.1 Limitations and Recommendations

The limitations of this paper related to its focus on one university in a region of high socioeconomic disadvantage, and concentrated immigrant demographics. A comparable study involving the similar socioeconomic and immigrant population of another Australian city, i.e., Melbourne, or a contrasting comparison with Chinese international students studying in the more affluent areas of Sydney, may provide additional insights relating to the significance of socioeconomic status with ethnocentric behaviour in an Australian setting.

It is important for Australian decision-makers to address this raft of issues affecting the experience of Chinese international students attending university in that country. After all, if the nation treats Chinese international students as a commodity, its customers may very well seek the same 'product/service' elsewhere. Too often, the social and financial study contract sees Chinese international students shouldering the greater burden of language, study, and social adaptation. However, beneficiaries of this contract should consider how Australia can better perform its side of the contract and adapt the system to the needs of its 'paying guests'. Australian decision-makers should see Chinese international students as people, who are highly motivated, studious learners, as individuals with equal rights who are invited guests with a keen interest in adapting and contributing to Australian society. The

affordance of this form of assistance and respect may scaffold the CCA experiences of these often vulnerable, young people.

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Dr. Dennis Lam was responsible for study design, data collection and drafting the manuscript and Dr. Adrian Hale contributed additional insights and revised the manuscript. All authors read and approved the final manuscript. There are no special agreements concerning authorship.

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Data sharing statement

No additional data are available.