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Immobility, Remote Education, and Racism Experiences of Chinese and Korean International Students During COVID-19

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ABSTRACT

This study examines international student experiences from two different yet intersecting dimensions: immobility and racism on campus during COVID-19. In addition to pre-existing challenges, COVID-19 introduced additional barriers to international student life. During the pandemic, international students encountered an unexpected remote education system designed to bridge their transnational connection with American higher education. This study aims to uncover the experiences of Chinese and Korean students and understand how COVID-19 further complicated their situations. The research reveals that international students also faced discrimination at various levels, exacerbated by heightened anti-Asian sentiments and the political climate during the pandemic. As hate incidents increased, international students began to recognize that educational institutions were not safe spaces but rather contact zones operating within power differentials. However, this study concludes that despite the intensified vulnerability caused by COVID-19, international students demonstrated resilience through various copying mechanisms while finding this period of immobility meaningful.

Keywords: International students, precarity, (im)mobility, neo-racism, COVID-19

On March 11, 2020, the World Health Organization (WHO) officially declared COVID-19 a global pandemic (Cucinotta & Vanelli, 2020). From that point onward, people were strongly encouraged to adopt behaviors different from those of the pre-pandemic era. This included avoiding close contact with others who were sick, consistently washing hands, disinfecting frequently touched surfaces, and avoiding non-essential travels. In response to the increase of COVID-19

cases, many educational institutions also took proactive steps to slow the spread of the virus and reduce associated risks. Numerous schools, including American universities, transitioned from in-person to remote education systems. This shift aimed to limit the transmission of the virus while safeguarding students, professors, and school personnel. Remote education allowed students to continue their education without being physically present at school. Therefore, international students were also given an option to remain in their home countries and take online classes.

However, many students remained in the states, despite the shift to remote education (Martel, 2020). Chinese students, in particular, stayed on campus either because they had not left for break or had already returned to the U.S. after the break. This period coincided with lockdowns in several states, including New York, where limited social interactions were strongly encouraged (Evelyn, 2020). While domestic students could return to their homes and families, international students living in the U.S. faced unique challenges. Without nearby family or friends, they might have experienced heightened feelings of isolation and loneliness. Additionally, Asian students may face increased instances of racism on campus, including subtle microaggressions, discrimination, and verbal attacks both on and off campus (Zhai & Du, 2020). The experiences of students in the U.S. likely differed significantly from those of students outside the U.S., despite it being the first encounter with the global pandemic and remote education for both groups.

Therefore, as part of a larger dissertation titled, “A Mixed Methods Study of Chinese and Korean International Student Satisfaction and Experience in American Higher Education,” this study delves into the transnational experiences of students who remained on campus and those who stayed outside the U.S. Specifically, it explores the narratives of Chinese and Korean students who engaged in remote education either in the U.S. or from their home countries. I will examine how these students navigated the remote education system admist restricted mobility. Finally, I will apply neo-racism theory and deficit discourse to analyze their experiences with racism in the post-COVID-19 era, a period marked by heightened anti-Asian sentiment on campus. This will add nuance to our understanding of how international students’ marginalization and vulnerabilities intersect.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Questioning the “unlimited global mobility” of international students

International students are often perceived as transnational elites whose privileges extend across various economic, political, and sociocultural arenas (Hari, Nardon, & Zhang, 2021; Wang, 2022). They are also depicted as a group with “unlimited global mobility” (Gomes, 2015, p.10; Hari, Nardon, & Zhang, 2021), implying that they can cross borders with fewer restrictions than other migrants. This perception of international students as mobile human capital is reinforced by a neoliberal mindset, which positions them as affluent global consumers of

educational institutions. For instance, American universities have systematically shifted its focus to maximizing private interests by adopting a market-driven approach (Giroux, 2002; Olssen & Peters, 2005). Facing funding cuts, particularly in state universities that heavily rely on government support, these institutions often resort to raising tuition or service fees, despite the potential disadvantages for lower-income students (Giroux, 2002). By viewing students as customers, universities aim to recruit more prospective students, ultimately leading to an aggressive recruitment of international students capable of paying full tuition.

However, international students are a diverse group from various socioeconomic backgrounds. It is, therefore, challenging to categorize them all as mobile human capital with the ability to freely cross borders with minimal limitations. The portrayal of their "unlimited global mobility" has also been challenged by the COVID-19 pandemic (Gomes, 2015, p.10; Hari, Nardon, & Zhang, 2021). Global mobility was heavily restricted. For instance, the South Korean government mandated quarantine for all visitors, regardless of citizenship, while the American government required a PCR test for border entry. These restrictions presented unprecedented challenges for many, including international students. This state of immobility, which Bingyu Wang (2023) refers to as a "temporal suspension," resulted from various restrictions such as border closures, flight cancellations, or stay-at-home orders that physically limited international student mobility. During this period of suspension, as COVID-19 cases surged, students may have felt vulnerable and uncertain about their futures, potentially affecting their life and educational trajectories (Wang, 2022). These circumstances raise critical questions about the experiences of international students during the global pandemic with limited mobility.

Neo-racism and deficit discourse

As Omi and Winant (2015) argue, racism in the contemporary era is an institutionalized form of discrimination, oppression, and domination of the "others." This process of othering subtly and persistently reinforces the distinction between [white] Americans and non-Americans. This distinction leads to a hierarchical divide between non-white groups as abnormal compared to [white] American lives. Moreover, a striking feature of racism is its role in perpetuating stereotypes, thereby reinforcing "epistemic erasure" (Thomas, 2020). This erasure and the oppression of marginalized identities by dominant hegemonic groups enable the maintenance of social power over these communities. For example, actress Sandra Oh, born to Korean parents, discussed with *Vulture* how epistemic erasure has affected her career (Jung, 2018). She was surprised to realize the extent of internalized racism when she was offered a main role in *Killing Eve*. She remarked, "Oh my goodness, I didn't even assume when being offered something that I would be one of the central storytellers." Her reflection illustrates how the lack of representation of Asian Americans in leading roles has influenced her own career self-limitation.

In that sense, racism, deeply ingrained in American society, is not merely a relic but remains a present issue. This raises the question: How do international students, especially those who have never been part of a racial minority, digest

the experience of being in a minority group? How do they understand and interpret racism in the U.S. context? To explicate the experiences of international students and their encounters with racism, Lee and Rice (2007) coined the term neo-racism. According to Lee and Rice, neo-racism is a new modality of racism "justified by cultural differences or national origin rather than by physical characteristics alone, which can thus disarm the fight against racism by appealing to 'natural' tendencies to preserve group cultural identity—in this case, the dominant group" (p. 389). In other words, it is fueled by the belief that it is human instinct to protect and sustain the American way of life. This form of racism extends beyond race, presenting a more complex and intersectional manifestation of prejudice based on several characteristics, including nationality, geopolitical relations, and culture (Kim & Diaz, 2013; Lee, 2007; Lee & Rice, 2007). It could also emerge as political rhetoric that perpetuates anti-immigrant sentiments or hinders international students of specific nationalities from entering the U.S (Lee & Rice, 2007).

Upon arriving in the U.S., international students often find themselves categorized as minorities distinct from white American society. This distinction is largely based on deficit discourse, which systematically labels their language and culture as deficits (Lee & Rice, 2007). Nevertheless, they are still encouraged to assimilate into white American culture by distancing themselves from their home culture identity (Marginson, 2014). For instance, international students who do not socially engage with domestic students or the host community are often portrayed negatively and encouraged to step out of their comfort zone. This portrayal assumes that their primary purpose is to acquire cross-cultural skills, despite the diversity of international students and their varied motivations for studying abroad (Page & Chanboun, 2019). Chinese students, specifically, are portrayed as "inassimilable others who threaten to undermine America with their radical differences" (Abelmann & Kang, 2014, p. 386). This portrayal marginalizes Chinese students while justifying the perceived superiority of Western culture and its education system (Doherty & Singh, 2005).

Deficit discourse has also significantly shaped the experiences of international students in the U.S., particularly during the COVID-19 pandemic. This is especially relevant to Asian students, who are influenced by stereotypes perpetuated by media outlets and the Trump administration's anti-immigration sentiments. In fact, hate incidents, or anti-Asian racism, increased compared to pre-pandemic times, targeting Chinese people and individuals with similar physical attributes (Abram, 2021). During his presidency, Trump outspokenly depicted Asians as threats or carriers of the "Chinese virus" or "Kung flu." Although these political accusations are not new, they represent an evolving form of structural racism deeply ingrained in American immigration policy. As a result, Asian students may have experienced fear and isolation on campus (Zhai & Du, 2020).

To expand the understanding of the varied experiences of international students during and after COVID-19, this study will examine how they navigated life with limited mobility, remote education, and racism on campus. The study aims to explore how students continued their education despite limited mobility

and resources, both in and out of the U.S., and how they recognize and interpret racism on campus. The focal group of this study is Chinese and Korean students, who constitute a significant part of the international student population. Although previous studies have often grouped the international population as a homogeneous group, this study will focus on the potentially heterogeneous experiences of Chinese and Korean students, despite both groups being from East Asia. In sum, this research will answer the following questions: “What are the experiences of immobility and remote education among Chinese and Korean students?” and “How does COVID-19 add additional barriers to their lives in the U.S.?”

METHOD

This study is part of a broader dissertation project that employs mixed methods, incorporating both survey and interview data analyses. While this paper focuses exclusively on interview data, the original study began with a quantitative phase, involving the collection and analysis of survey data, which then guided the subsequent qualitative phase. The qualitative phase consisted of interviews with Chinese and Korean students who were either current students or had previously been students during the interview. Initially, I intended to select interviewees from the survey respondents, but due to a low response rate for interview participation, I extended invitations to others who had not completed the survey.

To ensure safety during the COVID-19 pandemic, the interviews were initially conducted exclusively via Zoom. Later, the format was expanded to include in-person, phone, and Zoom interviews, depending on participant preferences. These methodological adjustments were made with approval from the Syracuse University Institutional Review Board (IRB). As a native Korean speaker, I conducted interviews with Korean students in Korean, while interviews with Chinese students were conducted in English. After obtaining written or verbal consent from the participants, I audio-recorded and transcribed the interviews into English.

This study employed a qualitative research approach to analyze the experiences of Chinese and Korean students in response to immobility, remote education, and racism in schools during COVID-19. Most participants were current students or alumni affiliated with a private university in upstate New York, a public university in Minnesota, or a public university in California. These institutions were selected because they have a higher percentage of international students compared to the national average (5.5%) (Institute of International Education, 2019). Recruitment was initially conducted through international student offices, student-led organizations, and ethnic-religious groups at various universities, and was later expanded to include social networks and snowball sampling.

In total, twenty-five individuals participated in the interviews, including 15 females and 10 males. Among them, 15 were Korean, 9 were Chinese, and one identified as Chinese-Korean. Table 1 provides a summary of the interview

participants' demographics, including gender, nationality, institution type, status, and major. To ensure confidentiality, pseudonyms were used for all participants.

Table 1: Demographics of interview participants

Pseudonym	Gender	Nationality	Institution type (state)	Status	Major
Jiyeon	Female	Korea	Private university (NY)	Current student	Psychology
Thomas	Male	China	Private university (NY)	Current student	Accounting
Sungmin	Male	Korea	Public university (NY)	Current student	Landscape architecture
Xinyi	Female	China	Private university (NY)	Current student	Psychology
Yuxi	Female	China	Private university (NY)	Current student	Industrial interaction design and information management & technology
Hyunwoo	Male	Korea	Public university (MN)	Graduated	Industrial engineering
Jinwoo	Male	Korea	Private university (NY)	Current student	Economics
Jamie	Female	China	Private university (NY)	Current student	International relations, Economics
Jenny	Female	Chinese-Korean	Private university (NY)	Current student	Entrepreneurship and Emerging Enterprises
Joonho	Male	Korea	Private university (NY)	Current student	International relations
Minseo	Female	Korea	Private university (NY)	Graduated	Multimedia, photography, and design
Miyoung	Female	Korea	Public university (MN)	Graduated	Education
Yimo	Female	China	Private university (NY)	Graduated	Multimedia, photography, and design

Ruoxi	Female	China	Private university (NY)	Current student	Anthropology
Hyunji	Female	Korea	Private university (NY)	Graduated	Acting
Sanghoon	Male	Korea	Private university (NY)	Current student	International relations, Political science
Dohyun	Male	Korea	Private university (NY)	Current student	Political science
Fang	Female	China	Private university (NY)	Current student	Design
Joonseo	Male	Korea	Public university (MN)	Graduated	Business
Minsung	Male	Korea	Public university (CA)	Current student	Biology
Yeri	Female	Korea	Public university (CA)	Current student	Education
Hyungwon	Male	Korea	Public university (CA)	Current student	Philosophy
Yoori	Female	Korea	Public university (MN)	Graduated	Psychology
Min	Female	China	Public university (MN)	Current student	Genetics, cell biology, development
Hui	Female	China	Syracuse University	Current student	Sociology

For the analysis, I employed thematic analysis to identify patterns within the interview transcriptions (Fereday & Muir-Cochrane, 2006; Sithas & Surangi, 2021). The process began with summarizing each interview and writing memos based on predefined themes drawn from existing literature. Additionally, I meticulously reviewed each memo multiple times to identify emergent themes that were frequently mentioned by interviewees (Fereday & Muir-Cochrane, 2006).

RESULTS

State of immobility and remote education

In response to a sharp rise in COVID-19 cases in 2020 and the subsequent social distancing orders, American higher education institutions swiftly adopted remote

education systems. This transition was a crucial strategy for universities to continue their semesters. It was also beneficial to international students whose mobility was restricted by border closures or flight cancellations. Instead, they were given the option to reside in their home countries and participate in remote education.

However, while remote education was perceived as a savior for international students, some stories reveal a different reality. In this study, I had the opportunity to discuss the experiences of students regarding remote education. Many of the students I interviewed, particularly those who were first-year students in 2020, continued their education from China or Korea. They found remote education to be a unique experience. Some viewed it as a practical alternative to in-person education, facilitating the transnational connection between American universities and international students. However, others found it impractical due to various challenges, including time differences that compromised the quality of education they received. Jamie, a student majoring in international relations and economics, took online classes while residing in China. Jamie said:

> "I did a horrible job on virtual classes. I always forgot what the due date was, and I had to calculate the time."

Jamie struggled to submit assignments on time due to the time difference between the U.S. and China. Taking online classes from another country requires students to be mindful of time zones. Some classes only offer synchronous sessions based on American time, forcing students in other countries to either wake up early or stay up late to attend. Like Jamie, Xinyi was set to begin her first year at a private university in New York. However, instead of fully participating in online classes offered by her American university, Xinyi was involved in a somewhat distinct educational system. During COVID-19, while staying in China, she enrolled in a hybrid education system, which she referred to as an "exchange program." This system allowed her to attend in-person classes at a university in Shanghai while also participating in online classes offered by her American university. She had the option to choose between two Chinese universities that had connections with her American university. When I asked Xinyi about her experiences balancing in-person education at a Chinese university and online education from her American university, she found the experience positive, appreciating the opportunity to speak English while in China.

> "Although all of us were Chinese, the professors conducted the classes in English."

Xinyi viewed this "exchange program" as a valuable opportunity to prepare for her future adjustment at an American university, especially since her classes in China were conducted in English. Taking classes in a familiar environment with other Chinese students may help them overcome the barriers of using English in class. Echoing Xinyi's sentiments, other students also saw this period of immobility not just as a forced suspension but as a preparation for their next steps

in life. Hyunji, a Fine Arts major, found this period of immobility valuable, even though the remote education system seemed impractical for her major, which requires in-person communication and interaction with professors and students.

"Taking my acting classes online was very challenging and limiting for me. You know, acting is about making connections, collaborating and communicating with others. However, I found it very limited to act in front of a computer, and it felt like a waste of tuition money…And I also dreamt about taking a leave of absence because I felt like I need additional time without focusing on acting. I kind of wanted to see if there are anything I can do or I would love to do, since I have been acting from high school. So, it was a good timing."

Since Hyunji encountered several limitations with the remote education system, she decided to take a leave of absence and returned to Korea in March of 2020. However, what is intriguing is her perspective on this pause in education. Instead of bemoaning the situation, she saw it as a unique opportunity that allowed her to explore her true passions. These insights resonate with Wang's (2022) study on how Chinese students demonstrate agency despite infrastructural limitations in remote education. Like Hyunji, their understanding of immobility encompasses diverse embodied states and spaces. In this sense, immobility is not merely the opposite of mobility; rather, students themselves derive meaning from it. While this state of immobility may initially seem like a barrier or a compelled decision for students, it can also be empowering and dynamic as they creatively navigate ways to make this period meaningful (Wang, 2022).

Some students also chose to stay in the U.S. during COVID-19. Among those who remained, many Chinese students had no choice but to stay. This was due to various factors, including China's strict COVID-19 health policies, which imposed several lockdowns and testing requirements for re-entry into the country (Radford & Yip, 2023). Ruoxi, a Chinese student majoring in architecture in New York, was one of these cases. She first came to the U.S. as a high school student in a boarding school and was about to graduate in 2020 when COVID-19 hit. As the number of COVID-19 cases rose, Ruoxi booked a flight back to China. However, when her school announced plans to reopen after spring break, she canceled her flight. But the school ultimately did not reopen, leaving Ruoxi without a place to stay until her university's fall semester began. She stayed at a friend's house from March to June. Once she moved on campus for the fall semester, she took a mixture of in-person and online classes, as not all of her major courses were available online.

Similarly, Yimo, another Chinese student who graduated high school during COVID-19, also could not return to China due to the high cost of flight tickets. Although she found a cheaper ticket, it was later canceled. Just like Yimo, lockdowns and social distancing measures severely restricted the mobility of international students while they remained in the U.S. At that time, New York Governor Andrew Cuomo ordered shutdowns for all non-essential businesses and encouraged New Yorkers to stay indoors (Evelyn, 2020). During this time by herself, Yimo said, "I stayed in the apartment all day," while trying to maintain

social contact with her friends and family through video chat because "there's no one to talk to" in person.

While residing in the U.S. and practicing social distancing, Yimo experienced a profound sense of immobility. However, not all international students felt the same level of alienation and loneliness that Yimo did. Some had opportunities to cope with social distancing more effectively, especially those with family in the U.S. Hyunwoo, a Korean male student who graduated from a university in Minnesota, was one such case. He married a fellow Korean international student whom he met at a Korean ethnic church near campus. After graduating, they both secured jobs and obtained H-1b work visas to stay in Minnesota. When I asked Hyunwoo about his experience during COVID-19, he said:

> Hyunwoo: "COVID was hard. I was not able to meet my friends, and there was nothing out there. It would be even harder if I were not married."
>
> Interviewer: "When were you married?"
>
> Hyunwoo: "I married in 2020, after COVID-19…I was able to endure the hard time because of my family."

His story contrasts sharply with Yimo's, who felt isolated due to the stay-at-home order imposed in New York. To cope with the loneliness, Yimo maintained transnational contact with her family and friends online. Fortunately, technological advancements have made it possible to stay connected through video chats and calls that transcend borders. However, social distancing remained a significant challenge for international students like Yimo, who were separated from their families and friends by entire continents.

Campus is not a safe space anymore

Aside from increasing immobility, COVID-19 has brought to light the pervasive nature of racism and its deep-rooted presence in American society. Hate crimes against Asians, or anti-Asian racism, have surged compared to pre-pandemic levels (Abrams, 2021). This phenomenon is particularly significant for Asian international students on campus, especially those who remained on campus during the pandemic. In this paper, I argue that deficit discourse adds complexity to our understanding of racial relations in American society, actively repositioning Asian students as inferior. For many students, the American concept of race and its divisions—tied to a history of oppression and marginalization—may be unfamiliar. This raises critical questions: How do they perceive racism in light of the rise in anti-Asian hate incidents? How do these rapidly changing environments influence the experiences of international students amidst heightened xenophobia both on and off campus?

To fully comprehend the international student experience in the U.S., I argue that American institutions function as contact zones, "places that have been

historically constituted as sites of transculturation, where colonizers and colonized, travelers and travelees interact, co-exist, and engage in interlocking understandings and practices, often with radically asymmetrical relations of power" (Pratt, 1992, p.7; Doherty & Singh, 2005, p.55). Within these contact zones, tensions arising from power differentials may perpetuate oppression and reinforce the perceived inferiority of non-Western individuals (Marginson, 2014). International students, who may have once considered their classrooms to be safe spaces, could find themselves situated within these tensions, leading them to reconsider their positions as outsiders. For example, Ruoxi, a Chinese female student, encountered microaggressions from both a teacher and classmates in her high school classroom.

> "In a writing class, they were all white male students and only two, probably only two females. And then the teacher was, I think he was an Indian American, and he hated China. The teacher hated China, at least Chinese government so they were always talking about how bad the Chinese government is and then I don't know if they knew I was Chinese… they thought Chinese government is dictator."

She continued:

> "Actually, there was only one white student talking about Chinese government, but teacher agreed with him. But everyone else was staring at them and laughing with them…but it's okay because there was another white student next to me who was telling me, "It's okay. They are just dumb. Ignore them.""

Ruoxi felt invisible while her teacher and classmates openly expressed their hatred toward her country, China. In fact, such experiences are common among international students of color in predominantly white schools (Diangelo, 2006). Students are often silenced in classrooms where power asymmetries manifest through white supremacy, granting white students more cultural capital and classroom resources. It is also important to note the coping mechanism Ruoxi's white friend advised her to use: she was told to simply "ignore" discriminatory and offensive remarks from her teacher and classmates, considering them to be "dumb." Similar to Ruoxi, Joonho faced comparable experiences in high school. He attended high school in Canada before entering college in New York.

> Joonho: "The common thing about those who are racists is that they have a low educational achievement. Even in private high school, there are students who are quite uneducated in that sense."
>
> Interviewer: "What kind of experiences did you have?"
>
> Joonho: "They make a judgement based on wrong stereotype, like for instance, they gave me a specific position in the soccer team just because

they think Asians are fast. There were so many small events happened. They also said something problematic or made a gesture that was discriminating."

Interviewer: "Like what kind of gesture?"

Joonho: "Like making chinky eyes."

Similar to the coping strategies employed by Ruoxi and her friend, Joonho described "racists" as individuals with "low educational achievement" and being "quite uneducated." These conversations reveal how Ruoxi and Joonho not only acknowledge existing power asymmetries but also actively reconstruct hierarchies to position perpetrators as inferior. By challenging the ideological foundations that sustain racism, they reframe those who engage in racist behaviors as socially and morally deficient. In doing so, they navigate their vulnerability and present their resistance by dismantling racial hierarchies and redefining power dynamics (Butler, 2016; Gao & Sai, 2021).

However, despite the ways in which international students demonstrate agency in resisting microaggressions and racism, deficit discourses continue to shape their experiences, particularly during the COVID-19 pandemic. Miyoung, a Korean female student, recounted an incident where she and her friends were approached by a stranger who questioned why they were wearing masks.

"I had not felt difficulties during COVID-19, but once I was walking on campus with my friends…you know campus is safe. But there was a tall white man holding a golf club walking on campus. I thought he was not a student, and it looked like he was too old to be a student…he asked, "where are you from?" and asked why we were making masks, you know at that time Americans did not wear masks…we said, "we are not sick, but we are just trying to be careful." Then he asked us to borrow him phone, money for transportation, and kept trying to talk to us."

Even though the encounter with the tall white man was random, Miyoung and her friends found it intimidating, particularly because he was holding a golf club. The questions he asked about mask-wearing were alarming due to the racial stigmatization associated with mask usage during COVID-19. Mask-wearing has been racialized and linked to China, the virus's origin, and Chinese individuals (Ma & Zhan, 2020). This racialization reinforces stereotypes not only of Chinese people but also of individuals of Asian descent, potentially leading to hatred toward Asians. Miyoung and her friends, aware of the racial stigma tied to mask-wearing, cautiously explained their reasons for wearing masks. This incident was particularly surprising for Miyoung, who had previously considered the campus a "safe" space from discrimination.

Jamie, a Chinese student, also faced a distressing situation when fellow students yelled "coronavirus" at her in high school. Jamie said:

Jamie: "When I wore a mask and went to school, people yelled at me "coronavirus." They were just kids."

Interviewer: "Did it happen near your school?"

Jamie: "In school. Like, I was on my way to go back home, and some school students just came out and yelled at me."

Interviewer: "They were students in your school?"

Jamie: "Yeah, they were in lower grades too."

Ruoxi, a Chinese student in New York, also had a similar experience as Jamie. She said:

"During COVID, a group of white men or students live in [a dorm] called me Chingchong."

A group of white students at her university yelled at Jamie to "open your eyes," which made it difficult for Ruoxi to process her emotions. Although Ruoxi was with friends at the time, experiencing racism remains challenging and emotionally taxing, even years after such incidents. These experiences during COVID-19 made them realize that the campus, once perceived as an ivory tower free from racism or discrimination, is a space for contact zones, where power differentials exist while deficit discourse is reinforced and manifested.

DISCUSSION

This study reveals the ways COVID-19 challenges the prevailing notion of international students as agents of "unlimited global mobility" (Gomes, 2015, p.10; Hari, Nardon, & Zhang, 2021). The pandemic, through travel restrictions, border closures, and lockdowns, has uncovered conditional and fragile nature of global mobility. Restrictions to global mobility expose to international student precarity which have been manifested in varied ways. Some international students had no choice but to stay in the U.S. because flight tickets were too expensive, or flights were unexpectedly canceled. Those living alone with limited social integration felt particularly isolated during periods of social distancing.

In response to limited global mobility, remote education has been initiated to make the transnational connection available. Both students who remained in the states or returned to their home countries had diverse responses to the remote education system. Some found remote education to be a useful preparation—a stepping stone to American higher education—as it provided an opportunity to use English while still in China or a useful alternative to in-person education system. Echoing Wang's (2022) study on Chinese international students, many tried to maintain a positive attitude during this state of immobility, viewing it as a "good timing," which made the state of suspension feel less static (Wang, 2022).

Others found remote education less practical as it did not suit all majors and disciplines like architecture or acting.

COVID-19 has underscored the reality that college campuses function as contact zones where power asymmetries are deeply entrenched. Reflecting the broader rise in anti-Asian racism during the pandemic (Abram, 2021), the experience of neo-racism on campus has become less about specific locations and more about pervasive, everyday occurrences. These incidents manifest in various forms, ranging from subtle actions, such as being subjected to uncomfortable stares, to overt aggressions, such as random strangers shouting xenophobic slurs. In response, many students chose not to directly confront these acts but instead dismissed the perpetrators as ignorant and uneducated. This strategy allowed them to deconstruct existing hierarchies and reframe them. However, although international student resilience is highlighted in that way, it is crucial to further study how they manage these challenges, especially when their social integration into American society is limited. Institutional support services, such as mental health services, should also facilitate the process of coping with these experiences, enabling students to process, reflect on, and care for their emotions.

In terms of recommendations, it is essential for American higher education institutions to develop online classes that are suitable for students whose majors cannot be effectively taught online. For example, Hyunji took a leave of absence because she believed that her major, acting, could not be adequately learned online. If the quality of education suffers, alternative solutions should be explored. According to one interviewee, Xinyi, her university implemented an "exchange program" with a university in China, allowing students to take in-person classes in China while simultaneously attending online classes from the university in New York. This transnational model of globalized higher education enabled Xinyi to connect virtually with her home university in New York while also having the opportunity for in-person classes in China. However, this hybrid approach was only offered to Chinese students, leaving Korean students like Hyunji with no options for in-person classes, leading her to take a leave of absence. While some argue that we are now living life in an endemic state, the uncertainty of when the next pandemic might occur persists. It is now essential to redesign the quality of online education through collaborative efforts and implement accessible learning systems to meet the diverse needs of students in an increasingly interconnected world.

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