

Voices from Chinese International Students about Racism in Higher Education in the United States

Yilin Wang
Guangzhou Huawan School
and
Yiqi Xie
Fordham University

Abstract: This qualitative study aims at understanding the experiences and feelings of Chinese international students enrolled in higher education institutions in the United States regarding racism in their learning careers. The researchers found three differences that may guide future research. First, gender might influence one's experiences, feelings, and attitudes toward racism. Second, students from different majors might have different experiences and feelings toward racism. Third, different socio-economic backgrounds might influence individuals' experiences and feelings regarding racism. It is hoped that the findings of this study can be useful for stakeholders, like policymakers, professors, and administrators, in making modifications to the higher education experiences of Chinese international students that may help to ease concerns about racial bias.

Introduction

The United States is known as a country where students from diverse cultural backgrounds and different countries come to pursue their studies (Shen & Herr, 2004). Mitchell, Steele, Marie, and Timm (2017) cite statistics collected by the Institute of International Education (IIE) showing the population of international students in the United States is massive. Statistics also show that the enrollment of international students in higher education institutions in the United States is increasing rapidly. In 2020-2021, more than “710,000 international students were enrolled.” Chinese students constituted the largest population (317,299) with students from India a distant second (167,582) (BestColleges, n.d.).

Racism is a social and political issue in the United States worthy of discussion and in need of tackling. As Museus and Park (2015) point out, there are various studies regarding racial issues experienced by Black, White, and Latinx students. However, regardless of the massive population of Chinese students in the United States, few studies exist regarding racism specifically from the perspectives of Chinese students. Yet, racism related to Asian students, including Chinese international students, is a nuanced and multiform area of study. Museus and Park's (2015, p. 551) study of 46 Asian college/university students revealed nine types of racism experienced by study participants, including “racial harassment, vicarious racism, racial isolation,” and so forth. However, Museus and Park looked at Asian students in general. Such studies leave a gap in research about racism focusing on Chinese students.

Our qualitative study contributes to the literature in three ways. First, it helps fill in the gap in the literature regarding racism from the perspectives of Chinese international students in higher education in the United States. Second, the findings of this study help guide further research toward a more comprehensive understanding of the experiences of Chinese international students in higher education institutions. Third, this study provides stakeholders such as policymakers, professors, and administrators at higher education institutions data with which to inform decision-making regarding what discrimination Chinese international students in higher education are experiencing and how they interpret their feelings regarding racism.

Meanings of Racism

‘Racism’ is a word derived from race. Literally, the root of racism is ‘race’ and ‘-cism’ (unfavorable). Racism starts because of race differences. The related words/phrases of racism, racial bias, racial inequality, stereotype, and prejudice are sometimes alternatively used. In the Oxford Learner’s Dictionaries (n.d.), ‘racism’ is explained as “the unfair treatment of people who belong to a different race or violent behavior towards them.” However, researchers have offered various interpretations when defining the term ‘racism’. For example, Wong (2021, p. 359) defined racism as “verbal, emotional, physical and symbolic forms of abuse or violence” towards people from different ethnic or race groups, rather than defining it simply as the extreme action of physical harassment or violence. Racism is also defined in systemic and structural terms. Systemic racism is used to describe the ubiquity of racism in society while structural racism refers to the concrete expression of systemic racism in specific contexts (Braveman et al, 2022). For our discussion in this paper, racism will be analyzed in terms of structural aspects of higher education and its relationship to Chinese international students.

Racism in Education Affects Chinese International Students

The topic of race and racism is heatedly discussed in the field of education. The Civil Rights Act of 1964 was intended to address, even in the field of education, (in)equality issues among people of different colors, and promote the advancement of people from minoritized racial groups (Palmer, et al., 2013). However, racial inequality is still a fact in spite of the protection of the law. Vidal (1996) observes that scholars and researchers normally have a misunderstanding that racial diversity contributes to racial equality. However, the fact is racial diversity does not change racial discrimination.

In the field of education, racism may not be manifested explicitly in verbal or physical discrimination, but subtly. For example, it can manifest in the quantity, preferences, or availability of resources for certain race groups. When searching the keywords ‘Black racism in higher education’ using online library databases, there were over 4,000 peer-reviewed target papers in journals throughout the period 1967-2023, while fewer than 700 resources were found during the same period when searching the keywords ‘Asian racism in higher education’. Similarly, Franklin (2012, cited in Harper, 2016) also claims that the lack of school reading materials for marginalized groups could be an expression of subtle racism. As Harper (2016) found in Delgado’s (1984, 1992) work, when researchers and experts who are White wrote on racial inequality topics, they were inclined to use papers from their same race groups for reference they were inclined to neglect perspectives of scholars from other racial groups, which can cast doubt on the comprehensiveness and trustworthiness of their research.

With the matriculation of international students in institutions of higher education in the U.S. approaching $\frac{3}{4}$ of a million and Chinese students making up nearly half that number, Singh (2021) has correctly pointed out that the revenue contribution from international students in higher education is huge. Take Fordham University as an example of private schools in the United States. Any student in the graduate school of education pays \$1,560 for each credit, no matter if they are international students or local students (Fordham University, n.d.). For public schools, however, take Queens College as an example. Pursuing a graduate degree at Queens College costs \$5,545 for New York State residents per semester (enrolled in 12 or more credits), while for international students, it is \$855 for each credit or \$10,260 per semester for 12 credits (Queens College, n.d.). Chinese international students are making a greater percentage of

contributions to higher education revenue in the United States through the form of tuition than are local students (Lee, Jon & Byun, 2017).

International students pursuing degrees in the United States not only have to adjust to the new environment financially but culturally and academically, as well (Heng, 2018). They might experience culture shock and feelings of exclusion as cultural differences might extend to racial bias. Some administrators recognize this issue and have tried to provide international students with some support. However, as the statistics from the report of IIE (2022) illustrated, 97 percent of support provided to international students involved advising and academic learning while other kinds of support were for basic living. It is noteworthy that no support or assistance helped the international students deal with racism in their learning journey, which may cause mental health problems such as depression and anxiety (Lian & Wallace, 2020; IIE, 2022).

According to Moosavi (2022), East Asian students (including Chinese) are inclined to be treated, labeled and stereotyped negatively. For instance, academic or language delay, plagiarism, or lack of critical thinking were some of the labels attributed to Chinese international students. Additionally, Moosavi (2022) notes that language oppression or discrimination is very common in classrooms. For example, international students are requested to write their names in the English language convention or to speak English rather than their native language. Moreover, the past three years have been an even harder time for Chinese international students. Yu (2022) explains that Chinese students are experiencing an even worse hostility because of the global virus, COVID-19. Despite experiencing negative racial bias, Chinese students still tend to remain reticent. Therefore, in order to hear the experiences and feelings of Chinese international students in higher education, our study is essential.

Theoretical Framework and Methodological Considerations

Our study is guided by Critical Race Theory (CRT), which holds that racism permeates American society in many respects including law and education. As described by Abrams and Moio (2009, p. 251), CRT includes six basic tenets: “endemic racism,” “race as social construction,” “differential racialization,” “interest convergence/materialism determinism,” “voices of color,” and “anti-essentialism/intersectionality.” These six tenets are closely related to our study. For instance, “voices of color” refers to providing oppressed groups with power in society. Our study aims at creating a platform for a minority group, specifically Chinese international students, to express their experiences and feelings regarding race in higher education.

We, the authors of the paper, are Chinese international students who hold advanced degrees in Education. Both of us obtained our master’s degree in the United States. One of us is currently in the third year of doctoral study in New York. Both of us have experienced some racism or uncomfortable exclusion in our learning process. However, the degree of feelings toward racism is different between the two researchers. One of the researchers has more direct and personal experiences related to racism than the other.

A benefit of the positionality that we hold relative to our research project is that we can understand the feelings and experiences of our participants. Moreover, as Chinese international students, most of our participants trust us and are willing to share their experiences and feelings with us. However, our positionality might cause some issues regarding the interpretation of the findings of our study. First, the researcher who had negative experiences regarding racism may

have brought some negative assumptions to bear on the findings. Second, we might tend to focus attention more on participants who said that they had experienced racism or exclusion in their learning career. In order to minimize the influence caused by our positionality, we not only invited participants who said they had experienced racism or exclusion, but we also sought out participants who said they did not experience any racism or exclusion. Meanwhile, we sent what we coded and wrote in the findings back to the participants for member check to assure that our analysis and interpretation of their responses were valid and accurate.

Participants had to meet the following criteria: 1) nationality is/was Chinese, 2) pursuing/had pursued education in universities and/or colleges in the United States, and 3) have experienced racism during their study in higher education. Those who met these three criteria were invited for an interview. Those who met the first two criteria but replied 'no' to the third criteria were asked if they would like to participate in the interview as well. Eligible participants were contacted to schedule an interview. The participants were read the consent letter and were given a chance to ask any questions about the study. They had a week to decide whether or not they would like to participate. It is important to highlight that this study *only* focuses on the learning journey in higher education. What participants might have experienced outside school, such as in their job or personal life, was not included in our study.

Six individuals with experience as Chinese international students participated in this study. All participants earned master's degree issued by universities in the United States. Five women were in education majors and the sixth participant, a man, majored in Music. One participant studied and lived in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, and the other five studied and lived in New York. They are all native Mandarin speakers and came to the United States as international students. Of the six participants, four indicated they had experienced some racism or heard of racist experiences from friends, and the other two said they had not experienced any racism in their learning career. Among these six participants, five came from majors in Liberal Arts, while one of them majored in Performing Arts. The data were mainly collected through Zoom video recordings of the interviews. One of the participants recorded the responses using the recording function on a cell phone and sent the recordings to us. The video and audio recordings were stored in a Google Drive account accessible only to the two researchers completing the study.

The video and audio recordings collected were first transcribed into a Microsoft Word document and then translated into English for data analysis. The researchers checked the transcription back and forth several times to ensure accuracy. N-Vivo coding was conducted during the transcription process. After transcription, the researchers conducted an inductive coding process to generate key concepts based on the data collected. Similar concepts were combined into themes for analysis.

Findings

When participants were asked about the racial composition of the cohort of students with whom they studied, five out of the six participants said that the Chinese population in their cohort ranged from 30% to 100%. One participant said that she was the only Chinese/Asian student of the 30 students in her cohort. In this section, findings are listed and summarized for analysis from the themes of participants' understanding of racism, course materials, inclusion and exclusion, and expectations of teacher training/culturally responsive classrooms. All names mentioned in the following are pseudonyms.

Participants' Understanding of Racism: Though all the participants had their own definition of racism, they all believed it to be a negative term and one word they mentioned in common is 'race'. They all maintained that the target of being discriminated against was usually the race group as a whole instead of an individual. However, it was interesting to recognize differences in their understandings of the origin of racism. Lisa viewed racism as a malignity deep inside someone's heart that becomes more explicit behavior in a diverse culture. Lily believed racism is caused by misunderstanding stemming from political and historical reasons. People sometimes are educated differently, which may also lead to misunderstanding. Julia and Lucy viewed racism as a stereotype towards a specific race group. As Julia explained: "It is sometimes a behavioral aggression and verbal abuse. However, it could be an inner impression that exists in one's mind.... He (or she) may not express it out loud." During the process of the interviews, we found that sometimes the participants were sometimes unsure whether or not a specific behavior was an expression of racism.

Course Materials: The reading materials assigned to the participants in their coursework barely touched on the race of Asians. One of the reasons is that for some of the majors or courses, race was not viewed as relevant. In John's case, as his major was performing arts specializing in Western musical instruments, he wasn't asked to read any literature related to Asians. From John's perspective, he does not think there is a connection between his major and racism. Likewise, in Julia's case, racism was not mentioned in her coursework toward her major in teaching Chinese as a foreign language. racism was not mentioned in her coursework. Therefore, the topic of racism was outside the curricula studied by John and Julia.

However, for the courses that do mention or assign course readings that involve or focus on race, studies focusing on Asians were rarely assigned no matter the population of Chinese or Asian students in the classroom. Lisa mentioned there was only one time her professor assigned reading about Asia. It was a book based on the immigration history of Japanese women. She mentioned how this book was outdated and how the in-class discussions based on that book were superficial and narrow. No other reading materials regarding Asians were assigned, but readings were assigned about other race groups. This experience was similar to Lily's, Lucy's, and Sarah's stories. Referring to the resources Sarah studied in one of the courses she took, she said: "We read a lot of articles about race and racism. But the thing is, for most of the literature, most of them are about Latino students or Black students. But I have to say we may have some [readings about Asians] but I couldn't remember that clearly. We may have some articles about Asian students but they are not a target population here [for the class] ... there might be some times that we mentioned about Asian in the in-class discussions though." Similarly, Lily recalled, "...sometimes we read some literature about racism, but they are all about Black or Latino. Asian or Chinese are not mentioned in the literature we read." Lily explained: "...there were only a few [of the readings related to Asians assigned to the class]. It might be one or two parts that mentioned Asian in the assigned specific chapters or readings. For example, [in those readings or chapters, Asian might be mentioned by the researchers] when summarizing their studies of different countries...." Thus, for some courses or majors, reading materials about race were never assigned. For some coursework in other majors, Black and Latinx races appeared in assigned reading materials; but reading materials regarding Asians were seldom assigned.

Inclusion and Exclusion: Some participants mentioned feelings of being stereotyped or subject to bias in some of the courses when the teachers mentioned China or Chinese culture. When China was mentioned in the class, usually the negative side was mentioned and discussed. For instance:

“Sometimes the professor took China as an example [for class discussion], but that's China in his/her own perception, which, from my point of view, is not true or accurate. However, my words may sound flat if I try to explain (for my country) because that is what he/she recognizes and believes about China. I wonder why they don't avoid using China as an example. There are many racial groups and it is better to talk about all the racial groups from an equal and objective perspective” (Lily). Lisa and Sarah shared Lily's experience of being stereotyped. They all mentioned their experiences of being negatively affected by the unwarranted assumption that Chinese international students are weak in spoken English but good at Math. For example, the professors tend to interact or communicate more frequently or actively with students whom they perceive to have better fluency in English.

Apart from that, most participants mentioned feelings of exclusion. For example, when Lily read the literature on topics related to Black, Whites, Latinx, etc., she said the materials are sometimes beyond her understanding, due to the fact that she was not familiar with the history and culture of the race groups other than hers. When it came to discussion in class, she worried that what she said might offend others. As a result, she didn't feel comfortable talking about races that she was not familiar with and ended up silent in the discussions. Lucy also feels excluded to some extent. On the one hand, Lucy's experience is similar to Lily's in that she didn't understand the culture and history of the race group the class was discussing. On the other hand, being from a country that didn't have as diverse a racial group composition as the United States, Lucy was not sensitive to the topic of race.

However, it is a totally different story for John and Julia, who majored in performing arts and teaching Chinese as a foreign language, respectively. For example, as John described: “My professor is really nice, and he is the kind elder who treats his students equally regardless of their races... I think my professor really respects each individual, and this is what he values... Anyway, I guess it is probably because of the inclusiveness and openness of the nature of music... most of my classmates are from different culture backgrounds.”

To conclude, how the participants experienced their learning journeys depended on their majors and individual professors to a certain extent. Of the six participants in this study, four out of five who have Liberal Arts majors sometimes felt excluded as they were exposed to literature materials, topics, and discussions of mainstream American culture, which they, as Chinese international students, were not familiar with. Two out of the five participants who majored in liberal arts, contrary to two other participants, had positive experiences in their learning journey. John had a positive experience in his learning journey majoring in Performing Arts, which, from his point of view, was an internationalized major. Overall, each individual may feel different when the design of their major is more or less internationalized and inclusive.

Teacher Training/Culturally Responsive Classroom: Some participants mentioned expectations of a more culturally responsive and inclusive classroom even if there was only one Chinese student in the class. They thought some instructors were not culturally well-prepared, especially for teaching Chinese international students. As Sarah said: “Like, for example, if you [the teacher] have a diverse group, at least you can do some homework before the class and to know more about the students, and know more about their culture. Or if you have to prepare something sensitive [like race] related to culture, I think you [the teacher] at least... do the research... at least do some research on that [different culture of the students]. Lucy stated a similar expectation: “...I think our professors should also have the awareness of not having prejudice

against students of other races... I basically think most of the professors did a good job and they took care of most of the students... I think they should care about all groups of students.”

While a pre-established cultural mindset is comfortable and convenient for most people, keeping an open mind and eliminating stereotyping was another expectation mentioned by the participants. As Lisa stated, “I hope that everyone can get rid of the stereotype regarding international students... because if you think about it, no matter what school you are in, everyone has been enrolled... you may have to make some policies that are better for international students... By contrast, John and Julia had very positive experiences in their learning journey and said that their professors are inclusive and culturally responsive already and they hoped their professors would continue in the way they treat their students.

In short, most participants advocated for more training for the teaching faculty on culture, diversity, responsiveness, and inclusiveness. They wished the teachers would be well-trained to meet the needs of different race groups, including Chinese international students, and could be more inclusive and considerate of all students in the class. They also hoped the faculty would understand Chinese culture more comprehensively and objectively.

Discussion

What was found in this study can be valuable. Bringing together perspectives of participants who had completely different experiences and feelings about racism in their learning career in higher education increases the comprehensiveness of this study. The varied ways that participants defined racism influenced their sensitivities and feelings toward the concept of racism as well as real-life racist practices. Due to the diverse understanding of racism, some participants were not sure if some behaviors/exclusions can be categorized as racism. Thus, one might identify a certain behavior as racism, while another might treat it as normal social action.

We found three important differences that may guide future research into perceptions of racism among Chinese international students enrolled in institutions of higher education in the United States. First, sex might influence one’s experiences, feelings, and attitudes toward racism. Only one male student was included in this study as a participant, his experiences and feelings regarding racism in higher education were positive. We wonder if the same result will happen for the majority of Chinese international male students in higher education and if the opposite trend for Chinese international female students might be confirmed with further study.

Second, students from different majors might have different experiences and feelings toward racism. In this study, four of the six participants came from similar majors (liberal arts) and had experienced or heard about their friends’ experiences regarding racism, while two out of the six participants came from completely different majors and claimed that they had never experienced any racism in their learning career. Thus, if we were to expand our investigation to various majors, we wonder whether similar results would be generated.

Third, social-economic background may influence an individual's experiences and feelings regarding racism. As mentioned earlier, one of the participants said that a lot of Asians who can enter higher education are at a relatively high socio-economic status. Whether this is accurate is still in need of examination, but the higher cost of higher education in the United States for international students does seem to indicate the validity of this observation. Thus, we would like to confirm if the chances of being racially biased or excluded might relate in some way to an individual’s socio-economic status.

Conclusion

As the largest international population pursuing higher education in the United States, Chinese students are non-negligible and should be treated well and fairly. Through this qualitative study, which invited participants to share their perceptions on racism in their learning careers, two research questions are answered: 1) What experiences and feelings do Chinese international students have in higher education in terms of racism? and 2) What perspectives or opinions do Chinese international students hold about higher education in terms of racism? Our study contributes to understanding the experiences and feelings of Chinese international students in United States higher education racial bias, exclusion, labeling, and stereotyping that exists for Chinese international students in higher education institutions in the U.S. However, it varies across individuals by sex, academic field of study, and socioeconomic status of students. Our study contributes to understanding experiences and feelings of Chinese international students in United States higher education and provides stakeholders, such as policymakers, professors, and administrators, guidance on how to make modifications or adjustments in curriculum and teacher training to minimize feelings of bias among Chinese international students.

Limitations

Our sample only consisted of six participants, all of whom attended college in the eastern United States. Therefore, their views cannot represent the whole group of Chinese international students. This limits the statistical integrity of our findings. Our findings are not generalizable to all. We also concede our research is insufficient in its comprehensiveness since five participants are females and only one is male. We need to interview many more students to discern if our initial findings about sex differences in regard to perceptions of racism are valid for the general population of Chinese international students. Furthermore, only one participant is majored in music, while other students are in areas of liberal arts. Students majoring in liberal arts reported more experiences indicating structural racism than did the participant in performing arts. Additionally, the experiences of students in STEM and other fields have yet to be examined.

Implications

In developing further research studies, a more comprehensive approach to the topic, one incorporating more participants from both sexes, various majors, and different areas of the United States, should be taken. In addition, based on the advice of our participants, American-born Chinese (ABC) are another group that should be identified and investigated as to their feelings and experiences regarding racism as United States citizens. Last but not least, there should be more studies focusing on Asian immigrants of all age groups and nationalities to discern similarities and differences between/among the experiences of these groups and those of Chinese international students enrolled in institutions of higher education in the U.S.

Nonetheless, for policymakers and administrators, the implication of our study is to initiate programs of staff training, curriculum design, and lesson planning so that professors and administrators can elicit and hear the inner voices of international Chinese students to better understand cultural differences and create more culturally responsive learning environments. For international Chinese students themselves, it is essential for school administrators to organize workshops or orientations which not only provide students with assistance in academic learning and living, but also equip them with the capability to deal with racism when encountering

exclusion, labeling, stereotyping, or neglect. Workshops about what racial bias is and how to confront any kind of racism need to be provided to the students.

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