Chinese International Students in U.S. Classroom Race Discussions: A Transnational Perspective

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Abstract

Although current research has discussed U.S. students' engagement in race-related discussions, less is known about the experiences of international students in these contexts. This article explores the experiences of Chinese international graduate students participating in race discussions within U.S. academic settings, examining their transnational identity construction in the process. Drawing on data collected from two Chinese international students and employing a transnational perspective, I address three key questions: What challenges do Chinese international students encounter when participating in discussions about race within U.S. higher education settings? Are there any transnational activities that influence their engagement? How do Chinese international students respond to these discussions? Through interviews, analysis of assignments, and a review of our WeChat history, this study sheds light on the challenges faced by Chinese international students when participating in courses focused on racial issues, as well as their responses to these situations. The findings contribute to a deeper understanding of the experiences of Chinese international students within transnational educational environments.

Keywords: transnationalism, transnational racialization, international students, race discussions

1. Introduction

A piece of artwork appeared as the professor moved to the next slide of her PowerPoint presentation on Zoom. It was two portrait paintings on the same canvas. The primary portrait was a standard rendering of a white male, but the canvas had been peeled back from the stretcher almost three quarters, folds creasing the subject's dark brown robe and blush red skin. Only one of his eyes looks out over the spectator. Behind this canvas laid another portrait, one of a young black woman, peering out shyly from behind the male stature.

The professor invited us to discuss the artwork. From our zoom boxes, some unmuted themselves to present their thoughts, while others typed in the chat. The discussion was flowing. As soon as one finished speaking, another jumped in. New messages popped up in the chat box before I could finish reading an old one.

As much as I desired to participate, I was silent. I've never seen the artwork before. Who created the artwork? Who were the man and the woman on the canvas? What is the painting about?

'Okay, you need to figure out the name of the painting', I told myself. But where should I begin? I started putting keywords in Google. 'Painting, white man in the front, black woman in the back', nothing. 'Painting, canvas peeled', negative. After a few attempts, I ran out of keywords. 'You need to change your strategy', the voice in my head said. Then I anxiously skimmed through the chat box, looking for hints. Jefferson, slave, feminism, I scribbled down a few words in my notebook. I heard a name, but is it Kafar, Cafar, or something else? I tried a few possible combinations on Google, and this time I found it! The artwork was *Behind the Myth of Benevolence* by Titus Kaphar.

When I was busy searching for an answer, a red dot appeared on the upper right corner of my WeChat (a Chinese instant message app) icon. I clicked on it. It was a message from a WeChat group created by two other Chinese international students and me so that we could share information related to this class. They struggled as I did, having no idea what the painting was about or who created it. I shared my discovery. The next five minutes were in lively discussion; not on Zoom, but in our WeChat group; not about our opinion on the artwork, since we didn't have any, but about our inability to participate in class.

This was one of the many tasks that we had in this class with which we struggled. We were also asked to create a digital timeline that traced our racial literacy development, comment on the *Uncomfortable Conversations with a*

Black Man videos, and discuss Black History Month. All these tasks and discussions opened a door for me to an unknown area of knowledge, which I appreciated. Yet being unable to contribute more to class discussions left me feeling silenced and ineffective.

Coming from an environment where racial issues were not prominently addressed, I found myself lacking familiarity and depth of understanding regarding race-related topics. In addition, when we talked about race in this class, conversations centered around Black and Brown people with minimal attention given to those of Asian heritage.

I came to understand the challenges Chinese international students may face in discussing unfamiliar racial topics in the U.S. academic context. I was eager to know more about Chinese international students' responses when they engaged with race discussions. What follows in this article is a literature review that situates this study in conversation with other relevant research, and a conceptual framework that explains transnationalism and transnational racialization. Methodology and methods are discussed, in which I introduce my participants, the context of the study, and how I collected and analyzed data. After that I share the stories of the participants and draw implications from their experiences.

2. Literature Review

Different from other groups of people who go across national borders (Gargano, 2009), international students specifically come to the U.S. with the purpose of pursuing education, with some opting to return to their home countries after completing their studies, while others choose to stay (Gargano, 2009). Therefore, the experiences of other border-crossing groups, such as migrants, in education settings cannot provide a comprehensive understanding of the unique challenges and perspectives encountered by international students (Gargano, 2009). In this section, I review literature that examines Chinese international students in particular. Given the purpose of this study to explore Chinese international students in classroom race discussions, this literature review incorporates two main sub-sections: Chinese students' perceptions of race and their participation in U.S. classrooms.

2.1 Chinese Students' Perceptions of Race

In the U.S., race is more often used to distinguish people based on phenotypic characteristics like skin color (Omi and Winant, 2014). However, in China, race is conceived differently, so examining how racial discourses are constructed in China is crucial when it comes to how these students initially make sense of racial identities and categories.

Sun Yat-sen (1866-1925), founder of the Kuomintang, promoted the 'yellow race' and 'Han' ethnicity to unify the nation and portray the Chinese identity (Dikötter, 2005; Okura, 2021). 'Yellow' isn't simply a marker of race that denotes skin color but signifies being descendants of the Yellow Emperor, the mythical first ancestor of the Han race (Dikötter, 2005). The Han group, comprising over 90% of the population, have become identical with 'Chinese', because it has been 'claimed by mainland officials to be a homogeneous group (*minzu, ethnicity*) with common origins, a shared history, and an ancestral territory' (Dikötter, 2005, p. 179). The other less than 9% of the Chinese population makes up the 55 ethnic minority groups. In other words, race, in China, is conceived less in terms of physical appearance and more through ancestral lineage and cultural heritage (Dikötter, 1992). In this sense, Chinese international students' perceptions of race, which is closely associated with the Han identity, is influenced by state ideologies (Yu, 2022).

In addition, as ties between China and African countries grow, an increasing number of African people come to China for various purposes. Anti-blackness and Anti-Africanness sentiments have grown. Internalizing Western/white superiority, Western ideologies are used to rank different people within a racial hierarchy (Zhang, 2004). In China, the term 素质 *suzhi* (quality), used to evaluate the quality of people, and African people are often described as 低素质 *disuzhi*, or "low quality" (Cheng, 2011; Zhang, 2024). Pfafman et al. (2015) argued that this anti-blackness sentiment stemmed from perceived threats to identity, economic stability, and State fidelity. Therefore, Chinese international students, before coming to the U.S., are influenced by the racial environment constructed in the Chinese context.

It's worth noting that Chinese international students' perception of race is not only limited to how race is framed by Chinese official discourse. Kim (2018), who studied South Korean immigrants to the U.S., proposed the idea of transnational racialization, in which Kim argued that immigrants became aware of their racial status through exposure to U.S. mass media culture even before their arrival. Through mass media, U.S. racial concepts are exported overseas. In this process, Chinese international students become aware of their status as 'Asian' in the U.S. even before they enter the country (Okura, 2021). Being influenced by both Chinese state ideologies and race construction in the U.S., Chinese international students have multiple race schemas, instead of a singular conception of race (Roth, 2012).

2.2 Chinese International Students' Racialization in the U.S.

In addition to their preconceived notion of race, Chinese international students undergo racialization when in the U.S., a process defined by Omi and Winant (2014) as 'the extension of racial meaning to a previously racially unclassified relationship, social practice, or group' (13). While they gain some understanding of U.S. racial discourse prior to their arrival, experiential learning is crucial for comprehending racism and racialized systems (Fries-Britt et al., 2014; Yu, 2022).

The racialized experience of Chinese international students in the U.S. are multi-faceted. Firstly, they encounter stereotypes imposed on Asian Americans, such as being the model minority, perpetual foreigners, and the yellow peril (Ng et al., 2007; Wing, 2007). Despite the historical reference to Chinese Americans, the model minority label now encompasses all people of Asian descent, creating pressure and homogenizing a diverse community (Li, 2005). Additionally, Chinese international students contend with stereotypes specific to their community. Despite the model minority stereotype, they are often perceived as wealthy yet incompetent in English, quiet, and shy (Ruble & Zhang, 2013; Xie et al., 2020), which neglects individual differences.

Discrimination, ranging from explicit racism to subtle microaggressions (Lee and Rice, 2007; Sue et al., 2007), shapes their racialization. The outbreak of COVID-19 further fuels anti-Chinese and anti-Asian sentiments (Yu, 2022), exacerbated by public figures like Former President Trump using derogatory terms, such as 'China virus', 'Chinese plague', and 'Kung flu'. At the height of the pandemic, many Asian people were physically attacked, pushed onto subway tracks, or even brutally murdered (Yu, 2022).

Amidst encounters with racism and discrimination, Chinese international students reassess their racial and ethnic identities in the U.S. transitioning from a nationality-based understanding of being 'Chinese' to embracing the broader label of 'Asian' (Okura, 2021).

2.3 Chinese International Students' Participation in Class: A Contextual Approach

For the purpose of this study, examining Chinese international students' perspectives on race is complemented by an exploration of their participation in U.S. classrooms. While student participation can be both verbal and non-verbal, in many U.S. institutions, where the emphasis is on active verbal engagement (Tatar, 2005), East Asian students, who may seem more silent than their American peers, are often inaccurately perceived as passive learners (Heng, 2016). Research has attributed this perceived silence to these students' English language proficiency (Cheng, 2000) and traditional culture of East Asia (Heng,2016). However, the fact is that although rote learning traditions shape passive classroom norms (Rao, 2002), contemporary education reforms in China encourage active participation and independent thinking (Dello-Iacovo, 2009). In addition, diversity exists among Chinese students based on individual preferences and disciplinary backgrounds (Shi, 2006).

Many researchers thus advocated for a contextual approach to understanding Chinese international students' classroom participation, emphasizing the influences of various factors. One such factor is the classroom environment. More specifically, while a student-centered approach encouraged participation, a more teacher-centered setting might result in decreased involvement (Cheng, 2000). Moreover, professors' attitudes and sensitivity to language difficulties, along with peers' reactions during sharing can impact students' willingness to participate (Zhou et al., 2005). Familiarity with Western culture also affects perceived reticence, as Chinese students may lack contextual knowledge assumed by professors and U.S. students (Zheng, 2010). Despite access to online resources and prior education about U.S. culture, disparities persist between Chinese students' learning experiences and their actual encounters in the U.S. (Henze & Zhu, 2012). Additional factors such as class size,

peer composition, professors' teaching methods, and expected participation norms further influence students' engagement (Zhou et al., 2005). Therefore, Chinese international students' participation is complex and situation-specific, requiring a comprehensive examination of various factors in each case. In this study, I adopted this approach when looking at the participants' experiences.

When it comes to race dialogues in classrooms, research showed structured race talks could enhance students' racial literacy, empathy, and social justice orientation (e.g. Sue et al., 2011; Twine & Steinbugler, 2006). For example, Walls and Hall's (2018) focus group study demonstrated the experiences with classroom discussions about race of 22 African American undergraduate students in a dominantly White university. Bryan et al. (2012) focused more specifically on doctoral students, including White/Caucasian, African American, and Hispanic students, and explored their engagement in race discussions in classroom settings. Although the importance of classroom race discussions has been highlighted, such discussions are often silenced (Castagno, 2008). Factors contributing to this silence were identified, including discomfort, fear of offense, and power imbalances (Sue et al., 2009), and color-blind ideologies.

Although race talk has been examined, current research has focused on domestic students. limited research explored how international students uniquely experience and negotiate classroom race conversations. Therefore, this study aims to gain a deeper understand of this group of students. This study asks: 1) What challenges do Chinese international students encounter when participating in discussions about race within U.S. higher education settings? 2) Are there any transnational activities that influence their engagement? 3) How do Chinese international students respond to these discussions?

3. Transnationalism and Transnational Racialization

In this study, I employ transnationalism and transnational racialization as the theoretical framework to help me analyze and understand my participants. Transnationalism is a perspective in migration studies that examines how contemporary migrants maintain active connections between their home country and the new host country. This concept sees migrants' lives as transcending national borders (Vertovec, 2009; Levitt & Schiller, 2004).

In the past, migration often involved more definite relocation–leaving one's home country behind for a new land. Transnationalism recognizes this is no longer the norm, as today's migrants, through advances like the internet and affordable travel, are able to regularly communicate with and visit their home country even after moving abroad (Zhao, 2019). That is to say, a transnational perspective examines and understands social phenomena that transcend traditional boundaries and considers the interconnectedness of individuals, cultures, and societies across national borders (Vertovec, 2009; Levitt & Schiller, 2004). It recognizes that people, ideas, and influences move fluidly between different countries, creating a complex web of relationships that shape individuals' experiences and identities (Smith, 2017). Transnationalism highlights the cross-border activities, networks and patterns of life that connect migrants' home and host societies into a unified social field (Schiller et al., 1992).

For example, a Chinese international student in the U.S. can video chat daily with family in China, return home during school breaks, and keep up with Chinese pop culture and current events online while studying overseas. Their life integrated both Chinese and American places and cultures, spanning geographic boundaries (Portes et al., 1999), and they occupy an 'in-between' space fusing the home and host (Sarroub, 2002).

Within the transnational framework, the idea of a dual frame of reference is important when inquiring into Chinese international students in U.S. classrooms (Guarnizo, 1997). It means that these students have two different lenses they can look through–both their Chinese background and their experiences in the U.S. Having a dual frame of reference allows them to draw from both their Chinese and U.S. toolkits. They don't just rely on what they've learned in the U.S. to make sense of things; they can also tap into the values, perceptions and ways of thinking that come from growing up in China. This matters a lot when they join conversations about race in class. They aren't only shaped by the racial issues and ideas they've encountered in the U.S.; their Chinese side brings different understandings about culture, identity, ethnicity, and nationality that color how they see race too (Kibria, 2000).

Especially relevant to this study's focus on Chinese students' engagement with race discussions is Kim's (2018) conceptualization of transnational racialization, a lens that offers insight into how transnational migrants

understand racial dynamics across national borders. This concept acknowledges that individuals, even before physically arriving in a new country, are already exposed to and influenced by the racial classifications and stereotypes prevalent in the host society (Kim, 2018).

For a Chinese international student, they may absorb ideas about race in the U.S. through Hollywood films, new reports, social media influencers etc. Long before arriving, they form assumptions about the meaning of whiteness, blackness, and Asianness in the U.S. racial order (Kibria, 2000). However, once in the host society, transnational migrants bring the values and perceptions constructed in their home country (Schiller et al., 1992). Preconceived racial notions intersect with actual lived experiences. Direct encounters with racial labeling, stereotypes, and racism complicate original assumptions. Through this intersection, migrants' racial identities are reconstructed in a transnational, evolving process (Lee & Rice, 2007).

The transnational racialization process for Chinese international students is distinct from other migrant groups due to China's unique historical and cultural contexts, and state ideology of *minzu* (ethnicity) which emphasizes ethnic harmony under a unified national identity. This framework contrasts sharply with the U.S. racial discourse rooted in slavery, colonialism, and systemic racism (Omi & Winant, 2014), which may lead Chinese students to initially perceive U.S. racial dynamics through a lens of ethnic categorization rather than racial hierarchy (Kibria, 2011). Additionally, China's historical narratives and media representations, such as anti-African sentiments and portrayals of Blackness in popular culture, further mediate Chinese students' interpretations of U.S. racial discourses (Cheng, 2011). These pre-existing narratives shape their perceptions of racial groups in the U.S., often before they arrive, potentially creating conflicts between their preconceived notions and the realities of racial dynamics they encounter in American classrooms.

I employ a transnational perspective because it challenges simplistic, binary views that limit understanding to the confines of national borders (Gargano, 2009). It encourages the exploration of the ways in which individuals integrate elements from multiple cultural contexts. For Chinese international students, this means that their perceptions, behaviors, and identities are shaped not only by their experiences in the U.S. but also by the cultural values, expectations, and media presentations they bring from China.

4. Methods and Methodology

This study utilized a qualitative case study approach to explore the experiences of two Chinese international graduate students in U.S. university class discussions about race. As Yin (2018) noted, case study research enables an in-depth examination of a phenomenon within its real-world context. The bounded nature of case study aligns with my aim to gain a deeper understanding of these students' perspectives within the context of their specific classes. The key questions leading this study included: What challenges did Chinese international students encounter when participating in discussions about race within U.S. higher education settings? Were there any transnational activities that influence their engagement? How did Chinese international students respond to these discussions?

4.1 Participants

Although I go into more details about each participant in the data analysis section, I offer some relevant information on the two participants to give the readers some context of this study. The two participants in this study were Anqi and Qing (both are pseudonyms), both female Chinese international graduate students at a selective university in the East Coast. Anqi was enrolled in the Communication, Media, and Learning Technologies program, while Qing was studying English Education. I knew them through taking relevant courses with each during the first two years of my doctoral program. I invited them to participate in my study by directly contacting them.

In terms of prior exposure to U.S. racial discourse, the experiences of the two participants differ. Anqi, who completed all her education in China before pursuing graduate studies in the U.S., mentioned in our interviews that race-related discussions were not a prominent part of her academic curriculum in China, although she was exposed to some historical content about racism in the U.S. Much of her knowledge about race in the U.S. was acquired through social media and news outlets. In contrast, Qing attended an international high school in China, where she had American teachers, and later pursued both her undergraduate and graduate studies in the U.S.

Therefore, she felt she had a deeper understanding of U.S. racial issues compared to many other fellow Chinese international students. Further details about the two participants will be provided in the data analysis section.

I acknowledge that this study focused on two participants, which may raise concerns about sample size and generalizability. However, my purpose was not to make broad generalizations but to provide a detailed account of their unique perspectives. My decision to invite two participants aligns deliberately with the principles of case study research, which prioritizes depth over breath and seeks to provide rich, contextual understanding of a phenomenon through intensive examination of specific cases (Stake, 1995; Flyvbjerg 2006). The two participants were purposefully selected because of our shared academic experiences in the same classroom settings, which enabled me to sit in the same classroom with them and examine how their unique perspectives and interactions unfolded within a common context. This not only allowed me to provide deeper insights into their engagement in race-related discussions and their transnational identity construction but also highlight the complexity of these processes within a specific context.

4.2 Data Collection and Analysis

To understand their experience more comprehensively, various sets of data were collected and analyzed. In this section, I offer details on how I collected and approached data.

4.2.1 Interviews

I employed Seidman's (1991) phenomenological interview. This three-stage method explores participants' focused life histories, detailed experiences, and reflective exploration of meaning. Conducting multiple interviews over time allowed my participants to reflect and potentially gain new insights to share. Given my participants' availability, I interviewed each participant three, each lasting approximately 60 minutes. The interviews took place at the beginning, middle, and end of the semester. More specifically, the first interview focused on life history and racial learning in both China and the U.S., and the second and third interviews explored experiences in the classes we took together, focusing on their responses during race-related discussions.

The interviews were conducted either on Zoom or in person, depending on the participants' preferences. The interviews were in Chinese, the participants' and my home language, to ensure clear communication, a comfortable atmosphere, and an accurate expression of experiences and perspectives. Interviews were then transcribed after each session for data analysis.

4.2.2 Assignments

In addition to interviews, I collected written assignments from each participant's courses that involved analysis or reflection on race issues. These included 2 final papers, 2 written reflections, and 10 posts on online discussion boards.

These course assignments provided valuable insights that complemented the interview data, because analyzing documentation uncovered themes and insights beyond what was directly observed or discussed. Assignments offered a snapshot of students' perspectives crafted over time with opportunity for deep reflection, rather than on-the-spot responses required in interviews. The multiple assignments from each participant allowed me to trace the development of their thoughts on race issues over the span of a semester.

4.2.3 WeChat Discussions

Another source of data was WeChat, a social media platform popular in China. This included conversations in a WeChat group for the course I took with Anqi and personal communications on WeChat with both Anqi and Qing. Because WeChat provided a more casual and informal space for communication, these conversations provided candid insights into how students reacted to and made sense of classroom experiences.

4.3 Data Analysis

When I began analyzing the data, I adapted phenomenological tools and followed a whole-part-whole approach (Vagle, 2018). In the initial 'whole' phase, I thoroughly familiarized myself with the entirety of the data by reading through all the materials. This holistic immersion allowed me to have a broad understanding of the participants' experiences before delving deeper. I then moved into the 'part' phase, conducting a line-by-line reading of each dataset to identify significant moments that resonated with and surprised me (Vagle, 2018). I subsequently brought in the transnational theoretical lens to further examine the ways in which the participants experienced race discussions in the U.S. academic setting. Finally, I returned to the 'whole' by examining the multiple datasets in conjunction to gain understanding of the data from different perspectives and uncover potential relationships or patterns that might not have been apparent when analyzing each dataset in isolation. I then shared my analysis for feedback on whether I had accurately captured their experiences and perspectives.

5. Data Discussion

In this section, I discuss the data by presenting the distinct experiences of each participant. Rather than organizing the discussion thematically, the focus here is to detail the specific moments and perspectives of the individual participants.

5.1 Anqi: Silenced When Desiring to Speak

Anqi, who spent most of her life in China with a brief summer at a Cornell program, arrived in the U.S. for her graduate studies. At the time of our interviews, she was 23 and in her second year in the Communication, Media, & Learning Technologies Design program. Being eager to 'gain a deeper understanding of U.S. culture and how American people perceive the world', she enrolled in the same class I attended, the one I mentioned in the introduction. It was a graduate-level course focusing on digital and racial literacies and was co-taught online by two professors, with a group of over thirty students. Despite the diverse ethnic and racial composition of the class, with a notable presence of Black and Latino students, only three were Chinese international students, including Anqi and me. When the professors invited us to talk, students eagerly unmuted to express their opinions or typed comments into the Zoom chat box. However, neither Anqi nor I were the main contributors. Throughout the sessions, her Zoom camera remained off, and while I noticed that she participated in the chat a couple of times, she never unmuted herself to speak.

Contrary to my initial impression of Anqi being shy, our interactions on the WeChat group created by the only three Chinese students in the class, revealed a different side. She was the most talkative member in our WeChat group, frequently sharing sophisticated perspectives. As I got to know her, I realized that she was an active member in the Chinese international student community. I couldn't help but wonder why someone who loved having new experiences and meeting new people chose silence in a discussion-oriented class.

Anqi's perceived silence in classroom race discussions reflected a complex interplay of factors. Her lack of background knowledge on context-specific racial issues posed an initial barrier, as she needed time to research unfamiliar topics brought up in class. She recalled,

> Many racial issues they discussed in class, I wasn't familiar with. Nor did I know it before. When classmates talked, I needed to search for information about it before I could join in the discussion. So I had less time.

In this class, students were invited to share their thoughts by engaging in small media projects, such as creating video reactions to a series called *Uncomfortable Conversation with a Black Man*, recording responses to Titus Kaphar's artwork *Beyond the Myth of Benevolence*, and making collages featuring influential figures in their racial literacy journeys. Having spent most of her life in China, Anqi primarily obtained her understanding of the U.S. through her education in China and online sources. While her knowledge from China familiarized her with certain aspects of U.S. culture, its limitations were acknowledged (Zhang-Wu, 2018), which made it difficult for her to discuss racial issues in the U.S. contexts.

However, Anqi demonstrated agency through transnational practices that allowed her to bridge knowledge gaps by skillfully utilizing resources across geographic spaces (Vertovec, 2009). For instance, Anqi accessed information using both Chinese (Baidu) and American (Google) search engines. By strategically drawing from resources from both her country of origin and her country of settlement, she transcended national borders and embraced diverse sources to handle the complexities of her academic journey.

She also maintained connection to her Chinese identity through our WeChat group, where she could candidly process class content. Although the three of us seemed silent on Zoom, our discussions on the WeChat group were quite productive. We shared thoughts and feelings about what our American peers were discussing, clarified uncertainties about assignments, and kept each other informed about events in China. It was our private sanctuary, where we were unrestrained in sharing anything. To use Anqi's words, the three of us can '抱团取暖' (bao tuan qu nuan, translated as huddle together for warmth) in this WeChat group.

'抱团取暖' is a Chinese expression that has recently become commonly used, especially by young people. In a literal sense, the expression means individuals physically gathering together for warmth in chilly weather, but it is also used metaphorically. In a broader context, it symbolizes unity and mutual support in face of challenges or adversity. She described the WeChat group as a place where 'I didn't have to worry about saying something wrong. But if I were to express myself in class, I would need to think twice and feel nervous. I felt a sense of belonging in the WeChat group'.

It's important to note that reluctance to discuss race is not unique to Chinese international students. Many white students also struggle with openly discussing race in diverse classroom settings (Sue et al., 2009). However, the underlying factors and implications may differ for Chinese international students. As transnational students, they must grapple with reconciling their own cultural understandings of identity and social dynamics with the racialized frameworks prevalent in the U.S. (Fries-Britt et al., 2014). This adds an additional layer of complexity that white students may not face to the same degree.

Thanks to the development of technology, transnational migrants were able to engage in global actions while remaining in their local environments (Zhao, 2019). In this online transnational space, Anqi successfully leveraged digital media to build community (Sawir et al., 2007). Although geographically she was in the U.S., the WeChat group has provided her with a vital tool for maintaining cultural ties, sharing experiences, and offering a sense of belonging even when physically distant from China.

At other times, Anqi felt disconnected when unable to reference her Chinese upbringing in assignments about U.S. racial literacy. Unfamiliar with the U.S. conceptualization of race, she struggled to make personal connections (Dikötter, 2005). One particular assignment that Anqi found challenging was a timeline project. This assignment required students to reflect on two decades of their lives and trace the development of their racial literacy within that time frame.

For Anqi, who was only 23 at the time, this project was difficult as she had to dig deep into her memories, reaching back to a time when she was merely three years old. In our WeChat group, Anqi playfully commented, 'I plan to start by writing about my birth'.

Being 23 was not the only factor that made this assignment particularly challenging, as she commented with some frustration in the WeChat group, 'I was born in a country where there is no racism and ethnic minority groups are even superior. Martin Luther King was in the textbook. But that's it. I can't think of anything else.'

Some clarifications here are necessary. When Anqi said that 'ethnic minority groups are even superior,' she was referring to the policies in China that gave preferential treatments to ethnic minorities. For example, one well-known policy is that ethnic minority students get bonus points in College Entrance Examination. In this excerpt, the statement 'I can't think of anything else' stood out to me. Although racial hierarchy exists in China (Pfafman et al., 2015), compared to in the U.S., racial issues are less discussed in China. She explained,

> I feel like I haven't received any racial education since I was young. For us Chinese, there isn't a concept of race, but we have *minzu* (ethnicity)... We (Han people) and the ethnic groups are part of the same collective. We are all Chinese.

Given China's differing conceptualization of *minzu* versus race (Dikötter, 2005), Anqi felt this assignment discounted her transnational upbringing. This comparison also highlighted transnationals' dual frame of reference (Guarnizo, 1997). Anqi was drawing contrasts between the Chinese ethnocultural paradigm she was socialized in, versus the racialization paradigms predominant in the U.S. Her reflections revealed how transnational students interpreted and negotiated their experiences through more than one cultural lens.

In contrast, Anqi mentioned an open-ended poem activity from another course that allowed her to draw from her childhood in China. She modeled after a poem called *Where I am From* and wrote her poem.

Where I Am From

I come from the neighborhood with houses

and many friends

who play hide-and-seek around the houses

I come from the wet concrete road on rainy days

and the grandmother selling gardenias by the roadside

I come from a lively family

and countless New Year's Eve gatherings together

and the happy faces of every family member

I come from the comfort of food

from the hot carp noodle soup

from a bowl of millet congee

that warms the palm of my hand

I come from the endless curiosity about the world

and the courage and love to explore it

She recalled how she drew inspiration for the poem,

I stayed in Changsha for a while when I was a kid. I remember in the spring, there were always many gardenias and street vendors who sold gardenia bracelets and pouches. I always feel that my childhood was filled with the fragrance of gardenias. So when I wrote the poem, I asked my parents to send childhood photos. I also facetimed with them to get inspiration.

This project enabled Anqi to reconnect with her parents virtually to gather inspiration for the poem. She appreciated the chance to process her identity through a self-reflective assignment allowing for transnational learners' identity negotiation (Kim, 2012).

Anqi's sense of alienation also arose from the classroom climate. Perceiving that the Asian community was neglected, she felt discouraged from participating (Museus & Park, 2015). She reflected,

I knew Asian people are discriminated against, even before I came here. In this class, I feel that they don't think Asians are treated unequally. They don't care about them at all. Maybe not not at all, but

they care just to be polite. I feel like an other, and I don't want to seem like I am judging issues in other people's country.

Anqi's reflection echoes the concept of transnational racialization (Kim, 2018), which suggests that transnational migrants have an awareness of their racialized identity in the U.S. before their arrival. In Anqi's case, she was already conscious of the discrimination against Asians, thus having a feeling of an 'other' in the U.S. This feeling in the larger U.S. social context coincided with the classroom environment. As I observed, many topics and conversations in that class were around Black and Latino communities. Little time was designated to discussing the Asian communities in the U.S. Feeling neglected, she did not want to steer the conversation toward issues that people paid little attention to.

 The statement that she didn't want to seem like passing judgements to other people's country (i.e., the U.S.) reflected not only her racialized identity as an Asian in the U.S., but also her identity as a Chinese international student. In other words, she didn't want to engage in conversation about race because of both her otherized identity as an Asian in the U.S. society and her non-citizen status as an international student.

Her concern may be eased, as Anqi noted, 'if there had been more Chinese students, and we discussed with each other, it might have been better'. This observation reflected the impact of class demographics on her willingness to participate in class (Rocca, 2010). Having more Chinese students in the classroom could have created a space where she was able to have a closer connection to her country of origin. In this shared cultural context, the discussions might align more closely with her own experiences and perspectives as a transnational student. At the end of the course, Anqi believed,

> This course has given me a deeper sense of alienation, rather than bringing me closer to other classmates or making me feel more equal. Instead, it has given me a deeper sense of inequality and distance.

Even though the professors likely did not intend to alienate students, the course experience did not foster a greater sense of community and belonging. Her report of a 'deeper sense of inequality and distance' speaks to the difficulties she faced in reconciling her transnational identity and experiences within the primarily U.S.-centric discussions on race. As my analysis of the data indicated, Anqi struggled to make personal connections to the course material and assignments due to her differing conceptualizations of race and ethnicity from her Chinese upbringing.

Anqi's alienation also seems to stem from a perception that the course neglected the experiences and perspectives of Asian students like herself. The curriculum and classroom dynamic did not provide adequate diversity, representation, and space for Anqi to meaningfully engage and feel her transnational identity was valued. Her experience highlighted the complex challenges transnational students face in navigating discussions on race and identity within U.S. academic contexts that may not fully account for their unique transnational perspectives and lived experiences.

Being in the same class, I resonated deeply with Anqi's experience and the sentiments she shared. During Zoom sessions with fellow Black and Latino students discussing topics pertaining to their communities, I found myself quiet despite the desire to speak up. Much like what Anqi has shared, my reluctance to speak in class had to do with my limited knowledge on certain topics that were raised, concerns about inadvertently causing offense with my perspectives, and a desire to avoid being perceived as judgmental towards others' countries. I wondered if other Chinese international students found themselves in similar situations. In the next section, I discuss the experience of Qing, in which I found both similarities and differences.

5.2 Qing: Neither Here nor There, but In-between

I met Qing from another course, Teaching English in Diverse Cultural Context, in which we had the opportunity to engage in various race discussions. It was an in-person course with a few online sessions, but because I was studying remotely from China at the time, I attended all sessions on Zoom while Qing was in the U.S. In one session when we were all online, I sent a direct message to Qing in the Zoom chat and introduced myself.

Different from Anqi, Qing attended an international high school in China. Compared to Chinese students in mainstream high schools, Qing had teachers from the U.S. and took courses that aligned more closely with the U.S. high school curriculum. After high school, she came to the U.S. to pursue undergraduate studies in Education Studies and graduate studies in English Education. Before starting her graduate program, Qing worked at an NGO where she interacted closely with Black students.

Like Anqi, Qing saw the value of having prior knowledge. What was different about Qing was that while Anqi thought she lacked such prior knowledge, Qing was confident that she had more prior knowledge than many Chinese international students because of her educational experience. Because of this, she recalled that she didn't engage in many transnational activities to study for this particular course.

However, Qing actively engaged in various transnational activities outside of the classroom. She listened to both Chinese and English podcasts on various topics. She shared her student teaching experiences on Chinese social media platforms, to Chinese people both in China and the U.S. She also hosted book clubs on WeChat where Chinese educators in China and the U.S. met regularly. According to Qing, she 'wanted to connect Chinese educators in both countries and make space so that we can all learn from one another'. Although she actively participated in transnational activities where she connected with home while in the U.S., it seemed that these activities are restrained to her daily and social lives. In formal educational settings, her transnational activities were less salient.

Our interviews unveiled complex negotiations between conformity and authenticity in her engagement. Though seemingly outspoken, Qing said, 'I was actually disciplined to a certain extent by the so-called Western political correctness. I know what to say and what not to say, so it looks like I'm more outspoken'. Her conscious adherence to U.S. norms reflected similar scholarship on international students' adaptive communication for integration (Young & Schartner, 2014). Yet Qing questioned if this reflected true outspokenness, expressing that,

> But is this really being outspoken? I think not necessarily. Because I am speaking according to the rules of their game. I used to consider what they (Americans) think after hearing what I've said or how they would react within a U.S. context.

This constant internal negotiation between voicing her perspective and accommodating others' expectations reflected a dual frame of reference (Guarnizo, 1997) and an in-between position of Qing who led dual lives (Portes et al., 1999).

As a Chinese student in the U.S., Qing held two cultural frames in her mind and was aware of different rules of engagement, styles of communication, and worldviews between China and the U.S. On the surface, she appeared outspoken in classroom race discussions, sharing her views openly. However, she critically examined this outward outspokenness and wondered if it truly reflected her authentic perspective. She could not rely purely on her own outlook shaped by her Chinese background, but must filter commentary through an American lens. In these class discussions, she dealt with the tension between maintaining her cultural authenticity and conforming to the norms of the cultural milieu in which she found herself.

This feeling of in-betweenness became more salient when she discussed these race-related topics with her family in China. She shared her observation,

> When my mom sees the world…her perspective on issues has always been rooted in China…When I talk to my American peers, I found that they tended to unconsciously center the narrative around the U.S. I feel that because I went to college here, and I've been here for almost 8 years, I am a little resistant to both Chinese and American narratives... I think what's changed is that compared to my mom, my Chineseness is lower…It's like, I am moving between two centers, and naturally I can see that both China-centric and U.S.-centric views are problematic.

She noted her mother's China-centric views, while her American peers centered the U.S. narrative, and she felt 'resistant to both Chinese and American narratives'. Her perceptions were not bounded by national borders, which signified her deterritorialized identities as a transnational (Vertovec, 2009).

Realizing a diminished 'Chineseness', Qing was by no means indicating that her Chineseness was erased or replaced; rather, this transformation represented a constant and complex identity work through years of transnational living. Having spent a significant portion of her formative years in the U.S., Qing found herself having 'a higher Americanness' through processes of assimilation, adaptation, and integration. Bringing her perceptions developed at home to the U.S., the interplay of these two cultural forces brought about identities that were neither here nor there, but in between (Schiller et al., 1992).

Qing's emotional response during the final class presentation further captured the in-between space in which she resided. 'Who Am I'? As she read the only line on a slide, Qing's voice choked. She unpacked this moment, questioning the need for a strong sense of belonging:

> Living here and having the discussions made me feel that I didn't belong anywhere. But I also thought, do I really need that? Why do people need to strongly belong? I'm not saying that I have no sense of belonging to China. What I meant is that is the loss of a sense of belonging a bad thing?

Her questioning the need to belong showed how transnationals often reconfigured traditional notions of belonging. Qing appreciated both her lingering China ties and growing U.S. connections. With two feet in two worlds, rigid categorization gave way to more fluid subjectivities. Her evolving perspective signaled a shift toward a more fluid, flexible, understanding of self-situated between cultures.

Much like Anqi's comparison between assignments in two different courses, Qing, in this presentation, compared a Teaching of Reading course she was taking with the same instructor. She observed,

> The Teaching of Reading course is more technical and I could apply what I've learned directly into my classroom. But the course we took together was more related to culture and society. I felt marginalized, or that the feeling of being outside was all too obvious.

In the Teaching of Reading course, the focus was on concrete pedagogical skills, which aligned closely with Qing's role as a student teacher in that semester. There was a sense of continuity and perhaps a smoother integration of her own previous educational experiences, both in China and in the U.S., as she mentioned. However, in the course examining sociocultural issues, her transnational background positioned her as examining unfamiliar discourses and societal norms.

As she further elaborated, the course we took together claimed to explore diverse cultures, yet overlooked Asian voices. Qing critiqued how Asians were broadly lumped into one category, noting 'in this class, we talked a little bit about Asians, but I felt like all Asians were lumped together'. Similar findings are presented in other research, which argue that Asian perspectives are frequently 'glossed over' in diversity discourses (e.g., Museus & Park, 2015).

From a transnational perspective, this erasure severed crucial connections to transnational students' heritage, as their cross-border lives were ignored. Despite living in the U.S. classroom, students like Qing retain close ties to home culture, and yet the U.S.-centric curriculum disregards these hybrid transnational realities.

As we ended our interview, she concluded that her knowledge of American culture brought a stronger sense of in-between feeling, a feeling of more marginalized. She noted, 'the more you know this country, the more marginalized you feel'.

6. Conclusion

This study's findings mirrored the findings of other research on international students' classroom participation, that is, their pattern or willingness to participate should not be reduced to English proficiency and culture (e.g. Cheng, 2000; Zheng, 2010; Zhou et al., 2005). Although Anqi and Qing exhibited varying degrees of reluctance when engaging in race-related conversations, neither of them mentioned language as a factor that hindered their participation. Other elements, such as background knowledge, classroom dynamics, and educational background, were more salient throughout the interviews.

When handling race discussions, the two participants' approaches differed. While Anqi more actively drew resources from both China and the U.S. to help her understand course content, Qing engaged in fewer transnational activities. However, both were more active participants in transnational activities outside of the classroom. Further, despite these courses' aim to promote inclusion and cultural awareness, the two Chinese international students often experienced a heightened sense of marginalization and in-betweenness. As U.S. universities annually welcome numerous Chinese international students, there is a need to create a learning environment that enables them to grow and thrive. As research has shown the benefits of culturally relevant teaching (Ladson-Billings, 1995), this study highlights the need for educators and institutions to incorporate this pedagogy through a more globally inclusive, transnational lens that acknowledges and validates the experiences and knowledge of Chinese international students.

This first includes an epistemological shift aways from a deficit view towards Chinese international students and expect them to achieve academic success (Ladson-Billings, 1995). To achieve this, faculty development is key to raise awareness of varied participation styles and implement inclusive practices that nurture international students' integration (Washburn & Hargis, 2017). This combats potentially harmful assumptions that silence equates to disengagement or deficiency. This shift moves beyond assumptions that minoritized students need to assimilate to dominant cultural paradigms, and instead nurture the assets of all students (Museus & Maramba 2011).

In practice, adopting transnational curricula is key for fostering learning contexts where Chinese international students feel recognized and able to meaningfully contribute (Gopal, 2011), which aligns with the goal of culturally relevant teaching to empower students in various ways (Ladson-Billings, 1995). When it comes more specifically to race discussions, rather than assume international students lack necessary U.S. racial literacy, educators must proactively value the multifaceted perspectives these students bring from their diverse national and cultural backgrounds. As examples, faculty can purposefully incorporate international and cross-cultural sources, invite Chinese international students to share their experiences and viewpoints, and design activities and assignments that elicit students' transnational lived experiences. Pushing for greater inclusion of varied racial viewpoints beyond just U.S.-centric ones enables classrooms to embrace the heterogeneity within diverse student populations (Guo & Guo, 2017).

While institutions should work to cultivate more inclusive learning environments, proactive steps by students themselves can help mitigate feelings of alienation. Anqi's example underscores the value of leveraging transnational practices, such as utilizing diverse information sources and creating supportive communities like the WeChat group. By actively bridging their knowledge and experiences across cultural contexts, Chinese international students can develop strategies to process course content and engage more meaningfully, even when classroom discussions feel disconnected. Furthermore, seeking out or forming peer support networks can provide a sense of belonging and a space for candid reflection.

This study displays how two Chinese students navigated classroom race discussions and their perceptions on their experience. Future research may track students over time to reveal how perspectives evolve through prolonged cultural exchange. Additionally, studies with other international and domestic student groups could uncover similarities or differences across diverse populations. By addressing these areas, future research can provide greater clarity into how educational institutions can equitably support transnational students navigating complex racial landscapes.

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