



## **“Why Do They Hate Us?”: Learning from the Racialized Experiences of Chinese International Students in the United States during COVID-19**

Charles Liu, *Michigan State University, USA*

Cheng-Ching Liu, *Michigan State University, USA*

Ravichandran Ammigan, *University of Delaware, USA*

Michael D. Kaplowitz, *Michigan State University, USA*

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### **ABSTRACT**

*In this qualitative study, we explore Chinese international students' overall racialized experiences at the start of the COVID-19 pandemic at a predominantly white institution (PWI) in the United States. Using in-depth one-on-one interviews and a focus group, we shed light on the impacts of xenophobic incidents against Chinese international students and how institutions of higher learning could better serve all of their students. Three main themes emerged from our findings: (a) racial resiliency in the face of discrimination, (b) positive self-concept through group support, and (c) increased motivation to advocate for themselves. Implications from this study provide a basis for how institutions could design, shape, and engage in initiatives that improve success for Chinese international and other minoritized students.*

**Keywords:** Chinese international students; Diversity, equity, inclusion, and belonging; Social justice; Student experience; Student success

## INTRODUCTION

The year before the COVID-19 pandemic struck, more than 1 million international students enrolled in U.S. colleges and universities, accounting for about 6 percent of all students in U.S. higher education (IIE, 2019). In 2019, 60% of international students in the United States were from China, representing an increase of 500% from 59,939 in 2001 to 372,532 in 2019 (IIE, 2022). At the same time, about 65 percent of students at U.S. universities and colleges are Asian and/or of Asian descent (IIE, 2022). However, the COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated U.S.-China geopolitical tensions and, in turn, affected how Chinese international students are (negatively) perceived and treated by some in the United States (Lee & Haupt, 2021).

Between March 2020 and March 2021—xenophobic incidents across the United States created fear in Chinese international students' academic and personal lives (Koo et al., 2021). According to the U.S. Centers for Disease and Control Prevention (2022), over a third of students in the United States experienced racism before or during the COVID-19 pandemic, with the highest levels reported by students of Asian heritage. Our study focused on the lived experiences of Chinese international students at a large, public (R1) university in the Midwestern region of the United States. We listened to the stories of Chinese students experiencing racial discrimination during the start of the COVID-19 pandemic. Our study aims to add to the scholarship on Chinese international students' experiences, anti-Chinese/anti-Asian racism in the United States, and the movement of Chinese international students (and others) towards increased self-advocacy.

Next, we continue with a brief review of the literature on Chinese international students' experiences in the United States. We describe our study design and methods before discussing our results. Three main themes emerged about the students confronting the increased anti-Chinese bias: racial resiliency when confronted by racism; group support of positive self-concept; and motivation to advocate for themselves. Likewise, the results support increased work on combating the adverse impacts of the model minority stereotype as well as on work supporting minoritized people (re)claiming their racial identities. We conclude by discussing some recommendations for supporting student success for Chinese international students, other minoritized students, and all students on higher education campuses.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### **Historical racism against Asians in the United States**

Today's Chinese international students in the United States join a long, contentious history of caustic sentiment against people of Asian descent.

As Museus (2014b) highlighted, historical oppression against Chinese people in the United States goes back to the outright systemic racism of excluding them from various labor markets by the 1882 Chinese Exclusion Act. The stated purpose of the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882 was to prevent/limit Chinese people from entering the United States (History, 2018). That period of systemic oppression against those of Chinese descent, particularly men and emigrants (including women and children) of Asian descent in the mid-1880s, found new arrivals of people of Chinese descent facing discrimination that worsened after they arrived in the United States. It is important to note that not just Asians and/or Chinese immigrants experienced this level of state-sponsored racism in the United States.

The histories of Asian immigrants and non-immigrants in the United States are full of examples of discriminatory harm against them. The Japanese internment camps during WWII stripped away the rights of ethnically Japanese American citizens. The Los Angeles race riots of 1992 saw Koreatown looted and destroyed. The September 11, 2001, attacks unleashed a wave of racial/religious backlash against people of Middle Eastern heritage and other racial identities by individuals across the country.

In the 21st century, it appears that a new period of systematic oppression (e.g., neo-racism) against Chinese people was catalyzed by the COVID-19 pandemic. This period saw a rise in worldwide xenophobic incidents of Asian hate (Kalkin et al., 2021). Indeed, the COVID crisis laid bare ongoing anti-Asian racial discrimination, even for Asian Americans who are citizens of the United States, because the hatred and oppression did not differentiate between Asian non-U.S. citizens and U.S. citizens (Haft & Zhou, 2021; Kalkin et al., 2021; Lang, 2021; Tang, 2021). Associated Press (2023) reported on the challenge of being Asian in the United States pointing out the tragic stabbing in the head of an Asian college student while riding a bus.

### **Enrollment Decline of Chinese International Students**

Despite international student enrollment enjoying large increases in U.S. universities during the last several decades, Chinese international student enrollment began declining during the Trump administration (Laws & Ammigan, 2020). The COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated the decrease in international student enrollment, with projections of a continued decline in international student enrollment in the United States (IIE, 2021). U.S. enrollment of international students from China dropped in 2020 for the first time since 1970 (IIE, 2021). Despite Chinese international students contributing an estimated \$15 billion in tuition to U.S. institutions of higher learning in 2019, 55% of the American public—with a noticeable partisan

majority (69%) being Republicans—voiced support for limiting Chinese students' ability to study in the United States (Silver, 2021). Currently, 290,086 Chinese international students are studying in universities and colleges across the 50 states of the United States (IIE, 2022).

### **Racialized Experiences of Chinese International Students**

Scholars have highlighted that Chinese international students with limited English language proficiency (or having an accent) in the United States are frequently subject to some form of discrimination (Sam, 2001; Xiong et al., 2021). Discrimination occurs in many forms (e.g., laughing at their accent or ignoring their existence) and often depends on the subjective perception of others (Schmitt et al., 2014; Ma, 2020). Perceived discrimination, which is not uncommon on U.S. campuses, has been known to negatively impact the cross-cultural adaptation and the mental and physical well-being of Chinese international students (Lee, 2005; Wei et al., 2008). A recent study of 192 Chinese international students across the United States found that about 33% of these students reported experiencing discrimination in their local campus communities; in contrast, 66% of the same respondents reported feeling discrimination from the media (Ma & Miller, 2021).

### ***Impacts of Racial Discrimination***

The adverse impacts of discrimination and bias on Chinese international students in U.S. higher education are real. Shadowen et al. (2019) reported that perceived discrimination experienced by most Chinese international students was positively associated with anxiety, depressive symptoms, and acculturative stress—and negatively correlated with social support. These authors stress the importance and unmet need for institutions of higher learning to provide adequate social, networking, and wellness activities and resources for their international student communities.

A recent analysis highlighted alleviating the psychological adjustment of international students by (a) addressing culture shocks; (b) providing wellness programming; and (c) building institutional capacity to support students in counseling and advising (Ammigan et al., 2022). For example, Chinese international students will feel heard about their racial discriminatory experiences when campus professionals (e.g., faculty members or advisors) share similar experiences with them as well as provide strategies for self-care (Erkut & Mokros, 1984; Harris, 2019; Lockwood, 2006; Melnyk et al., 2021).

Interestingly, Iwamoto and Liu (2010) observed some Chinese international students beginning to cultivate racial resiliency skills in their

community of support when they faced discrimination incidents in the United States.

### **Theoretical Framework**

Our work in this study is grounded on Lee and Rice's (2007) theory of neo-racism (or a new type of racism) with the use of the 'Chinese virus' label against Chinese international students during the COVID-19 pandemic (e.g., Tang, 2021). Our work is situated within empirically- tested neo-racism theory (J. J. Lee & Rice, 2007). The theory of neo-racism—also called the 'new racism'—encompasses current white people's bias, prejudice, and discrimination against individuals and groups of people of color based on their language, culture, and ethnicity (J. J. Lee & Rice, 2007). At its core, neo-racism describes a framework in which white people seek to maintain cultural and national superiority by increasing marginalization against groups deemed subordinate to people who self-identify as part of white dominant groups (J. J. Lee & Rice, 2007). Neo-racism seemingly tries to justify points of view and policies of assimilating (or normalizing) the "unnaturalness" of subordinate groups/people of color to the so-called "natural" characteristics of the dominant group/whiteness.

The neo-racism theoretical framework provided the researchers with a "natural v. unnatural" framework to understand bias incidents and prejudice faced by Chinese international students at a PWI in the U.S. Midwest during COVID. That is, instead of being dismissed as isolated incidents, random attacks, or the work of a few 'bad actors,' the racial discrimination events experienced by Chinese international students, we believe, may be better understood as symptoms and evidence of neo-racism and that doing so may illuminate ways for educational institutions to better address such racism moving forward.

## **METHODS**

### **Research Design**

In this study, we employed a generic qualitative inductive approach (Kostere & Kostere, 2021) to better understand and discover racialized experiences of Chinese international students. This study's generic qualitative methodology is warranted because it frees the researcher to study the human experience. Kostere and Kostere (2021) explained that the generic qualitative approach does not follow strict philosophical assumptions in the traditionally established qualitative methodologies but rather seeks to discover and understand the perspectives as well as worldviews of the people involved. Generic qualitative research strives to understand how people make meaning of a phenomenon or situation based on what works best for them. This

approach also seeks to understand “how people construct meaning interrelated to themselves, others, social situations, and world occurrences” (Kostere & Kostere, 2021, p. 3). Most importantly, the fluidity of the research topic and doing research during a pandemic align with using a generic qualitative approach intended to be exploratory and generative (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Kostere & Kostere, 2021).

### **Context and Participants**

We used in-depth, one-on-one interviews together with a focus group to learn from Chinese international students at a PWI in the Midwestern United States about their experiences with racism and bias during the start of the COVID-19 pandemic. Our university’s Institutional Review Board approved the study, its data collection approach, and its informed consent process. All participants volunteered their time without any monetary incentives for their participation. All participants self-identified as Chinese, an international undergraduate student, and a first-generation college student. Undergraduate is a crucial inclusion criterion where many Chinese international graduate students are at the study site. Participants ranged in age from 18 to 25 years.

We recruited participants for this study using the snowball sampling method. Through email and social media channels (e.g., WeChat), we recruited campus (Chinese) undergraduate student leaders to participate in the study and asked them to invite their friends to participate. The recruitment efforts resulted in 40 university students completing an online survey to express interest in participating in the study. Only half (20) of the potential participants who expressed interest met all criteria to participate in the study. Of those 20 potential participants, only eight were available to participate in the in-depth interviews, and only five were willing to participate in the subsequent focus group discussion. The focus group discussion was used to help illuminate issues that Chinese international students raised individually by warranted being raised and discussed in a group context to reduce feelings of isolation and provide group support for each other.

The study’s lead author conducted the in-depth interviews and the focus group, fluent in Mandarin and English. Participants were encouraged to speak freely in Mandarin and/or English of their choosing so they could use the most comfortable language to fully express their thoughts and feelings. We assigned Chinese pseudonyms for each to provide participants anonymity and honor their Chinese culture and racial identity.

**Table 1***Chinese International Students Study Participants*

<u>Pseudonym</u>	<u>Academic Level</u>
Chuanyue*	Senior
Feng*	Junior
Lingxiao*	Senior
Yinglun	Junior
Yinyuntong*	Senior
Zelei	Senior
Zhejiao	Senior
Zheyi*	Senior

*Note.* \* Student participated in both individual interviews and focus group discussion. The rest only participated in individual interviews.

**Data Collection and Analytical Process**

Eight in-depth interviews were conducted between January 2022 to April 2022. Each in-depth interview lasted roughly 60 to 75 minutes. In March 2022, after most of the individual interviews had been done, we conducted a focus group. The focus group was designed to use group dynamics to generate additional insights and perspectives, shed new light on some things raised during the individual interviews, and examine whether more interviews or focus groups were needed. The focus group also helps us determine whether we reached data saturation from our participants (e.g., Guest et al., 2017). Because of the nature of the COVID-19 pandemic, the focus group was conducted ‘virtually’ using Zoom (a virtual video chat platform). Focus group participants were told that the session would be audio-recorded, translated, and transcribed into text.

All study participants were informed that complete confidentiality could not be guaranteed (especially for focus group participants). Therefore, we strongly encouraged focus group participants to respect other participants’ confidentiality and urged them to abide by the notion that “what is said in the group stays in the group” (Kostere & Kostere, 2021, p. 45). All participants were informed that direct quotes from their interviews/focus group may be used in the study, analyses, and publications but that such quotations would

not be linked to an identifiable participant. While interview participants were reminded that there are no right or wrong answers to our questions before beginning the interviews, focus group participants were reminded of some ground rules for the discussion, including that we all should withhold our judgments when a participant was sharing their stories as and that we should try to avoid 1) interrupting, 2) talking over, 3) arguing, or 4) monopolizing time. Doing so, we believe, helped participants feel that their input and stories would be respected and that they had sufficient time and space to share their experiences and viewpoints.

***Data Analysis Process***

It was important to us that our research approach helped our research participants maintain and even develop positive self-concepts about themselves and their identities. Furthermore, we worked to help our participants move beyond immersion within their Chinese racial communities on campus towards being able to “successfully connect with other populations...without abandoning their newly redefined racial identity” (Patton et al., 2016, p. 110).

**Table 2**  
*Data Analysis Process*

	Data Analysis	Analytical Process
Step 1	Coding	Translate and transcribe individual interviews and one focus group discussion into a Microsoft Word document.
Step 2	Develop Themes	Upload Microsoft Word documents into Dedoose to highlight text segments and similar patterns throughout the transcripts.
Step 3	Identify Categories	Categorizing themes and parsing out phrases—in both individual interviews and a focus group discussion—that were shared by the participants.
Step 4	Researcher reflexivity	Thicken the thematic analysis with the researcher’s field notes.
Step 5	Validity	Conduct member checks and consult with a community of scholars.

*Note.* Adapted the coding process for qualitative research (Saldaña, 2021)

The semi-structured interview guide, as well as our focus group discussion guide, was designed to allow flexibility for exploring relevant themes as well as diving deep into topics, issues, and experiences raised by



the participants. For example, we asked participants directly about their racialized experiences on campus, typically by asking a salient open-ended question (e.g., What does being a Chinese person mean to you?) with subsequent follow-up questions and prompts (e.g., How does being Chinese impact you as a student here?).

Our iterative analytical approach encompassed four key elements of qualitative research coding (Saldaña, 2021) (see Table 2 above). Our steps one to four were circular and repeated multiple times with each transcript to develop salient categorized themes and representative quotations. This iterative process helped ensure high-quality analyses.

### **Trustworthiness and Triangulation**

Participant checking of analytical memos, transcripts, translations, and coding categories can help confirm and validate study results (Kostere & Kostere, 2021; Rossman & Rallis, 2017). Therefore, to enhance the trustworthiness of our findings, we asked each participant to check the translations and transcriptions from their individual interviews. Later, we also asked them to reflect on the themes identified in their interview and asked them to help us correct any errors, big or small, to confirm the accuracy of our data. We also provided the focus group participants with our written notes and observations to help ensure that we did not mishear or misinterpret their stories. The focus group participants were also given an opportunity to edit or expand their stories. In the end, all the translations, transcriptions, and themes were reviewed and approved by the participants without any major modifications—only some small typos of names and locations in the transcription need to be corrected.

### ***Triangulation***

We also used triangulation to corroborate, confirm, and cross-validate this study's findings or derived themes. Namely, we used member-checking of transcripts/notes/analytical memos based on their interview and/or focus group (Kostere & Kostere, 2021; Rossman & Rallis, 2017; Saldaña, 2021). We also sought counsel from scholars in the field who have conducted similar research with empirical research on Chinese international students to ensure that our process was sound (i.e., to negate and address any confirmation bias).

## **FINDINGS**

This study of Chinese international students' racialized experiences (e.g., racial discrimination) during the COVID-19 pandemic revealed three major themes: 1) racial resiliency, 2) positive self-concept, and 3) motivation

to advocate for themselves against racial discrimination (see Appendix for a mapping of key quotations (exemplars) on the revealed thematic categories). The first two themes were drawn from individual interviews, while the third theme was drawn from individual interviews and the focus group discussion.

### **Building Racial Resiliency**

One key theme emerging from the data was that the Chinese international students reported ultimately feeling more resilient and empowered by their racial identity when facing discrimination. Instead of giving in to unfair/untrue stereotypes about who they are, the Chinese international student participants reported developing better (deeper) self-understanding of their racial identity because external forces push them to think harder. This affirmation of racial resiliency (Harris, 2019; Iwamoto & Liu, 2010) was evident when we asked participants what being a Chinese person means to you? We found that our research participants reflected on the racial resiliency of their experiences in the United States. As Yinglun, a junior student, put it:

When I saw this question, I thought about it for 10 mins because I am afraid of my racial identity because of the current US-China political tensions affect how Americans may treat me more hostile than with another Asian person.

Feng, a junior psychology major, and Zelei, an undergraduate senior, shared that Chinese international student felt more aware of their racial identity in the United States than back in China. As he stated:

I am more aware of my Chinese racial identity because everyone is Chinese back home, but when I am here [in the U.S.], I am the minority....

Feng also shared that because of his awareness of his racial identity, he is keener on the racial issues in the United States and has authentic conversations with his peers about race in America.

On the other hand, Zelei shared that he felt a sense of racial affirmation both in China and in the U.S. Zelei attributes this sense of mutual affirmation due to his experience of growing up as well as during the COVID-19 pandemic in a metropolitan city in China where he observed diverse groups of people who speak different languages hang out with one another, embracing each other's ethnic and racial differences. As Zelei observed,

During the [COVID-19] pandemic, I see Chinese people hang out with Latino people, and they play well together. I believe people identify with their race when they are outside their racial identity group.

Especially during the COVID-19 pandemic, Zheyi, Zhejiao, Feng, and Yingyuntong reported feeling most validated about their Chinese racial identity when they are with their peers from the same/similar backgrounds. In the most recent 2022 Lunar New Year celebration, Chinese international students were able to celebrate this significant cultural tradition instead of partaking in one of America's most favorite pastimes, the Superbowl. Superbowl LVI fell on the same weekend as the Lunar New Year. So, Chinese international students spent time video chatting with their families back home as opposed to watching the Superbowl on television with their American friends. Here, the participants vocalized that coming together to celebrate their cultural tradition (i.e., Lunar New Year) affirmed their racial heritage with their families back home, as well as strengthened their racial resilience in the U.S. Furthermore, this finding highlighted the interconnectedness of Chinese international students' racialized identity and their ethnic identity; because, in the U.S., regardless of ethnicity, Chinese students are racialized as Asians (J. Kim, 2012).

The most explicit examples of participants' racialized experiences as Chinese international students were shared by participants reflecting on how they felt their Chinese racial identity being a part of who they are, where they came from, and how they identify with their country as home. All participants shared and reminisced about their racial identity, how they experienced life as a Chinese person back home, and how their Chinese peers affirmed their group identities while living and studying abroad in the United States, especially during the COVID-19 pandemic.

### **Fostering Positive Self-Concept**

Having some academic success during the COVID-19 pandemic, students also mentioned that continuous positive self-concept and group identity of their race (Chinese) help them feel that they are not alone in surviving the pandemic. Specifically, student participants attributed their positive self-identity development to their involvement in ethnic and cultural student organizations while others attributed a positive attribution to their Chinese group identity when they were able to celebrate their cultural history and traditions.

Zhejiao, an undergraduate senior, noted that her community of support stems from her cultural identity group (Chinese Undergraduate Student Association or CUSA).

CUSA gave me a voice to be who I am and how I feel like a Chinese person living outside of my home country... I feel comfortable sharing my true feelings with my people.

Similarly, Lingxiao, an undergraduate senior, and Yinglun, a junior standing, felt grateful to be Chinese.

In summary, they explained that being Chinese made them feel a stronger sense of racial and ethnic identity because the university celebrates diverse major holidays despite it being mostly White/Eurocentric (e.g., Thanksgiving or Christmas). Phrased another way, they have become more aware of their racial identity (Asian) because the university celebrates their cultural heritage once a year in a secluded microscopic area of the campus—for example, the Lunar New Year celebration is hosted in a basement of a campus residential hall—that traditionally would be weeklong celebratory events throughout campus as well as greater community in their home country. Still, during the COVID-19 pandemic away from home, they felt very much cared for when the students themselves mustered their will (i.e., through student organizations) to host Lunar New Year celebrations on campus, in person. This finding suggests that COVID-19 exacerbated the Chinese international students' homesickness and disconnect from others. Hence, these cultural celebrations became more significant in fostering a sense of belonging/community for them.

### **Motivation to Advocacy**

Two male students talked about their pandemic experience, where they had great support in improving their English proficiency, Zheyi, an undergraduate senior, reflected:

During the COVID-19 pandemic, I used the writing center to help convey my racialized experiences for class assignments. I felt empowered to use exact words to share my innermost feelings.

Additionally, Zelei, another undergraduate, said:

I entered the university under the English Language Program because I needed more help learning the language. Especially during the COVID-19 pandemic, I need more help figuring out how to advocate for myself in case of racial discrimination.

In summary, both Zheyi and Zelei mentioned that the true reason behind enhancing their command of the English language is to know how to advocate for themselves against racial discrimination. This finding implies that COVID-19 gave them a sense of resiliency to seek extra help, and receiving campus resources (i.e., the writing center) increased their motivation to learn even when English was not their primary language.

### ***Advocacy Against Racial Discrimination***

The focus group dynamics (Guest et al., 2017; Kaplowitz & Hoehn, 2001) led to our further learning of different information about Chinese international students wanting to advocate for their racial discrimination incidents. Participants Lingxiao and Yingyuntong, after the group discussion of COVID-19 racial discrimination, both reported:

Why do they hate us? They hated us because we are Chinese. We are more targeted because the news is spreading information that all Chinese people carry the Coronavirus, and it is all my fault because of my race!

At the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, Yingyuntong felt targeted because of her race and went on to say,

I have been studying in the U.S. since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic and have not returned to China. What makes people think I am China Virus?

Similarly, both Zelei and Yinglun shared racial discrimination in or around March 2020—when classes at the university were shifted to remote learning and when COVID-19 cases began to increase in the cities surrounding the university. Zelei and Yinglun recounted their shock and disbelief when they were told to go back to China. They both highlighted their racial discrimination incident with their instructors and their peers. This is an important finding that Chinese students in the surrounding community outside their university campus racial discrimination was targeted at the height of the COVID-19 pandemic, albeit not in the national spotlight at this study site.

### **Synthesis of Findings**

The findings suggest that Chinese international students have become more aware of their racial minoritized status at a PWI in the Midwest. Interestingly, we noticed that the female Chinese international students in this study were more likely to participate during the focus group discussion around topics of perceived (neo)racism against them during the COVID-19 pandemic as compared to their male counterparts. For example, the female participants shared their racialized experiences, saying they felt belittled, threatened, and hated during the COVID-19 pandemic because of their race. At the same time, the male Chinese international students were relatively silent on that topic. In contrast, our male Chinese international student focus group participants contributed vibrantly to the discussion on the topic of racial alienation/exclusion outside the campus environment—namely, the feeling of exclusion/alienation of their racial identity as Chinese people. Our focus group participants used their own lived experiences as starting points to share

their feelings and explore their racialized experiences, resulting in all participants coming away from the focus groups with a sense of having shared and significant experiences.

## **DISCUSSION**

The three themes that emerged from the data suggest ways to improve addressing racialized experiences and support Chinese international students and other students with marginalized identities. Our discussion aligns with the literature on the marginalization faced by historically underrepresented student populations and their racial experiences on college campuses (J. J. Lee & Rice, 2007; Ma & Miller, 2021; Museus, 2014b; Xiong et al., 2021).

### **Racial Stereotypes**

Previous work has made clear that racial stereotypes such as the model minority myth can have negative impacts and result in harmful stereotypes, discrimination, and violence against Asians/Asian Americans (Schmitt et al., 2014; Shadowen et al., 2019; Tang, 2021; U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2022). The COVID-19 pandemic laid bare anti-Asian sentiment that exacerbates how people of Asian heritage are stereotyped in the United States (Haft & Zhou, 2021; Kalkın et al., 2021; Lang, 2021; Tang, 2021). In this study, most of the participants shared how being treated based on a racial stereotype resulted in them facing more aggression and microaggressions (i.e., neo-racism theory cited in J. J. Lee & Rice, 2007). The bias incidents shared by participants in this study so that Chinese international students assumed the burden themselves to explain that they are not carriers of coronavirus while developing a sense of racial resiliency against stereotyping and marginalizing them.

### **Validation of Positive Self-Concept**

Validation of Chinese international students' positive self-concept is important to grow from their racialized experiences (Ma, 2020). Validation is contextualized in this study as a process of confirmation and empowerment (e.g., Rendón, 2009). Like so many others, Chinese international students would rather speak for themselves than have others speak for them (e.g., French et al., 2020). Our results highlight the power of validation through group and individualized settings (e.g., focus group and one-on-one interviews) and that the sharing of rich "personal and social experiences" helped the Chinese international student participants feel better, listened to, and supported (Rossman & Rallis, 2017, p. 86).

Not only was the collective validation of stories of Chinese international students a step towards raising awareness of Asian hate crimes on campus, but the focus group discussion lifted and amplified their voices as they shed light on their true (real) racialized experiences. Validation and positive self-concept are important post-COVID-19 for Chinese international students (and other Asian and Asian American students) because of the specific targeting, hate speech, and bias they faced during the pandemic (Haft & Zhou, 2021; Kalkın et al., 2021).

### **Institutional Support for Social Justice Actions**

This study's results align with the literature on Chinese international students experiencing discrimination at U.S. higher education institutions suffering increased stress, anxiety, and depression (Ma & Miller, 2021; Shadowen et al., 2019). The COVID-19 pandemic increased discrimination against these students. Our findings reveal that students' mindsets—noncognitive factors of self-efficacy—affect their sense of belonging to the campus community. Academic mindsets are amenable to change across race and ethnicity for college students with intervention programs (Farruggia et al., 2018). For Chinese international students, the findings suggested that institutions such as ours should design effective program interventions, including diversity and inclusion, belonging, self-efficacy, self-advocacy, and academic motivation. People-centered success programming, especially for minoritized students, can lead to higher persistence rates and academic performance (Ammigan & Drexler, 2021; Zhu et al., 2016). We believe that doing so can help create humanized educational environments for these students centered on “meaningful relationships with faculty and staff members who care about and are committed to student [*sic*] success” (Quaye et al., 2020, p. 23).

### **IMPLICATIONS**

To counter the adverse impacts of COVID-19 and other negative stereotypes on Chinese international students, we support institutions taking steps that support minoritized people (re)claiming their racial identity and (re)defining their full sense of personhood (Haft & Zhou, 2021; Kalkın et al., 2021; Lang, 2021). The institutions should validate and honor the racialized experiences of Chinese international students (e.g., embrace their racial looks, language, and culture) in ways that support students' dignity and personhood (Sam, 2001; Xiong et al., 2021). We do not pretend to offer an exhaustive list of undertakings for U.S. higher educational institutions to support Chinese

international students and other minoritized student populations who are confronted with racialized experiences.

### **Equitable and Effective Student Success Support**

The study results made clear the importance of equitable and effective student support for student success. Two suggestions for helping to improve student success work for Chinese international students, and all students for that matter, center on increased listening to students and targeted programming.

#### ***More Listening and Student Engagement***

The results make clear the vital role that faculty and staff engagement with underrepresented and minoritized students can play in supporting these students' success (Ma & Miller, 2021; Museus, 2014b). Such efforts by faculty and staff do not necessarily require highly specialized skills (Ammigan et al., 2022; Zhu et al., 2016). Establishing listening sessions for minoritized students can create spaces for sharing and benefitting from intra- and inter-cultural perspectives, helping students feel comfortable, safe, and, simultaneously, valued because their voices are being heard (Malcom-Piqueux & Bensimon, 2017).

#### ***Support Programs***

While listening to and learning with diverse students is important, institutions must make changes to advance equity and inclusion (J. J. Lee & Rice, 2007; Koo et al., 2021; Museus, 2021). This may be achieved by improving linkages to existing campus resources (e.g., financial aid office, dean of students' office, counseling center, and international student office) as well as by offering dedicated support services to minoritized students (Ammigan et al., 2022; Liu & Ammigan, 2022).

#### ***Support Students' Sense of Self***

Another takeaway from the results centers on the importance of supporting international students' sense of self (Koo et al., 2021; Museus, 2021). Our work shows the value of staff and faculty validating the Chinese international students' stories, creating opportunities for connection, and providing role models.

#### ***Validate each Student's Stories and Situation(s)***

Our work shows the positive impact of students' advisors who affirmed students' various and intersecting identities. Providing Chinese



international students with a judgment-free space to discuss such matters as their sexuality, socioeconomic status, (dis)ability, legal status, and technological abilities instead of immediately focusing on their academic performance humanized the advising experiences. It supported these students' development of a positive sense of self. For instance, when a Chinese international student appears at their first advising appointment looking disheveled or confused, simply asking how they are doing and listening to them can humanize the advising experience and demonstrate much-needed care and compassion for the student (Ladson-Billings, 1995; J. A. Lee, 2018; Liu & Ammigan, 2021; NACADA: The Global Community for Academic Advising, 2017).

### ***Cultivate Dialogues to Social Justice Actions***

The participants saw University faculty and staff as essential for helping them feel comfortable and connected to their university communities. Furthermore, the participants reported the value of cultivating community spaces (e.g., intergroup dialogues) for them and others to share feelings, identities, and experiences (Gurin et al., 2011; Iverson, 2007; Noble & Renn, 2021). Such dialogue across differences may build deeper relationships and connections leading to social justice actions among students in the institutional setting (Montgomery, 2020; Museus et al., 2017).

### ***Role Models for Minoritized Students***

The importance of role models for college students, particularly women, has been recognized and studied for some time (e.g., Erkut & Mokros, 1984; Lockwood, 2006). Our results suggest that Chinese international students and other minoritized students could also benefit from having role models. Doing so would create cohorts of student role models for other students who could, in turn, call in other students to engage in learning about themselves and others.

## **CONCLUSION**

In this study, we found that Chinese international students' racialized experiences were negatively impacted at the start of the COVID-19 global health crisis. We also found that Chinese international students confronting increased racialized experiences developed: (a) racial resiliency in the face of racial discrimination, (b) positive self-concept through group support, and (c) motivation to advocate against racial discrimination is salient for Chinese international students.

Participants' voices in this research shed light on not just the racialized experiences of Chinese international students but, perhaps, more importantly, how institutions of higher education can better implement directed resources (e.g., intergroup dialogues) for Chinese international students as well as all their students to share their racialized experiences in ways to grow a more sustainable, interconnected humanity.

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### **About the Authors**

**CHARLES LIU**, J.D., Ph.D. Candidate, currently serves as associate director for university advising at the office of undergraduate education, at Michigan State University (MSU). He has earned his Juris Doctorate from Ave Maria School of Law. He is currently a Ph.D. Candidate in the Higher, Adult, and Lifelong Education (HALE) program at the College of Education at MSU. His research interests include institutional practices and policies that affect student success initiatives. Email: [charlie7@msu.edu](mailto:charlie7@msu.edu).

**CHENG-CHING LIU**, Ph.D., MBA, R.N., is an Assistant Professor at the College of Nursing, at Michigan State University. Her research interests include international students' health promotion, self-care, and well-being. Email: [chengliu@msu.edu](mailto:chengliu@msu.edu).

**RAVICHANDRAN AMMIGAN**, PhD, is the Associate Provost for International Programs and an Assistant Professor of Education at the University of Delaware, USA. He leads his university's internationalization strategy and global engagement efforts and directs the Center for Global Programs and Services. His primary research focuses on the student experience at institutions of higher education globally. Email: [rammigan@udel.edu](mailto:rammigan@udel.edu).

**MICHAEL D. KAPLOWITZ**, J.D., Ph.D., is a professor of environmental policy and sustainable development at Michigan State University. Kaplowitz also serves as one of two MSU Faculty Athletics Representatives to the Big Ten and the NCAA. In addition to teaching multiple sections of Introduction to Community Sustainability, Kaplowitz co-facilitates intergroup dialogues on race for faculty and staff at MSU. His research includes international and US-based projects with students and colleagues focused on improving community well-being and sustainability. Email: [kaplowit@msu.edu](mailto:kaplowit@msu.edu).

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