

International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education

ISSN: 0951-8398 (Print) 1366-5898 (Online) Journal homepage: www.tandfonline.com/journals/tqse20

A phenomenological study of the racial sensemaking of Chinese international doctoral students in the United States during and post the COVID-19 pandemic

Peiwen Wang

To cite this article: Peiwen Wang (2026) A phenomenological study of the racial sensemaking of Chinese international doctoral students in the United States during and post the COVID-19 pandemic, International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education, 39:1, 2571499, DOI: 10.1080/09518398.2025.2571499

To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1080/09518398.2025.2571499

Published online: 10 Oct 2025.

Submit your article to this journal

Article views: 141

View related articles

View Crossmark data

Citing articles: 2 View citing articles

Full Terms & Conditions of access and use can be found at
https://www.tandfonline.com/action/journalInformation?journalCode=tqse20

INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF QUALITATIVE STUDIES IN EDUCATION
2026, VOL. 39, NO. 1, 2571499
https://doi.org/10.1080/09518398.2025.2571499

Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group

Check for updates

A phenomenological study of the racial sensemaking of Chinese international doctoral students in the United States during and post the COVID-19 pandemic

Peiwen Wang

Department of Curriculum & Learning, Southern Connecticut State University, New Haven, CT, USA

ABSTRACT

Despite a growing body of literature on international students' racialized experiences (e.g., Mitchell et al. 2017; Yao et al., 2023), the racial sensemaking of Chinese international doctoral students remain underresearched. This study examined how twelve Chinese international doctoral students understood and navigated racialization in the United States during and post the COVID-19 pandemic. Utilizing the Learning Race in a U.S. Context framework (Fries-Britt et al. 2014) and Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis as the theoretical and analytical lenses, this study draws on data collected through survey and semi-structured interviews. Findings demonstrate that participants shifted from passively internalizing imposed racial classifications to actively challenging U.S.-centric racial logic and that they used different strategies to cope with racialized experiences. Implications are offered for stakeholders to develop targeted support that speak to and affirm international students' identities and equip them with tools for developing racial literacy and advocacy.

ARTICLE HISTORY
Received 19 November 2023
Accepted 1 August 2025

KEYWORDS
Chinese international students; doctoral students; race and racialization; COVID-19

Introduction

While international students' economic, cultural, and intellectual contributions are acknowledged by host institutions (Abdullah et al., 2014), they are not on a level playing ground as their domestic counterparts. Upon embarking on their transnational journey, international students have to constantly grapple with various difficulties attributed mainly to language barriers (e.g. Li & Liu, 2020), academic stress (e.g. Wu et al., 2015), and cultural differences (e.g. Yan & FitzPatrick, 2016). In addition, they frequently encounter different forms and degrees of *Othering*, discrimination, and racism on campus and beyond (e.g. Wang et al., 2022; Yao et al., 2021).

During the COVID-19 pandemic, there was a surge of overt anti-Chinese racism, fueled partly by Trump's "China/Chinese virus" rhetoric, which racialized a public health crisis by linking a virus with a specific nation and ethnicity (Zhu, 2020). As a result,

CONTACT Peiwen Wang wangp1@southernct.edu Assistant Professor, Department of Curriculum & Learning, Southern Connecticut State University, New Haven, CT, USA.
© 2025 Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group

Chinese international students, namely, 30.6% of the international student population (Institute of International Education, 2022), were subject to more hostility and aggressive behaviors compared to their international counterparts (Chirikov & Soria, 2020). They were disproportionately scapegoated and victimized due to their racial or ethnic identity (Anandavalli et al., 2021). These patterns of discrimination must also be understood within the United States' long history of anti-Asian discrimination and racism, particularly regarding the exclusion and racialization of Chinese immigrants dating back to the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882 (Wang & Santos, 2022) and post-9/11 anti-Asian violence (Subedi, 2013). The COVID-19 pandemic merely exacerbated the long existing anti-Chinese racism. Because of the skyrocketing anti-Asian sentiments and discrimination during the pandemic, Asian/Chinese international students may develop a derogatory attitude towards their own racial or ethnic group and a mentality that the inequalities that they have experienced are natural and legitimate (Ramos et al., 2016), hence further internalizing social injustice and inequalities (Yan & Pei, 2018).

Discriminatory and racist practices within higher education institutions have profound repercussions, which not only undermine the international appeal of U.S. universities but impact the sense of security and psychological wellness of the students they serve (Wei et al., 2012). Research on campus climate has shown that international students of color, Chinese international students included, often experience discrimination, racialization, and exclusion, while receiving limited institutional support (e.g., Bruch et al., 2018; Yao et al., 2021). Challenges as such were further exacerbated during the pandemic, thus highlighting the urgent need for higher education institutions to critically examine their role in (re)producing and preventing racism. Understanding Chinese international students' perception of race and racism as well as their strategies for navigating racialized experiences thus remains crucial for creating a more equitable environment and developing targeted support and policies that recognize and address the unique challenges faced by this group and overall international student population.

Chinese international students' sensemaking of racial constructs and racialization, however, has not been adequately examined in academia. There is a small body of inquiry specifically probing into the racial sensemaking of Chinese international undergraduate students in the United States (e.g. Jiang, 2021; Yu, 2022a, 2022b). However, the perspectives and experiences of Chinese international doctoral students remained under-researched, despite being nearly one third of the international doctoral recipients (National Science Board [NSB], National Science Foundation [NSF], 2022) and their longer stay in the United States than undergraduates (Truong & Museus, 2012).

Critiques suggest that studies examining experiences of Chinese international doctoral students within higher education are often under the broad category of "Asian students" or "Chinese international students," without considering differences or variations among undergraduate students versus graduate students (e.g., Brazill, 2021; Zhang, 2016). Therefore, the current study aims to add to existing literature by specifically looking into how Chinese international doctoral students made meanings of race and navigated racialization in the United States. The current study also extends the broader scholarly discussion on how higher education institutions can reinforce

or challenge existing racial structures (Yao & Mwangi, 2022). This study is guided by the following research questions:

1. How do Chinese international doctoral students perceive race? In what ways, if any, do their understanding of race or racial issues shift after arrival in the United States?
2. In what ways do they navigate racialized experiences?

Literature review

Race and racialization in the United States

The concept of race is considered a social construct, often defined by shared phenotypical, cultural traits, and ancestral roots (Golash-Boza, 2018). Golash-Boza (2018) further argued that race is shaped by various historical dimensions rather than biological differences. These dimensions include slavery, colonialism, and the emergence of scientific racism, which is defined as "the use of science or pseudoscience to rationalize or reproduce racial inequality" in the nineteenth century (Golash-Boza, 2018, p. 28). Rather than being a static concept, race is historically, socially, and politically constructed, with its meaning and racial categories continually shaped by historical contexts and sociopolitical relations (e.g. Omi & Winant, 2014).

The United States is largely organized and operates based on racial classifications, stratifications, and hierarchies, where race serves as "a master category—a fundamental concept that has profoundly shaped, and continues to shape, the history, polity, economic structure, and culture of the United States" (Omi & Winant, 2014, p. 106). The salience of race in the United States makes racialization an inevitable process that every individual experiences, as it is deeply woven into the social and cultural fabrics of the United States and is ingrained in the minds of its people (Smedley & Smedley, 2005). Racialization is manifested in various ways and takes place when racial meanings are externally imposed on relationships, social practices, or groups that were previously non-racial, typically involving a "process of selection, of imparting social and symbolic meaning to perceived phenotypical differences" (Omi & Winant, 2014, p. 111). Therefore, it is through the process of racialization that race and racial categories are constructed hierarchically which systemically privilege White Americans (Omi & Winant, 2014).

This historical and societal backdrop plays out when non-White or non-English speaking immigrants land in the United States, who often experience racial dichotomizing, i.e., the binary construction of race, e.g., Black versus White, or White versus non-White/people of color or American versus international (Yao et al., 2019). These racial classifications are essentially grounded in Euro/Anglo-centric racial logic that frequently clashes with transnationals' self-identified racial or ethnic identities (Omi & Winant, 2014). Racial categories in the United States, however, have not remained static but have shifted depending on the needs and interest convergence of those in power (Delgado & Stefancic, 2023). Specifically, Harris (1993) argued that Whiteness has operated as a form of property that confers legal, social, and economic benefits. Both tangible and intangible value of whiteness was (re)produced and maintained

through law and policy (Harris, 1993), while proximity to whiteness was strategically extended to certain immigrant groups to sustain white supremacy (Savaş et al., 2021). The complexities of race and racialization indicate the necessity for examining how international students, such as Chinese international doctoral students, understand and navigate U.S. racial constructs and racialization, which will be elaborated in the following section.

(Chinese) international students' navigation of U.S. racial constructs and racialization

There is a gradually growing, small body of literature that focuses on international students' perception of the U.S. racial constructs and racialization in the recent decade (e.g., Bardhan & Zhang, 2017; Fries-Britt et al., 2014; Lewis, 2016; Mitchell et al., 2017; Yao et al., 2023). These authors argued that international students come from diverse societies which may not be structured or organized along racial lines. Instead, social markers such as nationality, culture, ethnicity, class, castes, or religion are often used by international students to define who they are, based on their specific cultural contexts (Lewis, 2016). However, upon arrival in the United States, international students are often subjected to U.S. racial logic, through which racial categories are imposed regardless of their self-identification (Yao et al., 2019).

Fries-Britt et al. (2014) developed an emerging framework outlining three phases of international students' racial identity development, including an initial phase of unawareness, a subsequent racist encounter leading to their exploration of U.S. racial concepts, and a final phase of integrative awareness (see more details in the theoretical framework section). This framework is particularly relevant for international students whose home country (such as China) does not centralize race as an organizing principle for the society and who rarely see themselves as a minority member prior to arrival in the United States because they are the majority in their home country. Fries-Britt et al. (2014) indicated that these students may not realize the nature of certain discriminatory or racist experiences, which partly explained some international students' denial of discrimination or racism they encountered. Mitchell et al. (2017) confirmed Fries-Britt and colleagues' findings as their participants initially demonstrated a lack of understanding of race, while constantly drawing from and connecting culture and nationality with race.

Bardhan and Zhang (2017) examined how international students from post-colonial countries (e.g., Ghana, the Democratic Republic of Congo, China mainland) who came to the United States for the first time expressed or performed their identities in relation to race. Utilizing a post-/decolonial lens, Bardhan and Zhang (2017) viewed racialization as a "historical, transnational, context-driven, and shifting production" (p. 287), serving to sustain White privilege. They analyzed 22 participants' narrative responses to 14 open-ended questions that explored their experiences with race prior to and after entry into the United States, adjustments to the U.S. racial landscape, and identity changes (if any) they experienced. They found that the participants challenged and rejected the U.S.-centric racial logic, which hegemonically imposes rigid racial binaries (e.g. White vs. non-White) and ascribes racialized meanings often

with negative connotations. Rather than passively accepting the externally imposed racial identities, the participants actively drew from affirmative components of their ethnic and national identities as a form of discursive resistance. Participants' resistance challenged the coloniality of racial categorization, enabling them to feel empowered about their identity. They viewed the racial minority label not as permanent and intrinsic signifier of their identities but temporary and context-driven, which became a source of positive identity. Engaging in acts of resistance helped them embark on a journey toward healing, empowerment, and reclaiming identity on their own terms, rather than through the lenses of the oppressor (Bardhan & Zhang, 2017).

Studies that specifically probed into the racial sensemaking of Chinese international students in the United States remain relatively scarce, often focusing exclusively on undergraduate students (e.g., Jiang, 2021; Yu, 2022a, 2022b). Yu (2022a) found that Chinese international undergraduates' process of learning and understanding race and racism were collectively shaped by their upbringing in their home country and racial encounters in the United States. She argued that Chinese international undergraduate students, as transnational elites, were afforded with more flexibility in returning to China where they enjoyed structural privileges, thus typically distancing themselves from contributing to racial activism in the United States, which they considered a temporary home (Yu, 2022b).

While existing studies have centered on Chinese international undergraduate students who often received strong financial support from family (Yu, 2022a, 2022b), these findings may not be applicable to most Chinese international doctoral students whose financial standing and career trajectory can differ from their undergraduate counterparts. Approximately 90% of doctoral students depended on assistantships or fellowships as the primary sources of funding for their education based on the survey of earned doctorates administered by National Science Foundation (NSF, 2021), meaning that they might not enjoy the same level of financial flexibility as the elite undergraduate students did (Yu, 2022a, 2022b). Such economic distinction may lead to different perceptions of and strategies for navigating racialized experiences. Therefore, how Chinese international doctoral students make sense of racial constructs and grapple with racial encounters within the U.S. context is worthy of further investigation, as an important extension to the current literature. In the following section, I will elaborate on the framework of Learning Race in a U.S. Context and explicate its relevance for the current study.

Theoretical framework

Learning race in a U.S. Context (LRUSC)

This study draws on the Learning Race in a U.S. Context (LRUSC) framework developed by Fries-Britt and colleagues (2014). These authors argue that existing models of racial or ethnic identity development, primarily grounded in U.S. racial contexts (e.g. Phinney, 1993; Helms, 1995, as cited in Fries-Britt et al., 2014), may not be applicable to international students or immigrants. Unlike the traditional models, LRUSC (Figure 1)

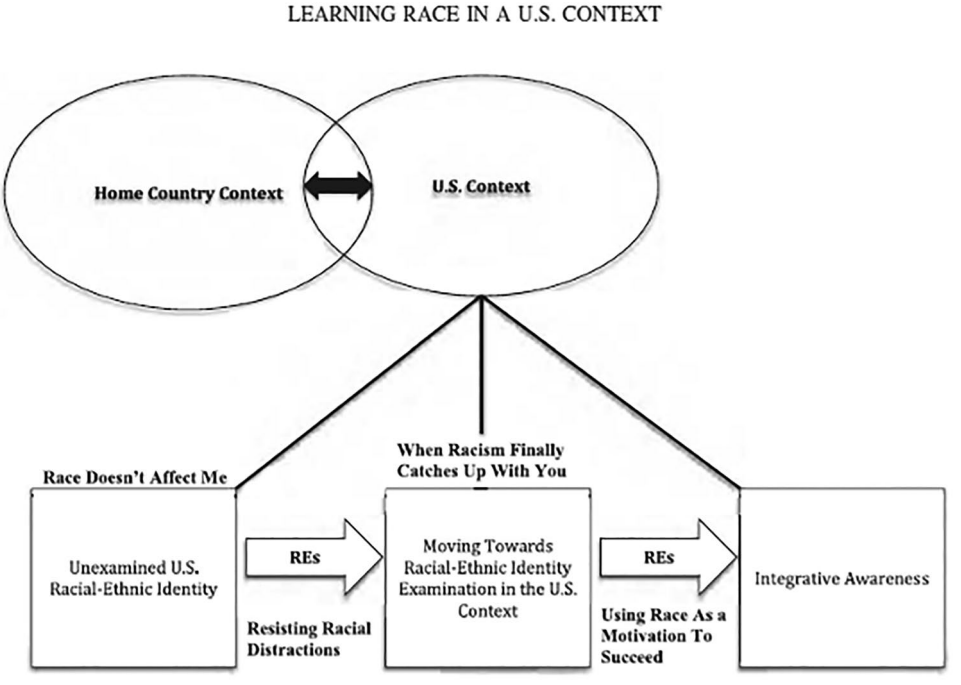


Figure 1. Learning race in a U.S. context (Fries-Britt et al., 2014).

accounts for the varied socio-cultural backgrounds of international students of color, while acknowledging that race and ethnicity are perceived and enacted differently across global contexts.

The LRUSC framework argues that the racial learning of international students is collectively shaped by how race or ethnicity is constructed and their socialization in the home country, and racial encounters in the United States. It identified three categories/stages in the development of international students' racial identity. In the first category, since race is manifested differently in different countries, many international students do not identify or internalize concepts of race or racism based on U.S. racial logic, which they consider exerting little influences on them, thus possessing "an unexamined U.S. racial-ethnic identity" (Fries-Britt et al., 2014, p. 10). In the second category, they begin to examine their racial-ethnic identity in the context of United States, often after racial encounters, and try to resist the impacts, further leading to different responses, including withdrawal, isolation, or growing motivation for academic success (Fries-Britt et al., 2014, p. 10). Finally, they have gradually developed "integrative awareness," allowing them to draw from race and enabling them to be committed to actions that advance social change (Fries-Britt et al., 2014, p. 10).

LRUSC remains a relevant lens for this study to examine the racial sensemaking of Chinese international doctoral students. By exploring their relative position through the stages outlined in the framework, this study aims to shed light upon the shifts (if any) regarding their racial perceptions and strategies they employed while

navigating racialized experiences, thus contributing to the broader scholarly discussion on international students' racial identity development within higher education.

Methodology

Research design

The current study is grounded in phenomenology, a qualitative methodological approach for exploring "the common meaning for several individuals of their lived experiences of a concept or a phenomenon" (Creswell & Poth, 2018, p. 121). Phenomenology aims to provide a description and understanding of the essence of the lived experiences of individuals who have experienced a particular phenomenon (Lichtman, 2013). Therefore, phenomenology is a suitable approach for this study, which aims to understand Chinese international doctoral students' racialized experiences and racial sensemaking in the United States.

Data-collection instruments

Survey and semi-structured interviews (in English and Chinese) were used as the data-collection instruments, allowing participants to choose language for expressing their thoughts. The survey is composed of two parts: (a) demographic information, summarized in Table 1 in the participants section below; and (b) five open-ended questions exploring participants' racialized experiences before and after arriving in the United States. These questions were developed using the lenses of the LRUSC framework (Fries-Britt et al., 2014), with two adapted from Bardhan and Zhang's (2017) study on international students' navigation of U.S. racialization. I modified and added three questions to explore participants' experiences with racialization prior to coming to the United States, to better align with the goals of current research.

Table 1. Demographics of the 12 participants.

Name	Ethnicity	Gender	Major	Length of stay	First-gen college student	Primary source of funding
Jianhao	Han	Male	Materials Engineering	3	Yes	teaching/research assistantship
Qianqian	Han	Female	Statistics	4	Yes	graduate assistantship
Lili	Manchu	Female	Educational Psychology	5	Yes	teaching/research assistantship
Panpan	Han	Female	Child, Youth & Family Studies	8	Yes	research assistantship
Meixiang	Han	Female	Food Science & Technology	7	No	research assistantship
Xiaoan	Han	Male	Physics	3	Yes	research assistantship
Jiajia	Han	Female	Educational Studies	15	Yes	teaching/research assistantship
Yunfei	Han	Male	Biology	7	Yes	research assistantship
Zhixun	Han	Male	Educational Studies	2	Yes	research assistantship
Jiadong	Han	Male	Bioinformatics	1	No	research assistantship
Chufeng	Han	Male	Materials Engineering	6	Yes	research assistantship
Shiyun	Han	Female	Educational Studies	4	Yes	teaching/teaching assistantship

I also used semi-structured interviews as a data-collection instrument to solicit rich data and create a space for both the researcher and interviewees to engage in dialogues while allowing room for modifying the interview protocol as conversations unfolded. The 17-question interview protocol was informed by stages of racial learning identified in the LRUSC framework (Fries-Britt et al., 2014). I adapted some questions from Bardhan and Zhang (2017) particularly regarding participants' experience of shifts in racial identity. More questions of interest were raised as the interview proceeded. Each semi-structured interview, conducted via Zoom, lasted approximately 60 to 120 min, followed by dialogic exchanges via We-chat (Chinese WhatsApp) with participants, in which I asked them to clarify or elaborate on their responses.

Data analysis

The analysis included two qualitative data sets: (a) open-ended survey question data and (b) interview data. The rationale for using the open-ended questions in the survey is that it increases the possibility of obtaining spontaneous responses given by the participants, thus helping avoid bias resulting from suggesting responses to participants, as this could possibly occur when using close-ended questions (Reja et al., 2003). In addition, findings summarized from open-ended questions were later compared with interview findings to see if similar patterns were found.

The analysis of the above qualitative data was informed and guided by Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), which foregrounds participants' perceptions while acknowledging subjectivity inherent in their lived experiences (Smith & Osborn, 2008). IPA aims to obtain an in-depth account of the sensemaking of different participants towards the world they are situated in, and how subjective feelings and meanings are constructed and negotiated individually (Smith & Shinebourne, 2012). Patterns indicating "similarities, differences, echoes, amplifications, and contradictions" (Smith & Shinebourne, 2012, p. 67) were identified from the participants' narratives following several rounds of engaging and re-engaging with the data. I utilized IPA to analyze the qualitative data because this analytic approach aided a nuanced exploration of participants' subjective experiences and the complex ways through which they constructed racial identities and navigated their racialized experiences in the United States.

After I finished transcribing the interviews, I compiled the transcripts into a Word document and uploaded it to MAXQDA (version 2022) for coding. Following the qualitative data analysis procedures suggested by Creswell and Guetterman (2019), I first read the transcript to get a general sense of the data. Then I started the initial round of coding by going through the file and marking salient ideas and sentences from the participants with a code label. Next, I went for a second round of coding in which I reviewed all the codes, identified similar or/and redundant ones, and merged them into broader categories. With a list of codes, I went back to review the data to see if any new codes emerged. In sum, I identified four major themes to reflect what the participants most frequently talked about, those having the most supporting evidence, and what remained unique perspectives or/and experiences. In this way, the thematic patterns capturing the essence of the participants' response were identified, written into a narrative account, and supported by quotes from participants (Smith & Osborn, 2008).

Researcher positionality

Qualitative researchers remain integral to the research process, as they draw from their own perspectives and experiences to make sense of participants' realities (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). It is crucial that I acknowledge and reflect upon my positionality as the researcher and the intersectional systems of oppression and my shifting places within those structures (Boveda & Annamma, 2023). Born and raised in China, where I received K-12 and college education, I later earned my master's degree in TESL in the United States. Coming from an ethnic majority (Han Chinese) in China, I had never critically examined my ethnic/racial identity or privileges until I moved to the United States, where I became racially minoritized. My doctoral journey started in Fall 2019, and a course entitled *Decolonizing Education* deepened my understanding of race and racism as well as how racialized, intersectional power structures can impact minoritized groups and communities. The outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020 became a catalyst for my racial awakening. I witnessed the material consequences of racism, manifested by escalating cases of verbal attacks, physical violence, and hate crimes against Chinese people and Asian American and Pacific Islanders (AAPI) communities across the United States. These sociohistorical and sociopolitical contexts compelled me to critically interrogate my own positionality as a Chinese international scholar and reflect upon how my research can problematize the interlocking systems of oppression and provide support to fellow Chinese international students navigating the racialized climate.

My identity as a Chinese international doctoral student and the shared sociocultural experiences with the participants afford me an emic perspective (Creswell & Poth, 2018), which helps me build rapport with participants and elicit richer data than an outsider might obtain. Having shared experiences or identity does not necessarily guarantee an objective interpretation (Creswell & Poth, 2018). I need to acknowledge that the assumptions, beliefs and values I hold, my own educational and lived experiences, and research training could shape my interpretations of their lived experiences. Remaining reflexive regarding the duality of my positionality and the power structures embedded in the research process (Boveda & Annamma, 2023) helps me interpret the data as I am conscious of both the strengths and limitations that I have as a qualitative researcher.

Sample selection and recruitment procedures

I used purposive rather than random sampling to recruit those participants considered most likely to generate "appropriate and useful information" (Kelly et al., 2010, p. 337). Chinese international doctoral students were recruited because compared to undergraduate students, they are more likely to develop coping strategies for racial issues (Truong & Museus, 2012). Following approval from the university Institutional Review Board (IRB), I sent out a recruitment email via university listservs and personal networks. When potential participants indicated their interest, I provided further details regarding this study so that they understood the expectations and their rights as participants.

Participants

Demographics of the participants (with pseudonyms) were summarized in Table 1 below. They were from various STEM and humanity disciplines at a Mid-Western, predominantly White Institution (PWI). Their length of stay in the United States differed substantially, ranging from 1 to 15 years. Notably, only one participant (Lili) was an ethnic minority, and most were first-gen college students. All the participants were funded through graduate assistantships. Two participants graduated from this university and are currently working as postdocs at other universities.

Trustworthiness or strategies of validation

I used several strategies to enhance data trustworthiness and credibility of the study, following established qualitative research practices (Creswell & Poth, 2018). First, content validity was established through expert assessment (Mastaglia et al., 2003). I consulted the three faculty members (one being a critical race scholar) in my dissertation committee who have expertise in qualitative research when developing both the survey and semi-structured interview protocol. Their feedback was incorporated into the revision of my data-collection instruments to better align with the goals and research questions of the current study. Second, to enhance the reliability of the data, anonymized transcripts were reviewed and proofread by a close friend who holds a master's degree in social work and has prior training in qualitative research. I also conducted member checking by sending key parts of transcripts back to participants to confirm accuracy and clarify meanings (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Thirdly, I employed researcher triangulation by engaging two researchers, i.e., my dissertation chair and my cohort, who helped review my preliminary codes and initial findings. Their feedback offered alternative lenses and helped minimize interpretive bias, thus improving the credibility of the data analysis (Russell & Gregory, 2003). All the above strategies helped enhance the rigor and trustworthiness of this study. In the section below, I will elaborate on the four major themes identified from the data.

Findings

From "It's Not a Big Concern" to "It Could be Me"

Overall, participants transitioned from a state of having a limited understanding of race to a heightened awareness of the salience of race after arriving in the United States, as evidenced by their shifting perceptions of race and racism. Before their transnational sojourn, the participants perceived race mainly through a biological lens, with phenotypic or biophysical traits such as skin color and facial features delineating racial categories. With middle and high school textbooks being the primary sources for understanding race, participants tended to view race and race-related concepts as objective, rather than socially constructed. This biological conceptualization of race did not translate into a pivotal component of their identity, often overshadowed by more salient social markers, as noted below:

> Xiaoan: The language the person is mainly speaking, cultural background, behaviors, I think these are two main indicators.

Participants like Xiaoan highlighted the importance of other dimensions, including language, culture, behaviors, beliefs, and geographic location, that distinguish people from different races. In sum, none of the participants considered race a significant component of their identities before arriving in the United States, who instead emphasized the multi-dimensionality of their identity that extends beyond mere physical attributes to embrace various dimensions.

In addition, the participants' perceptions of race were also shaped and limited by the lack of salience of race in China, which they deemed as a racially homogeneous nation consisting of 56 ethnic groups. Topics related to the term "民族" (ethnicity) rather than "种族" (race) seems more widely discussed among the Chinese citizens. Participants such as Chufeng cited the lyrics from a popular patriotic folk song 爱我中华 (*Love My China*):

> Chufeng: "五十六族兄弟姐妹是一家" (we're a big family of brothers and sisters from 56 ethnicities).

The lyrics above illustrated the emphasis on ethnic unity in public discourses, consolidated by government policies. Some participants further attributed their unawareness of race to the relative phenotypic resemblances among Chinese people, given that more than 90% of the population is "汉族" (Han ethnic/Han Chinese). Lili, the only ethnic minority (Manchu) among the participants, noted:

> Lili: Before I came here, I didn't think about this topic most of the time because in China, we are almost the same, especially it's hard to tell a person's background based on appearance, so it is different from what I experienced in the US here.

Lili's remarks indicated that her ethnicity is not determined by physical appearance in that although she looked like the ethnic majority group, she was ethnically different from them. In addition, most participants demonstrated indifference to racism before their migration, despite Chinese media coverage of discrimination against minorities in the United States, as explained below:

> Meixiang: Most of the cases I read about are from the news, like Asian hate. I've just noticed that story on the news or from the internet, but I don't have my friends or family associated or directly related to any situations.

> Qianqian: Before I personally experienced something, whatever happened to other people was just like a story to me. It's something that happened to other people, not me, so it's not a big concern for me.

Echoing Mexiang and Qianqian, most participants believed that these cases were merely extreme, sporadic cases intentionally featured by the media, viewing them as stories that affected other people rather than themselves or their friends or families, thus remaining personally irrelevant.

In sum, participants had limited understanding of race, echoing studies such as Ham (2023), which indicated that international students often arrived in the United States with a 'color-blind' ideology, largely due to different ethnic or racial dynamics in their home country. They were not concerned about being affected by discrimination and racism prior to arriving in the United States, thus situating at a stage

where U.S. racial categorization is not salient or internalized, based on the LRUSC framework (Fries-Britt et al., 2014). This aligns with previous studies that found international students navigating their U.S. experiences through non-racialized identities (e.g. Lewis, 2016; Mitchell et al., 2017).

After entering the United States, most of the participants (11 out of 12) no longer maintained the privileges afforded by Han ethnic majority status. Many started to sense the impacts of being racialized as minorities, often manifested in nuanced rather than overt ways in their academic studies and daily life, as Shiyun pointed out:

> Shiyun: Because I grew up in another context, I just do not have that hands-on experience. So, I always hesitate to participate in classroom discussions. And my professors do not always care about that. So, no one [is] trying to include me in the conversations… People do not even care what I'm talking about. And my voices are not important, and I was not being understood by people. I feel the feelings of being the minorities. I do not have really harsh discriminations, but I do have something like when I [am] trying to say something, my classmates said, "Oh, this is your context." I was like, "yeah, but that's my only context".

Shiyun revealed her feelings of exclusion and marginalization in the classroom, where professors may invalidate international students' perspectives and contexts (Kim & Kim, 2010). Meanwhile, her voices and knowledge were often dismissed and delegitimized by her domestic classmates, who used a Euro-/Anglo-centric lens to determine whose perspectives and knowledge are valid.

In addition to encountering marginalization and exclusion within the academic spaces, the pandemic and ensuing rise in anti-Asian sentiments and attacks served as catalyst for participants' moments of racial awakening, leading to increasing awareness of vulnerability to racial violence and racism (Chirikov & Soria, 2020). As Meixiang lamented, "at one point, I feel sad, of course, I feel sad. Then I feel like it could be me one day". This remained a shift from their previous perceptions of racism as a distant problem that only affected "them" versus "us". Participants revealed fears over becoming targets of attacks in that the Chinese and AAPI were often scapegoated for the alleged origin of the pandemic:

> Yunfei: I think COVID is the main reason because people think it's from China. They blame what happened to another group, it's like an easy target. Then they don't hit on young Asians, they hit a non-English speaking, old grandma. Then that really makes people furious. But I really hope my families don't encounter that.

While participants like Yunfei attributed anti-Aisan/Chinese racism to the pandemic, others, such as Panpan, articulated that racism against Chinese/Asian Americans were exacerbated rather than caused by the pandemic because they still lingered post the pandemic. She noted, "I think there are a lot of anti-Chinese, racism things going on there, and even now, when the pandemic is approaching [to the end], I think it's almost over right? Still there". These perspectives signified an awakening to the endemic nature of racism.

In addition to being vulnerable to race-fueled attacks, some participants came to realize structural and systemic racism in the United States extending beyond anti-Blackness to impact all people of color:

> Zhixun: Before coming here, I just think that racism means White people do not like Black people, just Black people. Surprisingly, when I came here, I realized that Black people include Asian people, Latino people and even all people of color. We are in the same group, not just Black people who might be discriminated [against]. So that's a big part of what I got when I came here.

Zhixun's sense of "not [being] liked" by the racial majority group in the United States also revealed how opportunities are assigned differently to racially minoritized groups. He further discussed the lack of employment opportunities for people of color, and how being an international student compounded the discrimination and marginalization.

The synthesis of these perspectives and experiences demonstrated participants' shifts from little knowledge of race towards a deeper understanding of the current U.S. racial dynamics, thus reflecting the second stage in the LRUSC framework (Fries-Britt et al., 2014), where participants started to examine their racial identity. In summary, it was not only their experiences of racist encounters but the broader U.S. sociopolitical and sociocultural climate, particularly during the pandemic that collectively led to participants' moments of racial awakening. This demonstrated their transition from unexamined racial-ethnic identity to probing into U.S. racial constructs, in which they employed different strategies to grapple with racialized experiences, as elaborated in the sections hereafter.

Resisting and disrupting ascribed racial classifications/order

Many participants noted the pervasiveness of racial discourse in U.S. society, permeating all facets of society, academia, politics, and daily life. Meanwhile, they discussed the omniscience of racial categorizations in how U.S. society is structured and functions. Along with other international students or people from other racial or ethnic groups, they were often lumped into racial groups (e.g., "students of color" or "people of color") that they did not personally identify with. Some expressed questioning of the U.S.-centric racial labels as well as the binaries inherently embedded in their daily interactions and socialization and further questioned the validity, as Shiyun elaborated:

> Shiyun: I do have a very strong opinion about White and people of color. For me this label [is] trying to binary people, like White people and people of color, but when they use this label, I always wonder what does this mean? White is not a color? The language can imply that white is not a color. So, why are we using this? This is something I always think about.

Shiyun's confusion and rejection of these labels reflected her resistance against simplifying and rigid racial classifications that fail to capture the complexity and nuances of one's identities and the fullness of who they are. Others displayed resistance to being identified solely as Asian, which appeared to be a broader discomfort among participants with being reduced to a single, broad category:

> Yunfei: I guess I don't really like being called Asian, which seems to be the only identity I have. Because I'm much more than just a racial label. It's complicated.

In addition to the monolithic portrayal of racial/ethnic minorities denoted by such labels as identified by Yunfei, the dichotomizing framings such as "us vs. them," "majority vs. minority," which are contested by many participants, further intensified senses of *Otherness* and alienation. Especially among those from STEM backgrounds, they preferred identity descriptors that are more neutral and transcend racial binaries, such as international students. Other participants resisted U.S. racial categorizations and labels:

> Jiajia: I don't really like the racial labels here, because having the label is like putting people into different groups and then you stick the stereotype on each group of people.

Jiajia's remarks further pointed to the detrimental impacts of U.S. racial categorizations, as this essentializes different people into rigid groups, typically associated with negative stereotypes. The above narratives, therefore, showed a desire for recognition of their full identities and experiences.

Participants further suggested alternative ways to understand people from diverse backgrounds, as opposed to merely focusing on racial differences. Jiajia stated, "As a human, we have multiple personalities, culture, all kinds of things, not just good, but also something diverse," which emphasized placing more weight on one's personality, preferences, or culture, rather than buying into existing racial classifications and underlying assumptions or stereotypes. Jianhao cautioned that significant cultural differences can exist among people under the same racial label (e.g., Asian):

> Jianhao: Even though you're Asian, Asia has a lot of countries. the culture also has a big difference between different countries. It would be better if you can talk about the country you were from and the culture.

Such perspectives pointed to the need of using geographical or cultural identity for a more accurate representation of people from that particular group. Along these lines, Panpan argued that geographical identity is part of her culture and cultural identity and the specific cultural group that she belongs to, rather than identify herself using the general label of "Chinese". Given that vast cultural differences can exist among people from different geographic areas of the same country, examining one's geographic origins can be another possible way to understand identity that transcends broad racial categories.

In sum, following their arrival in the United States, the participants' perspectives signified a critical engagement with imposed racial identities, thus positioning them at the second stage in Fries-Britt and colleagues' (2014) framework. They took a step further compared to participants in similar studies (e.g., Fries-Britt et al., 2014; Yao et al., 2023) by resisting hegemonically ascribed U.S. racial labels while proactively disrupting the current racial order. Their narratives served as a call for alternative, neutral, affirming, and inclusive forms of identification that acknowledge and celebrate the full spectrum of their lived experiences and cultural backgrounds, thus echoing Bardhan and Zhang's (2017) findings on transnational resistance to coloniality.

Combating racism through self-affirmation and resilience

Many participants leveraged their ethnic/racial and cultural identities as sources of strengths and self-affirmation, while grappling with discrimination and racism. Their narratives reflected a shifting perception of racial identity in which race transitioned from an external, imposed label to one of the central components of their identities, given that they were more conscious of their racial/ethnic identity as Chinese after coming to the United States. Participants such as Xiaoan and Yunfei revealed:

> Xiaoan: For now, I consider race an important part of my identities. Because I consider myself Chinese and I know so many things about Chinese culture. I could not say everything is the best in Chinese, but I really think that Chinese culture is still the best at the moment.

> Yunfei: I'm proud of being a Chinese, because the longer you stay in the US, the more you're appreciative of your own culture, learn more about it.

Echoing Xiaoan and Yunfei, many participants felt more affirmed and validated by their Chinese identity and cultural heritage, serving a source of strengths against surges of anti-Asian/Chinese sentiments.

For another, participants demonstrated a remarkable level of resilience in the face of racial scapegoating and anti-Chinese/Asian hate crime. While they noted and acknowledged the vulnerability of living as a Chinese against the backdrop of the pandemic, they navigated these challenging experiences with optimism, agency, and resilience:

> Panpan: What happened [has] just happened, and that's not really a single nation's fault or single people's fault…Even though we might experience or face these kinds of not really nice experiences in our life, what we do is to, don't feel inferior. Don't feel like we have the fault… just be confident in our own identity, our own culture, be confident in our own values… Don't be influenced by the negative things or feelings we receive in our environment, because what they think is their opinion, it's not really a stigma on us, so we should be confident and stay strong and reach out for help.

Panpan argued against stigmatizing Chinese people or holding the entire nation accountable for the pandemic, while constantly drawing from Chinese culture, identity, and values for self-affirmation and strengths, thus rejecting the prevalent anti-Chinese/Asian narratives that tried to put them in an inferior position. Similar strategies were also employed by participants raising their children in the United States:

> Jiajia: And because at home, we always told them, you should be proud that you are Chinese, and you are an Asian. You are unique and you have a lot of talent that they don't have, and you have your heritage, culture, the spirit of the Chinese from the Chinese culture.

As articulated by Jiajia above, fostering cultural confidence among the younger generation of Chinese immigrants and helping them become proud of their Chinese heritage and identity are crucial to safeguarding them from the racial microaggressions, bullying, and attacks in the schools.

In summary, participants in this study relied on their cultural and ethnic identities as important sources of self-affirmation and exhibited a remarkable level of resilience against discrimination and racism during the pandemic. Such affirmations resonate

with the literature that found communities of color can draw from their cultural wealth as protection from racism (Acevedo & Solorzano, 2023).

Racial disinterest versus racial activism[1]

Participants showed different levels of interest in understanding race and engaging with racial issues. While they noted the salient role of race in shaping their experiences in the United States, the majority (8 out of 12) prioritized study, research, work, and life, thus displaying a disinterest in engaging in racial discourses, as discussed below:

> Jiadong: I'm not very sensitive about this. I have not reflected upon this concept. Because my focus is more on study, research, and life, I don't have a solid understanding of race.

In addition to prioritizing their responsibilities in life, participants such as Jianhao noted, "I just avoid talking about these topics with people from here, just to avoid tensions." This concern for assumed tensions and conflicts explains their reluctance for discussing racial issues among classmates and colleagues, especially their White counterparts.

Echoing Yu (2022a, 2022b), this study also found that participants determined to go back to China for future employment were less motivated to engage in conversations about race or become more knowledgeable about the topic or participate in racial justice movements:

> Lili: I feel that I don't use my time to learn or think about race, although there are so many events and emails about this topic in my department. I don't think that I'm interested in those. Maybe it's because I don't feel that I want to stay in the US for a long time. So, I have this idea that I may not need to know them.

Lili's narrative demonstrated that, despite being an ethnic minority in China and further minoritized in the United States, having such transnational mobility could shape one's engagement with racial issues.

Conversely, four of the participants not only demonstrated greater levels of interest in discussing racial issues but sought opportunities to equip themselves with racial knowledge through watching relevant documentaries, engaging in conversations and events that aimed at developing critical racial consciousness and knowledge. For example, Shiyun's journey from racial indifference to activism reflected a transformative engagement with race, demonstrating a sense of integrative awareness, i.e., the final stage of the framework proposed by Fries-Britt et al. (2014).

> Shiyun: I mean at first, I was like, well why do I care about this? And I was forced to be included in such conversations. But that's like slowly, I get the idea, oh I'm a part of this process. I should use my agency to make some changes. So I think all those conversations regarding race are beneficial for me. I think that's the factor which changed my idea.

Shiyun further discussed her proactive role when confronting racial stereotypes and misconceptions from the students. She helped them understand implicit biases embedded in media coverage and called for a more critical lens rather than passively receiving information:

> Shiyun: When I taught Chinese at the high school, I got students trying to talk about Chinese people eat dogs, cats. And I just stopped them, I was like, "okay, let's talk". I stopped them and talked about this whole issue and told them what I know regarding this topic and told them how the media can produce biases. I think it's a better way to deal with such stereotypical thinking for our country.

Shiyun not only effectively combatted racist discourses against Chinese people but challenged and dismantled racial misconceptions when students consciously or unconsciously reproduce or disseminate racist portrayals, thus effectively countering racist narratives.

Other participants echoed by advocating for resistance by speaking up not just for themselves, but communities impacted by racism:

> Zhixun: Don't be shy. Speak out your own opinions loudly, even your opinions would be sensitive for white people, white classmates. Don't be shy, just speak out.

> Meixiang: But most of the cases in the news, the Asians were quiet, they didn't fight back, right? …We need to speak up, raise our voice to the public, and we need to fight.

Zhixun argued for boldly voicing one's opinions when confronted with racism, even if it might make the White counterparts uncomfortable. Similarly, Meixiang suggested that in addition to amplifying their voices, potential victims need to fight back against the perpetrators instead of remaining silent or passive.

For Qianqian, racially fueled incidents during the pandemic drove her to racial activism. She was so saddened that she wanted to make her voice heard and contribute to the anti-racism work by joining the Stop-Asian-Hate protests along with her friends:

> Qianqian: I think there's a lot of crime, bad stuff happened to Asian people because of the pandemic. There was a dispute about where the COVID originally started. So Asian people had some pressure and we got bullied by maybe some other races. I just felt bad for them, and I wanted to contribute a little bit, so I went there…It's my friend who brought this up, let me know there's a protest, so I went there.

Qianqian further revealed that her friends were allies from the LGBTQA+ and the Black communities who stood up for the AAPI communities. Such solidarity building and collective action across different social groups are crucial components for advancing social changes (Wiley & Bikmen, 2012). Qianqian mentioned later that protesting was not common in Chinese culture and students are usually taught to refrain from doing so. When asked about how her experiences with protesting shape the way she thought about social or racial justice, Qianqian mentioned:

> Qianqian: From the protesting experience, I mean it's nice to have the chance to do something to let other people hear your voice. Again, I still don't think this is something that I would do a lot in the future. But still I just feel like we Chinese students were educated to be humble or to be quiet, to listen, to follow the command. But for people here, it's the human right to speak for yourself, nobody can stop you saying something.

While Qianqian emphasized that she would not protest a lot in the future, engaging in protests against Anti-Asian/-Chinese hate crime shaped the way she perceived

protesting and how she could speak up for the voiceless through active participation in social movements that aimed for advancing justice.

To sum up, participants were not on the same page regarding their interest in furthering racial knowledge or participating in events that advance racial justice. While the majority (8 out of 12) prioritized academic or professional duties over racial issues, four of them embraced opportunities for racial dialogues and antiracist activism as catalysts for social change. Drawing from the LRUSC framework (Fries-Britt et al., 2014), four participants, i.e. Shiyun, Zhixun, Meixiang, and Qianqian, reached the final stage of integrative awareness, evidenced by their engagement in racial discourse and commitment to advancing racial justice.

Discussion and implications

This phenomenological study has centered the racial sensemaking of twelve Chinese international doctoral students in the United States, drawing from the LRUSC framework (Fries-Britt et al., 2014) and Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis. Survey and semi-structured interview data were collected to understand Chinese international doctoral students' perception of race/racism and navigation of racialized experiences. The findings from the interviews were largely in line with the survey results, revealing more nuances and complexities.

In response to RQ1, Chinese international doctoral students' perception of race evolved from passively accepting racial classifications based on phenotypic traits to critically challenging U.S.-centric racial categories. Many pushed back against U.S. racial labels, often associated with negative stereotypes, and advocated for using more neutral, affirming ways of defining different people. This finding aligned with previous studies exploring similar inquiries (e.g., Bardhan & Zhang, 2017). Shifts as such were shaped and prompted not only by individual racist encounters but participants' socialization and the broader U.S. sociocultural and sociopolitical climate during and post the pandemic, which differed from previous studies (Fries-Britt et al., 2014; Mitchell et al., 2017). Additionally, socioeconomic status shaped their motivation for racial learning. Unlike the elite undergraduate students who displayed little interest in racial issues or combating racism because of their transnational mobility and structural privilege in China (e.g. Yu, 2022b), the participants in the current study employed various coping strategies to navigate and make sense of racism, or/and fight against racial injustice.

In response to RQ2, participants used different strategies to grapple with racialized experiences. While many participants prioritized study, work, and life over racial issues, several actively combatted racism through self-affirmation and resilience. They felt more validated by their cultural and ethnic identities and expressed interest in and motivation for understanding their racial identity. The majority (8 out of 12) of participants were in earlier stages of racial learning, as they began to engage in racial sensemaking but had not yet turned into sustained activism (Fries-Britt et al., 2014). Four out of the twelve participants were situated at the last stage, i.e. integrative awareness stage, based on Fries-Britt et al.'s (2014) framework, as they became agents of change through proactively countering racism or taking actions to contribute to social change in the United States. Participants' racial learning, however, did not strictly

follow a linear path, since some may oscillate between disengagement and reflection, depending on their personal contexts, future employment (working in the USA vs. going back to China), and deepened understanding of race. Such nuanced and non-linear trajectories have shown the complexities of racial learning among Chinese international students and point to the importance of adequate support and education in fostering racial literacy and social justice engagement.

The findings suggest important implications for higher education policy and practice as well as future research. First, stakeholders, including faculty, administrators, international students' offices etc., need to recognize the complexity and nuances of Chinese international doctoral students' racialized experiences and navigation strategies. These students are not a monolithic group; rather, their racial sensemaking and navigation strategies to racism can vary vastly, shaped by their lived experiences, socioeconomic status, career goals, and broader sociopolitical and sociocultural contexts. Institutions must move beyond simply providing general international student support to develop targeted support and programs that speak to and affirm international students' identities and equip them with tools for developing racial literacy and advocacy. Specifically, frameworks such as LRUSC (Fries-Britt et al., 2014) need to be incorporated into international student orientation, mentoring, and workshops to support students in navigating racial encounters, cultivating critical consciousness, and help them move toward activism.

Second, this study challenges the deficit-based narratives of international students in previous studies that often position them as passive and monolithic (e.g., Sherry et al., 2010). Instead, the current study highlights their unique lived experiences, voice, agency, and resilience. Chinese international doctoral participants in this study, despite situated at different stages of racial learning, demonstrated various strategies to cope with racism and their potential to become change agents. Higher education institutions and stakeholders should tap into the assets and insights brought by international students and create safe and brave spaces for racial learning and dialogues as well as building solidarity and allyship across different student populations. Meanwhile, stakeholders also need to recognize vulnerabilities of Chinese international students, particularly when geopolitical tensions and global pandemics exacerbate anti-Asian/China sentiments. Anti-racist policies and support must be developed to protect international students from discrimination and racism.

Thirdly, this study highlights the necessity for continued inquiry that centralizes international students' lived experiences and insights, particularly regarding their racial identity development and factors leading to social and racial activism. Future research may consider conducting longitudinal studies to examine racial sensemaking among Chinese international students, particularly regarding how their racial learning evolves post-graduation and translates into activism in real life over time beyond academic contexts. Studies conducted across different institutions and regions may also help shed light upon how additional factors can shape students' racial sensemaking and resistance strategies.

In conclusion, this study adds to the growing body of literature that aims to understand the complex interplay between race and identity among international students within an increasingly diverse and globalized higher education context. It demonstrates the importance of examining international students' racial learning

journey in ways that not only illustrate the nuances but celebrate the diverse perspectives, insights, and experiences they bring to higher education institutions and beyond.

Note

1. The data did also speak to some participants' awakening to ethno-racial issues in China as a result of their study in the US, but due to the scope of this paper, I will not deal with this here. Please refer to Author (forthcoming).

Acknowledgement

The author would like to express her deepest gratitude to her dissertation committee, Dr. Kara Mitchell Viesca, Dr. Theresa Catalano, Dr. Amanda Morales, and Dr. Calvin Garbin, for their insights and support on an earlier version of this paper as well as to the two anonymous reviewers for their valuable and constructive feedback.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

ORCID

Peiwen Wang http://orcid.org/0000-0002-0124-1696

References

Abdullah, D., Abd Aziz, M. I., & Ibrahim, A. L. M. (2014). A "research" into international student-related research: (Re)Visualising our stand. ?*Higher Education*, *67*(3), 235–253. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10734-013-9647-3

Anandavalli, S., Borders, L. D., & Kniffin, L. E. (2021). "Because here, white is right": Mental health experiences of international graduate students of color from a critical race perspective. *International Journal for the Advancement of Counseling*, *43*(3), 283–301. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10447-021-09437-x

Acevedo, N., & Solorzano, D. G. (2023). An overview of community cultural wealth: Toward a protective factor against racism. *Urban Education*, *58*(7), 1470–1488. https://doi.org/10.1177/00420859211016531

Bardhan, N., & Zhang, B. (2017). A post/decolonial view of race and identity through the narratives of US international students from the global south. *Communication Quarterly*, *65*(3), 285–306. https://doi.org/10.1080/01463373.2016.1237981

Boveda, M., & Annamma, S. A. (2023). Beyond making a statement: An intersectional framing of the power and possibilities of positioning. *Educational Researcher*, *52*(5), 306–314. https://doi.org/10.3102/0013189X231167149

Brazill, S. (2021). Narrative inquiry into Chinese international doctoral students' journey: A strength-based perspective. *International Journal of Doctoral Studies*, *16*, 395–428. https://doi.org/10.28945/4785

Bruch, S. K., Popovaite, I., Felix, E., & Anson, M. (2018). Patterns and Impacts of Racial and International Student Disparities in Experiences of Campus Climate, Academic Support, and

Financial Conditions. In: Soria, K. (eds), *Evaluating Campus Climate at US Research Universities*. Palgrave Macmillan, Cham. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-94836-2_15

Chirikov, I., & Soria, K. M. (2020). International students' experiences and concerns during the pandemic. SERU Consortium, University of California - Berkeley and University of Minnesota. https://hdl.handle.net/11299/215272

Creswell, J. H., & Guetterman, T. C. (2019). *Educational research: Planning, conducting, and evaluating quantitative and qualitative research* (6th ed.). Pearson Education.

Creswell, J. W., & Poth, C. N. (2018). *Qualitative inquiry & research design: Choosing among five approaches*. Thousand Oaks.

Delgado, R., & Stefancic, J. (2023). *Critical race theory: An introduction* (Vol. 87). NyU press.

Fries-Britt, S., George Mwangi, C. A., & Peralta, A. M. (2014). Learning race in a US Context: An emergent framework on the perceptions of race among foreign-born students of color. *Journal of Diversity in Higher Education*, *7*(1), 1–13. https://doi.org/10.1037/a0035636

Golash-Boza, T. M. (2018). *Race and racisms: A critical approach* (2nd ed.). Oxford University Press.

Ham, S. (2023). Understandings of race and racism in globalizing higher education: when east Asian international student perspectives resonate with color-blindness. *Race Ethnicity and Education*, 1–20. https://doi.org/10.1080/13613324.2023.2257138

Harris, C. I. (1993). Whiteness as property. *Harvard Law Review*, *106*(8), 1707–1791. https://www.jstor.org/stable/1341787 https://doi.org/10.2307/1341787

Helms, J. E. (1995). An update of Helm's white and people of color racial identity models. In J. G. Ponterotto, J. M. Casas, L. A. Suzuki, & C. M. Alexander (Eds.), *Handbook of multicultural counseling* (pp. 181–198). Sage.

Institute of International Education. (2022). *"Open Doors 2022 Fast Facts" Open Doors Report on International Educational Exchange*. https://opendoorsdata.org/

Jiang, S. (2021). Diversity without integration? Racialization and spaces of exclusion in international higher education. *British Journal of Sociology of Education*, *42*(1), 32–47. https://doi.org/10.1080/01425692.2020.1847635

Kelly, S. E., Bourgeault, I., & Dingwall, R. (2010). Qualitative interviewing techniques and styles. In I. Bourgeault, R. Dingwall, & R. de Vries (Eds.), *The SAGE handbook of qualitative methods in health research* (Vol. 19, pp. 307–326). Sage.

Kim, S., & Kim, R. H. (2010). Microaggressions experienced by international students attending U.S. institutions of higher education. In D. W. Sue (Ed.), *Microaggressions and marginality: manifestations, dynamics, and impact* (pp. 171–191). Wiley.

Lewis, A. (2016). Making meaning of race and racialization in the lives of five international graduate students. In Bista, K. (Ed.), *Exploring the social and academic experiences of international students in higher education institutions* (pp. 59–78). IGI Global.

Li, D., & Liu, Y. (2020). International counseling doctoral students' teaching preparation: A phenomenological study. *Counselor Education and Supervision*, *59*(3), 200–215. https://doi.org/10.1002/ceas.12184

Lichtman, M. (2013). *Qualitative research in education: A user's guide* (3rd ed.) Sage.

Mastaglia, B., Toye, C., & Kristjanson, L. J. (2003). Ensuring content validity in instrument development: challenges and innovative approaches. *Contemporary Nurse*, *14*(3), 281–291. https://doi.org/10.5172/conu.14.3.281

Merriam, S. B., & Tisdell, E. J. (2015). *Qualitative research: A guide to design and implementation*. John Wiley & Sons.

Mitchell, D., Jr, Steele, T., Marie, J., & Timm, K. (2017). Learning race and racism while learning: Experiences of international students pursuing higher education in the Midwestern United States. *AERA Open*, *3*(3), 2332858417720402. https://doi.org/10.1177/2332858417720402

National Science Board (NSB), National Science Foundation (NSF) (2022). *Higher Education in Science and Engineering. Science and Engineering Indicators 2022. NSB-2022-3*. https://ncses.nsf.gov/pubs/nsb20223/

National Center for Science and Engineering Statistics, National Science Foundation. (2021). Doctorate Recipients from U.S. Universities: 2020. NSF 22-300. https://ncses.nsf.gov/pubs/nsf22300/

Omi, M., & Winant, H. (2014). *Racial formation in the United States* (3rd ed.). Routledge.
Phinney, J. S. (1993). A three-stage model of ethnic identity development in adolescence. In M. E. Bernal & G. P. Knight (Eds.), *Ethnic identity: Formation and transmission among Hispanics and other minorities* (pp. 61–79). SUNY Press.
Ramos, M. R., Cassidy, C., Reicher, S., & Haslam, S. A. (2016). A longitudinal study of the effects of discrimination on the acculturation strategies of international students. *Journal of Cross-Cultural Psychology*, *47*(3), 401–420. https://doi.org/10.1177/0022022116628672
Reja, U., Manfreda, K. L., Hlebec, V., & Vehovar, V. (2003). Open-ended vs. close-ended questions in web questionnaires. *Developments in Applied Statistics*, *19*(1), 159–177. http://mrvar.fdv.uni-lj.si/pub/mz/mz19/reja.pdf
Russell, C. K., & Gregory, D. M. (2003). Evaluation of qualitative research studies. *Evidence-Based Nursing*, *6*(2), 36–40. https://doi.org/10.1136/ebn.6.2.36
Savaş, Ö., Greenwood, R. M., Blankenship, B. T., Stewart, A. J., & Deaux, KAY. (2021). All immigrants are not alike: Intersectionality matters in views of immigrant groups. *Journal of Social and Political Psychology*, *9*(1), 86–104. https://doi.org/10.5964/jspp.5575
Sherry, M., Thomas, P., & Wing-Hong, C. (2010). International students: A vulnerable student population. *Higher Education*, *60*(1), 33–46. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10734-009-9284-z
Smedley, A., & Smedley, B. D. (2005). Race as biology is fiction, racism as a social problem is real: Anthropological and historical perspectives on the social construction of race. *American Psychologist*, *60*(1), 16–26. https://doi.org/10.1037/0003-066X.60.1.16
Smith, J. A., & Shinebourne, P. (2012). *Interpretative phenomenological analysis*. American Psychological Association.
Smith, J. A., & Osborn, M. (2008). Interpretative phenomenological analysis. In J. A. Smith (Ed.), *Qualitative psychology: a practical guide to research methods* (pp.53–80). Sage.
Subedi, B. (2013). The racialization of South Asian Americans in a post-9/11 era. In *Handbook of critical race theory in education* (pp. 187–200). Routledge.
Truong, K., & Museus, S. (2012). Responding to racism and racial trauma in doctoral study: An inventory for coping and mediating relationships. *Harvard Educational Review*, *82*(2), 226–254. https://doi.org/10.17763/haer.82.2.u54154j787323302
Wang, S. C., & Santos, B. M. C. (2022). "Go back to China with your (expletive) virus": A revelatory case study of anti-Asian racism during COVID-19. *Asian American Journal of Psychology*, *13*(3), 220–233. https://doi.org/10.1037/aap0000287
Wang, P., Gu, X., & Morales, A. (2022). "It was just my name!": A CRT/CRF Analysis of International Female Graduate Students' Perception and Experiences Regarding Their Ethnic Name. *Journal of International Students*, *13*(2), 172–188. https://doi.org/10.32674/jis.v13i2.4716
Wei, M., Wang, K. T., Heppner, P. P., & Du, Y. (2012). Ethnic and mainstream social connectedness, perceived racial discrimination, and posttraumatic stress symptoms. *Journal of Counseling Psychology*, *59*(3), 486–493. https://doi.org/10.1037/a0028000
Wiley, S. E., & Bikmen, N. (2012). Building solidarity across difference: Social identity, intersectionality, and collective action for social change. In S. Wiley, G. Philogène, & T. A. Revenson (Eds.), *Social categories in everyday experience* (pp. 189–204). American Psychological Association.
Wu, H. P., Garza, E., & Guzman, N. (2015). International student's challenge and adjustment to college. *Education Research International*, *2015*, 1–9. https://doi.org/10.1155/2015/202753
Yan, L., & Pei, S. (. (2018). Home away from home. How international students handle difficult and negative experiences in American higher education. *Journal of International Students*, *8*(1), 453–472. https://doi.org/10.32674/jis.v8i1.174
Yao, C. W., Oates, E. Q., Briscoe, K. L., Buell, K. J., & Rutt, J. N. (2023). Re/Negotiating Race and Racialization for International Students of Color in the US. *Journal of College Student Development*, *64*(1), 79–95. https://doi.org/10.1353/csd.2023.0003
Yao, C. W., & Mwangi, C. A. G. (2022). Yellow peril and cash cows: The social positioning of Asian international students in the USA. *Higher Education*, *84*(5), 1027–1044. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10734-022-00814-y

Yao, C. W., Briscoe, K. L., & Rutt, J. N. (2021). In the aftermath of a racialized incident: Exploring international students of color's perceptions of campus racial climate. *Journal of Diversity in Higher Education*, *14*(3), 386–397. Advance online publication. https://doi.org/10.1037/dhe0000179

Yao, C. W., George Mwangi, C. A., & Malaney Brown, V. K. (2019). Exploring the intersection of transnationalism and critical race theory: A critical race analysis of international student experiences in the United States. *Race Ethnicity and Education*, *22*(1), 38–58. https://doi.org/10.1080/13613324.2018.1497968

Yan, Z., & FitzPatrick, K. (2016). Acculturation and health behaviors among international students: A qualitative approach. *Nursing & Health Sciences*, *18*(1), 58–63. https://doi.org/10.1111/nhs.12232

Yu, J. (2022a). The racial learning of Chinese international students in the US: a transnational perspective. *Race Ethnicity and Education*, *28*(1), 154–173. https://doi.org/10.1080/13613324.2022.2106878

Yu, J. (2022b). "I don't think it can solve any problems": Chinese international students' perceptions of racial justice movements during COVID-19. *Journal of Diversity in Higher Education*, *17*(5), 775–786. https://doi.org/10.1037/dhe0000457

Zhang, Y.(Leaf) (2016). International Students in Transition: Voices of Chinese Doctoral Students in a U.S. Research University. *Journal of International Students*, *6*(1), 175–194. https://doi.org/10.32674/jis.v6i1.487

Zhu, H. (2020). Countering COVID-19-related anti-Chinese racism with translanguaged swearing on social media. *Multilingua*, *39*(5), 607–616. https://doi.org/10.1515/multi-2020-0093