

Between Nationalism and Beaconism: How Do Chinese Students in the United States Think of the Social and Cultural Issues

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ABSTRACT

This study investigated how Chinese people in the U.S. view racism and racial issues from the perspective of Chinese university students in the U.S. The research is based on Critical Race Theory (CRT) to define racism and found that the majority of Chinese college students regard the situation as a problematic one, and they are supportive of civil rights movements such as Stop Asian Hate. Additionally, though most of the interviewees have not heard of CRT, through their responses to other questions, they show acceptance of the concepts of CRT; for example, almost all of the interviewees responded that they would consider racism as a social problem instead of a personal one.

Background and Literature Review

The Chinese university students in the US formed a unique group within the Asian communities which is between Asian Americans and the new immigrants who were not educated in the US. However, there is quite few current research on this group of people who are not US citizens but also should be regarded as a critical unique part of the U.S. society. Contemporarily, there are a few studies about Chinese university students in the US and the new generation of Chinese immigrants. The majority of the studies are focused on Asian Americans or old generation immigrants, such as the 2012 Pew Research Center study, which exhibited the Asian American community as the fastest-growing group in the United States, as well as the highest level of education and household income (The Rise of Asian American, 2012). Fan et al.'s study demonstrates the anti-China discrimination from the United States would increase Chinese international students' support toward the Chinese government (Fan et al., 2020).

Currently, Chinese people in the U.S. are in a quite awkward position: they are the victims of Asian Hate. Chinese people that came to the U.S. during the 1980s and 1990s showed pro-racism attitudes towards the BLM movement and other civil rights movements within the U.S. (Thanawala, 2021). This study was done investigate and understand how the Chinese youth studying in the US higher education system view racial issues and other social justice issues. Its implication include helping Chinese students in the U.S. and the Chinese community as a whole to build a stronger bond with other communities, as well as helping the U.S. society to understand and somehow to predict the future of the Chinese community in the U.S.

The research is based on these assumptions: 1. The difference in the time period and sociological condition of the local society would cause different motivations of immigration. 2. Immigrants with more diversity cultural views would be easier to accept Critical Race Theory (CRT), a concept that argues that rather than only being a product of people's prejudice, racism is embedded in the legal and political system, or similar theories because such theories would help immigrants understand the anti-racial discrimination movements of other races and make them sensitive to racial equality. 3. Immigrants who were educated in the U.S. will be more accepting of racial equality, CRT and other progressive ideologies.

Development of Chinese American Community

It is documented that in the year 1785 the first four Chinese men arrived at the shore of Baltimore. the Chinese American community has grown into the largest origin group among Asian Americans with a population of 5.4 million (Budiman and Ruiz, 2021). The Chinese made up the largest student group in the U.S. In the year 2020. Currently there are 372,532 Chinese international students studying in the United States (Duffin, 2020).

The early Chinese immigrants were mainly laborers. The immigration took off in 1849 of the “Gold Rush” and continued to grow during the “railroad-building boom from 1864 to 1869 (Chinese-Americans 1785-: Home). While working for the Panama Railroad construction, despite the promise of getting paid 25 dollars per month, Chinese workers only received a few dollars from their American employers, with the excuse that the rest was retained as a payment for the ocean passage and food; records of the local newspaper mentioned that Chinese laborers were frequently seen on streets begging for food, and the suicide rate was at a distressing level.-(Cohen, 1971, 311). Fast forward to today, for Chinese international students, their financial situation is much well off than the laborers of the 19th century. In a randomized survey done by Chao. et al., roughly one-third of Chinese international students studying in the U.S. have an annual income of over 75k U.S. dollars (Chao, 2017, 264), making them have better living standards as well as more capable of perusing education in the United States.

Different Immigration Motivations Between Different Generations

For the earlier generations of Chinese immigrants before the 1980s, the motivation for their immigration mainly was the contrast of poverty and wealth. In the mid-19th century, China went through an economic depression known as the “Daoguang Depression” from 1820 to 1850, along with social and political crises that ripped Qing dynasty apart (von Glahn, 2017); meanwhile, in the United States, the economy was growing fast with the first phase of industrialization already taken place, increasing the production and the economy rapidly (Economic Growth and the Early Industrial Revolution). According to the neoclassical economics theory of immigration, which states that people tend to migrate from places where laborers are cheap to places where laborers are scarce and expensive (Massey et al. 1993). This explains why majority of the first generation of Chinese immigrants were laborers. Differently, the Chinese international students nowadays are motivated to study in the U.S. due to the fact that only five universities from China Mainland made it to the top 100 universities 2021 list in the QS World University Ranking compared to Twenty-seven American universities (QS Quacquarelli Symonds, 2021). What’s more, Chinese education resources are highly scarce and competitive, making it difficult for students to get into a nice university (Chao et al., 2017, 258; Zhu, 2020, 43). According to the social network theory (Jasso, 2011), when Chinese international students return to China from the United States and praise the U.S. education, or exhibit the phenomenon that they on average they get paid more than domestic students (Chao et al., 2017, 258), more Chinese families are swayed to send their children to the US to pursue their education. Under such circumstances, more and more Chinese families send their children abroad seeking education, with the United States being one of the destinations.

Changing Motivations, Unchanging Discrimination

All generations of Chinese immigrants might have experienced difficulties in cultural integration in different times and different ways. The early Chinese laborers were not welcome in the United States because of the idea that Chinese laborers were taking too much of the local jobs. In response to this, in 1882, the United States Congress passed the Chinese Exclusion Act, which suspends Chinese laborers from immigrating to the U.S. for 10 years as well as requiring every Chinese traveler with documents identifying their status (Chinese Immigration and the Chinese Exclusion Acts). This eventually turned into an anti-Chinese riot in 1885 in Seattle. Labor organizations started the campaign with violence and slogans like “The Chinese Must Go”, which was supported by newspapers articles talking about the

integrity of Chinese, for matters such as the unreliability of Chinese witnesses, or the uncleanness of China Town (Karlin, 1948, 103). To this day in the U.S., though the lives of the Chinese or minority population as a whole see a significant improvement.

Some Chinese international students are still experiencing anti-Asian racism. A 2020 report published by Stop AAPI Hate Campaign found that about 25% of Asian American youth have experienced anti-Asian racism, includes cyberbullying, verbal harassment, even physical assaults (Cruz et al., 2020). Additionally, because of the US-China political relations, the Chinese community in the US is often criticized because of their association with China. Due to the strain on the Sino-U.S. relationship in 2020, the United States criticized China of stealing technologies and revoked more than 1000 visas for Chinese students and researchers. (Togoh, 2020). During the pandemic, COVID-19 being referred to as the “Chinese virus” repetitively in public resulted in 1.2 million anti-Asian hashtags on Twitter as well as a 150% increase for violent anti-Asian hate crimes (Hart, 2021).

Despite all the chaos, the financial status of Chinese international students in the U.S. has significantly improved since the 19th century. Their motivations changed as well, with the early generation of immigrants in the U.S. were here to make money, while contemporarily, people are motivated by education. However, the difficulties to fit in with the U.S. culture and society have remained the same.

Asian People’s Participation in Politics

In response to the discrimination they have faced, the Chinese community in the U.S. has made continuous efforts to defend their civil rights and to build their own narration of their own stories. According to some stereotypes, some views may regard the Asian American community generally as relatively politically inactive, both under-represented in terms of voters’ turnout rate which is lower than that of the black and white community (Jacob, 2021), and politicians in office (Dugyala, 2021). However, this situation changed at least in 2020 as Asian American population experienced increased discriminations and hate crimes. The Asian population became the group with the second largest relative increase in voters’ turnout (Ghitza et.al.); in 2021, followed by the Atlanta shooting, Stop Asian Hate Movement erupted around the U.S.

Methods

This qualitative study investigates the Chinese university students’ opinions on racism and racial issues by conducting one-on-one interviews. 12 Chinese students who studied or are studying in the United States were selected (Table 1). The interviewees were ensured to have the experience of studying in the U.S. before the COVID-19 quarantine so that the participants had a relatively complete experience with the U.S. society. During the interview, interviewees were asked questions on these categories: background information, experience with racism, and opinions on the more generalized United States politics & social issues.

Table 1

Student	Location	Education Degree	Major	Time in the U.S. (Year)
Student 1	Arizona	Undergraduate	Undecided	5 years
Student 2	California	Juris Doctor	Law	3 years
Student 3	Massachusetts	Undergraduate	Business Administration, Psychology	6 years
Student 4	D.C., Illinois	PhD	International Relations, Political Science	3 years
Student 5	California, New Jersey	Master	Political Science, Computer Science	3 years

Student 6	California	PhD	Anthropology	6 years
Student 7	New York	Undergraduate	Political Science, China Studies	4 years
Student 8	New Jersey	Undergraduate	Public Relation	3 years
Student 9	Missouri	Undergraduate	International Relation, Political Science	4 years
Student 10	California	Master	Education	3 years
Student 11	California	Undergraduate	Sociology, Filmmaking	4 years

Results

Cultural Integration

The majority of the interviewees found there may be some difficulties to fit in the U.S. culture. Student 5 said that her friend had conflict with her employer for her habit of taking nap at noon, which is common in the Chinese culture, which could potentially be one of the reasons of her failing to complete the probation period.

My friend had a conflict with her employer because he was not understanding of her probation habit, and she could not finish her probation period because of this.

We also asked participants if they have friends that are not Chinese, and the majority of the responses we received is not a lot, ranging from 4-5, while some interviewees, such as student 9, said that he has 20-30 friends of different races and ethnicities, and student 3 described that she had more friends from other nationalities than Chinese friends. Student 1 said that among these, the majority were still Asian classmates, and there was seldom interaction with other races. Student 4 said the cultural difference was the major obstacle.

I found that Chinese and Americans are quite culturally different. For example, Chinese people usually go out with friends to shopping malls, while their non-Chinese friends typically go hiking and do competitive sports.

Student 4 adds, “Those Chinese students not interested in staying in the US for the long-term don’t see a meaningful reason to fit in.”

Racism Incidents

When being asked if they have experienced any form of racism, student 1, 2, 3, 5, 9, 10, 11 reported that they went through at least one racism incident; student 4, 6, 7, 8 did not experience any racism, but students 4, 7 reported that at least one of their friends has experienced racism incidents. Most of the events were at the micro-level. Student 1 who had a man on the bus yelling at him to get out of the bus, student 9 reported that his football teammates sometimes make racist jokes with him. There are also a few cases of structural racism; student 2 who is studying Judiciary Doctor, states that one of her professors was made racist remarks on his social media connecting the Chinese community with COVID-19.

Effects of the COVID-19 Pandemic

When asked if the name-calling-such as “Chinese Virus” and “Kung Flu” had an impact on their daily lives, all of the participants responded positively. Such finding is consistent with other responses. Out of 7 participants who experienced racism, 4 encountered racism after the pandemic started. Some more extreme cases were mentioned by some interviewees. Student 4 reported she was being directly called “coronavirus” by a stranger; Student 3 was being called “Chinese Virus” by a child who appeared to be 4 to 5 years old on the street.

The Efforts of Schools on Pursuing Racial Equality

All of the participants stated that they are aware of the school’s racism reporting procedure as most of them recalled from the school’s orientation-

Opinions on Civil Rights Movements

The majority of the participants showed a positive reaction towards Stop Asian Hate movement (SAH). The majority of the interviewees believed that these movements are definitely something worth to be done since these movements care about social justice and having Chinese people in the U.S. participating in such movement will benefit the Chinese community in the U.S. as well. However, the majority of interviewees did not take part physically in the SAH rally for some other concerns. Student 5 expressed her concern that being in a large crowd which do not wear masks might enhance the risk of contracting COVID-19. Some participants made efforts to contribute to racial equality. For example, Student 11 made documentaries to speak out for the Asian Community and to promote the Stop Asian Hate movement; student 2 delivered public speeches on SAH rallies; student 4 established a remote community to share information about CRT and other progressive issues; and student 6 who is a PhD at political science conducted research on racial policies.

Opinions on the former administration

When being asked about their opinions regarding to the former U.S. administration, all of the interviewees responded negatively. For example, student 11 said it was “irresponsible”, using phrases such as the-“Chinese Virus”. Student 5 described that there was increased hate during the pandemic against Chinese.

We also asked if participants had any experience with the pro-Trump Chinese community, and we found that the church goes among the Chinese community are more likely to encounter Trump supporters. Student 5 stated that the majority of the community at Churches, mostly made up of old Chinese immigrants or American born Chinese. Such finding is consistent with Lin’s work, showing some Chinese American Christians are quite conservative which makes them to have a strong motivation to support Trump (Lin, 2020). Student 9 mentioned that only a very low number of his classmates with mainland backgrounds participating in Church activities.

Discussion and Conclusion

The research found that racism is not an uncommon experience for Chinese students in the U.S. The majority of the incidents are verbal assaults, which is consistent with the Stop Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders (AAPI) Hate National Report which exhibits 68.1% of racist incidents against Asian being verbal harassment (Jeung, 2021). Racist incidents experienced by participants were more common after the pandemic, which is consistent with a report from Pew Research Center, showing that about four in ten Americans expressed increased racism with Asians after the COVID-19 pandemic (Pew Research Center, 2020).

The research also discovered that the majority of Chinese students were supportive of the Stop Asian Hate Movement, but it is also worth noting that the majority of the interviewees did not participate in a BLM or SAH protest physically due to safety reasons.

The research was done in the form of one-on-one interview to explore the integration situation among Chinese college students studying in the U.S., investigate the students' experience for racism and their political views. It can be concluded that while college campuses are generally a safe place with seldom violent attacks, the Chinese students often have trouble fitting in the local society, and sometimes face systematic racism from in various settings, with the number increasing after the COVID-19 pandemic.

The paper contributes to the movement of racial equality in the United States by providing a point of view of Chinese university students. Future research could investigate ways that could motivate Chinese people in the U.S. to learn and care about the issue of racial equality.

Limitations

Due to the fact that the research was done in China while the U.S. was still in lockdown, the participants were selected from researchers' social network. However, authors tried their best to diversify interviewees by selecting interviewees from different states, different majors, different universities/colleges, different industries and different genders.

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