

Beyond the Classroom: Neo-racist Incidents and the Chinese Student Experience in the U.S.

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Tags

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Setting

Over the past two decades, the number of Chinese students studying abroad, particularly in the U.S., has significantly increased, driven by China's economic growth and the desire for a better education (Ma, 2020). As Chinese students embark on their academic journeys in U.S. universities, they quickly encounter a reality that is as unfamiliar as it is unsettling. From the moment they step onto campus, they are immediately racialized, categorized, and often stereotyped based on their race, ethnicity, and nationality. This phenomenon highlights a critical intersection in international student experiences: Chinese students are not just "international students" from a foreign land but are often symbolic figures within the larger narrative of Western society: technological rivals, intellectual threats, and cultural anomalies.

Since Donald Trump's election in 2016, the United States has experienced a rise in conservative populism and sociopolitical upheaval. The neo-nationalism and nativism that emerged from Trumpism have continued to reshape Western democracies, particularly in terms of immigration and higher education policies. In the midst of these challenges, Chinese students and scholars have frequently found themselves at the center of contentious political debates, facing increasing scrutiny, racial profiling, and restrictions on their mobility (Lee & Li, 2021). Now, with the return of Trump to the presidency in 2025, anti-China rhetoric in political discourse is likely to further exacerbate the racism Chinese students face, contributing to an unwelcoming environment that affects both their academic and social experiences in the U.S.

Traditional racism is based on biological differences in skin color, but culture and ethnic origin serves as a proxy or a politically correct code for discrimination in neo-racism (Lee, 2007, 2015, 2017). This shift doesn't mean that

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race, as a social construct, has disappeared from U.S. society. Rather, it has been obscured, often marked by a system that promotes exclusion and marginalization based on a hierarchy of countries and cultures where some are favored more than others. Compared to the broader concept of xenophobia, neo-racism targets specific countries and ethnicities of the world (e.g., the Muslim travel ban, Cuba sanctions). Chinese students, as the racially minoritized group, are particularly vulnerable, subject to a barrage of stereotypes and possible discriminations tied to cultural attributes of their homeland.

There are two main forms of neo-racism targeting Chinese students in the higher education context: linguistic and moralistic judgments. Specifically, Chinese students are often discriminated against for their language proficiency and unfairly accused of academic dishonesty and plagiarism. These forms of discrimination manifest in everyday interactions, including classrooms, research collaborations, and faculty-student relationships, where these mechanisms play out in subtle but impactful ways.

Against the backdrop of an already unwelcoming environment, neo-racist incidents targeting Chinese students have unfolded across U.S. campuses. In one instance, a professor openly warned Chinese students against speaking their native language (CNN, 2019). In another, a faculty member bluntly declared, "All Chinese students cheat" (Inside Higher Ed, 2019). Despite the gravity of these incidents, institutional responses have been disappointingly predictable. As Cole and Harper (2017) noted, U.S. institutions typically have two common responses to issues of race and racism. One response is to not address the issue at all; the other response is to address the issue indirectly, attributing the problem to the individual initiator involved rather than connecting it to "larger issues of systematic and institutional oppression" (Cole and Harper, 2017, p. 9). While some professors have stepped down after facing public allegations of discrimination against Chinese students, these actions are rarely accompanied by concrete efforts by the university to deal with ongoing, systemic, structural, institutional problems. Consequently, racialized incidents continue to happen in U.S. universities (Stein, 2018). Additionally, institutions often lack concrete policies or effective interventions to address such discrimination. International students have resorted to informal support networks, student organizations, and advocacy efforts to combat these challenges, though these efforts are often insufficient in the face of institutional neglect.

Case

A recent neo-racist incident targeting Chinese students occurred at a top AI conference in 2024. A professor (who is a white, middle-aged woman) from an elite research university was invited to offer the opening day keynote address. The audience, filled with scholars, researchers, and graduate students from around the world, listened attentively. In the midst of the presentation, the speaker included a slide that read:

"I did it to make my paper results look better. Nobody at my school taught us morals or values."

This statement was allegedly from a Chinese student who had been expelled from the professor's institution, but the context of the incident was not explained during the presentation. The speaker used this quote to highlight ethical concerns in academic research and discuss issues of academic integrity. However, by mentioning the student's nationality, this professor presented a harmful stereotype that Chinese scholars inherently lack morals or values, perpetuating the damaging notion that ethics are not part of the educational system in China.

The presentation immediately sparked outrage and backlash from Chinese students, faculty, and the broader community, with critics condemning the incident as racially-charged and offensive. They expressed deep

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concern about such explicit discrimination, arguing that the remark reinforced racialized stereotypes and unfairly positioned Chinese students and scholars as morally dishonest or unethical. The lack of context further fueled the perception that such behavior was not an individual act but a cultural trait. To fully understand neo-racism as a system of discrimination rooted in nationality and cultural background, we must move beyond viewing it as isolated prejudice or bias. Instead, we must recognize the broader, systemic forces that perpetuate these narratives. This incident is not just a single case of discrimination, but it reflects a recurring pattern of neo-racism that continues to impact Chinese students and scholars in academic spaces, where isolated incidents are unjustly generalized to an entire nationality or ethnicity, reinforcing racialized scrutiny and exclusion.

Discussion Questions

As you consider this case, discuss:

- In what ways have you observed Chinese students facing neo-racism in the U.S. (or in your country)? What other groups are targeted, and in what ways?
- How do racialized incidents like this professional conference contribute to the broader context of neo-racism against Chinese students and scholars in the U.S. context?
- What role do universities play in either addressing or reinforcing discrimination on campuses? What concrete policy changes could universities implement to proactively address discrimination, beyond just reactive measures?
- How can we make sure that neo-racist incidents are not just addressed as isolated incidents but recognized as part of broader systemic issues in higher education? How can faculty, administrators, and students collaboratively shift institutional narratives around minoritized students?

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