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Navigating Racial Discrimination as Transnational Actors: Racial Experiences of Asian International Students in the U.S. under the COVID-19 Pandemic

by

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Abstract

Since the COVID-19 pandemic, there has been intensified anti-Asian sentiment and increased incidents of anti-Asian discrimination. Whereas a large amount of research has focused on Asian American experiences, this project specifically centers on the experiences of Asian international students as transnational actors and non-citizens of the U.S. under the COVID-19 pandemic. What this project attempts to capture are: a) situated in the racial landscape in America, how Asian international students experience racial discrimination differently as transnational actors, and b) how Asian international students interpret and navigate racial discrimination as transnational actors. In-depth interviews are conducted with 20 Asian international graduate students at the University at Albany, State University of New York. Findings suggest that Asian international students display having mixed feelings when facing racial discrimination, including having a sense of ambivalence. In understanding discriminatory behaviors, Asian international students tend to use their transnational background and knowledge to interpret the intent of racial discrimination. Moreover, in terms of navigation strategy, data shows Asian international students are more likely to tackle with discrimination privately, partially out of fear for immigration threats. Limitations of the research are discussed.
Acknowledgements

This thesis is my first independent research project in the field of Sociology. As an Asian international student myself from China, this project is my small attempt to understand the racial reality in America and capture the racial experiences of many Asian international students under the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, when incidents of anti-Asian discrimination has been on the rise since. Conducting this research has been challenging, and I want to give special thanks to my thesis chair Angie Chung for helping me shape my ideas of the thesis and guiding me throughout the process. I also want to thank my committee members Zai Liang and Jennifer Burrell for providing insightful feedback on this project. Last but not least, I would like to extend my thanks to my colleague Tingting Liu for reading my very first draft and motivating me every day to complete this project.
Introduction

The U.S. is the top country that international students choose to pursue their higher education around the globe (UNESCO 2021). Among international students, Asian international student has become one of the largest groups (IIE 2021). Since the COVID-19 pandemic, however, the American context has become hostile towards Asians and Asian Americans, with the coronavirus “nationalized as Chinese and racialized as Asians” (Horse et al., 2020). Research has revealed intensified anti-Asian racism, anti-Chinese sentiment and xenophobia under the pandemic (Horse et al., 2020). Asian Americans reported experiencing a surge of incidents, such as being verbally harassed and physically assaulted (Stop AAPI Hate Project 2020). The change in the climate deeply affects the well-being of Asians and Asian Americans, who expressed feeling fearful for their safety and experiencing anxiety towards perceivable discriminatory acts (Yu et al., 2020). Indeed, the Crisis Text Line, a national mental health organization, released a report showing Asian Americans texted the crisis services at higher rates than other groups since the start of the pandemic (Filbin 2020).

With the change in the U.S. context, a large amount of research has centered on the experiences of Asian Americans. Although previous research has drawn attention to the racial discrimination Asian international students face in educational institutions (Houshmand et al. 2014), the racial experiences of Asian international students under the context of COVID-19 pandemic are rarely in the conversations. I contend, however, that Asian International students’ experiences are distinct and deserve their own attention. In studying the discrimination faced by Asian Americans, scholars have provided theoretical insights into Asian American experiences: in addition to the discrimination along the color divide, foreignness is racialized and ingrained in Asian American experiences (Kim, N 2008). Their experiences of discrimination can be uniquely
shaped by nativism, international relations, and perception as economic competitors (Ancheta, 2006). Yet, when applied to international students, these insights might not fully capture international students’ experiences. Different from Asian Americans, Asian international students are, in fact, foreigners. Growing up in racially homogenous Asian countries, they might acutely experience racialization for the first time since the COVID-19 pandemic in America. Moreover, as international students, their non-immigration status renders them to immigration restrictions that American citizens do not need to be concerned about during the pandemic. As foreigners and transnational actors, how then would they experience racial discrimination differently?

Furthermore, the effects of racialization vary by context. The meanings of race, as argued by Omi and Winant (2014), are inconsistent and subject to change across time and space. In the matter of time, the COVID-19 pandemic itself presents a timeframe when anti-Asian discrimination is heightened. In the matter of space, space has been theorized as a part of the race-making process, in which the interactions between people in a space produce or contest the meaning of race (Knowles 2003). Researchers have looked into the relationship between race and space at the local contexts, such as racially coded neighborhoods (Lewis 2013), and at the national level that speaks to nativism and belonging of racial groups (Knowles 2003). In the case of Asian international students, however, the concept of space perhaps can be expanded to transnational contexts. Indeed, in the study of transnational contexts, scholars have found that individuals acquire a certain framework to interpret race under a specific national context, and apply their acquired knowledge to articulate their racial experiences in another national context (Tsuda 2016; Kim N 2008). Socialized in Asian countries, Asian international students may have acquired an interpretive framework from their original countries to read race that is different from the
American racial framework. Thus, how would they interpret racial discrimination in America distinctly with their transnational backgrounds?

In this project, I am interested in a) studying how Asian international student experience everyday racial discrimination differently as transnational actors under the context of COVID-19 pandemic, and b) exploring how their backgrounds in transnational contexts shape their interpretation and response to their racial experiences.

Literature Review

Race

Race originally refers to perceived and uncategorized physical differences: our skin color, hair color and other physical features. It becomes a social category when social meanings and social interpretations are ascribed to physical distinctions, the process of which is theorized as racialization (Omi & Winant 2014). During this process, certain qualities and identity are attached to body with different biological markers. Recent theories on race have treated race as a fundamental category, theorizing the modern American society as a racialized social system (Omi & Winant 2014; Bonilla-Silva 1997). As a master social category, race organizes social orders, and as argued by Omi and Winant (2014), race deeply shapes “the definition of rights and privileges, the distribution of resources, and the ideologies and practices of subordination and oppression.” In the racialized social system, racism, as a product of the system, develops as racial ideology that “crystallizes racial notions and racial stereotypes”, justifying the practices of privilege and oppression in economic, cultural and social spheres (Omi & Winant 2014; Bonilla-Silva 1997). It functions in the system by signifying the social position of a race group, providing an “organization map” that organizes behaviors of race groups, and thus maintaining their position
within the system (Omi & Wining 2014; Bonilla-Silva 1997). When racial ideologies are translated in everyday discrimination, they can refer to everyday unfair treatment and poor services that racial minority groups receive (Willams et al, 1997).

**Triangulated Position of Asian Americans**

Discussions on race have been centered on the binary Black-White race relations, in which racial groups positioned in between are often silenced (Kim N 2008). Asian Americans, pinned as the successful model minority because of their high educational and economic achievement, are assumed to experience no racial barriers in the racialized American society (Feagin & Chou 2015). However, a large body of literature has challenged this assumption. The concept of model minority itself, as argued by Chou and Feagin (2015), is created by influential Whites in the 1960s to suppress the protests of Blacks and Latinos against racial discrimination. This framing is theorized by Kim, C (1999) as “relative valorization”, a process in which the dominant Whites valorize the subordinate group Asian Americans in relation to another subordinate group Blacks to control both groups culturally and racially.

In this process, the valorized group, Asian Americans, on the one hand, is constructed as a model minority that values education, family and “advance” in the American society diligently and quietly unlike other racial minority groups (Kim, C 1999; Feagin & Chou 2015). On the other hand, these qualities are ascribed to Asian American groups as their distinct cultural values, used to construct their foreignness and justify their unassimilability to the dominant Whites (Kim, C 1999). The image of model minority thus becomes racial ideology, and is used to discriminate Asian Americans in the racialized system. One example is that Asian Americans are stereotyped as lacking of social skills, which can be translated into workplace discrimination (Lai & Babcock 2013). Research has showed that with similar qualifications, Asian Americans workers earn less
and are less likely to get promoted to managerial position compared with White workers (Wise 2005; Feagin & Chou 2015). As such, the intermediary position of Asian American, below Whites and above Blacks and Latinos, is maintained; the racial order is justified.

At the same time, Kim, C’s (1999) conceptualization not only unveils how valorization places and maintains Asian Americans in an intermediary position between Black and White in the racialized society, but also emphasizes the dimension of foreignness, an aspect that is racialized as Asians historically beyond the color divide (Kim, N 2008). This phenomenon is understood as racial citizenship of Asian Americans (Kim, N 2008). At the institutional level, in the American history, Asians were denied American citizenship, the process of which is conceptualized as “civic ostracism” (Kim, C 1999). Add on the insights of Kim, C., on the visible institutional and political exclusion of Asian Americans, Kim, N (2008) develops the framework to include another facet of foreignness, that in America, the status of Asian groups is invisible, “unknown and ignored, and hence ‘un-citizen’”. Asian American citizenship, although recognized by laws now, is still invisible to Americans in everyday life. Tuan’s research (1999) shows that Asian Americans do not have choice to freely identity themselves only as Americans; instead, they are often expected to identity with their foreign ethnic root as well. Considering the aspects of foreignness in Asian Americans’ experiences, visible and invisible, is critical in understanding the discrimination that Asian Americans face. Conceived by Kim, C (2008), the racial system does not operate on one single scale, but functions on at least two axes, one is along the color line “superior / inferior”, and the other along the racialized citizenship “insider / foreigner” (Kim C 2000).

**Racial Experiences Across Time and Space**

The meanings of race and experiences of racial discrimination, however, are inconsistent and changeable across time and space (Lewis 2013; Omi & Winant 2014). Space becomes a
meaningful concept because of the social relationships that people have formed inside it (Knowles 2003). In the study of the relationship between race and space, space has been theorized as a part of the race-making process, in which the particular interactions and activities between people happen in a space produce or contest the meaning of race (Knowles 2003). Spatial dimensions of race operate in various forms. One of the forms, as elaborated by Lewis (2013), is that space can be racially coded, such as local schools and neighborhoods. A racial minority group might have a strong feeling of being racialized when residing in a space marked as White space (Lewis 2013; Knowles 2003). Moreover, spatial dimension in race-making also concerns national space. This dimension of space speaks to nativism at the national level, where race plays out in the relationship between people and space in the discourse of belonging, that is, the discourse over who is considered as “foreign invaders” and who is considered natives in a national space (Knowles 2003). This dimension directly connects with Asian American experiences because of their racialized citizenship.

Whereas a significant body of literature has examined space regarding its relation with race in local and national contexts, research on transnational contexts has gradually emerged. The complexity of transnational context lies in that race can be structured and comprehended distinctly in different national contexts. Individuals acquire their interpretive framework of race in the national context where they grow up, a framework that might be carried over when they are in a transnational context. Tsuda’s study (2016) on “return immigration” shows that the racial framework that fourth-generation Japanese Americans acquire in the American context shapes how they articulate their racial experiences in the context of Japan, their ethnic homeland. In the American context, as reviewed, racial experiences of Asian American are framed by racialized foreignness (Kim, C 1999; Kim, N 2008; Tuan 1999) and that they do not have freedom to choose
an identity outside of their race and ethnicity (Tuan 1999). Fourth-generational Japanese Americans, growing up with this interpretive narrative of racial system, describe and interpret their racial experiences in Japan from the angle of “foreignness”. They articulate that they feel blended in the Japanese context as their physical marker is not salient in indicating their racial identity anymore in a nation where Asians are the majority (Tsuda 2016). Yet, far from having the sentiment of contesting their status as racialized citizens under the American context, they express their different experience of “foreignness”: they expect Japanese to treat them as foreigners because of their lack of knowledge of Japanese culture and their upbringing in the American context (Tsuda 2016).

In a similar but reversed study, Kim, N (2008) follows pre-migration and post-migration South Koreans to study how transnational contexts matter in their comprehension of race. What she found is that the historic contexts of the Japan’s colonization and America’s recent military dominance over South Korea provide an interpretive framework for pre-migration Koreans to understand race from the perspective of global order of economic power based on nations. Pre-migration Koreans conceptualize themselves being in the middle between White Americans as the “light-skinned/developed” dominant group, and Black Americans (African countries) and third-world countries as the “dark-skinned/ underdeveloped” bottom group, a perspective that is linked to global order (Kim, N 2008). When they immigrated to America, they carry the insights of nation-based “Korean version” racial system with them. Therefore, in the face of their unrecognized ethnicity in the American racial system, they attribute this invisibility to the lower global power of South Korean in the hierarchy of global order (Kim, N 2008).

Likewise, transnational contexts matter in the racial experiences of Asian International students. As foreign students, they might make sense of racial discrimination through a lens of
global perspective. They carry the knowledge and narratives of race they acquire in their original countries, whether the perceptive is through the lens of culture of their country, or through the lens of global comparisons between countries. In any ways, transnational contexts are inevitably linked to their experiences of racial discrimination as they navigate their life between America and their home country.

**Conceptual Framework**

As reviewed, recent theory has developed frameworks to analyze Asian Americans’ experiences of race beyond the color divide. One of the critical elements in their experiences is the embedded aspect of racialized foreignness (Kim N. 2008; Kim, C. 1999; Tuan 1999). This dimension of foreignness can apply to spatial dimension in the sense that Asian Americans are viewed as not belonging to the national context of America. Most theories of Asian Americans’ racial experiences, however, have an underlying prerequisite, which is the ownership of American citizenship. Therefore, insights from racial theories might not fully capture Asian international students’ racial experiences. The very reason lies in that Asian international students are indeed foreigners without American citizenship. In the meantime, as reviewed, the backgrounds in which individuals grow up provide interpretative frameworks to understand race (Kim 2008; Tsuda 2016). Asian international students, growing up in Asian countries and as foreign students temporarily pursuing their career in America, might not describe their experiences in the American racial narratives, but interpret their racial experiences with the framework they have acquired in their home countries or with transnational knowledges they have.

In this project, I will first look into how Asian international students experience racial discrimination differently, particularly I will focus on their reaction as foreigners facing racial
discrimination perhaps the first time in America. Regarding the sites of discrimination, I take into consideration the explicit and implicit forms of discrimination students encounter in their neighborhoods, as well as discriminatory messages that come across to them from social media outlets. Social media outlets serve as channels that expose international students to discriminatory languages and behaviors through news reporting or sharing of videos and posts (Timberg & Chiu 2020), and hence with reduced outdoor activities under the pandemic, it is worthwhile to include social media outlets as sites in order to capture the experiences of international students to racial discrimination online.

After that, I will take a closer look at how they make sense of racial discrimination. From the interview data I have with my participants, it shows that Asian international students are prone to interpret racial discrimination under two themes. One of the major themes, under the historic timeframe of the COVID-19 pandemic, is that most Asian international do not recognize that they are racially discriminated; instead, they interpret it from a transnational comparison of measures taken by governments to contain the pandemic. Racial hostility, in this sense, is interpreted as lack of understanding of the pandemic at the personal level, a result of the governmental failure in raising public awareness of the pandemic and failure in implementing necessary protective measures in America. Additionally, more to understanding racial discrimination as a conditioned response under the pandemic, Asian international students also tend to interpret racial discrimination by drawing insights from transnational cultural and social differences between their home country and America.

Furthermore, in exploration with my participants regarding how they navigate racial discrimination, I find that they display conflicted thoughts on their navigation strategy. On the one hand, it seems obvious to them that they do not need to get involved because racial hostility is
interpreted as “personal issues” of some Americans; on the other hand, they also point out they cannot do anything because their status as foreign students subject them to immigration threats. Responding to racial discrimination may put them into a complicated situation in which institutions, such as schools and police department, would get involved, and many Asian international students have the concern that the potential involvement of institutions may danger their legal status and result in deportation. Consequently, as we will see, many Asian international students decide to deal with discrimination privately, a strategy that is perceived as the most practical one.

Methodology

Data Collection

This project is a qualitative study, and I have conducted semi-structured interviews with 20 graduate students at the University at Albany, from September 2020 to April 2021. 10 of them are from China, 5 from India, 2 from South Korea, 1 from Vietnam, 1 from the Philippines, and 1 from Nepal. Their age ranges from 22 to 36 years old. Because of the restrictions that Institutional Review Board put into effect since the COVID-19 pandemic, in-person interviews are not approved, and thus my interviews are conducted online. Considering the variety of online applications suitable for interviews, I pick the most widely used applications, and my participant can choose among Zoom, What’s app, WeChat, or phone call. I primarily have my interviews over WeChat with my Chinese participants, as WeChat is the most commonly used app by the Chinese population. All of my participants from other countries chose video call over Zoom. Interview length ranges from 30 mins to 2 hours and audio calls tend to be shorter than video calls.


**Justification of Method**

I choose interviews over quantitative methods, because interviews allow me to have in-depth conversations with my participants. Scale questions are usually framed as close-ended questions with fixed options to choose from, but participants’ experiences might not fit into the existing and neatly worded choices. The use of interview gives me the flexibility to incorporate open-ended questions, enabling me to study their mental health by asking how my participants feel about racial discrimination, probe why they feel so, and inquire how they navigate their feelings and behaviors. It helps me as a researcher to understand the thought processes of my participants, and grasp the nuances and complexities of their feelings and perception that might be very different depending on their various life experiences.

**Data Collection Site and Target Population**

I recruited my data at the University at Albany, State University of New York. University at Albany is a public university, with 81% of its undergraduate and graduate international students coming from Asian countries, and 77.6% of its international graduate students coming from Asian countries (ISSS 2019). Asian international students are mostly from China, South Korea, Japan, Vietnam, and India (ISSS 2019). I recruit my sample at the University at Albany because it has a large and diverse Asian international student population. Additionally, Albany is also a city with high diversity, and according to the American Community Survey, Asian population makes up 6.94% of its race and ethnicity composition, along with 27.9% of Black or African American population and 10.2% of Hispanic population (Data USA 2018). Conducting my study in Albany can help capture Asian international students’ racial experiences in a racially and ethnically diverse city.
I also choose to target graduate student population at the University at Albany. Compared to undergraduate population, graduate student population is more likely to display variety in terms of their age, marital status, family composition and career planning. Compared to college students, graduate students may be more committed to pursuing their career and academics, which may affect how they understand their purposes in coming to America and thus could influence their position in navigating racial discrimination. At the same time, graduate students are more likely to consider forming their own family, or already have their own family with children, and having their family in America may shape how they understand racial discrimination in terms of its impact on their family members and future generations.

At the University at Albany, the main offices that can reach the population of international students are International Student and Scholar Services (ISSS) and Graduate Student Association (GSA). I asked their help to include my recruitment information into their weekly newsletter that is sent to the international student population via university email. As an Asian international student myself, I took advantage of my social network, and shared my study information on my personal social media account such as Facebook. I also use snowball sampling by asking my participants to share my study information to people they know that might be interested in the study.

**Interview Topics**

In my interview guide, I include four main sections. The first section is about their demographic information, including age, marital status, sex and sexual orientation, length of stay in the US, visa type and their plan after graduation. In the second section I ask them about challenges they have since the COVID-19 pandemic, entailing stress related to their and their
family members’ health, stress related to discrimination and legal status, and stress related to the adaptation into the US education. In the third section, I include interviews questions about their social support. In this section, I ask them their relationship with their parents and siblings, their parents’ occupation, their connections with their friends and community in or outside of Albany, and the support they receive from institutions such as schools. By asking these questions, I want to look into how they seek for support, and how they navigate their stress of discrimination and legal status under the pandemic, In the last section I include some contextual questions that capture why they choose to pursue an education in the US. I also ask them if their experiences in the US society fit into what they expected before they set foot in the country. These sections are general guiding topics, and I go about asking more detailed questions in different sections based on my participants’ responses. Asking demographic questions in the beginning set a formal tone for our interview, and in order to make my participants feel more comfortable, I ask about their demographic information at the end of our interview, except when the demographic information is needed to probe further questions and understand their responses.

**Methodological Limitations**

There are several limitations that come with doing interview online. Some of my interviews are conducted over audio call, and interviews conducted by audio call tend to be shorter than video call. It is challenging to conduct interviews over audio call, since I cannot pick up my participants’ body languages and facial expressions, especially when they seem hesitated answering certain questions. At the same time, with interviews going online, when I ask an interview question, it seems difficult for my participants to take the time to think about their responses before they jump in to fill in the awkward silence, and it has been a challenge to slow down the pace and probe thoroughly in the interviews.
In addition to the challenges of the online interview, the first 8 interviews that I conducted were not recorded as initially I target my thesis on the topic of mental health. I took notes and organized my notes right after interviews. Taking notes during interviews, however, has its limitations. I find it difficult to give full attention to my participants while quickly writing down everything I can, and it is possible that I missed out information of my participants. In order to preserve their original voices, I include audio-recording as an option. Now I record the audio of our interviews as long as my participants are comfortable with it.

Reflective Thoughts

As an Asian international student at the University at Albany, I am familiar with visa and immigration policies, COVID restrictions on international traveling, and resources that provide help for international students, such as resources provided by the International Student and Scholar Services. Therefore, I find it less challenging to connect with my participants and share their concerns regarding uncertainty over racial discrimination and changeable visa policies. I also live in Albany since August 2019, and I have some basic knowledge about the demography makeup of Albany. I am aware of which neighborhood has more Asian students, such as Danker Village.

Moreover, my native language is Mandarin, so I conducted my interviews with my Chinese participants in Mandarin. It helps my participants feel more comfortable talking with me in their native language. Although I also noticed that it is more difficult for me to probe questions in Mandarin with my Chinese participants than in English with my other participants. With my native language, I often took it for granted for what my participants implied or referred to without further probing. But with English, my second language, I have the habit of probing concepts that are vague and unfamiliar to me. To navigate the language differences, I write notes in my notebook to remind
me of what questions I should probe with each language. Translating Chinese to English has been a tough task as well, some words cannot simply be translated directly, and therefore, in my interview transcription, I put my participants’ conversations in its original language together with the English translation to preserve our dialogues.

Findings

America is considered as one of the most ideal destination to pursue higher education worldwide (UNESCO 2021). My Asian international student participants share similar ideas. They remark that America has more advanced technology, its educational system is more flexible, and the relationship between students and professors are more professional and less involved in personal networking. As graduate students, they heavily focus on their academic and career development, and they choose to come to America to pursue advanced degrees.

Research has investigated into the export of American racial ideologies in the era of globalization, especially through the export of movies through mass media, and the influences of such export on the people’s views of race under globalization (Hale 2014; Kim 2008). Nevertheless, Asians/Americans have extremely low representation in American movies (USC Annenberg 2016; La Force 2018). Asian international students in my samples do not display that they have a systematic knowledge of how the racial system works in the U.S., even though many of them grow up watching American Hollywood movies. Without systematic knowledge of the American racial landscape, they are likely to draw insights from the transnational differences they notice between their own countries and America to interpret discrimination to interpret racial discrimination they encounter in daily life.
Transnational Context: Government Response to the Pandemic

Amid the COVID-19 pandemic, when facing racial discrimination, despite having all the mixed feelings of confusion, ambivalence, fear and anger, few Asian international students recognize that they are racially discriminated. To comprehend their racial experiences, they draw insights from their transnational backgrounds. One of the interpretations they come up with is that discrimination might stem from the differences in governmental and public attitudes towards the pandemic they perceive between their original countries and America.

Mai, 28, growing up in Vietnam, has been studying in the US for six years, and is now pursuing her PhD at the University at Albany. Although Mai has been in the US for a relatively long period of time, she reported that she started to feel increasingly conscious about her Asian looks since the COVID-19 pandemic. Mai traveled to Singapore right before the country locked down, and as a result she had to stay there for several months. The interview exchange happened when I asked her how she felt about being Asian at the beginning of the pandemic.

Mai: Before I came back [to America], I felt anxious and uncertain. I was worried about how people would react to my hair color and Asian look. News on social media sacred me because the news was very emotional. Like Trump openly called the virus ‘the Chinese virus’, so that was like verbal abuse.

Mai felt anxious about herself having the ‘Asian look’, and was worried about how people would react to her Asian features since the pandemic. She referred to the racial language used on news as verbal abuse, indicating the level of demeaning and hurt she felt. Mai’s words also indicate that news and social media, serving as information outlets, channeled down the anti-Asian sentiments to the public since the COVID-19 pandemic. When I probed how Mai was feeling when
she came back to Albany, however, she interestingly dismissed her feelings, and interpret racial discrimination from the aspect of governmental responses to the pandemic.

Mai: It is weird to me now. Although I’m afraid, I don’t see and feel [racial discrimination] in Albany community. I think that this is common now on social media that people share a lot of articles and emotional response to the pandemic, but they are not…you know verified by research or experts…hmm…like they are not strategies to deal with the COVID pandemic, but only reactions. I think we will have to wait for the research to see if the reactions on news are real.

Also in Singapore, everything is very disciplined, and the government requires people to wear masks and keep social distancing. But in America, people don’t do it…the policy is not strict. I myself are afraid of American people [spreading virus]! There were debates on personal right…I mean, come on! America is discriminated by other countries in the pandemic. […] If America keeps doing this [not taking strict measures], it is isolating itself from the rest of the world. Even my parents back in Vietnam said that the U.S. will be the last country that Vietnam open its border to.

Mai immediately drew insights from the transnational differences in governmental responses to the pandemic to interpret discriminatory languages she was exposed to on news outlets. Although initially she started with the worries of being discriminated because of her Asian heritage, she soon changed the direction of our conversation and interpreted racial discrimination as a consequence of American government’s failure in informing the public of the situation and failure in taking strict measures to control pandemic under the Trump administration. American
people’s discriminatory behaviors are understood as reflection of loose policy enforced by the government. Understanding discrimination as a pure reaction to the pandemic, Mai said defensively “I myself are afraid of American people!” Mai also compared America with Singapore and Vietnam, two countries that have been the models in successfully containing the pandemic (Hsu & Tan 2020; Pollack et al., 2021) and two countries where she has social connections and hence has the resources to know how they are doing in controlling the pandemic. Mai then drew her observation at the global level and commented that America was the one that was being discriminated by other countries, because it failed to recognize the magnitude of the pandemic and tackle with it effectively.

In a similar vein, Xie, who just finished his undergraduate degree in New York City and came to Albany for graduate school, shared with me his experience of overt racial discrimination on the street of Brooklyn. Coming from China, Xie has been studying in America for four years.

Xie: in the late February, when I was wearing a mask on the street, somebody even yelled at me.

Chen: do you remember what they yelled?

Xie: umm, I remember one time there was a guy yelling, ‘son of a bitch, there’s a Chinese guy wearing a fucking mask’. I remember that was in Brooklyn, I was out for shop, and when I got out of this store, and then on the street there was that guy saying that, yeah.

Chen: Did you respond? How do you feel about it?
Xie: I was so scared because I was afraid that he would punch me. That’s why at that time, I was walking, I just sped up, I just tried to get to the subway station as soon as possible.

Chen: I wonder if you get angry afterwards when you think about it [what happened in Brooklyn]? 
Xie: yes, of course of course. Because you are doing the right thing, but other people, they just don’t understand you.

Even though Xie has stayed in America for 4 years, a relatively long length of time, the use of the word “even” denotes a sense of surprise that Xie felt when a random guy yelled racial slurs at him on the street of Brooklyn. Xie also immediately felt fearful of violent behaviors that the guy might act towards him. He admitted later that he felt angry because he believed that he is doing the right thing of wearing a mask, but Americans do not understand his purpose of doing so. In order to get a close look at what Xie meant by Americans don’t understand, I pulled out other conversations we had about conflicts in his workplace regarding mask-wearing.

Xie: My boss, she is an Asian also, but she is kinda like abc style, and then I was the only one that came from China, so not that long [in America], so I prefer to use the Chinese way to protect myself and people around me, but they just don’t understand.

Chen: what do you mean by abc-style? 
Xie: like she was born in the United States. She’s like it’s [the COVID] nothing to be scared. […] That’s the common sense, if you are sick, wear a mask, that’s their common sense. But in our common sense, if you are not sick, but if you want to protect yourself and protect other people, you could wear a mask.
Chen: are you surprised that she is not supporting you?

Xie: yeah I did surprised, hm, but she has reasons, she said, I checked the CDC website, you don’t need to put the mask on. […] um I would say CDC also has responsibility, they need to be responsible for that. [...] um maybe it is the American culture and other stuff…

Similarly, from conversations above, we can see what Xie meant by “they just don’t understand” is referring to the differences of public attitudes towards the pandemic. The differences of public attitudes can be traced back to governmental attitudes towards the pandemic, such as the guideline issued by the Central Disease Control (CDC) mentioned by Xie.

In this scenario, Xie, as a transnational actor, made contrasts between the Chinese government and the American government in response to the pandemic. Xie was aware of how strict the Chinese government was in containing the pandemic through connections with his family members back in his homeland, which he shared in our interview as “we already know what is happening in China. We had the knowledge.” In contrast, in America, the government was relatively negative in handling the pandemic and the public showed mistrust in wearing a mask to prevent the spreading of the corona virus.

Nevertheless, in our conversation, Xie, as a foreign student, also showed ambivalence towards the concept of racial discrimination. When I tried to ask more directly whether he believed that his experiences on the Brooklyn street was an example of racial discrimination, he asked for clarification several times and hesitantly replied “maybe”. Instead, he made sense of the racial discrimination he experienced on the Brooklyn street under the umbrella that Americans were reacting to his behavior of wearing a mask because they did not understand the necessity of taking
protective measures in the pandemic. In this case, Xie did not distinguish his experiences in the workplace, which could be his boss’s general suspicion towards mask-wearing, from his experiences of overt discrimination in Brooklyn. Rather, both incidents were interpreted as Americans’ lack of understanding of the pandemic, a consequence that had its root in the governmental response to the pandemic. As such, racial discrimination is comprehended as personal-level understanding of the pandemic that is attributed to the negative responses from the U.S. government in handling the COVID-19 pandemic.

Transnational Context: Cultural and Social Contexts

Previously, we have illustrated that how Asian international students comprehended racial discrimination as Americans’ pure reactions to the virus, a consequence of negative attitude America had in containing the COVID-19 pandemic compared to other Asian countries. Yet more to understanding racial discrimination as a response of the American public to the pandemic, many Asian international students also draw knowledge from comparisons of cultural and social differences between America and their home countries. That means, they interpret discriminatory actions based on what those actions might mean in their homeland context, and on the basis of their understanding of cultural and social differences or similarities between the American context and their homeland contexts.

Park, from South Korea, is in pursuit of her PhD degree at the University at Albany. In her thirties, Park shared interesting perspectives on race in America. At the beginning of our conversation on race, when I approached the topic of discrimination, she thought about it for a bit, and told me that she believed that racism is something Black communities are facing, the hostility that Asians experience perhaps was not counted as racism. She then repeated “When something
happens to me, when somebody says something to me, or somebody does something offensive, or something that was unpleasant, I don’t jump into that conclusion”. And hence, I took a different approach and inquired if she met crazy people since the start of the pandemic.

Park: sure, it was in Albany, I was walking in downtown Saturday, Albany downtown is very quiet on weekends
Chen: which area do you remember?
Park: it was Broadway. There are many shops that are mostly closed, downtown Albany is very quiet during the weekends because all the state workers go home and they don’t hang out there. So I was walking there with a friends of mine, who is also an international student from Korea, and this guy comes right straight, walking towards us, and yells “you Chinese whore, Chinese cunt.” And he kept repeating it and we walked away. And I almost said something to him, but I didn’t because I didn’t want to get involved my friend into that, because obvious that she didn’t want to get involved. I almost told them “sir, I can be a whore and I can be a cunt, but I’m not Chinese” it’s a joke and that is a racial slur, yes that is a racial slur, but was it racism? Um, In part, um, yes, but mostly to me, it sounds like crazy person doing drugs in the middle of the day and going crazy […] so you know, I don’t … it is traumatic in some sense.

Park quickly recalled an incident she had in downtown Albany. Conflicted with what she emphasized previously that she did not jump into the conclusion racial discrimination, here she showed doubts in terms of whether her experience was counted as an incident of racism. Upon her ambivalent thoughts on racial discrimination, she also displayed unease on her ethnicity not being
recognized, and she interpreted the actions of the guy yelling at her as the guy’s personal problem “a crazy person involved in drugs”. Although she seemed to reconcile with the discriminatory actions by making sense of it as personal issue of discriminators, she used the word “traumatic” to convey a level of shock she experienced.

Chen: what do you mean by traumatic?
Park: yeah it is interesting the word I chose. Um because it is a harsh word. It is not even about the word, but that somebody come in to break that kind of barrier, the personal barrier, people don’t do that especially in the US. Because in my opinion, Americans are very territorial, um because in America there are a lot of different people, there are different races, you don’t come in to contact immediately. You say “hi how are you?” all of these nice things to get to know a person, all those small talks. For me, small talks are Americans trying to figure out a person, [to know] if they are safe. Koreans we don’t have that, because we are all Koreans, we just feel safe, we don’t feel that, we don’t feel like we need to screen people and be territorial, everybody is in everybody’s business. But Americans you don’t come into contact, you don’t come to people’s personal space like that. So that kind of intrusive behaviors is kind of shocking, especially in the US.
Chen: what makes you think that he is somehow involved in drugs?
Park: just whole, you know, normal person doesn’t do that. He kept yelling and no one was on the street. You walked away and he kept yelling about something, so I think he’s just crazy.
In explaining why the event was traumatic, Park shared her observation of cultural differences between Americans and Koreans in terms of personal space. As she observed, Koreans share close connections with each other because they share the same ethnicity and culture, but America has a variety of people with diverse backgrounds, so they keep “personal barrier” and need to examine each other through small talks. The guy yelling on the street did not fit into her understanding of what normal Americans would do in a daily social interaction. Consequently, she used the word “crazy” to describe the behaviors of the discriminator, and interpreted discriminatory behaviors as a result of drug abuse.

Other international students, who witness similar social issues as racial discrimination in their home country, picked up the phenomenon of discrimination quickly. Similarities between the society in which they grew up and American society in which they are studying provide them insights into understand the phenomena of racial discrimination.

Ankit, in his early twenties, is coming from India and is finishing his master’s degree. Since the pandemic, Ankit had been paying attention to news and social media, where he obtained information on increased hostility against Asian communities.

Ankit: I saw a video, and in the video, some Chinese old people in the US were blamed for the pandemic. I also saw that some people sprayed “go back to your country” on the wall of their apartment. What do they have to do with the coronavirus in China? it is just stupid.

I think that the government really should punish racist people, that is the worst in this country [America]. The government really needs to focus on addressing racism.

I see similar things in India, it is just stupid. [Chen: for instance?] like we have
religion issue and caste issue that people at the top of the caste discriminate against other people. I think US is a more secure place than India, but these stupid actions [racist actions] make it less secure. It will damage the reputation of the US. You can’t expect things from stupid [racist] people, and this kind of hatred should be stopped spreading by the government. US is diverse, there are Mexican, Indian communities and other communities… government should address racism.

Ankit Expressed his raw feelings towards racism in terms such as “the worst” and “stupid”. He was also among the few students that directly and confidently pointed out that the actions he saw on social media were examples of racial discrimination. This certainty, as I noticed in his speech, was coming from his awareness and observation of social issues in India, where religion and caste system are two of the fundamental sources of discrimination. With this knowledge in mind, Ankit was able to make analogy between the Indian society and the American society and state that racism should be eradicated by government intervention. As an international student, Ankit also articulated his concern of racism from the perspective of the global image of America. America was perceived by Ankit and his community as a safer country that has high reputation. Racial discrimination is thus also understood and considered in its potential damage to America’s global reputation as a research hub, a more secure and developed country.

**Processing Racial Discrimination**

In the previous section, I have discussed how Asian international students interpret racial discrimination using the transnational knowledge they have. They make comparisons between their home countries and America in the realms of the COVID-19 policy, culture, and society.
Nonetheless, their backgrounds seem to contribute to the interpretation of racial discrimination as personal issues of discriminators. Even Ankit, who can quickly identify racial discrimination and emphasized governmental intervention, conveyed that “you can’t expect” from discriminators. The transnational insights they carry in translating racial discrimination seem to put weight on individuals, and thus place them in a position where they feel that they do not need to get involved in other people’s problems, and what they can do is to focus on themselves.

Xie talked about it could just because of his bad luck that day on the Brooklyn street that he was yelled at. “bad luck” is a phrase brought by many other Asian international students as well, including Park. In thinking of his experience as a matter of luck, Xie also shared how he digested his emotions privately.

Chen: I wonder if you get angry afterwards when you think about it [what happened in Brooklyn]?
Xie: yes, of course of course. Because you are doing the right thing, but other people, they just don’t understand you. So I was really mad about it, very angry, but what can I do? [laugh] the only thing I could do is like listen to music and try to calm down myself.

Xie’s word “what can I do?” indicate that he believed that he cannot help with others’ lack of understanding of his behaviors, and what he can do is to focus on soothing himself privately from the incident. Wu, another PhD student in his mid-twenties from China, also shared his thoughts that he would not get involved in responding to discriminatory acts because he did not need to act like racist people.
Wu: If that kind of things [people yelling racial slurs] happened to me, I of course would not argue back. It is like I don’t need to be as low-level as they are [regarding hostile attitudes], I think after all it is just a small group of people that do that, not everybody.

In talking about people that display discriminatory actions as “low-level”, Wu implicitly place the cause of racial discrimination at the personal level, and because discrimination is comprehended as personal problem, Wu would not feel like he needed to respond in a discriminatory scenario. Similarly, Lin, also an advanced PhD student from China, used her knowledge in Psychology to explain discriminatory behaviors of individuals.

Chen: So I wonder that when your friends told you that they are worried that somebody would beat them up, what was on your mind?
Lin: There is always good people even though, um in bad times, so I’m not so worried about that, I think you cannot just avoid bad people, it’s just accident if you meet a bad person one day because they always exist. [...] Those people probably are not well-educated, they might have trouble in their own life and they just try to bully someone else to make them feel better. Because my major is educational psychology, we know that if one person is really fucked up, they want to make themselves feel better by blaming other people.

Again, Lin understood racist people as bad people that everyone will encounter inevitably in life, and she understood those people as having their personal troubles. By considering hostility
as coming from a place of personal life problems, bad characteristics, or “bad luck”, my participants seem to show a certain level of distance to racial discrimination. After all, it is the personal problem of discriminators that is outside of their control and not theirs to concern.

Yet, another theme that emerges in the data seems to contradict this overall distanced attitude towards discrimination. In many ways, Asian international students are also unable to respond even if they want to because of their worries over immigration threats. Responding to discrimination denotes a level of immigration danger that international students do not want to risk. Xie fluently articulated his concerns regarding this:

Chen: did you feel anything when you reflect on it [being yelled on the street] now?
Xie: I felt uncomfortable. But the thing is, I got no choice, because as an international student here, like we are different, we are not like other, some green card holders, so some other citizens, we just try to avoid to get in trouble, so when they say that, the only thing I can do it to speed up, go to other place, just try to avoid him, so that’s how I do.
Chen: how do you think is different that as international students, we shouldn’t get in trouble?
Xie: I have read about um, other news saying that international students, when they get in trouble, even something, how do I say, let me think, when they get caught, and then it will be a lot of troubles, like they will send you back to China, and then they don’t listen to you, that’s why I was scared, I’m sacred that when I get into trouble, no body will listen to me, because we are the International students, we have no rights, I think I don’t mean you really don’t have a right, but they just prefer not listen to you, but they prefer to listen to other people, because they are citizens,
they are green card holders, they are more powerful than you. So also in other school, um, I’m not sure about admission office, some advisors they even mention to the international students like, ‘try not to get in trouble.’ Because, yeah, that’s how I hear from other school, but at UAlbany, I never heard about that. In other states, other schools, because I have so many international friends, and then they say the admission office, the advisors said if you got into trouble, you got a lot of work to do. The first thing is that they will send you back to China, so try not to get into trouble.

Xie noticed the hierarchy in the citizenship, and that international students are not in the privileged position to voice out their concerns without worrying about being warned about deportation. The emphasis on Americans would not listen to international students shows a rather painful awareness that international students do not have the same power as those who have citizenship or permanent residence, and that they are at a low priority in the American society. Xie’s strategy of not responding seemed to be the most practical for him to remain safe and maintain his legal status. In this sense, his strategy is shaped by his status as a foreign students subjected to immigration threats.

Xie is not the only person that spoke on the relatively powerless position of international students. Patel is a master’s student in his early twenties from India. He first talked about he was really surprised to learn that racism exists in America, a country that is admired and aspired by his communities back in India. He then illustrated in details how his awareness of race has been impacting his life, and why he would steer far away from people that discriminate against him for the sake of personal safety and legal status.
Chen: have that awareness you have now about things in America impacting your life a little bit? Thinking about you have Asian look and all that?

Patel: I wouldn’t say that it has changed my day-to-day life, but I do make sure that I do not involve in any kind of activities. like if I know there are someone that is shouting because I’m Asian, I would make sure I’m hundreds of feet away from that, I would not want to interact with that person at all. […] and to be honest I have seen a lot of videos that you know people can carry guns and they can shoot whoever they want, and I really freak out. Because I do care about my life, I want to live a longer life so yeah it has made me aware that if you are getting into stations with other American people, just say sorry and leave, do not do anything else.

Patel first commented on his strategy because of his worry over gun violence against Asians, but after I probed, he laid out his other concern over his legal status.

Chen: so you are worried that they carry guns?

Patel: yeah that is one of my worries, and also, you know if they call police or something like that, and already I’m on international students’ visa, if anything bad happened, I’m going to jail or I’m going back to my country, even if…I mean so there are these things that I read about these Black people that are mistreated because of their race, I’m really worried that this will happen to us, even if we are not at fault, we might have to face these kinds of situations. Also there’s this friends of my dad, he used to live there, he recently moved back [to India], I think 5 years back, he used to say the same thing, even if the cop stops you or does anything to
you, just don’t do anything at all, just follow orders, otherwise you will be in great danger, and so he used to say these thing a lot when I was leaving for America, so these things have definitely put me into awareness that you are the lowest of the low people here, so you are not supposed to do anything wrong here.

The statement of “the lowest of people here” shows Patel’s recognition of his legal status in America is dependent on his student visa, which subjects him to immigration threats that he believed he had no word in decision-making. Not involving in any situations that he might do wrong, such as in a situation of responding to racial discrimination, is the safest option for him to continue his study in the States. Patel also shared the concern of police from the knowledge he absorbed from his family members and by self-studying about police system in the U.S. With these worries in mind, Patel almost certainly would not be able to respond to racial discrimination that happened to him, as silence seems to him the most perceivable and harmless choice.

In this section, I investigated into Asian international students’ strategy of navigating racial discrimination. On the one hand, Asian international students seem to have distanced attitudes towards discrimination from the interpretation they make of discriminators. On the other hand, distanced attitudes, or their choice of not responding, seems to be the most practical strategy they use to protect themselves against potential immigration threats. Engaging in discriminatory situation may involve institutions such as school or police department, and they are concerned that institutions have the power to put their legal status in danger. These seemingly conflicted stands illustrate the very position of Asian international students as transnational actors who comprehend racial discrimination with the knowledge they have, and as foreign students whose status is ultimately subjected to immigration control.
Conclusion

Under the Covid-19 pandemic, Asian international students show mixed feelings in their experiences of intensified racial discrimination in daily life. Many of them felt hurt, angry, and fearful for personal safety. As foreigners, international students are unfamiliar with the racial landscape in America. Towards racial discrimination, they display a strong sense of surprise, shock, and ambivalence. Uncertain about whether they are discriminated against or not seems to run through the transcripts.

With all these feelings, Asian international students manage to understand and interpret their experiences through their transnational knowledge. As transnational actors, they make comparisons between their home countries and America, in the aspects of different governmental attitudes in controlling the pandemic, cultural differences, and similarities in social problems. The interpretations they make of racial discrimination, however, seem to put weight on individual behaviors rather than comprehend racial discrimination as a part of a larger racial system. This tendency shaped their overall distanced attitudes towards racial discrimination, although their experiences can be painful at times. In the meantime, Asian international students’ status as visa-holders is another critical element in shaping their non-responding attitudes towards discrimination. As non-citizen, Asian international students articulate their understanding of their position as below citizens in the hierarchy of American citizenship. Fearful of not being treated equally as citizens and fearful of deportation, remaining silence in a discriminatory situation seems to be the most realistic self-protection strategy.

This research sheds light on the experiences of Asian international students in regard to their experiences of racial discrimination as foreigners and transnational actors subjected to
immigration restrictions in the context of the Covid-19 pandemic. It will contribute to the limited literature that addresses the unique experiences of Asian international student under the pandemic.

Due to the time restraint of the study, the sample size of this research is relatively small. Whereas the framework may be helpful in understanding the transnational experiences of Asian international students regarding racial discrimination, the scope of the research limits deeper investigation into the historical and social contexts of each Asian country. Future research should expand sample size and examine distinct historical and global contexts of Asian countries that contribute to the variations in international students’ racial experiences. Furthermore, the study restrains its participants to Asian international students, but it could be further developed by including Asian Americans into research. Including Asian Americans may make it possible to compare Asian international students’ experiences with Asian Americans’ experiences, and thus may help develop an analytical lens into the transnational differences and similarities in their comprehension of racial discrimination and adoption of navigation strategy.
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