



The post-racial myth: rethinking Chinese university students' experiences and perceptions of racialised microaggressions in the UK

Jingran Yu^{1,2} · Rohini Rai³ · Miguel Antonio Lim²  · Hanwei Li⁴

Accepted: 10 October 2023
© The Author(s) 2023

Abstract

As the world recovers from the pandemic and anti-Asian hate crimes have been gradually disappearing from the headlines, this article offers a timely reflection on Chinese international students' experiences and perceptions of racialised microaggressions during the pandemic, and, more importantly, takes the discussion further by deconstructing and challenging the underlying post-racial discourse. Based on 54 interviews with Chinese students from 13 universities across the UK, this article examines four phrases used by Chinese international students in making sense of their racialised experiences, in terms of the denial of racism ('it is not racism'), the justification of racism ('it is normal'), taking the blame of racism ('it is my fault') and in some rare cases, their reflections on anti-Asian racism in the so-called post-racial universities in the UK ('we are invisible'). It argues that such expressions are induced by and reflects neo-racism, neo-orientalism and everyday racism embedded within the wider post-racial discourse in the UK, which affirms the relevance of anti-Asian racism in the post-pandemic era rather than negates it. We thus make recommendations to UK universities to better support international students and combat anti-Asian particularly anti-Chinese racism.

Keywords Anti-Asian racism · Chinese students · Global social responsibility · Higher education · International student mobility · Microaggression

Introduction

In recent decades, Western universities tend to portray themselves as increasingly meritocratic, 'post-racial' institutions where racialised inequalities do not exist (Tate & Baguley, 2017). Moreover, the ascendance of neoliberalist principles in higher education

✉ Miguel Antonio Lim
miguelantonio.lim@manchester.ac.uk

¹ Institute of Education, Xiamen University, Xiamen, China

² Manchester Institute of Education, the University of Manchester, Manchester, UK

³ Dept. of Social and Political Sciences, Brunel University London, Uxbridge, UK

⁴ Tampere University, Tampere, Finland

systems objectifies international students as ‘cash cows’, further undermining public awareness of and humanistic concern about the racialisation of and racism against this student group (Waters, 2021). As a result, anti-Asian racism remains marginal if not non-existent in the formal institutional approaches of UK universities. This means that East Asian and particularly Chinese international students’ experiences, which form the largest ethnic minority group in UK higher education (Moosavi, 2020), are left vulnerable.

The sudden outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic brought public attention to the Asian international student body, which had long been ‘largely invisible’ and ‘habitually taken-for-granted’ in Western societies (Waters, 2021, n.p.). It is now widely acknowledged that the COVID-19 pandemic is a deeply racialised social crisis that has led to a spike of anti-Asian, especially anti-Chinese, hate crimes and microaggressions, presenting great challenges to international student mobility (He et al., 2020; Lee, 2020; Yao & Mwangi, 2022). Since then, important investigations have been carried out on students’ struggles with anti-Asian hate crimes and microaggressions (e.g. Koo et al., 2023; Ma & Zhan, 2022; Miyake, 2021), and, in response, many universities have taken actions to safeguard their students. However, in the UK higher education context, such recognition of discrimination tends to occur mostly in light of explicit or direct discrimination as witnessed during the COVID-19 pandemic but not in the context of everyday racism, leaving the underlying post-racial discourse untouched. As the world recovers from the pandemic and anti-Asian hate crimes have been gradually disappearing from the headlines, the discussion about anti-Asian racism appears to be less relevant while the Asian international students once again risk losing their visibility in anti-racist activism.

This article offers a timely reflection on Chinese international students’ experiences and perceptions of racialised microaggressions during the pandemic and, more importantly, takes the discussion further by deconstructing and challenging the underlying post-racial discourse in the UK context which remains no less relevant and important in the post-pandemic era. It exemplifies four phrases used by Chinese international students in making sense of their racialised experiences, in terms of the denial of racism (‘it is not racism’), the justification of racism (‘it is normal’), taking the blame of racism (‘it is my fault’) and in some rare cases, their reflections on anti-Asian racism in the so-called post-racial universities in the UK (‘we are invisible’). In the analysis, we shall reveal how such expressions are induced by and reflects neo-racism, neo-orientalism and everyday racism embedded within the wider post-racial discourse in the UK, which affirms the relevance of anti-Asian racism rather than negates it.

It contributes to the literature in the following ways. First, it problematises the dominant representation of international students as ‘monetarised objects’ in the Global North shaped by neoliberal market principles (Waters, 2021) where humanistic concern remains long absent. Rather, this article calls public and academic attention to their lived experiences as racialised subjects. Second, it offers insights into the racialised experiences of Asian international students in the UK context. While considerable literature on anti-Asian racism and sinophobia in Western universities has emerged in the past 2 years since the outbreak of the pandemic, most of these studies stem from the US and North American contexts (see Lee, 2020; Ma & Zhan, 2022). Third, this article deconstructs the post-racial discourse and critically examines its intersection with neo-racism, neo-orientalism and everyday racism, thus raising questions to the post-racial myth in the UK higher education context. On that basis, it makes recommendations to UK universities to better support international students and combat anti-Asian particularly anti-Chinese racism in the post-pandemic era.

Neo-orientalism, neo-racism and everyday racism: understanding anti-Asian and anti-Chinese racism in post-racial UK

While COVID-19 has indeed exacerbated anti-Asian/anti-Chinese racism in the West, such discriminatory attitudes and practices have a longer historicity linked to the discourses of orientalism (Said, 1978) and the ‘yellow peril’ (Lyman, 2000). Through orientalism or the Western knowledge-power nexus that discursively represented the ‘East’ from Eurocentric perspectives, the ‘Orient’ or ‘East Asia’ including China were historically represented as the ‘exotic’, ‘erotic’, ‘backward’, ‘irrational’ and ‘unintelligible’ ‘other’ of the ‘Occident’/‘West’ (Said, 1978). The yellow peril discursive image of East Asia and China, which itself is a product of orientalism, further constructed the entire region and people tracing ancestry to it, as the dreaded enemy of Western civilisation— ‘a fire breathing dragon that is the “yellow peril”’ (Lyman, 2000, p.684). This systemically legitimised the Western political-epistemic domination of the orient (Said, 1978), particularly in the context European imperialism, which continues to have implications today (Miyake, 2021; Pang, 2021). Following this orientalist logic, contemporary anti-Asian racism in the context of COVID 19 pandemic itself can be understood as an extension of the yellow peril rhetoric that is based on the pathologisation of ‘yellowness’ and racialisation of disease (Miyake, 2021). In this context, Pang (2021) argues that there is an uncanny parallel between the nineteenth century discourse of the yellow peril and the current COVID-19 crisis, whereby East Asians/Chinese are positioned as a (cultural and pathological) threat to Western societies, leading to the ‘othering’ of ‘Chineseness’.

Miyake (2021) argues that contemporary anti-Asian/anti-Chinese racism reflects neo-orientalism, which unlike classical orientalism that used scientific-racial language deploys a rather juridico-political and economic language, in turn contributing to the criminalisation of China and sinophobia within today’s global context (Lee, 2020). Modern neo-orientalism also involves bio-cultural racialisation or the process through which essentialist racial meanings are invoked and made meaningful through biological (e.g. size of the eyes) and/or cultural (e.g. food cultures) signification that may lead to othering of East Asians including Chinese communities (Garner, 2017; Murji & Solomos, 2005). Such bio-cultural racialisation involves a marking of yellowness, like that of hegemonic ‘whiteness’ and subaltern ‘blackness’, which homogenises, categorises and essentialises all those with East Asian/Chinese appearance, leading to their othering, stigmatisation and discrimination reflected in anti-Asian racism against all those who were perceived as Chinese in the context of COVID-19 (Miyake, 2021). In the UK, such racialisation was revealed by a recent survey that showed that after the outbreak of COVID-19, one in seven people in Britain avoided contact with people of Chinese origins/appearances as they were perceived as ‘vectors’ of the coronavirus disease (Beaver, 2020; Pang, 2021).

Despite longstanding orientalism, Western universities including those in the USA, Canada, Australia and the UK have today become hotspots for Asian, particularly Chinese, international students seeking ‘world-class’ higher education (Long, 2022). This is set in the context of the wider neoliberalisation and internationalisation of Western university system, whereby higher education has become a major export industry for Western economies, marked by fierce competition for international students’ recruitment (Brown & Jones, 2013). While this has undoubtedly generated financial gains for Western universities, the neoliberalisation of higher education has been intensely critiqued as a form of academic capitalism and knowledge imperialism that is based on commodification of education for profit (Dawson 2020). This is also accompanied with the prevalence of ‘student-as-consumer’ discourse in

the Global North universities (Brooks, 2018). Speaking particularly of the UK context, the dominant discourses on Chinese international students follow the cash cows logic, where they are objectified primarily as means of financial benefits, lacking any robust institutional support (Brown & Jones, 2013; Long, 2022).

Previous studies mostly from North America show that racialised microaggressions against East Asian/Chinese international students manifest in the form of verbal and non-verbal insults aiming at their accents, hairstyles or dress and patronising attitudes, stigmatisation and negative stereotyping of them as ‘passive’, ‘silent’ and ‘needy’ learners uninterested in socializing or integrating within Western societies (Lee & Rice, 2007). Studies also show that East Asian/Chinese students often experience universities as unwelcoming environments, where they are positioned as ‘outsiders’ in predominantly White spaces, leading many to also suffer from poor mental health conditions and systemic exclusion (Koo et al. 2023). Moosavi (2020) argues that East Asian students are often perceived as lacking critical thinking skills and intellectual competence, which reflects on-going orientalism and Eurocentrism within Western HEIs. Alongside this, East Asian and Chinese international students are also often positioned as ‘model minorities’ who are seen as ‘peaceful’, ‘docile’, ‘law-abiding’ and ‘insular’ community, who therefore do not face racism, which further erases their racialised experiences (Yeh, 2014), reproducing the post-racial myth that views racism as increasingly irrelevant in the liberal West (Paul, 2014).

Thus, in this article, we call for attention to neo-racism (Balibar, 1991) and everyday racism (Essed, 1991, 2002) in the context of Chinese/East Asian students in the UK within the broader frameworks of orientalism (Said, 1978) and post-racial discourse (Goldberg, 2008). Since anti-Asian racism in the British context remains largely under-theorised, this theoretical-conceptual framework allows us to examine both historical and contemporary dimensions of racialization of Chinese/East Asian communities, and the invisibilisation of their racialized experiences. ‘Neo-racism’ refers to those discriminatory and exclusionary ideas and practices linked to notions of cultural and national differences that maintain unequal power-relations leading to the othering of ethnic minorities (Balibar, 1991). Unlike ‘old racism’ that legitimised discrimination based on ‘natural/biological/phenotypical’ differences particularly in the context of European colonialism, neo-racism justifies them based on ideas of absolute cultural incompatibility in today’s context of globalisation and migration, which is nonetheless rooted in white supremacy (Balibar, 1991; Long, 2022). ‘Everyday racism’ on the other hand relates to mundane experiences of racialised discrimination, recurring so often that they are almost taken-for-granted, and may even involve a ‘denial’ of racism (Essed, 1991). Everyday racism links the micro to the macro, institutional to interactional and ideology to practices, which often manifest in unconscious exercise of power that recentres whiteness and the primacy of Western culture (Essed, 2002). Since East Asian, particularly Chinese, international students are discriminated based on cultural and national factors such as language, accent and ‘foreignness’, as well as experience racialised microaggressions on a day-to-day basis, the concepts of neo-racism and everyday racism can act as useful tools in examining their experiences particularly in the UK higher education context.

Methodology

This article emerged from two related research projects. Project A explored socio-cultural integration of Chinese international students into the British society. It was designed as a qualitative single-case study, including semi-structured interviews with

30 Chinese (including one Thai student of Chinese ethnic heritage) students at University X. During the data collection period, the COVID-19 pandemic struck the world and soon became one of the greatest obstacles to the interviewees' sociocultural integration to the British society. Based on the findings of project A, the researchers then developed research project B that investigated the safety, security and communication issues of Chinese and East Asian international students during the COVID-19 pandemic in UK universities. Project A started data collection in December 2019 and finished in April 2020. Project B started data collection in March 2021 and finished in June 2021. It adopted a mixed-methods design, incorporating 160 online surveys and 25 semi-structured interviews with Chinese or Chinese-presenting/East Asian students and 15 freedom of information (FOI) requests to police forces. FOI sources include requests made by the team (seven responses out of 37 submissions) and eight existing FOI requests made within the period of enquiry (December 2019–December 2021). Both projects have been through Proportionate University Research Ethics Committee (UREC) Review by University X.

This article is solely based on qualitative data. It draws upon 30 interviews from project A and 24 interviews from project B to investigate microaggressions against Chinese students not only provoked by the outbreak COVID-19 but also in relation to everyday racism in UK higher education. Project A, as a single-case study, recruited all interview participants only from University X. International student office of University X distributed interview invitation letter to help us recruit students self-identifying as Chinese to participate in our research. We also recruited participants through online Chinese student groups and used snowball sampling. Project B managed to recruit 25 students through online Chinese student chat platforms and used snowball sampling. The participants are from 13 universities across the UK (including one Thai student, who is excluded in this article), including the following: University of Manchester (six), University of Birmingham (four), University of Glasgow (three), University of Nottingham (two), University College London (two), London School of Economics (one), King's College London (one), University of Sussex (one), University of Surrey (one), University of Sheffield (one), University of Edinburgh (one), Imperial College London (one) and Durham University (one). At the time of the interview, the respondents were either enrolled or had obtained a degree from a British university. All interviews were conducted in the interviewees' first language, which means Mandarin in most cases except for the interviews with Thai students were conducted in English. The researchers who collected the interview data were themselves ethnic Chinese as well as Chinese nationals. The article authors include Chinese nationals of Chinese ethnicity, non-Chinese nationals with mixed Chinese heritage and a non-ethnic Chinese researcher (perceived as East Asian). All interviews were audio-recorded, each lasting for 1–2 h. Interview transcripts were shared within the entire research team after the identifying details removed to ensure anonymity. Analysis and coding were conducted inductively in the original language of the transcripts by the leader of the qualitative research team, and emerging themes were discussed and reviewed by the principal investigator in dialogue with the findings from the quantitative research team. The transcripts have thus been through several rounds of coding and thematic analysis, then selectively translated into English in the process of writing up of this article, which informs the following analytical sections. All names cited here are pseudonyms.

Findings

In this section, we present our findings under four themes emerged during the interviews: the denial of racism, the justification of racism, taking the blame of racism and the invisibility of Asian students in UK higher education.

'It is not racism'

When students talked about their experiences of microaggressions, one of the most heard phrases that emerged is *it is not racism*. However, with deeper explorations, we discovered that racism is denied owing to the absence of 'anti-Asian racism' discourse in the UK context, which may be further masked by the intersectionality of race with other power axes such as gender, which is nonetheless embedded within the wider post-racial discourse.

In the first aspect, the findings show a lack of 'racial consciousness' among Chinese international students induced by the absence of anti-Asian racism discourse in the UK context, implying that they may not necessarily be aware of discrimination as being an outcome of their racialization and may not always articulate their experiences through the language of racism. In this context, the term racial consciousness refers to the consciousness of identity and status based on racialised difference including colour and cultural roots, which is intertwined with social classification and prejudice (Cane, 2021), and in this case, microaggression. Racial consciousness entails 'a critical appreciation of uneven power relations between racial groups, the understanding of privilege, and bias associated with race' (Cane & Tedam, 2022, p.4). In the UK context, microaggressions against Chinese students tend to take the form of neo-racism, where their cultural and national identity, i.e. Chineseness, was used as a basis for discrimination and verbal abuse (Long, 2022). However, when asked if he had such experiences, students like Fang (male, undergraduate, computer science) hesitated: 'I don't know how to define racism ... I'm not sure if they're being racist or not'. With further explorations, he recalled that he was verbally abused by someone on his way out to the grocery store. According to his description, the offender was driving by when cursing him using the exact phrase 'Chinese'. But Fang thought,

There is no way you could determine what exactly was in his head. So I can only say this kind of incidents did happen to me; but I don't think this is racist.

This reiterates the difficulty for Chinese students to articulate their experiences of microaggressions as 'racism' due to the lack of the discursive language of anti-Asian racism, which is particularly true in the UK context as opposed to the US where such discourse exists to a larger extent. This lack of language or 'badge' of 'race/racism', which itself is a symptom of wider post-racial discourse in the British context, prevents Chinese students from 'naming' and therefore identifying microaggressions as racism, which may hinder their ability to address the enduring significance of racialized othering and resist along the lines of anti-racism (Paul, 2014).

In some cases, the offenders may not be explicitly racist, making it more difficult for the Chinese students to pinpoint racism. For instance, Liu (female, undergraduate, mechanical engineering) denied ever experiencing racism. Instead, she attributed her experiences of microaggressions to 'just student bully[ing]' because they 'never called the C[hinese] word' or expressed that 'you are from China' in such incidents. This shows the 'subtle' and 'indirect' nature of neo-racism (Balibar, 1991), as that they are not based on explicit

biological references and are not expressed 'directly' or 'explicitly'. In this way, 'racism without racism' (Goldberg, 2008) is achieved, as the 'post racial' logic based on a denial of racism leads to the erasure of racialized discrimination and microaggressions, which results in racisms without the language of racism with which to identify and challenge its conditions. It can therefore be argued that such post-racial forms of neo-racism induce a lack of racial consciousness among Chinese international students in the UK, who are thus unable to call out on their experiences of microaggressions as racism due to the absence of the language of anti-Asian racism. As Wong et. al. (2021, p.370) point out, there is a denial of racism, especially in the UK higher education contexts, since it is 'unacceptable for racism to be acceptable, especially for those who are subjected to racism'.

In the second aspect, some interviewees tended to attribute microaggressions to other factors such as class, gender and culture, in which race was not necessarily considered as relevant. For example, some female students attributed their experiences of microaggressions to their gender. Meng (female, doctorate, counselling psychology) shared her experience that a drunk man threw a bottle at her in the evening in the street at Edinburgh; similar incidents also happened to her on several occasions in Northampton and London. When asked if she considered such incidents relevant to racism, she said 'not necessarily that. I think it's because I'm a short, Chinese, woman'. This reflects the significance of intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1991) in the racialised experiences of Chinese international students in the UK, whereby the organisation of power in racial microaggressions is not shaped by the single axis of race, but other interrelated axes of difference such as class, gender and culture (Anthias and Yuval-Davis, 2005), which may work to mask racism.

In this context, 'culture' stood out as a key factor that many students ascribed microaggressions to. Thus, racialized microaggressions experienced by Chinese international students in the UK are informed by an intersection of neo-orientalism and neo-racism, which involves the signification of cultural difference rather than biological race in the articulation of discrimination. Chinese students' experiences of racialized microaggressions are therefore informed by a neo-orientalist logic, whereby othering occurs through a sense of disavowal against 'Asianness' or Chineseness (Miyake, 2021; Said, 1978). Such neo-orientalist perceptions are sometimes manifested in the othering of Chinese traditional culture reflected for instance, when students had experiences of stones thrown at their window when they put decorative papercuts on for window decoration to celebrate Chinese Spring Festival. In everyday settings, some students believed they were discriminated against because the British people perceive Chineseness as backward as compared to British cultural values that represent 'forwardness', and tended to use the phrase 'cultural difference'. For instance, Zhu (female, postgraduate, TESOL) said that 'They [the British people] think we are still in the feudal society'. 'They think we have no spiritual and cultural life and education is also far behind', added Mo (female, doctorate, finance). Xie (female, doctorate, textile design, fashion and management) also compared the British people who discriminate, to those Chinese people who lived in Qing Dynasty, 'they are proud and entitled. They have little knowledge about us'.

Furthermore, such discrimination was also represented in a binary construction of contemporary China as 'authoritarian' that is associated with 'human-rights violations', in contrast to the 'liberal' West that is often represented as 'humanitarian', thus constructing notions of 'us' (West) vs 'them' (Chinese). In this context, Fang expressed frustration that local people tend to associate China with 'concentration camp in Uighur' or 'cotton from Xinjiang' as those were the predominate representation in Western media. Hu also referred to another example in a university setting during a seminar discussion, where fellow students were judging Chinese people for eating dog meat, further highlighting

neo-orientalism and neo-racism (Balibar, 1991; Long, 2022). Hu said, ‘I was feeling uncomfortable, but I just left without arguing with them’. According to Hu, he does not eat dog meat himself; it is just that he did not like their attitude and how they imposed Euro-centric cultural stereotypes on them. Such examples of microaggressions directed against Chinese culture reflect the argument that the neo-orientalist construction of China as the other of the ‘liberal, democratic West’ is legitimised through representational repertoires of China as an ‘undemocratic’ and authoritarian regime characterised by labour exploitation, human-rights violations, environmental pollution, organised crime and cruel eating habits (dogs and bats)— a rhetoric consistent with anti-Asian/anti-Chinese racism in the context of COVID-19 crisis and beyond (Miyake, 2021).

‘It is normal’

In the cases where interviewees did recognise racism, they tended to justify racism by considering it as ‘normal’. This shows how everyday racism reproduces itself through normalisation, familiarity and taken-for-grantedness of discrimination, whereby racism is normalised as a ‘universal’ and almost natural phenomenon (Essed, 1991). For example, Ke (male, postgraduate, accounting) expressed that he was getting used to microaggression and considered racial incidents to be universal as a way of making sense of them:

Racism exists everywhere, right? There are also Chinese people discriminating other races. It’s not about an individual country, be it the UK, China, or other countries. For me, if it happens, I can understand.

Ke’s thought was echoed by a few others. Tao (female, undergraduate, mathematics with finance) believed ‘it’s just a social phenomenon. If it happens to you, then it’s your bad luck’; hence ‘don’t take it personally’, said Qian.

This reflects a common thought for the Chinese international students to relegate racism to the level of the individual — the unfortunate ‘bad apple’— ‘who is condescended as being constitutionally ‘bad’ who knew no better’ (Valluvan, 2016, p.2241) rather than viewing it as a systemic problem. They tended to attribute it to an individual’s character or intentions, rather than seeing it as a structural phenomenon that is systematically reproduced through hegemonic structures of power. A few students also believed they became the targets of microaggressions because the perpetrator came from lower-class hence were not well-educated, further showing the intersectionality of race and class. Similarly, Luo (female, postgraduate, educational leadership) thought that microaggressions targeting Chinese students particularly during COVID19 emerged owing to ‘mask-phobia’, and that the ‘China virus’ discourse were ‘understandable’ as ‘there are people from various social class with various level of self-cultivation in every country’. In a similar vein, some students even made excuses for the perpetrator, common expressions including: ‘they meant no harm’; ‘he was just making a joke’; ‘don’t take it seriously’. However, with further explorations, it is worth noticing that interviewees usually did feel a sense of racism while making excuses for the perpetrator[s]. Take Yan (female, doctorate, neuroscience) as an example; he started by commenting on his supervisor as ‘a very nice person who likes making jokes’; however, the example Yan gave was about his supervisor showing him an article on *The Sun* saying that the female soldiers in the parade for China National Day were all beautiful and well-trained spies to be sent to all other countries. ‘It might be half-joke, half-racist’, Yan eventually mumbled.

Correspondingly, Chinese students also develop coping strategies at the individual level to resist racism. For instance, Wang (male, doctorate, polymer science and engineering) shared his experience of microaggression of being verbally and physically abused, and said:

I didn't push him back, but I shouted at them. However, there were other Asian faces at the scene, but nobody gave me a hand. Everyone was indifferent, Asian people, White people, all the same. Only a homeless guy sitting next to the door spoke for me, saying 'this is not right'.

Wang's experience shows that Chinese students do exercise agency and challenge racism, particularly in its direct and explicit manifestations. However, such resistance to microaggressions is often expressed at the individual level, which makes it difficult to challenge deep-seated racism due to a lack of solidarity and silence from the wider society. As such, Wang expressed feeling hurt especially because he was trying to fight against racial microaggression, but everyone including those from the same racialised group just stood idly by. But he also reiterated that he understood this, as those who were 'new' to the UK might be lacking awareness and understanding of anti-Asian racism. This has also been observed by Wong et. al (2021, p.365), who argue that in the UK universities, students often respond to racism by taking on a 'bystander' approach, which is underpinned by passivity and inaction despite recognition of racism. However, the bystander stance is not due to a lack of critical responsibility but rather due to limited knowledge on the issue which makes them feel unqualified to intervene in racialized conflicts.

Another underlying rationale for students to justify racism is their 'internalised orientalism' (Moosavi, 2020, p.286). In this context, several students even took the blame as a way of developing strategies to cope with racial microaggression. For example, Ban (female, postgraduate, international education studies) thought it would be 'normal' if the 'weaker side' in international relations is subject to discrimination. Hence she thought: 'it is better to put expectation on ourselves rather than others. If one day we become a stronger country, they would give us the respect we deserve.' This shows how racial minorities such as Chinese students in the UK make sense of their experiences and cope with them by reproducing the same neo-orientalist stereotypes and binaries between us and them, where they see themselves through Eurocentric tropes like backward or weaker compared to the West. In this context, Moosavi (2020) has stated that East Asian students often tend to accept and endorse orientalist stereotypes, reflecting a sense of inferiority complex by adopting such dominant discourses that in the deeper level works to reproduce neo-racism. However, the tendency of Chinese students to justify their experiences of racialized microaggressions by giving the benefit of the doubt to the perpetrator or internalising racism and orientalism can also be seen simply as an assertion of minority agency by moving beyond the 'victim' status and strategically attempting to take control of their lived experiences.

Nevertheless, we also observed that such normalisation of racism can be deconstructed, and racial consciousness can be cultivated with support from peers and universities. In the rare case of Xu (female, postgraduate, international business and commercial law), she had two flatmates, one British, other American, both of whom offered great help in enhancing her awareness of racism and developing the knowledge to deal with racial microaggression. She elaborated:

The American flatmate is Black, hence having a better understanding of racism and hate crimes and incidents. [...] The British flatmate knows the system well, I mean, the channels to communicate to the university. [...] Yes, the university then

sent out several student representations to discuss this issue, to inform you how to respond, and introduce the most efficient way to bring such incidents to the universities, should these happen again.

When asked if she found such procedures helpful, she said:

Indeed. Earlier I was not even sure if I were discriminated against. [...] Now I think I can identify racial microaggression and take quicker actions that previous times.

In comparing these two examples, it can be said that in the case of Wang, Chinese students' lacking racial consciousness led to insufficient support, which makes the individuals' fight against racism even more difficult, whilst the experience of Xu demonstrates that with sufficient peer support and appropriate guidance by the university, racial consciousness can be cultivated, and proactive anti-racism approaches can be learned.

'It is my fault'

With the fear of being racially discriminated against, it was common for Chinese students to resort to 'self-segregation'— since they had no effective language or discursive tool to deal with racialized microaggression, the best way seemed to be remaining silent and preventing inter-ethnic contacts altogether. This could easily lead to self-blame, attributing racism and racialisation of Chinese students to their own behaviour. This became particularly intensified during the context of COVID-19 and the amplification of anti-Asian racism in the UK and globally. For example, when asked if local people had any strange reactions when seeing them during covid-19, Gu (female, postgraduate, education) said: 'To be honest, I was the one having strange reactions'. S/he chose to sit far away from and avoid contact with local people on the bus when s/he had the mask on. 'I was concerned about microaggressions, but also worried if they would feel uncomfortable around me.' Gu explained. This therefore shows that faced with racialized microaggression, a key strategy of response is 'silence' which informs 'avoidance' or the inability to voice out injustice, which may yet have the dangers of reproducing anti-Asian racism since it remains unchecked.

However, it must be noted here that we do not use the term self-segregation uncritically where we imply that Chinese students are an insular community who 'huddle together' while avoiding contact with people of other ethnic backgrounds. Rather, we use it as a form of critique against dominant discourses and perceptions of Chinese and other minority communities in the UK (e.g. Muslims) as 'living in a cultural bubble', being unable to integrate within dominant British/Western culture (an orientalist claim in itself) (Kalra & Kapoor, 2009). This further pathologizes and marginalises Chinese students by placing the blame of racism on them for their self-segregating tendencies, rather than examining the role of real structural and institutional barriers that exclude and marginalise them from mainstream British society.

This is well-expressed in the following example provided by Guo (male, doctorate, mechanical engineering). One day, his neighbour upstairs knocked on his door. He was alerted and refused to open the door as he was afraid the neighbour would harm him. After several rounds of communication, he realised that the old couple upstairs had dropped some cookware on his balcony and was seeking his help to pick it up. He reflected on this experience:

I feel the overall atmosphere has done something to me. I can't help wondering if I was in danger. This was supposed to be a normal case of mutual help between neighbours, but my defensive mindset led to misunderstanding.

His neighbours could not understand why he was overacting and behaved in such a defensive way, and questioned him, 'Why such an attitude? I would do no harm to you.'

Consequently, such instances further prevent the Chinese international students from engaging with and making sociocultural contributions to the community. Taking Ban (female, postgraduate, international education studies) as an example, who was feeling bad because she had to turn a homeless away as she was concerned about her own safety. According to her description, a homeless guy approached her for food in front of a supermarket; she really wanted to offer her help but had to keep a distance because she was concerned about hate crimes and incidents. After she entered the supermarket, another White woman took the homeless guy in and bought him food. Then she started to feel guilty:

Maybe I was over-protecting myself. I was thinking that woman dares to take him in, alone, why can't I do the same? Why don't I dare to the same?

Ban kept talking about her feeling of guilt for not helping, but also emphasised that she was really scared because of anti-Asian crimes she read and heard especially during the pandemic. Through such experiences, the discourse of Chinese student as a self-segregating community becomes further reproduced particularly in the context of the pandemic. However, such strategies too fail to address and challenge neo-racism and everyday racism but rather works to reinforce them.

It seems that strategies of silence and avoidance may have worked in terms of reducing microaggressions in the short term. However, we argue such strategies reinforce racialisation and intensify anti-Asian and particularly anti-Chinese racism in the long run. Additionally, strategies of avoidance may also feed into the persisting cultural stereotype of Chinese students as being 'quiet' and 'submissive', as part of the 'model minority' discourse (Yeh, 2014). As Wang pointed out,

Our quietness affirms their impression of us as an easy target. Before, they only had such impression in their mind; but after bullying one Chinese person, they would think, oh, they're really an easy target. Then they will bully us in a worse way, and more frequently.

Such model minority tropes further work to racialize Chinese students in the UK albeit through positive ascriptions as the 'acceptable other' who are peaceful, law-abiding and insular, and who refrain from challenging the established racialized status quo of British society. However, it is detrimental to Chinese students, since it reproduces the post-racial assumptions that the Chinese do not experience racism, which further works to silence and erase anti-Asian racism in the UK context (Song, 2003). Despite 'positive' stereotypes, the model minority discourse should be understood not as an opposite of microaggressions but rather as a part of wider racial schema of neo-orientalism and neo-racism (Yeh, 2014).

'We are invisible'

In rare cases, several interviewees were conscious of the racialisation of and anti-Asian racism against Chinese students and provided their reflections on the invisibility of Asian international students in the UK, particularly within higher education contexts. For instance, citing the Black History Month which has now been adopted by most UK

universities, Ruan (female, postgraduate, public management) said that her university assigned the theme of Blackness to a specific month, launching a series of events including the history, experiences and identities of Black British people in the UK. She thought it was a good idea, which really enhanced her understanding of anti-Black racism. But, she and other students also expressed that East Asians and anti-Asian racism continues to be neglected in such efforts. 'I had to read from the news to know what's happening with my fellow students; honestly, except for those who are in the same programme and those encountered on campus, I don't even have a clue about how many Asian students are in my university', said Ruan. Similarly, Liang (background) expressed solidarity against the social injustice Black students had to face, and said 'however, not so many people really know about the injustice happening to us'.

As such, as an (East) Asian student, Lin (female, undergraduate, plant science) felt being 'invisible' in UK higher education 'in every sense'. She took one prestigious award in her university as an example. To win the award, undergraduate students were required to complete a 'challenge' every academic year. For the second year, it was the 'social justice challenge', including one sub-topic as racism. 'However, all the cases studies were about anti-Black racism while nobody talked about anti-Asian racism', she expressed. She also used the example of the official Instagram page of her university and problematised their representation of 'diversity' therein:

I see a lot of European students, international students, I do not see yellow skin Asians, I see different skin colours representative represented but not really us. Yes, I think probably someone should call the university out on institutional racism.

These examples once again reiterate the wider process of silencing and invisibilisation of anti-Asian racism in the UK universities, which results in the institutional exclusion of Chinese/East Asian students. Even when universities do take steps towards enhancing inclusion and diversity, interviewees like Lin saw them as a 'tick-box' exercise, that 'only scratch the surface without touching the substance'.

In terms of the official actions, Tang (female, undergraduate, English language for Education) commented 'They were merely saying those words, like respect for 'racial diversity', things nice to hear and decent.' As for semi-official channels like the Student Union, Liu commented 'They were like politicians. Only for the formality. It was embarrassing ... they talked so much about ideology and culture, but did nothing that was really helpful'. As a result, some interviewees even doubted about it was realistic to seek for racial equity. Shang (male, doctorate, economic geography) concluded: 'as the ethnic minority, it is impossible for us to expect the same right enjoyed by the locals'. It is thus worth noticing that anti-racism could be diluted in within the dominant diversity, inclusion, cultural competence and multiculturalism discourses (Ladhani & Sitter, 2020). Such dilution of anti-racism has misled some universities to representing themselves as achievers in combating racism, while leaving the core issues of race and racism, particularly anti-Asian racism, under addressed and therefore unchallenged (Cane & Tadam, 2022).

Our findings echo with Tate and Bagguley (2017) observations of universities' post-racial stance that views racism only in its explicit form and individual level, but denies those institutionally embedded, normalised, indirect forms of everyday racism (Essed, 1991). This is particularly true for anti-Asian racism in the UK, as this strain of racism is often taken-for-granted, denied and invisibilised in British society (Song, 2003; Yeh, 2014) as compared to other forms of racism like anti-Black racism which has been visibilised particularly due to the recent efforts of anti-racist movements like the Black Lives Matter 2020.

Conclusion and implications

In this article, we have examined four dominant phrases used by Chinese international students in making sense of their experiences of and responses to racialised microaggressions against the wider context of post-racial discourse in the UK context. These include: it is not racism, it is normal, it is my fault and we are invisible. These contribute to the widespread post-racial discourses that view ‘race’ as a thing of the past, and therefore irrelevant; hence, race-conscious practices and policies are no longer necessary in the higher education context particularly in relation to anti-Asian racism (Baber, 2015). However, first, our analyses show that students’ denial of racism is resulted from the absence of anti-Asian racism discourse in the UK context, and/or masked by the intersectionality of neo-racism with other power axes, which itself is a reflection of wider post-racial claims. Second, they perceived racism as normal because they attributed racist behaviours to imperfections or weakness of character of the racist perpetrator, instead of institutional racism at a social level; meanwhile, to a certain extent, findings manifested internalised orientalism (Moosavi, 2020) among the Chinese international students. Third, with fears of racist offences as well as discursive tool to cope with, it was common for them to opt for self-segregation, which is in reality a result of their systemic exclusion. This leads to their self-blame and limited social and cultural engagements, which reinforces negative cultural stereotypes and hinders their potential sociocultural contributions. Fourth, a small number of students noticed the invisibility of Asian international students particularly in UK universities and hope for more actions from the university than mere formality.

Thus, we argue that Chinese international students’ denial of racism, justification of racism, taking the blame of racism and invisibilisation in UK higher education only reaffirms the relevance of combating anti-Asian racism in the post-pandemic era rather than negating it. It is important to understanding their experiences as ‘racialised subjects’ rather than monetarised objects, who face multiple forms of racialised microaggression and discrimination but tend to be masked by other power axis and relate to neo-racism, neo-orientalism and everyday racism. Moreover, our research findings show that it is sufficient to only acknowledge racism in its ‘direct’ or ‘extreme’ forms perpetuated by few individuals, which works to minimise or even, we would argue, *invisibilise* the daily effects of racism (Valluvan, 2016). Accordingly, we suggest UK universities take further actions to combat everyday anti-Asian racism on campus, beyond the temporary procedures implemented for COVID-19-related incidents by acknowledging the existence of anti-Asian racism at multiple levels and in diverse forms.

Ours is not the first work to call for universities to pay particular attention to international students’ welfare. Nor is the benefit of such a call limited only to international students. Johnson and Lollar (2002) have shown that policies that are implemented to ensure diversity also help to secure a wider range of contributions from students. The initial step towards ensuring and improving this welfare is to educate students themselves — apart from the wider HEI community — that ethnic identity is a protected characteristic and something to be valued. In response to what we have shown above, universities — students, staff and other community members — must act to reject the normalisation of everyday racism and certainly help racialised individuals to realise that it is not their fault. This rejection of the racism as normal and the invisibility of racialised subjects call for the university to educate its community in the lived realities — and challenges — of Asian students, thus rendering them visible.

The need to revisit education initiatives to raise awareness for international students and staff already resonates with demands of the Equality Act 2010, the adoption of the Race Equality Charter Mark in 2014 and the findings of the UK Equality and Human Rights Commission (2019) which found that the higher education sector did not fully realise the depth and breadth of the challenge of racial discrimination in the UK and that university staff members lacked the ‘understanding, skills, and confidence’ to resolve these issues properly and that university cultures would themselves have to change in order to address the deeply seated problems.

The UK higher education sector acknowledges the need for change. In its report, “Tackling Racial Harassment in Higher Education”, Universities UK (2020) — the organisation that represents UK universities — pledged to do its part to address the recommendation of the Human Rights Commission and to implement the necessary recommendations to protect students and the university community from racialized discrimination. These protections naturally apply equally to British students from ethnic minorities as well as to international students who are unable to pass for the ethnic majority in the UK. In spite of this, our findings suggest that, to a certain extent, respondents perceived UK universities focus on racism against domestic students to the exclusion of international Chinese students. Furthermore, Campion and Clark (2022) find that initiatives like the Race Equality Charter Mark, while good, achieve only incremental change, which further supports the claims of this paper.

Our position is that racism of any kind is to be fought and avoided which is why we also argue that other affected populations, such as Chinese and East Asians, should not be invisible in initiatives to combat racism. We echo Waters’ call (2021) to ‘render [these students] visible’. To be clear, we *contribute to the existing* call for further action to combat racism, but precisely highlight the need to combat *anti-Asian racism* which, although a worthy goal in itself, also results in the good of the wider higher education community and society at large.

Funding British Academy, COV19\201439, Miguel Antonio Lim

Open Access This article is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License, which permits use, sharing, adaptation, distribution and reproduction in any medium or format, as long as you give appropriate credit to the original author(s) and the source, provide a link to the Creative Commons licence, and indicate if changes were made. The images or other third party material in this article are included in the article’s Creative Commons licence, unless indicated otherwise in a credit line to the material. If material is not included in the article’s Creative Commons licence and your intended use is not permitted by statutory regulation or exceeds the permitted use, you will need to obtain permission directly from the copyright holder. To view a copy of this licence, visit <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>.

References

- Anthias, F., & Yuval-Davis, N. (2005). *Racialized boundaries: Race, nation, gender, colour and class and the anti-racist struggle*. Routledge.
- Baber, L. D. (2015). Examining post-racial ideology in higher education. *Teachers College Record*, 117(14), 5–26.
- Balibar, E. (1991). Is there a Neo-racism? In E. Balibar & I. Wallerstein (Eds.), *Race, Nation, Class: Ambiguous Identities* (1st ed., pp. 17–28). Verso.

- Beaver, K., (2020). *COVID-19 – one in seven people would avoid people of Chinese origin or appearance*. Ipsos. Retrieved May 9, 2022, from <https://www.ipsos.com/en-uk/covid-19-one-seven-people-would-avoid-people-chinese-origin-or-appearance>
- Brooks, R. (2018) Understanding the higher education student in Europe: a comparative analysis. *Compare: A Journal of Comparative and International Education* 48(4): 500–517.
- Brown, L., & Jones, I. (2013). Encounters with racism and the international student experience. *Studies in Higher Education*, 38(7), 1004–1019.
- Campion, K., & Clark, K. (2022). Revitalising race equality policy? Assessing the impact of the Race Equality Charter mark for British universities. *Race Ethnicity and Education*, 25(1), 18–37.
- Cane, T. (2021). Attempting to disrupt racial division in social work classrooms through smallgroup activities. *Journal of Practice Teaching and Learning*, 18(1–2), 15–138.
- Cane, T. C., & Tadam, P. (2022). ‘We didn’t learn enough about racism and anti-racist practice’: newly qualified social workers’ challenge in wrestling racism. *Social Work Education*, 0(0), 1–23. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02615479.2022.2063271>
- Crenshaw, K. (1991). Race, gender, and sexual harassment. *S. Cal. L. Rev*, 65, 1467.
- Dawson, M. C. (2020). Rehumanising the university for an alternative future: Decolonisation, alternative epistemologies and cognitive justice. *Identities*, 27(1), 71–90.
- Equality and Human Rights Commission. (2019, October 23). *Tackling racial harassment: universities challenged*. Equality and Human Rights Commission. Retrieved January 12, 2022 from <https://www.equalityhumanrights.com/en/publication-download/tackling-racial-harassment-universities-challenged>
- Essed, P. (1991). *Understanding everyday racism* (1st ed.). Sage Publications.
- Essed, P. (2002). Everyday racism. In D. Goldberg & J. Solomos (Eds.), *A Companion to Racial and Ethnic Studies* (1st ed.). Blackwell Publishers Ltd.
- Garner, S. (2017). *Racisms: An introduction*. Sage.
- Goldberg, D. T. (2008). Racisms without racism. *PMLA*, 123(5), 1712–1716.
- He, J., He, L., Zhou, W., Nie, X., & He, M. (2020). Discrimination and social exclusion in the outbreak of COVID 19. *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health*, 17(8), 2933.
- Johnson, S. M., & Lollar, X. L. (2002). Diversity policy in higher education: The impact of college students’ exposure to diversity on cultural awareness and political participation. *Journal of Education Policy*, 17(3), 305–320.
- Kalra, V. S., & Kapoor, N. (2009). Interrogating segregation, integration and the community cohesion agenda. *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, 35(9), 1397–1415.
- Koo, K. K., Yao, C. W., & Gong, H. J. (2023). “It is not my fault”: Exploring experiences and perceptions of racism among international students of color during COVID-19. *Journal of Diversity in Higher Education*, 16(3), 284–296. <https://doi.org/10.1037/dhe0000343>
- Ladhani, S., & Sitter, K. C. (2020). The revival of anti-racism: Considerations for social work education. *Critical Social Work*, 21(1), 54–65.
- Lee, J. J. (2020). Neo-racism and the criminalization of China. *Journal of International Students*, 10(4), 780–783.
- Lee, J. J., & Rice, C. (2007). Welcome to America? International student perceptions of discrimination. *Higher Education*, 53(3), 381–409.
- Long, F. (2022). The mystery of national identity of Chinese international students amid the COVID-19 pandemic: The role of western neo-racism and Chinese nationalism. *Studies in Social Justice*, 16(1), 162–181.
- Lyman, S. M. (2000). The ‘yellow peril’ mystique: Origins and vicissitudes of a racist discourse. *International Journal of Politics, Culture, and Society*, 13(4), 683–747.
- Ma, Y., & Zhan, N. (2022). To mask or not to mask amid the COVID-19 pandemic: How Chinese students in America experience and cope with stigma. *Chinese Sociological Review*, 54(1), 1–26.
- Miyake, T. (2021). ‘Cin ciun cian’(ching chong): Yellowness and neo-orientalism in Italy at the time of COVID-19. *Philosophy & Social Criticism*, 47(4), 486–511.
- Moosavi, L. (2020). “Can East Asian students think?”: Orientalism, critical thinking, and the decolonial project. *Education Sciences*, 10(10), 286.
- Murji, K., & Solomos, J. (Eds.). (2005). *Racialization: studies in theory and practice*. Oxford University Press on Demand.
- Pang, B. (2021). Beyond hypervisibility and fear: British Chinese Communities’ leisure and health-related experiences in the time of coronavirus. *Leisure Sciences*, 43(1–2), 111–117.
- Paul, J. (2014). Post-racial futures: Imagining post-racialist anti-racism (s). *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, 37(4), 702–718.
- Said, E. (1978). *Orientalism: Western concepts of the Orient*. New York: Pantheon.

- Song, M. (2003). Why aren't the Chinese Black in Britain? Some thoughts on "integration" and "social exclusion." *Kolor*, 3(2), 3–18.
- Tate, S. A., & Bagguley, P. (2017). Building the anti-racist university: Next steps. *Race Ethnicity and Education*, 20(3), 289–299.
- Universities UK. (2020). *Tackling racial harassment in higher education*. Retrieved June 9, 2022 from <https://www.universitiesuk.ac.uk/sites/default/files/field/downloads/2021-08/tackling-racial-harassment-in-higher-education.pdf>
- Valluvan, S. (2016). What is 'post-race' and what does it reveal about contemporary racisms? *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, 39(13), 2241–2251.
- Waters, J. (2021). *Covid-19 and International Student Mobility. Some reflections*. LSE Southeast Asia Blog. Retrieved June 9, 2022, from <https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/seac/2021/01/05/covid-19-and-international-student-mobility-some-reflections/>
- Wong, B., Elmorally, R., Copsey-Blake, M., Highwood, E., & Singarayer, J. (2021). Is race still relevant? Student perceptions and experiences of racism in higher education. *Cambridge Journal of Education*, 51(3), 359–375.
- 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>
- Yeh, D. (2014). Contesting the 'model minority': Racialization, youth culture and 'British Chinese'/'Oriental' nights. *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, 37(7), 1197–1210.

Publisher's note Springer Nature remains neutral with regard to jurisdictional claims in published maps and institutional affiliations.