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Haoxuan Gao
Macalester College, kgao@macalester.edu

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“Triple Consciousness”: How Chinese International Students Navigate Identity Amidst U.S-China Tension and COVID-19 Xenophobia

Haoxuan Gao

Advisor: Dr. Christina Hughes

Department of Sociology

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Abstract

International students from China account for the largest number of international students in the United States. Behind their vast and growing population lies the legacy of U.S. soft power diplomacy to spread democracy during the Cold War era, while a similar strategy has been utilized by the Chinese government for students to “represent China.” However, Chinese international students now stand on the intersection between COVID-19 xenophobia and the contentious U.S.-China relationship. How do these individuals navigate and (re)orientate their identities when they are pulled to opposite directions? This study utilizes one-on-one interviews with 22 Chinese international students from a small liberal arts college in the Midwest to explore this question. Using W.E.B. Du Bois’ concept of double consciousness, I argue that Chinese international students develop a “triple consciousness” with two external and competing gazes from the U.S. and China, and one internally conscious self. The findings suggest that the students develop an ambivalent self that forms more nuanced self-consciousness to reflect on the state gazes. The study provides a lens into how historical xenophobia and Cold War legacies shape the contemporary Chinese international student within the current U.S.-China debate while illustrating opportunities for individual autonomy to exist outside of those state ideologies.

Introduction

Here's the story of a Chinese student preparing for her college education in the United States. At sophomore year of high school, her family found a "study abroad" agency and negotiated a price. Then, the agents helped her select potential schools based on her interests and the overall ranking. She was told to maintain her GPA at a high point while participating in a variety of extracurricular activities that colleges like: volunteering, debate, and sports. During summer breaks, she buried her head in SAT prep-books, while also practicing for her TOEFL (Test of English as a Foreign Language) exam. After submitting tests and essays, she finally got into a college! To prepare for her entrance to the U.S., she and her family flew to the American Consulate in another Chinese city for a visa stamp. However, her journey has just begun. Due to her foreigner status in the U.S., she could not apply for scholarships or attend programs that her American peers did. Difficulties escalated at the end of 2019, when coronavirus (COVID-19) broke out in Wuhan and soon spread throughout China (CDC, 2020). Worrying about the wellbeing of her family far away, the student was also forced to navigate COVID xenophobia and geopolitical tensions in the United States.

As a former international student from China, this was my story and in many ways it is not unique. In fact, many Chinese international students shared the same difficulties of exam preparation in China and limited opportunities due to visa status in the United States. However, what is unique is the experiences of Chinese international students who are in the U.S. during and after 2020: in that year, large-scale lockdowns were followed by public health fear. This has made a significant impact on college students who resided on or near campus, and whose primary academic routine and social cycle became dramatically reshuffled (Kelly & Columbus, 2020). Amidst online courses and social distancing, Chinese international students became especially vulnerable. Having no permanent homes in the U.S., they faced the conundrum of whether they should fly back home with the risk of getting the virus or stay in the United States while worrying about the health and safety of their families (Wu et al., 2022). However, news and research articles point to an additional concern for Chinese international students in the U.S.: fear of xenophobia. Students were afraid of going to public places such as grocery stores while they were confronted with accusations that they carried the "China virus" and were told to "go back to China" on campus (Mcleod, 2020). COVID-19 xenophobia and racism were often linked

to their nationality while having perceivable impacts on Chinese international students' mental health, sense of belonging, and safety (Zhang et al., 2020).

Students' negative experiences with xenophobia did not exist in a vacuum. Political figures like the former president Donald Trump frequently used racist rhetoric like "China Virus" and "Kung Flu" in his speeches, increasing perceptions of Asian people being 'perpetual foreigners,' i.e. a nativist approach to define some migrants, including Asian Americans, as forever foreigners unable to ever fully assimilate (Ngai, 2004). Behind Trump's incendiary denouncements of China was the worsening of the U.S.-China relationship amidst the COVID-19 pandemic. In 2018, the Trump administration raised significant tariffs on imports from China, whereupon the Chinese government later responded with the same approach. This marked the beginning of the Trade War that resulted in direct economic competition between the two countries (Chen & Tan, 2019). In the media, Chinese factories were portrayed as taking jobs from Americans under Trump's "Made in USA" campaign, in which nationalists turned to xenophobia against Asian immigrants in the U.S. to blame them for their class discontents (Boylan et al., 2021). The geopolitical power battle and COVID-19 xenophobia therefore significantly impacted people who identify ethnically as Chinese as well as those who fall under the broad Asian category.

Though the COVID-19 pandemic has been gradually normalized by the public as lockdowns have faded out, anti-Asian sentiments continue to shape individuals' daily lives while historical xenophobia and racism still permeate their collective consciousness. Chinese international students, I argue, can consequently be understood as key subjects and players in this geopolitical contest between the United States and China, located at an intersection where the xenophobia and racism towards Asians, especially individuals of Chinese heritage, became deeply intertwined with lockdown and the global health panic. Asking, how do Chinese international students navigate the tensions derived from xenophobia, the COVID pandemic, and the relationship between the U.S. and China, my study draws upon interviews conducted with Chinese international students about their experiences studying at a small liberal arts college in the U.S. to understand the importance of Chinese international students in brokering geopolitical tensions and racial dynamics.

Engaging with W.E.B. Du Bois' concept of the double consciousness, I argue that Chinese international students experience a "triple consciousness" that contains two opposing external gazes from both the U.S. and Chinese states, while navigating meaning making outside of the external gazes through a third, internally conscious self. These findings indicate that Chinese international students develop resistance and resilience independent from Chinese or American rhetoric, while processing nuanced positions and opinions derived from both forms of state messaging. Chinese international students' presence therefore ultimately showcases how the modern-day U.S.-China political debate is deeply rooted in historical expressions of xenophobia and Cold War hegemony that preceded the present moment. More generally, I show how large-scale geopolitical tensions are manifested in individual experiences, while demonstrating the possibility for individual autonomy to exist outside these given political ideologies and state-driven demands.

Literature Review

Chinese Immigrant and International Students' History in the United States

According to the U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services (2023), international students are foreign non-immigrant visa holders who attend various levels and types of schools (like secondary, university, and vocational schools). When visa holders complete their degree, they are intended to return to their home society. In a Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs report, there were 289,526 Chinese students in the U.S. in 2023, which is 27% of the total international student population, though interestingly there was a 0.2% reduction of Chinese student numbers between 2020 and 2023 due to COVID-19 (U.S. Bureau of Cultural Affairs, 2022). In many ways, this is the scope of what many people seem to know about Chinese international students. In the popular imagination, Chinese international students suddenly appear, ahistorically, and without context except whatever contemporary frames are offered to make sense of them. However, I argue that Chinese international students can be understood as particularly located historical figures within a longer timeline of shifting U.S.-Chinese geopolitical relations.

As migrants, that Chinese international students now exist at all as a class should be of sociological interest given the United States' historical reliance on Chinese exclusion to underpin its exclusionary immigration system. Early Chinese migration to the United States consisted of mostly male laborers contracted to construct the transcontinental railroad and other infrastructure projects, for example (Kanazawa, 2005). Subjected to racial and ethnic discrimination that feminized Chinese men while hypersexualizing Chinese women, Chinese migrants were implicated in a discourse of disease related to suspicions of them carrying smallpox and popularizing the use of opium. (Lyman, 2000). The *Chinese Exclusion Act* in 1882 that prohibited Chinese laborers from immigrating to the U.S. was motivated by anti-Chinese sentiments and racial exclusion, eventually turning into a quota system that would still restrict Chinese immigration until 1965 (Lew-Williams, 2014).

Within that timeline the earliest Chinese students came to the United States in 1854, when China experienced a dire need to advance science and technology after the Second Opium War. Though the 1882 Chinese Exclusion Act mainly banned the entrance of laborers, Chinese students' numbers were only heavily reduced where a 1920 census showed that Chinese students still contributed the highest percentage of any international student nationality with 1443 students (17%) in total. This number rose steadily until the McCarthy era, when colleges and universities became targets under the Red Scare. In this climate of security paranoia, there was a rising fear of Chinese international students bringing their new knowledge back to China. Hundreds of Chinese migrants during this time were suspected to have connections with the Chinese Communist Party, and many lost jobs and were imprisoned (Bevis, 2016).

To boost security and bolster its Cold War influence, the United States turned to immigration policy to serve multiple goals. By the mid 1950s, the U.S. government had begun its collaboration with the Soviet government for cultural and academic exchange programs. International students were sought as an important instrument to spread American ideology, values, and democracy as they returned to their home countries, helping secure America's position during the Cold War against Communism. In addition, Chinese students were offered citizenship under the China Aid Act and the Refugee Relief Act as a way to use citizenship to demonstrate American superiority (Bevis, 2016). At the end of the twentieth century, other Western English speaking nations began recruiting international students, starting a new wave of

competition that forced the U.S. to diversify college experiences to increase recruitment. Since the 1980s, the demography of Chinese immigrants to the U.S. has thus drastically changed from laborers and traders to students and the professional class, aided by the passage of laws like the 1965 Immigration Act that created a preferential category of admission for skilled workers with professional qualifications (Schrecker, 1999).

The Cold War era diplomatic strategy aimed at spreading American democratic influence persists in today's foreign exchange programs. Political Scientist Joseph Nye believes that besides the hard power of military and economic force, soft power, "the ability to achieve desired outcomes in international affairs through attraction rather than coercion," has influenced international relationships and global power relations (Gupta, 2013). Consequently, higher education has been increasingly used as a soft power tool to transform culture and values. According to UNESCO, there were approximately 6.1 million international students globally in 2020, 21% of all international students are in the U.S. This number is expected to grow to 8 million by 2025 (Gauttam et al., 2024). According to Atkinson (2010), U.S. based exchange programs aim to provide the first-hand experience of a taste of democracy and a liberal state to students from nondemocratic countries. The ideal consequence is for students to first, go back home and question the authoritarian governments, and second, instill democratic ideas locally, altering policies, especially for the adversaries of the U.S. Atkinson argues that in order to have successful soft power influence, a program should have at least one of the following core values: 1. In-depth social interactions between international students and host institutions, 2. A shared sense of community and identity between students and host institutions, or 3. "the attainment of a politically influential position by the exchange participant after returning home." These programs, however, do not just recruit any students, but only those "potential elites" that might go on to shape the political conditions of their countries. These "elites" are selected through high tuition (and fewer opportunities for international scholarship) and additional English language qualifying exams like TOEFL (ETS, 2024).

However, while the U.S. shows an increased effort to exert soft power, China does so as well. According to the Chinese Ministry of Education, it aims for Chinese students studying abroad to "strengthen the Chinese dream abroad" through "harnessing the patriotic capabilities." In this capacity, Chinese state narratives encourage students to serve as "people-to-people

ambassadors" to represent the ideas and values of China and erase misunderstandings. Empirical studies have both affirmed and questioned the effectiveness of soft power in practice: Bislev's (2017) study finds that international students have a better impression of the host country after studying for a period of time.

As such Chinese international students' racial consciousness development, I argue, grows out of their negotiations within these geopolitical dynamics where–in their competition with one another–the US and China not only see each other as competing nation states but also as *racialized* states with deep-seated ideological differences. At the level of the sociological self, racial consciousness observed at the individual level therefore is not just a psychologically isolated phenomenon but a globally and historically situated condition of being imbricated in social transformations happening across the global, national, and local levels.

Macalester College and the History of Exchange Programs

According to the Minnesota Office of Higher Education, about 10,900 international and foreign-born students attend a postsecondary institution in Minnesota every year. It is also considered the 18th most popular state for international students education (Minnesota Office of Education, 2023). My sample is drawn from Macalester College, a small liberal arts college in Saint Paul, where international students account for 14% (290 students) of the total student population as of fall 2023. Though these students come from 80 countries, the Chinese student population accounts for 44.4% (129 students) of this total (International Students Programs, 2023). The strong presence of Chinese international students is generally consistent with the trend of international student statistics nationally (U.S. Bureau of Cultural Affairs, 2022).

Macalester College has a long history of promoting internationalism as one of its key institutional values. In the 1940s and 50s, Macalester President Charles J. Turck began to place an emphasis on internationalism by recruiting international students. This timeline matches that of the time when the United States generally advocated for international diplomacy, as mentioned above, with a concerted effort to recruit international students and send American students abroad. Macalester installed programs like the Ambassador for Friendship and World Press Institute to boost the College's image under the anti-Communist president James Wallace. According to Kilde (2010), the author of *A History of Macalester College,* "Internationalism at

Macalester cut both ways during this period, providing at least a temporary bridge between the political conservatism and anti-Communism of the major donors and the growing liberalism of others on campus."

In 1986, Macalester started its partnership with United World Colleges (UWC), a network of international schools that was developed during World War II and grew during the Cold War era. It aims to foster international connections through education. Currently, there are 18 UWC schools around the globe, recruiting students from over 150 countries and territories (UWC, 2024). Macalester's past and current presidents have visited UWC to foster close relationships. This partnership is reflected in the disproportionate recruitment of international students from UWC: 375 UWC alumni have graduated from Macalester as of 2017, and 89 current Macalester students are UWC alumni. This accounts for 30% international students on campus (Macalester College, 2024). This long-standing relationship and recruitment pattern between UWC and Macalester indicate the College's effort to promote its stated values of internationalism and multiculturalism.

Moreover, Macalester College has historically been a left-leaning campus where students actively organize and participate in political protests, with a significant counterculture atmosphere in the 1960s and actively liberal–Leftist political orientation today. At the same time, however, Macalester is a predominantly White institution (PWI) with 66% of students identifying as White (Macalester College, 2023). Similarly, the surrounding Macalester-Groveland neighborhood, in general, has a high percentage of White residents (86%) (U.S. Census Bureau, 2021). Broadly, these liberal political and white demographic details are important contextual elements to consider to understand the interviews provided by the Chinese international students.

Method

In the summer of 2023, I interviewed a total of 22 students who identified as international students from China. To accomplish this goal, I partnered with Macalester International Programs (ISP) to identify potential interviewees from the international student mailing list.

After the first round of interviews, snowball and convenience sampling were utilized. All the interviews took place on Zoom and lasted between 20 and 60 minutes.

For data collection, I conducted in-depth life-course interviews that allowed participants to detail narratives regarding their racial journey and experiences on campus. Interviews started with participants' general impressions of race and ended with their racial experiences. Participants were asked to reflect on their racial consciousness and experience in China and the U.S. For the maximum comfort of the participants, I allowed them to choose whether to conduct the interview in Mandarin or English, and half chose Mandarin while the other half chose English. Those in Mandarin were manually translated into English afterwards. The English interviews were transcribed using Otter.ai. It is notable that, for all of the participants, English is not their first language, and they have mostly learned about race in the United States through English and U.S.-specific terminologies. This might have affected how they view race and talk about race to me. However, due to our shared positionality as Chinese international students, they might be willing to share insider information that they wouldn't be willing to share if I did not identify as an in-group member. They might also, however, assume we have the same point of view due to a shared language, nationality and cultural background. Therefore, they might imply answers to some questions without elaborating, assuming that I understand what they mean.

My sample contained a mix of class years ranging from freshmen to recent graduates. Most participants first arrived in the U.S. during college, while four of them came during high school. 15 identified as women and 7 identified as men. Most participants described having a middle class or higher background in the Chinese educational system. To analyze the data, I used inductive coding with thematic analysis in ATLAS.ti.

Results

Triple Consciousness: American Gaze, Chinese Gaze, and an Ambivalent Self

The renowned scholar W.E.B. Du Bois' contributions are still significant for understanding race relations in the United States today. In *the Souls of Black Folk*, Du Bois uses

the idea of the "color line" as a reference to the most contentious problem that troubled the twentieth century, and even today: the oppression of Black people by the White population. In the book, Du Bois further introduces the idea of the "veil" to explain the barriers that prevent White Americans from truly understanding Black American experiences. The consequences for African Americans, according to Du Bois, is a "double consciousness," or awareness of "twoness" that lives inside one body. Internalizing the external gaze of White society leads to the identification of one's self with two conflicting identities: in Du Bois' case, with (White) American-ness and with Blackness (Du Bois, 1903). However, scholars like Nahum Welang (2018) believe that double consciousness alone does not fully explain the experience that Black women face in American society. Therefore, she introduces the idea of "triple consciousness" aiming to capture a fuller picture for African American women: it argues that Black women face two external gazes derived from being Black and being women, with one internal self. It adds the dimension of patriarchy in addition to the oppressive White society while arguing how the two realities in conjunction dictate Black women's experience. The definition of triple consciousness is further expanded by other scholars to explain the tensions and multifaceted experiences of minority communities who are implicated by more than one dominant force (Akram, 2022).

Here, I utilize Du Bois' framework of double consciousness, and Welang's theory of triple consciousness to analyze Chinese international students' relationship navigating lives in the U.S. In particular, these students experience a triple consciousness of confronting the American gaze and the Chinese gaze enforced upon them, while simultaneously struggling with meaning making and forming resistance against these external gazes.

The American Gaze

Students experience the American gaze by observing their absent presence in the American racial binary. At the same time, they struggle with being stereotyped while forced to conform to U.S. societal expectations. Their encounters with the American gaze were heightened by COVID-19 anti-Chinese sentiments and xenophobia due to the troubled U.S.-China relationship for Chinese students, in the classroom and with their future in the U.S.

Many participants struggle to find themselves in the American racial system, which highlights a binary ideology of race being “Black and White.” When I asked participants to discuss their understanding of race in the U.S., one representative statement expressed:

> “Racial issues are about White people discriminating Black people. It doesn't really concern much about Latino, Asians, or Native Americans. They are not as significant and obvious as compared to African Americans' struggles” *(Male, fifth year).*

Through their classes, Chinese international students have identified the importance of race in the past and present U.S., especially the oppression against African Americans. They have not only highlighted the racial differences but racial hierarchy as well. This suggests their understanding of the basics of U.S. racial discourse. At the same time, they observe an absence of racial discussion beyond the Black-and-White binary. Students see this lack of representation in class discussions, politics, and media, where they do not see others that resemble their assigned race of “Asian.” This student refers to Asian racial issues as “not significant and obvious.” This shows his lack of understanding of Asian history in the U.S. Based on students' responses, I suggest that his lack of Asian American history knowledge is due to the lack of exposure in the classroom: students told me that they are educated about slavery, the Civil Rights movement, and more recent history such as redlining in general education classes. However, only a few students who specifically chose Asian American related courses were informed of Asian American history. The difficulties with accessing this knowledge makes it hard for Chinese international students to feel that the Asian group has historical significance, contributing to their binary-race thinking.

At the same time, the American gaze fails to distinguish the nuance within the racial categories from a global racial perspective. Though students have expressed that Asians are not represented in the American racial binary, it does not mean that they fully identify as Asians. Many are hesitant, and even resistant to the U.S. assignment of Asian as their sole racial category. Many told me that they would rather identify with their ethnic and national identity “Chinese,” some said “East Asian,” or “international,” and a few others said “Chinese and Asian.” When I asked them for a reason, many believed that the word Asian is too broad to describe their particular culture. Students gave examples that though both are considered as

"Asian," Chinese and Indian people have drastically different appearance, language, and culture. Even Chinese people are different from Chinese Americans, they said. Thus, merging all those diverse groups into one category felt limiting to students and not representative of their unique identity.

Besides the rejection of the American racial categories, students also encountered the American gaze through stereotypes targeted towards their Asian and Chinese identities:

> "Because you're Asian, because you're Chinese, you got to do more to impress others [in school]" *(Female, second year).*

I find this student's need to "impress others" to align with many other participants: as international students, they have the mission to study and learn about American culture. As Chinese and Asian, they are especially stereotyped as high achievers. In order to successfully fit into their host society, they internalize the stereotype and are forced to accept it. It is hard to shake off the stereotype because their failure to perform could signal that they are outcasts in American society in which they are *supposed to* fit in.

This stereotype is especially harmful because it transforms its racist ideology into societal expectations that individuals are fully responsible for. It limits students' potential to succeed in other areas beyond school work while trapping and reducing their multifaceted identity in poorly fitting boxes. Additionally, for those who do succeed in school, their success might be attributed to their "racial and ethnic advantage" instead of personal achievement, which diminishes individual efforts. This is related to the model minority myth developed during the Cold War era, suggesting that Asian Americans have successfully assimilated into the U.S. society and have worked their way out of discrimination. It was also weaponized against other minority groups, creating separation among people of color. The formation of the myth could be attributed to the 1965 Immigration Act that allowed many professional Asian individuals to immigrate to the U.S. Nonetheless, the myth contributes to the downplaying of anti-Asian discrimination and wealth disparities within Asian ethnic groups (Lee, 2010). Though my participants might not have learned about the history of the model minority myth, they have experienced the stereotype in their daily lives. As international students who are always taught that they are *successful* for

breaking the language barrier and attending a prestigious institution in the U.S., they actively face the pressure to accept the model minority American gaze.

Before COVID-19, students have felt that their racial identity is not present in the U.S. race debate. However, their identity as *Chinese* became highlighted during the COVID-19 pandemic and initiated the formation of a more salient racial consciousness. In particular, in receiving xenophobia that made them feel unwelcomed in the U.S., one student said:

> "When I was in high school [in the U.S], at the beginning [of COVID-19], I heard people say "go back to China" or something like that. "You are the one who brought these viruses to the United States" *(Female, third year).*

This participant attended an American high school and received those comments from American students in 2020, just before the lockdown. The language of xenophobia was typical of those that are commonly heard on social media: "go back to China" signifies a rejection of belonging for the Chinese students in the U.S.: though they have a legal visa to study in the U.S., they are still seen as foreigners and intruders that are not welcomed here. This matches the 'perpetual foreigner' narrative that targets Asian Americans articulated by Mae Ngai. Though "go back to China" does not have the same connotations for Asian Americans and Chinese international students, it still shows a denial of their legal presence in the United States. At the same time, the 'germ' narrative of Chinese people does not stand alone in history, as already discussed. The Chinese laborers in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries were framed as unhygienic beings who were targeted as the "Yellow Peril" that invaded the West who tempted innocent Americans into smoking opium and spreading diseases like smallpox. The resurgence of the disease narrative reinforces that of the perpetual foreigner narrative: Chinese people are framed as invaders to the U.S., and thus they must be gotten rid of to protect the hygiene and order of the country.

In the specific context of COVID-19, Chinese students were judged as the people responsible for introducing the virus. Of course, the participant is not actually responsible for bringing the virus to the U.S., but she *represents* China on the American-majority campus. This xenophobic narrative equates a particular student with China, thus the student becomes a symbol of China and is held accountable for whatever China does. This narrative is dehumanizing, while

putting extra pressure on the Chinese students to behave. Yet this narrative is not uncommon under the current China-U.S. relationship: my other participants were questioned by White Americans about Chinese politics and foreign policies. They felt as if they were targeted and blamed for whatever happened in China, making it hard to separate the individual self identity from the *China* label forced on them. It shows an essentializing perspective where students are equated with their country, stripping other qualities from them. It positions students in a situation where they want to embrace their Chinese identity, yet are afraid of the consequences of doing so.

Additionally, the U.S.-China diplomatic relationship has been negatively heightened in the U.S. since COVID-19. At a politically active campus like Macalester, many students have observed a shift of attitude towards them due to their Chinese identity:

> "It was a U.S. Constitution class and I was the only Chinese international student. When I tried to explain things, I knew that using China [as an example] is weird and sensitive. So I used Canada [as an] example. From professors to students, they just didn't buy it. So they ignore my words completely" *(Female, third year)*.

This participant has also been in the U.S. since high school, so she expressed that language was not an issue for conveying their thoughts. However, she always had a feeling that she was isolated whenever she attended classes that discussed political issues. Due to her desire to do well in class, she still felt the pressure to participate even if it was uncomfortable. In this student's case, she was already self-aware of the "sensitive" dynamics to talk about China in a political situation. She told me that if she talked about China, her Chinese identity would make her argument invalid, because it would seem like she was representing her country instead of speaking objectively. This showcases the internalization of the American gaze: the student restricts herself from speaking on China-related content due to a fear of being associated with the negatives of China. However, even when she avoided the "sensitivity" by using Canada as an example, her words were still deemed untrustworthy. It left the student confused and disappointed because she was not sure if they really had bad arguments or if the whole class was being xenophobic. Her disappointment and self-doubt were common among students in the Political Science/International Studies department. They especially mentioned how their Chinese identity seems to overshadow their contributions in class. When students spoke, they felt as if

they were always seen as representing China. Thus, many became careful to avoid discussions about China even when relevant. This makes students feel like they are disadvantaged in the classroom and cannot be as expressive as their peers because their own individual opinions are always tied to the country's.

Besides being essentalized as *China* as a whole, international students also face a more practical problem in the U.S.: the visa. When I asked participants if they would like to stay in the U.S. after school, many of them told me: "yes, if the U.S. wants me here." Many want to continue their career in the U.S. for more opportunities and financial prospects, since the job market is quite competitive in China. However, they all express concern for how they might obtain a visa: in order to work in the U.S., non-citizens need to apply for the H1B visa, which operates on a lottery system that may allow them to work in the U.S. for 3-6 years. To do so, students will have to first be accepted to a visa-sponsoring job before entering the lottery system that has an approximately 20% success rate. Nonetheless, H1B visas are increasingly difficult for Chinese students to obtain due to the great number of their presence. Under the tense U.S.-China relationship, many companies in the STEM field have stopped sponsoring Chinese citizens. In 2021, former vice president Pence called for Biden to ban H1B visas for Chinese nationals who work in technology-related fields due to "national security" and "intellectual property" problems. Many were also rejected visas for school due to their affiliation with the Chinese Ministry of Industry and Information Technology. From news stories, many Chinese students and technology workers are ascribed the "spy" narrative who secretly work for China by stealing American technologies (Ting, 2021). This narrative finds expression in formal law and policy to position Chinese students as invaders who pose harm while also working to limit students' prospects in the U.S.

The Chinese Gaze

The Chinese gaze mainly consists of the values and knowledge ingrained in students' minds from prior experiences in China, passed down generationally and systemically through organizations like school and family. For example, students expressed the single-voiced curriculum in school that does not encourage critical thinking. When asked about the differences between the U.S. and Chinese mindset, one student expressed:

> "That's just Chinese culture. You're always taught to not speak up, when you have a different opinion. And I think that still affects me somewhat, especially in college classrooms [in the U.S.]" *(Male, second year)*

The student uses the example of education to describe the ideological difference between China and the U.S.. According to him, different opinions were discouraged in Chinese classrooms, in contrast to his experience in the U.S. where different opinions were welcomed more. This has shaped his performance in classes where he felt like he lacked the courage to speak, in case his opinions are unpopular. This has hindered the student's opportunity to participate in meaningful discussions, afraid that he would "stick out." However, the need to be with the majority goes beyond classroom participation. In my interviews, students have identified the "individualism" versus "collectivism' that the two countries represent: one student told me that when they were traveling abroad with her middle school groups, the teacher told them to act on their best behaviors because they were "representing China." Similarly, another student's parents told him to lower his head to fit into the U.S. society. Additionally, many non-STEM students have expressed the pressure to do well in STEM due to the high-level Chinese STEM education compared to the U.S. They were worried about "losing face" if they do not do well in a subject they are "supposed to" be good at. These examples all hint at the internalization of the Chinese government mission for the international students: representing China positively. Though no student directly linked their college experience with this mission, the collectivist and nationalist mindset is ingrained in students' education from a young age. This has stayed with the students even as they arrive in the U.S.: they face constant pressure to perform well due to their Chinese identity and are cautious of making mistakes. In consequence, they lose opportunities to express their genuine opinions, interests, and identity while subconsciously serving the Chinese ideal to "represent China."

This collective and national identity encouraged in Chinese society also collides with students' new international identity. This is exacerbated by the geopolitical tension between China and the U.S. during COVID-19.

> "Before I came to America, China stressed international vision and education. But now in the post-COVID era, China is closing, excluding, so it's a conflict. Now if I say I like America, people [in China] argue with you, because it's not accepted,

> so you can't straightly identify as Chinese. Because a part of you doesn't fully belong there" *(Female, first year)*.

This student was a freshman during the interview, so she arrived in the U.S. in 2022, when lockdowns were dismissed while hostility towards the U.S. worsened in Chinese media. She discussed the "international vision and education" encouraged by China while she was preparing for admission to Macalester College. However, a drastic shift had happened after COVID: my participants discussed negative and even inaccurate representations of the U.S. on Chinese social media, much different than before. As international students, the condition becomes an especially difficult dilemma: instead of being the "bridges" between those two countries like before, they become targets for blame from two directions. While Chinese students have become a *threat* in the U.S., they are also a threat to China as well. Here, the Chinese gaze surveils and punishes those who hold different opinions, much like the fear expressed by the student from previous quotes. My participants highlighted how they were blamed by relatives for not "helping China", while the internet scolded them for being unpatriotic. At the same time, international students serve as the scapegoat for blame, since they become the most convenient target. This has influenced the students' pride as an international student while restricting her ability to fully be herself in China. Hence, the student feels like she cannot "fully identify as Chinese" due to the rejection of her international identity.

Besides facing challenges representing China as a collective while navigating new identity, many participants also discuss the Chinese gaze that conditions their understanding of race. In the beginning of the interview, I asked the participants, "What is race like in China?" and many described that "there is no race in China" which reinforces the collective and nationalistic identity that the Chinese government imposes on individuals. This has influenced students' ability to read microaggressions and racism: the majority of my participants described an initial confusion about race when they came to the U.S. Though they have acquired knowledge in classrooms, many did not recognize racist encounters until much later. For example, one student answered the question "Do Chinese people eat dogs?" sincerely until they later recognized it was not a question at all.

Besides the perceived homogeneity, racism and xenophobia towards Black people in China also contribute to students' biased understanding of race in the U.S.. Many students told

me that the Chinese media portray Black people in extremely negative images, framing them as primitive predators or lower-class citizens. At least four others have shared similar feelings when asked about racial discrimination in China. Some participants told me that this apathy comes from being the dominant group in China: they did not need to worry about racial discrimination, thus they find themselves being more negligent towards racism against Black people. Being in the U.S. helps students recognize that racism exists in China, but the Chinese gaze is still ingrained in a generational manner: one student told me that their mom only allowed them to date White and Asian people in the U.S. Though the student acknowledged that their mom's opinion is "problematic," they did not argue against it. Other students also mentioned that when their family discussed "Americans," what they really meant was "White." Thus, the Chinese gaze not only embeds discrimination towards Black people, but also reduces multicultural America into Whiteness. This has influenced the Chinese students' attitudes towards Black and White students on campus, while also induces frustration and disappointment: one participant was told by their family to "assimilate into White culture" in high school. However, since Whiteness was seen as a symbol for good, she was initially shocked when she received discrimination from her White classmates. This mixed message had left the student confused and angry until they learned more about race in America.

Additionally, some students take the "colorblind" approach towards race:

> 1: "I don't think it's a good idea to focus on race. I perceive others around me with their personality, religion, gender, and other parts of their identities" *(Male, second year).*
>
> 2: "Like, I've met some really, really good Black people" *(Male, fourth year).*

The first student listed above told me that race should not be a focal point of identity, but other elements like personality matter as well. Although it is certainly important to consider many elements when interacting with others, this student still falls into the color blindness perspective. Though "other identities" are important, in many situations, race (and also gender) signal the most distinct differences that can result in immediate exclusion. The colorblind ideology is internalized through a seemingly homogeneous society that does not discuss racial or ethnic issues, albeit the existence of diverse ethnic subgroups and growing population of

foreigners in China (Poston & Jing, 1987). Though the student has developed a concept about race in the United States, this ingrained Chinese gaze prevents him from understanding the significance of how race can be weaponized for oppression.

Similar to the first student who believes that they have an equal mindset, this second example comes from a student who wants to stress their openness to diversity after engaging with race in the U.S. However, his words still contain a discriminatory lens. The student categorizes those polarizing terms to an entire race, showing an essentializing and reductive narrative that strips away the nuance of human nature into a monolithic race. It also shows how the student only understands race from a shallow perspective that individualizes race and racial experiences instead of reflecting on it systematically. When asked about if he has received racist or xenophobic comments, he said yes. He also told me that he "wouldn't think too much about it" so that he could "blend in to America." This is connected to the Chinese authority's expectations on international students: they are given the mission to be a "people to people ambassador" that builds bridges between Chinese and American relationships. By viewing race as an interpersonal rather than systemic issue, the difficulty for Chinese students to "buildbridges" is reduced. For example, by coding racist comments as individual confrontations, the student could internalize the experiences as *individual versus individual*, instead of *America against China*, which is much easier to deal with. In turn, if he minimizes those negative experiences, he could "blend in" faster. This showcases how the Chinese gaze impacts students' self-perception and lens to view racial experiences in order to maximize the so-called connections rather than divisions.

The Ambivalent Self

The term "ambivalence" was first coined by Homi K Bhabha in postcolonial studies to describe the space between the seemingly polarizing relationship between the colonizer and the colonized. Bhabha argues that being complicit or resistant towards colonization, the colonial subjects experience an ambivalence that combines the cultural identities from both sides in a fluid and changeable manner. It signifies a more complex and intertwined relationship that the colonized subjects experience, and in turn challenges the norm of the polarized duality and the authority of the colony (Bhabha, 1984).

In this section, I utilize Bhabha's definition of ambivalence to describe the third part of Chinese international students' triple consciousness: the self. Though the colonizer-colonized relationship in my study is different from that of Bhabha's, an ambivalence still exists as students are pulled into two opposite directions between the Chinese and American gazes. The ambivalent self navigates potential spaces to exist between the two pulls by seeking independent identities while in itself posing a danger to both states' agendas.

Many students report learning alternative views about Chinese politics that they were not taught in China. However, they did not gain this learning through the American gaze, or formal education. Instead, they learned it through other international students of color:

> "What I hear about China within the country is always positive, like we were bullied but we fight back. It's always others who were faulted first. But [when I study abroad] I find that China didn't always do good things. I was hanging out with my Indian and Vietnamese friends, and we were talking about global invasions. And when it's the Vietnamese girl's turn, she said China [invaded Vietnam]. I didn't know it all. It's kinda scary. Like the media inside [China], you don't know what they [China] did and it seemed ignorant" *(Female, first year)*.

This participant had little knowledge about negative perceptions of China until she was informed by her Vietnamese friends. I found this to be a common theme among many participants who were willing to share about Chinese politics: many expressed that what they learned from Chinese textbooks, classrooms, and media did not align with their newly acquired knowledge in the U.S. At first, it was extremely difficult for them to distinguish what information was real and what was not, since they have lived in China most of their lives and had fully embraced the Chinese gaze of politics. Thus, they come to the United States with a full set of previous knowledge that can be extremely biased. However, when students engage with new perspectives about China in the U.S., they remain under the watchful American gaze. It is difficult for them to distinguish if those who reveal new information have genuine or malicious intent, because, 1) under the tense U.S.-China relationship, both countries benefit from misinformation of the other in the media, and 2) it could potentially become an essentializing and xenophobic rhetoric against the Chinese students. Thus, formal learning and conversation with

American (especially White) peers can be challenging for acquiring information and gaining new perspectives.

Under the pressure of both the Chinese and American gazes, the ambivalent self emerges. Sometimes, students lean into the American gaze about Chinese politics while other times they rely on their personal experiences and previous knowledge from the Chinese gaze. Many times, however, students are sandwiched in between and do not trust either narratives. This had led to confusion and frustration for students as exemplified above: the student described how it was "scary" to learn about the colonial history of China, as she previously related colonialism with the U.S.. Like the U.S., China also engaged in colonial conquest, which disrupted the student's previous ideals of China as pure victims and disrupted the polarized national relationship. Additionally, ambivalence also exists in students' relations with self identity. In this case, the student describes herself as being "ignorant" which is a term students typically associate White people with when facing xenophobia. This self-position of ignorance mixes the giving and receiving end of xenophobia, resulting in an ambivalent relation with self.

However, from students' experiences, the ambivalence is not always negative. One student commented:

> There's a middle ground between the full on Chinese Nationalist, and full on White Orientalist vision of China or Chinese identity. And I always like to explore the middle ground" *(Male, fourth year).*

Though some students have navigated ways of gaining new information through informal learning, not everyone has had the opportunity. This has become increasingly difficult during and after COVID-19, when anti-Chinese rhetoric has increased. Many have experienced xenophobic and Orientalist encounters that cause them to "want to defend China." At the same time, they are afraid of being seen as a Chinese nationalist. For example, students resist the Trump presidency's narrative of "China virus" and unscientific COVID practices while also protesting against the inhumane Chinese quarantine policies. However, it is difficult to express both at the same time without being seen as "Orientalist" or "Chinese nationalist." This increased sense of split makes it hard for students to embrace the U.S. educational curriculum while facing xenophobic rhetoric. At the same time, it is difficult to stay intimate with Chinese culture while confronting government actions. It is worth noting that when I interviewed students over Zoom, many used

vague language to describe Chinese politics since they do not have much experience of critically reflecting on the government. Thus, it can be challenging for students to choose precise words when describing issues in China.

The ambivalence is portrayed by the student as a “middle ground” that exists between the two extreme ends of the states’ pulls: Orientalist versus Chinese nationalist. Besides the obvious difficulties, the student framed this ambivalence as a potential for exploration. Indeed, due to their bi-cultural experiences with learned culture and education from both countries, Chinese international students have the opportunity to explore the ambivalent ground that is otherwise difficult to access from either side. Compared to Chinese or American people who mainly gain information from a singular state, Chinese international students are acted upon byboth. Though, as exemplified, the oftentime contradictory narratives result in a confusion, there are opportunities for reflection. The access to an ambivalent ground allows the students to use their knowledge to process the information and critically examine them using their experiences. By doing so, they are able to form a more nuanced outlook on the geopolitical issues between the U.S. and China without submitting to a total state gaze. Although the ambivalent middle is subjected to change based on individual experiences and political outlooks, and although students are always in process of seeking answers, the mere existence of the ambivalence presents danger to the states. It indicates the beginning of autonomy outside the projected and predicted duality of the U.S.-China pull, which is far more difficult to exert control over.

Ambivalence is also presented as forming meaningful connections outside of state-sanctioned relationships. In the case of my participants, the Chinese government encourages students to interact with American peers to clear misunderstandings about China. At the same time, the American government encourages the same relationship for American students to impart democracy. However, relationships that exists outside of the Chinese-American friendship offer a different experience:

> “[I have] Vietnamese friends, we were eating, and I ate the chicken skin. And the Vietnamese girl asked if I liked chicken feet too, I said yes. And we found out that we could relate to each other.” *(Female, first year)*

This quote comes from the same student who discussed their ignorance of China’s invasion of Vietnam. According to the student, regular lunches at the cafeteria have become an

important channel for them to discuss culture, interests, and bond with each other. When the student was talking about the chicken feet story, she seemed especially delighted to find a person who also consumes seemingly weird food according to American standards. Indeed, chicken feet is a stereotypical and classic example used to discriminate against Asian people: as a food not commonly consumed by White Americans, chicken feet has the association with being dirty and barbarous, positioning Asia and Asian people outside of the civilized world. Having each other's company in a society that turns a side-eye towards their cultures, race, and foreign identity helps the students form a community of support. As previously mentioned, many Chinese international students have challenges embracing their Chinese cultural heritage, since Chinese state narratives and Chinese culture are negatively linked together under the American gaze. However, through a shared experience of Chinese and Vietnamese culture, these students take a break from the state-surveilled relationship and find a space where shared culture can be enjoyed without political tensions. Through the example, we see that the self is always a fluid entity subjected to changes as the currents of culture and politics continue to ebb and flow. Thus, the self is an endless search for meaning making while navigating ambivalence from the numerous external gazes projected onto its veil.

Discussion and Conclusion

How do we make sense of the post COVID-19 America where xenophobia is still heightened amidst a continuing tense U.S.-China relationship? I argued that Chinese international students are a suitable case for us to think about this question. Under the opposite diplomatic interests of the U.S. and Chinese authorities, Chinese international students develop a triple consciousness that contains two external gazes from the U.S. and Chinese authority that pull them in opposite directions, and one ambivalent self in the middle.

Understanding race allows for a more nuanced perspective in how individuals navigate geopolitical pulls: race has also been closely tied to geopolitics as a tool to justify control. According to anthropologist Partha Chatterjee (2007), colonial conquests are driven by a "rule of colonial difference" that justify control. Using British Imperialism as an example, Chatterjee argues that though its administration advocates for an eventual homogeneity between the colonizer and the colonized, the essential difference between the two parties will persist to rule the colonized group. In the case of British Imperialism, the obvious appearance distinction

between the White conquerors and Indian people signifies the colonial difference (Kolsky, 2005). Building on the colonial difference, historian Arif Dirlik (1998) argues that Euro-Americans invent the "Pacific" as a capitalist frontier. He states that the colonial conquests and tradings in Asia have signified a success of reproducing capitalist economy. At the same time, however, this very success poses a threat to the Euro-American ideological and cultural domination over Asia. This "threat," he argues, is expressed through the resurgence of racist vocabulary to justify White superiority. This is seen repeatedly in the China-U.S. debate in the recent decades due to China's rapid economic expansion. As previously mentioned, Trump's racist rhetoric during the trade war and COVID-19 shows a resurgence of the colonial languages used against Chinese migrant workers. This narrative is also utilized as xenophobia against international students in my study as a part of the American gaze. At the same time, the American gaze intends to diminish students' individual presence through blanket racial categories and stereotypes.

Furthermore, students' own individual identities are overshadowed by the American gaze of the Chinese state. Restrictions on their visa is paired with a xenophobic spy narrative, a rhetoric not unfamiliar to the past. At the same time, the Red Scare rhetoric continues to restrict students' mobility, a scare under the threat from China's economic development that projects on students. This paradoxical approach of welcoming Chinese students on college campuses while rejecting them for life after school further indicates that their identity is politicized to serve America's democratic goal. It reinforces that they are always foreigners in the U.S. and are no longer welcomed after the goal is served. However, as exemplified in students' cases, this democracy is not achieved as the U.S. government desires. Reflecting on the nature of the international student program, sometimes referred to as the "exchange" program. The word "exchange" is supposed to signal equality, but is shown asymmetrically in students' experiences: Chinese students are absorbed in the American gaze but do not have the opportunity to gaze back to the U.S. students. Their prescribed foreign identity subjects them to non-belonging, which hinders their participation with Americans who do belong. This power imbalance impedes their chance to participate in true democracy in the form of equality, which makes it hard for them to fulfill the U.S. government's desired mission to impart its ideals.

Besides facing the American gaze that casts students as outsiders, my participants' experiences in the U.S. are constantly guided and misguided by the Chinese gaze. The focus on collectivism has trained students to represent China in every way. At the same time, the

divergence of identities students experience while studying in the U.S. results in conflicts during COVID-19. The American experience is negatively targeted under the Chinese gaze which results in a failure for students to fully identify as Chinese. The perceived homogeneity of the Chinese race also prevents students from understanding and respecting race. This is especially showcased in students' colorblind racist towards Black people. In turn, ignoring the structure racism of the United States serves the Chinese gaze by reducing racial problems to individuals, thus students could "blend in" faster.

Though students are under influences from both the American and Chinese gaze, they develop a self in the ambivalent middle. It fluctuates between accepting the pull from either side and rejecting both at the same time. The ambivalent self at times causes students to lose touch on their identity, unsure which society they are welcomed in. At the same time, the ambivalent self serves as a space relatively independent from states control, offering students a chance for more nuanced reflections. The self can also be achieved through connections that have distance from both state gazes, such as friendships with other international students not from China.

My research, however, still possesses limitations. Most of my participants define themselves as middle class, and their economic status could perhaps help them avoid state sanctions and gain advantages in China. Thus, it could potentially influence their attitudes towards the Chinese government. At the same time, their middle class status provides them with mobility in the U.S.: Some Chinese students could afford to go to China during the COVID-19 pandemic, thus having distance with the xenophobic rhetoric at the time. However, as previously mentioned, the U.S. shuffles through the "elite" Chinese students that already have economic advantages, which limits the economic status of my participant sample.

Additionally, my participants all attend Macalester College- a politically Left-leaning, small liberal arts college. Due to the small number of students, my participants have to engage with their American peers in classrooms. However, one participant points out that at University of Minnesota, a large public university nearby, they have only seen "Chinese students hanging out with themselves." Lecture-based classrooms can also be a determining factor to limit Chinese students' engagement with their American peers in large schools. At the same time, due to Macalester's Left-leaning atmosphere and high percentage of international students, my participants have not faced direct racism and xenophobia on campus. However, at a more

politically diverse public school, students might face different experiences. Thus, further research should diversify the sample to other types of schools to better represent the international student population.

In conclusion, under COVID-19 xenophobia and an increasingly hostile U.S.-China relationship, Chinese international students' triple consciousness provides a useful case for studying the ways Cold War power struggles and xenophobia are manifested and contested in the present day geopolitical context. International students' provide us with the lens into how large-scale geopolitical tensions are shown in individuals identity and experiences. Lastly, besides the two external gazes, international students' ambivalence provides the possibility for individuals to reflect on the polarized national rhetoric and search for alternative meanings of the self.

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