The Mystery of National Identity of Chinese International Students amid the COVID-19 Pandemic: The Role of Western Neo-racism and Chinese Nationalism

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ABSTRACT   *The research aims to explore the changes of national identity among Chinese international students in the odd social context of the global pandemic. By conducting semi-structured interviews with 10 Chinese undergraduate and postgraduate students in a prestigious university located in London, UK, the study provides evidence of Western neo-racism against Chinese students and the rise of Chinese nationalism. More significantly, it is found that Western neo-racism and Chinese nationalism have a push and pull effect on the national identity enhancement of Chinese international students. The participants revealed that bottom-up popular nationalism is more than a shadow of top-down state nationalism in China, and is more influential on students' national identity formation. The research also discusses the implications of these findings, limitations and future research directions.*

KEYWORDS Chinese international students; Western neo-racism; Chinese nationalism; popular nationalism; national identity; discrimination; COVID-19

Introduction

According to the UNESCO Institute for Statistics (2019), the number of internationally mobile students grew from two million in 2000 to 5.3 million in 2017. Moreover, the number of international students is estimated to reach eight million by 2025 (QS, 2018). Many countries recognize the considerable economic benefits being generated by the international education industry. In the United Kingdom, the United States of America, Australia and Canada, higher education has become an important export sector as a large number of international students choose to study in these countries.

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Meanwhile, the enrollment of Chinese international students has been increasing dramatically in recent years. China has become the largest sending country of international students in the world. In 2017, 869,000 Chinese students were studying abroad, the majority in Anglo-Saxon countries (Smyth et al., 2020). Due to the financial gains, many Western universities have been aggressively recruiting mainland Chinese students, and increasingly relying on the revenue generated. Thus, Western societies have started to attach more attention to the educational and social experiences of Chinese international students. Nevertheless, misunderstanding, bias and even discrimination are not uncommon for mainland Chinese students. Western nations,[1] such as United States, advocate equality, freedom, justice and other core values, but Chinese international students are often associated with stereotypes and prejudice in Western societies (Heng, 2016). It is critical to know that China and the West have different expectations of students. Without an adequate understanding of the differences in sociocultural contexts, Westerners tend to perceive mainland Chinese students as passive, silent and needy learners who are uninterested in cultural adaptation via socializing (Jenkins, 2000). More importantly, Chinese international students may have to put up with subtle microaggressions or visible hostilities on a daily basis as a consequence of Eurocentrism (Guo & Guo, 2017; Lee et al., 2016; Lee & Rice, 2007; Walker & Zuberi, 2020).

What is worse, reports of xenophobic sentiment are increasing, and allegedly there have been a growing number of incidents of physical violence against Asians in Western societies after the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic (Russell, 2020). According to media coverage, anti-Asian crimes spiked in the US (Ellerbeck, 2020), UK (Grierson, 2020), Australia (Yang, 2020) and Canada (Xu, 2020). In this worrisome trend, people of color, including Chinese international students, have been stigmatized in the West. As a result, they are struggling for physical and mental survival every day (Ma & Miller, 2020). In this social context, the new generation of Chinese international students, unlike their predecessors in the 20th century, are speaking out against unfair treatment via rallies or social media (Suspitsyna & Shalka, 2019; Wang et al., 2021). The cause of the generational difference remains unclear, but the difference might be partially attributable to the influence of Chinese nationalism in recent years, which is strongly enhanced by China's growing economic power (He & Guo, 2000; Suspitsyna & Shalka,

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[1] "Western nations," "Western countries" or "the West" do not refer to a fixed location, but rather describes a historically constituted concept that is used in contrast to "non-West," "Asia" or "China." In this article, Western European countries, United States, Canada, Australia and New Zealand are categorized as "the West." The author recognizes that the binary divisions are problematic as these terms obscure the heterogeneity of the above-mentioned countries, but the author makes use of these terms throughout this article to highlight the social, economic, political and historical divides and discuss the formation of Chinese international students' national identity under the influence of neo-racism and nationalism amid a global health crisis (see e.g., Stein & de Andreotti, 2016).

2019; Zhang, 2020; Zhao, 2004; Wang et al., 2021).

How do Chinese international students, a temporary diaspora, define and redefine their national identity in light of the microaggressions and discrimination faced amid the current COVID-19 pandemic? Studying and residing in a transnational space, mainland Chinese students' sense of identity is inevitably being shaped and reshaped through their interactions with the host societies (Tran, 2017). At the same time, they keep a close connection with mainland China, which has a direct impact on their evolving identity. Some research discusses discrimination and self-identity related to Chinese international students, but it mainly focuses on the impact of social ties with the host societies, and largely neglects the complexity of identity formation induced by both sociocultural and political perspectives in a transnational context (Cheng et al., 2016; Tran, 2017). This paper aims to explore the sociocultural and political forces of Chinese national identity for international students amid a global health crisis.

Neo-Racism Against International Students

International education is believed to promote global peace and improve people-to-people understanding across nations, laying the foundation for the exchange of constructive ideas (Hail, 2015; Jamaludin et al., 2016). However, the notion of the "idealized" international interaction seems problematic, and its realization needs mutual collaboration between host and home countries (Lee, 2013). Prior research on international students and mass media suggest that international students may encounter various forms of discrimination, including cultural discrimination, microaggression, verbal conflict and physical violence, within the host country (Heng, 2016; Lee et al., 2016; Lee & Rice, 2007). As a result, many international students may feel segregated in the host country. Along with the accumulation of negative emotions, they may start to view their host community and its residents with resentment (Hail, 2015).

Discrimination against international students is ubiquitous across major Western countries (Stein & de Andreotti, 2016). Although most relevant studies are conducted by US-based researchers, discrimination is also evident in other English-speaking countries engaged in internationalization in higher education (Guo & Guo, 2017). In Canada, this social problem is concealed by an ostensible multicultural harmony, but racism is deeply rooted in Canadian history (Cui, 2019). At the beginning of the 20th century when Eurocentrism was dominant, a textbook used in British Columbia even bluntly described Chinese or "the Yellow Race" as "some of the most backward tribes of the world [who,] as a rule, are not progressive" (Stanley, 2011, p. 108).

The influence of Western culture globally rose dramatically in the 19th century, and peaked in the 20th century. During these two centuries, the technological dominance of the West was often associated with supremacy of

Western science and related culture, so the knowledge production system of non-Western societies was transformed in line with the Western style (Elshakry, 2010). Winter (2009) argues that Eurocentrism prevails in modern scholarship (Tucker & Hayes, 2019; Tucker & Zhang, 2016). Under the influence of a worldview overemphasizing Western civilization, many Westerners and even non-Westerners consciously or subconsciously think Western culture is superior to other non-Western cultures, which may explain unfair treatment of international students within Western countries.

With the emergence of civil rights movements in Western countries from the mid-20th century, blatant discrimination based on "race" is arguably declining, and most people in Western countries are consciously trying not to be racist. Does this mean that "racial" discrimination is eradicated thoroughly in Western societies? Unfortunately, it still exists, but in a more subtle and covert form (Lee et al., 2016). Bell (1987) explains that racism is institutional and systematic because it has been used as a fundamental framework to organize human society, and people tend to perpetuate racism because of the system and social structure they live by (DiAngelo, 2018). Thus, this author believes that an individual's racial prejudice is largely attributable to political, economic, cultural and social structures that systematize and justify unequal distribution of power, resources and economic interest (DiAngelo, 2018). In a society perpetuating cultural hierarchies, discrimination against international students is framed through cultural differences (Lee & Rice, 2007; Yao et al., 2019). Due to neo-racism, international students from "inferior" cultures are susceptible to many social and academic challenges (Noon, 2017; Walker & Zuberi, 2020), and their sense of belonging to local communities is also compromised (Yao, 2018).

According to Balibar (1991, p. 84), neo-racism or new racism refers to "a racism whose dominant theme is not biological heredity but the insurmountability of cultural differences," and it postulates "the incompatibility of life-styles and traditions" that later leads to a belief of cultural superiority. Therefore, reinforcement of the dominant culture is rationalized with narratives avoiding blatant racism. Based on neo-racism theory, Lee and Rice (2007) examine how international students perceive discrimination in America, and they find that international students with typical white features experience much less discrimination compared to their peers from non-Western regions. The phenomenon echoes the cultural hierarchy as white international students have many cultural similarities with the host community (Lee, 2010).

The hierarchical dichotomy between the West and non-West (e.g. "superior" and "inferior") is systematically manifested in many educational institutions of the Western world. Cui (2019) argues that Chinese Canadian youth are often considered uncivilized, undesirable and powerless immigrants, thus prime targets of school bullying. In addition, Guo and Guo (2017) interviewed 26 international students from nine countries at a university in western Canada, and they concluded that students from Asia

were more likely to encounter alienation and discrimination than those of European descent. There is no exception for mainland Chinese students who grow up in a very different and relatively homogeneous cultural environment. They tend to face various challenges in Western countries, including language skill, Western thinking style and many others (Heng, 2016). Inadequate cultural adjustment contributes to challenges that international students confront. However, Lee and Rice (2007, p. 381) argue that "some more serious challenges are due to inadequacies within the host society," and social isolation from the host community may push international students to cling to their own national identity for emotional comfort (Tajfel, 1978).

Humiliation, Rejuvenation and Chinese Popular Nationalism

Without understanding China's socio-cultural features, Westerners may gaze upon Chinese international students from a perspective of Western rationality (Hervik, 2004; Suspitsyna & Shalka, 2019). Thus, it is critical to explore China's history in modern times. In the 19th and 20th centuries, the West had a global military dominance due to its absolute advantage in science and economy (Elshakry, 2010). Meanwhile, China went through the "Century of Humiliation" being suppressed by imperialistic Western powers and Japan, which begins from China's First Opium War in 1839 and ends with the establishment of People's Republic of China (PRC) by the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) in 1949. During the period, China lost its status as the "Celestial Empire," and was forced to give various concessions of sovereignty to foreign powers. The traumatic memory of the "Century of Humiliation" is an important foundation for China's modern nationalism (Townsend, 1992).

The concept of nationalism can be traced to Western philosophers, such as Rousseau and Machiavelli, who use the idea of social contract to explain the relationship between individual and state. Kelman (1997) argues that nationalism entitles a nation state to its members' support in maintaining national dignity. Thus, the research defines nationalism as an individual's commitment to protect their perceived national identity. Under the official narrative of "Century of Humiliation," Chinese nationalism is often associated with anti-Western, anti-Japan and pro-CCP sentiments (Wang, 2014; Wang, 2020; Zhang, 2020).

The discourse of "the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation" is another significant component framing Chinese nationalism. Since the "reform and opening up," China has made great economic progress. With an accumulation of wealth, China desires to regain its former glory as a powerful nation (Wang, 2010). At the same time, the Chinese government uses economic achievement as a new narrative for publicity purposes to further justify its ruling legitimacy towards all Chinese people. It implements "patriotic education," encouraging a patriotic spirit and reiterating that only the CCP

could rejuvenate China (Wang, 2014). Under these economic and educational influences, young Chinese tend to be more confident about their national identity compared to their older counterparts whose memories focus on the "Century of Humiliation," and they truly believe in a "Chinese Dream" (Callahan, 2017; Wang, 2020; Zhang, 2020).

The "Century of Humiliation" and the "national rejuvenation" are deeply rooted in Chinese people's collective memory, which shapes Chinese nationalism in modern times (Callahan, 2017; Wang, 2014; Wang, 2020). According to Townsend (1992), "the rise of Chinese nationalism is obviously of global importance" (p. 102). In China, nationalism could be broadly categorized into state nationalism and popular nationalism (Gries, 2006; Gries et al., 2016). The structure of the two forms of nationalism is different. State nationalism is initiated by the Chinese government from the top down, and popular nationalism is initiated by the Chinese people from the bottom up (Cheng et al., 2016). In terms of the interrelationship, some Western scholars believe that popular nationalism is a shadow of state nationalism under the control of the CCP (Gries, 2006). However, Townsend (1992) argues that popular nationalism is stronger than it seems to be, and state nationalism is weaker than the Chinese government proclaims. More importantly, popular nationalism may not be entirely under the government's control in China (Gries et al., 2016).

In recent decades, it seems that popular nationalism is rising in China along with the official narratives of "victim" of historical humiliation and "victor" of economic development. Young Chinese, including international Chinese students, are generally proud of their national identity, and are inclined to be more outspoken against injustice and unfair treatment from the foreign powers (Wang, 2014; Wang et al., 2021; Zhang, 2020). For example, Chinese college students organized a large scale protest in 1999 after the US bombed the Chinese embassy in Belgrade; Chinese international students protested against Western bias against China before the 2008 Beijing Olympics; and they also engaged in anti-racism activities during the COVID-19 pandemic (Gries et al., 2016; Hail, 2015; Chen, 2020). These responses may be seen as a reflection of a clear national identity among the young Chinese.

Methodology

The present research focuses on people's perception, experience and feelings, therefore semi-structured, in-depth interviews were used to explore how the national identity of Chinese international students are being shaped and reshaped by Western neo-racism and Chinese nationalism in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic (see Creswell, 2012; Mukminin, 2019). After studying relevant literature and media reports a set of interview questions was developed, and a purposive snowball sampling approach was adopted. Ten Chinese students studying at a prestigious university in London, were

recruited via the researcher's personal social networks (Creswell, 2012). The author focused on Chinese students in the UK because it is one of the most popular study destinations for students from mainland China (Smyth et al., 2020). All participants were between 19 and 24 years of age, and had studied in the UK for at least one year, implying that they are knowledgeable about their study destination (degree-seeking students may have a different interpretation on their life experience abroad compared with short-term exchange students). Although this methodology and sample cannot claim to generate representative results, it did produce rich and multi-faceted data, which allowed the researcher to gain a deeper understanding of the complex issue of national identity formation among Chinese international students in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic (Zainal, 2007).

All the participants were residing in either the UK or mainland China, and the researcher was residing in Malaysia when this study was conducted. To facilitate data collection, WeChat (a multi-purpose mobile phone APP) was chosen for conducting audio interviews, as it is the most frequently used social media platform among Chinese international students (Ammigan & Laws, 2018). WeChat allows users to communicate via instant text messaging, hold-to-talk voice messaging, video calls, audio calls and other features. In terms of WeChat's function of audio calls, it is similar to person-to-person communication via telephone (Ma et al., 2019). However, dialing phone numbers is not needed on WeChat. Instead, an audio call is simply initiated by pressing a button labeled "voice call." With either Wi-Fi or 4G/5G coverage, people can talk with each other from different corners of the world via WeChat without extra charge. Although the function of video calls is available on WeChat as well, new acquaintances may face awkward situations via one-on-one video chats (Ma et al., 2019), so audio calls were used instead.

Concerning the interview process via WeChat, the researcher mainly followed the method suggested by Ma et al. (2019). Before the interview, an invitation and consent message in Chinese was sent to all participants through WeChat text, and they were asked to reply to the message stating whether they agreed to join in the interview. All interview sessions were conducted in Mandarin by the researcher of the study, and each interview between 40 and 60 minutes. Before the start of each interview, participants were specifically informed that they could withdraw from the interview at any moment if they felt uncomfortable with the questions.

The interviews took place in March and April, 2020 when COVID-19 cases surged in many popular study destinations for Chinese students. The rise of xenophobia towards Chinese and other Asians was observed, and alleged hate crimes were reported in many countries (Russell, 2020). Given the sensitive nature of the research, the interview started with general questions about participants' study experience abroad. After participants became more relaxed and comfortable questions focused on their experiences, feelings and opinions related to discrimination, nationalism and national identity in the

context of COVID-19 pandemic. With participants' consent, all the conversations were documented in MP3 format by using a digital voice recorder during the interview process (Ma et al., 2019). Then, these recorded interviews were transcribed in Chinese verbatim. For anonymity purposes, pseudonyms were assigned to the participants, and any information that may reveal interviewees' true identity was concealed as well. The researcher is attached to a Malaysian university where Institutional Review Board approval is not common for qualitative research in social science. Nevertheless, the researcher strictly followed ethical principles (e.g. respect, autonomy, confidentiality, beneficence, and non-maleficence) to ensure research integrity, and avoid possible harm to the interviewees and the researcher (Aluwihare-Samaranayake, 2012; Mukminin, 2019).

  After the transcription of the recorded interview, the researcher analyzed the written documents sentence-by-sentence manually. Thematic analysis was adopted to systematically develop common themes concerning the life experience and national identity of Chinese international students (Nowell et al., 2017). To increase the richness of of data analysis, important quotations were translated into English and integrated into the findings section (Mukminin, 2019). An interpretive paradigm was used during data analysis, because the issue of identity is a very complex social phenomenon (Rossman & Rallis, 2003). According to Angen (2000), personal experience is an indispensable part of our understanding of the world, and logical and meaningful interpretations facilitate us understanding ourselves, others and even our broader social world. The researcher is from mainland China, and he has been studying abroad more than four years, which enabled a smoother interview process and deeper insights on the interviewees' opinions (Rossman & Rallis, 2003).

  Goulding (1999) states that knowledge is negotiable in different culturally constructed societies, and our own experience shapes our ways of thinking and how we see the world. Based on this view, the researcher embraced his identity as a Chinese student studying abroad, and evaluated respondents' feedback from the dual perspectives of a researcher and a Chinese international student. This helped the researcher understand Chinese international students' experiences of discrimination and its related themes (Cheng et al., 2016).

Findings

According to the semi-structured interviews with 10 Chinese students in the UK, some meaningful insights are provided to understand the mystery of national identity change under the synchronized force of Western neo-racism and Chinese nationalism in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. A few relevant themes were identified based on the data analysis, including superiority and discrimination, rising Chinese nationalism and strengthened

national identity. The alleged discrimination cripples Chinese international students' connection with the local community, and pushes them to identify more with their home country, including the people and the government (Litam & Oh, 2020). Meanwhile, rising Chinese popular nationalism makes Chinese international students proud of their Chinese identity, and pulls them back to a strong attachment with China. The interconnected themes reflect Chinese international students' life experience and national identity change in the West.

No.	Pseudonym	Age	Gender	Enrollment	Overseas Years
1	Bin	20	Female	Degree	2
2	Aidan	19	Male	Degree	7
3	Alex	19	Female	Degree	1
4	Melody	19	Female	Degree	2
5	Poki	22	Female	Degree	3
6	Wong	24	Male	Master	2
7	Lee	20	Male	Degree	2
8	Ana	23	Female	Master	5
9	Ashley	22	Female	Master	1
10	Nick	20	Male	Degree	2

Table 1. Demographic profile of participants.

Superiority and Discrimination

Eight interviewees reported that they had experienced some forms of discrimination, such as microaggressions, verbal or even physical conflicts in the UK, particularly at off-campus settings. These discriminatory behaviors were often linked with a Western "superiority complex" and the COVID-19 pandemic. Seven respondents mentioned that the locals have an ingrained superiority complex, and it is easy to feel it when they communicate with local people in various social contexts (Noon, 2017). Specifically, five out of the seven interviewees believed that the superiority complex was one of the main contributors to the unfair treatment they encountered in the UK. Regarding this issue, Alex described her life experience in the following manner:

> One day, my local friends and I went to a pub for a drink. We were discussing what would happen to China if there was no Opium Wars. One British friend said that the UK brought civilization to China and India... I think that some British feel [they are] superior to Chinese or Asians, and they don't even bother to know our history and civilizations.

Likewise, Poki said,

> Discrimination [against Chinese students] are always there. At the beginning of 2018, my [Chinese] roommate and I went back to our apartment from the university library. Two British guys touched our backpacks and kept cursing at us. I was so angry, and I cursed them back, but they were laughing. I never thought this would happen to me.

Both Alex and Poki expressed that discrimination against Chinese international students worsened after the COVID-19 outbreak. They all mentioned that they were cursed at by strangers outside of campus in February and March. For example, Alex was walking on a street near her university, and a stranger shouted "fuck you" towards her. She said, "I was the only Asian there at that moment. I felt very scared." These feelings and experiences were common among respondents.

A couple of interviewees had never encountered any overt discrimination, but they acknowledged the existence and worsening of discrimination against Chinese people. Aidan stated, "I've never felt any obvious discrimination on me. It's already the year of 2020. Why does racial discrimination still exist?" He further explained,

> I heard some stories from news and social media. Recently, a Singaporean student was beaten up near Oxford street. We study at the same university... I never felt the existence of discrimination before. Now, I become more cautious when I walk on the street.

When asked about the root cause of discrimination, most respondents thought that Western-centrism was the main contributor. It seems that alleged discrimination cases surged during the COVID-19 pandemic, but the pandemic is only a surface reason. Ana elaborated,

> To be honest, we live in a Western-centered world. The industrial civilization originated from the West, and the West is still leading the world in many areas. [As a result], some people may have a false sense of superiority that everything about the West is the best, like culture, arts, technology and political system. Because of the superiority complex, some Westerners refuse to acknowledge the progress we made in China... The COVID-19 just gives the haters an excuse to blatantly discriminate Chinese and other Asians.

Significantly, all the interviewees believed that media and social media should take partial responsibility for the hostile environment toward Chinese people. After the COVID-19 outbreak, media channels around the world featured intense coverage of the pandemic, and some of them used misleading headlines and distorted content to link the pandemic with Chinese people (Wen et al., 2020). Nick shared his thoughts as "this is unfair. We are not the virus. Some Western media outlets present biased coverage on China, [and] it gives Chinese international students and other Asian students much

psychological suffering."

Likewise, Ana stated,

> Media bias is a poison. Many foreigners have never been to China. They rely on the media and the internet. There is a lot of misleading content. They may think China is like North Korea. Some of my foreign friends told me that they would never visit China because of what they saw from the [Western] media. Take COVID-19 for example, a few classmates said that the pandemic started because we [Chinese] eat bats, but I don't know anyone who eats bats in my whole life. All the pictures or videos online claiming Chinese eat bats, they were not even taken in China.

Most study participants also revealed that their bonds with the locals were not as strong as those with other Chinese students. Their interactions with locals are largely restricted within the campus. For example, Wong often communicated with his local friends. Their interactions exceeded the boundary of campus, but he admitted that his British friends wouldn't understand some of his feelings as a Chinese student studying in the UK:

> I like making friends with the locals. It's a good way to understand their way of thinking. We study together, we eat together, and we hang out together. Sometimes, I feel I don't understand them, and they don't understand me either... They are my friends, but some of them have a prejudiced view about China and my culture. Mmm, I feel it's easier to be friends with other Chinese students.

Strengthened National Identity

Facing an allegedly increasing amount of discrimination described above, most of the interviewees showed a much higher level of attachment to China, including both the government and the people. Some study participants even experienced strong emotions, such as sadness, anger and depression, after they heard criticism of China in relation to COVID-19 from the media, social media and their social circle (Ma & Miller, 2020; Wen et al., 2020). Those Chinese students who had never expected discrimination before seemed to have the strongest identity with China. In brief, Chinese international students in the UK thought of China in a more positive way after they left China, and the COVID-19 crisis strengthened their national identity. Ashley shared her opinions on the issue,

> Like other young people in China, I complained a lot about the Chinese government before I came to the UK. I used to think that China should adopt Western-style democracy, but I doubt it now... China made some mistakes at the beginning of the COVID-19 [outbreak], but generally China does a much better job than the West... I am proud to be Chinese... I plan to go back after my study.

Other respondents shared some similar views,

> Wuhan [government] should have done a better job in dealing with the virus. Fortunately, the central government made a prompt decision to lock down Wuhan. It takes courage to do the sacrifice. Not many countries in the world dare to shut down a city with more than 10 million residents. Looking at how different countries are reacting towards the pandemic, I support our government more. (Ana)

> When I read the news coverage and social media posts, I see the bias. You barely read positive things about China from Western media. China has things to improve on, but the West should look at the positive aspects as well... I became more patriotic after I studied abroad. Living here makes you feel that you are an outsider. You don't belong here. (Wong)

Meanwhile, it seemed that those Chinese students who did not expect to be treated unfairly before their arrival to the UK experienced a stronger emotional struggle. A couple of them even showed signs of psychological trauma. As a result, their positive interactions with the local community weakened, and their sense of patriotism became even more salient. They actively strengthened their national identity to counteract the negative emotions caused by the perceived discrimination. Bin mentioned, "staff at my apartment's office always whispered when I passed by before (COVID-19). I didn't feel anything wrong. Now, I think back. They may have laughed at me."

Similarly, Ashley said,

> For me, racial discrimination is just a vague concept before. Studying abroad makes me love China more... I am a careless person, but now I become very sensitive, and even paranoid, especially with strangers... I plan to do my PhD after Master in the UK, but I don't really want to live here permanently.

A few interviewees expressed that their parents or friends had discussed discrimination with them before their arrival to the UK, so it was easier for them to adjust to the local community and social environment. They seemed to see the issue of discrimination in a more "objective" way:

> The British are arrogant. They have some old stereotypes against Chinese. It's difficult to blend in their society. Discrimination is not unique in the West. In China, people also discriminate against migrant workers. The reason [behind discrimination] is that we don't have sufficient resources [for everyone]. My parents and friends told me things about discrimination abroad before, so I feel that my life is better than my expectation... Besides their [British] arrogance, some Chinese had "uncivilized" behaviors in the past. Now, the West sees China as a competitor, and we don't have the same values. Therefore, discrimination exists. I think it will still exist for a long time. (Melody)

Rising Chinese Nationalism

When asked about the origin of their national identity, most of the study participants expressed that popular nationalism was more influential than state nationalism in China. Some scholars think that China is a centralized country and the government has considerable control over its citizens through its education system, but it seems that Chinese students think state nationalism has a limited impact on them (Townsend, 1992). According to Ashley,

> I am always being patriotic. If you ask me the influence of government-related channels, like school. I would say that it only accounts for 30% of my patriotism, and the rest comes from family education and books I read out of school... I am not a big fan of politics. I think that patriotic education at school has no practical meaning in China. I mean, what you learned in a textbook is just some abstract concept. You will have a clearer idea about what patriotism is from your parents, friends and pop culture, particularly your own experiences.

Lee shared some similar thoughts,

> National identity will change. For example, I went back to China in April. The whole process was smooth. The airport staff and medical staff were nice to us. During the mandatory quarantine, I felt the care from the hotel staff. This experience makes me love China more. Not only the government, but medical staff... If you are talking about patriotic education from school or other official outlets, I disliked it at school. It's boring and political.

To some extent, they were resistant to the state nationalism-driven patriotic education when they were studying in China. However, state nationalism may have an invisible impact on them by planting a seed in their mind, and it probably has a stronger influence than they claim. Meanwhile, the growing popular nationalism may stimulate China's state nationalism (Zhang et al., 2018). A few study participants mentioned China's past humiliation and current economic progress, which echoed with the "victim" and "victor" narratives of state nationalism. Wong mentioned the "US-China trade war" in the interview, and he said,

> Chinese people suffered a lot before because of the Western powers, but we've made great progress in economy and technology. We are able to protect ourselves now. The US just doesn't want to see us develop. I think that Chinese government should have a tough attitude towards the US.

Likewise, Nick stated,

> China used to be very poor a few decades ago. We made a big contribution to the world economy. The West should acknowledge this, and don't always criticize China. I've travelled to a few countries, and I see how people live. Western developed countries are not paradise, and they have their own problems... China is

not perfect, but I think that the government is doing well, not worse than the US or UK at least.

It appears that Chinese international students were not very satisfied with the Chinese government before their arrival to the UK. They intentionally separated popular nationalism from state nationalism, and they preferred to differentiate between the Chinese people and the Chinese government. Furthermore, they had a rather vague understanding of national identity when they lived in China. However, their national identity became strengthened via their own experiences of living abroad. Significantly, they tended to mix the two forms of nationalism consciously or unconsciously as their previous differentiation between Chinese people and Chinese government were blurred by the perceived discrimination in the host society and Western media outlets. As individuals, they started to express their dissatisfaction with their unfair treatment abroad and their support for the Chinese government. As a result, popular nationalism tended to rise among Chinese international students.

Discussion and Conclusion

As a result of educational internationalization, more students from mainland China have chosen to study abroad. How their national identity is shaped by their study abroad experiences remains a mystery in the context of COVID-19 pandemic. The present study combined neo-racism theory and political science concepts to investigate the changes in national identity for Chinese international students. Through in-depth interviews with 10 undergraduate and postgraduate students studying in the UK, the research identified three interconnected themes describing the issue of national identity during a global pandemic.

The findings suggest the existence of neo-racism and discrimination against Chinese international students. From the interviewees' experience living abroad, it is found that Chinese students may encounter a range of discrimination, from subtle microaggressions to obvious verbal or even physical aggressions, which is consistent with prior research exploring the challenges of students from developing countries in the West (Guo & Guo, 2017; Lee, 2010, 2013; Lee & Rice, 2007). Neo-racism splits people into a dichotomy of "superior us" and "inferior them." Because of the systematic othering, discrimination against Chinese international students and other people of color is culturally rationalized, and the vilified "others" are usually blamed as a scapegoat during times of crisis (Woods et al., 2020). The COVID-19 pandemic has been amplifying ethnic and nationalist tensions in a dynamic process of othering whereby immigrants and foreigners (e.g. international students) are targeted (Suspitsyna & Shalka, 2019; Woods et al., 2020).

Based on the interviewee's subjective experience, a Western sense of

cultural superiority was one main contributor for neo-racism in the West. Moreover, the escalating competition between China and the West worsened the circumstances of Chinese international students residing in the West. A few study participants thought that China's progress led to a sense of insecurity among some Westerners, and their anti-Chinese sentiments reflected their lack of confidence in the competitive position of the West in the world. Furthermore, misleading media coverage and social media posts on COVID-19 adversely affect Chinese international students' mental health and their interactions with the local community (Wen et al., 2020). As a result, Chinese students are pushed by the perceived discrimination from the host country to form a closer psychological attachment with their home country (Jamaludin et al., 2016). Their national identity became more salient when they live abroad, particularly during the global pandemic. Nevertheless, the enhancement of national identity, as a passive response towards discrimination, could not fix the ingrained social cleavages (e.g. neo-racism) of Western societies that are pivotal to social injustice during the pandemic (Woods et al., 2020). Chinese nationalism catalyzed by COVID-19 may even further intensify the existing ethnic and nationalist conflicts in the West (Zhang, 2020; Zhang et al., 2018).

The findings further indicate that Chinese nationalism has a pull effect on the Chinese international students for a strong national identity. Popular nationalism plays a very important role in patriotic education in China. It is more than a shadow of CCP's state nationalism (Gries et al., 2016). Noticeably, many students are resistant towards state nationalism-driven content as they hold a critical attitude towards the Chinese government. However, their deliberate separation between the people and the government is blurred by the change of the external environment. When they feel threatened in an unfamiliar society as a minority, they tend to strengthen their national identity consciously or unconsciously, as a way to compensate for negative emotions resulting from perceived discrimination (Tajfel, 1978). Facing an increasing discrimination during COVID-19, minorities, such as Chinese international students, are pushed to enhance their own ethnic and national identity as a coping strategy for mental health (Litam & Oh, 2020). Simultaneously, Chinese international students are also pulled by Chinese nationalism that provides an ideological roadmap to glorify Chinese ethnic and national identity along with "the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation" (Callahan, 2017; Wang, 2014).

Significantly, state and popular nationalism are interrelated. Chinese international students are reluctant to accept state nationalism, but this top-down mechanism has a rather subtle influence on those students. It seems that CCP's official narratives of historical "victim" and current "victor" began to influence Chinese students after they left China for study. They started to identify more with the state nationalism-driven content. On the other hand, the rising popular nationalism among the people may further promote China's state nationalism (Zhang et al, 2018).

This research analyzed the subjective experiences of 10 Chinese international students at a university located in London to discuss the mystery of national identity change in the odd social context of COVID-19. To the author's best knowledge, it is probably the first one to explore the issue by combining Western neo-racism and Chinese nationalism. It is suggested that the two mechanisms have push and pull effects respectively on the national identity enhancement among Chinese international students, which provides a theoretical contribution to national identity construction among minority groups in the West. The framework combining Western neo-racism and Chinese nationalism explored the liminality of Chinese international students' identity in a transnational space and advanced our understanding of their identity construction in Western societies, particularly in relation to the higher education sector. The interaction between neo-racism and nationalism reveals the complexity of the process of constructing ethnic and national identity among racialized groups. Moreover, the two mechanisms demonstrate how international education's role of promoting mutual understanding and global peace is hindered in a conflict between an "inferior" social position due to racist nativism and an expectation for a "glorified" identity as a result of nationalism.

As student mobility continues to grow, educators from both home and host countries may want to see a holistic picture of international students' life experiences in an unfamiliar society. By knowing the implications of Chinese nationalism, it would be easier to understand the emotional struggles of Chinese international students resulting from Western neo-racism. This would allow educators to take necessary measures to facilitate students' psychological adjustment to the local community, such as organizing regular discussion between international and local students and residents to minimize the negative impacts of stereotypes and prejudices. Meanwhile, educators of host countries may collaborate with other major stakeholders to build a more welcoming environment for international students, and encourage international students to reflect on their background and living abroad experiences for a better study outcome (Hail, 2015). Apart from efforts at the micro-level for constructive engagements among individuals from different ethnic groups, it is also essential to move upward to the macro-level to restructure the political, economic, cultural and social structures that systematize and manifest racism towards ethnic minorities in the West (DiAngelo, 2018). Only with sufficient institutional support, can individuals explicitly understand racism and properly react towards racial experience (Bell, 1987).

This study is limited in terms of representativeness by its small sample size of 10 Chinese international students in London. Chinese international students may have different social encounters in the US, Australia or Canada. Future studies are encouraged to approach Chinese international students in different countries for comparison. The sample was collected in March and April when the alleged discrimination against Chinese and Asians spiked in

the West (Russell, 2020), which also limits the degree to which its findings can be generalized. In future, Chinese international students should be approached again to see if they may have different views in relation to the racial discrimination after the end of the COVID-19 crisis.

Acknowledgements

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