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There are no Asians in China: the racialization of Chinese international students in the United States

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ABSTRACT

Foreigners who arrive in the United States experience a process of racialization by which they adjust to the new racial realities of their host society. This paper presents a unique longitudinal study of racialization, drawing upon 30 interviews with 15 Chinese international students conducted twice per respondent over six months. The first interviews were carried out within two weeks of the students' arrival in the U.S. to capture their pre-migration racial schemas and racial identity. Upon their arrival in the U.S., Chinese students primarily understand the concept of 'race' through the paradigm of nationality and racially identified as Chinese. Just half a year later, however, there was a striking shift towards a conceptualisation of race that emphasises phenotype over nationality, and some respondents began to identify with the pan-national racial label 'Asian.' I argue that these changes can be attributed to the process of racialization in the United States.

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KEYWORDS Racialization; transnational racialization; race; racial identity; racial schemas; experiential knowledge

Introduction

Many scholars have examined how migrants in the United States gradually adjust to the racial realities of their host society, a process which can be called *racialization* (Itzigsohn, Giorguli, and Vazquez 2005; McDonnell and Lourenço 2009). In the Caribbean, for example, individuals do not racially identify themselves exclusively on the basis of their skin colour because socioeconomic status and other markers of class can qualify a person's racial classification (Charles 1992; Waters 1999). Once in the United States, however, Caribbeans who migrate are eventually racialized with the understanding that they are simply and unambiguously categorised as 'black'. Meanwhile, other studies have examined how U.S. racial ideologies can racialize immigrants even prior to their migration, a process which

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can be called *transnational racialization* (Kim 2008). Notably, through mediums such as the mass media and the internet, as well as through returning migrants, even individuals who have never left their home countries can become aware of U.S. racial classifications, hierarchies, and their own identity within such a racialized system. As a result, foreigners in the United States rarely arrive in their host country with a racial tabula rasa upon which U.S. racialization processes take place.

This paper aims to examine the process of racialization in the U.S. through the use of longitudinal data. Existing studies have relied on cross-sectional interviews in which respondents retrospectively reflect on their own racialization experiences. In this study, I draw on data from 30 longitudinal interviews with 15 Chinese international students in New York City. I focus on examining changes in their understandings of race (racial schemas) and racial identities. The interviews were conducted twice per respondent, the first interview taking place soon after each student's entry into the United States (on average 12 days) in order to get an assessment of their initial perceptions about the concept of 'race'. This first set of interviews thus serves as a proxy of their 'pre-migration' racial consciousness and captures potential influences of transnational racialization. Half a year later, all 15 respondents were interviewed a second time to examine the extent to which their racial schemas and racial identities changed during their time living in the United States. A comparison of the second set of interviews against the first was thus utilised to examine the process of U.S. racialization as it unfolds in real time.

My empirical argument proceeds as follows. First, through an analysis of the first interviews, I examine how the concept of 'race' is commonly understood and invoked in China. I argue that two understandings of 'race' are particularly salient: (1) the paradigm of nationality and blood origin that positions the Chinese against all other foreigners, and (2) the paradigm of ethnicity which contrasts the dominant Han Chinese with the 55 Chinese ethnic minorities. At the same time, due to the reach of transnational racialization, Chinese international students are cognisant of the U.S. racial classification that posits racial groups such as 'white', 'black', 'Asian', 'Latino', and 'Native American'. I contend, however, that this pre-migration influence of transnational racialization is inherently constrained by the lack of *experiential knowledge*. That is, U.S. racial labels like 'Asian' remain conceptually insignificant for Chinese international students prior to their relocation, and experiencing racialization in the United States is a necessary condition for transforming the salience of their nationality-based racial schema and identity. Comparisons of the longitudinal data across the two interviews provide compelling evidence for this argument, and I find that just six months later, several respondents had shifted from a nationality-based understanding and identification of their race as Chinese towards a pan-national, phenotype-based conceptualisation of their racial status and identity as 'Asian'.

Two dimensions of racialization: racial identities and schemas

Racialization is a ubiquitous term in the sociological literature on U.S. racial acculturation and its conceptualisations more broadly have been inconsistent (Murji and Solomos 2005). In this paper, I focus on the effects of racialization along two dimensions: (1) racial identity and (2) racial schema. I focus on these two dimensions because developing a U.S.-based understanding of race and racial identity is typically integral to the process of U.S. racialization. Indeed, the study of racial identity has been the central in previous studies on the topic (Itzigsohn, Giorguli, and Vazquez 2005; McDonnell and Lourenço 2009; Waters 1999). The development of racial identity may be attributed to processes of ethnonational conflation and racial labelling, where differences between diverse ethnicities and nationalities are systematically erased and groups are homogenised into larger 'racial' classifications (Cornell and Hartmann 1998; Espiritu 1992; Kibria 2002; Rodríguez Domínguez 2005). For instance, Itzigsohn and Dore-Cabral (2000) argued that the emergence of a Latino or Hispanic identity for Dominican immigrants can be explained as a form of accommodation and reaction to the imposition of racial categorisation in the United States. Likewise, Nadia Kim (2008) in her study of South Korean immigrants observed that her respondents 'became' Asian in the United States in large part because of Americans' inability to distinguish between individuals of various Asian nationalities.

At the same time, migrants in the United States do not simply come to adopt a U.S.-based racial identity; this identification is typically situated within a broader shift in their conceptualisation of what 'race' means. Here, Wendy Roth's (2012) concept of racial schema is useful. Defined as 'the bundle of racial categories and the set of rules for what they mean, how they are ordered, and how to apply them to oneself and others', racial schemas can paint a bigger story of the ways in which immigrants are racially acculturated in the United States (2012, 12). This concept is important because immigrants often bring with them alternative understandings of race (Bonilla-Silva 2014; Joseph 2015; Kusow 2006). For instance, in countries like Jamaica and Puerto Rico, 'race' is not necessarily contingent on physical appearance and can be mediated – or even primarily defined – by an individual's social class or nationality (Vargas-Ramos 2014; Waters 1999). In the United States, race is a concept understood to categorise human beings based on their physical appearance, most notably skin colour as well as phenotypes such as facial features (Morning, Ann 2011; Roth 2012; Winant 2001). Historically, the U.S. has maintained a strict white-black bimodal model of race, with laws of hypodescent (i.e., the one-drop rule) enforced to affirm such rigid racial boundaries (Dominguez 1986). In recent years, there has been a shift to a racial configuration that, while not

necessarily more flexible, expanded to define whites, blacks, Asians, Latino/Hispanics, and Native Americans as the five major, distinct U.S. racial categories (Hollinger 2006). While racialization in the United States does not require the replacement of alternative racial schemas in favour of a U.S. racial schema, migrants are both more likely to adopt this U.S. racial schema and more likely to emphasise this understanding over alternatives as they integrate into U.S. society over time. I now turn to a brief overview of the historical emergence of the idea of 'race' in China and its racialization process.

Race and racialization in China

The emergence of 'racial' discourse in China can be traced back to the end of the nineteenth century (Dikötter 1992). The power of the ruling Qing dynasty (1636–1912) was in rapid decline after humiliating defeats by foreign powers, first by Britain in the Opium Wars in the mid nineteenth century and later by Japan in the first Sino-Japanese War. In response, and out of fear that China would soon be divided up by the global powers of the time, Chinese reformers strove to invent a basis for a common group identity in order to unify the nation. Inspired in part from Euro-American influences of the time, notably the burgeoning social Darwinism and Western 'scientific' racial knowledge, the reformers promulgated a racialized national identity that portrayed the Chinese as a 'yellow race' struggling against the other races for survival and domination in the world. One such reformer at the time wrote: 'Yellow and white are wise, red and black are stupid; yellow and white are ruler, red and black are slaves; yellow and white are united, red and black are scattered' (Dikötter 1992, 81). At the same time, this racialized discourse was not simply a byproduct of Euro-American imperial influences. It was also a reconfiguration of extant Chinese notions of patrilineal descent (which existed long before Western influences) that was transformed into a racialized national identity (Dikötter 1996).

It is also important to emphasise that 'yellow' as invoked here should not be conflated with the pan-nation term 'Asian'. The Chinese did not – and to this day generally does not – see themselves as belonging to the same 'race' as other nationalities in Asia such as the Japanese, Korean, or Vietnamese. The idea of the Chinese being a 'yellow race' was therefore not so much a reference to their physical appearance as much as to the belief that they were blood descendants of the Yellow Emperor, a Chinese mytho-historical figure (Dikötter 1992). Moreover, while this racialized nationalist discourse was officially extended to include all 55 of the national minorities in China (e.g., ethnic groups such as the Hui, Kazakh, Mongol, Tibetan, and Uighur), in practice it remained confined only to the 'Han' (Dikötter 1996). The Han is a Chinese ethnic group which today represents roughly 92% of mainland

China's population. In this paper, I distinguish between the Chinese racialization of their ethnicity as Han or other minority groups and their racialization of their nationality as Chinese, but it is important to acknowledge that they are not mutually exclusive but rather closely intertwined with each other. That is, the Han Chinese tend to see themselves as constituting a distinct 'racial group' from all other 'foreigners', a category which may be invoked in a catch-all manner to include just about everyone who is *not* a Han Chinese – whether they are a Chinese ethnic minority group like the Uighurs and Kazakhs or literal foreigners such as the Japanese and Koreans.

U.S.-China transnational racialization

While countries like China have their own unique racialization processes, the modern hegemonic influence of the United States has led to the spread of U.S. racial classifications to other countries via processes of transnational racialization. I borrow this concept from Nadia Kim (2008), who, in her work *Imperial Citizens*, documented the ways in which U.S. imperialist racial ideologies have permeated South Korea and triangulated its citizens vis-à-vis white and black Americans along axes of the 'color line' and the 'citizenship line'. Kim focuses in particular on the role that the U.S. mass media culture and its military forces in Seoul play in racializing South Koreans even prior to their potential migration to the United States. Kim's argument is important because prior scholarship on race in transnational studies have largely focused on how immigrants in the United States are racialized in their host society, ignoring how such processes also occur in their home countries. In fact, because of these transnational influences, Kim argues that South Korean immigrants in the United States arrive in their host society '*already* racially triangulated. That is, a constellation of forces ... inculcates the group with White-Black ideologies, and prompts them to reckon their social positioning vis-à-vis the two ... long before they land on U.S. airport runways' (Kim 2008:114, emphasis added).

The use of the term transnational racialization in this paper is broadly consistent with Kim's conceptualisation, but my usage is more specific in scope in two ways. First, while Kim discusses how South Korean immigrants transmit U.S. racial knowledge back to their home country via processes of what she calls 'transnational feedback' or 'social remittances', I do not examine how my respondents engage in such ongoing transracializing processes because my primary focus is on examining how the respondents themselves are racialized in the United States. Second, given my aforementioned conceptualisation of racialization along the dimensions of racial identity and racial schema, I specifically invoke transnational racialization as the processes by which U.S. racial classifications and identities are exported to other countries. For instance, it is through such transracializing processes that Chinese international students are aware of their racialized status as 'Asian' even prior to migration to the United States.

U.S.-China transnational racialization, however, is constrained by the lack of *experiential knowledge*. Experience is important because technical knowledge about one's own pan-national classification as 'Asian' in the U.S. context as conveyed through various mediums of transnational racialization is insufficient to foster a new form of identity or alternative conceptualisations of race. In contrast, upon migration to the United States, both racial schemas and identities may shift via exposure to racialized social encounters, whether through overt forms of racism or through more covert race-inflected events such as the conflation of all nationalities from Asia as constituting a single racial group (Kibria 2002). I examine this hypothesis in this paper, examining whether Chinese international students' experiences of living in the United States increased the salience of U.S. racial schemas and identities over time.

Race and Chinese international students

Chinese international students comprise a quickly growing and important demographic within U.S. colleges and universities. In the 2017–2018 academic year, the number of Chinese international students studying in the United States increased for the eighteenth consecutive year, climbing to over 360,000 enrolments in colleges and universities across the country (Institute of International Education 2018). This figure represents a meteoric 660% surge in enrolment since 2000, when enrolment stood at roughly 55,000. Today, China alone accounts for a third (33.2%) of the 1.1 million international students in the country, surpassing even the combined number of students from its five closest competitors: India (17.9%), South Korea (5.0%), Saudi Arabia (4.1%), Canada (2.4%), and Vietnam (2.2%).

Given the growing visible presence of Chinese international students on U.S. college campuses, many schools have begun to devote greater attention and resources aimed at better facilitating their integration (Haynie 2015). Meanwhile, scholars have increasingly examined the various dimensions of Chinese international student college experiences, including their acculturation challenges (Bertram et al. 2014; Zhang and Goodson 2011), language barrier struggles (Cheng and Erben 2012), and psychological health concerns (Liu 2009). Conspicuously missing, however, from the collective discourse regarding the experiences of Chinese international students is an analysis of how the students learn about, encounter, and navigate 'race' as it is conceptualised in the United States.

Methods and data

This study draws on 30 longitudinal interviews with 15 Chinese international graduate students attending a private university in New York City. To locate and interview Chinese international students as soon as possible after their

arrival in the United States, I employed a number of recruitment strategies. I attended several orientation sessions hosted by various graduate and professional programmes, where I directly asked students for interviews and ultimately recruited half my sample. I also asked for help from a Chinese students' association, whose board members were able to put me in contact with several more newly arrived students. In addition, I posted recruitment messages on public groups in WeChat, a messaging service application that is used by all Chinese students. Lastly, I was able to find a student through the International House of New York, which is a residence programme centre for nearly 700 graduate students, scholars, and trainees. I interviewed 7 male and 8 female Chinese international students. In this paper, I assigned an American pseudonym for respondents who chose to identify with an American nickname, while I assigned a Chinese pseudonym for respondents who chose to identify with their Chinese name.

During the recruitment process, I emphasised that I was specifically looking for 'new' international students from China who had visited and/or lived in the United States for less than a month, preferably within two weeks. I ended up with a sample of 15 students who had, on average, been in the U.S. for 12 days. I sought to find Chinese international students who were as new to the U.S. as possible in order to study the influence (and limits) of transnational racialization *before* the effects of U.S. racialization could take place. This is similar to the strategy employed by Nadia Kim (2008), whose interview sample consisted in part of recent South Korean immigrants in the U.S. (whom she called 'newcomers') in order to best capture their pre-migration racial understandings. Although I could have also done this by interviewing individuals living in China who had never lived in the United States (as, for example, Kim additionally did by interviewing non-migrants residing in South Korea), my second goal was to examine the effects of U.S. racialization on the *same* respondents after they had spent some time living in the United States.

Each interview was semi-structured and lasted between an hour to an hour and a half. I generally invoked the word 'race' in an open-ended fashion and allowed the respondent to conceptualise the term as they saw fit. In practice, the way the respondents interpreted the term was rarely consistent throughout their interviews, signalling that they typically had multiple racial schemas. For instance, when asked in the first interview to speculate on how their 'race' might affect their social experiences in the United States, many students answered with reference to their Chinese identity or their Chinese cultural upbringing. When asked, however, to name specific 'racial' groups, or to define the concept of 'race', some students then invoked 'Asian' as a racial group in comparison to other groups such as 'whites', 'blacks', 'Latinos/Hispanic', and even 'Native American'. (Note that the answers were not simply an artefact of the specific

type of race question, as some students instead invoked the paradigm of race as nationality when asked to list racial groups and invoked the paradigm of race as U.S. racial categories such as 'Asian' when asked about their social experiences.) In addition to these open-ended 'race' questions, I also asked students to reflect on the label 'Asian'. I asked, for instance, whether being 'Asian' was an important or meaningful part of their identity currently or back home in China. In the second interviews, I probed again on these same questions to compare and contrast how their responses changed (or did not change). At times, I also brought up specific remarks made by the respondent in their first interview and asked them to reflect on why their answers changed. The interviews were conducted in English, which proved to be a challenge for some Chinese international students. On the whole, however, and with some help of translation phone applications, the Chinese students I interviewed were capable of speaking conversational English without too much difficulty. I analysed my interviews on the qualitative data analysis software, Atlas.ti, and I utilised codes such as 'race as nationality', 'race as 56 ethnic groups', and 'race as Asian/U.S. racial categories' to code my respondents' varied answers. For example, if a respondent articulated the importance of language differences, food preferences, and Chinese holidays when discussing the significance of their 'racial' identity, I coded the passage 'race as nationality'. Likewise, if a respondent named 'white', 'black', and 'Asian' as examples of racial categories, then I coded such a response as 'race as Asian/U.S. racial categories'.

Some sceptical readers may speculate that Chinese international students' multiple racial schemas were simply due to misunderstandings or discrepancies in how the term 'race' is translated into Chinese. I argue, however, that this is not the case. For example, one respondent, Shen, initially invoked Asian when asked to speculate how his 'race' may shape his future experiences, then later referred to the 56 Chinese ethnic groups when asked to define the concept of 'race', and ultimately concluded that his 'race' was first and foremost Chinese. When pressed to acknowledge such disparities, he readily acknowledged that he simply had multiple ways of understanding the term 'race'. In the first interviews, all of the interviewed Chinese students had at least a technical awareness of their 'race' as Asian, while two thirds additionally identified 'race' to refer to their nationality as Chinese, and a third associated 'race' with the 56 Chinese ethnic groups. It is important to note that this distribution does not reflect the *strength* of each respective association as indicated by coding frequency. That is, while all 15 respondents indicated an awareness of their race as Asian at least once in their initial interviews – which compares with two-thirds of those who associated their race to be Chinese – the number of times respondents explicitly linked their race to be Chinese doubled the number of times they referred their race to be Asian. This disjunction occurred in large part

because many Chinese respondents would give a perfunctory nod to their 'race' as Asian, only to otherwise highlight the importance of their Chinese identity when asked to discuss their racial identity, emphasise their Chinese culture and upbringing when asked to speculate on how their race would shape their experiences, and so forth throughout their interviews. This also strongly suggests that an understanding of 'race as Chinese' was the most firmly entrenched understanding of race among my respondents, at least in the first interviews. In the second interviews, shifts in these patterns were apparent, and several students began to more strongly associate their race to be Asian.

Race as Chinese

When Chinese international students reflected on questions regarding 'race', two thirds of the respondents in their first interviews equated race and their *nationality*. Tom, a computer science student, reacted to a question about what 'race' meant in Chinese society by responding, 'When people talk race, I think they're talking about our nationality. For example, I'm a Chinese guy and you're Japanese'. Similarly, Fang, an engineering student, replied to a question about how his race would shape his future experiences in the United States by stating: 'Since I am Chinese, so sometimes I tend to, um, talk with Chinese people ... You know, I am now living in an apartment with three other Chinese'. These remarks illustrate how Chinese students often invoke the idea of 'race' through the prism of nationality, defining the symbolic boundaries between distinct 'racial' groups as stemming from differences in national origins.

This association of race as nationality was at times specifically tied to the belief of a shared (national) *blood descent*. For example, when Nicole, a physics student, was asked how she understood the concept of race, she replied, 'Race? Oh, well, that's ... that is about where we come from, our blood nation'. She went on to assert, 'I'm Chinese. That's my race. That's all. And you're Japanese. And that's your race'. Her matter-of-fact response linking race with the idea of a 'blood nation' signals a primordial understanding of 'race' based on national origin and common ancestry (Dikötter 1992). While few respondents explicitly discussed the notion of blood descent when discussing their 'race', it was apparent that for most respondents, both their racial schema and their racial identity was primarily conceived of through the lens of nationality.

To be sure, Chinese international students' association of race with nationality is not mutually exclusive with a simultaneous awareness that they could likewise be 'racially' classified in other ways. This is consistent with Wendy Roth's (2012) argument that individuals can have multiple racial schemas simultaneously. For example, Shen, an engineering student,

admitted to checking the 'Asian' box when asked to identify his race while filling out his application form for graduate school in the United States. At the same time, he rejected the idea of being racially categorised as Asian, emphasising that he nonetheless considered his race to be Chinese more so than 'Asian'. He explained:

Actually, I want to use Chinese to – when answering the previous question [regarding my race] ... Yeah, I think, to be honest, I think Chinese more than Asians ... It's too big and there is too much culture differences between the Asians, especially the Chinese and the Indians ... Yeah ... Asian is weaker than Chinese ... You can call me Asian and you can call me Chinese, but I prefer you call me Chinese.

There are several reasons why many Chinese international students may prefer to declare their race to be Chinese instead of Asian. First, as Shen suggests in the passage above, there is a belief that there are significant cultural differences between Chinese and other Asian nationalities, thus problematizing a pan-Asian conflation. Moreover, there is the reality of national pride as well as geopolitics that make a collective 'Asian' category anathema to some Chinese. For instance, Fang admitted in his interview that he felt uncomfortable discussing about race because the topic is 'sensitive when you talk to other country people ... Some Chinese have grudge with Japanese'. Although Fang claimed not to hold such a position himself, his comment illustrates, again, an automatic conflation of race with nationality and a reason why the Chinese may reject privileging a collective Asian racial category over emphasising their race as Chinese. Indeed, unlike with the U.S.-based racial schema, similarities in skin colour and phenotypes in themselves do not necessarily warrant a racial amalgamation of different nationalities.

Race as 56 ethnic groups

Roughly a third of the Chinese international students associated the term 'race' with the 56 Chinese ethnic groups. For instance, Steve, a computer science student, responded to a question about the significance of race in China by stating, 'I think if you are a minority in Chinese, you will have more advantages than the Han'. He went on to explain, 'I think there isn't so precise race – races in the U.S. than in China. China divide races into 56 groups. U.S. just divided into Asian or something like that'.

The 56 ethnic groups in China and the racial categories in the United States are comparable in some ways. The Han Chinese in China, like white Americans in the United States, are the most numerically and politically dominant group in their country. Likewise, there are affirmative action policies (or as Steve noted, 'advantages') in China in college admissions

and job employment opportunities for the non-Han Chinese minorities. A key difference between the racial schema in China and in the United States lies in the way the group boundaries are widely articulated and conceptualised. In the U.S., racial categories are primarily distinguished with reference to physical characteristics, most notably skin colour and facial features. In China, however, 'races' in the sense of the 56 ethnic groups are foremost understood as culturally distinct. For example, when Shen was asked to define 'race', he answered:

Since I was born, I think race is uh, is ... some group of people with different culture ... There are 56 races in China. And actually we are very scared about the race in Xinjiang ... Some race in Xinjiang is always, uh, likely to be terrorist. So we are very fear[ful] about them ... Some races, some races living in East we can't tell the difference. But some races living in West we can tell. Because they wear characteristic clothes and have some, uh, different festivals and culture.

Xinjiang is a province in northwestern China where nearly half the resident population are Uighur, a predominantly Muslim group strongly associated with terrorism due to a number of violent attacks committed in the region (typically in the name of the Uighur separatist movement). Note, however, that when Shen invokes various symbolic boundaries between different 'racial' groups in China, there is no explicit reference to differences in skin colour or phenotype. What instead appears to be salient are religious and other ethnic divisions, while a method of distinguishing between the 'races' appears to be through cultural markers and practices such as clothing styles and festivals. In the same vein, Olivia, a psychology student, recalled how she discovered that a friend from school was a Hui minority only upon disclosure because the 'Hui look almost [the] same as Han', adding that Chinese racial minorities are 'usually open to tell people where they are from and what kinds of special cultures or festivals they have'.

This is not to suggest that the 56 ethnic groups in China can never be distinguished by physical characteristics such as skin colour or phenotype. This is particularly the case for specific minority groups (e.g., the Uighurs and Kazakhs), who are known to have some physical resemblance with Europeans and Middle Easterners. On the whole, however, physical differences are typically not the primary marker of differentiation between the 56 'racial' groups in China. While some minority groups like the Uighurs may be easily distinguished by their physical distinctiveness, as Jin, a mathematics student, observed, 'It doesn't work all the time ... At this time, we may distinguish between different groups by observing culture and custom'. He added that such cultural indicators were becoming less reliable in contemporary China, as minorities relocating to places like Beijing and Shanghai can simply assimilate and adopt the mainstream Han culture.

Transnational racialization: race as 'Asian'

While most respondents in their first interviews typically maintained a racial schema and identity that was centred on their nationality as Chinese (and occasionally also specifically as Han), they also had a simultaneous understanding of 'race' through U.S. constructed racial categories and identities. Consider, for example, the following exchange with Nicole, who was earlier quoted stating that her race was about her nationality as Chinese:

Q: When you hear about the word "race" in the context of this society – American society – then what do you think about?

A: Well, actually, talking with you, I think the concept of race is a bit confusing. Sometimes we use it as nation, you know, sometimes we use it as more specific ways.

Q: What kind of specific ways?

A: I don't know, maybe just like, you know, there are two American people. They are both American citizens, one is black, one is white. Sometimes we just say they are Americans, but sometimes we say this is an African American ...

Upon further interaction, Nicole went on to assert that there were five racial categories: whites, blacks, Asians, Latinos, and Native Americans, alluding to the ethnoracial pentagon of racial classification in the United States (Hollinger 2006). This exchange is significant because Nicole's dual conceptions of race through the lens of nationality *and* U.S. racial categories indicate again how Chinese students can have multiple and simultaneous understandings of 'race'. Moreover, Chinese international students' evident awareness of U.S. racial categories evinces the power and global reach of transnational racialization, in which U.S. racial schemas and identifications may be directly exported to China.

Transnational racialization, however, is in large part constrained by the extent of U.S. racial classifications successfully disseminated in China. When Chinese international students invoked their knowledge of U.S. racial categories, most only articulated three racial groups: blacks, whites, and Asians. For instance, Olivia responded to a question about examples of different racial categories by simply stating, 'Black people. White people. Asian people. And no other'. Even when students went beyond the black-white-Asian trifecta, only several mentioned Latino or Native American as additional racial categories. More importantly, while all of the interviewed Chinese students were aware of their own pan-national racial status as 'Asian' under the U.S. racial schema, none of them considered this particular U.S./Western-constructed racial marker as meaningful to their sense of identity. Instead, for the respondents, the most salient and important conceptualisation of 'race' was through the paradigm of

nationality. I argue that such limitations of transnational racialization can be explained by the lack of *experiential knowledge*. Simply being cognisant of differing racial classification systems via transnational influences is not sufficient to bring about significant changes in the salience of alternative racial schemas and identities. I now compare the first and second set of interviews to examine how Chinese international students experienced racialization in the United States.

Six months later: racialization in the United States

Ruby studied English as an undergraduate student in China and chose to come to the United States as a graduate student to study education. Besides her unusually proficient English verbal fluency, Ruby in her first interview was like any other respondent in the study. For instance, when asked to speculate how her 'race' might shape her future experiences in the U.S., Ruby replied, 'It should be hard for a Chinese person ... Like the hardest thing is ... to find a job'. She went on to remark how obtaining visas to stay in the United States would be difficult for her as a foreign Chinese national. Ruby also elaborated that she defined the concept of 'race' as 'people from different cultural backgrounds ... I define according to nationality', and listed 'Chinese' and 'Japanese' as examples of racial groups. It was evident, in other words, that both her racial schema and racial identity was conceived primarily through the lens of nationality and culture.

In her second interview, however, when posed with the same question – except this time asked to reflect on how 'race' *had* shaped her experiences living in the United States in the past six months – Ruby brought up a social event she attended on Halloween night in which she ended up sitting on the sidelines by herself and being an observer rather than an active participant drinking and partying. Referring to this disheartening experience, Ruby mused:

There's definitely the [racial] influence. Take that [Halloween] night as an example. I think if I had a white face, even though I was just sitting there, there would be someone who would come to talk to me. So the face draw a line around me – draw a circle in a way you can't change.

This response represents a striking contrast from the first interview and speaks to Ruby's *racialization* in the United States. First, it is apparent that the salience of different racial schemas had changed quite dramatically – in her first interview she had emphasised her Chinese racial schema that defined 'race' via nationality and culture, but in her second interview she invoked the U.S. racial schema that prioritises phenotype and physical appearance (e.g., 'white face'). In the same vein, Ruby went on to claim

that her racial identity as 'Asian' had increased in importance and salience in the United States. As she explained, 'Before [in China], I don't really define myself as Asian because you are in Asia. So you don't realise it. But here, I think because we all look the same – the face – so there's many things we can relate'. She went on to elaborate:

It's just I never realized it before. But now I think it's because, hmm, how people treat you – the native American people treat you. Or, as I said, because we look the same, so I get to make friends with – I actually never expect that I would make friends with Asian Americans or people from Japan, that it would be easier to make friends with them than white people. I think it's because of the community. And because of the sympathy. Because I think you may feel that, oh, she's in the same position as me.

This account represents another remarkable shift from the first interview, when Ruby, in response to a question about whether being 'Asian' was an important part of her identity, replied in the affirmative but went on to emphasise how her Chinese cultural upbringing shaped 'the way I think. The way I behave. I'm already 24 years old ... I think it's something rooted in deep that cannot be changed'. This original remark indicated that Ruby had simply intended to recognise the significance of her Chinese upbringing when she ostensibly affirmed an 'Asian' one. In contrast, in the second interview, Ruby invokes the importance of being 'Asian' in a manner that is both pan-national and rooted in physical appearance. She makes this evident with a declaration that she now feels a kinship with Asian Americans as well as the Japanese in the U.S. Notably, Ruby emphasises how she 'actually never expected' that she would become friends with such non-Chinese individuals prior to her experiences in the United States. When she was living in China, such sentiments of affinity would no doubt have been peculiar because the most salient social boundary would have been delimited around nationality. Indeed, Ruby is quite explicit that it was her *experiences in the United States* that engendered this newfound awareness of the significance of her Asian identity, citing, for instance, how 'native American people treat you', and her consequent feelings that other Asians in the U.S. are 'in the same position as me'.

Several other Chinese international students also exhibited similar patterns of racialization in the United States via their social experiences. For instance, Karma stated in her first interview that her conceptualisation of 'race' prioritised culture over physical appearance, but in the follow-up interview reversed her position. When pressed to explain why her understanding of race changed, she responded, 'After I came here, I find that people are so busy that they don't have enough time to get a deep understanding with you, so really people will judge whether we are same kind of group by their appearance'. Meanwhile, Shen echoed Ruby's remarks about

her panethnic racial consciousness when he elaborated on how the racial label of being Asian became very significant in the United States. As he remarked:

Yes, it's [a] very important part of [my] identity. Because the identity of Asian divide me into [a] certain group ... I view Japanese, Korean, and Chinese as the same group. Like when we go to K-town, which is Korean, I view them as the same group with us. And we're very good to with each other. [Q: Is this something you thought in China?] No, no, no. No. It was just in the United States we view the Koreans and the Japanese as the same.

Here, Shen elaborates on how the pan-national 'Asian' identity was not salient in China but *became* important in the United States. It is also important to recognise that Shen is not simply acknowledging how he is racially classified; instead, he is actively embracing his racial identity as 'Asian'. He remarks, for example, that *he* views Japanese, Koreans, and the Chinese to be 'the same group', as opposed to him simply acknowledging that others (e.g., Americans) conflate the three nationalities. He later even expressed an affinity with the interviewer despite being of different nationalities simply because they were both Asian. As he put it, 'I feel closer to you – although your English is much better than mine, but I think we are very close'.

To be sure, only three of the interviewed Chinese international students exhibited what could be regarded as major shifts in their racial schemas and racial identity across the two interviews, while four other respondents exhibited less dramatic but noticeable changes. The remaining eight respondents exhibited no discernable changes between the two interviews. What accounts for these differences in racialization outcomes? A key factor appeared to be the level of social exposure to U.S. society. Notably, respondents who reported developing friendships with Americans and having meaningful interactions with them (for example, spending Christmas or Thanksgiving with an American friend and their family) were far more likely to exhibit changes in their racial schema and racial identity. In contrast, the eight respondents who appeared little affected by U.S. racialization reported social networks centred primarily on other Chinese international students. This observation is consistent with this paper's argument that *experiential knowledge* is crucial in processes of racialization. That is, Chinese international students who were more socially active in their host society (which includes but is not limited to making American friends) were more likely to be exposed to and thus influenced by dominant U.S. racial ideologies. In contrast, respondents who remained socially insulated within a network of other Chinese international students were minimally affected by U.S. racialization.

Conclusion

This paper examined the racialization of Chinese international students in the United States through the use of longitudinal interviews. I first interviewed respondents when they newly arrived to the United States (an average of 12 days), and I interviewed them again six months later to examine if and how their racial schemas and identities shifted via processes of U.S. racialization. I found that in their first interviews, Chinese international students primarily understood the idea of 'race' through the paradigm of nationality and identified racially as Chinese. Six months later, however, some respondents' conceptualisation of race shifted towards a more American-based one that emphasises phenotype, and their identification with the pan-national racial label 'Asian' increased in salience. I argue that these changes could be attributed to processes of U.S. racialization, and more specifically to the effects of experiential knowledge of living and socially interacting in U.S. society.

This study contributes to the existing literature in several ways. First, it aims to address the invisibility of Asians in previous studies on racialization as well as the literature on race in the United States more broadly (Kim 2008). The existing literature has focused on migrants from regions in the Atlantic complex, and more specifically from countries such as the Dominican Republic, Jamaica, Mexico, and Puerto Rico (Roth 2012; Waters 1999). This oversight is problematic especially when considering that Asians have recently surpassed Latinos as the fastest growing immigrant group in the United States (Lopez, Ruiz, and Patten 2017). Second, this study helps bridge the literature on racialization and their transnational racialization by interviewing those who newly arrived to the United States and examining how, even prior to their migration, they were already influenced by U.S. racial ideologies. In particular, a greater focus and acknowledgement of transnational racialization is important because of the global scope of U.S. racial hegemony and the reality that migrants do not arrive in their host country with a racial tabula rasa (Kim 2008). Third, this study utilises longitudinal interviews, which provide unique strengths for analysing causal processes such as racialization (Hermanowicz 2013). Notably, this study does not exclusively rely on respondents' retrospections and was able to explicitly compare and contrast how respondents' answers changed over time in order to study the process of racialization.

The empirical findings of this study also pose important implications for the broader literature on racialization. In particular, I find striking effects of U.S. racialization among some Chinese international students despite them having only lived in the U.S. for six months. Previous studies have implicitly assumed that a longer period of time was necessary for racialization processes to take effect, thus typically interviewing migrants who had lived in

the U.S. for at least several years. My findings suggest that such an assumption greatly underestimates the strength of U.S. racialization processes in engendering rapid changes in how even new foreign arrivals understand the concept of race and their own identities. Such potent effects were made most clear with the respondent Ruby, who in her first interview understood race primarily through the lens of nationality and rebuffed the significance of an 'Asian' identity, but just half a year later in the United States almost entirely reversed her position. Moreover, my findings also reveal both the scope and limits of transnational racialization in engendering such changes. Specifically, while transnational racialization has the power to engender alternative conceptualisations of race and racial identities across national borders, such processes are crucially constrained by the lack of experiential knowledge.

Finally, this study points to new directions for future research. In particular, while existing studies have typically conflated racialization with the emergence of U.S. racial identities, future research should conceive of racialization as a broader process that encompasses other dimensions such as racial schemas (Roth 2012). Taking into account racial schemas can give scholars a more complete account of how migrants in the United States make sense of racial classifications and their own identification within that system. Moreover, it is possible to conceive of racialization as a process with multiple dimensions extending beyond the adoption of racial schemas and identities. For instance, Chinese international students come from a society where the open expression of anti-black prejudice is largely acceptable but learn in the United States that such expressions are typically frowned upon in their host society. In fact, they may, over time, adopt race-critical ideologies as they become aware of the extent of racial inequalities and discrimination in the United States. Although previous studies have noted such aspects of racialization (Kim 2008), scholars to date have not proposed a systematic framework of racialization that fully takes into account such varied dimensions. Furthermore, studies should not overlook the effects of transnational racialization by which U.S. racial ideologies are transmitted to immigrants' countries of origin (Joseph 2015; Kim 2008; Roth and Kim 2013). This is especially important in the twenty-first century, where the globalisation of U.S. racial ideologies has been facilitated by the rapid rise and reach of the internet, not to mention its byproducts such as social media. Finally, scholars of migration should consider the use of longitudinal interviews when examining racialization. While the logistic hurdles are often considerable, longitudinal studies can better examine the process by which migrants in the United States are racialized as they interact and integrate into their new society.

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