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## Racism and Resilience: Counter-Narratives of Asian International College Students in the Age of COVID-19

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## Racism and Resilience: Counter-Narratives of Asian International College Students in the Age of COVID-19

### Abstract

Using Asian Critical Race Theory and Resilience Theory, this qualitative study explores how Asian international college students experienced racism before and after the eruption of the COVID-19 pandemic and how they developed and used resilience to counteract that racism. Eleven Asian participants shared their counter-narratives through semi-structured interviews. Results reveal that, before the pandemic, participants were regularly subjected to racist acts and attitudes grounded in a deficit view of Asians that treated them as inscrutable foreigners, blamed them as individuals for perceived shortcomings in their home countries, dismissed their expertise outside of technical STEM fields, and failed to recognize their abilities in creative and leadership roles. During the pandemic, the racist acts and attitudes experienced by Asian international college students greatly exacerbated the unprecedented challenges of isolation, limited access to university space and resources, and financial and physical insecurity caused by the pandemic. Results also indicate that Asian international students developed resilience grounded on their life experiences and community assets to counteract racism.

### Keywords

Asian Critical Race Theory, COVID-19, critical counter-narrative, international students, racism, resilience

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## **Racism and Resilience: Counter-Narratives of Asian International College Students in the Age of COVID-19**

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Using Asian Critical Race Theory and Resilience Theory, this qualitative study explores how Asian international college students experienced racism before and after the eruption of the COVID-19 pandemic and how they developed and used resilience to counteract that racism. Eleven Asian participants shared their counter-narratives through semi-structured interviews. Results reveal that, before the pandemic, participants were regularly subjected to racist acts and attitudes grounded in a deficit view of Asians that treated them as inscrutable foreigners, blamed them as individuals for perceived shortcomings in their home countries, dismissed their expertise outside of technical STEM fields, and failed to recognize their abilities in creative and leadership roles. During the pandemic, the racist acts and attitudes experienced by Asian international college students greatly exacerbated the unprecedented challenges of isolation, limited access to university space and resources, and financial and physical insecurity caused by the pandemic. Results also indicate that Asian international students developed resilience grounded on their life experiences and community assets to counteract racism.

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### **Introduction**

American...universities lead global civil society, installing a conception of the world consistent with American economic, political, and military power.... Gramsci remarks that hegemony can vary in the degree of integration it facilitates. Although hegemony mostly presupposes that account is taken of the interests and tendencies of the groups over which it is exercised, there is the hegemony of the Italian *Risorgimento*, which does not feel the need to secure concordance between its interests and those of the dominated groups or engage with their specificities such as languages and ways of life. They wished to “dominate” and not to “lead” (Gramsci, 1971, pp. 104-105). This argument is more contemporary, more indicative of the forms of American hegemony. (Marginson, 2008, p. 308)

Global higher education, argues Marginson (2008), is a system in which institutions in the United States hold a hegemony over institutions and students in other countries—a system in which political control by a dominant group rests on “the ‘spontaneous’ consent given by the great masses of the population to the general direction imposed on social life by the dominant fundamental group” (Gramsci, 1971, p. 56). More specifically, U.S. institutions wish to “dominate” and not to “lead” the global system, eschewing “engagement with the languages and ways of life of the dominated groups” (Marginson, 2008, p. 308). At the same time, Trueba

(1993) suggests that universities have the potential to inculcate democratic values and respect for diversity. Moreover, many universities place that potential at the center of their recruitment materials and mission statements, especially those designed to attract students globally. Reconciling the potential of U.S. higher education to further democratic values and diversity on a global level with the role of U.S. colleges and universities as the dominant party in a hegemonic system should be central to the recruitment and success of international students, but this rarely occurs.

This push-pull of American hegemony in higher education has encouraged significant educational migration into the United States. International student enrollment in U.S. institutions of higher education reached a record high of 1.1 million students in the academic year 2018-2019, constituting 5.5 percent of U.S. higher education enrollment and contributing \$44.7 billion to the U.S. economy that year. Asian international students are the majority, comprising more than 80 percent of the total international student population in the U.S.; China, India, and South Korea alone account for 76 percent (Institute of International Education, 2019). Asian international students thus make a significant contribution to the U.S. economy and are also an important source of student diversity in higher education institutions, delivering a positive impact on domestic students' global awareness (Altbach & Knight, 2007; Will, 2016). It is evident, however, that U.S. higher education pays less attention to Asian international students' academic success and well-being than to their existence as a source of revenue—international students pay two to five times the tuition of domestic students and are ineligible for most forms of financial aid (American Academy of Arts & Sciences, 2016, p. 17; Cantwell, 2015).

Research on Asian international students indicates that they are often perceived by U.S. faculty and peers as technologically adroit rote learners, but passive, quiet, prone to cheating, and lacking creativity (Heng, 2016; Hsieh, 2007; Kim, 2012; Valdez, 2015). As such, they are often subject to discriminatory practices such as exclusion from learning opportunities, isolation from their non-Asian peers, and blame for negative aspects of international relations on the basis of their nationality alone (Hail, 2015; Will, 2016; Yuan, 2011). Among the reported effects of the discrimination experienced by Asian international students is a tendency to develop a deficit perception of themselves (Hsieh, 2007; Kang, 2017; Kim, 2012). For example, Kim (2012) observed that formerly high-achieving Korean students studying in the U.S. developed a new sense of inferiority due to their struggle to perform in English at academic levels comparable to their monolingual English-speaking American classmates, and comparable to their academic levels in their home countries. Asian international students thus face internal and external pressures to conform to U.S. norms, even while their own subject positions are dismissed, situating them in a uniquely vulnerable position; the appearance of COVID-19 and subsequent U.S. response have only made their position more difficult in ways that will become clear in the findings to this study. Nationwide, anti-Asian hate crime began rising significantly at the start of the pandemic. Stop AAPI Hate documented that from March 19, 2020, to December 31, 2021, a total of 10,905 hate incidents against Asian American and Pacific Islander (AAPI) persons were reported (Stop AAPI Hate, 2022). Of the hate incidents reflected in this report, 4,632 occurred in 2020 (42.5%) and 6,273 occurred in 2021 (57.5%). Chinese Americans continue to report the most hate incidents (42.8%) of all ethnic groups, followed by Korean (16.1%), P/Filipinx (8.9%), Japanese (8.2%), and Vietnamese Americans (8.0%).

## **Research Problem and Objectives**

Although there has been some research on how Asian international students experienced racism in U.S. higher education before the pandemic (e.g., Diangelo, 2006; Dos

Santos et al., 2019; Yeo et al., 2019), most research reinscribes a deficit framework emphasizing the skills and experiences Asian international students lack rather than considering the assets they bring; research taking place during the pandemic is only now becoming available. Historically, vulnerable communities have demonstrated resilience in overcoming adversity by mobilizing their networks and resources (Aldrich, 2012; Miller et al., 2021). Because the COVID-19 crisis continues to exacerbate deeply rooted racist tendencies and inequities in U.S. K-16 education, including racial bullying and harassment (Chang, 2020; Le et al., 2021), it is imperative to explore how this global pandemic may have further marginalized already vulnerable Asian international students, necessitating that they leverage their life experiences and community knowledge as resources to overcome the adversities they face in U.S. higher education. As such, this study worked with 11 Asian international students at a Minority Serving Institution (MSI; described below) to investigate how they experienced racism before and during the COVID-19 pandemic, and how they employed their resilience in counteracting racism. Specific research questions included:

1. How do Asian international college students generally experience racism in a U.S. higher education context?
2. How has the racism Asian international students experienced exacerbated their general COVID-19 related experiences during the pandemic?
3. How have Asian international students leveraged their life experiences and community networks to counteract the racism they experienced in general and during the COVID-19 pandemic with resilience?

### ***Intended Audience and Benefit of Research***

By investigating these questions using a qualitative approach that focuses on a specific institution of higher education in the U.S., this study draws upon the voices of Asian international students in outlining their experiences of racism before and during the advent of COVID-19 and details the ways in which they employed their life experiences as well as their formal and informal social networks to respond to that racism. The findings and accompanying analysis should encourage higher education administration, faculty, and staff to consider the lived experiences of Asian international students in formulating policies and practices, and to modify those policies and practices to enable such students to tap their community-based support networks more readily, not just to cope with racism but to ease all aspects of study abroad. In addition, the results of this study point to the importance to Asian international students of opportunities to adopt AsianCrit to reflect critically on their positioning within the racialized U.S. higher education system and resist the dominant narratives.

### **U.S. University Experiences and Deficit Perspectives**

Research on Asian international student experiences in the U. S. primarily focuses on how well they fit into the American higher educational system, examining the linguistic and cultural barriers they face (Ohata, 2005), their cultural adaptation and adjustment patterns (Constantine et al., 2004; Kim, 2016; Li & Gasser, 2005; Major, 2005; Wang & Hannes, 2014; Young, 2017), academic success (Zhou, 2014), isolation, and social acceptance (Quinton, 2020). Such “adaptation research” typically uses unexamined models of psycho-social acculturation that erase important aspects of positionality such as colonial experience, intracultural difference, gender (Bhatia & Ram, 2001; Dervin, 2011; Haider, 2020), and the impact of the global academic system and its hierarchy on international students (Kim, 2012). Research on how Asian international students cope with challenges primarily focuses on

institutional support (or lack thereof), typically gauged through surveys and student interviews (Cho, 2013; Frey & Roysircar, 2006; Li & Gasser, 2005; Ra & Trusty, 2017; Zhang & Jung, 2017). Much of the research on Asian international students also employs an international deficit framework (Menchaca, 1997; Valencia, 2019), placing the blame for the problems international students face on the students themselves (Bai, 2016; Quinton, 2020; Ye, 2006; Zhou et al., 2018) while failing to acknowledge how English language ability affects academic performance (Lun et al., 2010; Paton, 2011).

The result of the deficit approach to adaptationist research is an over-reliance on culturalist explanations of the implied deficits, such as poorly conceived notions of “Confucian” or “Collectivist” values (Frey & Roysircar, 2006; Lin & Scherz, 2014) and psychological models of parental attachment grounded in normalization of middle-class White American family structures (Han et al., 2017) that stem from largely discredited social-psychological research such as *The Chrysanthemum and the Sword* (Benedict, 2018). The implication is that these students experience difficulties in adjusting to U.S. educational environments which promote critical thinking skills presumed absent from Asian institutions (Major, 2005; Moore, 2011). However, studies by Paton (2011) and Manalo et al. (2013) found no demonstrated differences in the learning dispositions of Asian and western students, suggesting that their prior experience with other educational systems do not constitute a deficit for Asian international students in the United States.

### **Racialized University Experiences and Anti-Asian Sentiment**

Although an increasing number of studies over the past decade have documented Asian international students’ racialized experiences in U.S. higher education (Constantine et al., 2004; Diangelo, 2006; Dos Santos et al., 2019; Lee & Rice, 2007; Tian et al., 2019; Wei et al., 2010; Yeo et al., 2019), few explored how these students cope with racism (Yeo et al., 2019). Studies suggest members of different minoritized groups experience different types of discrimination (Ancis et al., 2000; Poyrazli & Lopez, 2007); in this vein, Stevens et al. (2018), in a survey of nearly 70,000 students across 100 U.S. colleges and universities (p. 668), found that 8.8% of Asian and Asian international students reported experiencing racial discrimination, a significantly smaller percentage than that for Black students (15.5%) but still higher than that for students as a whole (6.6%). The percentage of Asian students indicating that discriminatory experiences affected their academic performance (19.1%) was slightly higher than that for Black students (18.6%), as well as for all students (17.3%). Although Stevens et al. (2018) did not venture an explanation for this phenomenon, their data indicate that 19.3% of the surveyed Asian students were international, indicating that national origin might be an important factor to investigate.

Our reading of the literature suggests three reasons for the lack of theorization to most discussion of Asian international students’ experiences of racism. First, unlike other international students in the U.S., Asian international students are subject to the Asian American Model Minority stereotype of being “industrious, intelligent, compliant, and quiet” (Thompson et al., 2020), being successful in STEM disciplines (McGee et al., 2017), and thus receive less attention from education policy and academic research (Assalone & Fann, 2017). Second, the overemphasis on cultural differences and student adaptation allows college administrations to ignore that Asian international students’ challenges are part of the broader campus racial climate (Yeo et al., 2019), reinforcing the belief that Asian international students do not experience racial discrimination; therefore, campus studies and university amelioration are not warranted. Finally, racism in the U. S. is typically understood in terms of White racism against Black people, rather than as an issue of White supremacy working in tandem with anti-Blackness, colorism, and the minoritizing of all people of color, albeit in different ways (Blow,

2021). Functioning within an intricate caste system consisting of rules for status ranking based largely on skin color (Wilkerson, 2020) leaves Asian international students, like Asian Americans, in a liminal position outside the Black/White binary and excluded from consideration.

Overall, anti-Asian sentiment is historically rooted in 19th century immigration patterns, so that the dominant White population sees the labor, capital, and presence of Asian immigrants as an economic (Abdalkareem, 2020; Chen et al., 2020) and a social-cultural threat due in part to an orientalist notion of “unassimilability” (Torok, 1996, p. 63) so fundamental to White empire (Said, 1978). Further, the stereotype of the quiet and successful “model minority,” resulting in part from post-WWII immigration patterns, fosters greater resentment towards Asians and Asian Americans (McGowan & Lindgren, 2006) when they are successful, and renders them invisible when they are in need. Over the past year, Asian immigrants as well as Asian Americans have been targeted for racist attacks (Gover et al., 2020) so that, “in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic we see not only a rise in anti-Asian sentiment but also a recapitulation of history” (Chen et al., 2020, p. 556).

### **Theoretical Framework**

Given that the goals of this research were both to reveal the lived experience of racism on the part of Asian international students and to examine the resources and strategies that they employ in combating that racism, we built a theoretical framework synthesizing Critical Race Theory (CRT) and Resilience Theory. The brief literature review of research on international students above makes it clear that the foundational notion of CRT (that racism is a normal experience in a system built upon and designed to perpetuate White supremacy) applies to Asian international students as much as to anyone else in the country. Acknowledging the normality of experiences of racism and White supremacy was present at the birth of CRT in the 1990s, particularly in the work of Matsuda (1991) and Crenshaw (1993), continued with the application of CRT to education by Ladson-Billings and Tate (1995) and others, and remains at the core of CRT and its supporting methodologies today. However, more recent scholars have also recognized the different subject positions of different groups within the U.S. and have tailored their approach to respond to the unique ways in which racism is experienced within specific systems of oppression. For example, scholars have developed applications of CRT that emphasize the oppressed and intersectional experiences of Asian Americans (Chang, 1993; Iftikar & Museus, 2019), Latinx (Solórzano & Yosso, 2001; Valdés, 2005), Indigenous communities (Brayboy, 2006; Wright & Balutski, 2016), and dis/abled people (Connor et al., 2015).

Because the participants in this study are Asian International students, we chose to supplement the general insights of CRT with Asian Critical Race Theory (AsianCrit), particular on the work of Chang (1993), Han (2014), and Iftikar and Museus (2019). AsianCrit puts at the center of its analysis the specific racialized identity of “Asian,” which is grounded in the opposition between the “nativism” of White Americans and the eternal “foreignness” of Asian Americans that is a key element in the Model Minority stereotype and can manifest as an insistence that Asian Americans are truly “from” outside the U.S. (Chang, 1993, p. 1253). This opposition manifests itself in a deficit model of Asianness that, particularly within an academic context, discredits the experience, talent, and expertise of Asian Americans and excludes them from areas of society in which they have not been deemed “successful.” For example, the Asian Model Minority stereotype (Lee, 1994; Museus & Kiang, 2009) limits Asian Americans to technical roles in STEM and business fields (e.g., mathematical, and statistical calculation, accounting, and finance), but excludes them from creative or leadership roles, even in STEM and business. As a result, Asian Americans are an invisible minority, their success in technical

areas expected, and their presence in creative and leadership areas ignored. Furthermore, these stereotypes are applied to Asian Americans regardless of their heritage, disregarding cultural, social, and political differences between Asian countries as well as the different circumstances conditioning migration to and reception in the United States.

Acknowledging the vast size of Asia, its cultural, social, and political diversity, as well as the fact that most non-Asian Americans operate with an orientalist (Said, 1978) view that erases those differences, Iftikar and Museus (2019) modified previous CRT models to better reflect Asian American realities. For example, the broad acknowledgement of the centrality of race to American society is specified in terms of the notion of “Asian” as constructed through White supremacy, erasing inter- and intra-cultural differences across Asia, and denying historical agency to immigrants from Asia. Similarly, AsianCrit emphasizes the continuing transnational and intersectional contexts of Asian American identities, acknowledging the complex and somewhat fluid status of “Asian” within an overarching racial hierarchy that relies on a dichotomy between Black and White. Furthermore, the role of counter-narrative—key to CRT from the beginning—plays an important role that is not limited to documenting the specific elements of anti-Asian racism, such as Han’s narrative (2014) of having her competence and even right to teach English literacy questioned because of her Asian identity. Rather, counter-narratives in AsianCrit also function as acts of resistance and the assertion of self-identification employed by Asian Americans. Iftikar and Museus (2019) mentioned, for example, the reinsertion of Asians and Asian Americans into historical narratives, and the strategic assertion (or denial) of the entire category of Asian American in those narratives, underscoring the agency of Asians and Asian Americans in their efforts to unify “story, theory, and praxis” by centering Asian American experiences through their stories (Iftikar & Museus, 2019, p. 941). Given that much of the racism faced by Asian international students is grounded in the same stereotypes applied to Asian Americans--indeed, the two groups are often mistaken for each other (Yeo et al., 2019)--adopting AsianCrit as the primary explanatory theory for this study was the most appropriate choice.

In considering the resources and strategies that Asian International students leverage to counter the racism they experience, we drew upon critical resilience, founded in a synthesis of social capital and network theory (Aldrich, 2012; Patulny & Svendsen, 2007) to examine how individuals in the face of discrimination and oppression derive strength from their communities and families. We consider critical resilience to be constructed upon social capital including household, community, and individual resources. As such, resilience is linked to the community funds of knowledge (Moll et al., 1992; Rios-Aguilar, 2010; Rios-Aguilar & Kiyama, 2012) constructed and employed by minoritized and oppressed communities within the larger context of a majority-dominated society. We therefore coded reports in the transcriptions of acts of coping and resistance in terms of the sources and forms of resilience by Asian international students in counteracting racism.

## **Positionality**

The research team included three faculty members and a graduate research assistant. Collectively, their professional preparation and research experiences represent interdisciplinary lines of inquiry which include Teaching English as a Second Language (TESL), Teaching English as a Foreign Language (TEFL), Teacher Preparation, Asian Studies, and historical and anthropological methodologies. Born and raised in China, Katrina Liu has experienced racism both as an Asian international student and Asian international faculty in U.S. higher education and thus is uniquely situated to appreciate the situation in which the participants found themselves and the assets they and their families have in dealing with racism they encounter. Sharolyn Pollard-Durodola, an African American scholar focuses on the



education of multilingual students and how socio-cultural factors influence school practices. Richard Miller, White, has a background in the history and social science study of East and Southeast Asia, with a special focus on the history of music and education in China, Korea, Japan, and insular Southeast Asia. Finally, Lei Ping is a doctoral student from China who contributes to understanding the challenges and resilience of Asian international students based on her own experiences.

## Method

To explore Asian international students' racialized experiences before and during the pandemic and how they leverage their life experiences and community knowledge as resources to overcome adversities they face in U.S. higher education, we adopted counter-narrative as a method (Miller et al., 2020; Milner & Howard, 2013) to work with 11 Asian international students at a Minority Serving Institution. This study was conducted under IRB approval of the researchers' home university.

## Counter-Narrative as a Method

Both CRT in its original form and in the specific application of AsianCrit position the amplifying of the suppressed voices of subordinated communities as key to both documenting their lived experience and providing stimulus to transform oppressive social structures and political practices (Iftikar & Museus, 2019; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995; Miller et al., 2020). Counter-narratives, whether understood as stories that challenge widespread beliefs and discourses (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002), or "perspectives that run opposite or counter to the presumed order and control" (Stanley, 2007, p. 14), function as "a means of exposing and critiquing normalized dialogues that perpetuate racial stereotypes" (DeCuir & Dixson, 2004, p. 27).

Grounded on the importance of counter-narratives in revealing and transforming racial inequity, many scholars have made use of counter-narrative as a research method, positioning it as a vital tool to center data collection on the lived experiences of people of color within systems conditioned by racism and ethnocentrism (e.g., Lee, 2009; Love, 2004; Milner & Howard, 2013; Wilson, 2016). In "Counter-Narrative as Method: Race, Policy, and Research for Teacher Education," Milner and Howard (2013) provided a clear description of counter-narrative as a research method grounded on the recognized tradition of narrative inquiry (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990). They pointed out the method of eliciting narratives from research participants as counter to majoritarian narratives and making use of these voices as analytical devices to identify and critique majoritarian narratives, especially those that target people of color. In the case of AsianCrit, Iftikar and Museus (2019) suggested that counter-narratives not only provide "alternative epistemologies" (p. 941) within the context of systems of White supremacy inside the United States, but also regarding U.S. colonialism and imperialism that conditions the push and pull of migration from Asia, whether as permanent settlers or temporary sojourners, including Asian international students. Han (2014) provided an example of this use of counter-narrative, intending to "reveal subtle racism" as well as to enable "White students, other educators, and administrators...to see through the eyes of Others" with the goal to "allay racism" (p. 127). As Takaki (1989) eloquently argued for Asian American history— "in the telling and retelling of their stories, these immigrants and their descendants contribute to the creating of a larger memory of who we are as Americans" (p. xv)—we argue that in telling and retelling of their stories, Asian international students contribute to the understanding of the racialized experience of non-White international students in the U.S. higher education context. Rising from the voices and lived experiences of

marginalized populations, counter-narratives serve as a powerful method against the master narratives created by the majority groups (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995; Miller et al., 2020).

## Research Approach and Design

To investigate these questions, we felt that a qualitative approach would be superior to a quantitative or mixed methods approach for the following reasons. First, as shown in the brief literature review (above), the existence of racism on Asian international students in U.S. higher education is well established through quantitative research. To address questions beyond the fact of racism—the details of such experiences as well as the resources and strategies Asian international students employ in coping with those experiences—requires a qualitative research approach that elicits the students' own narratives, and then supports analysis structured by their worldviews. Therefore, we turned to collecting critical counter-narratives from the participants, and building an analytical framework informed by CRT to code and interpret those counter-narratives, presenting the findings (below) in terms of the coded quality of the counter-narrative, the data found in the participants' counter-narratives, and our analysis. The next subsections explain the research design in detail.

## Research Context and Participants

This study was conducted at a Southwestern university designated as a Minority Serving Institution (MSI) that also meets the requirements of an Asian American, Native American, and Pacific Islander-Serving Institution (AANAPISI) and a Hispanic Serving Institution (HSI). The international student population in Fall 2020 numbered 914 (out of 35,457), the largest on-campus international student populations coming from China, South Korea, and India, which together contributed about 62 percent of the entire international student population.

We employed purposive selection (Gentels et al., 2015; Yin, 2014) to recruit Asian international students who were continuing their studies during the summer of 2020 in which the university continued with pandemic protective measures (including remote instruction). Researchers initially sent emails to students in university programs and schools with higher populations of Asian international students. Eleven students responded via email and consented to participate, including eight Chinese, two South Koreans, and one Filipino; five of the participants were men, six women. Nine of the participants were doctoral students in education, music, mechanical engineering, or biological sciences, while the remaining two participants were undergraduate students in accounting and hospitality. Table 1 provides the demographic data of the participants.

**Table 1**  
*Participant Demographics Data*

Participants (Pseudonyms)	Degree Program	Major	Gender	Nationality
Kyung	Doctor of Musical Arts	Music	F	Korean
Cholsu	Doctor of Musical Arts	Music	M	Korean
Jun	Doctor of Musical Arts	Music	M	Chinese
Feng	Doctor of Musical Arts	Music	M	Chinese

Ling	Doctor of Philosophy	Education	F	Chinese
Yan	Doctor of Philosophy	Education	M	Chinese
Feifei	Doctor of Philosophy	Education	F	Chinese
Hong	Doctor of Philosophy	Mechanical Engineering	M	Chinese
Leah	Doctor of Philosophy	Biological Sciences	F	Filipina
Qing	Undergraduate	Accounting	F	Chinese
Mei	Undergraduate	Hospitality	F	Chinese

### Method of Information Gathering

Guided by the counter-narrative method that highlights the importance of the voices and lived experiences of people of color, we conducted interviews with each participant using a semi-structured interview protocol as they are ideal tools for collecting the data needed to answer the research questions (Marvasti & Trevino, 2019; Spradley, 2016). The interviews enabled the researchers collect counter-narratives from each participant, which allowed consistency in questions while facilitating an “in-interview analysis” of responses (Saldaña & Omasta, 2018, p. 92); this analysis then shaped impromptu follow-up questions. The following provides some sample interview questions:

- Have you experienced any discrimination and/or racism because of your identity (for example, have you been treated differently due to your skin color, accent, cultural practice etc.)? If you have been treated differently, please provide some examples.
- Based on news and social media posts, what have you learned about discrimination/racism against Asian Americans and Asian international students during the COVID-19 Pandemic?
- Have you personally experienced any of those discriminations/racism? Why or why not?
- Has COVID-19 made the discrimination and racism you just talked about more explicit or visible in your life experiences? If so, how? Please provide some examples.
- How have you coped with what you experienced?

Each interview was conducted remotely, lasted approximately 2 to 2.5 hours, and focused on the participants’ lived experiences in U.S. higher education settings as well as their life experiences in their home countries that might serve as the roots of their resilience. Students also participated in follow-up interviews of 1.5 to 2.5 hours to explore their responses from the initial interview. All interviews were video recorded and transcribed for coding.

### Method of Information Analysis

This study relied on qualitative analyses of participant counter-narratives to unitize narrative data into important themes of commonality (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The analysis

was guided by the AsianCrit and critical resilience theoretical frameworks and the counter-narrative method. We developed a set of a priori codes (Saldaña, 2016) from theoretical frameworks to conduct the data analysis; the summary tables (Tables 3, 4, and 5) in the findings section below provide a clear demonstration of how the AsianCrit, critical resilience, and critical counter-narrative method shaped the data analysis. The first three researchers initially listened to the recorded interviews and read through all the transcriptions to ensure accuracy. We then developed a priori codes (Saldaña, 2016) based on our theoretical frameworks and two researchers in the team independently coded the transcriptions. A third researcher independently and concurrently used open coding to document themes emerging from the data, using pattern matching (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) to yield broad themes corroborating the a priori codes, including Challenges Related to Racist Experiences and Resilience/Resourcefulness During COVID-19. Table 2 lists the a priori and open codes. We held multiple meetings to discuss our coding processes and interpretations until we reached unanimous agreement among the three researchers.

**Trustworthiness.** Trustworthiness of the study was maintained through multiple researchers coding the data and discussing alternative explanations for codes to reach inter-rater reliability; second interviews and the use of low-inference descriptors taken from the transcripts ensured that data analyses were not biased by researchers' personal viewpoints (Johnson, 1997). Throughout this manuscript, we provided a clear demonstration of our research process and the method we used for data collection and analysis. Our findings are solely based on the data we collected and analyzed.

**Table 2**  
*A Priori and Open Codes*

<b>Codes</b>	<b>Subcodes</b>
<b>A Priori Codes</b>	
AsianCrit	(Re)constructive history Asianization Commitment to social justice Intersectionality Strategic (anti)essentialism Deficit model of Asianness
Asian model minority stereotype	
	Limited to technical roles Discrediting creative expertise Exclusion from leadership roles
Critical resilience resources	
	Family resources Home community resources Institutional resources Peer resources
<b>Open codes (COVID-specific challenges)</b>	
	Blamed for COVID Economic stress on family Increased isolation and anxiety
	Political uncertainty Anti-Asian climate

## Findings

Below we summarize the findings by research questions, noting that some participants may have experienced more racism or chosen to share more of their experiences than others.

### Findings for Research Question 1

The first research question asked how Asian international college students generally experience racism in a U.S. higher education context. Our findings (summarized in Table 3) indicate that the participants frequently experienced racism due to their Asian identity, including Asian Model Minority stereotypes, discrediting their ideas and denial of leadership opportunities. Some participants also reported experiences of overt racism including verbal attacks and unwarranted accusations. The detailed explanation of the findings is provided below.

**Table 3**

*Asian International Students' Experiences of Racism*

<b>Finding</b>	<b>Definition and example</b>
Asian model minority stereotype applied to exclude Asian international students from activities	<p><b>Definition:</b> Denial of expertise outside STEM and technical areas interfered with students' access to and success.</p> <p><b>Examples:</b> Kyung having to be "way way better" than White singers to obtain a primary role</p>
Asian model minority stereotype applied to exclude Asian international students from leadership roles	<p><b>Definition:</b> Denial of value of ideas to exclude Asian international students from leadership roles while claiming their ideas for White leaders.</p> <p><b>Examples:</b> Qing having her ideas for a group project being used but leadership (and credit for the ideas) going to a White student</p>
Deficit view applied when responding to Asian international students' competence outside STEM and technical areas	<p><b>Definition:</b> Expressing surprise or disbelief when Asian international students demonstrate competence in areas outside the stereotype.</p> <p><b>Examples:</b> Jun being told by White classmates that they thought Asians only worked in restaurants, and didn't play piano.</p>
Assertion of broad incompetence or stupidity when Asian international students perform below expectations in English-dependent coursework	<p><b>Definition:</b> Assertion that Asian international students are "stupid" when they are temporarily hindered by language comprehension or production issues.</p> <p><b>Examples:</b> Feifei and Hong reporting being told they were stupid during their undergraduate general education courses, which were English-language heavy and largely unrelated to their majors.</p>

Verbal attacks and unwarranted accusations	<p><b>Definition:</b> Name-calling, blaming, and criticizing Asian international students based on their identity.</p> <p><b>Examples:</b> Mei hearing anti-Asian epithets from other students in the cafeteria; Qing and Mei being positioned to represent Chinese government policies during unprepared discussions in undergraduate courses</p>
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### *Applying the Asian Model Minority Stereotype to Exclude from Activities*

Participants supplied multiple examples of experiences demonstrating Asian Model Minority stereotypes of Asian international students as hardworking, studious, and excelling in STEM. Mei, a Chinese undergraduate student majoring in hospitality, reflected that:

They think I'm good at studying and I'm good at math. I had an economics class and there's another girl and she said, "I think you're pretty good at math." I said, "Yes but why do you think that way?" She said, "I heard that a lot of Chinese are good at math and math in China is pretty hard. (Mei, Interview #1)

This stereotype on many occasions served as an overt criticism of Asian international students who felt uncomfortable with math. Feifei, a Chinese doctoral student in Education, witnessed a professor in her math class openly shame one of her peers, saying, "You are the only Chinese student who got a C in my class!" and most of her classmates laughed. As a Chinese international student, Feifei vicariously experienced her peer's stigmatization and felt "embarrassed by being spotlighted as a Chinese student" (Feifei, Interview #1). On other occasions, this type of model minority stereotype functioned to set higher standards for the purpose of exclusion. For example, Kyung, a Korean doctoral student majoring in voice, shared being told that she had to perform much better than competing White candidates when auditioning for a soprano role:

I had my audition for one of the Operas for a Miss World Role ...the soprano role. There were 26 or 27 of these singers applied for that role, but it's in English. I am the only Asian who's auditioning for that role. My voice teacher was telling me, "If you [want to get] this role you need to do your audition super super well because they're not going to pick you if you're not doing way way better than them. (Kyung Interview #1)

In addition to Kyung being considered "foreign" to the practice of opera singing, this experience also reflects a longstanding dismissal of Asian expertise outside of technical areas, as is documented in the classical music world (Yoshihara, 2008).

### *Discrediting but Exploiting Ideas to Deny Leadership Opportunities*

Although Asian international students are often considered competent in STEM fields, many participants reported that their ideas were discredited and that they were not allowed to serve in leadership roles. For instance, Qing, a Chinese undergraduate student in accounting, reported:

Asians are technically the people who get things done but Asians are rarely the leader. We were doing this team project in class to develop an app [and] come

up with a business idea. The four of us brainstormed and each came up with an idea and my idea got the most votes. So obviously if this project's foundation is my idea and my business plan, it's only logical for me to be the leader. But then after we started to work on my plan, whenever I tried to implement my business idea, this other White girl said: "Okay now we need to tweak it here. We need to change it here." It just naturally became a team where I was only the person that gave us the idea, but the one who claimed the leadership was that girl. (Qing Interview #1)

This experience of having one's ideas used as the basis for White students' success was not unique. Hong, a Chinese doctoral student in mechanical engineering shared similar experiences:

They ask you to work hard but at the same time they think you know nothing but study. In the mechanical engineering department when as an undergraduate student, we had a lot of teamwork. Every time we needed a leader, nobody ever thought of me, even once. One of the guys would ask, "Who wants to be the leader?" Everyone was looking at someone else, skipping me. But when we needed someone to do the calculation and the design, they would ask me to do it. After that, they are the ones to give this team a name, do the presentation, and accept all the applause, and they put their names first on the name list. (Hong Interview #1)

It is important to note that the experiences students reported of cooptation of ideas coupled with refusal of leadership roles in higher education appears to be a broader problem; it has been reported by Asian and Asian American faculty as well (Dancy & Gaetane, 2014; Hong, 2022), indicating a deep-seated practice in academia.

### ***Deficit View of Asian Expertise Outside of Expected Areas***

Participants reported that their peers and instructors essentialized their cultures from a deficit framework, as if any expertise they demonstrated outside of technical and STEM disciplines was surprising and unusual. For example, Jun, a Chinese doctoral student majoring in piano reflected:

I am a pianist, and I am good at playing piano. I've heard one of my friends say, "I thought Asians are people running restaurants, but you are different. I've never thought that Chinese people can play the piano so well and can join us in the choir and perform really like American people." They have images in their mind that Asians should be working in restaurants. They should not like piano or classical music. (Jun Interview #2)

The surprise Jun reported coming from his non-Asian friends echoes the dismissal of Kung's vocal expertise (above) and underscores the "eternal foreigner" element of the Model Minority stereotype.

In addition, most participants reported that they struggled during the first few semesters because they were still learning how to use their productive English language to communicate their knowledge of the concepts they were learning. However, their instructors and peers often had a deficit view of their cognitive and academic ability due to their English proficiency. They were also learning to deal with a biased and non-culturally responsive curriculum for which

they were not adequately advised. For example, Feifei and Hong both said that their GPA during the first year was low because the initial courses they were advised to take (“general education requirements,” which are primarily English, history, and social studies) required a wide range of extensive content reading, familiarity with U.S. culture, and an English language ability which required more exposure and opportunity to develop as second language learners. Hong experienced these problems while eagerly waiting to enroll in a mechanical engineering major course sequence for which he had existing background knowledge. He was advised to primarily take courses—potentially to meet core requirements—that did not leverage his academic strengths. When his resulting GPA was low, his undergraduate advisor suggested he transfer to a different major, stating, “You are too stupid to stay in mechanical engineering.” In this vein, core courses may have served as damaging gatekeepers when evaluating a student’s academic potential and cognitive ability while ignoring the implications of their status as an English language learner.

We note that the idea that poor performance in general education courses implies stupidity on the part of the student demonstrates a deficit understanding that not only ignores the specific barriers to international student success in these courses, but also suggests an essentialist, and therefore irremediable, condition. This deficit perspective was also demonstrated by White peers. For example, Kyung, Qing, and Mei all observed that when they did not feel comfortable to answer questions in class, their White peers’ behavior indicated that they thought the Asian international students were stupid, lazy, or cognitively unable to answer “simple” questions.

### ***Verbal Attacks and Unwarranted Accusations***

Several participants experienced overt racism within classrooms as well as in other campus locations in forms ranging from specifically directed verbal attacks to context-free introduction of classroom discussion topics putting Asian international students on the spot. As shared earlier, when Mei first arrived at the university, she overheard White students using expletives towards them. Further, due to the ongoing media coverage of tense U.S./China political affairs, several students described class discussions in which they received unwarranted accusations or were put in a hyper-visible spot because of their nationality:

The biggest problem that I encountered would be political issues. The accounting program here doesn't have many international students. Some of my instructors would like to talk about political issues especially this year when a lot of stuff happened. Whenever they talk about politics, China is always the number one topic. Being the only Chinese student in the classroom, I find it very hard to stand up to express my opinion. I've done that before; if I defend my opinion, which is sometimes pro-China, it would be seen that I was brainwashed or a spy. (Qing Interview #1)

Qing staunchly maintained that these tense political discussions were fueled by the overt racism coming from the U.S. president and government leaders, who had repeatedly demonized immigrants in general and Chinese in particular:

You have these individuals who express racism and spread hatred but now you often feel the [U.S.] government is doing that too, which makes it worse because it feels like they're supporting those very individuals who're spreading hate. I know what those people are thinking, “The president is doing this, why shouldn't I?” (Qing Interview #1)



Other participants experienced negative classroom discussions about their native countries, as exemplified by Qing and Mei:

I felt it was pretty annoying because ...one time we're talking about technology and the professor said, "What do you guys think [about] the technologies like competition in [between] the ... big countries like China and America". One student just said, "I think China doesn't have their [own] technology; they just copy..." (Mei Interview #2)

Mei complained that the professor in the writing class failed to provide critical background information to ensure that students could have an informed discussion before raising the technology question. Knowing Mei and her friend were the only Chinese students in class, the professor's question was provoking, putting them in the spotlight to represent China. Similarly, Qing shared that when questioned by a professor, her peers laughed at her response:

Being the only Asian in the room is not always easy. In one class, [the professor] was asking, "What's your favorite country?" And then he asked me, and I said, "Oh, it's China because I'm from China." He asked, "Why?" and then the whole class laughed. Other students were like, "I like America" and I get that because you are an American and of course you love your country, but I don't see how that's a problem for me [to say I love my country]. I feel like it's not what the classrooms ought to do. It's the professor's attitude because I feel like as a professor, you can't be like that. (Qing Interview #1)

## Findings for Research Question 2

The second research question explored how racism experienced by Asian international students exacerbated their general COVID-19 experiences. Our findings (findings summarized in Table 4) reveal that overall, navigating through the pandemic presented its own challenges: Participants had limited access to university spaces and resources, experienced isolation, and interruption in their ability to focus on work related routines, worried about new U.S. policies, their finances, and health care. Their COVID-19 experiences were exacerbated by racism, the participants witnessing a surge of anti-Asian hate crimes and continued police brutality toward and murders of African Americans.

**Table 4**

*How Racism Experienced by Asian International Students Exacerbated their General COVID-19 Experiences*

Finding	Definition and example
General challenge: Limited access to university spaces and resources	<p><b>Definition:</b> Shutting down the campus and moving online prevented Asian international students from access university labs, studios, and resources in ways that they could not compensate for.</p> <p><b>Examples:</b> Cholsu and Feng unable to practice their musical instruments; Leah unable to access the laboratory.</p>

General challenges: Isolation, anxiety, personal and financial insecurity	<p><b>Definition:</b> Isolation from nearly all human contact, coupled with distance from home, intensified feels of anxiety and exacerbated personal and financial insecurity.</p> <p><b>Examples:</b> Mei, Ling, and Leah feel isolated and concerned for their family; Feng being victimized by thieves; Yan losing his graduate fellowship; Cholsu relying on his parents' limited resources and worrying about his siblings.</p>
Racism-exacerbated challenges: Bureaucratic inflexibility, verbal violence	<p><b>Definition:</b> ICE inflexibility regarding in-person instruction, coupled with the elements of the university acting to reinforce anti-Asian.</p> <p><b>Examples:</b> Cholsu and Kyung complaining that Asian international students were treated as agents of disease by both ICE and the university international student's office; Qing and Mei receiving accusations of blame for COVID by students and faculty.</p>

### *Limited Access to University Spaces and Resources*

After March 2020, when the university shut down and moved all instruction to remote, all participants faced unprecedented challenges in continuing their study plans successfully due to the severely reduced accessibility to university spaces and resources such as music practice rooms, laboratories, and library resources. For example, all the music major participants encountered difficulties in maintaining their practice routine:

My ritual is almost [the same] but just one day, it changed a lot. I feel I don't want to do anything ...for three or four days. I was just lying in my bed. I feel really powerless, and I feel really useless. I was trying to study and practice really, really hard for like a few days and after that I feel powerless and useless again. I don't want to touch my flute. It is that kind of emotional thing. It's really like up and down, really bad. (Cholsu Interview #1)

Similarly, Feng was a percussion major and needed to practice the instruments at school:

Our instruments are very unique. They are very large in size. It's unrealistic to bring them to my small apartment. Also, percussion music instruments are very loud. If I practice in my apartment, it's disturbing to other people. They are very expensive. I am not able to buy them. Even if I were, it's impossible to bring them back after graduation. So, my practice is badly impacted by the pandemic. (Feng Interview #1)

In a similar situation, Leah, a Filipina doctoral student in biological science, said:

Because of this pandemic and because of the fact that I have chronic and severe asthma, I have been, and I am still anxious. At times, my anxiety level is so high, that I could not even be productive, even just in doing my data analysis. Aside from many delays in my experiments because of some hold order on the purchase of mice that I need and the lack of access to some laboratory facilities,

I also stopped coming to the lab for two weeks because of fear. (Leah Interview #1)

In all cases, although the reduced (or eliminated) access to labs, studios, and resources was the same for students who were U.S. citizens, the stress experienced by Asian international students was compounded by their status, which greatly limited their ability to compensate for these types of issues.

### ***Isolation, Anxiety, Personal and Financial Insecurity***

The mid-March state order to shelter at home, followed by campus closure, caused unprecedented disturbance to the social and emotional well-being of the participants. All participants reported feeling isolated and anxious during the pandemic. According to Mei:

It is emotionally hard. Most of us are pretty anxious right now because your life is just shut down like this, right? We can only stay at home even though we are still doing the online courses, but we lost the connection, and our life is shut down. So emotionally it's hard. My friend (also an international student) is very anxious about this because she thought she was just wasting her time for this whole five months. (Mei Interview #1)

Ling shared feeling lonely, unable to visit her family:

I think the biggest challenges for me from COVID is like...the most nostalgia which means missing home because I cannot go back. I can just video chat with my parents. Yeah, kind of being lonely. I've never had that sensation before. (Ling Interview #1)

Leah reported anxiety and concerns for her own and family's safety:

Emotionally, I was also shaking upon learning that a former classmate in high school working as a nurse in the UK died of COVID. Because of this, I constantly worry about my family's safety back home on top of my own safety here, considering that cases are still going up. (Leah Interview #1)

Feng stayed in an on-campus apartment and after the campus was shut down in March 2020, his roommate moved out, as did many US students who returned home. In addition to feeling isolated, Feng was deeply concerned about his personal safety after a theft from his apartment:

There is a balcony in my apartment. After I get packages or food deliveries, I disinfect and air them in the balcony. A couple of weeks ago, I had food and other packages delivered and I aired them in the balcony. Two hours later, they were all stolen during the daytime! It was my food supply for the month and study materials. I called the police and the apartment office. They did not tell me anything about protecting myself but questioned why I put my stuff in the balcony. I feel it is racism. Would they blame me if I were White? (Feng Interview #2)

Deeply concerned, Feng decided to move out of the apartment. However, during the pandemic and in the middle of the semester, it was very difficult to find a place to stay. Finally,

he moved to a single-room unit that was twice as expensive as his other apartment. His graduate assistantship was not even enough to cover his rent; as an international student, he was not allowed to work outside the university to earn extra money either. Although Feng's parents agreed to support his rent partially to help him through this difficult time, Feng felt very guilty:

I felt very sad. Both my parents are just common workers. My mother retired early because the plastic factory where she worked was not profitable. My father is still working. They are using their retirement savings to support me... (Feng Interview #2)

Many participants expressed financial insecurity. Cholsu worried that if he and his brother did not have graduate assistantships, his parents would not be able to support them to continue their programs here. Yan shared part of his research assignment was collecting data in the local K-12 schools. After the shutting down of public schools due to COVID-19, the project was discontinued, and his research assistantship was terminated. Mei was even thinking of taking a leave for a year because her mother's income was dramatically reduced during the pandemic. As noted in the previous finding, although the basic experiences of isolation, financial concern, and exposure to crime was shared between Asian international students and students who were U.S. citizens, the former's legal status and distance from support networks greatly increased the stress they felt from those experiences.

### ***COVID-19 Challenges Exacerbated by Racism***

Early July 2020, the U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) under the Trump administration issued a policy declaring that international students attending U.S. colleges would not be able to remain in the country if their classes were entirely online although many universities had decided to offer online learning for Fall 2020. This unfair and hostile policy escalated the participants' fear and uncertainty. Cholsu experienced feelings of helplessness:

The Trump administration just announced their new policy. We just came here to study but because of the pandemic we have to worry about what classes I have to choose or what if I have to go back to Korea. Currently, I have no idea because I already contracted my apartment for another year. Even if I go back to Korea, I still have to pay the rent. I have rented a car too. Everything makes me really hurt and I cannot focus on studying. (Cholsu Interview #2)

Kyung continued to experience deep frustration even when it was later rescinded by ICE:

Last week was tough for me. They are treating international students as if we were bringing the virus to the US which is not [true]. They are trying to kick out all of the international students who are already in the U.S., which is unfair. I am approaching graduation and I only have one course left. So, my advisor had to offer in-person classes in order to support us and it might bring the virus to him. (Kyung Interview #2)

Soon after ICE's announcement, the university's International Student Office sent an email to all international students that simply repeated the ICE policy without further explanation. This increased the participants' anxiety:

They're not responsible. Actually, they just notified me. They just warned me. They didn't have any alternative plans. They asked us to just try to find in-person classes. I was trying but all the classes I don't have to take or like most classes, they already changed them to remote learning. They didn't suggest any alternative plans. They just notified me and warned me if you don't find in-person classes you have to go back. (Cholsu Interview #2).

Further, participants felt that their racist experiences were more overt and stinging due to the callous comments of the U.S. national leadership, which worsened a politically hostile environment:

When this COVID-19 happened my friend who's in Hospitality got an email from her professor and that email was sent to all his students. So, everyone in his class can see that email and, in that email, he referred COVID-19 as the Wuhan virus. And ...there was a sentence he wrote, "Why do people keep eating bats?" He knew that there are international students in his class. He knew that there are students from China. That was straight after when Trump said Wuhan virus. (Qing, Interview #1)

One time I go to the grocery store next to campus and ... at the road there, a car just passed by, and the driver just rolled down his window and said f\*ing Corona Virus you Asians. (Mei Interview #1)

Feifei shared the experience of her husband Hong that "I think in March my husband got [the] flu [non-COVID related] and he was wearing [a] mask and somebody just shouted at him saying just go back to your own country" (Feifei Interview). Hong remembered that hurtful experience and its emotional impact: "I feel like if I wear a mask anyone else will just attack me like saying go back to your own country" (Hong Interview #1).

### **Findings for Research Question 3**

The third research question asked how Asian international students leveraged their life experiences and community networks to counteract racism they experienced in a higher education institution in general and during the COVID-19 pandemic with resilience. The findings (summarized in Table 5) revealed that participants drew from family and community strengths to respond to racist words and deeds, pushing back against essentialism and dismissal of their home countries, redoubling their efforts to prove their intelligence and competence, and building networks on which they could rely for support.

#### ***Employing Anti-Essentialism and (Re)Constructive History***

Multiple participants shared how they demonstrated strengths and courage to stand up against racism. Their strategies include anti-essentialism and reconstructive history that are closely connected to their strong sense of identity. For example, as discussed earlier, Mei and her friend experienced open attack and criticism from their classmate. They stood up against him:

After he said that [China doesn't have technology and only copies], we just raised our hands and said you're not actually talking about the fact because you cannot ignore what you don't want to see. It's like confirmation bias, right? If

you just want to believe what you want to believe, but the truth is China is pretty strong now and we have our technology and we have our innovations. (Mei Interview #1)

The ability and willingness to respond to a classmate's stereotyped view of China was clearly something Mei was proud of, but at the same time the incident itself increased her sense of exclusion from the class and, by extension, the university.

Most participants remembered being asked stereotypical, essentialist questions about their families by their U.S. peers. Those questions were all around how strict their parents were and how much their parents only cared about their success. The participants always pushed back, using their counter-narratives to teach their peers that their parents were not authoritarian and explaining how they supported them to pursue their interests with the ultimate hope for them to be happy.

For example, Cholsu shared that he and his two siblings are all musicians, he a flutist, his brother a cellist, and his sister a pianist. He and his brother were both studying in the United States. Back in Korea, their father worked in a sushi restaurant and mother in the office of a church. Although his parents had to work very hard to support their education, they never forced them to change to more "practical" majors:

A lot of parents in East Asia are willing to sacrifice their life for their kids. My parents are the same. They sacrifice everything to support us to become good people. They work really hard to support me and my siblings. We are all musicians. I play the flute, my brother plays cello, and my sister plays the piano. The instruments are crazily expensive, but they support us unconditionally. They never asked us to learn something different, something that they may prefer. (Cholsu Interview #1)

In fact, all participants indicated that their parents never imposed their dreams or preference on their education and career choices. For example, Mei chose hospitality although her mother sent her to after school programs to learn art when she was little. Her mother did not force her to stick with art but supported Mei's choice. She pushed back her White peer's stereotypical question:

I had a friend who is American, and she said, "Does your mother treat you pretty hard?" I said, "No. We are just like friends. Why were you thinking that way?" She said, "Maybe others think Chinese mothers are tough to their kids and they just require them to do a pretty hard job." I said, "No, it's a stereotype. There are strict parents in the U.S., right? But I won't think your mother treats you very hard. It's a stereotype." (Mei Interview #1)

In addition, Mei and her friends shared their experiences with each other, and they encouraged each other to push back instead of being obedient:

Because we are the minority here, but it doesn't mean that we should receive this, or we should just be obedient. When we experience racism, we will shout out or try to show them that they are wrong, "You are discriminating right now. Maybe it's not that obvious but you really are. You do not think we are equal. You think you are American, and you are better than I am. It's not OK." We just talk about this together. (Mei Interview #1)

Hong also pushed back when he was not credited for his contribution:

At first, I was quiet. I was not that comfortable but still I think maybe this is called teamwork in the U.S. and this is how they run the society. After a few years, I started to talk with those White leaders face to face and tell them that I can lead the team. It's not because I'm Chinese. It's only because I'm the one who is good at it. We should value every one of our members, not just value people from one specific race. (Hong Interview #1)

### ***Working Harder to Prove “I Can”***

All the participants demonstrated their resilience of working harder to prove “I can” in fighting racism. They treated racial discrimination and exclusion as a motivation for them to work even harder. As shared earlier, Kyung practiced even harder when she was told that she would not be selected in the audition unless she was much better than the other singers:

I was thinking it's a little bit... but that also motivated me to get that role through more practice, and so it was racism. But that helped me to boost my practices to like giving me more motivation and I got that role... They're like, they're putting more expectation on me, because I'm a different color. (Kyung Interview #1)

Linking back to Mei and her friend's experience in the writing class at the Honors College, instead of being defeated and giving up that semester, Mei and her friends worked even harder because they wanted to show their peers that “I really do better than you”:

I think the most serious part is my Honors College class. I would say that's hard; it's one of the hardest classes in my university. It's not only because the content is hard but because my classmates' attitude and it influenced me: I would try harder. I would say because they think I cannot do well; I will show them I actually can. Because they think I cannot do well, and I just will show them I really do better than you. (Mei Interview #1)

Leah echoed this strategy of using challenges as motivation to “working harder”:

As regards the difficulties and challenges I have experienced, I let these realities motivate me to work even harder so that I could graduate the soonest time possible and come back home to the Philippines. Because of these, I have been really doing well in my academics (my GPA is 3.99). Emotionally, I have become stronger because of the challenges I have faced and overcome. (Leah Interview #1)

### ***Tapping Peer and Community Networks***

In response to the challenges and racism during COVID-19, participants leveraged family and friend networks, social media communities, hobbies, and their strong determination to complete their degree. Many participants stood up against the racist attacks related to COVID-19. For example, in response to the instructor who called COVID-19 “Wuhan virus,” Qing and other Chinese international students organized to write letters to the department chair and sent petitions demanding a response from the instructor and the university.

When we saw that email [from the instructor], all those Chinese students formed a group, and they were posting stuff on WeChat. They were asking people to sign the petition to send emails to the chair and staff members. That's why the university responded that way. The instructor wrote an email to address his wording issue and then he said he would be more careful. I feel that's not enough. It's hard for Chinese students to have a voice because whenever you say something it's so easy to be attacked, like you are from a communist country. (Qing Interview #1)

Many participants formed communities of support during the pandemic, including roommates and friends. For example, Cholsu highlighted that he and he and his roommates, one of them his own younger brother, cooked and shared food together: "So we just hang out together at home playing games and sometimes we make dishes together. We share food." Similarly, Kyung shared that she did not often tell her family back home what was exactly going on in order not to worry them, but she did share with her roommates: "I do share my concerns with my roommates just because we live together." Many participants indicated that they received emotional and material support from their friends and families. For example, Leah reported that her friends and family were the major source of support:

My family and friends (both in the Philippines and here in the US) always call to check on me, to give me emotional support and encouragement. My friends here in [current location] also assured me of their help for things I need. My Uncle from Texas sent me some masks and other things that I need. (Leah Interview #1)

### ***Crediting Family Culture and Education Back Home***

The resilience the participants developed in dealing with racism and other COVID-19 related challenges reported above were deeply rooted in participants' family values, cultures, and home country experiences. As shared earlier, most participants took initiatives to ask questions and advocate for themselves. Mei and a few other participants stated that they learned to ask questions from their K-12 teachers and family members.

I think it's because my high school, primary school, and middle school in China. My teachers always told to ask questions. I was not good at math when I was little. My teacher always told me, "If you don't understand you just ask me and highlight the part you don't know." That's a habit I keep. My elder sister also keeps telling me that if you don't know, you ask. (Mei Interview #1)

Similarly, Leah attributed her resilience to her experiences in the Philippines and the Filipino culture of being positive:

Having been through more difficult times before and coming from a country with cheerful people. These have helped me cope with the present challenges. Mainly because I had experienced even worse and despite these hardships, I had been so used to focusing more on the brighter side, like every Filipino who still has that cheerful disposition and optimistic attitude despite the bleak reality around us. (Leah Interview #1)



Many participants directly attributed their resilience to fight against racism to their family culture. For example, Kyung said that her parents raised her to treat people equally:

My parents taught me that you need to treat everyone the same. It does not matter the color. My mom always teaches me how to treat a person, not related to the color. Because I grew up in a Christian family, she always teaches me it doesn't matter the color of those who have, it matters what is in their heart. (Kyung Interview #2)

Mei said that her family raised her with courage to stand up against unjust treatment, not just for herself, but for other minorities:

It's because of the atmosphere I grew up in, my parents, my sister, and what I learned before I came here. When I was little my mom always told me, "If you think others treat you differently or you're not treated equally, you should shout it out, not only for you, but for the people who are in similar situations. You're not just doing it for yourself. You're doing it for other minorities or others who are not treated well." (Mei Interview #1)

Contrary to the stereotypes of Asian culture and family described above, the home experiences of the participants in some cases prepared them to resist race-based discrimination, even though they were unaware of having experienced them prior to arriving in the United States. Furthermore, several participants reported a learning from family to carry a sense of responsibility to stand up for others, and not just oneself, which encouraged recognition of race-based discrimination when it was experienced in the U.S.

### **Discussion**

U.S. higher educational settings, with a measure of acquiescence from the rest of the world (albeit in a background of political, economic, and military coercion), attract the lion's share of international students both because of the promise of access to knowledge and credentials identified by Marginson (2008) as well as the promise of the experience of democracy and diversity identified by Trueba (1993). However, Asian international students face racist words and deeds from some faculty, staff, and students in their institutions; AsianCrit informs us that this is in part because the institutions themselves are not well constructed to benefit the lives and identities of the international students they attract. Nevertheless, Asian international students can draw upon their social capital to cope with the racism they experience, and in some cases even use their experiences as a goad to greater efforts and greater success. The resilience of Asian international students neither diminishes nor excuses the perpetuation of an educational approach that is grounded in Whiteness, deficit thinking, and stereotyping, but it does point to the strength and agency of this community that should be lauded and supported.

This study sought to understand how the COVID-19 pandemic exposed a system of structural racism in the U.S. that is governed by White supremacist ideologies and myths about the Other. Because U.S. higher education institutions serve as a microcosm of the complex racial dynamics that exist in broader society (Dade et al., 2015; Pittman, 2010), we examined how Asian international students at an MSI during the era of the COVID-19 pandemic and a racialized Trump administration were further marginalized in their interactions with university students, faculty, and individuals in broader society. As such, we utilized an AsianCrit framework (Iftikar & Museus, 2019), emphasizing the intersectionality and diversity of 11

Asian international students to substantiate the use of counter-narratives to detail students' experiences and how they drew from personal and community capital to develop resilience to overcome adversities. This study is significant because it contributes to a narrow literature base on Asian international students primarily employing an international deficit standpoint, framing the problems they face in U.S. higher education in terms of their inability to adapt to institutional structures and practices conceived as natural, meritocratic, race-neutral systems. Instead, as the findings show, Asian international students are subject to covert and overt racism best understood through the theoretical framework of AsianCrit. This study thus has important implications not just for policy improvements in U.S. higher educational institutions serving Asian international students, but also for future research on Asian international students from strengths/assets perspectives.

### **Asian International Student Experiences: Racism, Covid-19, Resilience**

Counter-narratives in our study show that participants encountered multi-layered racist experiences that echo what Yeo et al. (2019) report from the experiences of Asian American students. Specifically, all participants shared experiences that were related to the Model Minority Stereotype, in which statements such as, "You are good at math," appear to be complimentary but disguise prejudice while generating undue pressures that threaten academic performance (Cheryan & Bodenhausen, 2000). Further, the Model Minority Stereotype creates higher standards for the purpose of exclusion, silences important discussions about racism and inequities experienced by Asians, Asian Americans, and Pacific Islanders, and positions Asian international students against other minoritized groups not subject to that myth. Diangelo (2006) observes that the centering of Whiteness serves to deny Asian international students and other students of color an equal opportunity to learn in higher education classroom environments, but most pointedly, serves to privilege White students in such a way that conditions the students of color as their audience. Our participants' counter-narratives confirm Diangelo's observations and suggest that college environments, dominated by White supremacy and colonial ideology, position Asian international students as scapegoats for global issues that are the outcomes of colonialism, and perpetuate this scapegoating by minimizing interactions between Asian and American students (Yuan, 2011). In this vein, our participants confirmed that classroom interactions may be riddled with misinformed, deficit and offensive views, also documented in previous research (Hail, 2015), placing Asian international students amidst a disintegrating US-China relationship that further deteriorated during the Trump era because of COVID scapegoating.

Further, our findings related to participants' initial English language challenges echo Paton (2011) and Manalo et al. (2013) that academic language ability should not be the sole criterion for evaluating international students' academic and cognitive abilities and growth. Asian international students are likely to experience stress associated with second language use, especially when language is used as the basis for discrimination (Dos Santos et al., 2019) while ignoring that second language barriers can be temporary and should not be judged as lack of student effort or active engagement. Sensitivity to international students' socio-emotional needs during the second language acquisition process can lessen their stress level and increase their self-confidence as they grow in their ability to use a second language for academic purposes.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, participants experienced unprecedented challenges (isolation and interruption in their ability to focus on work routines, personal and financial insecurity, anxiety, fear) and shared that they understood that COVID-19 was unfortunate and many people in the U.S. suffered. However, what made their life during a pandemic even more stinging was racism operationalized at multiple levels (new anti-international student policies,

witnessing anti-minority crimes via social media) under the White supremacist Trump administration, culminating a surge of anti-Asian hate crimes and the continued police brutality and murders of African Americans. Overall, the participants' experiences echo historical lessons that during global public health disasters, minoritized groups are blamed and attacked (Chen et al., 2020; Herrera, 2020; Hoppe, 2018) because xenophobia drives how majority groups assign "social meaning and responsibility to disease" (Hoppe, 2018, p. 1463).

The participants' experiences in our study further underscore Gusa's (2010) finding that schools and colleges are the third most common place for racial bias and hate crimes and that these institutions must be aware that their populace mirror the racial dynamics represented in the broader society. Our findings support this argument and go beyond: although as an MSI the university's student population is not predominantly White, and its mission is to serve students of color, its structures and resources did not prevent Asian international students from experiencing racism. An MSI designation does not guarantee racial justice and evidence of anti-racist commitments to move beyond myths about the Other.

Participants' counter-narratives highlighted the resilience they developed and implemented to overcome racism and overall challenges. This resilience was manifested via the Asian international student communities who supported each other to counteract racism while generating collective strategies to push back through approaches such as anti-essentialism and (re)constructing history (Iftikar & Museus, 2019). Additionally, participants took initiatives to overcome academic challenges and associated the origin of their strategies with their family culture and educational experiences back at home.

Unlike previous research which indicated passivity and quietude on the part of Asian international students (Hsieh, 2007; Kim, 2012; Valdez, 2015), counter-narratives in the current study reveal Asian international students' resilience, their standing up against racism, that demonstrates new strengths, hope, and courage developed in part through navigating and thriving in a racialized higher education institution. Notably, participants in the current study demonstrated resilience through working even harder to prove they could do a better job than those who discriminated against them, findings which diverge from previous research that reported Asian international students internalizing a deficit view of themselves because of racism (Hsieh, 2007; Kim, 2012). Further, much research characterizes Asian international students' educational experience in their home countries as authoritarian, teacher-dependent, passive, receptive, unquestioning, and lacking in critical thinking (Atkinson, 1997; Bista, 2012; Davies, 2013; Ferris & Tagg, 1996; Shaheen, 2016). However, participants in this study did not conform to these stereotypes but reflected upon the encouragement of teachers in their home country to always ask questions.

Their previous life experiences in their home country, therefore, prepared them to take the initiative in the U.S. when navigating an unfamiliar educational system with independence and success. As such, participants' strengths and courage were deeply rooted in their family culture, values, and support.

## Limitations

Our findings should be considered in the context of two limitations that have implications for future research. First, sampling more undergraduate students might have yielded more comprehensive information on how racism is experienced by Asian international students in higher education settings, and how these experiences were exacerbated during the pandemic.

During the interview discussions, it became apparent that undergraduate Asian international students appear to be more exposed to racism in a higher education setting because their lives tend to be more dependent on campus support, residences, and systems than

graduate international students. Undergraduate students at this MSI may not have had closely monitored advisor relationships, although the latter is pivotal to undergraduate success, especially for international students recently arrived in the U.S. Most graduate international Asian students in our study lived off campus and had access to varied resources (family, hobbies, academic advisors, graduate assistantships) that may have helped buffer the racism experienced by undergraduate students living on campus. Further, graduate students may have more established professional identities and closer relationships with faculty advisors who support them academically and professionally.

The second limitation is related to the composition of the participants. A more diverse sample of Asian international students might have revealed greater differences in experience, even though the university under study primarily enrolled Chinese international students, which is representative of national trends (Wang, 2021). Yet the very fact of a large Chinese student population may affect the experiences of other Asian international students. Therefore, although seeking a more diverse population in research might be challenging, doing so might well deepen our understanding of this complex subject.

### Implications for Research and Practice

The purpose of this study was not to judge or even gauge the participants' perceptions of their racialized experiences; rather we aimed to solicit their stories and narratives primarily centered around their lived experiences in the United States as much as possible. We realized that when simply inquiring whether they experienced racism, their initial response was sometimes "no." As Dervin (2011) suggests, merely reporting participants' answers as evidence of a phenomenon can be problematic; it is equally problematic to just report some of our participants' answers of "no" in the first interview as evidence that they did not experience racism. We therefore used dialogical methods (Dervin, 2009; Liu, 2017) during interviews to identify voices of participants by providing specific examples of how racism is operationalized in the U.S. based on an AsianCrit framework (Iftikar & Museus, 2019). Through this approach, the participants became more conscious of the racist elements in their interactions with others and may have benefitted from the interview process. The AsianCrit framework and dialogic methods were, therefore, instrumental in eliciting and analyzing the lived experiences of the participants. In this vein, the dialogic interview process used in this study contributed positively to this study's catalytic validity by "re-orienting" (Lather, 1986, p. 67) the participants to a level of consciousness that may have assisted them to understand some aspects of their reality as Asian international students studying at a U.S. university. This re-orienting mirrors the ethnographic process of "making the familiar strange" (Spindler & Spindler, 2000, p. 395) which allows a participant to obtain a sense of distance to gain new insights and perspectives of familiar life events. A critical lens may, therefore, be instrumental for future anti-bias research in which participants of color are provided with the opportunity to share life stories about sensitive issues that may go unnoticed in their daily lives.

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