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Privilege or Marginalization: How Chinese Youth from Divergent Class Backgrounds Make Sense of Racism in the U.S. and Australia¹

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Abstract

This study examines how Chinese youth in the U.S. and Australia perceive and respond to racism as temporary migrants, focusing on the influence of pre-migration class positions and host-country contexts. Based on interviews with 60 Chinese students in the U.S. and 45 working holiday makers in Australia, we find that U.S.-based students, primarily from urban, upper-middle-class backgrounds, experience status shock as they encounter systemic racial hierarchies and institutional barriers, fostering heightened sensitivity to racism and strong racial consciousness. Conversely, working holiday makers, largely from rural or economically disadvantaged areas, experience status uplift and a sense of empowerment. Viewing multiculturalism and mobility opportunities in Australia as an improvement over class-based discrimination in China, they tend to normalize or downplay racism. These contrasting responses are further shaped by each country's immigration policies and labor markets. This study advances racialization research through a comparative, intersectional approach to Chinese diasporas.

Keywords: class, intersectionality, overseas Chinese youth, racialization, racism, transnational migration

¹ **Equal Authorship:** The authors contribute equally to this article, with Qing Tingting Liu contributing the Australian case and Weirong Guo the American case. The names are listed in alphabetical order.

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Introduction

Classic scholarship on the racialization of immigrant populations has predominantly focused on long-term immigrants, often framing their experiences within the racial structures of the host countries. In the case of Chinese immigrants in America, for example, they are frequently analyzed through the Black-White racial binary, emphasizing the historical making of the “Yellow Peril” and “model minority” myth (Li and Nicholson Jr 2021; Tchen and Yeats 2014). Similarly, studies on Chinese Australians have largely explored their positioning within settler-colonial frameworks, focusing on their interactions with White Australians and other minority groups like Indigenous populations (Ip 2013; Ye 2023). While valuable, this scholarship often pays less attention to the distinct racialization of temporary migrants whose experiences differ markedly from those of long-term residents.

Temporary migrants occupy a precarious position within host societies, navigating racial hierarchies and discrimination through lenses shaped by their pre-migration knowledge and experiences (Kim 2008; Tsuda 2016). Although recent studies have begun to address these dynamics (Li 2019; Liu and Chung 2024; Robertson 2016), existing literature has two key limitations. The first limitation is methodological nationalism (Wimmer and Glick Schiller 2002), as most studies are confined to a particular national context about one specific group. This restricts our understanding of how pre-migration social contexts, host-country policies, and labor markets interact to shape racialization across national boundaries. Second, an intersectional lens is largely missing. While some studies have demonstrated the role of class background in shaping the racial experiences of Chinese immigrants (Lan 2012; Ma 2020; Ong 1999), they mainly focus on how this population tries to reproduce class privilege, thus overlooking how race intersects with class as well as other factors such as visa status. These limitations hinder a comprehensive understanding of the heterogeneity within the Chinese diaspora.

This study addresses these gaps by adopting a comparative and intersectional framework to examine the racialization experiences of two contrasting groups within transnational Chinese migration: Chinese international students on F-1 visas in the U.S. and Chinese youth on working holiday visas in Australia. These groups represent opposite ends of the class and mobility spectrum, with Chinese students in the U.S. predominantly from urban, upper-middle-class backgrounds, pursuing education in a country known for its deeply entrenched racial hierarchies, while Chinese working holiday makers in Australia typically come from rural or economically disadvantaged regions and encounter a relatively egalitarian, multicultural ethos.

Australia and the United States have long been the two largest destinations for contemporary Chinese migration. In addition to traditional long-term business, labor, and family reunion migrants, temporary Chinese migrants, such as those pursuing international education or taking “gap years” abroad, have grown significantly in number. Since 2009, Chinese students have been the largest group of international students in the U.S., reaching 289,526 in 2023 (IIE 2023). Similarly, Australia’s Working Holiday Visa (WHV) program has increasingly attracted young Chinese participants, with over 30,000 Chinese youths holding visas by 2024, making

them a leading demographic in the program (DHA 2024). Together, these groups represent significant and expanding forms of temporary migration.

Drawing on interviews with 60 Chinese college students in the U.S. and 45 Chinese working holiday makers in Australia, this study demonstrates how race, class, and migration intersect to shape divergent perceptions of and responses to racism. We find that Chinese students in the U.S. experience a “status shock” as their upper-middle-class privilege from China collides with systemic racial barriers, fostering heightened sensitivity to racism and promoting racial solidarity through selective activism. In contrast, Chinese working holiday makers in Australia, having migrated to escape class inequalities in China, often perceive racism as less significant compared to the discrimination they faced at home or the challenges they associate with the U.S.

This article begins with a review of the literature on racialization, class, and transnational Chinese migration, identifying gaps that this study addresses. Next, the data and methods section explains the contrasting case design and the sampling and interview processes. The findings section compares the experiences of Chinese international students in the U.S. and working holiday makers in Australia, focusing on how pre-migration class positions and host-country contexts shape their responses to racism. Finally, the discussion highlights the study’s contributions and future directions for the field.

Rethinking the Classic Racial Framework in Host Countries

The racialization of overseas Chinese diasporas has historically been shaped by the racial structures of their host countries. In the U.S., early Chinese immigrants were subjected to exclusionary laws such as the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882, rooted in the “Yellow Peril” stereotype (Tchen and Yeats 2014). This early racialization persisted into the 20th century through the “model minority” myth, which portrayed Chinese Americans as successful while obscuring structural inequalities (Li and Nicholson Jr 2021). Ngai (2014) further emphasizes the intersections of race, class, and national origin in shaping exclusion. In Australia, Chinese immigrants were racialized as threats during the 19th-century gold rush, prompting the White Australia Policy. Though repealed in the mid-20th century, its legacy continues to shape contemporary stereotypes (Ip 2013). Ang (2001) uses the concept of “in-betweenness” to explore how Chinese Australians navigate complex identities, marginalized by both the dominant White society and other minority groups. Similar dynamics appear in Singapore, where new Chinese migrants, despite ethnic similarity with the majority, are often perceived as culturally alien and economically threatening and are racialized based on class, nationality, and migration history (Ang 2022).

The classic scholarship on the racialization of Chinese populations has one major limitation, as it tends to focus mainly on the racial structures of the host countries. However, temporary immigrants—such as Chinese international students and working holiday makers—experience race and racism in ways distinct from those of long-term immigrants and local citizens (Lee and Byrd 2024; Liu and Chung 2024). Immigrants often bring with them an

interpretive lens shaped by their socialization in their country of origin, which influences how they understand and respond to race and racism in their new environment (Roth 2020). Studies on immigrants from South Korea (Kim 2008) and Japan (Tsuda 2016) reveal how individuals, who are familiar with a particular racial framework rooted in the history and context of their home country, selectively apply this cultural knowledge when confronting racial challenges in their host societies.

Recent studies of Chinese overseas students in the U.S. have illuminated how their experiences of racialization differ from those of native-born Asian Americans and long-term immigrants. While Yu (2025) examines how Chinese students in the U.S. engage in contrastive “racial learning,” Liu and Chung (2024) demonstrate how these students, occupying a liminal space between nations, negotiate their ambiguous racial and ethnonational position under the pressures of pandemic-induced exclusion from both the U.S. and China. Similarly, the unique position of Chinese working holiday makers in Australia’s racialized landscape has also begun to receive attention in recent years. Li (2019) notes that while these workers often face microaggressions, such as being stereotyped as “hardworking” or “submissive,” many downplay these incidents, viewing them as minor. Robertson (2016) adds that their temporary visa status exacerbates their vulnerability to discrimination, as it prevents them from engaging in long-term struggles against racial inequality. These studies illustrate how Chinese overseas youth navigate a precarious racialized existence, shaped by both their temporary visa status and the pervasive stereotypes attached to their nationality and ethnicity.

Although valuable, much of the existing scholarship on the racialization of the Chinese diaspora remains narrowly focused, often examining specific national contexts or subgroups, such as Chinese international students in the U.S. (Ma 2020) or Australia (Martin 2021), highly skilled Chinese immigrants in Europe (Zhang 2003) or Singapore (Yeoh and Lam 2016), or Chinese entrepreneurs and expatriates in Africa (Dobler 2009). While insightful, these studies are limited by methodological nationalism, which hinders a broader understanding of the heterogeneity within the Chinese diaspora, particularly those who come from diverse class backgrounds and reside in different host countries.

Reconstructing Racialization in Chinese Diasporas: A Comparative and Intersectional Framework

Prior research has highlighted the role of class background in shaping the racial experiences of Chinese immigrants. Ong (1999) introduces the concept of “flexible citizenship” to describe how wealthy immigrants leverage transnational resources to evade racial barriers, distancing themselves from racialized labor markets and accessing elite social circles. Lan (2012) similarly shows that upper-class Chinese immigrants in Chicago segregate from working-class co-ethnics to avoid overt racial hostility and preserve social mobility. In contrast, working-class immigrants face compounded racial and class-based marginalization. Ma (2020) extends these insights to Chinese international students, arguing that those from affluent backgrounds can more easily navigate racialized structures in U.S. higher education due to superior access to

academic and social capital. While illuminating, these studies primarily emphasize how class privilege buffers against racism, overlooking instances where privileged migrants become more attuned to racial exclusion, especially when their class advantages are undermined by social exclusion in host societies. Thus, these studies fall short in capturing the diverse and nuanced ways Chinese migrants experience racialization across different class statuses.

Regarding the relationship between privilege and perceptions of racism, studies show that privilege often correlates with a diminished recognition of racial inequalities. Bonilla-Silva (2021) introduces the concept of color-blind racism to argue privileged individuals deny or downplay racial disparities by asserting that race no longer affects life chances. Mueller (2017) expands on this by identifying epistemic strategies, such as evasion and willful ignorance, that privileged individuals employ to sustain color-blind ideologies, even when confronted with clear racial disparities. Similarly, Warikoo and de Novais (2015) show how white students in elite institutions adopt color-blind frames, limiting their engagement with racial diversity. Gallagher (2003) finds that meritocratic beliefs often coexist with colorblindness, as White individuals attribute their success to personal effort while rejecting the role of systemic racism. While these studies suggest that privilege acts as a buffer against recognizing racial inequalities, thereby perpetuating colorblindness and reinforcing the status quo, they often conflate White privilege with class privilege, neglecting other factors such as immigration status. Furthermore, the assumption that privilege invariably leads to colorblindness neglects counterexamples where privilege may heighten sensitivity to racism.

To address these gaps, this study adopts a comparative and intersectional framework by examining the racialized experiences of Chinese youth on F-1 student visas in the U.S. and those on working holiday visas in Australia. By focusing on how race, class, temporary migration status, and immigration policy regimes interact in the U.S. and Australia, we demonstrate that pre-migration class positions and host-country contexts significantly shape temporary migrants' interpretations of and responses to racism, revealing how their racialization differs not only from that of long-term residents but also from one another.

Data and Methods

Contrasting Case Design

This study adopts a contrasting case design to examine how pre-migration class positions intersect with host-country contexts to shape racialization and responses to racism. Following Skocpol and Somers (1980), our goal is not to test causal relationships through controlled comparison but to illuminate how the same social processes (e.g., racialization and marginalization) unfold differently across divergent contexts. Rather than comparing similar populations, we intentionally juxtapose two groups of Chinese migrants at opposite ends of the transnational mobility spectrum: upper-middle-class F-1 visa students in the U.S. and working-class Chinese youth on working holiday visas (WHVs) in Australia. These groups differ in pre-migration class background, visa type, and future immigration trajectories.

Similar to Geertz's (1971) comparison of Islam in Morocco and Indonesia, we selected these cases not for their similarity, but for their ability to highlight contrasting dimensions of a shared transnational process—serving as a “commentary on one another's character” (Geertz 1971, 4). Our comparison of F-1 students and WHV holders reveals how class and mobility shape racialization in divergent yet interconnected ways. Both groups consist of young, Mandarin-speaking, PRC-born temporary migrants living in multicultural settler democracies with large Chinese diasporas, providing a basic level of comparability while maximizing contextual contrast.

Importantly, this approach moves beyond methodological nationalism (Wimmer and Glick Schiller 2002), which confines analysis within bounded national contexts and overlooks transnational and intersectional processes. Even within diaspora studies, research often focuses on a single migrant group in one national setting, limiting insight into intra-diasporic variation. Our design addresses this limitation by comparing two contrasting migrant groups within the Chinese diaspora, capturing how both pre-migration class positions and post-migration opportunity structures intersect to shape responses to racism. Comparing the same migrant group across countries would have flattened class contrasts, while comparing different groups within the same country would have obscured how structural and policy environments shape racialized experience.

Australia and the U.S. offer both shared and distinct immigration contexts, enhancing the comparative value of this study. Both are former British settler colonies with liberal democratic governments and multicultural immigration frameworks, making them prominent destinations for Chinese migrants (Freeman and Jupp 1992). However, their immigration systems differ significantly. Australia employs a neo-corporatist, points-based system shaped by government, business, and labor sectors, whereas the U.S. uses a market-oriented, demand-driven system primarily influenced by employers (Koslowski 2013). Consequently, Australia exercises immigration control mainly at the border, while the U.S. applies internal control, particularly through the labor market. These structural differences shape migrants' perceptions of belonging and future prospects, with migrants perceiving Australian policies as more favorable than those of the U.S. (Walsh 2008).

Sample and Data Collection

We conducted semi-structured life-history interviews with 60 Chinese international students in the U.S. (2019–2021) and 45 WHV holders in Australia (2023–2024). Participants were recruited using a combination of snowball sampling, outreach to student and migrant organizations, and online platforms such as Facebook and WeChat. Interviews were conducted in Mandarin and focused on pre-migration life, class background, racial encounters, visa experiences, and long-term aspirations.

The U.S. sample includes 60 college students on F-1 visas, primarily from major metropolitan areas such as Beijing, Shanghai, Guangzhou, and Shenzhen. These participants attended top-tier Chinese high schools or overseas preparatory programs, and all came from middle-class or upper-middle-class families capable of supporting their tuition and living

expenses abroad. Due to prohibitive financial and visa barriers, none came from working-class backgrounds. Of the 60 participants, the majority were born in the early 2000s; 39 were female, 32 were STEM majors, and 32 were juniors or seniors.

The Australian sample comprises 45 WHV holders, predominantly from rural or county-level cities in China and often the first in their families to pursue opportunities abroad. Most participants completed vocational or non-elite undergraduate programs, with only a small minority attending elite universities. Financial constraints made WHVs an alternative to higher education overseas. Among the 45 participants, 11 were male, 25 were female, and 9 identified as LGBTQ+. The majority were born in the 1990s. During the interviews, 32 were in Australia, 12 in China, and one in a third country. Of those in Australia, 23 were pursuing or had obtained permanent residency.

The contrasting demographics reflect global hierarchies in higher education. The U.S. is viewed by Chinese families as the most prestigious—and costly—destination (Ma 2020; Tu 2022), attracting primarily affluent students. In contrast, Australia’s WHV program offers a lower entry threshold, allowing youth from rural or working-class backgrounds to migrate with less financial strain. Many later transitioned to student or skilled work visas, making Australia more accessible to less privileged migrants. See Table 1 for a summary of the main characteristics of the two groups.

Table 1. Sample Characteristics of Chinese Youth in the U.S. and Australia

	Chinese Youth in the U.S.	Chinese Youth in Australia
<i>Initial Visa Type</i>	F-1 student visa	Working holiday visa
<i>Class</i>	Middle and upper-middle	Lower-middling & working class
<i>Family Socioeconomic Status</i>	Can afford tuition and living expenses abroad	Mostly cannot afford overseas study
<i>Place of Birth</i>	Mostly metropolitan cities	Rural areas, small towns, or county-level cities
<i>Educational Background</i>	Elite academic trajectory	Vocational or non-elite degrees

Positionality and Data Analysis Strategy

The author who interviewed the U.S.-based Chinese students was also an international student pursuing an advanced degree in the U.S. during the research period. Although less affluent than many participants, she shared an urban upbringing and elite educational trajectory, which enabled her to understand and empathize with the interviewees’ struggles. The Australian

fieldwork was conducted by the other author who was also a U.S.-based international student and had participated in the WHV program from 2017 to 2018. This prior lived experience facilitated participant observation, trust-building, and recruitment in 2023 and 2024. Both authors' personal histories of transnational mobility and racialization in the U.S. and Australia helped them make sense of the participants' life stories.

For data analysis, we combined manual readings of transcripts and notes with qualitative software (ATLAS.ti and MAXQDA). Using a three-stage coding process (Neuman 2014), we organized key ideas and developed reflective memos on coding categories. First, open coding allowed themes to emerge inductively from participants' narratives. Next, axial coding grouped overlapping categories and contrasted emerging patterns. This helped identify themes related to racial understandings, responses to racism, temporary migrant identities, and shifts in aspirations relative to pre-migration experiences. Finally, selective coding refined and synthesized these themes, while each stage included attention to theoretical resonance and divergence. We validated findings through team discussions and analytic comparisons across cases.

Heightened Sensitivity to Racism in the U.S. Versus Normalization of Racism in Australia

Our findings reveal how Chinese youth in the U.S. and Australia, despite sharing a common ethnic background, interpret and respond to racism in remarkably divergent ways. Chinese international students in the U.S. have heightened sensitivity towards racism and attribute even trivial incidents to racism. In contrast, Chinese youth in Australia tend to normalize or dismiss racism in the receiving context. We argue that these divergences stem from disparities in their pre-migration class positions within China, as well as the different mobility opportunities and constraints embedded in each country's immigration and labor regimes. Specifically, Chinese students in the U.S. commonly report feeling disenfranchised relative to their upper-middle-class status in China, whereas Chinese working holiday makers in Australia portray themselves as comparatively empowered and uplifted compared to their marginalized status back home.

Most U.S.-based students recollect frequent, if subtle, racist behaviors, including microaggressions in classrooms, dining halls, and grocery stores. Kevin described the lingering impact of seemingly minor slights in everyday life:

“At the supermarket, some cashiers would deliberately not talk to Asians. When I said ‘thank you,’ they wouldn’t respond. I’m actually good at engaging with people; it’s not that I avoided talking, but they saw me as a foreigner and didn’t want to chat. I was very angry but couldn’t do anything.”

For many, these interpersonal slights are compounded by broader anxieties about racial violence, especially during COVID-19. Shiwei candidly shared: “During the pandemic, I was scared of two things: catching COVID and anti-Asian hate, so I didn’t dare to go out.” This fear was echoed by others who reported being targeted with slurs like “Chinese monkey” and “China virus,” as well as phrases such as “go back to China” and “no Chinese allowed.”

Meanwhile, some participants also described heightened discomfort around questions regarding their national origins, interpreting the ubiquitous “Where are you from?” query as evidence of “perpetual foreigner” labeling (Kim 1999). Emily recounted many times that the instructors in the classrooms kept asking this question as if they wanted to know where she was “really” from, i.e., China. Emily commented:

“They ask, ‘Where are you from?’ all the time. I sometimes say, ‘I call many places home,’ or I say where I have lived recently. I think maybe subconsciously, I want to fight against the ‘where are you from’ questions. Why do you have to ask me this question? I don’t know how to answer.”

This pattern of everyday racism aligns with research showing how Asian migrants become acutely aware of their minority status within the U.S. racial hierarchy (Kim 2008; Ong 1999). While Chinese students interviewed in 2021 emphasized more explicit hostility and referenced broader social justice movements like Black Lives Matter, those interviewed in 2019 were already attuned to systemic exclusion related to immigration, employment, and daily interactions (Guo 2023). Despite differing emphases, heightened racial awareness was a consistent theme across both cohorts.

Chinese students in the U.S. are highly intolerant of racism, believing there is no justification for such behavior. In contrast, Chinese working holiday makers in Australia tend to justify and normalize racism, often viewing it as less severe compared to the discrimination they experienced in China or the more overt racism they associate with the U.S. Emma, originally from Wuhan, the initial epicenter of COVID-19, emphasized this comparative perspective:

“I think I encountered more racism in my home country. In China, it might not be called ‘racism,’ but it’s still discrimination...As someone from Wuhan, especially during the pandemic, people wouldn’t let me rent a room. The difficulties I faced back home were far more serious than here. So, here, I don’t really take these things to heart.”

Emma also contrasted racism in Australia with the U.S., praising Australia’s emphasis on multiculturalism:

“I think there’s more of it [racism] in the U.S. than here. Here in Australia, they promote multiculturalism. It encourages and welcomes diversity. I personally don’t feel very sensitive to racism.”

However, she also admitted that Chinese people in Australia, including herself, may harbor prejudices toward other non-White groups, acknowledging that “racism exists objectively,” and “Chinese people in Australia also have racist views toward Indians.” In other words, she believed being racist is part of human nature.

Similarly, Wa, who came to Australia with a vocational degree, shared that she did not experience racism related to her Chinese identity during the pandemic but recalled an earlier conversation with a White man. He asked, “Where are you from?” and, upon learning she was from China, followed up with, “If it’s so good, why did you immigrate here?” Wa laughed and explained, “I’m not good enough in China.” Reflecting on her life, Wa attributed her migration

to her inability to succeed in China's competitive urban centers, saying, "I can't survive in big cities like Beijing or Shanghai."

Unlike Chinese students in the U.S., who actively resist questions like "Where are you from?" and challenge narratives that question their presence abroad, Chinese youth in Australia tend to internalize such encounters. They often frame their migration as a reflection of personal shortcomings, rather than systemic inequities, and measure racism against the class-based discrimination they faced in China. For many, migration to Australia represents an improvement in both material conditions and social acceptance, leading them to downplay or normalize racism in their host country. Instead of aspiring to ideals of full equality, their experiences suggest a relative framework, comparing current hardships to those they endured before migration.

Contrasting Responses to Racial Discrimination

Chinese Students in the U.S.: Racial Solidarity and Selective Activism

For U.S.-based students, discriminatory encounters evoke strong racial consciousness, leading some to recognize shared struggles with other marginalized groups. Many explicitly referenced figures like Martin Luther King Jr. or social movements like Black Lives Matter (BLM). Michele, a senior actively involved in racial discrimination awareness campaigns, stated:

"My vision is quite similar to MLK's—everyone is equal, and the differences between people aren't that significant. I really hope to see a more mixed and diverse America one day. Black people have faced discrimination throughout history, which is heartbreaking and infuriating. The BLM movement is their way of venting their emotions."

Similarly, Brandon, another senior, emphasized the importance of action, urging: "We should participate in activities and sign petitions, especially when we witness racial discrimination, to make the perpetrators face consequences."

William, who engaged in racial justice activism through research and volunteering, shared: "I led middle school students in a study on racial discrimination, and the study found that many international students had experienced some form of racial discrimination... We also found that many of them have started to take action against racism."

However, not all students embraced activism with the same enthusiasm. Some participants expressed ambivalence, citing concerns about their outsider status or the risks associated with political engagement. Susan articulated this reluctance: "I don't identify as Asian or feel that I belong to America, so sometimes I don't feel it's my place to join these protests." Milla, echoing similar fears, added, "Even if I agree with the movement's principles, I won't participate in BLM out of fear that it could affect my immigration status. As a minority, I can understand the discrimination Black people face, but it's hard to support them in action."

This hesitation underscores the conflicting priorities faced by Chinese international students in the U.S.: an increasing awareness of racial injustice, especially since the pandemic, balanced against fears of jeopardizing their immigration status or derailing their academic and career ambitions. Similar patterns of racial awareness and political hesitation have been observed among other international students of color in the U.S. (Koo, Yao, and Gong 2023). However,

compared to groups such as South Asian or Middle Eastern students, who at times engage more openly in collective action (Lee and Rice 2007; Mobasher 2006), Chinese students in this study expressed a more cautious and selective approach, shaped by geopolitical concerns and potential transnational repression from their homeland (Guo 2023). That said, most U.S.-based participants express empathy toward other marginalized groups within the U.S. racial hierarchy, though their actions vary.

Chinese Youth in Australia: Class-Based Justifications and Strategic Avoidance

Racism is an undeniable reality in Australia, as studies demonstrate that Chinese migrants experience discrimination and microaggressions in the workplace and in everyday interactions (Li 2019; Martin 2021; Robertson 2016). However, unlike the U.S.-based students, who often develop a heightened racial consciousness, Chinese working holiday makers in Australia tended to normalize these experiences. San, for instance, shared that his local friends often made racist and sexist jokes about Asian women, and when he questioned their comments, they dismissed his concerns, saying, “It’s just the way the world works.” Instead of feeling deeply offended, San rationalized their behavior, attributing it to their limited education and the constraints of their social environment:

“His limited education and the constraints of his family background had restricted his understanding of the world. The place where I was working was like a small village, and if he didn’t behave that way, he would be excluded by his peers for being different.”

San related this experience to his own upbringing in a small city in China, where social norms similarly reinforced conformity and exclusion. For many working holiday makers, limited job opportunities confined them to rural or agricultural settings, where interactions with working-class and less-educated locals often exposed them to the most explicit forms of racism. Compared to Chinese students in the U.S., participants in Australia sometimes faced more overt discrimination but felt less empowered to confront it.

Confronting racism directly was widely viewed as impractical or counterproductive, particularly given participants’ dependence on local employers and the precarious nature of their temporary visa status. San described how his financial and immigration goals shaped his decision to stay silent, even in the face of hostility:

“Indeed, there is racism in Australia, especially while I was working in a fishery in Tasmania. The locals were very harsh towards us Asians, and their attitude was very unfriendly. They deliberately bullied us. But at that time, I knew this job was very important to me because I needed it to earn money, and I also needed the pay slip since I had submitted my PR application.”

In such contexts, participants often adopted strategies of compliance and relationship-building, viewing these as essential for their long-term goals of securing permanent residency or economic advancement.

Others attributed their reluctance to protest racism to their working-class upbringing in China, where they had learned to navigate structural inequalities and accept the status quo. Many participants, like Wa, internalized the belief that they were “not good enough” to succeed in

China, making Australia a place of relative improvement and opportunity despite its racism. Unlike Chinese students in the U.S., who often retained the option or desire to return to China, many working holiday makers viewed migration as their best chance for upward mobility, making conflict avoidance a pragmatic strategy.

Similar forms of class-based rationalization have been observed among other working-class migrant groups in Australia, such as African, Middle Eastern, and Pacific Islander communities, who downplay racism as a survival strategy in precarious labor conditions (Colic-Peisker and Tilbury 2006; Hage 1998; Wise 2009). Chinese working holiday makers exhibited a comparable tendency, often framing racism as a product of class conditions rather than personal animosity, emphasizing the shared working-class background between themselves and their perpetrators. This normalization reflected the intersection of economic vulnerability, temporary visa status, pre-migration class experiences, and a sense of empowerment compared to their positions in China.

Explaining Divergent Responses: Class Mobility and Policy Regimes

Sense of Disenfranchisement Among Chinese Youth in the U.S.

A consistent thread among U.S.-based participants is their urban, privileged backgrounds. Many hail from major metropolitan cities such as Beijing, Shanghai, Guangzhou, and Shenzhen, and have benefited from substantial familial resources, including elite education, private tutoring, or prior study abroad experiences. Several participants explicitly noted that their family wealth placed them in the top 10% of Chinese society. These advantages fostered expectations of continued privilege. However, upon entering the U.S., many experience what can be termed “status shock,” as their privileged backgrounds in China clashed with the racialized and systemic barriers in the U.S. They were confronted with the harsh reality that advantages tied to their citizenship, gender (especially for male students), ethnicity (as Han Chinese), and social networks no longer held the same value in this new environment.

This sudden awareness of their marginalized position within the U.S. racial hierarchy—unfamiliar compared to the class-based stratifications they knew in China—led to feelings of disenfranchisement and heightened sensitivity to racism. Jessica exemplified this transformation, becoming more “patriotic” after going abroad, particularly when comparing “equity” in China and the U.S.: “There’s White Supremacy in America where people are stratified along racial lines, but in China, everyone is equal.” While her privileged background obscured her understanding of class-based inequalities in China, her marginalized status in the U.S. heightened her awareness of its racial stratification, an experience entirely new to her.

Kevin also reflected on the sense of “lost privilege” he felt while applying for an internship:

“As an Asian male, I’ve experienced a lot of implicit discrimination because Asian males aren’t considered a minority group. When I applied for an internship at a consulting firm, their website stated that they had a diversity program. I was excited to apply, but in the first step, after

selecting ‘Asian,’ a mandatory question popped up asking which group I wanted to join: women’s group, LGBTQ group, and so on. None of them fit, so I had to give up.”

Kevin’s exclusion from diversity programs illustrates the concept of “racial triangulation,” where Asians are positioned in U.S. racial hierarchies as simultaneously valorized above Black Americans through the “model minority” myth and ostracized as “perpetual foreigners” (Kim 1999). Although Chinese international students may not self-identify as Asian American, they are racialized and perceived as such, often becoming targets of anti-Asian hate and institutional exclusion like their Asian immigrant counterparts (Guo 2024; Liu and Chung 2024).

This exclusion is exacerbated by citizenship-based discrimination, particularly in academic and professional settings. Jenny, a STEM student aspiring to become a doctor, noted:

“Discrimination [here] is more institutionalized. Many medical schools don’t accept international students or have a separate pool for them, making it very hard for international students without a green card to become doctors. Similarly, for internships and fellowships, most are unavailable to us.”

Participants also reported feeling marginalized in broader societal structures. Wendy, an aspiring investment banker, described the challenges she faced:

“I feel that Asians are essentially second-class citizens in American society. This is especially true when I prepare to go into investment banking, where there are so many White people, and it’s inherently elitist. There’s even a term to describe the workplace ceiling for Asians—‘bamboo ceiling.’”

Navigating these barriers often required participants to adapt and compromise, even as some engaged in racial justice activism on campus. Wendy, who was acutely aware of these injustices and wrote reports on how Asians often must work harder than others to achieve the same recognition, ultimately felt she had no choice but to “Americanize” herself to succeed:

“To find a job, I had to Americanize myself, not only in personality but also by not using my Chinese name. America isn’t as open-minded as we imagine, and having an ethnic name can definitely affect your prospects... There’s no choice. If you want to succeed in their game, you have to play by their rules.”

These experiences of racial hierarchies, institutional exclusion, and the pressure to assimilate left many U.S.-based participants feeling disenfranchised and disillusioned. While these challenges fostered a heightened awareness of racism and racial dynamics, they also fueled doubts about participants’ long-term futures in the U.S., with many questioning whether the sacrifices required to “succeed” were worth the cost.

Sense of Empowerment Among Chinese Youth in Australia

In sharp contrast to Chinese youth in the U.S., working holiday makers in Australia often come from rural regions or smaller cities, where entrenched inequalities and limited access to quality education stifle social mobility. For them, migration to Australia represented an escape from rigid class hierarchies, rural-urban divide, and urban-centric competition in China, fostering a sense of liberation and empowerment, even in the face of racism.

This empowerment was particularly profound for female participants, who felt that leaving behind the entrenched misogyny and gender norms of their hometowns enabled them to reimagine their identities. These accounts echo Martin's (2021) study of Chinese female "student transmigrants" in Australia, who experience a "zone of suspension" and "liminal time" that helps loosen ties to neo-traditionalist femininity and cultivates new forms of agency. Lan, originally from a county-level city in Shanxi, reflected on how differently she was perceived in Australia:

"My identity is tied to Australia since I've found like-minded people here. There is absolutely no one like me in my hometown. After arriving in Australia, I started to make some genuine friends... They appreciated me for my straightforwardness, my innocence, and my lack of sophistication. They considered these traits to be strengths, which was the first time I realized that these things were not flaws... The most important thing I found was that I could actually be appreciated by others."

For Lan and many other female, working-class participants, this was the first time they felt their worth was validated and that they could simply "be themselves." Emma, another participant from a vocational degree background, echoed this sentiment:

"As a woman, since childhood, my emotions and feelings have not been validated, including my body. In such an environment, the constraints are much greater for women than for men... In Australia, I feel more vibrant. Upon coming here, I gradually opened up because I felt no one was judging me... Slowly, I dared to be myself and discovered that being oneself is cool."

Many working holiday makers like Lan and Emma, who were not born in metropolitan cities, experienced social exclusion from peers and even family in China if they dared to envision a life outside of traditional norms. In Australia, however, they found the freedom to make friends, build chosen families, and fully embrace their personalities and life choices. Lan aptly described the Working Holiday Visa as a chance for rebirth and a way to "protect the light of our soul."

This sense of empowerment extended beyond economic upward mobility; it was also tied to liberation from what participants described as the suffocating culture of their hometowns in China. The liberating experiences in Australia gave Chinese working holiday makers the courage to envision a different and "better" future. Emma summed up this transformative perspective:

"Australia is a well-established developed country. Many people have jobs that, from our perspective in China, may not seem very decent, but they still lead good lives. Here, you have more opportunities to separate life from work, which gives me self-assurance and shows there are more choices ... Unlike China, where there's only one definition of success: earning a lot of money, having a big house, getting married, and having children."

Australia's multiculturalism, flexibility in immigration policies, diversity of lifestyles, and relatively egalitarian social environment collectively empowered participants to become better versions of themselves compared to their pre-migration lives. Ironically, while Chinese students in the U.S. often felt trapped in a rigid racial hierarchy and must "Americanize" themselves to succeed, working holiday makers in Australia had the freedom to define their own identities.

Participants noted that the “American Dream” many U.S.-based students pursued mirrored the singular definition of success in China, where wealth and status dominate social expectations. By contrast, Australia’s more inclusive environment allowed participants to escape these pressures, suggesting that Chinese students in the U.S. were often “worse off” relative to their pre-migration status, both materially and psychologically. Unlike their Australian counterparts, U.S.-based students could not afford to ignore racism and felt compelled to react to it.

To Stay or Not to Stay: Different Immigration Pathways and Labor Markets

The contrasting immigration policies and labor markets of the U.S. and Australia also significantly shape the experiences, aspirations, and responses to racism among Chinese youth. For Chinese international students in the U.S., the transition from education to employment is fraught with challenges. Strict H-1B work visa quotas, limited career options, and lengthy waits for permanent residency create significant barriers, even for those who excel academically or professionally. These structural impediments not only shape their professional trajectories but also amplify their sensitivity to racism, as they often perceive both overt and systemic discrimination as contributing factors to their limited opportunities.

Many participants expressed frustration with the uncertainty and systemic exclusion tied to their temporary visa status, which heightened their awareness of being marginalized in a racialized hierarchy. Only one-third of U.S.-based participants interviewed in 2021 expressed an interest in staying long-term, with many citing the restrictive immigration system and limited career prospects as key deterrents. For example, Nancy, a STEM-major senior student, shared that during her first and second years, she and most of her Chinese peers were eager to stay in the U.S. However, as they began navigating the challenges of internships and job applications, their certainty about the future diminished due to the labor market and restrictive immigration policies. “Just muddle through” became their mantra. Likewise, Allan compared the labor markets in the two countries and noted that securing a job and advancing in one’s career seemed easier in China:

“My parents hope I return to China after graduation because social connections are more abundant back home, making it easier to get things done. In the U.S., without such connections, things become harder, and even very capable individuals will hit the glass ceiling very soon. My parents have a friend who works at Google, and the highest position he can reach is department head.”

Cheris, whose parents are high-ranking government officials in China, also highlighted the stark contrast between her internship experiences in the two countries. While securing an internship in the U.S. was difficult, in China, her parents’ social connections made it significantly easier. Reflecting on her summer internship at a major media company in China, she remarked, “This might be the first time I realized my parents have some power,” noting that she was treated more like a VIP client than an intern. Similarly, many Chinese students tended to do internships in China rather than the U.S., echoing the sentiments of Allan and Cheris.

Others, like Donald, who pursued a Juris Doctor degree after graduation, viewed the U.S. as a stepping stone, adopting a pragmatic approach to navigating a system they saw as

exclusionary: “After graduating from law school, I want to work in the U.S. for a few years to accumulate experience. My ultimate goal is to return to China and become a civil servant.”

It is not uncommon for Chinese international students to pursue master’s or even doctoral degrees at U.S. Ivy League schools to enhance their prospects for better jobs in China (Ma 2020). Earning another degree also provides a temporary reprieve from the challenges of the U.S. labor market and immigration system, as student visas are more accessible and less restrictive than work visas, which are tightly capped and limited by job type.

In contrast, participants in Australia reported more positive experiences navigating the immigration system and job market. The Working Holiday Visa (WHV), student visa, and pathways to permanent residency provided a tangible sense of long-term possibility, fostering optimism and enabling participants to view racism as less consequential. At the time of the interviews, 32 of the 45 Chinese youth in Australia expressed strong intentions to remain in the country, with 23 already holding permanent residency or actively pursuing it through employer sponsorship or other channels. Unlike U.S.-based participants, WHV holders like Emma argued that there were more opportunities and less social hierarchy in Australia than in China:

“[Even with all these hardships in between?] I see myself getting better and better, so I feel gratified. Now, firstly, I have a profession here that can provide me with a decent salary and rewards. I’m not sure about the situation if I were to return to China, but at least here, I can find a space to improve myself and move upward in development. Even in basic jobs or starting points here, the possibilities are generally higher than in China.”

For many, Australia’s relatively egalitarian social environment and its diverse and inclusive ethos gave them the freedom to imagine a better future, both personally and professionally. Lan explained her decision to stay in Australia and many other youths’ choice to leave China: “While a replanted tree can die, humans who relocate can thrive. Individuals venture out [from their home country] to prevent the light in their hearts from fading.”

This comparison reveals that immigration policies and labor markets do more than determine economic outcomes. They shape how migrants perceive themselves, their futures, and their place in society. In the U.S., the rigid and exclusionary system leaves participants more attuned to systemic discrimination, reinforcing their marginalized position in the racial hierarchy and making it difficult to separate professional challenges from racialized exclusion. In Australia, the structural flexibility and visible opportunities for integration allow participants to focus on self-advancement, reframing racism as a less central concern. The decision to stay or leave thus reflects not only economic calculations but also broader social and structural environments that define migration experiences and racial consciousness.

Discussion and Conclusion

This study advances understanding of migration, privilege, and racialization by examining how Chinese temporary migrants in the U.S. and Australia experience and respond to racism. By comparing F-1 students and WHV holders, we illuminate how pre-migration class positions and

host-country contexts interact to shape divergent racialization processes. Specifically, this study contributes to the existing literature in three critical ways.

First, this study contributes to scholarship on racialization by highlighting the intersectionality of race, class, and immigration status. Our findings dialogue with emerging research on how transnational migration shapes individuals' understanding of race and how pre-migration acquired knowledge plays a significant role in responding to racism (Kim 2008; Liu and Chung 2024; Roth 2020; Tsuda 2016). For F-1 students, their elite educational backgrounds and urban origins in China initially insulated them from systemic discrimination, making encounters with U.S. racial hierarchies particularly jarring. In contrast, WHV holders from rural or economically marginalized regions perceive migration as an opportunity for social upliftment, reframing racism as a lesser concern. These divergent responses reveal how racialization is not solely determined by host-country structures but is co-constructed through transnational interactions between sending and receiving contexts.

Second, this study challenges dominant frameworks that treat privilege as static or uniformly associated with colorblindness. Prior research often does not differentiate race and class privilege, focusing primarily on White populations in singular national contexts (Bonilla-Silva 2021; Mueller 2017; Warikoo and de Novais 2015). By examining privilege across transnational contexts, we reveal its fluidity: Chinese students in the U.S., despite their upper-middle-class backgrounds, develop a heightened sensitivity to racism as they face "status shock" and structural exclusion. Conversely, WHV holders in Australia, with relatively disadvantaged pre-migration positions, normalize racism by framing it against the harsher class-based discrimination they experienced in China. Rather than labeling these individuals as "colorblind," it is crucial to contextualize their perceptions within their prior experiences and social realities. Our findings also challenge the notion that meritocratic beliefs inherently contribute to colorblind racism (Gallagher 2003). Chinese international students in the U.S., despite their elitist educational trajectories, exhibit heightened awareness of racism. This awareness arises from the stark contrast between their pre-migration privilege and the racialized barriers they face post-migration. These findings underscore that privilege operates not as a fixed attribute but as a contingent and relational construct, shaped by transnational migration, national racial or class hierarchies, and structural opportunities.

Third, this study provides a comparative lens to examine how immigration regimes and labor markets mediate migrants' sense of belonging and agency. In the U.S., restrictive immigration policies and market-driven labor selection exacerbate feelings of marginalization among F-1 students, limiting their long-term aspirations. Australian immigration policies, with more flexible pathways to permanent residency and an emphasis on lifestyle diversity, offer WHV holders a more optimistic view of integration and mobility. These structural differences shape not only migrants' material conditions but also their emotional attachment to their host societies. This study shows the need for cross-national learning in shaping effective immigration policies. Given the ongoing shifts in global geopolitics, as well as the evolving social, economic,

and political dynamics in both countries, policymakers in the U.S. and Australia can draw valuable lessons from their contrasting approaches to immigration.

Our research opens several important avenues for future exploration. First, the temporary visa status of our participants—F-1 visas typically granting five years and WHVs one to three years—underscores the need for further research on how length of stay and transitions to permanent residency shape migrants’ racialization, incorporation, and sense of belonging in both sending and receiving countries. Second, while this study focuses on Chinese migrants in the U.S. and Australia, future research could expand comparative work across other ethnic groups and national contexts to examine how varied immigration and emigration policies shape racialization globally. Third, although our contrasting case design prioritized between-group comparison, future studies should explore the heterogeneity within each group. F-1 students and WHV holders are not monolithic. Variations in gender, region, and educational background influence how migrants experience and interpret race and racism. Addressing these internal differences would further enrich the understanding of Chinese diasporas.

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Ethics Statement

The research on U.S.-based Chinese students (IRB00109427) received exemption from Emory University’s Institutional Review Board (IRB). The project on Chinese working holiday makers in Australia (IRB22X156) has received approval from UAlbany’s IRB.

Disclosure Statement

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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