



Deserving More Visibility: The Pain and Prejudice Faced by Asian International Students in the U.S. Education System

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Abstract. This paper explores the challenges and prejudices faced by Asian international students in the U.S. education system, examining how cultural differences, language barriers, and biases contribute to their difficulties. Asian students comprise nearly 70% of the total international student population in the U.S., and their expectations often starkly contrast with their actual experiences. Drawing from existing literature and case studies, this paper analyzes the sense of alienation these students face, emphasizing the gaps in institutional support and the prevalence of both explicit and implicit biases. Additionally, it connects these experiences to broader historical and social contexts, highlighting the need for systemic change in the U.S. education system. Ultimately, the paper advocates for the development of targeted programs to address the unique challenges faced by Asian international students, promoting an equitable education system that values their contributions and helps them succeed.

Keywords: Asian international students, U.S. education system, cultural differences, language barriers, implicit bias, alienation, institutional support, equity in education.

1 Introduction: The Reality of Asian International Students in the U.S.

According to Statista, there were 1,057,188 international students in the United States (U.S.) during the 2022-2023 school year, with Asian students comprising nearly 70% of the total international student population (National Center for Education Statistics, 2023)[3][6]. This staggering number demonstrates the preference of Asian international students for the U.S. education system, as they come to the U.S. excited to embark on new adventures in pursuit of their own American dreams. However, their arrival is not always the reception expected. “Anxiety was found in 64.9% (707 out of 1,090) of international students,” according to Yejun Tan and other researchers from the University of Minnesota Twin Cities reported in the peer-reviewed journal from the National Library of Medicine[15]. Why are the experiences of Asian international students in the U.S. education system so different from their expectations? This article explores the

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impact of both explicit and implicit alienation, stemming from cultural barriers, language discrepancies, stereotypical perceptions from educators, biases in the classroom, and societal and moral expectations, on Asian international students.

2 Literature Review: Neglect of Minorities and the Need for Self-Advocacy

Jacob Lawrence's painting "Confrontation on the Bridge" (Source E, 1975), as well as Melinda Janko's article "Elouise Cobell: A Small Measure of Justice" (Source D, 2013), showcase the prejudice and neglect of minorities in different social and contemporary contexts in the United States[9]. These works depict the arduous struggle faced by marginalized communities. In the current U.S. education system, Asian international students as minorities receive very little attention, further amplifying the cultural and linguistic problems they encounter due to prejudice. As international students, schools and the entire education system serve as their most vital support systems. Without this support, these students may suffer great mental anguish and developmental obstacles. Meanwhile, Lawrence's depiction of African Americans in the civil rights movement and Janko's description of native Americans' political advocacy on the Congress floor illustrate the importance of confronting injustice and self-advocacy. This theme is as prevalent today as it was in 1975: Minorities should always be noticed and supported. Lawrence uses vivid colors and expressive compositions to highlight the strength and courage of the African American marchers, amidst snarling dogs and ominous skies. Yet, the parade will always move forward. Janko saw what sustained Indians like Elouise Cobell and others who continued to fight after one defeat after another: their passion for righting historic wrongs and their love for their people. Therefore, the pain and prejudice faced by Asian international students, as a marginalized minority group, are also worthy of greater attention. The education system they rely on should engage in deeper introspection regarding their experiences and implement meaningful adjustments.

3 Insufficient Support from the Education System

The arrival of international students in the U.S., their access to schools, and to opportunities and resources are all dependent on government, community, and school support. For example, in higher education, some universities offer specialized branches for international students, such as the "Extension's International Program" at the University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA), whose tagline is "No matter where you're from, we're here to help you succeed." Specific programs include study abroad programs for current college students and participation in UCLA courses in foreign locations[7]. Similarly, the University of Utah and the University of Pittsburgh, display international student programs on their websites[1][12]. While concerns of international students may be recognized, those who come to the U.S. are not truly provided

with opportunities and resources. There are no visible programs, let alone targeted departments for international students from various regions.

Most international students do not have family accompanying them or a community of their own. They often come to the U.S. alone in pursuit of the American dream, with school being the only place they can socialize and acquire knowledge. But can schools truly provide them with the support they need? Sociologists Carola Suárez-Orozco, Jean Rhodes et al., at New York University, highlighted in a peer-reviewed journal that unaccompanied newcomer youth face other constraints, many of which are prevalent within schools^[13]. Valerie Strauss, a journalist from Washington Post who has interviewed over 100 international students, echoes this sentiment, categorizing those constraints into “low-resources and academic and socio-emotional supports in their schools, lack of quality and culturally sustaining curriculum, and a lack of counselors with background and language-ability that reflects newcomers’ culture”^[14]. These restrictions international students encounter can result in a sense of alienation which limit the development of a positive sense of self. Despite the abundance of cultural resources within American schools, they are often underutilized^[14].

Hence, what specific “constraints” do Asian students encounter? In summary, the core “constraints” include cultural differences, language barriers, and external biases (both explicit and implicit).

4 Constraint I: Cultural Differences

In terms of cultural differences, Jonathan Gorry, a professor of international relations at Nottingham Trent University, says that “most international students from Asia experience difficulties in adapting to the host environment because of cultural differences”^[5]. Researchers such as Yahong Zhang, Lois Warner, and others from Rutgers University-Newark, published in the peer-reviewed Sage Journal, categorize such “cultural differences” into three prominent types: the distinction in a culture of academic engagement, a culture of learning and teaching, and a culture that informs students’ approaches to challenges^[18]. Professor Gorry compared the Asian learning and teaching culture to didacticism, especially when compared to the American version^[5]. For students, acquiring knowledge provided by teachers is prioritized over innovation. Chen, a 17-year-old teenage boy, currently attends a private high school in Boston. Prior to his arrival in the U.S., he studied at a renowned middle school in China, where he achieved a TOEFL score of 114/120. Despite his consistent high grades across all subjects, he struggles with confidence, feeling unnoticed in his Boston high school. After a year of studying in a American high school, he began to feel “undeserving of happiness because he feels he can’t do anything well except for exams.” For Asian international students, such as Chen, growing up in an Asian culture with traditional “values of humility and emotional self-control” rather than the U.S. culture of “values of individualism and openness to emotional expression” gives them a different approach to challenges and behavior^[17]. Jennifer Young, a professor at California State University, Long Beach, reveals that when Asian international students come to the U.S. alone,

they often hold negative attitudes toward professional counseling. Instead, they frequently seek assistance from family and personal networks, and in some cases, remaining silent rather than seeking help is a natural response^[17].

In addition, it can be difficult for their distant families to support these students, yet schools often fail to provide guidance or teach them how to seek help. Yiying Xiong, a doctoral student in Counseling and Higher Education at Ohio University, and Yuchun Zhou, an Assistant Professor in the Educational Studies and Evaluation Program at Ohio University, noted in an empirical study that Chinese international students were not accustomed to finding information on their own^[16]. Instead, they expected professors and schools in the U.S. to arrange everything for them, as was the practice in their home programs in China. Conversely, university staff and faculty in the U.S. may expect international students to be more self-reliant than domestic students in the United States. Such discussions often criticize Chinese students as not meeting the expectations of American universities^[18]. However, schools do little to help international students with their transition to a new learning model. Nevertheless, there should be specific institutions or programs within the university's educational system to guide them in developing self-reliance more quickly, rather than allowing some of them to lose confidence and miss opportunities in confusion.

5 Constraint II: The Language Barrier

Another major challenge is the language barrier which affects the personal and academic experiences of international students. Researchers such as Eunyoung Kim from Seton Hall University stated in the peer-reviewed *Journal of International Student* that the language barrier hinders Asian international students from participating in educational activities, including reading long lectures, class participation, group discussions, academic writing, and oral presentations, especially in the early stages of their studies in the United States. Lack of English abilities can also lead to feelings of low self-esteem, loneliness, homesickness, shame, shyness, embarrassment, and perceived discrimination^[10]. Such feelings can eventually lead to decreased classroom participation, academic procrastination, social withdrawal^[17]. Second language students may struggle with English proficiency, becoming discouraged and further distanced from learning and school. For example, a 10th grader from East Asia may find it challenging to complete assignments on time and participate in class discussions because they cannot read the assigned books at the same pace as native students in their English class, which can negatively impact their happiness and confidence at school. Without English-speaking family members, the student may be unable to share daily school events or ask questions about homework^[18]. This can result in students falling through the cracks, as the education system has not developed an effective way to assist them. Even more alarming is the issue of "linguistic racism" faced by Asian international students, as identified by Sender Dovchin, a professor in the School of Education at Curtin University in Perth, Australia. Dovchin identifies two key features of "linguistic racism": "racial accent bullying" and "linguistic stereotyping". She found that Asian international students are

often perceived to be lacking proficiency in English, regardless of their actual English skills, which can lead to significant psychological harm[4].

6 Constraint III: Stereotypes and Bias

Furthermore, the ethical dimension of the treatment Asian international students face is both implicit and explicit; however, regardless of its manifestation, it ultimately stems from stereotypes of Asian international students. As early as 1996, in the Harvard Educational Review, Professors McKay and Wong from San Francisco State University and the University of California, Berkeley, noted that East Asian students studying in the U.S. were often perceived as timid, unsociable, and reticent in classroom activities and discussions. This perception stems from a longstanding stereotype of Asians, as well as demonstrated difficulties as second language speakers^[11]. Additionally, what is often overlooked are the implicit attitudes in the environments these students face. Differences in the way teachers and professors conceptualize and evaluate perceptions of teaching in education can lead to barriers in measurement and feedback, according to Sara Costa, Postdoctoral Researcher at the Department of Educational Sciences, University of Rome III. Research has shown that teachers have lower educational expectations regarding the potential success of students from ethnic and racial minorities, primarily due to the implicit prejudices associated with these social groups, such as international students^[2].

Some argue that these prejudices, both explicit and implicit, are just unavoidable obstacles stemming from cultural and cognitive differences due to various geographical and racial origins. However, as a diverse America, individuals in this country should have the same right to pursue their own American dream when they stand together. Whether they are considered part of the domestic population or are coming internationally, they deserve genuine attention and practical assistance from an education system that is designed to be equitable.

7 Conclusion: Reflection and Progress in the Education System

In conclusion, this paper analyzes the current perceptions of the U.S. education system towards international students and existing programs, as well as the self-perceptions of international students. It also delves into the significant challenges posed by Asian international students due to cultural differences, language barriers, and both explicit and implicit biases from the outside world. To truly enhance the lives of these unaccompanied international students, including a more nuanced approach to federal resources. “Don’t pretend they’re not here”^[14], but rather welcome and value them. Schools should develop assistance and guidance programs attuned to the needs of Asian students, facilitating their adaptation to the U.S. education system and new social lifestyles. For instance, addressing language barriers effectively, aiding cultural adaptation, and helping teachers navigate and reconcile cultural differences among students. Their cultural backgrounds should not be erased, but rather embraced in the creation of a diverse and innovative education system.

Lawrence focuses on portraying the bravery of the African American marchers; Janko's quote resonates even more deeply with me: "Imagine the celebration that took place after winning a 30-year battle with the most powerful government in the world"^[8]! Just like minority groups such as Asian international students, the pain and prejudices they face should be acknowledged. It may take 30 years for those pains and prejudices to be truly addressed, but the U.S. education system, must progress, even if it begins with just one small step.

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