Discrimination Under Cultural Differences: A Study of Implicit Bias Faced by International Students

Jiaqi Hu

School of Law, Guangdong University of Finance and Economics, Guangzhou, China

Keywords: Cultural Differences, Implicit Bias, International Students.

Abstract: In the context of high-quality international educational exchanges, more international students are choosing to further study abroad in countries with multicultural policies. Nevertheless, they face issues of discrimination, which have evolved from overt to covert forms instead. Implicit discrimination is mainly manifested in the microaggression of international students in academic research, the exclusion of social interaction, and the unfair treatment of employment development. These affect the mental health, academic and career development of international students. Though legal policies exist, practical implementation is challenging, leaving hidden biases unaddressed. This paper explores the forms, origins, and remedies of hidden discrimination against international students through literature review and case analysis. It highlights that cultural differences are the root cause and calls for a collaborative effort from students, universities and governments to break down barriers and create an inclusive learning environment for sustainable international education development.

1 GENERAL INSTRUCTIONS

Under the wave of globalization, international exchanges in the field of education are becoming more and more frequent. More and more international students are choosing to choose countries with multicultural policies for further study. In recent years, the number of international students has been growing. In addition to the traditional popular study - abroad destinations of the UK, the US, and France, the proportion of students choosing to study in countries such as China, Australia, and Germany has also significantly increased. However, in the seemingly inclusive social and cultural context, the international student community faces the real problem of prejudice and discrimination. Especially in the context of today's international education, the discrimination faced by international students is quietly changing from explicit to implicit. This prejudice is mainly rooted in the historical, cultural and social cognitive differences of different countries, and exists in the academic, social and career development of international students in ways that are hard to detect (Chen, 2021).

Implicit discrimination, unlike explicit bias, is more subtle, manifesting in subtle exclusion, unfair academic treatment, and social marginalization. These issues undermine international students' self-esteem and sense of belonging, impacting their academic progress and career development, and hindering their integration into foreign cultures. TCases such as the 2019 racist incident at Laurentian University in Canada and the 2021 Yu Jun v. Idaho State University case in the US underscore the severity and urgency of addressing implicit bias and discrimination. These incidents highlight the widespread nature of discrimination and its multifaceted impact on international students. Thus, addressing implicit bias has become an urgent and important task.

Despite efforts by various countries to address implicit discrimination against international students through policies and legal measures, implementation challenges persist, resulting in insufficient attention and ineffective resolution of bias issues. Universities, though possessing anti-discrimination policies, mostly focus on overt discrimination, with unclear definitions and handling procedures for implicit bias. For instance, the lack of clear standards for addressing microaggressions in classrooms leaves

international students without effective support. Additionally, students struggle to find proper feedback channels for such biases. Though multicultural acceptance has improved, stereotypes about international students remain in social. Many locals still view Asian international students as "not being good at socializing," leading to their exclusion in social settings. Furthermore, the limited intercultural activities at the societal level restrict interactions between international students and local residents, exacerbating the invisible discrimination they encounter.

When examining the reasons behind the implicit biases faced by international students, cultural differences are one of the important factors. These difference stems from the long-term accumulation of variations in history, values, and behavior patterns across different countries and regions, and has deep social roots. Due to the complexity and diversity of cultural differences, it is difficult to completely eliminate them in a short period of time. International students often need a considerable amount of time to adapt to a new cultural environment.

This paper focuses on the problem of implicit bias faced by international students during their study abroad experiences. Utilizing methods such as literature review and case analysis, it examines the manifestations and regulatory status of implicit discrimination in the current era. Through research, this paper aims to uncover the underlying social and cultural mechanisms behind the existence of prejudice, focusing on the external role of invisible bias on individuals and the internal construction of cultural identity. Additionally, the study offers multidimensional solutions and recommendations for educational institutions, policymakers, and international students.

This article proposes solutions to hidden discrimination from multiple perspectives to alleviate the cross-cultural conflict and adaptation problems faced by the international student community, create a more inclusive and supportive learning environment for them, and enable the international student community to achieve personal growth and academic development in the context of multicultural countries. At the same time, this study also hopes that international educational exchanges can be promoted to a deeper level and realize the sustainable development of international education. Only by working together to reduce the implicit bias faced by the international student community can countries make their study and life abroad smoother and make

greater contributions to the diversified development of international education around the world.

2 MANIFESTATIONS AND PRGULATORY STATUS OF IMPLICIT STATUS OF IMPLICIT DISCRIMINATION AMONG INTERNATIONAL AMONG INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS

2.1 Manifestations of Implicit Discrimination Faced by International Students

2.1.1 Microaggressions in Academic Research

One of the manifestations of implicit discrimination faced by international students mainly exists in academic research. Due to encountering unfair discrimination and bias in their studies, international students face obstacles on their academic journey.

Microaggressions, a common form of implicit discrimination, involve verbal offenses and behavioral rejections. International students may be overlooked in class or given unimportant tasks in group discussions. Professors may subconsciously undervalue their contributions, perceiving them as less insightful or creative compared to those of domestic students. A notable example is the December 2023 MIT incident, where Professor Rosalind W. Picard publicly criticized a Chinese student for academic misconduct at the NeurIPS conference in Vancouver. She highlighted the student's Chinese nationality and cited personalized statements as evidence. This act of stereotyping an entire group based on one instance is a clear affront to Chinese students and typifies academic microaggressions. It negatively affects the reputation of Chinese students, leading to doubts about their academic integrity and impacting their opportunities and career development.

Moreover, microaggressions are also manifested in international students who are wrongly accused of academic misconduct due to cultural differences between countries or unfamiliar with the professional academic norms of the country where they are studying. A typical case is the University of

Minnesota doctoral student expulsion over AI use. In January 2024, the University of Minnesota expelled a Chinese doctoral student in his third year, Yang Haishan, on suspicion of using AI to answer exam questions. The university alleged that some of his responses closely matched those of ChatGPT, implying plagiarism. However, Mr. Yang insisted that he only used ChatGPT to check grammar and did not use AI to generate answers on the test. For international students. This incident highlights the misunderstandings and biases that international students face in international education and academic research, often rooted in differing cultural backgrounds.

Through relevant research investigation and background analysis, we found that the formation factors of implicit discrimination faced by international students in academic research may greatly affect the mental health of international students, produce anxiety and decreased self-worth. It affects the academic development of international students' research opportunities, mentorship and career development.

2.1.2 Social Interaction Discrimination

International students also face implicit discrimination in their social interactions, which not only hampers their integration into the local culture of the host country but also poses incalculable obstacles to their psychological well-being and social development during their study abroad period. These forms of implicit bias at the social level manifests itself in many ways, and is compounded by cultural differences and historical contexts between countries.

In social interactions, international students are often prejudiced and ridiculed by local students because of their weaker second-language skills (Li & Gong, 2025). For example, some Asian American students are belittled by their classmates because they do not speak fluently because of their English accent or expression. These verbal attacks not only hurt their self-esteem but can also lead them to become silent in social situations and not take the initiative to express their opinions in order to weaken the bias of local students (Sembiante, Salinas, Ramírez, Vásquez-Colina, & Silva, 2020). This phenomenon is especially common on American campuses, where some Chinese students are ignored by their classmates and teachers in class due to accent problems, which seriously affects their enthusiasm for integrating into the local culture. In addition, there

is social exclusion, for example, international students often find it difficult to integrate into the local social circle, because local students may be reluctant to accept international students. Some international students are intentionally or unintentionally overlooked at campus parties or social events, with no one inviting them to participate, making it challenging for them to build friendships with local students.

Taking the UK as an example, Chinese students report a higher proportion of discrimination in UK higher education institutions. A 2024 survey showed that 41% of Chinese students reported experiencing discrimination due to a combination of race, ethnicity, and nationality. This discrimination manifests itself not only in verbal aggression and social exclusion, but also in cultural misunderstandings and stereotypes. For example, some Britons believe that Chinese culture is "backward" compared to British culture, a misconception that has led to prejudice and discrimination against Chinese students (Wang, 2023).

After being discriminated against, many international students often feel a great deal of psychological pressure. They may experience emotions such as anxiety, fear, impaired self-esteem, and heightened loneliness. Prolonged exposure to a discriminatory environment can not only affect international students' academic performance and quality of life but also cause lasting harm to their mental health. Due to language barriers and cultural differences, international students are more inclined to socialize with their compatriots and meet other people from the same country or region, thus forming a closed circle and missing important opportunities to expand their interpersonal networks (Yan, 2018).

2.1.3 Discrimination in Employment Development

International students also face numerous implicit biases in career development. Local employers believe that it is difficult for international students to adapt to the local corporate culture, and will consider the cultural differences of multiple countries, which will affect the work communication and task arrangement of the enterprise. Employers might also question the quality of overseas education, doubting the professional capabilities of international students despite their international education and high professional skills. Some local companies also put forward additional hidden requirements, such as

screening based on race or nationality, demanding the purchase of "American identity insurance," or requiring unconventional interview times. These hidden conditions not only increase the cost and psychological burden of international students, but also show the invisible discrimination faced by international students in employment development.

2.2 Current Status and Limitations of Solutions

In recent years, according to relevant literature and reports, it is not difficult to find that the problem of implicit discrimination faced by international students has gradually entered the public eye. Governments, social organizations and universities have taken multi-dimensional actions to solve it, but the solution to this problem is still generally limited.

In March 2025, the chairman of the US House of Representatives' "China Select Committee" requested detailed information on Chinese students from six universities. In response, China's Foreign Ministry spokesperson Mao Ning urged the US to protect Chinese students' legitimate rights and avoid discriminatory measures. Socially, organizations like the Asian American Coalition for Education have protested and negotiated to stop discriminatory practices in university applications. Legally, acts like the US Civil Rights Act and Title IX have been updated to protect international students' equal rights. However, current regulations mainly focus on study-abroad destination countries, neglecting protections for students by their home countries. Despite existing laws, international students often struggle to obtain sufficient support in practice. One-sided media reports and societal unawareness of implicit discrimination further exacerbate the issue, making it difficult to detect and correct such covert biases, which may even reinforce negative stereotypes.

In addition, as a school with a high incidence of invisible discrimination faced by international students, many colleges and universities are also actively carrying out anti-discrimination training, improving the awareness of multicultural understanding of teachers and students, cracking down on harassment or bullying, and providing psychological counseling and legal consulting services for international students. However, university anti-discrimination policies are often not effectively implemented. In handling complaints from international students, some universities are

unable to provide effective assistance due to a lack of concrete evidence or policy support.

3 WAYS TO SOLVE THE HIDDEN DISCRIMINATION OF DISCRIMINATION OF INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS

3.1 Cultural Differences: The Root Cause of Implicit Discrimination Among International Students

Based on the analysis of the multi-dimensional status quo and current measures faced by international students, we can see that the root causes of implicit discrimination are complex. These causes are primarily reflected in cultural differences, social cognitive biases, language communication difficulties, and the solidification of stereotypes. Research on cross-cultural communication has found that there are cultural differences between different ethnic groups. For instance, there are distinct differences in communication styles between Whites and Blacks, European Americans and Latino Americans. These differences extend to language use, non-verbal behavior, and values among different ethnic groups (Hu, 2005). These cultural differences have led to group biases faced by international students, and with the globalization of educational exchanges, they have gradually changed from explicit to implicit.

Therefore, among the many contributing factors, cultural differences are the most fundamental reason for the invisible bias faced by the international student community. As Nesbitt argues in The Global Paradox, as the world becomes more and more homogeneous, people increasingly value and hold on to their own uniqueness. Culture serves as an identity identifier that distinguishes different groups from each other, and people unconsciously maintain the uniqueness of their own culture. Culture serves as an identity identifier that distinguishes different groups from each other, and people unconsciously maintain the uniqueness of their own culture. Even though Chinese culture has undergone a transformation and gradually formed a relatively stable model, the differences between it and other cultures are still significant.

Cultural differences, as the core cause of implicit discrimination among international students, are

widely present in all dimensions of international students' life in foreign countries. At the level of language communication, due to the great differences in language habits and expressions in different countries, international students may encounter misunderstandings in daily communication and suffer unfair treatment. There are significant differences between Chinese and American cultures in terms of values, regional history, ethical concepts, and behavior patterns. This cultural and psychological difference has created different cultural models and educational orientations in China and the United States. For example, international students in Western countries who attend Chinese gatherings find that Chinese gatherings are usually mostly strangers, which is different from the Western social culture they are accustomed to. Not socializing because of this cultural difference may be misconstrued as "unsociable" or "unfriendly."

At the social level, international students may be excluded from mainstream interactions due to differences in cultural customs and etiquette norms. In education, varying learning styles and thinking patterns can lead to biases in academic evaluations, impacting students' development (Qu & Cross, 2024). For instance, Western individualism contrasts sharply with Chinese collectivism, causing Chinese students to be seen as "unactive" for not speaking up in class, affecting their participation and leading to misunderstandings (Jin, 2023). This was evident in the 2013 case at Idaho State University, where a top-performing Chinese doctoral student, Jun Yu, was dismissed without warning for "unsatisfactory progress." This incident highlights how cultural differences can cause stereotypes and biases, invisibly influencing evaluations. The university failed to understand and respect cultural differences in adaptation, using one-sided standards to measure Yu's progress, resulting in an unfair decision.

Although the phenomenon of implicit prejudice faced by these international students exists quietly in a hidden form, it also has an immeasurable impact on the psychological, academic, social and career development of international students, which urgently needs the attention and resolution of all sectors of society.

3.2 Resolutions

According to some of the measures proposed at present, it is still necessary to further start from multiple perspectives to solve the dilemma of invisible prejudice faced by international students, and build a highly inclusive support system for international students through comprehensive policies in terms of cultural education, legal protection, and social publicity.

3.2.1 International Student Group

In the early stage of studying abroad, international students should have an in-depth understanding of the cultural background, customs and social etiquette of the target country by reading books, watching documentaries, participating in online forums and other ways. At the same time, with the help of language learning tools, students can improve their language proficiency and master local slang and non-verbal communication skills, lay the foundation for cross-cultural communication, and effectively alleviate the problem of language communication bias caused by cultural differences.

During the study abroad period, international students should actively participate in club activities, volunteer services and cultural exchange activities organized by the exchange school and the community, take the initiative to communicate with local classmates and residents on a daily basis, and integrate into the local life of the country through daily contact, such as renting a house and shopping. At the same time, international students should respect each other's cultures, be open to new ideas, introduce their own cultures, break stereotypes, and enhance mutual understanding. The most important thing is that the international student community should correctly recognize that culture shock is a normal phenomenon and experience of studying abroad, and need to be patient and open-minded, try to understand and accept different perspectives and customs, and continue to learn and adapt to the new environment.

3.2.2 Organizational Groups of Colleges and Universities

Creating a collaborative support system among universities, communities, and social organizations is crucial to effectively alleviate hidden biases against international students. This system can form a joint force across three dimensions: cultural adaptation, rights protection, and social cognition, to further promote solution implementation. Universities generally include anti-discrimination guidelines in student handbooks, highlighting equal opportunities for all students. They should also establish robust

cross-cultural education mechanisms, integrating cultural customs and social etiquette into required courses and using scenario simulation training to enhance international students' ability to navigate cultural conflicts. Furthermore, universities should set up international service centers with multilingual teams to provide academic and psychological counseling, and implement mentorship programs to foster interaction between local and international students, reducing misunderstandings and prejudices. Moreover, universities need to create feedback channels, such as anonymous reporting mailboxes and online platforms, to collect and promptly address feedback. This ensures that international students have avenues to protect their rights and reduces issues arising from difficulties in providing evidence and feedback.

Social organizations need to work together from the three dimensions of culture, law, and publicity: plan multicultural themed activities, build interactive platforms, set up special legal service windows to provide rights protection support, and cooperate with the media to carry out systematic social mobilization. The community can build a normalized cultural exchange platform with colleges and universities, break the one-way output model through cultural display, art co-creation and other forms, promote the establishment of deep connections between international students and local residents, gradually eliminate the soil of prejudice, and finally form a social consensus that respects multiculturalism (Cipolletta, Tedoldi, & Tomaino, 2024).

3.2.3 At the Level of National Governments

The government should strive to improve anti-discrimination laws and regulations, clearly define implicit discrimination, clarify its manifestations and judgment criteria, and formulate specific punishment measures, such as fines and administrative sanctions, so as to enhance the operability and deterrence of the law, and provide a solid legal backing for international students, so that they can defend their rights in accordance with the law when they encounter implicit discrimination. According to the current legal provisions, it is not difficult to find that the relevant regulations still lack the protection of the discrimination faced by the host country of the international student group, which can be added in detail in the relevant regulations in the future to

provide a variety of ways to protect the legitimate rights and interests of international students.

The government needs to strengthen regulations in key areas such as schools, businesses and the media. Government departments shall urge schools to establish a fair and just educational environment to ensure the study and life of international students; Supervise enterprises to strictly comply with anti-discrimination laws and regulations, and avoid unfair treatment of international students in recruitment, promotion, etc.; The media is required to report on international students-related incidents objectively and fairly, avoid spreading stereotypes and prejudices, and reduce the occurrence of hidden discrimination through all-round supervision.

Implicit discrimination is a global problem, and governments should actively strengthen cooperation with other countries. By sharing their experiences and practices in dealing with implicit discrimination against international students, countries should jointly explore more effective governance strategies to promote the establishment of international cultural exchange and understanding mechanisms, promote mutual understanding and respect among students from different countries, and reduce implicit discrimination caused by cultural differences at the root. Through international cooperation, we will form a synergy of global governance and create a more equitable and inclusive international environment for international students.

4 CONCLUSION

In the context of globalization, international educational exchanges have shown a vigorous development trend, and the number of international students in universities from various countries has continued to grow. Although many study abroad countries actively advocate multicultural policies, prejudice and discrimination are still prevalent in many areas of life, such as academic, social, and career development, and cause problems for international students. Today, this shift from explicit to implicit discrimination reveals the complexity and urgency of the problem, and it is urgent to build a comprehensive support system to deal with it.

With the increasing frequency of international exchanges, international students face many implicit biases, which exist in the microaggressions in the field of academic research, social interaction, and employment development. The root causes of implicit

discrimination are complex, and cultural differences are the most fundamental causes. The communication styles and behavioral norms in different cultural backgrounds are very different, which can easily lead to communication misunderstandings and behavioral conflicts, and then form the problem of hidden biases encountered by international students in communication.

To address the issue of implicit discrimination against international students, a multi-level support system involving international students, universities, social organizations, and governments is essential. International students should proactively familiarize themselves with the cultural customs and social norms of the host country before departure. During the study abroad period, you will take the initiative to interact with local students to improve your language level and cultural adaptability. Colleges and universities should improve the cross-cultural education mechanism and establish a feedback mechanism to seriously deal with discrimination, so that the problem of implicit bias among international students can be solved. Social organizations should play the role of a bridge, plan multicultural activities and carry out anti-discrimination publicity, promote the exchange and integration of students from different cultural backgrounds, and raise the public's awareness of implicit discrimination. The government needs to improve laws and regulations to strengthen the supervision and punishment of discriminatory behavior. They should also promote international cooperation, sign educational cooperation agreements, and enhance academic exchanges and talent mobility between countries to improve the international recognition of international students.

Only through the concerted efforts of all countries can we hope to break down the barriers of prejudice from explicit to implicit, create a more equitable and inclusive learning and development space for international students, and make international educational exchanges truly an important force in promoting cultural exchanges and promoting human progress.

REFERENCES

Blue Book of China Study Abroad Development Report.2023-2024.Retrieve April 7, 2025, *Retrieved from http://www.ccg.org.cn/archives/84288.*

Chen. 2021. Academic Discrimination and Equal Protection of Academic Rights: From the Perspective of Academic Ecology. *Educational Research of Tsinghua University*42 (05):83-93.

Hu W.2005. An Empirical Study on Intercultural Communication. *Journal of Foreign Language Teaching and Research*05:323-327,400.

Lin Y. 2018. Language Socialization and Identity in Learning. (eds.) *Proceedings of the 5th International Conference on Education, Language, Art and Inter-cultural Communication (ICELAIC 2018) 2018*

Qu X.,Cross B. 2024.UDL for inclusive higher education— What makes group work effective for diverse international students in UK?. *International Journal of Educational Research 123. (2024):*

Renze J. 2023. Culture Variation in In group Bias:Exploring the Impact of Cultural Background on Group Identity and Preferences among Chinese Domestic and International Students. (eds.) *Proceedings of the International Conference on Global Politics and Socio-Humanities(part3). Nanjing International School:* 487-492.

Sabrina C., Ilaria T., Silvia C., Maria T.2024.A blended group intervention to promote social connectedness and well being among international university students: an exploratory study. *Frontiers in Psychology*15, 1497544-1497544.

Sabrina F. S., Cristóbal S.,J. Andrés R., Maria D. Vásquez-C.&Yamilé S.2020. Different When I Opened My Mouth: Experiences, Reflections, and Perspectives of Faculty Members with Foreign English Accents in Higher Education. *Meridians*19 (2) :295-320.

Weiting W.2023.Cultural Variation in In-group Bias among Chinese International Students. (eds.) Proceedings of the International Conference on Global Politics and Socio-Humanities（part3）. *Department of Psychology,Western University* :354-358.

Wendong (Marco) L.,Yang (Frank) G. 2025. Agency in the Nexus of Identity and Social Network: Understanding the Second Language Socialization Experiences of International Students in China. Journal of Language. *Identity & Education*24 (2):233-251.