

**Navigating microaggressions in the workplace:
experiences of Chinese international academics in
England**

CHENG, Ming <<http://orcid.org/0000-0002-7310-4981>>

Available from Sheffield Hallam University Research Archive (SHURA) at:

<https://shura.shu.ac.uk/37752/>

This document is the Published Version [VoR]

Citation:

CHENG, Ming (2026). Navigating microaggressions in the workplace: experiences of Chinese international academics in England. Higher Education. [Article]

Copyright and re-use policy

See <http://shura.shu.ac.uk/information.html>



Navigating microaggressions in the workplace: experiences of Chinese international academics in England

Ming Cheng¹

Received: 8 December 2025 / Accepted: 30 June 2026
© The Author(s) 2026

Abstract

Microaggressions are pervasive within historically white British higher education, but there is little research on Chinese international academics' experiences and how they navigate microaggressions in their workplace. Drawing on interviews with 41 Chinese academics from four universities in England, this research reveals that 35 participants (85%) experienced or witnessed microaggressions which created a hostile academic environment that undermined their professional standing and cultural identity. The verbal, behavioural, and environmental microaggressions operate through institutional structures that concentrate Chinese academics in junior positions with heavy workloads and deny them voice, credibility, and advancement opportunities. The research participants developed four main response strategies (non-confrontation, active resistance, strategic visibility, and exit planning) to navigate microaggressions, revealing sophisticated negotiations between cultural values, pragmatic assessments of their position, and survival needs. The complex patterns of microaggressions illuminated by this study contribute to better understanding of racial microaggressions in academic settings. The study extends Bourdieu's capital framework by revealing how racialization can create complete blockages to capital conversion, not merely inefficient conversion. It also provides important insights for Critical Race Theory, particularly regarding how racism operates distinctively for Chinese international academics who are hypervisible as foreign and different, yet invisible in decision-making and senior leadership in the English universities.

Keywords Microaggressions · Chinese international academics · Experiences · England

Introduction

This paper investigates Chinese international academics' experiences of microaggressions in the workplace in England. Microaggressions refer to the "brief and commonplace daily verbal, behavioural, or environmental indignities, whether intentional or unintentional, that

✉ Ming Cheng
M.Cheng@shu.ac.uk

¹ Sheffield Institute of Education, College of Social Sciences and Arts, Sheffield Hallam University, Charles Street, City Campus, Sheffield S1 2NE, UK

communicate hostile, derogatory, or negative racial slights and insults toward people of colour” (Sue et al., 2007, p.271). Microaggressions are the focus of the study because they are deeply entrenched in historically white British higher education where East Asian and black academics frequently encounter racial discrimination which negatively impacts their professional growth, well-being and sense of belonging (Bhopal, 2022; Kim, 2020; Kim & Ng, 2019; Rollock, 2012).

There is limited research on Chinese international academics’ experiences of microaggressions, even though they represent the largest group of international academics in the UK, and most of them in England (Universities, 2026). This study therefore seeks to explore their lived experiences of workplace microaggressions in English universities. It examines the main types of microaggressions encountered, whether and how microaggressions affect their credibility, workload, promotion, and leadership opportunities, and reveals the academics’ coping strategies to navigate the microaggressions. Critical Race Theory and Pierre Bourdieu’s (1986) schematic form [(habitus) (capital) + field=practice] are used to interrogate the dynamics at play in Chinese international academics’ experiences of microaggression.

Microaggression

The term microaggression was first coined by Harvard psychiatrist Chester Pierce in 1970 to refer to “black-white racial interactions [that] are characterized by white put-downs, done in an automatic, preconscious, or unconscious fashion” (Pierce, 1974, p.515, as cited in Williams, 2020, p.3). The definition of racial microaggressions introduced above (Sue et al., 2007, p.271) has become the most widely cited in the literature: “brief and commonplace daily verbal, behavioural, or environmental indignities, whether intentional or unintentional, that communicate hostile, derogatory, or negative racial slights and insults toward people of colour”. This definition emphasizes the everyday nature of microaggressions, their multiple manifestations, and their occurrence regardless of perpetrator intent. Developing the concept further, Williams (2020) defines microaggressions as “deniable acts of racism that reinforce pathological stereotypes and inequitable social norms” (p.4) which are “caused by socially conditioned racial biases and prejudices” (p.6).

According to Sue et al. (2007), microaggressions as interpersonal interactions can take three main forms: microassaults, microinsults and microinvalidations. Of the three, microassaults are the most overt type of discrimination towards an individual or group based on race or identity. They include verbal or nonverbal attacks meant to hurt the intended victim through name-calling, use of racial slurs, avoidant behaviour, and/or denying equal service based solely on race (Sue et al., 2007). Microinsults are subtle messages of rudeness and insensitivity that demean a person’s identity or racial heritage (Sue et al., 2007). Microinvalidations are comments and behaviours that negate or dismiss the thoughts, feelings, or experiential reality of a person or group (Sue et al., 2007).

As microaggressions are often associated with interpersonal interactions (Sue et al., 2007), they tend to be treated as isolated personal incidents, rather than recognized as direct products of systemic, institutional, and environmental inequalities (Archuleta et al., 2024). This is because microaggressions can be subtle, ambiguous, and invisible to the perpetrator and/or the recipient (Sue, 2010). This invisibility is facilitated by colour-blind attitudes

(Neville et al., 2000) that race and ethnicity do not matter, therefore denying the racial reality of people of colour while providing cover for discriminatory behaviours.

Microaggressions arise from a confluence of individual and structural factors and can be deeply embedded in institutional environments. Pérez Huber and Solórzano (2015) use a Critical Race Theory framework to interpret how systemic and institutional forms of racism, and their ideological underpinnings, allow microaggressions to occur. They point out that microaggressions are not simply interpersonal slights but also manifestations of the institutional structures that maintain racial hierarchies. Higher education institutions often maintain inequality through mechanisms that make advantaged positions appear natural and inevitable, even when they claim to promote equality (Ahmed, 2012; Archuleta et al., 2024).

Microaggressions in academia

Research reveals that microaggressions can negatively affect the work of academics, especially those from marginalized backgrounds, by causing stereotyping, psychological distress, and social isolation (Haynes-Baratz et al., 2021; Kim, 2020; Kim & Ng, 2019; Morley et al., 2018; Pustelnikovaite & Chillias, 2023; Sian, 2017). International academics often encounter stereotyping in the UK, which leads them to experience fragile social relations. For example, the participants in research by Morley et al. (2018) report exercising extreme caution in their interactions in the workplace, where they represent a minority presence, because things they say can either reinforce or challenge stereotypical assessments. The study by Kim and Ng (2019) reveals that East Asian academics can face particular kinds of microaggressions that are superficially positive but shaped by stereotypes of East Asian people, such as the ‘model minority’. This indirect slight draws on assumptions of universal success, academic prowess, and a lack of need for support, which can marginalize East Asian academics’ experiences and unique challenges.

The everyday acts of exclusion and marginalization also contribute to an environment where international academics are positioned as outsiders (Morley et al., 2018; Sian, 2017). Participants in Sian’s (2017) research described their academic environments as sophisticated in their discriminatory practices, with racism having become institutionalized. They reported constant feelings of outsider status despite colleagues’ superficial efforts to appear inclusive, highlighting how deeply embedded biases create persistent barriers to belonging. In a similar vein, Kim (2020) found that East Asian academics are viewed as perpetual outsiders in the UK, regardless of qualifications and length of residence. The outsider feeling can be reinforced by features of the institutional environment, such as spatial design, symbols, imagery, language norms, informal networks, and institutional rules (Duran et al., 2022). These features communicate and sustain institutional culture and value (Piwowar-Sulej, 2020) and therefore shape academics’ sense of inclusion.

Chinese international academics in the UK

Chinese international academics comprise the largest group of international academics in the UK, with 7,165 employed at British institutions in the academic year 2022–23 (Universities, 2026). There is scant research on this cohort’s experience of microaggressions. Exist-

ing studies focus on Chinese doctoral students (Ye & Edwards, 2018) and the cultural and linguistic challenges that academics from non-English-speaking backgrounds experience in the UK (Khattab & Fenton, 2015; Pherali, 2012). For instance, Ye and Edwards (2018) investigated the impact of study abroad on the self-identity of Chinese doctoral students in the UK, finding that they can experience challenges understanding various British accents and dialects, which creates additional barriers to their integration and professional confidence. Even international academics with strong academic English proficiency find that this proficiency “hardly supplements their local cultural knowledge and may not always translate into effective participation in non-academic gossip and ‘small talk’, which are crucial for maintaining networks and collegiality at work” (Pherali, 2012, p.15). Informal networks are important as they contribute to subcultures that influence access to opportunity (Daverth et al., 2016). The linguistic challenges suggest that language functions not merely as a means of communication but as a mechanism of social stratification within academia to marginalise academics whose English is not their first language, leading them to experience isolation and reduced networking opportunities.

The linguistic challenges are also linked to the fact that Chinese international academics in England are concentrated in the fields of business studies and engineering/technology and significantly underrepresented in social sciences, arts and humanities (HESA, 2024). This disciplinary clustering may reflect preferences but also barriers to entry in certain fields, with humanities and social sciences maintaining stronger gatekeeping mechanisms such as language proficiency and local cultural knowledge (Ebel, 2024). The disciplinary clustering and cultural and linguistic challenges need further research because the interaction of these factors with racial stereotypes about intelligence and competence can produce compound disadvantages for Chinese international academics. This research therefore investigates how these factors are linked to microaggressions in the workplace, what kinds of microaggressions occur, how microaggressions affect credibility, workload, leadership opportunities and promotion, and how Chinese international academics respond to them.

Theoretical frameworks

The study employs Pierre Bourdieu’s schematic form [(habitus) (capital) + field=practice] to understand the dynamics at play in Chinese international academics’ experiences. Bourdieu (1986) posits that individuals possess four forms of capital: economic, cultural, social, and symbolic. For Chinese international academics, their cultural capital (such as educational qualifications and cultural knowledge) and social capital (including professional networks and relationships) are seen as particularly relevant in navigating their careers in England. However, the value of this capital may diminish in a field where the dominant cultural norms and practices differ from their own.

The concept of habitus, “a system of dispositions” (Bourdieu, 1990, p.53), is used to analyse how Chinese international academics’ internalised norms, values, and behaviours influence their perceptions and responses to microaggressions. The higher education sector in England (the field in Bourdieu’s schema), with its power relations and structures, is therefore examined to understand how it contributes to the occurrence and normalisation of these interactions of microaggression.

For Bourdieu (2001), microaggressions are a subtle form of violence that often goes unnoticed and unrecognised. This symbolic violence exerts control and perpetuates exclusion while being marked as legitimate by the dominant cultural norms of the field (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992). By applying Bourdieu's concepts, this study explores how Chinese international academics' capital, habitus and field intersect, shaping their experiences of and responses to microaggressions.

Critical Race Theory posits that racism is ingrained in the social fabric of institutions and practices, making it a persistent feature of social dynamics that affects minority groups disproportionately (Solórzano et al., 2000). On the consideration that racial hierarchy is embedded throughout higher education institutions in England (Ahmed, 2012) and often manifests in white-centred structures like diversity initiatives, curriculum, and the establishment of the universities (Southern, 2026), Critical Race Theory is used to examine how institutional structural whiteness perpetuates the microaggressions that Chinese international academics face.

Methodology

This study addresses two main research questions:

1. What types of microaggressions do Chinese international academics encounter in the workplace in England?
2. How do Chinese international academics navigate the challenges posed by microaggressions?

In-depth one-to-one interviews were conducted with 41 Chinese international academics at different career stages from four universities in England. Chinese international academics here refers to researchers and academic staff who were born outside the UK and of Chinese ethnicity and were employed in higher education institutions in England at the time of the interviews. Two universities are pre-1992 universities which are research-intensive, ranking in the top 100 by Times Higher Education World University Rankings 2025. The other two universities are post-1992 universities, teaching-intensive, and lower ranked. The selection of differently ranked universities is to afford scrutiny of whether experience of microaggression varies with institutional prestige, informed by previous findings that microaggressions towards international academics are more prevalent in elite universities (Bhopal, 2022).

This research received ethics approval from the lead researcher's university. Potential research participants were identified based on the information provided on the staff directory published on the four universities' websites. Email invitations were sent to potential participants to introduce the research project and encourage participation. Participants were selected from the disciplines of business and management, engineering and technology, and social sciences, to explore whether their experiences would vary by discipline. The recruitment criteria are that each participant is: (1) ethnically Chinese; (2) foreign-born; (3) employed by the university on an academic contract at the time of interview. Also, the selection process ensured: (4) gender balance; and (5) different career stages. Of the 41 research participants, 23 are females and 18 are males, 39 were

born in mainland China and two in Taiwan. Their career stages span from postdocs to professors. Years spent in the UK range from 8 months to 28.5 years.

Informed consent was secured from each research participant before the start of their interview. The identities of the research participants and their universities were anonymised by using pseudonyms in both the quotes and the findings to ensure confidentiality. All the interviews were conducted in English language and they were audiotaped, professionally transcribed, and double checked by the research team.

Reflexive thematic analysis (Braun et al., 2018) was conducted to analyse the data, bring out patterns of meaning and generate themes. It began with reading through the interview transcripts to identify interesting points and initial connections in the responses. Codes were then generated through inductive coding via NVivo. Researchers grouped codes into broader themes which are related to the research questions. Candidate themes were further reviewed and grouped by the research team to ensure accurate representation of different types of microaggressions, the impacts on Chinese international academics, and how they deal with the challenges.

Findings

Data analysis reveals that microaggressions are prevalent in the four chosen universities. There is little evidence that the experiences of microaggressions vary with university type and disciplines. This is different from the findings of Bhopal (2022) that microaggressions towards international academics are more prevalent in elite universities.

Thirty-five research participants (85%) experienced or witnessed microaggressions. Three types of microaggressions are identified: verbal, behavioural, and environmental. Table 1 provides an overview of the types and prevalence.

Verbal microaggressions

Verbal microaggressions emerged as the most pervasive form of discrimination, with 19 out of 41 research participants reporting such incidents. There are four main kinds: name-based slights to undermine credibility, accent-based discrimination, hostile communication patterns, and stereotyping. Applying Bourdieu's lens of linguistic capital (1991), these interactions suggest systemic devaluation of Chinese international academics' cultural and linguistic resources within the academic field in England.

Table 1 Distribution of microaggression types among participants ($N=41$)

Microaggression type	Participants affected	Coded references	Percentage
Verbal	19	42	46.3%
Behavioural	19	35	46.3%
Environmental	18	31	43.9%

Percentages do not sum to 100% as participants could experience multiple types of microaggressions. Each percentage represents the proportion of participants who experienced that specific type

Name-based slights

The persistent mispronunciation and misspelling of Chinese names emerged as a form of identity erasure. It affected eight research participants. For example, a male research participant who is an associate professor in business studies from a pre-1992 university was disappointed that his Chinese colleague's name had been deliberately misspelled by the administrative staff:

The admin kept typing my colleague's Chinese name wrong, and every time it was a different misspelling. Even though my colleague told them 'My name is spelled this way,' the admin staff quite obviously ignored the situation. (Participant 12)

The deliberate disregard of requests for name correction suggests what Sue et al. (2007) identify as microinvalidation. This quote exemplifies how institutional actors exercise symbolic violence (Bourdieu, 2001), through the administrative staff's failure to acknowledge Chinese names as legitimate markers of identity worthy of respect and correct usage.

Name-based microaggressions go beyond individual incidents at the participants' own workplaces. Participant 33, a lecturer in business studies at a pre-1992 university, pointed out that name-based slights undermining academic credibility are widespread in the sector. He referred to an incident when attending a professional event at another university:

My name is xxx. They always miss the O in the middle many many times... I went to a university for seminar. They printed my name wrong on my name badge. (Participant 33)

Through Critical Race Theory analysis, name-based slights amount not merely to individual carelessness but institutional racism (Ahmed, 2012; Delgado & Stefancic, 2017; Moore & Nash, 2021) that positions Chinese names as unworthy of the effort required for accuracy. The contrast with the careful pronunciation of British and European names signals the racial hierarchy embedded in everyday academic practices.

Accent discrimination

Accent-based discrimination affected 15 research participants who found it a direct attack on their professional competence. For example, Participant 21 is a senior lecturer in computer science at a post-1992 university. He had lived and worked in the UK for over 20 years at the time of interview and he speaks fluent English. However, he was forced to undertake English language training due to students' complaints about his Chinese accent:

The students, they make complaints about my accent, about the lecture delivery, and I was sent to language training by my manager, which I think is inappropriate because I don't think that's a real reason. (Participant 21)

Participant 21 felt that the institution's decision to mandate language training rather than address student prejudice exemplifies institutional discrimination that is routed through seemingly neutral policies. According to Matsuda (1991), accent discrimination functions

as a proxy for racial discrimination and it can marginalise academics whose English is not their first language. The manager's action works to transform student prejudice into institutional policy, legitimizing discrimination through bureaucratic processes.

Hostile communication

Seven research participants reported hostile and condescending communications from colleagues and line managers. For example, Participant 6 is a senior lecturer in social sciences at a post-1992 university and has lived in the UK for nearly 30 years. She had to leave her previous university due to discrimination and the hostile working environment. She shared her traumatic experience of online teaching where she uploaded a video which her line manager found fault with. The content and tone of the manager's email was harsh and condescending:

My manager emailed me saying 'How dare you? Didn't you check the video? Any teacher would have checked it.' The tone was so condescending. (Participant 6)

Such a hostile communication style, delivered through work emails, purports to be a legitimate exercise of academic hierarchy, but it is masking racial aggression. The rebuke "any teacher would have checked" conveys an assumption of incompetence that positions Participant 6 as falling short of basic professional standards – a judgment that this participant noted was rarely applied to her white colleagues for similar oversights.

Hostile communication from line managers was also experienced by research participants at the pre-1992 universities. For example, Participant 4, a male lecturer in engineering at a pre-1992 university, described the persistently curt and critical communication from his line manager:

He would send me emails like 'It's your obligation to do something' ... very demanding, not polite and sometimes kind of ironic. Sometimes he said... 'This is your reputation – not attending university activities'. (Participant 4)

The manager's invocation of "obligation" and threats to "reputation" reveal how power operates through official channels to enforce compliance. According to Bourdieu and Wacquant (1992), such situations exemplify how symbolic violence is exercised through legitimate institutional authority. Racial aggression becomes subsumed into, and indistinguishable from, the normal workings of the academic hierarchy.

Cultural stereotyping and gendered racism

Twenty-four research participants experienced cultural stereotyping, with particular vulnerabilities apparent at the intersections of gender and ethnicity. For example, Participant 15, a female senior lecturer in engineering at a pre-1992 university, encountered multiple conflicting stereotypes:

Because I look so young and female and Chinese, and then they say, 'Oh, what are you studying?' I said mechanical engineering and they say 'You don't look like a mechanical engineering student.' (Participant 15).

Yet the same participant was also told by a colleague:

'You Chinese ladies are so bossy.' That's something I was really shocked about... He was referring to our supervisor, who is his boss. (Participant 15)

These stereotypes were deployed selectively by colleagues to justify exclusion regardless of actual behaviour or competence. The contradiction here – simultaneously too feminine for engineering and too aggressive in leadership – exemplifies what Chen and Buell (2018) identify as the “double bind” facing Asian women in Western academia.

Behavioural microaggressions

Behavioural microaggressions affected 19 research participants who found that their contributions were dismissed and/or their authority was undermined at work. These microaggressions by their colleagues systematically positioned Chinese academics as technical workers rather than intellectual contributors, reflecting what Bourdieu terms “misrecognition” – where the dominated group’s capital is systematically undervalued within the field.

Dismissed contributions and undermined authority

The denial of participants’ intellectual contribution emerged as a central mechanism of professional marginalisation. For example, Participant 16, a female lecturer in business studies at a pre-1992 university, was not permitted by her senior colleague to make comments on the assessment of a programme that she contributed to. The unjustness of this situation illustrates the dynamics of professional marginalisation:

You should not say anything about the assessment or the criteria of this lecture because that's not your responsibility. Your responsibility is just delivering the seminar along with the lecture notes. (Participant 16)

This experience of being explicitly confined to routine seminar delivery and denied fuller intellectual engagement points to what critical race theorists identify as the “perpetual foreigner” syndrome in academia (Kim, 2020). Research participants were positioned as only capable of technical execution and not intellectual contributors to the programmes they taught. The senior colleague’s directive reveals how academic hierarchy intersects with racial assumptions to limit Chinese academics’ professional scope and curb their academic freedom.

A blatant case of professional undermining was experienced by Participant 8, an early career researcher at a post-1992 university, who was accused of fraudulently claiming expenses for a low-priced bus ticket from a work trip. His line manager said the ticket was fake and refused to process the claim:

A few days later, the manager just texted me saying your ticket is wrong. "I doubt you can do this within that time. I guess you didn't go" I said, "Am I so stupid to give you a fake ticket to reimburse like one or two pounds?" (Participant 8).

The unfounded suspicion of dishonesty over such trivial amounts exposes deep-seated distrust that extends beyond matters of professional competence to questions of moral character. The manager's words implied criminal behaviour (Sue et al., 2007) by Participant 8, a person of colour. Participant 8 felt hurt and made a formal complaint against the manager, but after over three months of waiting he received a bland letter from HR stating that the manager did nothing wrong. Having lost faith after this incident, Participant 8 left that university and decided not to waste time making complaints again in the UK as he could see that the system protects management. His experience reflects what Critical Race Theory scholars identify as the presumption of criminality applied to racialized bodies (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017) and the systematic unfairness towards those who try to speak up (Ahmed, 2012).

Environmental microaggressions

Eighteen research participants reported environmental microaggressions which were manifested through institutional structures, policies, and cultural norms to exclude Chinese international academics from senior leadership, exploit them with heavy workloads, and limit their opportunities for promotion. This indicates a pattern of structural rather than individual discrimination.

Systematic absence from senior leadership

The near-complete absence of Chinese international academics from senior positions was apparent in the staff directories published on the four universities' websites and confirmed by the research participants. It created what the research participants described as a "glass ceiling" with racial characteristics. Observations by Participant 12, an associate professor in business studies at a pre-1992 university, well captures the structural reality:

The university management team or senior management team... we don't have any Chinese representatives... Sometimes it feels like this kind of role is quite symbolic. You're making a female or making a minority person in the role, but they may not hold the true power... the decision making is still by the white colleagues. (Participant 12)

Such tokenistic inclusion without genuine power reflects what Bourdieu (1996) identifies as "strategies of condescension" where dominant groups make symbolic concessions that ultimately reinforce existing hierarchies. Participant 2, a female lecturer at a pre-1992 university, described how a Chinese professor with a director post was excluded from the upper echelon of management in her school:

We have a senior management team of four to five people. The Chinese professor was initially part of this team as PGT Education Director, but they later decided that role shouldn't be included in senior management. (Participant 2, business studies)

This retroactive exclusion when Chinese academics achieve management positions exemplifies how institutional structures adapt to maintain racial hierarchies.

Workload and promotion

Analysis of power structures at the research participants' institutions reveals systematic barriers operating through processes of workload allocation and promotion. These mechanisms functioned to concentrate Chinese academics in junior, teaching-heavy positions with limited advancement opportunities.

Workload allocation as mechanism of exploitation

Research participants reported their experiences of taking on heavy workloads, especially the administrative and student-centred roles that are less valued. For example, Participant 35 had 130% workload:

It was quite full. I got like more than 100% capacity of the workload at the moment... I think it is like 130% something for my workload.

Participant 1 shared that both she and her Chinese colleagues in the school were overloaded:

Last year I had 118%... I have a colleague who has 135%. I have 118% of the workload. I don't know about other universities, but at my university marking, lecturing, preparation, admin work, research allocation all together, you have percentage... I work extra 18% - the university never pay me that extra 18%, would they?

The overloading represents wage theft legitimized through academic customs. The rhetorical question "would they?" conveys recognition that this exploitation is normalized for certain bodies but less likely for others and unthinkable for the most privileged. This echoes what Harvey (2005) terms "accumulation by dispossession" – extracting surplus value from marginalized workers through mechanisms that appear neutral but operate along racial lines.

Hidden labour and cultural taxation

Beyond their official workloads, more than half of the research participants had to perform extensive hidden labour. Participant 13, a female senior lecturer at a post-1992 university, described this unrecognized burden:

Me as Chinese, I tend to attract Chinese PhD students... I would spend much more time looking after their language skills, ... but the university kind of having the same hours for supervisors for both domestic and international students... I am spending way more. (Participant 13)

This additional labour represents 'cultural taxation' – the extra burden placed on minority faculty to serve as bridges between institutions and minority communities (Ahmed, 2012; Padilla, 1994). Universities benefit from Chinese academics' cultural and linguistic capitals

in attracting and supporting Chinese international students, while refusing to account for this labour in workload calculations.

Participant 37's experience with Equality, Diversity and Inclusion (EDI) committee work highlights another dimension:

I also work in the EDI committee... by the way, I don't get workload for that because I'm not in the leading position. I'm a member of that, but I don't get workload allocation, which I still complain a bit about. (Participant 37)

The irony of performing uncompensated labour for the very committee meant to address inequality reveals how EDI initiatives can perpetuate the exploitation they claim to address. This finding supports the argument by Ahmed (2012) and Archuleta et al. (2024) that EDI work often falls on academics from marginalised groups who are already experiencing discrimination, leading to hidden work that goes unpaid. Moreover, diversity initiatives can reinforce institutional whiteness by making individuals from marginalized groups responsible for changing the culture, while the institution itself remains unchanged.

Opaque promotion processes

Twenty-five research participants experienced promotion barriers, due to deliberate opacity of system and processes. The promotion system functioned as a 'reproduction mechanism' (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977) which maintains existing racial hierarchies while appearing meritocratic. Nineteen research participants identified lack of transparency in promotion processes as the primary barrier. Participant 19 described the hidden nature of decision-making:

The promotion procedure, I don't think it's transparent to be honest... most of promotions are decided behind closed doors... between people. So maybe this time a professor's postdoc can be promoted and next time another professor's postdoc can be promoted. (Participant 19)

In matters of job promotion, decisions that take place "between people" rather than through transparently applied criteria illustrate how social capital determines advancement. The phrase "behind closed doors" explicitly positions Chinese international academics outside the informal networks where real decisions occur. This exclusion disadvantages Chinese international academics because these informal networks influence access to opportunities, with negative effects on staff's perceptions of fairness (Daverth et al., 2016).

Response strategies to navigate microaggressions

The 41 research participants described the strategies they developed to navigate discrimination, and some adopted more than one strategy, revealing complex negotiations between cultural values, pragmatic assessment, and survival needs. Four main strategies emerged: non-confrontation, active resistance, strategic visibility, and exit planning (See Table 2).

Table 2 Response strategies

Strategy type	Participants	Percentage
Non-confrontation	29	71%
Active resistance	16	39%
Strategic visibility	12	29%
Exit planning	24	59%

Strategic non-confrontation

For the majority of research participants (29), non-confrontation was the primary strategy. While this is often attributed to Confucian cultural values which emphasize harmony and conflict avoidance, the analysis also reveals that participants were making strategic assessments of power relations and institutional responses.

The phrase “I don’t want to cause troubles” was used by 25 research participants. For example, Participant 1’s reflection illuminates the complexity of the issue:

I think it’s a problem as a Chinese person, ethnically Chinese, culturally Chinese – a very Chinese thinking, which is I don’t want to cause any troubles Culturally I don’t want to cause any conflict. I was very angry, but I don’t know how to say it in a way that sounds very professional... I also do not want to get in the wrong way with them, so I thought I’d just be quiet and said OK.

This quote demonstrates how habitus – embodied cultural dispositions acquired through socialization – shapes responses to microaggressions (Bourdieu, 1990). The repetition of “Chinese” emphasizes cultural identity as explanation, yet the concern about sounding “professional” and not getting “in the wrong way” reveals participants’ strategic thinking about institutional responses and their acute awareness of the potential danger of being vocal. In other words, the participants felt mistreated and angry, but they also judged that speaking out is a significant risk due to the underlying institutional power structure and the perpetuation of racial hierarchy which excludes the voices of Chinese international academics.

Active resistance

Sixteen research participants demonstrated strategies of active resistance, to challenge both discrimination and cultural expectations of compliance. These strategies ranged from direct confrontation to educational interventions, representing what bell hooks (1989) calls “talking back” – radical political gestures that challenge dominant discourse. For example, Participant 35 chose to actively confront microaggressions. She also encouraged her Chinese students to speak out:

I am the person. If I don’t think it is right, I will argue for myself... I think you need to speak out and this is something I told my student from China to do. I also tell them not to think everything is being discriminated, as they should try to learn to differentiate.
(Participant 35)

By self-identifying as “the person” who speaks out, this participant is asserting an identity claim to resistance. Her advice to students reveals commitment to cultural change within

the Chinese academic community. The caveat about differentiation – cautioning others to correctly identify genuine discrimination – points to the experience and pragmatism behind her strategic resistance.

Strategic visibility

Twelve research participants developed strategic visibility to deal with microaggressions. Five of them used education to challenge stereotypes at work. For instance, Participant 33 was very concerned by the generalisations that some of his colleagues made about the entire Chinese international student community in his school as passive learners with poor English. To tackle the misconceptions, he proactively intervened with educational sessions for his colleagues about the diversity of the Chinese students:

When I hear this kind of comments, I will try to explain to them that is not the case for all Chinese students. I will explain about the backgrounds of Chinese students and also the motivation of some Chinese students studying abroad. Previously I organised a session that introduce Chinese student community. I tried to educate my colleagues about the Chinese student community. (Participant 33)

This approach represents what Freire (1970) terms “critical pedagogy” – education as a tool for consciousness-raising and social change. By organizing formal sessions to increase staff awareness and understanding of Chinese international students, Participant 33 transformed his individual response into institutional intervention, confronting stereotyping, and creating space for counter-narratives within official structures.

Exit planning

The cumulative impact of microaggressions had produced widespread disillusionment. Twenty-four research participants (59%) considered leaving academia or the UK. This stark statement by Participant 1 captures the psychological toll:

I have lost interest working at university. I stay here just because I need that salary. I don't want to carry on anymore.

The relegation of academic work to something done merely out of economic necessity reveals how microaggression can destroy intrinsic motivation. Participant 13 linked her exit planning directly to her experience of microaggression:

Yes, it does. It (microaggression) will contribute to my decision to leave the university in the future. ... If there is a better opportunity comes up, I will [go] and this (microaggression) will definitely play a role in that decision.

The finding that exit planning is a common response to microaggression exposes how institutions are driving out the diversity they claim to value.

Discussion

The experiences of the Chinese international academics indicate that microaggressions are institutional patterns rather than individual isolated incidents. The identified verbal, behavioural, and environmental microaggressions operate through institutional resource allocation to concentrate these academics in junior positions with excessive workloads while denying them voice, credibility and advancement opportunities.

The complex patterns of microaggressions identified in the study challenge and extend the chosen theoretical frameworks for understanding racial microaggressions in academic settings. Chinese international academics are highly skilled migrants, bearers of valued technical expertise, yet they are persistently othered. Their unique positions demand new conceptual tools that capture the paradoxes of their vulnerable situation.

Blocked capital conversion

This study reveals that Chinese international academics' capital is extracted for institutional benefit and simultaneously they are denied legitimate recognition for career advancement. The participants consistently reported that their language skills and cultural knowledge were actively sought by universities for EDI committee membership and to attract and support Chinese international students, all without time allocations for these activities. Yet, when it came to promotion, these merits did not count.

There are three implications of this finding. Firstly, by documenting the systemic non-recognition of this additional labour, the finding extends Padilla's (1994, p.26) concept of "cultural taxation", which refers to the extra burden on minority faculty to serve as bridges between institutions and minority communities. Secondly, it expands Harvey's (2005, p.159) concept of "accumulation by dispossession" into the cultural realm, showing how institutions accumulate value from Chinese academics' capitals while dispossessing them of its symbolic worth. Thirdly, the finding reveals fundamental limitations in how Bourdieu's (1986) theory of capital conversion operates in transnational academic contexts. While Bourdieu theorized that different forms of capital could be converted into symbolic capital within specific fields, the experiences of Chinese international academics demonstrate that their capital conversion is blocked in the workplace due to institutional structures which disadvantage them.

Invisible visibility paradox

While microaggression is often interpreted as a phenomenon of interpersonal interaction (Sue et al., 2007), this study reveals that microaggressions against Chinese international academics in England go beyond the interpersonal and are deeply embedded in existing institutional structures. These structures, such as workload allocation and the promotion process, are fertile ground for the growth of microaggressions if power-holders are able to manipulate the structures and interpret relevant policy in ways that disadvantage Chinese international academics.

In specific, the criteria of workload and promotion are written on paper, which make them appear neutral. However, they are often interpreted and implemented in a subjective way and sometimes behind the door, which creates an environment that microaggress-

sions become prevalent and systematically disadvantage Chinese academics through their cumulative effect. The promotion process also exemplifies opaque meritocracy: although criteria are published, these are coupled with subjective decision-making which enables bias. Assessments of “collegiality” and “fit” provide cover for discrimination. These barriers represent not individual prejudice but structured discrimination – bias built into institutional structures (Ahmed, 2012). To drill down further, although workload and promotion are governed by published criteria and guidance, which makes them appear neutral and transparent, they are often interpreted and applied in subjective ways, and sometimes decisions are made behind closed doors. Promotion that operates this way exemplifies opaque meritocracy. Alongside the use of objective promotion criteria, assessments of the candidates’ “collegiality” and “fit” enable bias and provide cover for discrimination. These barriers represent not individual prejudice but structural discrimination – that is, bias that is built into institutional structures (Ahmed, 2012). Over time, the cumulative effect of these structural microaggressions entrenches the disadvantage to Chinese academics and perpetuates their absence from senior leadership.

The Chinese international academics navigated the impossible space at work between being seen as technically excellent yet culturally deficient, and competent in execution but unsuited for leadership. In other words, they face the double bind of contradictory stereotypes – simultaneously positioned as model minorities (technically competent, hard-working) and as perpetual foreigners, unfit for leadership (culturally incompetent, temporary). The intersection of these stereotypes creates unique challenges for Chinese international academics that existing literature has not fully explored. The pattern of stereotyping suggests that excellence in technical domains becomes like a prison that prevents the academics’ advancement to senior leadership roles. This finding extends research by Museus and Kiang (2009, p.68) on the constraints of being cast as the model minority, by showing how apparent praise becomes professional limitation.

This study provides crucial insights for Critical Race Theory, particularly regarding how racism operates distinctively for Chinese international academics who are hypervisible as foreign and different, yet invisible in decision-making and senior leadership in the four English universities. While Critical Race Theory scholars like Delgado and Stefancic (2017) have established that racism is ordinary rather than aberrational, this study’s insights into how specific institutional mechanisms (promotion and workload) produce the invisible visibility paradox for Chinese international academics do not fit neatly into existing Critical Race Theory frameworks. This finding also goes beyond the notion of the “perpetual foreigner” (Kim & Ng, 2019, p.24) to highlight the selective visibility deployed for institutional benefit to maintain the white racial hierarchy and dominance (Ahmed, 2012).

Conclusion

This study investigates Chinese international academics’ experiences of microaggressions and how microaggressions affect their academic credibility, workload, leadership opportunities, and promotion trajectories, and explores their strategies for navigating microaggressions in their workplace. Through in-depth interviews with 41 participants across four universities in England, the research reveals that microaggressions against Chinese interna-

tional academics are not isolated incidents but systemic institutional patterns. Two critical findings emerge:

First, Chinese academics experience a triple burden of discrimination: verbal micro-aggressions that attack their identity and competence, behavioural slights that undermine their professional authority, and environmental exclusion from leadership. The finding that across the four universities there are no Chinese international academics occupying senior management positions, despite their significant presence in English universities, points to structural rather than individual barriers.

Second, the paradox of exploitation and exclusion defines the position of Chinese international academics. Universities actively extract value from the cultural capital of these academics by using them to attract and teach Chinese international students and enhance diversity statistics to boost institutional reputation, while simultaneously denying them recognition in workload and promotion processes and excluding them from senior leadership.

Their experiences of daily microaggressions and marginalization represent not individual misfortunes but structural patterns. The response strategies developed by participants – from strategic non-confrontation to active resistance – suggest sophisticated navigation of discriminatory environments which exact a heavy psychological toll. These findings call for fundamental institutional transformation, as UK universities face a potential ‘brain drain’ of Chinese international academics which undermines the diversity essential for academic excellence and innovation.

Based on participants’ experiences, three recommendations are made:

1. Higher education institutions in England need to recognize the hidden labour of Chinese international academics. The work of attracting and supporting Chinese international students and the activities of serving on school/institutional committees must be reflected in promotion criteria and workload allocations.
2. Universities need to make the promotion process fully transparent and prevent behind-doors discussions and decisions. One approach is to replace opaque promotion processes with clear objective criteria that cannot be manipulated through subjective “fit” assessments.
3. Universities need to increase the opportunities for Chinese international academics to take up senior leadership roles. One way is to move beyond token appointments and ensure genuine representation by increasing the proportion of Chinese international academics in the university governance structures and senior management team.

This study suggests several directions for future investigation. Longitudinal research tracking Chinese international academics’ career trajectories could quantify cumulative disadvantage and identify critical intervention points. Comparative studies across national contexts could determine whether the patterns identified represent broader Western academic phenomena. Intersectional analyses examining how gender, discipline, and career stage shape experiences would provide nuanced understanding of varied vulnerabilities.

Funding Society for Research into Higher Education (SRHE).

Declarations

Ethic approval Yes.

Participant consent Secured.

Competing interest No.

Open Access This article is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License, which permits use, sharing, adaptation, distribution and reproduction in any medium or format, as long as you give appropriate credit to the original author(s) and the source, provide a link to the Creative Commons licence, and indicate if changes were made. The images or other third party material in this article are included in the article's Creative Commons licence, unless indicated otherwise in a credit line to the material. If material is not included in the article's Creative Commons licence and your intended use is not permitted by statutory regulation or exceeds the permitted use, you will need to obtain permission directly from the copyright holder. To view a copy of this licence, visit <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>.

References

- Ahmed, S. (2012). *On being included: racism and diversity in institutional life*. Duke University Press. <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv1131d2g>
- Archuleta, S., Ibrahim, H., Pereira, T. L. B., & Shorey, S. (2024). Microaggression interactions among health-care professionals, trainees and students in the clinical environment: A mixed-studies review. *Trauma Violence & Abuse*, 25(5), 3843–3871.
- Bhopal, K. (2022). Academics of colour in elite universities in the UK and the USA: The ‘unspoken system of exclusion’. *Studies in Higher Education*, 47(11), 2127–2137.
- Bourdieu, P. (1986). The forms of capital. In J. Richardson (Ed.), *Handbook of theory and research for the sociology of education* (pp. 241–258). Greenwood.
- Bourdieu, P. (1990). *The logic of practice*. Stanford University Press.
- Bourdieu, P. (1991). *Language and symbolic power*. Harvard University Press.
- Bourdieu, P. (1996). *The state nobility: Elite schools in the field of power*. Stanford University Press.
- Bourdieu, P. (2001). *Masculine domination*. Stanford University Press.
- Bourdieu, P., & Passeron, J. C. (1977). *Reproduction in education, society and culture*. Sage.
- Bourdieu, P., & Wacquant, L. J. (1992). *An invitation to reflexive sociology*. University of Chicago Press.
- Braun, V., Clarke, V., Hayfield, N., & Terry, G. (2018). Thematic analysis. In P. Liamputtong (Ed.), *Handbook of research methods in health social sciences* (pp. 1–18). Springer.
- Chen, G. A., & Buell, J. Y. (2018). Of models and myths: Asian (Americans) in STEM and the neoliberal racial project. *Race Ethnicity and Education*, 21(5), 607–625.
- Daverth, G., Cassell, C., & Hyde, P. (2016). The subjectivity of fairness: Managerial discretion and work-life balance. *Gender Work and Organization*, 23(2). <https://doi.org/10.1111/gwao.12113>
- Delgado, R., & Stefancic, J. (2017). *Critical race theory: An introduction* (3rd ed.). New York University.
- Duran, A., Foste, Z., Garcia, C. E., & Snipes, J. T. (2022). How campus space becomes white place: Advancing a spatial analysis of whiteness in higher education. *Journal of College Student Development*, 63(6), 611–625.
- Ebel, C. P. (2024). How can UK universities improve their strategies for tackling integration challenges among Chinese students. *HEPI Report*, 183.
- Freire, P. (1970). *Pedagogy of the oppressed*. Herder and Herder.
- Harvey, D. (2005). *A brief history of neoliberalism*. Oxford University Press.
- Haynes-Baratz, M. C., Metinyurt, T., Li, Y. L., Gonzales, J., & Bond, M. A. (2021). Bystander training for faculty: A promising approach to tackling microaggressions in the academy. *New Ideas in Psychology*, 63, 100882.
- HESA (Higher Education Statistics Agency) (2024). *HE staff data*. <https://www.hesa.ac.uk>
- Hooks, b. (1989). *Talking back: Thinking feminist, thinking black*. South End.
- Khattab, N., & Fenton, S. (2015). Globalisation of researcher mobility within the UK higher education: Explaining the presence of overseas academics in the UK academia. *Globalisation Societies and Education*, 14(4), 528–542.
- Kim, T. (2020). The positional identities of East Asian mobile academics in UK higher education: A comparative analysis of internationalisation and equality and diversity. In *Identities and education: Comparative perspectives in times of crisis* (pp. 47–70). Bloomsbury.
- Kim, T., & Ng, W. (2019). Ticking the ‘other’ box: Positional identities of East Asian academics in UK universities, internationalisation and diversification. *Policy Reviews in Higher Education*, 3(1), 94–119.

- Matsuda, M. J. (1991). Voices of America: Accent, antidiscrimination law, and a jurisprudence for the last reconstruction. *The Yale Law Journal*, 100(5), 1329–1407.
- Moore, R., & Nash, M. (2021). Women's experiences of racial microaggressions in STEMM workplaces and the importance of white allyship. University of Tasmania. Journal contribution. <https://hdl.handle.net/102.100.100/553646>
- Morley, L., Alexiadou, N., Garaz, S., González-Monteaudo, J., & Taba, M. (2018). Internationalisation and migrant academics: The hidden narratives of mobility. *Higher Education*, 76, 537–554.
- Museus, S. D., & Kiang, P. N. (2009). Deconstructing the model minority myth and how it contributes to the invisible minority reality in higher education research. *New Directions for Institutional Research*, 142, 5–15.
- Neville, H. A., Lilly, R. L., Duran, G., Lee, R. M., & Browne, L. (2000). Construction and initial validation of the color-blind racial attitudes scale (CoBRAS). *Journal of Counseling Psychology*, 47(1), 59–70.
- Padilla, A. M. (1994). Ethnic minority scholars, research, and mentoring: Current and future issues. *Educational Researcher*, 23(4), 24–27.
- Pérez Huber, L., & Solórzano, D. G. (2015). Racial microaggressions as a tool for critical race research. *Race Ethnicity and Education*, 18(3), 297–320.
- Pherali, T. J. (2012). Academic mobility, language, and cultural capital: The experience of transnational academics in British higher education institutions. *Journal of Studies in International Education*, 16(4), 313–333.
- Pierce, C. (1974). Psychiatric problems of the Black minority. In S. Arieti (Ed.), *American handbook of psychiatry* (pp. 512–523). Basic Books.
- Piwowar-Sulej, K. (2020). Pro-environmental organizational culture: Its essence and a concept for its operationalization. *Sustainability*, 12(10), 4197.
- Pustelnikovaite, T., & Chillas, S. (2023). Modes of incorporation: The inclusion of migrant academics in the UK. *Work Employment and Society*, 37(6), 1627–1645.
- Rollock, N. (2012). Unspoken rules of engagement: Navigating racial microaggressions in the academic terrain. *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education*, 25(5), 517–532.
- Sian, Katy Pal (2017) Being Black in a White World: Understanding Racism in British Universities. Papeles del Centro de Estudios sobre la Identidad Colectiva. 176. ISSN:1695-6494. <https://doi.org/10.1387/pcieic.17625>
- Solórzano, D., Ceja, M., & Yosso, T. (2000). Critical race theory, racial microaggressions, and campus racial climate: The experiences of African American college students. *Journal of Negro Education*, 69(1/2), 60–73.
- Southern, D. E. (2026). Privileging whiteness in higher education institutions: Critical discourse analysis of white racial frames in diversity strategic plans. *Whiteness and Education*, 11(2), 148–170.
- Sue, D. W. (2010). *Microaggressions in everyday life: Race, gender, and sexual orientation*. Wiley.
- Sue, D. W., Capodilupo, C. M., Torino, G. C., Bucceri, J. M., Holder, A., Nadal, K. L., & Esquilin, M. (2007). Racial microaggressions in everyday life: Implications for clinical practice. *American Psychologist*, 62(4), 271–286.
- Universities, U. K. (2026). *International staff data*. Retrieved from: <https://www.universitiesuk.ac.uk/what-we-do/policy-and-research/publications/features/uk-higher-education-data-international/international-staff-data>
- Williams, M. T. (2020). Microaggressions: Clarification, evidence, and impact. *Perspectives on Psychological Science*, 15(1), 3–26.
- Ye, W., & Edwards, V. (2018). Confucius Institute teachers in the UK: Motivation, challenges, and transformative learning. *Race Ethnicity and Education*, 21(6), 843–857.