The image of Chinese international students on Chinese social media *Zhihu*

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Abstract

COVID-19 and the surging nationalism and populism sentiments made Chinese international students (CIS) targets of online vigilantism on Chinese social media and they face alienation in the homeland (Feng, 2020; Gao, 2022) apart from discrimination overseas (Russell, 2020). To obtain comprehensive understanding about this issue, this research examines the image of CIS in a comparatively large corpus of Chinese social media discourses through a corpus-based critical discourse approach facilitated by statistical analysis. The Discourse-Historical Approach (Wodak, 2015) commonly used for media presentation studies is adopted to theorise and categorise the findings.

328 posts of 280995 Chinese characters on a major Chinese social media *Zhihu* were collected. Major referential expressions of CIS were identified and classified by browsing the general word and keyword lists and examining their concordances (Table 1). Predication analysis based on concordances of the most frequent referential expressions of CIS in the corpus *留学生(们)international student(s)*. I compared comments from CIS with comments from other *Zhihu* users to reveal in- and out-group differences. Chi-square tests were conducted to identify significant differences in their use of referential and predication expressions.

Table 1 Exemplary referential expressions of CIS

Category		**Examples**
Victim		受害者 victim;难民 refugee; 苦命人 luckless people
Trouble or degenerate		人渣 scum; 巨婴 giant baby
Meritocracy		人才 talent;无名之辈 nobody; 废物 trash
Nationalism	Real Chinese	中国人 Chinese;同胞 compatriot;爱国主义者 patriot
	Fake Chinese	恨国党 the gang who hate the country;大英帝国的子民 subjects of the British empire
Populism	The privileged	富二代 the rich second generation; 精英 elite;
	Ordinary people	普通人 ordinary people; (人)民 the people

It is found CIS were alienated and stigmatised as the problematic "other" through frames of trouble or degenerate, meritocracy, nationalism, populism, collectivism, and misogyny in the corpus though some comments try to challenge those frames and depict CIS as well-behaved people, victims, the socio-culturally marginalized, patriots, ordinary people without privileges or high socioeconomic status, talents, individuals with rights, and cosmopolitans. Comparative analysis of comments from CIS and other *Zhihu* users reveals both groups use stigmatising discourses against CIS. Apparently, tensions not only exist between CIS and non-CIS but also wihtin CIS. The major difference is that CIS are more likely to object to the "trouble or degenerate" and "meritocracy" frames, present CIS as "socio-culturally marginalized or isolated", recount reverse culture shocks for CIS, and depict CIS as cosmopolitans while non-CIS group is more likely to oppose the "victim" frame, stigmatize CIS as trouble or degenerates, position them in a meritocratic hierarchy, and perceive them from a collectivism (especially pro-collectivism) stance.

Keywords: Corpus linguistics; DHA; media image; Chinese international students; Covid-19

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