



## International students, intersectionality and sense of belonging: a note on the experience of gay Chinese students in Australia

Bin Wang & Andrew Gorman-Murray

**To cite this article:** Bin Wang & Andrew Gorman-Murray (2023) International students, intersectionality and sense of belonging: a note on the experience of gay Chinese students in Australia, *Australian Geographer*, 54:2, 115-123, DOI: [10.1080/00049182.2023.2174652](https://doi.org/10.1080/00049182.2023.2174652)

**To link to this article:** <https://doi.org/10.1080/00049182.2023.2174652>



© 2023 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group



Published online: 17 Feb 2023.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



Article views: 635



View related articles [↗](#)



View Crossmark data [↗](#)

## International students, intersectionality and sense of belonging: a note on the experience of gay Chinese students in Australia

Bin Wang<sup>a</sup> and Andrew Gorman-Murray <sup>b</sup>

<sup>a</sup>School of Culture and Communication, University of Melbourne, Melbourne, Victoria, Australia;

<sup>b</sup>Geography, Tourism and Planning, School of Social Sciences, Western Sydney University, Penrith, NSW, Australia

### ABSTRACT

This essay considers the experience of international students, contemplating their identity and agency in Australian society. Thinking through the potential experience of gay Chinese students, we argue that the community of international students is not homogenous. Working with and against the literature on studentification, we suggest more consideration should be given to the social and personal experience of students, not just their economic contribution to placemaking. The fluidity and dynamism of gay Chinese students' identities reveals how geography plays an important role in shaping intersectionality. In this essay, we also question the generalised image of 'Asian' identity that is often used in academic approaches, and argue that geographers could make valuable contributions to the debate of intersectionality, by grounding the analysis in specific geographical contexts.

### KEYWORDS

International students;  
Australia; China; gay;  
studentification;  
intersectionality; belonging

The experience of international students is inherently geographical. They are transnationally mobile, contribute to placemaking in host cities, and translate their experiences to home countries. While geographical scholarship has attended to the impact of international students on host cities through research into studentification, less has been said about the agency and identity of these students, and the effect of place and mobility on their senses of self and belonging. This thinking space essay calls for an unpacking of the experience of international students in Australia through drawing attention to the example of gay Chinese students. We argue this is apt and timely on multiple grounds: the recent return of international students to Australia; the public attention to the China--Australia relationship; and the increasing, though still contentious, acceptance of LGBTIQ+ people and their rights in Australian society.

Since the reopening of Australia's international border in December 2021, thousands of international students have been flocking back to Australia: within the first six weeks,

**CONTACT** Andrew Gorman-Murray  [A.Gorman-Murray@westernsydney.edu.au](mailto:A.Gorman-Murray@westernsydney.edu.au)

© 2023 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group  
This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives License (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>), which permits non-commercial re-use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited, and is not altered, transformed, or built upon in any way.

the number almost exceeded 30,000 (Hurley 2022). The rate of international students returning has attracted attention not just from educational institutions, but also within labour markets and the real estate sector. At the time this paper was written, a series of measures had been taken by both the federal and state governments to ‘welcom[e] international students back to Australia’, including student visa refunding, temporary relaxation on working hours for student visa holders, and extensions on post-study work visas (Department of Home Affairs 2022). In a sense, the pandemic seems to have reminded the country of the significant role of international students in both the higher education system and greater Australian society (Jayasuriya 2021). Particularly, for capital cities like Melbourne, Sydney and Adelaide, international students have long been an important component of their urban communities: this particular population has been identified as a driver of studentification in various Australian cities (Shaw and Fincher 2010; Baganz and Gorman-Murray 2018). Studentification refers to the urbanising process that occurs due to the concentration of students in a neighbourhood (Smith, Sage, and Balsdon 2014). Geographical research on studentification aims to understand the critical role students play in urban processes, including issues such as student-led gentrification, the placemaking effect of purpose-built student accommodation, and the problem of overcrowding in student houses.

While the significance of international students is acknowledged, how they connect and identify in Australian society beyond the urban economy remains obscure. Fincher and Shaw (2007) explored the role of international students in shaping urban spaces in central Melbourne. They attended to how international students drive the development of purpose-built student accommodation, as well as the ways international students segregate from domestic students in universities and the local residents in everyday lives. In the more recent research, the influence of racialised concentration and segregation of urban neighbourhoods in Australian cities, and how these shape international students’ practices of homemaking, were examined (Fincher et al. 2019). However, the lack of insights into this population’s more private and subjective experiences remains. Who are they apart from being students in universities? By using the term international students solely, without further identifying sub-groups, it is evident that the various sectors that are closely engaged (e.g. education, real estate, labour markets) tend to consider this population as homogenous, with similar characteristics and needs. However, as for other populations in Australian society, international students are inflected by social variables such as age, ethnicity and class. Overlapping their identities as students, individuals identify themselves with other social groups, which shapes how they engage with the society outside universities. Among those aspects of selfhood, sexual identity is perhaps ambiguous or ‘hidden’ compared to identifications of nationality, religious belief or socio-economic status. Indeed, if we look more closely at the home countries that account for the majority of international students in Australia – China, India, Nepal, Malaysia and South Korea (Department of Education 2022) – we see that Australia sits above these source countries in terms of international LGBTIQ+ quality ranking, some of which are positioned in the lower half of the index (China 100/175, Malaysia 115/175) (Williams Institute 2021). Arguably, studying and residing in a country that is more inclusive of sexual minorities will presumably alter how international students who identify as LGBTIQ+ understand, identify and represent themselves. In this

thinking space paper, we will consider the perspectives of gay Chinese students as an illustration.

### **Race, sexuality and the geography of intersectionality**

China is a major source of international students, accounting for more than a quarter of all international students in Australia (Department of Education 2022). In order to satisfy and cater for the needs of the large number of Chinese students in the higher education system of Australia, many universities have provided targeted services and facilities, such as workshops that are aimed to help students improve English proficiency, as well as training teaching staff on how to pronounce Chinese names more accurately. However, beyond the issues related to cross-cultural and linguistic learning, challenges that are more personal tend to remain invisible and unacknowledged. For gay Chinese students, attending Australian universities is perhaps the very first time they realise the expression of homosexuality can be embraced and accommodated. As most Australian universities have established and equipped services to support students who identify as LGBTIQ+, embedding acceptance in academic communities, this may protect and encourage students' expression of sexuality. For gay Chinese students who grew up in a social environment where heterosexuality is considered not only the norm but only sexual orientation available, being able to openly discuss and express their sexual identities may bring new perspectives that help them understand their sexuality in ways that are not coercive.

Beyond university spaces, however, gay Chinese students may be made aware of challenge linked to their racial identity. Prior to their arrival to Australia, many Chinese students belonged to the racial majority in their home country. Thus, their racial identity will perhaps only be made visible when they commence study in a foreign country dominated by a different race. Within universities, there are strict policies against discrimination and discriminatory behaviours. Beyond the university campus, however, the reality becomes more devastating. As Chinese students start to engage more deeply with the broader Australian society outside the academic institutions, they will inevitably witness how their racial identity has transformed into a source of oppression. What is worse, for those who identify as gay, racial marginalisation not only comes from general Australian society but also within the gay community. While a higher level of inclusiveness might be expected from this community, racial segregation is evident: opposite to the utopian image, 'Asian-ness' is often demolished during sexual encounters in urban gay spaces, and the racial boundary reproduced by the gay community is perhaps just as firm as within the greater society of Australia (Caluya 2008).

Therefore, at the crossroads of race and sexuality, two socially peripheral identities overlap and produce the specific experience of intersectionality, which influences how gay Chinese students identify and understand themselves. Furthermore, the distinction between social encounters occurring within and outside the university campus reveals the effect of geography that underpins the identification of gay Chinese students, and sheds light on the geographical stakes of intersectionality. This exemplifies Valentine's (2008) critical insights to the relations between intersectionality and place: she contends that intersections are not always stable over time and space, and certain personal characteristics can be made more salient at particular occasions or in specific spaces. The

difference observed in Chinese students' experiences on campus and their engagement with the greater Australian society suggests how place could trigger certain parts of personal identity to take precedence under particular circumstances. This gap between the encounters within universities and those in the greater Australian society may help explain international students' intention to concentrate at specific neighbourhoods. The geographical proximity to the universities and the student community, in certain ways, is positively correlated with social inclusiveness and security. This sense of perceived safety has then made international students more reluctant to participate in the society that is 'distant' from the studentified neighbourhoods because, by doing so, it may save them from facing the complex social reality at the other side of the hedge.

Gay Chinese students' experience of intersectionality is further complicated as they travel back and forth between Australia and their home country. While Australian society has given them the liberty to express their sexuality, returning to China, even just temporarily, could result in the sudden realisation that their sexual identity has become the factor that impairs a sense of belonging to their homes. Particularly, the experience of being once embraced will enlarge the subjective feeling and the negative feedback when they are forced to face the denial of their sexual identity again. Meanwhile, seeking belonging in the Australian society is perhaps equally inadmissible, since their identity as 'Asian' is contested and marginal. This process of being denied repeatedly creates a sense of spiritual homelessness. In other words, through constantly seeking a sense of belonging, gay Chinese students may gradually understand their inherent intersectionality and how it might inhibit them from building intrinsic connections to a community. In this case, the transnational nature of gay Chinese students' mobility provides critical insights to the geographical elements of intersectionality: how physical spaces or individuals' presence at particular places can make certain personal characteristics more salient than the other.

This open-ended pursuit of belonging reflects Knopp's (2004) theory of 'queer quests for identity', which refers to personal journeys through space and time that are aimed for the search of an integrated wholeness as individuals connected to some kind of community.<sup>1</sup> The core feature of the concept lies in the action of finding identity in movement and motion. By relocating among different geographical spaces – in the case of gay Chinese students, relocating transnationally in order to find and construct self-identity – it utters how geography and sexuality are closely interconnected in the formation of personal identity. However, the feeling of spiritual homelessness suggests that relocation does not necessarily provide better opportunities for individuals' quest of identity. On the contrary, the change of geographical context may just trigger the awakening of certain personal identities that are not salient in their home countries, which brings more complex challenges to individuals' self-identification. Gay Chinese students' interactions with the Australian society and their home countries also reflect how the management of personal identity is influenced by 'places of controversial intersections'. Rodó-de-Zárate (2015) defines 'places of controversial intersections' as the geographical spaces where individuals feel a sense of relief for some aspects of their identities, while simultaneously experiencing oppression for other aspects. For gay Chinese students, both the home country and Australia can become places of controversial intersections during their quests for identity: they feel more comfortable being Asian in China but marginalised for being gay, and in Australia they experience the opposite. Such places provide

crucial insights to how intersectionality forms and functions, as well as how individuals negotiate it in the geographical sense – by rendering the marginal identity invisible, or purposely concentrating with people of similar characteristics and distancing from the risk of facing coercive behaviours. The complex experiences of living with intrapersonal negotiation within place-based power structure reveals that intersectionality is beyond simply overlapping identities, and that geography has an important role in shaping the strategies undertaken to manage individuals' intersectional identities.

### Unpacking the 'Asian' identity

While gay Chinese students' experience of spiritual homelessness results from their intersectionality, the identities at these crossroads need further clarification. Although contemporary theorists have emphasised the fluidity and dynamism of identity, the monolithic narrative of 'Asian' identity remains static in the literature (Hunt, Moloney, and Evans 2011). Drouhot and Garip (2021), for instance, point out that the heterogeneity among Asian Americans is often absent or unacknowledged in academic approaches and it is crucial to disaggregate 'Asian-ness'. This is also evident in the intersectional approach to gay Asian men's experiences: existing research that focuses on gay Asian men tends to consider the intersection between race and sexuality as the source of marginalisation in their everyday lives (Han 2009; Ocampo and Soodjinda 2016; Hart et al. 2021). However, such analysis may disregard the complexity underlying the identity of 'Asian': while as a category of race 'Asian' is often constructed based on physical characteristics, beyond this, claims of commonality include shared history, geographical origins, cultural practices and kinship ties (Ansell and Solomos 2008). In this sense, being Asian in the cultural sense is vastly different from being Asian in the racial sense. For gay Asian men with strong cultural connections to Asian societies or communities, wrestling with the marginalisation of their 'Asian-ness' can be complicated by the extra cultural lens attached to the identity. Particularly, as their Asian identity is exposed to the host society's gaze, hatred can be expressed not only in relation to their Asian characteristics at the surface, such as their physical appearances, but also the Asian-ness embodied in their everyday lives such as diet, language, as well as values. As such, being Asian in the cultural sense may exacerbate gay Chinese students' need for belonging as it may create an illusion that such an identity can be abandoned when they have to: by making invisible behaviours or habits that are seen as 'Asian', they may regain acceptance by Australian society that once marginalised them. In other words, as a cultural identity, being 'Asian' is reflected in what seems changeable, compared to the racial characteristics that are almost inherent and permanent. Therefore, at the intersection of being sexual minorities and being Asian, gay Chinese students may be forced into an invidious position, where they perceive that hiding or even eliminating certain parts of their identities is a prerequisite for their quests of belonging. During the process of negotiating their identities in Australian society, the freedom of being able to express their sexuality may seem to be available only by trading off the freedom to express their Asian-ness. The feasibility of such action, however, is undoubtedly questionable.

Even under the basket of cultural identity, being Chinese only accounts for one of the various forms of being Asian. As the term 'Asian' is criticised for generalising a broad range of perspectives and experiences that should be more carefully defined (Kibria

2000), it also produces an over-simplified narrative of Asian identity, which then results in a blurring vision of how it intersects with individuals' sexual identities. The most glaring issue lies within the cultural and social constructions that deny the expression of gay Asian men's sexuality: for what reasons are their sexual identities marginalised? In answer, 'Asian' identity must be parsed to particular countries, regions or communities. For gay Chinese students, the challenge of denied homosexuality may be traced to the ideology of Confucianism, which portrays family formation as an essential component of individuals' life course (Adamczyk and Cheng 2015). For gay Asian men in other countries, however, what underpins societal homophobia may vary. For example, for gay men in South Korea or Malaysia, religious powers may be the more important driver behind the marginalisation of homosexuality (Williams Institute 2021). Exploring the various social and cultural constructions underlying homophobia in 'Asia' is of great significance because they have crucial impact in shaping the political and social institutions enforced, which determine the outlook of oppression towards sexual minorities in their everyday lives. For gay Chinese students, they are facing massive censorship, societal marginalisation and discrimination at various sites, including workplaces. Meanwhile, we may witness devastating situations in terms of the criminalisation of homosexuality in countries like Indonesia, or more progressive trends occurring in Thailand, which is likely to become the first country in south-east Asian to acknowledge same-sex marriage (Nguyen 2022). These substantial measures or social processes not only influence how individuals understand their sexual identity, but also the ways they experience intersectionality. These specific differentiations under the broad identity of Asian are crucial when individuals struggle to identify themselves and seek belonging to particular communities in a transnational context: to what extent they treasure the freedom to express their sexual identity fearlessly; whether they are in fact connected to the cultural communities that the host society assumes them to be; whether they consider the cultural habits from home countries to be a significant part of personal identities, etc. By using the mere term 'Asian' to describe such abundant and diverse experiences, not only fails to recognise the various social and cultural constructions underlying the identity, but also results in a less precise discussions of gay Asian men's intersectionality.

Thinking about how international students identify themselves in Australian society raises important geographical questions. Beyond the obvious economic changes brought by their residential and educational activities, how they engage with their surrounding environments both within and beyond the university campus reflects how a significant population is connected or disconnected to the greater Australian society. We contend that despite the financial benefits and significance, existing research has not established a holistic understanding of the internal dynamics of this demographic group. By using gay Chinese students' experiences as an illustration, we presented that the community of international students is not homogenous, and it is subject to the influence of various social variables such as sexuality. Although there are existing studies that explored the experiences of gay Asian men in urban Australia, the unique perspectives of gay Chinese students and how they experience intersectionality in relation to space and place – how they understand and present themselves differently within and outside of universities – extends the discussion of studentification to the social sphere and makes visible the spatial dimensions of intersectionality. Furthermore,

the transnational nature in their mobility also provides valuable insights to how their identities are made unstable by geographical spaces, which has then created the peculiar subjectivity of spiritual homelessness. Building on Somerville's (1992) conceptualisation of homelessness as heartlessness, rootlessness, 'purgatory' and lack of shelter, hearth, privacy and abode, we describe gay Chinese students' spiritual homelessness as the lack of connections to a community or place free from identity struggles with underlying power structures, where their multiple identities are mutually embraced.

Upon the discussion of intersectionality and place, we also raise the important question concerning the construction of Asian identity. In both the racial and cultural dimensions, what the term represents and reflects requires more precise understanding and clarifications. As geographers, perhaps our contribution to the debate could initiate with grounding the question in context and focusing on specific social groups as well as individuals in place. The perspectives of gay Chinese students only illustrate one form of international students and the ways they identify themselves in relation to the Australian society and their home countries. However, it does provide a critical insight to the general disregard of the internal dynamics of this specific social group, beyond the economic sphere. Therefore, prior to welcoming international students to return to Australia, maybe it is worth asking: have they ever been truly embraced by Australian society?

## Note

1. We are aware that there are various approaches to the conceptualisation of belonging, such as the literature on the politics of belonging by Yuval-Davis (2006). However, we find Knopp's (2004) theory of queer quests for identity the most apt and useful concept in unpacking the experience of gay Chinese students in Australia.

## Acknowledgements

We extend thanks to two reviewers and the editor, who provided helpful comments that have improved the essay.

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

## Notes on contributors

*Bin Wang* is a PhD candidate at University of Melbourne. His research interests include gender, sexuality and space; marginalised populations and their experience of inequality in everyday lives.

*Andrew Gorman-Murray* is a Professor of Geography at Western Sydney University. His research interests include gender, sexuality and space; urban and regional transformation; home, work and mobility; and wellbeing and place. He has published widely on LGBTIQ+ geographies, including experiences of homes, neighbourhoods, cities, country towns and disasters capes.

## ORCID

*Andrew Gorman-Murray*  <http://orcid.org/0000-0001-7479-8172>



## References

- Adamczyk, A., and Y. Cheng. 2015. "Explaining Attitudes About Homosexuality in Confucian and Non-Confucian Nations: Is There a 'Cultural' Influence?" *Social Science Research* 51: 276–289. doi:10.1016/j.ssresearch.2014.10.002
- Ansell, A., and J. Solomos. 2008. *Race & Ethnicity: Key Concepts*. New York: Routledge.
- Baganz, E., and A. Gorman-Murray. 2018. *Studentification: A Critical Review Supporting an Australian Application*. Western Sydney: Western Sydney University.
- Caluya, G. 2008. "'The Rice Steamer': Race, Desire and Affect in Sydney's Gay Scene." *Australian Geographer* 39 (3): 283–292. doi:10.1080/00049180802270481
- Department of Education. 2022. *International Student Numbers by Country, by State and Territory*. [online] Accessed July 17, 2022. <https://www.dese.gov.au/international-education-data-and-research/international-student-numbers-country-state-and-territory>.
- Department of Home Affairs. 2022. *COVID-19 Visa Information*. [online] Homeaffairs.gov.au. Accessed July 17, 2022. <https://www.homeaffairs.gov.au/covid19/visa-information>.
- Drouhot, L., and F. Garip. 2021. "What's Behind a Racial Category? Uncovering Heterogeneity Among Asian Americans Through a Data-Driven Typology." *The Russell Sage Foundation Journal of the Social Sciences* 7 (2): 22–45.
- Fincher, R., K. Iveson, H. Leitner, and V. Preston. 2019. *Everyday Equalities: Making Multicultures in Settler Colonial Cities*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Fincher, R., and K. Shaw. 2007. *Recognising Tertiary Students in Place-Making for Urban Spaces, rep.* Melbourne: University of Melbourne.
- Han, C. 2009. "Asian Girls Are Prettier: Gendered Presentations as Stigma Management among Gay Asian Men." *Symbolic Interaction* 32 (2): 106–122. doi:10.1525/si.2009.32.2.106
- Hart, T., R. Sharvendiran, V. Chikermane, A. Kidwai, and D. Grace. 2021. "At the Intersection of Homophobia and Racism: Sociocultural Context and the Sexual Health of South Asian Canadian Gay and Bisexual Men." *Stigma and Health*. Advance online publication. doi:10.1037/sah0000295
- Hunt, G., M. Moloney, and K. Evans. 2011. "'How Asian Am I?': Asian American Youth Cultures, Drug Use, and Ethnic Identity Construction." *Youth & Society* 43 (1): 274–304. doi:10.1177/0044118X10364044
- Hurley, P. 2022. "International Students are Coming Back and It's Not Just Universities Sighing with Relief." [online] *The Conversation*. Accessed July 11, 2022. <https://theconversation.com/international-students-are-coming-back-and-its-not-just-universities-sighing-with-relief-176530>.
- Jayasuriya, K. 2021. "COVID-19, Markets and the Crisis of the Higher Education Regulatory State: The Case of Australia." *Globalizations* 18 (4): 584–599. doi:10.1080/14747731.2020.1815461
- Kibria, N. 2000. "Race, Ethnic Options, and Ethnic Binds: Identity Negotiations of Second-Generation Chinese and Korean Americans." *Sociological Perspectives* 43 (1): 77–95. doi:10.2307/1389783
- Knopp, L. 2004. "Ontologies of Place, Placelessness, and Movement: Queer Quests for Identity and Their Impacts on Contemporary Geographic Thought." *Gender, Place & Culture* 11 (1): 121–134. doi:10.1080/0966369042000188585
- Nguyen, A. 2022. "Thailand to Be Southeast Asia's Pioneer With Same-Sex Union Bill." [online] *Bloomberg*. Accessed July 24, 2022. <https://discovery.ebsco.com/c/xpoptz/viewer/html/n3zeao2ko5>.
- Ocampo, A., and D. Soodjinda. 2016. "Invisible Asian Americans: The Intersection of Sexuality, Race, and Education among Gay Asian Americans." *Race Ethnicity and Education* 19 (3): 480–499. doi:10.1080/13613324.2015.1095169
- Rodó-de-Zárate, M. 2015. "Young Lesbians Negotiating Public Space: An Intersectional Approach Through Places." *Children's Geographies* 13 (4): 413–434. doi:10.1080/14733285.2013.848741
- Shaw, K., and R. Fincher. 2010. "University Students and the 'Creative City'." *Journal of Policy Research in Tourism, Leisure and Events* 2 (3): 199–220. doi:10.1080/19407963.2010.512203

- Smith, D., J. Sage, and S. Balsdon. 2014. "The Geographies of Studentification: 'Here, There and Everywhere?'" *Geography (Sheffield, England)* 99 (3): 116–127. doi:[10.1080/00167487.2014.12094405](https://doi.org/10.1080/00167487.2014.12094405)
- Somerville, P. 1992. "Homelessness and the Meaning of Home: Rooflessness or Rootlessness?" *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research* 16 (4): 529–539. doi:[10.1111/j.1468-2427.1992.tb00194.x](https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-2427.1992.tb00194.x)
- Valentine, G. 2008. "Theorizing and Researching Intersectionality: A Challenge for Feminist Geography." *The Professional Geographer* 59 (1): 10–21. doi:[10.1111/j.1467-9272.2007.00587.x](https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-9272.2007.00587.x)
- Williams Institute. 2021. *Social Acceptance of LGBTI People in 175 Countries and Locations*. Los Angeles: Williams Institute, UCLA.
- Yuval-Davis, N. 2006. "Belonging and the Politics of Belonging." *Patterns of Prejudice* 40 (3): 197–214. doi:[10.1080/00313220600769331](https://doi.org/10.1080/00313220600769331)