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Limited Agency, Racialized Labor, and the Mechanization of Asian International Students in U.S. Higher Education

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ABSTRACT: *Over 1 million international students work in U.S. institutions of higher education, with the majority being from Asia. Although previous scholarship has emphasized the cultural and language barriers faced by this population, relatively little is known about the labor conditions of these students and how they may contribute to inequality. Utilizing Bui's concept of Asian roboticism and literature on racial capitalism, this study investigates the working conditions of Asian international students in various disciplines across the U.S. Drawing on 22 in-depth interviews, the findings revealed three major themes: 1) limited agency in making decisions, 2) racialized labor driven by the model minority myth, and 3) the mechanization of Asian bodies. These conditions negatively affect students' mental health, physical health, and social well-being. The results underscore the harm perpetuated by racial stereotypes about Asian workers and highlight directions for future research on inequality in higher education.*

Keywords: labor, working conditions, international students, Asians, education

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INTRODUCTION

In 2022-2023, the number of international students attending U.S. colleges and universities increased by 12% to 1,057,188 individuals (Institute of International Education, 2023). Students from Asia represented more than 65% of this population, making them the largest subgroup of international students (Institute of International Education, 2023). Despite their growing numbers and visibility on campuses, Asian international students (AIS) face a host of challenges in U.S. higher education. For example, research has found that AIS struggle with language barriers (Choi, 2006), adapting to a new culture (Lin & Scherz, 2014), and balancing multiple roles (Myers-Walls et al., 2011). Much of this scholarship, however, has focused on individual problems and identified struggles within the students themselves. Relatively little is known about the broader social environment in which AIS work and how their labor has become racialized.

Understanding the working conditions of AIS is important for multiple reasons. First, due to the model minority myth, Asians are stereotyped as being hard-working (Wing, 2007), highly productive (Au, 2022), and showing deference toward figures of authority (Suyemoto et al., 2009). This myth creates expectations for AIS to meet an unfair *or even unrealistic* set of performance demands (Leong & Grand, 2008), making them vulnerable to labor exploitation. Second, since many AIS are in the U.S. on F-1 visas, which limit the job opportunities that they can seek out (U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services, 2024), they are constrained from finding alternative employment if they are overwhelmed by (or unhappy with) their current work setting. This has important implications for health and well-being, especially if AIS are pressured to work under poor conditions or continue research that they no longer find meaningful, simply to maintain their legal status. Few studies, however, have examined the social experiences of AIS in graduate school and the various ways that working conditions may affect them.

This article adds to the literature on race, migrant labor, and higher education by investigating the working conditions of AIS, how these conditions are shaped by ideas from the model minority myth, and their impacts on students. I argue that the model minority myth – although a myth – still contributes to faculty members' expectations of AIS' performance and labor output. This phenomenon occurs, even in departments where faculty study racial stereotypes and social inequality.

To explore how the work culture and professors' standards of students may vary by academic discipline and appear differently in various immigration policy contexts, I conducted 22 in-depth interviews with students across the U.S. in both STEM and social science fields. Based on these interviews, I uncovered three processes that characterize AIS' working conditions in graduate school: limited

agency in making decisions, racialized labor (driven by the model minority myth), and the mechanization of Asian bodies. These conditions have important consequences for physical, mental, and social health. By shedding light on the working conditions of AIS, this study reveals how faculty members' expectations of labor – influenced by seemingly “positive” racial stereotypes – can create inequality in graduate school and jeopardize students' overall well-being. I highlight the broader impact of these conditions and discuss implications for U.S. higher education.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The Model Minority Myth and Viewing Asians as “Machines”

The idea of viewing Asians as “machine-like” is entwined with the model minority myth. The origins of this myth are often traced back to William Petersen's *New York Times* article (1966), where he discussed how Japanese Americans – who previously had been sent to internment camps – had “overcome” racial discrimination and achieved economic mobility. In doing so, Peterson portrayed this group as being “exemplary” and able to recover from harm in ways that other racial/ethnic minorities had not. In a separate article from the U.S. News & World Report, the author highlighted how Chinese Americans had achieved a great deal of wealth and respect “with no help from anyone else,” despite legal challenges and social adversity (Author Unknown, 1966). These ideas entered both public and academic discourse (Walton & Truong, 2022) and became tools to minimize the significance of structural racism, frame Asians as a “model” for other minorities (Woo, 2000), and serve as a counterpoint to struggles for equality and government intervention.

Before these ideas spread, however, Asians were perceived as cheap labor by both public and private actors. In *Model Machines: A History of the Asian as Automaton*, for example, Long Bui discusses a case of a U.S. judge saying that “Chinese immigrants are simply machines and therefore should be allowed in the U.S.” (despite Chinese exclusion laws at the time), desiring them for their superhuman abilities and hyperproductivity (Bui, 2022). This idea of imposing superhuman and mechanical attributes to Asians is what Bui calls Asian roboticism (Bui, 2020). Since Asians have been viewed as post-human and robotlike in the U.S. and in the West more broadly (Bui, 2020), this type of thinking has created ways to further marginalize and subjugate this social group. I draw on Bui's concept of Asian roboticism, as well as literature on racial capitalism, to better understand the working conditions of AIS in the U.S.

How Racial Capitalism Shapes the Working Conditions of Asians

Racial capitalism is the process of deriving social and economic value from the exploitation of marginalized groups via a racial hierarchy (Leong, 2013). This concept is often attributed to Cedric Robinson, who wrote *Black Marxism: The Making of the Black Radical Tradition* (1983). In this book, he used the term to

describe how “the development, organization, and expansion of capitalist society pursued essentially racial directions” and argued that capitalism and racism were co-constitutive forces (Robinson, 1983). Although his scholarship was about the historical Black struggle (Robinson, 1983), understanding racial capitalism in the context of Asians in the U.S. has recently garnered scholarly attention (Au, 2022).

Day (2016), for example, argues that abstract labor (which is linked to a commodity's quantitative value and is often measured in money) and efficiency are essential to understanding the racialization of Asians in the U.S. The association of Asians with abstract labor mechanizes Asian bodies such that they can be “reduced to an economic functionality based on efficiency, identified not with the qualitative substance of their bodies but with the quantitative rate of their labor” (Day, 2021). This has important implications for capital. According to Melamed (2015), capital “can only accumulate by producing and moving through relations of severe inequality among human groups.” An article from 2020 highlights this inequality through numerous labor violations experienced by Asian noncitizens, such as wage theft and unsafe working conditions, and how employers engage in various strategies to maximize profit at the expense of their workers (Nguyen-Ngo, 2020).

In the case of higher education, the desire to accumulate capital has created expectations for AIS to consistently perform well and produce, not just to benefit faculty but also to advance their respective fields. In 2020, when Immigration and Customs Enforcement proposed a policy that would force international students to take in-person classes (despite the threat of COVID-19) or risk being deported (Chin, 2020), many people defended students' right to stay based on the economic gains and talent that they bring to the U.S. (Castiello-Gutierrez & Li, 2020). Additionally, various organizations have argued that students should be allowed to remain in the country, citing their contributions to science (American Physical Society Office of Government Affairs, 2020; National Foundation for American Policy, 2021).

These justifications to keep AIS in the U.S., fueled by the model minority myth, have not only commodified students in the interest of those in power (Yao & George Mwangi, 2022) but have also created racialized work. Despite being praised for their productivity, AIS may be subjugated due to their legal status and place on the racial hierarchy, viewed mainly through the lens of what they produce, and vulnerable to labor exploitation. Although previous research has focused on the cultural and language barriers faced by AIS, scholarship has been limited in examining the social conditions in which these students work and their impact on health and well-being. By centering the experiences of AIS, this study provides new insights into how the model minority myth shapes faculty members' expectations of Asian students' labor, contributing to inequality in higher education.

METHOD

This study received approval from the Institutional Review Board in March 2023. From March 2023 to May 2023 and then again from April 2024 to June 2024, I

conducted Zoom interviews with AIS across the U.S. Zoom is a useful platform for carrying out qualitative research, as it accounts for geographical barriers, helps maintain rapport (Archibald et al., 2019), and may allow participants to feel more comfortable discussing sensitive topics in a space of their own choosing. Conducting interviews also allows for a more in-depth understanding of respondents' social experiences and working conditions at their respective institutions. Although this investigation is part of a larger qualitative project, the interview questions pertinent to this study asked participants to explain their research agenda, describe their work schedule and how they felt about it, discuss how they managed conflict with supervisors, reflect on racial stereotypes about Asian people, and give thought to how these social factors may affect them as migrant workers. To be eligible for the study, participants had to be 18 years or older, be currently enrolled in a graduate program in the U.S., be part of a faculty-led lab or research group, and identify as an international student from Asia. Although there are clear cultural differences and various ways to approach work within Asian populations, AIS may still be racialized and stereotyped in similar ways. For this reason, I did not restrict my sample to students from a particular region of Asia.

The participants were recruited online through convenience sampling. First, I emailed information about the study to various student organizations geared toward international graduate students. Then, I posted the recruitment materials on threads in professional associations' websites, as well as on social media (Twitter/X, Facebook, etc.), inviting potential respondents to take part in a research project about their experiences as international students in the U.S. When I received limited responses, I adjusted my recruitment strategy and identified AIS from different universities across the country who were working in labs and/or were part of formal research groups. These students were sent messages about the study and given more detailed information on how to participate. Those who volunteered self-verified that they met all the eligibility criteria and then signed a consent form before being interviewed.

Overall, I conducted 22 in-depth interviews (see Table 1 for demographic information about the participants). The names mentioned are pseudonyms to maintain confidentiality. The interviews took approximately 45-60 minutes each, and each participant was compensated with a \$25 gift card for their time. To increase trustworthiness, I conducted member checks. I also engaged in memoing, an important component of qualitative data collection and analysis, which involves recording thoughts and notes throughout the course of a study (Bingham, 2023). Writing memos after each interview allowed me to reflect on the conversations and to maintain a record of my thoughts and what I believed were important patterns at the time. With participants' consent, the interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed. Each transcription was matched to its audio recording to check for accuracy. The transcriptions were then analyzed using QDA Miner 6.0, a qualitative data analysis software program. In line with previous research (Glass et al., 2015), I organized my analytic process into three general steps.

First, I reviewed transcripts line-by-line and assigned codes to text segments, including phrases and ideas (Saldaña, 2012). Then, I engaged in focused coding by organizing initial codes to generate larger concepts and categories, identifying similarities and differences between each participant's experiences in graduate school, and capturing central themes (Harry et al., 2005). In the last step, I re-examined the interview transcripts, along with concept maps, to understand the connections that emerged from the data analysis. Major clusters were confirmed through correspondence analysis, which illustrated the relationship between codes and participants (Lebart et al., 2010).

Table 1: Characteristics of Participants

Pseudonym	Sex	Place of Origin	Current U.S. Location	Area of Study
Janvi	Female	India	Southwest	Sociology
Seojoon	Male	South Korea	Southwest	Sociology
Taeho	Male	South Korea	Southwest	Sociology
Radhika	Female	India	Southwest	Sociology
Maqsood	Male	Pakistan	West	Communications
Junxi	Male	China	Southeast	Physics
Neelam	Female	India	Northeast	Public Health
Szu-Ying	Female	Taiwan	Southwest	Sociology
Wonsik	Male	South Korea	Northeast	Chemistry
Yuning	Female	China	Northeast	Engineering
Lihua	Female	China	Northeast	Earth Science
Meryl	Female	Singapore	Northeast	Earth Science
Xiaoyu	Female	China	Northeast	Earth Science
Haoran	Male	China	Midwest	Psychology
Abishek	Male	India	Southeast	Engineering
Jieqiong	Female	China	Midwest	Psychology
Jiali	Female	China	West	Psychology
Dayoung	Female	South Korea	Southwest	Psychology
Sonali	Female	India	Southwest	Engineering
Nizam	Male	Pakistan	Southeast	Engineering
Qiankai	Male	China	Southwest	Communications
Xialing	Female	China	Northeast	Communications

Positionality statement

As a scholar, it is important to reflect on how personal identities and experiences can influence the research process. Currently, I work as a faculty member at a four-year institution. Although I was born and raised in the U.S. and do not claim international status, I am racialized as Asian, was raised by immigrant parents, and have worked with international students in university settings before. I also study how stressors in the social environment impact the health of communities of color in the U.S., including immigrants. These factors

motivated my interest in understanding how international students experience working conditions and shaped the questions that I asked in the interviews.

RESULTS

Working conditions

The findings revealed three processes that characterize the working conditions of AIS: 1) limited agency in making decisions, 2) racialized labor driven by the model minority myth, and 3) the mechanization of Asian bodies. The quotes incorporated below capture what many students expressed regarding their work life.

Limited agency in making decisions

Having limited agency was a common theme that emerged when asked about students' ability to change their research agenda and how they progressed throughout their respective programs. While many students were given the freedom to explore other opportunities simultaneously (and were sometimes encouraged by their departments to do so), very few could leave their home lab/research group altogether and pursue a new or different route. If students experienced burnout or were no longer happy with the work they were doing, they had little choice but to stay with their current advisor. Abishek, an engineering student from India, shared:

I don't have any way to look for another research arena. Maybe it's dependent on the funding. So, another professor or another advisor may not have the money, or if they do have funding, they may have already taken another student. So... it's a very limited area to explore that, and that's a major challenge.

Here, Abishek describes limitations with switching research areas, particularly in advisor-funded graduate research settings. If things go awry, students cannot simply change who they work for because a different faculty member may not have the resources to support them. This locks students into very specific mentor-mentee relationships, which may or may not be ideal for their goals. Aside from funding constraints, however, many students explained that they would be hesitant to change their research program and/or leave their lab because they did not want to burn any bridges with their faculty advisor. Dayoung, a psychology student from South Korea, stated:

If I just think in a general way, I think I would feel kind of afraid of leaving where I am because there's like... visa issues, and she's the one connection I have in the U.S. If I ever needed a recommendation letter, I'd need to ask her, but if I feel like she doesn't like me because I'm no longer in the lab, that'd be a disadvantage for me.

These sentiments illustrate how strongly visa-dependent international students may rely on their advisors, which can limit students' agency in making decisions about their own path. Similar to Dayoung, many students discussed feeling reluctant to discontinue working with their primary advisor, even if they felt unmotivated or no longer found meaning in the project, for fear of consequences. These consequences included not receiving a positive recommendation from their advisor, missing important job opportunities, and potentially losing their legal authorization to stay in the U.S.

This section highlights the challenges related to funding, social networks, and institutional hierarchies, which ultimately undermine students' autonomy. These barriers can force students to stay in their advisors' labs or research groups (regardless of the condition) and have important implications for students' health and well-being.

Racialized labor driven by the model minority myth

Racialized labor was another important theme, which was seen in the type of work that AIS were tasked with, the association of Asians with abstract labor, and how long/often the students felt pressured to work. Regarding the type of work, students spoke about stereotypes of Asians being good at math and often being responsible for quantitative data analysis. Seojoon, a sociology student from South Korea, described:

There's like a preconception or bias against Asian students that they are good at math, and faculty who are working in the Population Research Center... I thought that they are, like, hiring Asian students just for the statistical and technical things.

Here, Seojoon illustrates a common racial stereotype about Asian people's abilities. Although this stereotype is seemingly positive, it creates pressure and places an unfair burden on AIS to always perform well in mathematical areas (Shah, 2019). This stereotype also assigns Asians to specific tasks, even if they may be interested in (or excel at) other responsibilities. Designating quantitative research as something that most Asians would be "good" at – and thus, should pursue – is one way how the labor performed by AIS becomes racialized.

Evaluating AIS by the rate of their productivity was another key feature of this racialized work. By associating Asians with abstract labor, faculty could easily calculate and criticize students who, from their perspective, were not doing enough. Nizam, an engineering student from Pakistan, shared his experience with this issue:

It was the second week of the semester, and I had to make some presentation. After I presented, my PI gave me the calculator that was in the lab, and he was like, "Okay, I'm spending \$70,000 on you per year in terms of the tuition fees and everything. If you divide that by 12 and then divide again to get a

daily estimate, that's like, you know, \$350 or something. So, you are doing this little with that amount of money. Is that acceptable to you?"

Nizam's experience reveals how faculty can weaponize funding to suggest that students are not adequately pushing themselves. It also serves as a prime example of how AIS are reduced to the rate of their labor. The irony, however, is that most students tended to work significantly more hours than what was required (or even legally allowed), based on their contract. Although in Nizam's case, his advisor confronted him explicitly about his performance, other students felt more of an implicit expectation (driven by the model minority myth) to produce as much scholarship as possible. Taeho, a sociology student from South Korea, explained:

I always work more. I can give you exact numbers. I think, on average, I work up to 70 hours per week, including Saturday and Sunday. It's partially because I want to, but partially because some professors prefer to work on Sunday. So, like, I need to figure out when professors are working... and kind of fit their schedule.

Taeho's work week was not unusual for AIS. Many students reported working on weekends, some were expected to work over breaks, and a few even shared that faculty believe international students do not care about protecting time off during holidays. These schedules raise concerns about labor exploitation. As Maqsood, a communications student from Pakistan, described:

By emphasizing repeatedly that Asian students are hard-working and doing all these crazy things just to stay afloat, it reinforces stereotypes that if you're an Asian student, you can be pushed to do more.

This section underscores a cycle of racialized work. AIS are assigned to particular tasks based on stereotypes about their abilities, but if they do not always meet a specific set of standards, they get reprimanded and told they are not working enough. However, many of them were already working long hours, and receiving harsh feedback from their advisors simply pushed them to exert themselves even more.

The mechanization of Asian bodies

Due to the routinization of their labor, participants also discussed feeling alienated from their work. Despite trying to prove their worth and demonstrating as much productivity as possible, students did not always find fulfillment in what they were doing. The high demands of their jobs stifled creativity and promoted work that was often monotonous. This process is what I call the mechanization of Asian bodies. Jieqiong, a psychology student from China, explained this process in the following way:

When [universities] need you, you're someone who can be used. You're not like a human. It's almost like dehumanization and thinking of Asians as robots... It makes me feel like... we're very disposable.

This point relates back to Bui's (2020) concept of Asian roboticism and viewing Asians as desirable for specific purposes. As Jieqiong mentioned, once those purposes have been fulfilled, there is a fear of easily being replaced. Classifying AIS as useful for research but expendable when not productive enough is a key feature of this mechanization process. Although students may have recognized how they are viewed, they sometimes found it difficult to challenge others' perceptions about them. For example, Janvi, a sociology student from India, shared:

It's more like... if you're allowed in our country, you should be of use to us... Yeah, I think that's a very capitalist view, like humans are resources and while I don't necessarily enjoy it or believe in it, it's also like... what can we do about it?

Some students also spoke about this issue in the context of future job prospects and how Asian students are compared to their white counterparts. Qiankai, a communications student from China, shared:

Sometimes I feel like I'm a machine. Like, I work a lot. That's not only because the job market is very competitive, but I remember when I left my previous institution to come here, one faculty told me that [I] have to be super hard-working. If a white student publishes one article, then [I] have to publish 10 articles. Then, [I] will be considered on the same stage.

Qiankai's reflections reveal the unfair standards set for AIS, which help explain the pressure that students feel to constantly produce more output. If faculty believe that students from Asia should publish significantly more to be considered "competitive" for the job market and securing a job within a certain timeframe is crucial to stay in the U.S., then those students would need to work much more quickly and efficiently (i.e., like a robot) to meet those expectations. These expectations, however, have important consequences for AIS, which are described below.

Impacts of working conditions on AIS

The working conditions impacted AIS in three major ways: 1) mental health, 2) physical health, and 3) social well-being.

Mental health impact

The working conditions of AIS had adverse effects on their mental health. This impact was seen through how much the students were willing to tolerate staying in their program, feelings of resignation when trying to address conflict with their supervisors, and their frustration with faculty not being more empathetic to their situations. Jieqiong, for example, shared:

I feel like international students have such a high threshold for quitting, and that makes some people just suck up everything and, you know, endure so much trauma just to not quit the program... So, I fully empathize with people who go through so much trouble, and you know, mental illness, just to be able to stay here.

Jieqiong's comments underscore how poor the working conditions for AIS can be, which many students are forced to accept to stay in the U.S. Since many AIS have invested years of preparation and significant amounts of money into their education, the risk of losing one's legal status can trap students in situations they would not tolerate otherwise. That students would endure trauma just to not quit their program puts a spotlight on the systems that rely on their vulnerability. It also raises questions about whether AIS' tolerance can make it harder to address issues with faculty.

Due to the power dynamics in the working relationships, students discussed the challenges of trying to raise concerns and address conflicts with their advisors. Not being able to do so (or trying and then being penalized for it) took a toll on their mental health. Maqsood, for example, stated:

I think faculty have realized that students that are coming from an Asian culture tend to be more obedient and not speak up. So, I think faculty abuse this and kind of use, and you know, overwork Asian students because they have an implicit understanding that they're unlikely to resist.

Maqsood's sentiments highlight the dangers of the model minority myth. When AIS are viewed as perpetually hard-working, there is also a perception that they will not defy figures of authority, which can subject them to abuse and exploitation. This way of thinking can lead to students being overworked and having little way to challenge or even simply address unrealistic expectations of their labor. Unfortunately, even though advisors were once graduate students, some participants did not feel like they empathized with the high (and sometimes excessive) workload. Qiankai spoke about this issue by sharing:

This is what I feel super weird about... that they used to be PhD students. They know the work and how frustrating a graduate student's life is like. But they still are very strict about deadlines. Like, when you negotiate... For instance, it's finals season. I still have to teach. I still have to grade. Can we

wait a bit? And the professor says “no” publicly. And I just feel like, “Are you kidding me?”

Qiankai’s reflections show how a lack of flexibility can lead to feelings of disbelief and frustration. When faculty members maintain a very rigid set of expectations around deadlines and availability, students may find it difficult to balance research goals with teaching responsibilities, coursework, and their own mental health. Furthermore, when students attempt to negotiate more time and get turned down, they may feel punished for having basic human needs. This rigidity and type of supervision can cause students to feel anxious and lead to burnout (Bekkouche, 2025), especially if students feel that it is impossible to accomplish everything that is expected of them.

This section illustrates the various ways in which AIS’ mental health can be harmed. Students may tolerate working conditions that would otherwise be unacceptable. They might find it difficult to raise concerns with their advisors and thus endure abuse or exploitation. Lastly, they may feel confused and frustrated when faculty members are unempathetic and not willing to make accommodations.

Physical health impact

Working conditions also had an adverse impact on AIS’ physical health. Losing sleep, skipping meals, and stress getting “under the skin” were not uncommon among the students. Nizam, for example, explained:

I couldn’t even get enough sleep... I was missing meals and everything. So, yeah, after all that, if you hear someone saying, “You’re not doing enough,” it hurts a lot.

Nizam’s experience reveals the extent to which students may sacrifice their own health to try and meet the expectations of their advisors. In his case, these sacrifices meant not getting rest and not eating regularly, resulting in a cycle of physical exhaustion. Despite these sacrifices, however, Nizam’s supervisor still did not feel like he was doing enough. It is important to note that students were aware of how these conditions impacted not only themselves but also their peers. For example, Sonali, an engineering student from India, shared:

Sometimes you put in a lot of effort, but you don’t get the results, right? I mean, the professors are not very understanding of that, and that is affecting our stress levels. And a few of my friends had to visit health services to get over some of the physical issues being caused by the stress. So that has been the case. It’s not a friendly situation.

Sonali’s remarks illustrate how physical health problems can manifest from exposure to chronic stress. When students feel like they are putting in a lot of

work, but faculty are not acknowledging their efforts, it can disrupt students' ability to maintain their health. This disruption may force students to seek out medical care and affect their overall performance in their respective program.

This section emphasizes the ways in which AIS' physical health can be jeopardized. Working conditions may cause students to be deprived of sleep, not eat proper meals, and experience so much stress that they start having health issues that require medical attention. These issues often reinforce one another, place students in a highly vulnerable position, and can increase their risk of illness (Yang et al., 2018).

Impact on social well-being

Lastly, working conditions negatively affected students' social well-being. Feeling disconnected from peers and loved ones, finding it difficult to maintain a work-life balance, and not prioritizing one's own happiness were all common experiences. Xiaoyu, an Earth science student from China, shared:

When people think of Asian students, the first thing that pops up in their mind is the work they do. That's kind of a typical thing to think, and actually, that sadly is also the first thing in my mind as well. It's not the social connection.

Xiaoyu's observation suggests that people may view AIS primarily for their labor, as opposed to their personhood. Seeing them mainly through the lens of what they produce is another way that AIS become mechanized. This mechanization has multiple consequences. For example, it may be harder for students to feel like they have meaningful connections and a sense of belonging outside of work. Since sense of belonging is important for self-esteem and overall life satisfaction (Tewari et al., 2024), AIS who lack it could experience psychological issues and social isolation (Chen & Zhou, 2019). In addition to students being viewed primarily for their labor, having a poor work-life balance was another important finding. Sonali, for example, explained:

I think we are used to almost very minimal work-life balance. It's just work. There's no life at all... I think we are taken for granted. I mean, most of us, but this is what I've heard among the discussions with my other friends.

This quote reveals Sonali's disillusionment with academia and shows how lab work can dominate students' lives to the point where non-academic interests and having a social life are largely erased. By believing that students are "taken for granted," Sonali's comments also point to a lack of recognition and appreciation for students' labor. This can make important contributions feel obligatory rather than valued. In addition to working long hours and being expected to constantly produce, some students reported not thinking about their own happiness and well-being. For example, Radhika, a sociology student from India, shared:

I always see my value as the value of my labor. I don't see my value as a person in this country. I also... kind of... have never thought of my well-being and what is going to bring peace to me.

Radhika's comments illustrate an internalized view of self-worth that is largely defined by her research output and what she is able to produce. Not thinking about well-being also suggests that meeting labor demands is constantly prioritized over emotional fulfillment. This has important implications, especially since tying self-worth to productivity can be detrimental to students (Fairlamb, 2022).

This section explains the various impacts of students' working conditions. Not only was their mental health affected, but their physical health was also compromised. Furthermore, the expectation of continuous labor made it challenging for participants to set aside time for self-care and their relationships with others. As a result, it was difficult for many of them to maintain their social well-being.

DISCUSSION

Over the past few decades, labor conditions in academia have been characterized by intense competition, precarious work, and managerial control (which emphasizes efficiency and standardization) and impact graduate students from many different backgrounds (Abramovitz & Zelnick, 2021). However, due to the model minority myth, these conditions can affect AIS in unique ways. This study, to my knowledge, is one of the first to investigate the labor conditions of AIS in the U.S., interrogate how racial stereotypes influence these conditions, and examine the impact they have on Asian students. The findings of the study reveal three processes that characterize the work of AIS in graduate school: limited agency in making decisions (including whether to leave their program), racialized labor, and the mechanization of Asian bodies. The first process underscores the relevance of power dynamics between faculty and students and speaks to the larger constraints imposed on international students by U.S. immigration policies and sources of funding. The latter two processes highlight the harmful effects of the model minority myth in shaping working conditions for AIS. More specifically, they illustrate how stereotypical ideas about Asians being "hard-working" and "highly productive" can create unrealistic expectations of labor, rendering them "model machines" (Bui, 2021).

These processes stem from racial capitalism and reinforce the association of Asians with abstract labor (Day, 2016). Namely, they make it possible for AIS's worth to be reduced to how efficiently they work and how much research they can produce. Additionally, these processes raise faculty members' expectations of AIS and often pressure students to try and meet an unfair set of performance demands. While there are students who can meet (or even exceed) these expectations, perceiving all Asians as being a monolithic, high-achieving social group can be harmful, especially for those whose experiences and outcomes do not fit this narrative (Lee & Zhou, 2016; Tran, 2016).

As the findings of this study revealed, continuously working through harsh conditions and being expected to maintain high levels of productivity had important consequences for AIS. These consequences included adverse effects on mental health, the development of physical health issues, and negative impacts on social well-being. These findings are in line with previous research on international students (Rodriguez et al., 2024; Yao, 2018), which has shown that structural barriers can lead to students feeling dismissed, othered, and isolated.

Implications for policy, practice, and research

Based on the findings of this study, there are several implications for policy and practice to address labor conditions in graduate school and create more equitable work environments for international students. First, since AIS reported working significantly more hours than what was written in their contract, there should be clearer enforcement of work-hour limits and labor protections for student employees. Without these mechanisms in place, students may continue to work excessively long hours, be subjected to mistreatment, and not have a way to hold exploitative supervisors accountable. Second, many respondents discussed how difficult it was to raise concerns and address conflicts with faculty for fear of retaliation and/or missing opportunities that may be crucial for their careers. As a result, colleges and universities may benefit from implementing confidential reporting systems that could be used to safely disclose workplace concerns without jeopardizing one's legal status or academic progress. If not already in place, institutions could also establish labor oversight committees and/or an ombuds office. Having a neutral, third-party to investigate complaints against faculty may encourage students to feel safe when reporting workplace violations and abuse by supervisors. Lastly, although many colleges and universities already have mental health and counseling services available, institutions could expand access to culturally responsive care that accounts for the unique stressors associated with immigration status, racial stereotypes, and power imbalances in the workplace. This would address many of the issues that AIS experience.

There are several limitations worth noting about this study. First, I limited my sample to AIS who were enrolled in a graduate program in the U.S. Therefore, I could not examine how these working conditions may vary in places such as Europe or Australia. The perception of Asians as being "machines," however, is a global phenomenon that requires investigations to go beyond the American context. Second, all interviews were conducted in English. As a result, I was not able to capture all of the complexities of how some students may have perceived (and felt about) their work environment in their primary language. Third, although I tried recruiting students who were further along in their graduate program, some had just recently matriculated. So, it is possible that these students may not have been exposed to more strenuous working conditions that they may face once they reach the dissertation stage. It might also explain why some students had very little issue with their work schedule and expectations from their faculty advisor/primary mentor. Fourth, students' experiences with work can also vary based on other social identities, such as gender and religion. However, these

factors were not inquired about in depth during the interviews. These limitations point to directions for future research.

First, future studies would benefit from interviewing Asian students in other countries. Understanding how Asians are racialized in different geographical contexts would provide insights into the various ways that people perceive them and how these students are treated. Second, conducting interviews in students' native language may better capture their feelings about work and allow them to share more details about their experiences as international scholars. Lastly, future research could study the experiences of more students further along in their respective programs, as well as how these experiences may differ by other identities, including gender and religion. By investigating the labor conditions of AIS, researchers will have a better understanding of how working environments impact marginalized students and contribute to inequality in higher education.

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