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# Contextualising intersectionality: A qualitative study of East Asian female migrant workers in the UK

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## Abstract

Previous intersectional research on ethnic minority women has largely focused on inequalities and disadvantages associated with the intersection between their minority gender and ethnic identities. In this study, we challenge the static and dichotomous assumption of the existing intersectionality framework (e.g. privilege versus disadvantage) and adopt Holvino's intersectional perspective of simultaneity as a theoretical lens through which to demonstrate the importance of understanding intersectionality within various levels of contexts, or contextualising social differences. Interviews with 43 female migrant workers from China, Japan and Korea living in the UK revealed that these women perceived disadvantage in terms of gender/ethnic stereotyping and discriminatory practices at work. At the same time, however, their accounts provided evidence of contextualised privilege, namely 'relative privilege' (privilege in comparison to multiple reference groups), 'assigned privilege' (privilege assigned by their employers and the host society), and 'ambiguous privilege' (privilege as a double-edged sword). Based on these observations, we suggest that the location of East Asian women is not fixed within the interlocking systems of oppression in the host country; rather, this location is dynamic and fluid within interpersonal, organisational and societal contexts in the home and host countries, moving back and forth between disadvantage and (limited) privilege.

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discrimination, diversity, ethnic minority, gender, intersectionality, migrants, privilege, work–life balance

**Introduction**

In recent decades, a growing number of studies have demonstrated that ethnic minority women in western societies tend to face distinctive barriers in the workplace. For instance, previous research has suggested that Black, Pakistani Muslim and other visible minority women are viewed as culturally unfit in UK organisations historically dominated by white men (Davidson and Davidson, 1997; Kamenou et al., 2013; Rana et al., 1998; Tariq and Syed, 2018). Tomlinson et al.'s (2013) study found that Black and ethnic minority women are excluded from informal workplace networks and have access to fewer mentoring or training opportunities at work, all of which are essential for career advancement. In addition, the uniqueness and therefore heightened visibility of ethnic minority women in white, male-dominated organisations increase performance pressure and risk of intense scrutiny in the case of under-performance (Wyatt and Silvester, 2015). Moreover, ethnic minority women are vulnerable to bicultural stress, in which they must repeatedly switch their ways of thinking or behaving as they move between work and family domains in order to meet different cultural expectations from each (Cooke et al., 2013; Kamenou, 2008).

In exploring these disadvantages and challenges experienced by many ethnic minority women over their careers, the concept of intersectionality has provided a useful theoretical lens. Intersectionality suggests that an individual has multiple identities, and the impacts of these identities are multiplicative and reinforce each other (Collins, 1998; Crenshaw, 1991). Researchers taking an intersectional approach contend that an individual's experiences cannot be explained simply by single-axis perspectives such as gender or ethnicity alone; instead, these experiences need to be understood by analysing the interdependent functions of multiple demographic categories such as gender, ethnicity, social class, language or sexuality (McBride et al., 2015; McCall, 2005; Warner, 2008). From its very beginning, an intersectionality perspective has been used as a framework to portray ethnic minority women and their career experiences primarily through discourses of disadvantage, challenge and oppression. Scholars in the field have argued that social categories be understood in relational terms rather than as isolated units of analysis, and these categories underpin intersecting systems of power such as sexism and racism that create complex social inequalities manifesting as distinctive social experiences for individuals and groups (Collins, 2015).

In an effort to guide further development of intersectionality in organisation studies, Rodriguez et al. (2016) identified two major perspectives taken by extant research. The first, more common perspective focuses on subjective experiences of inequality among individuals and groups based on their social membership within a particular time and place. This perspective illuminates how social discrimination and gender and ethnic disparities within workplace institutions negatively affect ethnic minority women's work lives and career progress in western societies. The majority of empirical studies on ethnic minority women's multiple disadvantages have adopted this perspective (Adib and

Guerrier, 2003; Bell and Nkomo, 2001; Kamenou et al., 2013). Although this body of research has greatly deepened understanding of the adverse circumstances that ethnic minority women encounter in their host country, Rodriguez et al. (2016) point out that it has been criticised for its dichotomous and static assumptions of power relations – for instance, of privilege versus disadvantage, and dominance versus subordination.

The second, less prevalent, perspective calls attention to the contextualisation of social differences, or how individuals experience, interpret and understand their multiple identities and power/inequality within the contexts of wider structures and institutions. This perspective posits that privilege and inequality are fluid and variable depending on the setting in which the power relations unfold, and intersectional analysis should therefore be contextualised (Tatli and Özbilgin, 2012). Holvino's (2010) framework of simultaneity adopts this perspective, positing that intersectional studies should simultaneously take into account different levels of processes and structures that may (re)produce privilege and inequality in the workplace: the ways an individual understands themselves and how other people perceive them (i.e. 'process of identity practice'), organisational norms or practices (i.e. 'process of institutional practice') and societal structures and systems (i.e. 'process of societal practice'). This framework advocates for the importance of giving voice to ethnic minority women (i.e. subjectivities) when attempting to understand their experience of intersectionality, while at the same time highlighting the importance of studying the interplay of these individual narratives with interpersonal, organisational and societal practices. By virtue of its emphasis on contextual influences, Holvino's framework presents a more flexible and dynamic aspect of intersectionality, allowing for the possibility that historically multiple disadvantaged individuals can experience both advantage and disadvantage simultaneously in broader, complex contexts. Such simultaneous consideration of privilege and disadvantage is of theoretical and practical importance since subjects are unlikely to be subordinate across all categories of difference and few are purely victims or oppressors (Collins, 2002).

Adopting the latter approach, several studies have indeed examined the contextual and fluid aspects of privilege and disadvantage in intersectionality (Alberti and Iannuzzi, 2020; Ang, 1996). These studies suggest that ethnic minority employees' (multiple) subordinate identities do not unilaterally work to their disadvantage but can also offer privileged positions in some contexts. For instance, in their study of senior managers, Atewologun and Sealy (2014) showed that ethnic minority individuals can sometimes be privileged, depending on whom they are compared to ('privilege is contextual') and whom they interact with ('privilege is conferred'), although their privilege is frequently challenged and under threat ('privilege is contested'). In a similar vein, Sang et al. (2013) found that migrant female professors' lives in British academe were not characterised only by multiple forms of disadvantage (as 'double strangers'; for instance, subtle discrimination resulting from language barriers or gender/ethnic stereotypes) but also by multiple forms of privilege and resources (e.g. ethnicised capital exclusive to ethnic minority women) stemming from their 'otherness' in terms of gender and ethnicity.

Building upon this body of work, our study aims to explore how Chinese, Japanese and Korean female migrant workers (hereafter referred to as East Asian women) experience the intersection of gender, ethnicity and migrant status in their professional lives in the UK. Informed by Holvino's simultaneity perspective, we contextualise East Asian

women's subjectivities within interpersonal contexts (social stereotyping of East Asian women), organisational practices (power relations of workplaces) and wider societal processes (social structures in their host and home countries). Through this contextualised exploration, we demonstrate that our participants' perceptions of their distinctive social experiences as identified by Collins (2015) are determined not only by their location within interlocking systems of oppression in a particular time and place, but also by constant sense-making and interpretations of their relative, assigned and ambiguous location within various contexts and settings of the home and host countries.

## **East Asian women in the UK**

In the 1950s, post-war British society saw a significant number of newly arrived Chinese migrants, mainly from Hong Kong. Many were low-skilled men with few educational qualifications who brought their wives and children with them and settled down in the UK by establishing their own businesses such as Chinese catering or being employed as manual workers (Pang, 2003). Since the late 1970s, there has been an influx of professional and highly educated workers and students from mainland China to the UK. Among them are many women who migrated to the UK independently, aiming to obtain better professional experiences or education overseas (Cooke, 2007; Wei, 2013). Migration from Japan and Korea began later than from China, around the 1970s and 1980s respectively. The majority of Japanese female migrants in these new waves of migration were trailing wives, following their expatriate or student husbands during a period of great economic growth in Japan (Izuhara and Shibata, 2001). Like their Japanese counterparts, Korean female migrants initially consisted predominantly of wives to expatriate and student husbands (Lim and Skinner, 2012). In more recent years, however, growing numbers of independent Japanese and Korean female migrants have come to the UK to gain international work and study experience (Kim, 2008; White, 2005). At present, there are approximately 207,000 Chinese, 43,000 Japanese and 17,786 Korean migrants present in England, Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland, within an overall UK population of 66.4 million (Office for National Statistics, 2011, 2016, 2019).

The limited research available demonstrates that Chinese, Japanese and Korean women in the UK share some migration experiences. For instance, although East Asian migrants perform relatively well in the UK labour market in terms of higher education levels, lower unemployment rates and higher professional status relative to other ethnic minority groups (Archer and Francis, 2007; Owen et al., 2015; Powell, 2018), they have been subject to ethnic and gender discrimination when it comes to recruitment and selection, pay level and promotion (Cooke et al., 2013; Izuhara and Shibata, 2001; Pang, 2003). They also struggle with an actual or assumed lack of language skills and a common frame of cultural reference with colleagues, and exclusion from informal networks in the workplace (Lawthom and Kagan, 2016; Lee et al., 2002). Although several studies point towards East Asian women's strategic mobilisation of ethnicised resources, such as additional language abilities or social networks with people from similar ethnic backgrounds (e.g. Cooke et al., 2013; Izuhara and Shibata, 2001), research consistently shows that these women face extra demands and challenges with regard to career development in comparison to their white British counterparts.

Throughout this article, we use the term ‘East Asian women’ to refer to female migrant workers from East Asian countries – China, Japan and Korea. We group these countries together as ‘East Asian’ because their geographical proximity and therefore historical and cultural relatedness distinguish them from other regions. However, we fully acknowledge that female migrant workers from these areas are not a homogeneous group and have significant differences in their immigration history as well as their social, cultural and economic experiences. Therefore, we try to refrain from a groupist approach (Ang, 2014) and to identify unique characteristics of each specific ethnicity whenever meaningful differences emerge.

## Research methods

We seek to understand East Asian women migrants’ experiences by examining their interpretation of those experiences. An interpretivist approach facilitates our understanding of motives, feelings and experiences from the perspective of women migrants rather than that of the researcher (King and Horrocks, 2010). We used an exploratory qualitative research design and collected data through semi-structured interviews, employing a combination of purposive and chain-referral sampling (Heckathorn, 2011; Ritchie et al., 2013). Five East Asian women were initially selected using the personal networks of the researchers and were contacted via email with an invitation to participate in the study. Upon completion of the interviews, participants were asked if they could refer any eligible contacts to the research. This process was repeated until evidence became repetitive and we determined that data saturation had been reached (Baker and Edwards, 2012).

These sampling techniques have both advantages and limitations. Purposive sampling is both cost-effective and time-effective and enables researchers to use their personal judgement to choose study participants who are well suited to achieve the research objectives of an exploratory research project (Robinson, 2014). The chain-referral process gives researchers access to samples that may be difficult to reach using other sampling techniques and also represents a cost-efficient way of finding participants and securing their involvement (Biernacki and Waldorf, 1981). Sampling bias can arise in both purposive and chain-referral sampling, however, because participants are known to one another and may share similar characteristics to a greater degree than would be the case in a random sample of the population of East Asian women in the UK.

In total, semi-structured interviews were conducted with 43 East Asian women – 13 Chinese women, 15 Japanese women and 15 Korean women. Participant ages ranged from 24 to 58, with an average age of 32. All interviewees were employed and had spent at least six months in the UK at the time of the interview. Most had moved to the UK for career or education purposes, although four participants did so for family reasons such as following expatriate parents or marrying a British or European husband. Participants worked in a range of white-collar occupations, from part-time school assistant to full-time investment banker. All participants except one had undergraduate degrees, and 21 of them held master’s degrees. Sixteen interviewees were married or cohabiting with long-term partners, and six had children.

All interviews were conducted by the lead author, who was able to relate to participants and draw upon her own experiences as an East Asian migrant woman in the UK, thus ensuring that the researchers' standpoint was aligned with that of the research subjects (Liu, 2018). Interviews took place in the participants' home, workplace or nearby cafe according to their preference and lasted between 30 and 80 minutes. While interviews with Chinese and Japanese participants were conducted in English, both English and Korean were used to interview Korean participants according to the preference of the participants, as the lead author is a native Korean speaker. Interviews were recorded where permission was granted. Two participants did not give permission and detailed notes were taken instead. The audio recordings were transcribed into English and/or Korean; if transcribed in Korean, key phrases and portions of the text were translated into English before presentation in this article. Prior to the interview, each interviewee was asked to sign the research consent form, which specified data protection issues and assured the participants of anonymity.

We used a thematic analysis approach to interpret the interview data (Braun and Clarke, 2006). Researchers read and re-read the data, engaging in a form of pattern recognition in which recurrent themes are identified and become categories for analysis (Fereday and Muir-Cochrane, 2006). The researchers read through the first transcript and together generated initial codes based on portions of text that represented a particular construct or idea (e.g. discrimination). The second transcript was then read and coded, using the codes generated from the first transcript as well as new ones based on constructs or ideas not yet encountered in the previous transcript. This cumulative and collaborative process continued for all 26 English language transcripts and two sets of detailed interview notes. The 15 mixed-language (Korean and English) transcripts were coded by the lead author, who then discussed the text and applicable codes with the other (non-Korean-speaking) author. We then sorted the codes into themes, categorising overarching themes as 'organising themes' and sub-themes as 'basic themes' (King and Horrocks, 2010). These are presented in Table 1. Themes were reviewed for internal homogeneity and external heterogeneity (Patton, 1990), in an effort to ensure that data within themes fit together in a meaningful way and that there were clear and identifiable distinctions between themes.

## **Findings**

Participants' work experiences were marked by multiple disadvantages and challenges that were often perceived (by themselves and others) as products of individual traits or deficiencies associated with their status as ethnic minority women and migrants. At the same time, however, participants attributed to these identities the experience of privilege in certain contexts. In the following sections, we first introduce the findings on negative work experiences in terms of social stereotypes and discriminatory practices at work, and then present the positive experiences that our participants reported in connection with their perceived privilege. Throughout, we seek to demonstrate how participants' individual-level experiences are in fact shaped by structural factors based on the simultaneity framework of Holvino (2010).

**Table 1.** Basic, organising and global themes.

Quotes	Basic themes	Organising themes	Global themes
'I think probably others may perceive me as passive.' (Sayaka, Japanese)	Perceived passivity	Gender and ethnic stereotyping	Challenges and demands
'I hide my real self and become a totally different person. I approach and talk to other people saying "Hi, nice to meet you" first.' (Jungyoon, Korean)	Efforts to overcome stereotypes		
'I mean one law firm told me that I couldn't speak English properly, as in you know as a native British person.' (Michiru, Japanese)	Selection	Discriminatory practices at work	
'I feel that I am the minority. I can also clearly see glass ceiling.' (Mihong, Korean)	Promotion		
'In conversations I usually get less opportunities to speak or to express my opinions. Whereas, the others, I mean the westerners, they tend to talk to each other very freely.' (Yiluyi, Chinese)	Interpersonal practice		
'Always they say, behave appropriately according to your gender and your age and that kind of stuff and I really reacted very badly and I ended up leaving [Japan].' (Satomi, Japanese)	Freedom from home country gender role expectations	Relative privilege	Contextual privilege
'There was more of a hierarchy obviously, it's Asia and it was just like, am I supposed to speak to him directly or do I have to speak to this person who is going to speak to this person and then that person. . . . My current company is not like that at all.' (Seiko, Japanese)	Freedom from home country seniority-based social norms		
'In the UK it's more friendly. It's more, like, flexible and more like, room to be yourself, so I appreciate that.' (Saori, Japanese)	Freedom from general social norms in home country		
'In China it's quite busy. You even need to work in the weekend . . . your personal life is more respected here.' (Rui, Chinese)	Work-life balance		
'They need a Japanese speaker.' (Nana, Japanese)	Language skills	Assigned privilege	
'One of my tasks is to manage the partnership with Korean organisations. . . . The fact that I am Korean seems to be very helpful in building and maintaining those relationships.' (Seoyeon, Korean)	Knowledge of home country business practices		
'People tend to think Japanese people are nice people, they're very polite and kind. So I think I get a bit of credit for that.' (Reiko, Japanese)	Communication style		
'People seem to think that Asian people work harder.' (Mihong, Korean)	Positive stereotypes	Ambiguous privilege	



### *Intersectionality and challenges/demands*

*Gender and ethnic stereotyping.* For our participants, gender and ethnic stereotypes generated experiences of workplace discrimination and inequality. Regardless of their individual characteristics, participants' visible gender and ethnic markers activated stereotypes of East Asian women's submissiveness and passivity as a process of identity practice. Satomi, a Japanese investment banker, related how her colleagues' assumptions gave her fewer opportunities to participate actively in meetings: 'People will talk over me thinking "she is not going to say anything".'

Some participants suggested that these gender- and ethnicity-based stereotypes might be linked to East Asian communication styles, which they characterised as indirect and self-effacing, and contrasted these styles with the more assertive and self-enhancing communication patterns that they perceived as being endorsed in British workplaces. They then emphasised how the difference between these communication styles led to colleagues and superiors underestimating East Asian women's work-related capabilities:

[S]ome people have a belief that Japanese female workers are the most quiet and the least aggressive colleagues. [We] try to say something but may not say it in a straightforward way, and then it might be taken as passive or weak, but it's not necessarily so. (Sayaka, Japanese management consultant)

I got feedback from my boss that I should be louder and jump in during a meeting if I want to stand out . . . [Korean people] respect others when talking. But here you should raise your voice regardless of age or rank and it is essential for your performance evaluation and promotion . . . I thought it was a respectful way of communication, but they seemed to think that I communicated in such a way just because I was passive, lacked creative ideas and didn't perform well. (Naree, Korean data analyst)

To overcome these generalised perceptions about East Asian women and demonstrate their competence, participants exerted extra effort to conform to western communication norms. For instance, Naree tried to 'talk more and loudly, and make more jokes'. They also tried to learn, as Satomi put it, 'how to play the game [that is] a very western male sort of thing'. Navigating between different cultural contexts to fit in at work as such often induced bicultural stress: 'We don't have such discussion culture in Japan. We don't cut in when someone is talking. But here you should do that. Here, people are very different . . . It is difficult' (Michiru, Japanese office coordinator).

These findings highlight how white, masculine communication styles are privileged in British workplaces with East Asian communication styles being interpreted as personal deficits. Participants experienced this problematisation of cultural difference as explicit and implicit pressure to 'fix' their communication style. This process of institutional practice reinforced negative stereotypes of East Asian women regarding their submissiveness and weakness, thereby (re)producing the inequality and discrimination experienced by the participants.

*Discriminatory practices at work.* Other workplace inequalities were also reported, ranging from scapegoating to perceived injustice in recruitment and promotion opportunities.

For instance, Inhee described how her supervisor attributed workplace conflict in which she was involved to cross-cultural differences and assigned blame to her:

When I had some work-related conflict with my colleague, who was a white European, I reported it to my manager, who was also a white European. However, what my manager said in response was awful. He said that because I am not European, I could not think in a European way and that's why this conflict happened. I was shocked. (Inhee, Korean customer service manager)

Shinae and Michiru also illustrated unequal treatment they experienced in terms of recruitment:

So I did a small experiment. I had normally used my Korean name in my CV, but in the experiment, I used my English name, and I also reduced the size of my photo so that it was difficult to discern whether I am Asian or not. Interestingly, after this change, recruiters were more interested in me. Three companies sent me interview requests right away. I really felt bitter about that. (Shinae, Korean documentary producer)

[I]t is hard to say the reason why I cannot get a job, a normal permanent legal job. It may be because I am Japanese, or it may not be for a real race issue but for the whole thing like English ability . . . according to lots of my friends at top law firms, they don't see [ethnic minority] people. . . . it is so difficult to find East Asians in legal occupation. (Michiru, Japanese office coordinator)

This issue of language proficiency arose repeatedly when participants described their experiences of inequality and discrimination. Lifei also noted that she had lived in the UK for over 10 years and had completed an undergraduate degree in a British university, yet was told that her English language skills were stalling her career progression:

I did request for promotion many times, but they didn't give it to me and then one of the reasons which I think was not very valid . . . he kept telling me to improve my English . . . I think it was just an excuse. (Lifei, Chinese project support analyst)

In the language-related quotes above, we see an interesting contrast between Michiru and Lifei. Michiru seemed to consider 'a real race issue' and 'English ability' as separate factors by drawing a line between them. Her account implies that, unlike the 'race issue', a lack of English ability could be a legitimate reason for why she and other ethnic minority individuals found it difficult to secure employment in top law firms. On the contrary, Lifei did not believe these were separate issues. She argued that although her manager had pointed to her English language proficiency as the reason for her failed promotion at a surface level, it might have been related to her gender and ethnic background at a deep level, whether the organisation acknowledged it or not. From her account alone, it is difficult to discern whether her lack of English was indeed a critical factor in the promotion decision (as her manager claimed) or whether it was an excuse presented by the organisation to justify their gendered and ethnicised decision (as Lifei claimed). What was clear from the interviews, however, was that the participants' status as non-native speakers and their language barriers were often the justifications used for unequal access to recruitment and promotion opportunities.

Participants related not only their own but also their compatriots' difficulties in securing promotion in British workplaces. While none of the women in our study had plans to return to their home countries to advance their careers, they knew of others who had responded to perceived inequality of opportunity in this way:

I do feel it's harder for Chinese or Asian to achieve or to get promoted in the UK, especially girls [ . . . ] A lot of my friends they are very clever. They graduated from, like, Cambridge, Oxford, they work in a law firm or investment banking, but they progress slower than local people. So [some people] decided to just go home or go to Hong Kong for a better future or career path. (Yilian, Chinese business development manager)

### *Intersectionality and contextual privilege*

Notwithstanding the demands and challenges arising from the intersection of gender, ethnicity and migrant status in the context of the UK workplace revealed in the interviews, our participants highlighted positive aspects of their work experiences with accounts of privilege, resourcefulness and appreciation. Participants reported that they felt privileged in comparison to multiple reference groups ('relative privilege'), they were assigned privileged status by their (British) employers and the larger society ('assigned privilege') and their minority identities unexpectedly provided them with ambiguous but still identifiable privilege ('ambiguous privilege'). This positivity in relation to their working lives emerged repeatedly throughout the interviews and is a notable theme of our study.

*Relative privilege.* A strong narrative of feeling privileged relative to their pre-migration selves emerged in participants' accounts of the work-related choices and opportunities they experienced in the UK. Many of the East Asian women in our study used the words 'free' and 'equal' when describing their work experiences after migration, contrasting these with a multitude of social restrictions imposed on them as women in their home countries:

If I had been in Korea, I would never have had this kind of life. I would have kept comparing myself with others, considered others' expectations, and taken care of my parents and so on. . . . I am much happier here since I have a job I love. I feel proud of myself and I am confident. (Jiyeon, Korean shop manager)

These accounts were particularly notable among our Japanese participants. Many Japanese participants drew comparisons between their home and host countries. They characterised the UK as comparatively more gender- and age-egalitarian, while describing the culture in their home country as requiring workers to follow strict social rules and to perform prescribed roles according to gender and/or age:

In Britain . . . at least theoretically they know men and women should be equal. Living in Japan . . . you have to fight. You have to prove that you're equal . . . I always felt like a second-class citizen when I was in Japan . . . I had really negative experiences in Japan being a woman, being a working woman. (Hinako, Japanese journalist)

In Japan if you see a senior person in a group we have to follow what that person says, but they don't have that kind of culture in this country. So, it's very equal. (Manami, Japanese product manager)

A sense of liberation arising from the relative anonymity provided by working in London, a city of nine million people where 37% of the population is foreign-born (World Population Review, 2020) was also discernible among Japanese participants, who described expectations to conform to social norms in their home country as 'suffocating':

I feel really self-conscious when I'm in Japan. I feel like that they are watching me . . . I feel free here . . . here, being different is tolerated. (Kanako, Japanese fashion designer)

[Here] you can be about yourself . . . [in Japan] you have to be always polite and punctual . . . but I don't need to follow that kind of thing [here] . . . When I was in Tokyo I feel like I will be put into a cage. (Saori, Japanese education consultant)

According to the participants, social norms in Japan, as processes of social practice, had served to discourage their career aspirations to a great extent through suppressing their perceived ability to make choices based on their interests and creative self-expression. Although many participants acknowledged that they were still not entirely exempt from these pressures, they saw the possibilities and benefits of alternative lifestyles available to them in the UK, feeling more empowered and privileged than their previous selves in their home society.

This perceived privilege relative to previous selves was also prevalent in accounts of participants' work-life interface. Many women commented on what they perceived as social consensus on the importance of an individual's work-life balance in British society and expressed appreciation for workplace practices that embody this social value. They emphasised that the work-life balance they currently experienced was a considerable privilege compared to past work experiences in their home countries:

One thing I find about working in the UK is that you separate work from your personal life very clearly. . . . [I]n China you're expected to be ready, like 24/7, and you're expected to work overtime . . . I think it's more freedom here. (Yiluyi, Chinese marketing consultant)

Peer groups in their home countries also emerged as a significant reference group. Participants kept in contact with friends and colleagues at home and had an indirect but concrete understanding of the working cultures and norms in the East Asian region. For example, Yifan was familiar with a culture of long working hours in China through her friends:

I've got loads of friends back in Asia they earn maybe 10 times the money than me, but then they don't have social life. They don't even have a week off holiday. I say that's not good life quality . . . you've got big house, big car and then expensive, kind of, luxury lifestyle, all that money, you don't have time. You don't have the time to appreciate life, you don't have holiday. (Yifan, Chinese bank analyst)

Participants did not take for granted the freedom, autonomy and work–life balance that they claimed to experience in the UK. Through multi-faceted and comprehensive comparisons of their current situations with those of multiple reference groups, they made sense of their post-migration lives as being relatively privileged – being ‘happier’ and ‘confident’.

*Assigned privilege.* Our interviews suggest that the perception of work-related privilege may originate not only from an individual woman’s sense-making (as discussed in ‘relative privilege’ above) but can also be assigned by others externally. Some Chinese and Japanese participants stated that their native language abilities and cultural knowledge about their home country were seen by their employers as valuable and useful resources in the UK labour market, conferring advantage in the recruitment process:

My colleagues have mentioned I should use more of my Chinese skills or speak Chinese whenever I get that opportunity and I think that’s one of the reasons why I was hired into the role, because of my language abilities. (Li, Chinese university recruitment coordinator)

The high value placed on East Asian women’s migrant status and associated attributes was particularly prominent in some contexts, specifically where the nature of participants’ jobs or the main area of their employer’s business were related to dealing with customers or business partners in East Asia. In such contexts, participants’ language abilities and cultural understanding of the region were viewed by their employers as ethnic capital, an extremely important skill set that their British colleagues could not easily obtain. Participants stated that the rarity of such skills rendered them irreplaceable and thereby advanced their relative status in the labour market:

[R]ight now I’ve got this job and the reason they can sponsor me is because they need a Japanese language speaker. (Seiko, Japanese tax advisor)

Usually they require Japanese [language] skills . . . there are always Japanese projects like five or six in London . . . they are looking for Japanese temporary para-legals for that particular project. (Ayami, Japanese non-governmental organisation (NGO) worker)

When giving reasons for why these skills have become highly sought after in British organisations, participants, especially the Chinese participants, pointed to the increased presence of China in the global economic market: ‘I think the reason why my company can sponsor my visa is China is big market, so I need to try deal with Chinese students, so that’s a big advantage of my nationality’ (Rui, Chinese education consultant).

In the previous section, we showed that female migrants’ status as non-native speakers was constructed by their employers as a problem. Here, we show how participants’ language abilities and cultural knowledge of their home countries were valued in their workplaces. We understand this contradiction to have resulted from the differences in the organisational contexts in which the participants were situated. The organisations of those quoted in the current section viewed East Asian markets, especially the Chinese market, as their targets and tried to actively expand their businesses into the region. Given this business focus on the Asian market, these organisations saw the practical and economic

value of the participants' migrant status, claiming them as 'resources' and offering them a privileged status. On the contrary, the organisations of those quoted in the previous section focused more on the local (British) market. Consequently, those participants' linguistic backgrounds were not acknowledged as resources but conceived more as liabilities. We suggest this contrast reveals an important aspect of assigned privilege. Assigned privilege can be referred to as 'privilege' only when employers acknowledge the economic or practical benefits that ethnic minority women can provide. Thus, the nature of assigned privilege is not equivalent to that of relatively stable and socially normalised privilege, which is often enjoyed by their white and male counterparts in many western societies. Assigned privilege is unstable and variable, subject to others' perceptions.

*Ambiguous privilege.* Ambiguous privilege was the last theme identified in our analysis. While relative and assigned privilege focused on how participants' identities and corresponding status are understood by themselves and their employers, the current theme draws our attention to the ambiguous and double-edged nature of their privilege per se. In this section, we suggest that although participants' minority identities seemed to place them in a disadvantageous position in some (or most) work contexts, those identities were also found to provide unexpected benefits and advantages in other contexts. Also, their identities seemed to offer unique privilege at a certain point in time, but this advantage might not be enduring and sustainable in the long term, even potentially backfiring on them. For example, Naree identified her Korean communication style, which tends to be more indirect and context-sensitive than western communication norms, as one factor influencing this ambiguous aspect of privilege. In her workplace, her communication style was seen as a positive attribute that helped her develop high-quality relationships with colleagues and superiors: 'It has not always been bad. [Due to my communication style] I think I could build and maintain good relationships with others. They see me as a very respectful person and a good listener' (Naree, Korean data analyst).

The fact that Naree referred to her communication style as an advantage is somewhat surprising given that the same factor emerged earlier as one of the elements that fed into negative stereotypes of her as too passive and dependent on others. Naree also seemed to be aware of the contradiction in her remarks, which might be why she hinted at the potential drawbacks of her communication style before continuing to describe the benefits: '[i]t has not always been bad . . .'. In addition, she linked the benefits of her communication style to the relationship-building and interpersonal contexts only, suggesting that the same factor might still be assessed as problematic in task-related contexts, such as in meetings (as Naree herself illustrated in the previous section). Despite this limited and ambiguous advantage, it was clear from the interview that Naree noted her East Asian communication style as one of her strengths. She explicitly commented that these communication norms were not entirely harmful to her career but instead had some favourable effects.

Another factor demonstrating the ambiguous face of privilege related to positive cultural stereotypes of East Asian women as being hard-working, polite and nice. Some participants stated that East Asian women were often viewed by others as being more industrious than their colleagues from other ethnic backgrounds: 'I think probably [East] Asian people have more reputation of being harder workers . . . and more

diligent. But then, that is what other people are telling me, not me telling myself' (Jiao, Chinese HR manager).

Other women in our study claimed that their gender and ethnic identities were often associated with being nice, polite and respectful. Irrespective of whether they were actually engaged in these kinds of behaviour, positive perceptions about East Asian women worked to their professional advantage by making a good impression on others. As Satomi says:

I mean it is such a cliché but most people will think that I am just naturally polite and nice and everything which I'm not really. But that is always a nice thing when they come to me and instantly associate me with politeness because that opens up more opportunities. (Satomi, Japanese investment banker)

The quotes above signify that participants deemed the positive stereotypes attached to them as constituting a career-building resource, enhancing their position at work in general in terms of relationship-building and impression management. This perceived advantage described by the participants, however, does not seem to correspond with what academic research has shown about the implications of positive cultural stereotypes (Ang, 1996; Chung, 2016). According to previous studies, it cannot be ascertained whether the seemingly positive perceptions will continue to help the participants in the long term. Rather, these labels may over time operate as an additional constraint by putting them into a metaphorical cage and depriving them of opportunities to express their authentic selves. This concern accords with some points raised by Liu (2017). In her study on Chinese employees in Australia, she found that stereotypical views of Chinese people in Australian society and Chinese people's 'self-orientalism' in conforming to those views could result in their workplace behaviours being dictated by a western (Australian) view of Chinese culture – that is, orientalism – not by their own free will, regardless of whether the stereotypes were positive or negative. Interestingly enough, unlike with the case of communication styles above, our participants did not seem to be aware of the potential downsides of positive stereotypes, or at least accounts suggestive of such awareness were not given during the interviews. Instead, the participants conceptualised these stereotypes and the relevant qualities which they were thought to have as unique resources and suggested they derived benefit from them.

## Discussion

The aim of this study was to examine how East Asian women understand their work experiences and status as migrant workers in the UK. In their accounts, participants interpreted their experiences at the individual level, but we sought to demonstrate how these experiences are shaped by the interaction of interlocking structures of oppression and privilege in the home and host countries. To this end, we drew on Holvino's (2010) intersectional framework of simultaneity as a theoretical lens and identified how East Asian migrant women's work experiences are informed by various contexts across different levels. Our findings suggest that participants faced significant barriers to gaining and maintaining quality career experiences in relation to gender and ethnic stereotyping and

discriminatory practices at work. At the same time, however, the women in our study reported that they felt empowered, appreciated and resourceful in some contexts and expressed a strong perception of relative, assigned and ambiguous privilege. This tension between privilege and disadvantage highlights that the experiences of ethnic minority women reflect and are affected by simultaneous processes of identity, institutional and societal practice, as Holvino argues in her intersectional framework, rather than being fixed and determined by individuals' gender and ethnicity per se. In the following sections, we discuss these findings in more detail with reference to the existing literature on ethnic minority women.

### *Challenges and unique characteristics of East Asian women*

The challenges and disadvantages faced by East Asian women can be interpreted within various levels of contexts surrounding them, including interpersonal, organisational and social contexts. Specifically, participants stated that due to their communication styles, which they characterised as being more self-effacing and indirect than the western standard (Gudykunst et al., 2006; Sanchez-Burks et al., 2003), they were perceived by others to be overly submissive and passive at work (Pyke and Johnson, 2003; Rosette et al., 2016). These stereotypes of East Asian women (as a process of identity practice) seemed to interact with a process of institutional practice in British organisations that normalises self-enhancing and direct communication styles and imposes bi-cultural stress on participants to 'correct' their communication styles so as to comply with organisational norms. Discriminatory recruitment, promotion and interpersonal practices at work reported by our participants can also be analysed in terms of how broader social contexts (as a process of societal practice), which identify East Asian women as 'perpetual foreigners' (as will be discussed in detail below; Lee, 2008) and devalue attributes associated with their ethnic minority immigrant status, cascade to organisational and interpersonal practices.

Our findings about difficulties and challenges among East Asian women are generally in line with previous intersectional studies illustrating the multiple disadvantages or jeopardy experienced by African American women in the USA and South Asian or Muslim women in western Europe (Adib and Guerrier, 2003; Kamenou et al., 2013). For instance, there is ample evidence showing that South Asian or Muslim female professionals in western European countries are denied privilege and power at work due to their assumed submissiveness, insufficiently white appearance, exclusion from homophobic networks and hypervisibility as well as invisibility (Ali et al., 2017; Kamenou, 2008; Wyatt and Silvester, 2015). Despite these general parallels in terms of the double bind of racism and sexism, we also identified issues more specific to East Asian women, particularly with regard to their discussion of language fluency. Our participants noted that their perceived lack of language competency was a legitimate reason or was utilised as an excuse for excluding them from the processes of selection and promotion. The issue of language proficiency has already been documented as a prevailing problem experienced by migrant and non-native-speaking workers in western societies (Johansson and Śliwa, 2016; Syed and Murray, 2009). However, the accounts from our participants were unique, as their main focus, especially Lifei's, was not on actual language barriers (e.g. limited English fluency or non-native accents) or linguistic backgrounds per se, as



in existing studies on immigrant workers, but on organisations' or managers' claims and subjective perceptions in relation to their language proficiency.

We suggest that these accounts may reflect how existing social stereotypes of East Asian women's immigrant status translate into organisational and others' assessment of the women's language proficiency. In western countries, East Asian people are often stereotyped as 'foreign' and 'strange' objects; this is known as the 'perpetual foreigner' stereotype (Kim, 1999; Lee, 2008). East Asian women may be particularly subject to this stereotype because their gender, along with their race, serves as another marker for deviation from the dominant group and further accentuates their image as foreigners (Khoo, 2007). Whereas this generalised perception of 'being other' may seem innocuous or at least less detrimental than the perception of 'being inferior', scholars have suggested that it can still have a damaging effect on East Asian women (and men); regardless of their actual migration backgrounds or history, East Asian people are generally presumed to be 'immigrants' and are therefore assumed to have a poor command of English with a non-standard accent (Lee and Kye, 2016). Indeed, people of East Asian origin frequently encounter comments or questions regarding their immigrant status – for example, 'where are you originally from?' – and English competence – for example, 'your English is really good (for an East Asian person)' (Liang et al., 2004). Considering that (assumed) poor English signifies an individual's unwillingness to assimilate into and/or deficit of marketable job skills in a white hegemonic society, the English proficiency stereotype may serve as an implicit form of discrimination, marginalising East Asian women in work and organisations.

In the context of our study, a perceived lack of English proficiency seemed a legitimate reason not to recruit many East Asian solicitors to top-tier law firms (as in Michiru's account). However, it is possible that employers' and managers' evaluation of language ability might have been tainted by existing stereotypes of East Asian women, robbing such recruitment decisions of their legitimacy. It also suggests that even in cases in which insufficient language proficiency was being used as an excuse by organisations and managers to disguise their gendered and ethnicised practices (as suggested by Lifei), this excuse may have originated from extant stereotypes in the larger society rather than arising in a vacuum. Taken together, the language barriers perceived by employers, possibly grounded in the perpetual foreigner stereotype, seem to pose a unique challenge to East Asian women.

### *Intersectionality and contextual (limited) privilege*

Challenges and constraints capture only part of the career experiences of our participants. During the interviews, many women stressed their perception of relative, assigned and ambiguous privilege at work.

*Relative privilege.* Participants described their work lives in the UK as characterised by empowerment, autonomy and emancipation. They portrayed their status and working conditions as relatively advantaged in comparison to their past selves and peer groups, who were restricted by strong patriarchal and seniority-based systems in their home countries. These observations on multiple reference groups align with previous migration literature. For example, Park (2007) showed that South Korean immigrant women in

the USA used various comparison groups (e.g. ‘white Americans’, other Korean immigrants in the USA and peer groups in South Korea) when evaluating their post-migration status. Depending on which reference group was used, they made different evaluations of migration’s impact on their own economic and social status. Our participants’ narratives on emancipation through migration and their resulting perceived privilege relative to their past selves are also in line with previous research on migrant workers. Groutsis and colleagues (2020) showed on the basis of Honneth’s (1996) emancipation theory that escaping adverse work and societal conditions to pursue recognition of the self, or self-respect, was one of the most significant motivators for skilled workers in Greece to migrate to Germany. Other studies also show how through migration, female workers can feel a sense of freedom from societal and familial demands such as pressures from in-laws and comparisons with others (Khokher and Beaugard, 2014; Shin and Shin, 1999; Yoon et al., 2010).

This relative aspect of privilege indicates that comparing ethnic minority female workers primarily with the dominant group in a given society (e.g. white male and female workers in the UK) and emphasising these women’s structural inequalities and disadvantages alone may be too simplistic since it risks masking the complexity involved in how migrant women themselves construct their multiple minority status (i.e. a process of identity practice, according to Holvino). Their accounts also demonstrate how this internal sense-making process interacts with processes of institutional and societal contexts in both their home and host societies. For instance, our Chinese participants described perceiving a contrast between British and Chinese organisational cultures regarding work–life balance and pointed out that these different institutional practices strengthened their perception of being privileged. According to our Japanese participants, the social practice of privileging men over women and age over youth as well as stricter social norms in Japanese society contributed to them seeing themselves as ‘freer’ in the UK compared to Japan. Accordingly, the perceived relative privilege discussed by our participants was a product of the interplay between home and host country systems, not either in isolation (Pyke and Johnson, 2003) and also of the dynamic and simultaneous interactions between identity, institutional and societal practices (Holvino, 2010).

*Assigned privilege.* Our discussion of assigned privilege also demonstrates the implications of organisational and social contexts (i.e. institutional and societal practices, according to Holvino) for the privilege/disadvantage experienced by ethnic minority women. Our participants provided rich accounts of how skills associated with their ethnicity, including native language abilities and local understanding of their home countries, were viewed by their employers and organisations as valuable resources and how this elevated their status in the workplace. This heightened value assigned to East Asian migrant status might be attributable to an increasing awareness in the UK society of East Asian countries’ economic power in the British and global markets, as Rui also indicated (‘China is a big market’). As such, since the status of assigned privilege is externally imposed (e.g. by employers and the larger society) on an individual, its benefits can be enjoyed only by those whose backgrounds or skill sets are recognised by others as valuable on the basis of their economic worth. That is, assigned privilege can be referred to as ‘privilege’ only when employers and society acknowledge the economic or practical

value that ethnic minority women can provide. This is illustrated by the tendency of participants to focus more on the perspectives of others – e.g. how employers assessed them – when giving accounts of assigned privilege, whereas self-assessments were more prominent in accounts of relative privilege.

By its nature, the status of assigned privilege seems precarious. Depending on employers' evaluations, even employees with the same skill sets can be situated in very different locations at the intersection of privilege and inequality. This is demonstrated by the findings that skills and qualities related to participants' ethnic minority migrant status were highly regarded in some organisations and industries (e.g. those which target East Asian markets) but not in others (e.g. those which target the local British market). This precariousness also indicates that although Mandarin language abilities and cultural understandings of China are currently perceived in some sectors of the UK economy as 'resources' due to increased Chinese economic power, those who possess this assigned status of privilege could also be deprived of it in future, contingent upon global economic changes and corresponding changes in institutional practices. As Kim (2019) argues, individuals, states and intermediaries (such as employers) shape the legitimisation and value of ethnic capital such as language skills in both meso-institutional (workplace) and micro-interactional (interpersonal) contexts, but with asymmetrical power: market forces determine how valued this ethnic capital is and thus its origins are structural.

These points also correspond to Ang's (1996) arguments regarding the ambivalent effects of privilege on Australian Asians. According to her, Asian identities and relevant skills gained significant social value and attention in Australian society and organisations due to the state's economic desire to take advantage of its geographical closeness to fast-growing Asian markets. However, this economically motivated multicultural propaganda paradoxically puts Australian Asians into an ambivalent location in society. They do not experience overt intolerance and racism as in the era of the White Australia policy, but neither are they entirely accepted as insiders, as (white) Australians. In the case of our participants, their accounts did not express awareness that the economic logic by which they were assigned a privileged status at a particular moment in a certain context could simultaneously be indicative of their fragile and unstable employment status. Instead, they portrayed their ethnic identities as conferring competitive advantage upon them via the generation of ethnic capital in the form of language skills and cultural knowledge.

*Ambiguous privilege.* Ambiguity surfaced in participants' accounts of how their communication styles and positive stereotypes of East Asian women benefited their working lives. While they stated that their East Asian communication styles could advantage them in terms of impression management and relationship-building at work, these benefits did not seem to be universal or permanent, as when Naree acknowledged that it was also a combination of others' perceptions of her communication styles and organisational norms that reward more direct and self-enhancing communication styles that kept her from being recognised as proactive, creative and capable in task-related settings. Furthermore, research suggests that the seemingly positive social perceptions of East Asian women, such as being polite and hard-working, may in the long term force them to comply with a white understanding of how they should behave, with potential negative sanctions if they fail to do so (Ang, 2014; Liu, 2017). These concerns resonate well with the

perils of the ‘model minority’ conception articulated in existing research. Scholars have argued there is a risk that positive stereotypes of Asian people in western societies as being more academically and professionally successful than other ethnic minority groups will ultimately strengthen white hegemony rather than empower Asian people (Chung, 2016; Huang, 2020). These stereotypes disregard the structural inequalities and marginalisation to which Asian people are subject and constrain individualities by governing Asian people’s thinking and actions (Wong and Halgin, 2006; Yeh, 2014). Also, categorising Asian people as a homogeneous group and assigning them a certain virtue in itself – whether positive or negative – is a process of othering, emphasising perpetual differences between them and the dominant society (Ang, 1996; Huang, 2020). Accordingly, while ‘model minority’ stereotypes may look positive and may indeed have some beneficial effects, they are still essentialist views, fixing East Asian women to their gender and ethnic categories through the gaze of the stereotype-holders.

Despite these limitations, our participants described their experiences of ambiguous privilege largely in a positive manner, focusing more on advantages than disadvantages. This adoption of rose-tinted glasses is also reflected in how the participants made tactical use of their communication styles and positive stereotypes. With regard to the former, the participants seemed to take a flexible approach by utilising British and Asian styles of communication ambidextrously to their professional advantage. They tried to familiarise themselves with British workplace norms (‘how to play the game’) by learning direct styles of communication, while not giving up the benefits their own indirect styles of communication could provide them in terms of the polite face. As for the latter, even though participants acknowledged that these perceptions were merely a ‘cliche’, they did not seek to correct them but rather attempted to exploit them.

Along with the relative and assigned privilege discussed earlier, our observations on this ambiguous aspect of privilege and how participants react to it give us an important insight into the contextualisation of intersectionality. The essentialism inherent in positive and negative ethnic stereotypes contributes to processes of both societal practice and identity practice, which in turn interact with processes of institutional practice: long-standing western views of East Asian women as quiet, submissive and hardworking (Mukkamala and Suyemoto, 2018) lend themselves to stereotypical constructions of participants as passive ‘worker bees’, which can help or hinder career development depending on the compatibility of these constructions with organisational norms for communication and work ethic. East Asian women’s identities can thus serve as a double-edged sword with an ambiguous impact on their working lives. On the one hand, East Asian communication style and stereotypes associated with East Asian women may have negative and disabling effects in many, or perhaps most, contexts. On the other hand, participants believed that these communication patterns and stereotypes could also have enabling effects in certain settings, although those positive effects might not be as unconditional or durable as some of our participants assumed them to be.

### *Theoretical contributions and limitations*

Our study makes three important contributions to the literature. First, the study advances a theoretical understanding of intersectionality by highlighting context-specific and fluid

experiences among East Asian female migrant workers in the UK. We show that the boundary between what constitutes privilege and disadvantage may not always be rigid, making it difficult to define ethnic minority women's specific positions in organisational hierarchies (Alberti and Iannuzzi, 2020; Tatli and Özbilgin, 2012). In demonstrating this, our study goes beyond suggesting that East Asian women can sometimes also be privileged or listing resources as well as challenges that are relevant to these women (e.g. Fernando and Cohen, 2016; Sang et al., 2013). We instead consider different spheres and levels of context surrounding East Asian women and delve into how these various contexts shape their experience of oppression and privilege on the basis of Holvino's simultaneity perspective.

Second, this study extends the notion of fluid and contextual privilege by illuminating its multifaceted nature. Although different aspects of contextual privilege experienced by people with multiple subordinate identities have previously been addressed in the intersectionality literature, the discussion on this topic remains limited. For instance, contextual, conferred and contested aspects of privilege identified by Atewologun and Sealy (2014) provided a meaningful insight into a more nuanced way of understanding privilege. However, this discussion has not been examined nor expanded upon since publication of their article. Much earlier, Ang (1996) also hinted at an ambiguous aspect of privilege with an example of Asian minorities' ambivalent positions in Australian society but did not give a name to or develop this concept. In the present study, through our observations on relative, assigned and ambiguous privilege of East Asian women, we build upon this nascent body of research and offer additional perspectives for understanding contextual privilege in intersectionality. It should also be noted that while Atewologun and Sealy studied the experiences of fluid privilege among ethnic minority senior managers, for whom privilege may already be embedded in their work lives to some extent due to their managerial positions, our study explored those of participants at a wider range of professional and occupational levels (from a head of division in an investment bank to a recent graduate just beginning her career). Therefore, the current study presents more robust evidence that fluid privilege is not possessed only by those members of ethnic minority groups who are in managerial positions but can also be perceived by those who hold multiple subordinate group memberships (including those lower in the organisational/occupational hierarchy).

Of course, we do not intend to discredit previous research showing systematic barriers to ethnic minority women's work and careers. Rather, our findings on the demands and challenges originating from East Asian women's deviation from the male and white standard clearly suggest the relevance of such structural inequalities to these professional women. Moreover, the findings that participants could enjoy contextual benefits of relative, assigned and ambiguous privilege paradoxically imply that privilege is not something these women could always and easily access and that its impact may also be arguable and limited. Hence, we fully acknowledge that not every privilege is of equal status and value. Nevertheless, portraying ethnic minority women merely as oppressed and subordinate objects misrepresents how they themselves understand and interpret their lived realities (Fernando and Cohen, 2016; Sang et al., 2013). This narrower understanding of ethnic minority women may also unintentionally reinforce existing essentialist views of them and normalise the problems they face. In other words, by having these

negative beliefs/ideas as the regular discourse about ethnic minority women, people may become desensitised to those women's difficulties, which, in turn, are less likely to be properly addressed (Murray and Ali, 2017; Pio and Essers, 2014). For these reasons, we posit on the basis of the participants' accounts that intersectional analysis of ethnic minority women should go beyond the perspective of 'multiple disadvantage' and should be flexible enough to recognise both the unique constraints and (limited) privilege that these women may experience in their working lives.

Third, we uncovered both disadvantages/challenges and advantages/privilege that might either be exclusive to East Asian women or experienced by this group to a greater extent than is the case with employees from other ethnic backgrounds. Our findings on East Asian women being perceived by their employers as lacking English language skills and being subject to positive stereotypes regarding East Asian communication styles and work ethic constitute some examples. Although identifying the uniqueness of East Asian women does not in itself make a theoretical contribution to the literature, we believe that it still represents a significant extension of existing research given that different groups of ethnic minority women are often cast only as 'non-white' or 'ethnic minority' in the intersectionality literature (e.g. Sang et al., 2013; Tomlinson et al., 2013), overlooking their differentiated experiences depending on their specific ethnicity or cultural background (Kenny and Briner, 2007). Grouping ethnic minority women as a whole risks sustaining and strengthening a discriminatory dichotomy of 'us' (white and/or male) and 'them' (the rest) widely present in (white dominant) society. Thus, it may inadvertently reinforce white (male) centrism and the normality of white masculinity (and the abnormality of those who deviate from this 'default'), which the notion of intersectionality inherently opposes. To overcome such limitations, our study focuses specifically on East Asian women and emphasises that ethnic minority women are not an undifferentiated and homogeneous group.

In a similar way, we have also strived to highlight meaningful distinctions *within* our heterogeneous East Asian sample (Kenny and Briner, 2007). For instance, narratives of emancipation through work lives in the UK and resulting perceived privilege relative to their previous selves were made most by our Japanese participants, which may be explained by the more traditional features of Japanese society in terms of gendered social norms and expectations (World Economic Forum, 2019). In addition, accounts of assigned privilege were most prominent among our Chinese participants, reflecting the recent recognition of market growth potential in China. By shedding light on such differences between East Asian groups, we seek to avoid essentialist and reductionist perspectives of East Asian women and ethnic minority women more generally (Ang, 2014).

While this study has made theoretical and empirical contributions to the literature as stated above, our research findings and implications need to be interpreted with caution. Considering that our participants were middle class, professional and highly educated, our findings on privilege may not be equally applicable to East Asian women with different socio-economic backgrounds. This intersectionality of gender, ethnicity and social class has been a critical issue in the literature, suggesting that class differences can create significant variation even among women belonging to the same ethnicity (Acker, 2006; Holvino, 2010). For instance, multiple disadvantage or jeopardy may more effectively

explain the realities of working-class East Asian female migrants due to their lower levels of economic and social resources (Lawthom and Kagan, 2016). Future research with this under-studied population would shed further light upon the potential fluidity of disadvantage and privilege they may experience, strengthening our argument that the intersection of multiple identities can be experienced in multiple ways depending on the context – in this case, depending on an individual's socio-economic background.

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