

International Student Migration: Pre-COVID Educational Paths of Chinese Undergraduate Students at Emory University

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Abstract

According to the Open Doors report published by the Institute of International Education (IIE), over 372,000 students from the People's Republic of China were enrolled at a U.S. college or university in the 2019-2020 academic year (IIE, 2020). Often employing a 'push-pull' model of international student migration, prior academic research has sought to identify the primary factors which motivate Chinese students' desire to receive an overseas education. However, the recent deterioration in U.S.-China relations, along with the COVID-19 pandemic, are expected to both alter and depress international patterns of Chinese student migration. Combining two datasets collected at Emory University in the past three years, our study investigates the pre-COVID educational paths of Chinese students from high school to American colleges and their motivations for pursuing undergraduate education in the U.S. Drawing from 190 survey responses and 15 interviews of Chinese students, our study highlights how Chinese students navigate the complex application process and identifies the key factors influencing students' decisions, particularly with regards to the political and economic status quo of the United States and China, parent-student aspirations, and the perceived value of higher education in the U.S. At the end of the paper, we will discuss another set of 20 recent interviews with Chinese students at Emory, which provided insights into challenges and concerns of the students during COVID-19; these insights in turn prompt reflection of future patterns of international student migration.

Keywords: Overseas Education, International Students, Chinese Students in the U.S.

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Introduction

A long-established phenomenon dating back to Chinese imperial period, international student exchange from China to the United States can be traced to 1854 with the graduation of Yung Wing from Yale University. Although hundreds of Chinese would be educated in the United States in subsequent decades, student exchange would decline to near zero by Mao Zedong's death in 1976 (Yan & Berlinger, 2016). It was not until 1978, more than a century after Yung Wing's graduation 1854, that Chinese enrollment at United States universities would begin to accelerate to the levels that characterize American higher education today (Lampton et al., 1986; Yan & Berlinger, 2016).

Rising sharply following Deng Xiaoping's 1978 agreement with the Carter administration to conduct student exchanges with the United States, the number of Chinese students in American higher education soared to approximately 20,000 by 1988 (Yan & Berlinger, 2016). By 2008, this number had quintupled to more than 98,000 and continued to rise across the following decade to over 372,000 in 2019/2020 (IIE, 2020). China has been the largest source of international students in the U.S. in the last 10 years. However, the recent deterioration in U.S.-China relations, along with the COVID-19 pandemic, are expected to both alter and depress international patterns of Chinese student migration. In fact, Fall 2020 enrollment of international students in the U.S. dropped by 43% (IIE, 2020).

Recent studies about the motivations of Chinese students' decision to pursue education abroad have revealed important insights into the factors that influence their decision, including high levels of competition for university entrance in their home country due to overpopulation (Bodycott & Lai, 2012, p. 254), recommendations by peers and relatives, and the ability to work in the host country (Mazzarol, Soutar, & Thein, 2001). Drawing from 190 surveys and 15 interviews of Chinese students at Emory University, our two interconnected studies investigate the pre-COVID educational paths of Chinese students from high school to American colleges and their motivations for pursuing undergraduate education in the U.S. The data collected from 2018 to 2020 reveals important social, political, and academic factors Chinese students consider when choosing their schools and majors, with regards to the political and economic status quo of the United States and China, parent-student aspirations, and the perceived value of an overseas education. Furthermore, based on recent, separate interviews with over 20 Chinese students at Emory, we will discuss the challenges and concerns of Chinese students studying in the U.S. during COVID-19 that provide insights into how online learning might shape future patterns of international student migration.

Our Studies

1. Background of Our Studies

Emory University is a private research university located in Atlanta, Georgia. In recent years, enrollment of international undergraduate students has been steadily increasing. According to data released by Emory's Office of Undergraduate Admissions, in Fall 2019 international students hailed from 105 countries, and they made up 22.7% of the total undergraduate student body. Among them, 1,196 (46.3%) were from Mainland China.

Why did the Chinese students decide to pursue their undergraduate education in the U.S.? What factors did they consider in their decision making process? How did they prepare for this journey? To answer the questions, we conducted two sets of surveys and interviewed 15 Chinese students. The first survey (“Study 1”) described in this paper investigates Chinese students’ motivations to study in the U.S. and factors influencing their choices of schools. The second set and the interviews (“Study 2” here, though actually conducted earlier) focus on Chinese students’ experiences preparing their applications, completing high school, and starting college in the U.S. The two projects thus illuminate how Chinese students navigate the spaces and roads leading to a transnational career. Students endeavor to understand the opportunities and challenges in both the U.S. and the Chinese educational systems, and once they decide to move abroad, they seek support from their families, teachers, and consultants to succeed in entering American colleges.

2. Literature Review

Deep academic research has sought to identify the primary factors which motivate Chinese students’ desire to receive an overseas education. Often analyzed within a ‘push-pull’ model of international student migration, these studies assess a variety of influential socioeconomic, political, and outcome-based factors (Mazzarol & Soutar, 2002; Chen, 2018; Fang & Wang, 2014; Lee, 2017; Lo et al., 2019). For example, McMahon (1992) investigates what might ‘push’ students from their home countries, such as a low degree of home-country prosperity or government emphasis on foreign educational attainment, and what might ‘pull’ students to other countries, such as a higher degree of economic prosperity or cultural linkages (Mazzarol & Soutar, 2002). In their highly influential study, Mazzarol, Kemp, and Savery (1997) employ a ‘push-pull’ model to identify six primary motivational factors behind the decision by Mainland Chinese, Taiwanese, Indian, and Indonesian students to pursue overseas education. These include the reputation of the host country, personal recommendations from parents, relatives, and friends, issues related to cost, such as the ability to find part time work, the local environment, geographic proximity to the host country, and social links to the host country, such as resident contacts (Mazzarol, Kemp, & Savery, 1997; Mazzarol & Soutar, 2002). These macrolevel factors, along with a host of other institutional factors identified by Mazzarol and Soutar (2002), have inspired significant application of the ‘push-pull’ model in the context of international student migration (Fang & Wang, 2014). Although the ‘push-pull’ model has helped scholars unpack what factors might influence the decision-making of students as they choose to study abroad, the model has notable limitations. For example, Wen and Hu (2019), along with many others, write that the focus of the ‘push-pull’ model on macrolevel social and economic factors tends to overlook important microlevel motivations, such as those associated with socioeconomic status, gender, age, and personal aspiration (Wen & Hu, 2019; Fang & Wang, 2014). Additionally, Chen (2017) notes that the model does not clearly account for differences between destination countries, such as how varying immigration policies may alter student calculations about post-graduation employment. Most pertinent to this study, the model grants little insight into who drives the consideration of these factors during the study abroad decision-making process. Regarding the process of student decision-making, Mazzarol and Soutar (2002) identify three distinct stages during which ‘push’ and ‘pull’ factors are evaluated. During the first stage, ‘push’ factors motivate a student to look outside the country for education. In the second stage, ‘pull’ factors increase the relative attractiveness of a particular country compared to

another. During the final stage, a student selects an institution of higher education based off factors like the reputation for quality, market profile, and the university alumni base (Mazzarol, 1998). However, Mazzarol and Soutar's (2002) evidence of a layered decision-making process, which seems to require careful cost-benefit analysis, offers an interesting question about the suitability of the 'push-pull' model in the context of Chinese student mobility.

In the context of the previous research, our Study 1 seeks to identify the complex macrolevel and microlevel factors about studying abroad that Chinese students evaluate in making the decision, examine their perspectives about the American and Chinese higher education systems, and pinpoint the concerns they have about studying/living in the U.S.

Study 2 owes a great deal to the scholarship of Vanessa Fong, Anni Kajanus, Steven Fraiberg, Xiqiao Wang, Xiaoye You, and many others, who have explored the experiences of young Chinese women and men seeking or realizing their dream of studying abroad. Some of these scholars completed case studies on Chinese students, tracing their personal journeys: discussing their decisions, their academic and professional achievements, and the prejudices they encounter. Fong (2011) and Kajanus (2015), for instance, interviewed hundreds of individuals in Dalian and Beijing over the course of several years. Fong addresses the quest for "world citizenship" or "flexible citizenship" of these transnational students; Kajanus talks about the economic, political, and cultural factors that affect the migration flows. Fraiberg, Wang, and You (2017) explore the lives of Chinese international students at the University Michigan, presenting the resources, communication channels, and communities that they draw on for support. Similar to Zamel, Spack, and their contributors (2004), Fraiberg et al. also discuss in their book, *Inventing the World Grant University*, how English language learners (ELLs) approach academic writing assignments in classes across the curriculum. There are of course hundreds of articles and books on teaching and tutoring ELLs at universities, occasionally with a focus on the interests and needs of students from China. Few people though, with a couple of exceptions (e.g. Yang, 2016), have examined the support Chinese students receive as they prepare for American college and as they work on applications, and there is little research on the challenging path from Chinese high schools to American colleges.

Based on the two studies, we propose that the decision by a Chinese student to receive undergraduate education overseas is complex, intrafamilial, and one that entails significant parental involvement, the assistance of often-expensive consultants and agencies, and extensive evaluation of the U.S. and Chinese educational systems.

3. Methods

Two studies (Study 1 and Study 2) were conducted over the span of two years between 2018 and 2020. Study 1 was a survey of Chinese students' motivations to study in the U.S. The survey, shared with students in Spring 2020, included 34 questions in the formats of filling in blanks, multiple choice, ranking of importance, and short essays. Questions were divided into the following sections: demographic information of students and parents, parental and student role in making the decision to study in the U.S., factors influencing the decision and their choice of schools, their evaluation of the U.S. and Chinese educational systems, and finally their concerns about studying and

living in the U.S. We received 56 partial/complete responses from Chinese international students at Emory University. At the time of completing the survey, they were pursuing a wide range of majors in the humanities, social sciences, and natural sciences, including business, math, economics, biology, psychology, art history, and music, and most of them came from so-called tier 1 and tier 2 cities in China (South China Morning Post, 2016).

Study 2 employed a mixed-methods approach with 136 completed surveys and 15 interviews of Chinese undergraduate students at Emory about their experiences preparing their applications, completing high school, and starting college in the U.S. (most enrolled in 2016 or 2017). Students were asked in the survey if they would be available for a follow-up interview, and a number of the respondents were open to discussing their journeys in some detail, with the semi-structured interviews lasting between 25-35 minutes. A writing tutor, herself originally from Qingdao, China, assisted in transcribing the interviews. A few excerpts from the interviews are shared below. In the future, the goal for us will be to code and more closely analyze these interviews, but also to talk to and survey additional students; interviews will likely be structured going forward to allow for better comparisons. Especially as we have collected some data and can present initial findings (discussed in this paper), it will arguably be sensible to conduct such structured interviews to facilitate more meaningful comparisons between students and refine our conclusions - and reflect on our research questions. After all, to quote Noam Chomsky (2002), “Maybe in doing research you only understand what you were doing LATER ... first you do it and later, if you are lucky, you understand what you were trying to do and these questions become sort of clarified through time.”

4. Findings of Study 1

With regard to the decision for a Chinese student to pursue undergraduate education in the U.S., 55% of the participants reported that their parents first proposed the possibility; however, more than 65% of the students indicated that they themselves made the final decision. This demonstrates a collective decision-making process, in which parents played a guiding role while students exerted individual autonomy. On average, the possibility was first raised when students were 15 years old. This is the age Chinese children are typically finishing junior high and starting senior high school. Our results reveal that the possibility of attending college in the U.S. has a deciding effect on the types of high school students attended. Over 65% of the students attended international high schools in China that provide choices for international curriculum models, English as a language of instruction, and AP/IB courses, while a small number of them came to the U.S. to receive their high school education. Nearly 90% of the students did not participate in Gaokao, the Chinese college entrance examination.

When comparing the suitability of attending university in the U.S. vs. in China, we asked students to consider several aspects of the higher education systems in China and in the U.S., including academics, instructional methodology, expenses, social life, and career prospects for the time after graduation. Among the most important characteristics of the U.S. higher education system considered and valued by the participants were the possibility to choose academic paths/majors (100%), the relatively small teacher-student ratios (100%), the experience of studying abroad, and universities' academic reputation (both at 95.83%). In contrast, only 33% of the students considered the

prospect of immigrating to the U.S. when deciding to study in the U.S., and the only prevalent factor for considering attending college in China was expenses (95.83%).

In terms of academic training in specialized fields and personal development, participants also overwhelmingly favored universities in the U.S. compared to China. Higher education in the U.S. was perceived as more suitable because it not only promises a higher quality of academic training in their chosen fields (87.5%), but also enables students to develop translingual and transcultural competencies (95.83%), dialectical and critical thinking skills (95.83%), and interpersonal communicative skills (83.33%).

Participating students also ranked the relative importance of factors that they considered when choosing universities in the U.S. Importance was placed on academic rigor (91.66%), career prospective ((87.5%), crime rate and safety (87.5%), gaining English proficiency (79.16%) and cultural connection (62.5%).

Since the survey was conducted during the spring semester 2020, when COVID-19 was spreading in the U.S. and when U.S.-China relations were worsening, a majority of the students expressed concerns about their personal safety, racial discrimination, and interference in their education by the U.S. government, which includes the possibility of not being able to obtain a visa or of not being able to return to the U.S. from China, or an increasing difficulty to obtain an Optional Practical Training work authorization or work visa.

5. Findings of Study 2

A significant number of students that responded to the survey for Study 2 attended traditional public Chinese schools, but as Figure 1 shows, many of them also chose to go to boarding schools in the U.S. or attend international schools in China, as they and their parents decided early in their educational career, usually in middle school, to study abroad. Most of the students in this survey, and at Emory more generally, are from the large cities in northern, eastern, and southern China, especially Beijing, Shanghai, Nanjing, and Shenzhen.

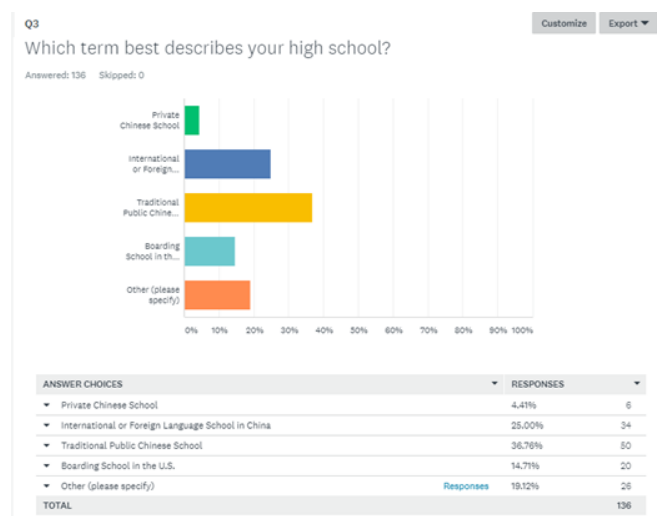


Figure 1: Which term best describes your high school? (Q3)

ANSWER CHOICES	RESPONSES	
For better employment opportunities in China (after graduation).	44.70%	59
To experience a different culture.	87.88%	116
To improve my English language skills.	43.94%	58
Because I would like to work in the U.S. after graduation.	31.06%	41
Because my parents urged me to go abroad.	19.70%	26
Because I didn't want to take the Gaokao.	30.30%	40
Because of family immigration.	2.27%	3
Because of friends in the U.S.	3.03%	4
Because my Gaokao results would not have allowed me to attend a top tier university in China.	12.12%	16
Total Respondents: 132		
Comments (18)		

Figure 2: Why did you decide to study abroad? (Q6)

Similar to the Study 1 respondents, the Chinese students that completed the 2018 survey for Study 2 made the decision to pursue an education abroad for a variety of reasons, including to grow personally and to gain an advantage on the job market (see Figure 2). As mentioned earlier, Among the key reasons mentioned was also the “escape” from the Gaokao or the fear that the Gaokao scores might not suffice for a top-tier university. Strikingly, the desire to work in the U.S. after graduation was listed by a third of the respondents.

Most students relied on several resources, primarily outside consultants/agencies, teachers, and in-schools counselors (Figure 3). Another question asked about the support provided by the agencies, which ranged from evaluating the applicant’s strengths and weaknesses, informing the applicant about extracurricular activities (including volunteer opportunities and competitions), all the way to determining a schedule for the student and reminding them of deadlines.



Figure 3: Which resources did you use to prepare your various application materials? (Q6)

While each of the students contacted for Study 2 followed a distinct path, the optional written comments left on the survey but also of course the interviews revealed commonalities and both complicated and clarified the data. One clear finding was many

students' dependency (coupled occasionally with skepticism) on agencies or consultants that operate outside of the school. These agencies frequently hire native speakers of English, with college or graduate degrees, to attract and then support students. One student wrote in response to a survey question: "They [agencies] helped me navigate the application process and offered me useful advice for preparing for TOEFL and SAT tests. Since I was from a traditional Chinese high school, and the education systems of U.S. and China are quite different, it's important to have someone experienced in applying for US universities to ask for advice." Another student explained: "The advice I get from the outside consultant is to make up my mind to apply to both Universities and Liberal Arts Colleges, and choosing majors I like rather than what my parents liked." And another recalled in a representative statement that the consultant "assists [*sic*] me on the college selection process, helps me stay organized throughout the application process, and proofreads my application essay." The agencies, charging typically thousands of dollars for guiding their clients, permit students to understand - and succeed in - the challenging, complex college application process. Multiple interviewees explicitly called out some agencies for providing improper assistance and controlling the application completely, though almost all students said that they had only *heard* about such practices: "It's really convenient because it is the fact that many chn families are not familiar with American educational system and application process, so it is good to have those agencies to lead them through all the process, but it's definitely not healthy that those essays are written by the agencies." (JH, personal communication, May 3, 2018). This statement reflects the conflicted attitude seen among at least some Chinese students towards the agencies that assist individuals unfamiliar with the U.S. system.

On another level, the experiences of many interviewees and respondents also reflect the imbalance or disparity of available resources each individual can access, based on hometown, attended school, and family. Whether a student successfully navigates the application process, is obviously not only related to someone's motivation and academic skills, but also to the resources. These resources inside and outside a school, as well as the advice given to Chinese students and the strategies they use to study for exams and revise essays have arguably an impact on their college preparedness, including their approach to college writing.

We do not have the space here to adequately address such inequalities and disparities - which certainly prevent students from attending their school of choice - but it is worth noting that we as instructors and administrators can help students tap into the knowledge and skills students (those who did manage to enroll in colleges abroad) may have gained throughout the application process. After all, as they apply for college, students have to navigate many different tasks, social interactions, and processes, and they also have to consider (consciously or not) rhetorical concepts such as audience, genre, argument, and organization. It would be valuable to assist students in reflecting on these concepts, for instance, and on their many newly developed skills and knowledge, and to facilitate the transfer of learning when they arrive in college classes.

Conclusions

1. Key Take-Aways

Our findings shed light on a few important issues related to Chinese students' decision to study abroad in the U.S.

First, they clearly articulated their preference for pursuing higher education in the U.S. based on their perception of the U.S. educational system. As the data indicates, this preference is largely motivated by the academic reputation and rigor of U.S. universities as well as their desires to gain diverse scholarly, social, and cultural experiences. Although career prospects are important, immigrating to the U.S. is not a major consideration. This finding coincides with the growing homeward trend of internationally educated Chinese graduates and is indicative of a shift in their perspective. In recent years "between 70 to 80 percent of students and graduates come back to China; the ratio of departees to returnees has now nearly flattened to one-to-one (1.28 to 1, to be precise)" (McCarthy, 2017). Sissi Chen, an international education specialist working with Chinese high schoolers preparing for college in the U.S., was quoted as saying, "More and more people are having this idea to explore the world, they are not thinking, 'I just want to go to America and never come back.' That's not the mentality anymore. ... They want to open another door to see a bigger world and get an educational advantage" (McCarthy, 2017). In the survey for Study 1, nearly all participating students (95.83%) expressed that gaining an internationalized perspective through the experience of studying abroad is an important consideration.

Second, the data reveals an overwhelming discontent with the higher education system in China, except in terms of cost of attendance. Having had the experience of attending elementary and middle schools in China, these students experienced the rigidity of an exam-oriented education system. Avoiding the extremely competitive Gaokao and even the Zhongkao, the high school entrance exam, was mentioned by students as a reason to seek education abroad. When interviewed for Study 2, one student said: "I know that Gaokao is even more competitive and crucial than Zhongkao, so I think I should find another way to escape from this." (JH, personal communication, May 3, 2018). One student wrote in response to the Study 2 survey, referring to his resistance to Chinese education, and his decision to go abroad: "Because the same amount of effort can get me into a better school (in terms of international ranking)." Research has also shown that the emphasis on testing can potentially "stifle a student's imagination, creativity, a sense of self, qualities crucial for a child's ultimate success in and out of the classroom" (Kirkpatrick and Zang, 2011, p. 36). Their discontent with the Chinese education system is clearly a "push" factor in their decision to study in the U.S., particularly in regard to their appreciation for the academic rigor and reputation of universities in the U.S.

Lastly, Chinese students are increasingly concerned about their safety, racial tensions in the U.S., and the impact of Sino-U.S. relations on their education. As one student explained, "Even though there are policies restricting racial discrimination in American society today, as a Chinese male international student, I personally still have certain concerns about American society's overall racial discrimination against Asia. This is because racial discrimination may negatively impact our education, employment, and life at critical times. Apart from racial discrimination, the deterioration of Sino-US

political relations in recent years has also made me more worried about the hatred American people have towards the Chinese people. As an international student at the forefront of exchanges and cooperation between the two countries, I sincerely hope that China-US political relations will develop steadily to promote further cultural and academic exchanges and cooperation between the two countries” (J. Fan, personal communication, September 24, 2020). This statement is quite significant in the context of COVID-19 and the shift to online learning in 2020. Many Chinese international students at Emory were not able to return/come to the U.S. in the fall semester of 2020. One student told us in an email, “My parents are extremely worried about my health and security situation in the US due to the increasingly dangerous Covid-19 situation..., as well as the worsening US-China relationship. They played a very important role in making this decision [of not returning to Emory], but I'm the one who finalized it” (J. Fan, personal communication, September 24, 2020).

All these findings provide preliminary support for the application of the ‘push-pull’ model in studies of motivational factors for Chinese students to consider studying abroad. Consistent with the findings of Mazzarol, Kemp, and Savery (1997), parents recommending this step is one of the primary “push” factors. Other important “push” factors center around various aspects of higher education in the U.S., such as academic reputation, rigor, quality of training, teacher-student ratio, and the possibility to choose majors. Finally, the potential for greater development of critical thinking skills, transcultural and translingual competencies, and communicative skills are also highly valued.

Mazzarol, Kemp, and Savery (1997) identified social links to the host country, such as resident contacts, as one of the six motivational factors. In our studies, however, social contacts were not a major “pull” factor. 75% of the respondents reported that social contacts, such as having family members or friends in the U.S., are “not important” or “not considered.”

The “pull” factors identified in our studies are at the macro level, including crime rate and racial tensions in American society, the deterioration of Sino-U.S. relations, and the tightening of U.S. policies towards international students. In the post-COVID era, will these “pull” factors eventually outweigh the “push” factors and result in a decline of Chinese students in U.S. universities? This is a relevant question that remains to be answered.

2. Limitations and Future Directions

Our studies only generated responses from a relatively small number of Chinese students at Emory University and therefore cannot be considered representative of Chinese international student bodies at other universities across the U.S. While we believe that the two studies demonstrate the pre-COVID educational pathways of international students at Emory, we are aware that the factors Chinese students and their families consider when making decisions about studying abroad will likely change in a post-COVID environment. The shift to learning online, the ongoing pandemic in the U.S., the uncertainty surrounding U.S. policy towards international education, and the deterioration of Sino-U.S. relations will undoubtedly alter the post-COVID educational pathways for Chinese students.

In Spring 2020, we contacted Chinese international students about their experiences of taking classes online in order to better understand their challenges and identify solutions. Their answers offered a glimpse into the extraordinary situations of Chinese students. In addition to challenges posed by the 12-hour time difference and the 14-day mandatory quarantine period in Chinese hotels, Chinese students were also wary of discussing sensitive topics related to Chinese politics and society due to China's internet censorship and surveillance and Zoom's flawed security standard (Lee, 2020). They also experienced difficulty conducting research and assessing resources within China's great firewall. Students we spoke with in the spring overwhelmingly expressed the desire to return to campus in the fall semester of 2020. However, most of the students we spoke to were unable or unwilling to return to the U.S., as the pandemic continued to affect the country. How will this alter Chinese students' educational pathways in regard to the possibility of studying abroad? A recent survey of over 100 Chinese agencies specializing in preparing students for education abroad reported that the epidemic had caused 40% - 60% of Chinese students experienced interference from U.S. authorities in their visa application and country entry and exit process; 66% of the agencies forecast a decline in students going abroad this year as a result (BOSSA and COSSA, 2020).

To understand the sustainable impact of COVID-19 on Chinese students' willingness to study abroad, we plan to streamline the two studies into one survey, focusing on identifying post-COVID push and pull factors. We will seek responses from current Chinese students in the U.S. and prospective high school students in China. Additionally, we hope to conduct interviews either in person or online to elicit extended narratives about their decision-making process. By cross-examining the qualitative and quantitative data in pre- and post-COVID contexts, we hope to identify the shifts and trends in their educational pathways.

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