

Lost in Lockdown: The Impact of COVID-19 on Chinese International Student Mobility in the US

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ABSTRACT

Due to uneven and hierarchical global context, the United States has been the world's number one "Educational Hub" (Knight, 2011), leading the internationalization of higher education in multiple forms, the top priority of which lies in international student recruitment and enrollment. However, the COVID-19 pandemic has thoroughly disrupted the traditional mobility experience—a situation that has broader implications for the demographic landscape of US higher education. This article explores how COVID-19 and pandemic-related Sinophobia affect Chinese students' perspectives on their educational decision-making. Based on Zoom interviews of a sample of 21 Chinese undergraduate students, this study demonstrates that despite the leading role of the US in international education, it is gradually losing appeal to Chinese students due to disillusionment with the romanticized imaginary of the US, anxiety about uncertain policies, and safety concerns. The unidirectional student mobility from mainland China to the US may be interrupted with Singapore and Hong Kong as the emerging destinations.

Keywords: international student mobility, higher education, international students, China

International student mobility (ISM) has received substantial attention in the past two decades (Altbach & Knight, 2007; Altbach, Reisberg, & Rumbley, 2009). Due to uneven and hierarchical global context, the United States has been the world's number one "Educational Hub" (Knight, 2011) leading the internationalization of higher education in multiple forms, the top priority of which lies in international student recruitment and enrollment. Despite the rise of conservative populism and anti-immigration rhetoric after the election of Donald Trump as US President in 2017, the nation's share of international students remained relatively stable over his presidency, especially international students from mainland China. In the 2019-20 academic year, US colleges and universities enrolled 372,532 Chinese international students, accounting for 34.6% of the total

number of available seats (Open Doors Report, 2020). However, the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic has thoroughly disrupted the traditional mobility experience — a situation that has broader implications for the demographic landscape of US higher education. The international mobility of Chinese students is a strong driver of the global educational business, which is deeply influenced by neoliberal ideology (Kubota, 2009; Stein, 2017) and social imaginary (Kubota, 2016; Rizvi, 2011). The destructive effects of the evolving situation have impacted students' and their families' considerations of whether or where to study abroad. Therefore, it is urgent to explore what factors and experiences affect Chinese students' decision-making and how these factors potentially shape the flows that transform the demographic landscape of US higher education.

Compared to other high-profile epidemics, such as SARS in 2003 and MERS in 2012, the current COVID-19 crisis impedes Chinese ISM more seriously and may contribute to long-lasting changes in the way students pursue a higher education degree abroad. Although multiple quantitative research was conducted to have obtained optimistic early findings that Chinese students are not willing to change their plans and are still interested in studying abroad in the US (IIE, 2020; WES, 2020), the majority of research participants in these studies had already invested in study abroad preparation (e.g., language testing, the application process) or started their sojourn experience in the US, so the findings might be biased since students' willingness to continue was influenced by the time and money they had previously spent. In addition, in the process of decision-making, it is important not to overlook the involvement of Chinese parents. In traditional Confucian societies such as China, major decisions related to education and future employment are “fundamentally a family project, imbued with familial expectations and goals” (Brooks & Waters, 2011, p. 53). While personal desires and familial aspirations are inextricably interlinked, Chinese parents usually have the ultimate say in their child's choice of study destination and academic programs.

The patterns and practices associated with ISM are the confluence of a complex interplay of national contexts, institutional characteristics, and individual motivations. The year 2020 was a landmark for student mobility, with dramatically reduced cross-border movements and emerging choices of destinations. The article examines the case of Chinese ISM under the COVID-19 pandemic. To begin with, I provide a theoretical framework of the social imaginary which largely shapes Chinese ISM. Next, by examining current international affairs and the potentially shifting geopolitical context, I explain how the US-China rivalry and anti-Asian racism may influence the flows of Chinese students during and after the pandemic. Based on Zoom interviews of a sample of 21 Chinese undergraduate students studying at a US public research university, this article demonstrates that despite the leading role of the US in international education, it is gradually losing its appeal on the global stage due to Chinese students' disillusionment with the romanticized imaginary of the US, anxiety about uncertain policies, and safety concerns. Another key finding is that the COVID-19 crisis reorders the factors that Chinese students and parents used to

choose a country for study abroad, from institutional ranking-oriented to prioritizing health security and emotional well-being. For that reason, Singapore and Hong Kong are becoming the emerging destination options for Chinese undergraduate students seeking to pursue graduate studies. My empirically grounded qualitative data analysis provides US institutions with information to help them restructure strategies for recruiting and retaining students from mainland China. More importantly, this research offers some long-term implications of COVID-19 on Chinese ISM and forecasts possible demographic changes within global higher education.

The Social Imaginary in Higher Education

The *social imaginary* (e.g., Taylor, 2004; Rizvi & Lingard, 2010) exerts a significant impact on the unipolar model of the US as the most popular educational destination in the international arena. Related to ideology, the concept of the social imaginary is tied to power and dominance, representing “a common way of thinking that is shared by a group of people and guides everyday practice” (Kubota, 2016, p. 348). Rizvi (2014) further conceptualizes the social imaginary as “processes through which people engage with ordinary life, consider options and make decisions, now in new forms of collaborations that are no longer confined to local communities but span across national boundaries” (p. 172). Since the established social imaginary is inherently implicit and normative, one cannot easily challenge its legitimacy or enact an alternative way of thinking that opposes to accepted beliefs. It is through such shared conventions that ordinary people, as collective agents, unconsciously make decisions in everyday life. Due to the social imaginary in the global higher education market, Western education is constructed as a valuable and desirable product (Stein & Andreotti, 2015). Gradually, people in Asian countries have developed “imaginative geographies” (Beech, 2019), which tacitly influences their decision to pursue an international education. The United States, a nation that offers “world-class” higher education, currently attracts the highest proportion of international students, and dominates the international higher education market. However, the year 2020 seems to have shaken the traditional social imaginary—fetishism of American higher education in spite of its deep ideological embeddedness in people’s shared thinking.

The Impact of COVID-19 on Educational Mobility

While US institutions and educators scramble to provide academic continuity, it is likely that the enormous impacts of the pandemic on international education, especially ISM, are irrevocable. Choudaha (2017) proposed that the ISM trend is largely shaped by critical external events. In his analysis, he asserted that Wave I (1999-2006) was triggered by the September 11 terrorist attacks; Wave II (2006-2013) was attributed to the 2007-08 global financial crisis; Wave III was shaped by Brexit and Trumpism (2013-2020). Choudaha (2021), in the latest commentary on *University World News*, speculated that COVID-19-induced economic uncertainty and political upheaval suggest that we are at the beginning of the fourth wave of ISM. Similarly, in a recent study, researchers (Mok et al., 2021)

anticipated that, unlike the traditional student mobility from Asian countries to Western universities (i.e., East-to-West mode), ISM might shift to an East Asia-oriented mode given mainland Chinese students' growing interest in studying in Hong Kong, Japan, and Taiwan. Taken together, the COVID-19 pandemic combined with the US-China rivalry and anti-Asian racism is significantly impacting the trends of student mobility.

US-China Rivalry

Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, Chinese international students were impacted by systemic competition between the US and China and were caught in the crossfire of the "New Cold War" (Yao, 2021). After the US presidential election in 2017, the Trump administration made a decisive turn in Sino-US relations. Unlike the past two decades, the US sees China as its primary rival with regard to ideology, geopolitics, and technology (Zhao, 2019). As for US higher education, Altbach (2019) showed that the major receiving countries face an impending "China Crisis" (p. 20): the declining enrollment of students from mainland China. The COVID-19 pandemic is a catalyst that has accelerated the coming crisis. As the virus spread and the death toll mounted in the summer of 2020, Trump used his executive, administrative, and political power to force the international student population to attend in-person classes or risk deportation. Although the policy was immediately rescinded, this political ploy indicates that governmental policymaking can structurally determine student mobility. While the Biden administration has raised hopes that the US would abandon Trump's isolationism in favor of cooperation with the rest of the world (Douglass & Edelstein, 2020), China seems to be the exception. In particular, when Biden's State Department denied visas to 500 Chinese students due to their perceived ties with the military (Presidential Proclamation 10043) in July 2021, it becomes clear that he would carry on the Trump administration's legacy of suspicion towards Chinese international students.

On the sending side, China tries to curtail outbound student mobility through financial pressure and government media. For example, in 2019, the China Scholarship Council stopped providing funding for Chinese students to pursue master's degrees abroad. In addition, China's Ministry of Education and Ministry of Foreign Affairs launched several official statements to warn its citizens of growing risks in America because of visa restrictions (Redden, 2019) and anti-Chinese attacks (Qiao, 2019). These official announcements prompt Chinese parents and students to think twice about studying abroad in the US. Thus, as the US-China rivalry intensifies, tightening regulations on both sides will affect the numbers of Chinese students furthering their study in the US.

Anti-Asian Racism

The outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic has also coincided with a rising tide of anti-Asian racism in the US context. In the early stages of the pandemic, Chinese international students who wore facial masks were stigmatized, harassed, and bullied (Ma & Zhan, 2020). As the crisis evolved into a politically-driven

blame game, President Trump publicly labeled the coronavirus as “Chinese Virus” and “Kung Flu.” Since then, Chinese students have faced a resurgence of “yellow peril” racism and Sinophobia both on and off campus (Shi, 2020). In addition to students’ lived experience with fear and hostility, Chinese parents, far away from the US, can only receive international news via China’s state-run media. When numerous reports show that Asian students have experienced discrimination or even assaults, those who plan to send their children abroad may reconsider their established plans and renavigate international education routes under post-pandemic conditions (Yan, 2020).

DATA AND METHODS

In order to capture the complexity of students’ views on their overseas decisions, I adopted one-on-one in-depth online interviews as the primary method for data collection. I specifically focused on full fee-paying Chinese undergraduate students’ perspectives on their future educational decision-making, with an aim to explore the impact of COVID-19 on Chinese ISM. This study is guided by two research questions: 1) How have COVID-19 and pandemic-related Sinophobia affected Chinese undergraduates’ perspectives on study-abroad decisions in the US? 2) What destinations will these students consider when pursuing graduate study abroad?

The participants in this study were enrolled at a US research university in the University of California system, ranked number 7 in the 2020 listing of the “Top 30 Public National Universities” by *US News and World Report*. According to the campus profile in the academic year 2019-2020, the school is home to 3,261 international undergraduate students, three-quarters of whom (2,445) are from mainland China. These numbers are consistent with global student mobility and US national enrollment trends (IIE, 2010-2020). Participant recruitment was through the Chinese Student and Scholar Association (CSSA)’s and the Chinese Student Association (CSA)’s WeChat official accounts, as well as my own social media accounts.

Altogether, I recruited 21 undergraduates (see Table 1 below). They represented all academic levels (four incoming freshmen, six sophomores, five juniors, and six seniors), and had majors ranging from physics to philosophy, mathematics to theatre. Almost 60% (12 participants) were from first-tier developed cities in China, including Beijing, Shanghai, and Guangzhou, while the remaining were from second or third-tier cities of various Chinese provinces. Over 75% (16 participants) attended an international high school or a public school with an international division. This detail is important because when Chinese students opt for an international curriculum in high school, they have essentially forfeited the option of taking the college entrance exam (*Gaokao*) for admission to Chinese universities and are therefore committed to study abroad. Regarding parental occupation, aside from business backgrounds, many were from professional fields, such as university professors, doctors, journalists, and accountants, with the rest holding manager-level positions in state-owned

enterprises. According to Lu's (2010) classification of social class in contemporary China, those with business, professional, and managerial backgrounds belong to economically privileged social groups.

Twenty-one interviews were conducted in Mandarin, each lasting approximately 60 minutes, and were audio-recorded and later transcribed with the consent of participants. I initially transcribed the data verbatim in Chinese and then translated excerpts into English for presentation in this article. I assigned an "American" pseudonym to participants who signed up for the interview using their American names and assigned a "Chinese" pseudonym to those who used their Chinese name. During the interviews, participants were asked to discuss their educational experiences in the US amid current geopolitical tensions and the public health crisis. In keeping with the original research intent, they were also invited to reflect on their overseas study decisions (i.e., if you had to do it again, would you still choose to study in the US?) and their future plans after graduation.

I employed the techniques of thematic analysis discussed in Creswell (2014) by searching for themes that emerged from the data rather than imposing them a priori. For my qualitative data analysis, I followed four concrete practices. First, all audio recordings of interviews were transcribed verbatim into Chinese to gain a preliminary understanding of their content. Complemented by fieldnotes of my observations during the Zoom interviews, these transcripts helped me connect 21 interviews. Next, while viewing and reviewing the interview transcripts, recurring words and phrases were noted down to be initially coded as shared experiences and feelings expressed by my participants (e.g., anxious, stressed). Furthermore, initial coding was performed to synthesize and classify similar descriptive events into emergent categories and subcategories, with particular attention to the exploration of COVID-19 impacts that have influenced the interviewees' choices and decisions. Lastly, salient categories were developed into themes for analysis, involving a detailed rendering of information about activities and events. I further confirmed my analysis by triangulating data, including passive observation of participants' social media and informal conversations with participants via WeChat.

FINDINGS

When I interviewed the 21 participants in the summer of 2020, only one student reported that he wanted to take a gap year, one student was undecided, and the rest (90%) said they would not defer or drop study abroad for the next academic year and beyond. The results are akin to the optimistic conclusions drawn from quantitative studies conducted by several large educational organizations (IIE, 2020; WES, 2020). Nevertheless, after in-depth interviews with these students, I discovered that their seemingly positive answers, in fact, were full of struggles and complexities. Based on my qualitative data analysis, three major factors that may prevent Chinese students and families from choosing the US as the destination for their graduate study in the post-pandemic world: disillusionment regarding their original romanticized views of the US, psychological stress

brought by uncertain US policies, and parental concerns about students' health and well-being.

Table 1: Demographic Profile of Participants

#	Grade level	Name	Gender	Cities/ Province	Majors	Types of high school
1	Freshman	Wenwen	Female	Shanghai	Pre-biology	American High School
2	Freshman	Yunxiang	Female	Beijing	Stats and Data Science	Chinese Public (international division)
3	Freshman	Lele	Male	Shanghai	Physics	Chinese Public in Shanghai
4	Freshman	Kelvin	Male	Beijing	Physics	Chinese Public (international division)
5	Sophomore	Qichen	Male	Beijing	Physics	Chinese Public + American Private
6	Sophomore	Kress	Male	Guangdong Province	Physics	Chinese Private (international division)
7	Sophomore	Karen	Female	Liaoning Province	Economics & Geography	Chinese Public
8	Sophomore	Angela	Female	Guangdong Province	Pre-economics	Singaporean High School
9	Sophomore	Yiyi	Female	Beijing	Maths & Philosophy	American High School
10	Sophomore	Xiang	Male	Guangdong Province	Sociology & Physics	Chinese Private (international division)
11	Junior	Ruby	Female	Liaoning Province	Theatre & Pre- communication	Chinese Public
12	Junior	Eva	Female	Tianjin	Mathematical Science	Chinese Public
13	Junior	Cheng	Male	Shanghai	Physics	Chinese Private (international division)
14	Junior	Shelly	Female	Liaoning Province	Financial Maths & Stats	International high school (Canadian curricula)
15	Junior	Rui	Male	Sichuan Province	Economics	Chinese Private
16	Senior	Shi	Female	Jiangsu Province	Electric Engineering	Chinese Public (international division)
17	Senior	Elly	Female	Guangdong Province	Econ Accounting & Financial Maths	American Private
18	Senior	Feifei	Male	Beijing	Physics	Chinese Public (international division)
19	Senior	Renping	Female	Henan Province	Earth Science	Chinese Public
20	Senior	Han Zhang	Female	Zhejiang Province	Psychology & Brian Science	Chinese Public (international division)
21	Senior	Teng	Female	Chongqing	Chemical Engineering	Chinese Public (international division)

Romanticization and Disillusionment Regarding the US

For many Chinese students and their parents, the US has always been the most attractive country to earn a well-respected degree, meet a diverse range of people, and enhance one's career prospects. This perception is unconsciously driven by their social imaginary of US higher education. As Stein and Andreotti (2016) argue, the social imaginary both constructs Western higher education as a desirable product and, at the same time, underlies the racist reception by the host campus and country. Deeply embedded in people's common understanding, the social imaginary of the US is formed through images, stories, and videos via popular media. However, this idealized image is gradually undermined 1) through Chinese students' firsthand observations of the US, 2) through Chinese people's collective skepticism about the market value of US degrees, and 3) through persistent Sinophobia in the US context.

After studying and living in the US for a period of time, Chinese students' geographical knowledge became more practical rather than ideological and symbolic. Their global mobility made them realize the gap between their

imaginary of the US and the reality they experience in everyday life. Qichen introduced this discrepancy during the interview.

In fact, at the beginning, my understanding of the US mainly came from American [television] dramas and movies, including listening to other people's stories, and I felt it [the US] was very impressive. But in fact, if you go to Los Angeles and walk through the slums, you will feel it's totally incomparable to Shanghai. You are afraid to take subway there [in Los Angeles]. As for [university location], other than the coastline and ocean view, the rest is like third- or fourth-tier cities [in China].

As mentioned earlier, most self-funded Chinese undergraduate students are from urban upper- and middle-class backgrounds. Their desire for American higher education is often entangled with their imaginary of the US as a global, modern, wealthy, and democratic paradise. Conversely, when they see well-known US cities (e.g., Los Angeles) with their own eyes, they discover that the place they yearned for has been overly romanticized through the dissemination of Hollywood films and television, American brand-name products, and American social media. As Qichen disclosed, he felt his hometown, Shanghai, was much safer and more advanced with regard to public security and infrastructure. His close contact with the US made him aware of his earlier naïve admiration for the US and the rapid development of his hometown compared to Los Angeles.

A second component in Chinese students' disillusionment with the US is a topic that is heatedly discussed in the Chinese public sphere: devaluation of foreign degrees. To respond to budget cuts and declining revenue streams, US institutions capitalize on existing global hierarchies to "make major investments in marketing and branding campaigns to earn name recognition and to increase enrollments" (Altbach & Knight, 2007, p. 301). The serious ramifications of these neoliberal practices, which prioritize short-term payoffs, have led to Chinese people's skepticism about the quality of US higher education.

Han Zhang: I feel the golden age of studying abroad may have passed, especially the current situation [under Trump administration] in the US. Previously, when you say study abroad, people may feel that the US is superior and exceptional, but now there are more and more stereotypes targeting international students [by Chinese people]. In particular, domestic public opinion in China will make you feel that certain US universities may not be of high quality. The education that I receive hasn't changed, but public opinion makes it less valued.

Concerns regarding neoliberalism, profiteering, and the corporatization of international education are nothing new among researchers (e.g., Ball, 2012; Brandenburg & de Wit, 2011). But recently, the "dark" side of US higher education has captured public attention as well. As Han Zhang highlighted, ordinary Chinese people in mounting numbers are starting to worry about the market value of US academic degrees. Multiple stereotypical portrayals of Chinese students, such as "super-rich kids" and "nerds" are widely circulated in both Chinese and the US social media, deepening the common impression of US institutions of higher education as degree mills that profit by selling "parchment-

only” degrees (Knight, 2012). Additionally, it has been suggested that many overseas returnees fail to land desirable and high-paying jobs in China as expected (Lan, 2019; Liu, 2016), which again devalues Western degrees and their supposed benefits. Moreover, the huge gap between the cost of study abroad and the starting salary for Chinese employees can further cast doubt on the investment in overseas education (Tu, 2018). Since the academic reputation of US institutions is socially, culturally, and geographically situated in China’s labor market, Chinese public opinion and concerns will largely influence students and parents in their decision-making. Han Zhang admitted that the value of US degrees has been diminishing in China due to neoliberal practices of US institutions. In a nutshell, the prestige of US higher education is largely dependent on word of mouth and social networks; therefore, collective skepticism in the Chinese public sphere is a negative sign for the US international education market.

The last component that has led to Chinese students’ disillusionment about the US is persistent Sinophobia in the US context. Before COVID-19, despite the American racial hierarchy, Chinese international students rarely confront verbal assaults or physical violence on or off campus. Nonetheless, as the pandemic increasingly has dominated world news, students’ experiences of discrimination and xenophobic attacks have become more obvious and extreme. More than a third of the students (seven participants) in my interviews expressed that they immediately felt fear and anxiety triggered by the outbreak of COVID-19. Two students reported they were openly attacked around the campus area with the phrase “Chinese Virus.” The resurgence of anti-Asian sentiment and xenophobic policies made Chinese students aware that prejudice and hate towards Chinese and Chinese Americans persists in the US society.

Shelly: Before I came to the US, I thought the US was one of the most accommodating countries for all racial and ethnic groups. I felt because of its history, because it’s a country where many races and ethnicities gather together, I thought there is no reason to exclude China, but lately these policies [signed by Trump] really convinced me that this place is not very friendly to Chinese, at least to international students at the present stage.

Students’ social imaginary of the US also contained the ideals of democracy and equality, but racist and violent events like George Floyd’s murder in May 2020 and the Capitol riot in January 2021 have thoroughly destroyed these ideals, leading to a reckoning with persistent racism and violence in the US. Taken together, these issues lead Chinese international students to realize that they could be discriminated against just because of their appearance and nationality. In other words, their lived experiences during the pandemic have taught them a vivid lesson about how race and racism operate in the US context. In sum, Chinese students’ disillusionment about the US may have a detrimental impact on the US’s ability to recruit students who want to go on to graduate study.

Anxiety Surrounding Uncertain Government Policies

The second factor that influences Chinese students and families in decisions about study abroad is uncertain US-China relations and related unpredictable visa policies. After a series of xenophobic policies targeting Chinese graduate students were implemented, the Chinese undergraduate students I interviewed suffered tremendous psychological stress. Particularly when Trump signed a presidential proclamation on July 6, 2020, requiring all international students on F1 visas¹ whose university curricula were entirely online to leave the country or face deportation. Trump wanted to utilize international students as political leverage for the purpose of threatening US colleges and universities to reopen during the pandemic. In response, Chinese students were extremely frustrated and alarmed. The impact of political unrest and abrupt policy change on students' mental health concerns is also a factor that influences their future overseas study plans. Both examples below use the same metaphor of being increasingly stressed by these policies.

Eva: In fact, I think, because we are undergraduate students with F1 status, at least these policies haven't affected us, but in fact our mindset was affected.

Jing: Can you describe to me how your mindset was affected?

Eva: At that time, I felt it [the xenophobic policies] would approach me step by step, we can no longer get back to "normal."

Jing: I believe when you applied, if the US had this attitude, you probably wouldn't have studied abroad.

Eva: I think so, if this was the case at that time, I might not have enrolled [as an undergraduate].

Shelly: The only effect these policies have had on me is that I feel this country is unstable, it is too changeable. That's why I'm not going to study here for graduate school. These policies have brought me many negative thoughts, I think, because each policy didn't directly target you, but beats about the bush to drive you away, makes you feel little by little that this place is exclusive and xenophobic.

Though these policies did not directly bar students with F1 student visa status from the US, Chinese undergraduates still felt targeted. Eva and Shelly used the phrases "step by step" and "little by little" in their narratives to describe how their emotional well-being was harmed by these policies. In the case of Eva, she stated that she would not have chosen the US for college if she knew that the anti-Chinese attitudes would be manifested in government policy and practice. As for Shelly, she felt that the constant changing rules indirectly drove Chinese students away, and she had therefore decided against graduate study in the US.

Apart from changeable and xenophobic policies that destabilized their psychological well-being, Chinese students strongly sensed that they had become political tools in the US-China trade war.

Wenwen: I feel I have been affected a lot [by US government policy], because the US government is actually very difficult to punish the Chinese government in a direct way. The easiest body that they can control is international students, so if they have

any dissatisfaction with China, they can directly say, “I will not issue your visa,” and China will definitely say something. International students are like scapegoats for political issues.

Wenwen’s account showed her fear of being abandoned, stuck in a limbo between sending and receiving countries. To international students who move from one political regime to another, transnational mobility means they lose half of their rights, privileges, security, and sense of belonging (Gaulee, Sharma, & Bista, 2020). As the US-China relationship deteriorates and neo-nationalism rises, Chinese students expressed that they were trapped in the middle and were afraid of being sacrificial “scapegoats.” In short, under pressure from policies beyond their control, Chinese students’ appetite for US higher education has been eroded and damaged.

Parental Concerns about Students’ Health and Well-being

Parental concerns are the third factor in study-abroad decision-making and one that is often overlooked by researchers. In fact, parents should be seen as the hidden protagonists who enable and sustain cross-border higher education. It is Chinese parents who communicate with educational brokers to select countries, schools, and majors for their children (Lan, 2018), who financially and emotionally support their children to study abroad in the US (Fong, 2011; Ma, 2020), who facilitate the new model of ISM for the educational purposes rather than the earlier immigration model (Zhang-Wu, 2018). The outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic has made the role of Chinese parents even more salient and crucial.

Xiang: My parents always think that the US is very unsafe, and that I’ll get the virus as soon as I leave the house. I explain to them that this isn’t not the case. In fact, it’s quite safe, it’s not that scary, but they don’t believe me.

International education is rarely regarded as highly risky by parents; however, the COVID-19 pandemic amplifies the risks of students’ physical health and emotional well-being. Compared to Xiang, his parents were more anxious about his health due to the information they obtained from China’s state-run media. The year-long COVID-19 pandemic has not only posed serious financial risks to Chinese families but has left them with psychological stress as well. Both Eva and Han Zhang stated that some parents they know originally were prepared to send their children to study abroad, but xenophobic policies and rampant discrimination led them to reconsider their overseas plans.

Jing: Because you’ve already studied abroad, you think this series of xenophobic policies actually has an impact on prospective students, right?

Eva: Definitely, I feel, we don’t really have to go there [to the US], right? There might be a lot of parents who aren’t happy to let their children go.

Jing: So do you think this series of policies will affect the US in terms of attracting international students?

Han Zhang: It definitely will, like my mom said that maybe a lot of parents who wanted to send their children abroad, now they may have to struggle. I know one of my [high school] classmates who is doing his undergraduate study in China and plans to apply for graduate school in the US, but his parents feel they should reconsider. Because after all he is doing undergraduate study in China, if he wants to continue his graduate study in China, it will be easier. His parents suggested him to stay. I feel parents' emotions should also be taken into account.

For those who have already invested in the overseas journey, it is not surprising that they choose to continue their undergraduate study in the US, but from the accounts of both Eva and Han Zhang, Chinese parents play a significant role in preventing their offspring from studying abroad in the US at this time, and their top concern is the security of the learning environment.

To summarize, disillusionment about the long-standing social imaginary of the US, unpredictable macro-level visa regulations, and safety concerns are the inhibiting factors that are likely to influence Chinese students' decision to study abroad in the US after the COVID-19 pandemic. Given the ultra-competitive education system in China, one thing remains certain: Chinese families still see the value in sending their children abroad for higher education in order to gain greater social and cultural capital. However, all the considerations I have noted above may adversely affect students' motivation to seek a US degree. If so, the sizable yet unmet demand for overseas education will create a vast market opportunity for other study-abroad destinations.

Emerging Alternative Study Destinations

Owing to the COVID-19-induced problems discussed above, Chinese international students are becoming increasingly aware of alternative countries and regions to pursue their graduate study.

Jing: Do you think that worsening US-China relations will affect your plans? For example, if you want to work in the US or something else?

Kress: Yes, because I've been thinking about graduate school, I want to choose somewhere else to study instead of the US. Like Singapore, Nanyang Technological University, yes, I started to think about it because of Sino-US relations and a "certain" US leader [i.e., Trump].

Jing: This "certain" leader may be gone when you apply to graduate school.

Kress: I hope he'll leave quickly. We'll see by then. If it can get back to normal, if they don't put so much pressure on international students, I think I'll still continue my graduate study here.

Jing: So you feel if you pursue your bachelor's degree in the US, it's very natural to go to graduate school in the US?

Kress: Yes, unless there are special circumstances.

Kress frankly stated that, because of Trump and worsening US-China relations, he considered not pursuing his graduate study in the US. But when I followed up by noting that Trump might soon leave the White House (the interview took place in the summer before the November 2020 presidential election), Kress was still

doubtful as to whether the US political situation would be stable or not. From Kress' account and those of many other interviewees, two generalizations can be made. First, it is natural for Chinese undergraduate students in the US to continue on to graduate study in the same country. Second, political stability is the precondition for a country to attract international students and maintain international student enrollment. For these reasons, it is foreseeable that the US might lose a large portion of its prospective graduate applicants if it continues to be unstable in its policymaking and antagonistic to China.

By contrast, due to effective handling of the virus as well as shared cultural practices, Singapore and Hong Kong were repeatedly mentioned as potential alternative study-abroad destinations.

Shelly: The first way that COVID-19 affected me is that I didn't think I would graduate within three years; my school year was shortened by one year. The second is that it affected my consideration of where to pursue my graduate school, because I originally wanted to study in the US.

Jing: You said earlier you might choose Singapore because of this pandemic?

Shelly: Yes.

Jing: Just because of the US' poor handling of the virus?

Shelly: I think one reason is due to the US crisis management, and the other is because of the recent policy that targets international students, so I feel this country is not so friendly to international students. But Singapore, although I haven't been there, I recognize their educational strength, including the pace of life. I also heard from many people, so I feel it's quite good. I'm thinking about it now.

From Shelly's narrative, it seems that Singapore is another emerging social imaginary that orients her to a certain way of understanding and acting in the political world. Her comments, "I haven't been there" and "I also heard from many people" are similar to how these students understood the US before they visited the country for themselves. As Chinese students become disillusioned with the established social imaginary of the US as a study-abroad destination, their emerging social imaginary will no doubt unconsciously steer people's everyday practice and decisions.

Because academic reputation and perceived quality of education are situated in a specific context, wider societal recognition and shared opinions among Chinese students will make alternative degrees more valuable in the employment market.

Jing: Have you thought about after your undergraduate study, whether you wanted to go to graduate school or straight to work?

Eva: Actually, I still want to return to China I came to the US just for the experience... I think in the future, I'll pursue graduate school, maybe the field of finance. I quite like universities in Hong Kong, or Singapore, their business and finance department is also relatively good. After completing graduate school, then I'll go back to China.

As a study by Jiang (2021) shows, the current generation of Chinese international students "[study] transnationally with a desire to return" (p. 44). Eva's response

reflects that study abroad in the US is for the pursuit of overseas experience and a “good” foreign degree. Alongside the devaluation of Western degrees, the market value of post-secondary degrees from Singapore and Hong Kong appears to be increasing in Chinese public space. From an instrumental perspective, such as economic investment and career prospects, Chinese families are starting to choose a destination or institution that provides more symbolic capital when students reenter long-term employment competition in the Chinese context. Consequently, against the backdrop of the new geopolitics of international higher education, my interview data indicates that regionalization within the Asia-Pacific region is likely to transform Chinese ISM in the post-pandemic era.

DISCUSSION

The global pandemic has the capacity to alter the geopolitical context and shape the rise and fall of world powers. Echoing Beech (2019), I find that irrespective of the declining enthusiasm of the US or the emergence of alternative destinations, the future flows of Chinese students are imbued with the social imaginary about study-abroad places. Prior to COVID-19, the construction of popular study-abroad destinations, such as the US and the UK, were characterized by marketing discourses and reinforced via social media. However, COVID-19 abruptly interrupted Chinese people’s imagined idea of the US and has begun to turn it to the opposite. It is especially true when Chinese parents perceive the US as the hot spot during the pandemic and bear over-pessimistic attitudes towards its medical healthcare services, as noted by my participants in this study. Thus, imaginative geography is not only a facilitating factor that motivates students to choose where to study, but also an impeding influence that discourages parents and students from choosing a particular place.

Long before the COVID-19 pandemic, Rizvi (2011) called for a new social imaginary of international education that highlights transnational collaborations and meaningful contributions to society. Yet, central to any social imaginary is power, hegemony, and discourse. While COVID-19 seems to open up new preferences for destinations in the Asia-Pacific region, Chinese student mobility is still largely facilitated by neoliberal ideology, as evidenced both by my findings and Mok et al.’s study (2021). Hence, it can be argued that COVID-19 has a profound impact on the direction of Chinese ISM from the traditional East-to-West mode to the East Asia-oriented mode; however, this disruption has not changed the neoliberal nature of international education. To avoid repeating regional asymmetries and inequalities, lessons need to be learned from internationalization and early interventions need to be made if additional persuasive evidence confirms this trend of regionalization.

CONCLUSION

International students and families’ decision of where to study abroad is highly complex. Compounded by the key events of the COVID-19 crisis, there will be a

tsunami of changes to the established trend of Chinese ISM, and the landscape of global higher education is no longer the same playing field compared to 2019. In this article, I explore ideological, structural, and personal factors that are likely to discourage Chinese undergraduate students from pursuing their graduate study in the US. Ideologically, disillusionment with the US compels Chinese students to be critical of their previous fetishism of US higher education and credentials. Through students' lived experience in the US, Chinese public discussion of the value of foreign degrees, and persistent US xenophobia targeting Chinese, the fever of study abroad in the US is gradually cooling down. The skepticism towards the social imaginary of the US is also reflected in shifting geopolitics in which the US is no longer the only superpower in the world, which further undermines its global attraction as the primary educational hub. Structurally, US-China relations and visa regulations will likely determine the future flow of Chinese students. The distrust and hatred of China that the Trump administration planted is continuing in Biden's presidency, as evidenced by visa denials in July 2021. Since the decision to study abroad is a multi-year investment, uncertain political situations between the host and home countries are certain to affect students' preferred destination. Individually, parental views stand out as a critical factor in shaping the future of Chinese ISM as well. The security of the learning environment, free from the virus and violence, will be Chinese parents' priority in the process of decision-making in the aftermath of the COVID-19 crisis.

In addition, the unidirectional student mobility from mainland China to the US may be interrupted, with Singapore and Hong Kong as emerging imaginative geographies. Despite the fact that the regionalization of higher education is still at the beginning stages, we may predict that these rising regional players are more likely to influence Chinese ISM based on growing interest from Chinese students and parents. Based on my research findings, these new destinations are still largely driven by the social imaginary, albeit realigned to reflect shifting geopolitics on a multipolar basis, so it is crucial to learn from the lesson of the US to avoid the regional (re)production of geographical hierarchy in order to build a more just and inclusive mode of international education. Ultimately, standing at the fourth wave of ISM, this article looks beyond the immediate impact of the pandemic on Chinese student mobility. While it is impossible to predict the future with precision, this study shows that COVID-19 will almost certainly have a long-lasting, negative impact on Chinese international student mobility to US institutions of higher education.

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