

International Recruitment: China Recruiters' Experience during COVID-19 PandemicTony Lee^{a*}, and Yanjie (Ruby) Cheng^b^aTexas A&M University-Commerce, USA*Corresponding author: Email: tony.lee@tamuc.edu.

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore the experiences of China recruiters during the pandemic, particularly with their job stress and sense of job security. The study also explored the new norms of Chinese students' recruitment following the post-pandemic crisis. Using qualitative analysis, we found that China recruiters experienced different stressors during the pandemic regardless of their working location. The participants recognized the importance of communication and seeking institutional support to help overcome their stress during the pandemic. They suggested that higher education administrators should be sensitive to the needs of their international recruiters. The participants also suggested several new norms for future recruitment, such as using the hybrid recruitment model, promoting university collaboration, initiating joint programs between US and Chinese institutions, and hiring domestic recruiters. Implications for practice are discussed.

Keywords: China recruitment, Chinese student, covid-19, higher education, international recruitment, international student, job security, job stress

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INTRODUCTION

International recruiters are university admission officers hired by US higher education institutions (HEIs) to recruit international students to study in the US. International recruiters play a key role in the growth and advancement of US higher education institutions that are striving to create a more diverse and inclusive learning environment. Additionally, they are assets to the financial success of the institutions, particularly HEIs that rely heavily on out-of-state tuitions from

international students to offset the decrease in state funding. Despite the important roles that international recruiters hold in US HEIs, there is limited literature that focuses on international recruiters' experiences (e.g., Herget, 2013). Most studies focus on the outcomes of using agents to recruit international students or the importance of international recruitment in HEIs (e.g., Goralski & Tootoonchi, 2015; Huang et al., 2014; Nikula & Kivistö, 2018, 2020). As Herget (2013) shared it is relatively common for admission recruiters to get burnout and experience monotony of the repeating admission cycle. Despite her challenges with international recruitment in Asia, her experience has changed her perception and outlook of her position. This might not be the case for other international recruiters. During the COVID-19 pandemic, US HEIs have turned to international students as a solution for the budget issue. This might have stressed international recruiters, especially those who recruit in China.

Research shows that Chinese international students have become great assets to US HEIs. In fall 2019, 1,075,496 international students enrolled in the US. Thirty-five percent of the international students originated from China, followed by India (Open Doors, 2020a). China and India have consistently been the top two countries sending students to study in the US since 2000, but China has taken over the top rank as the country that sent the most students to the US starting 2009 (Open Doors, 2020a). Despite the 43 percent decline in international student enrollment in fall 2019, China international students contributed \$15.9 billion to the US economy in 2019 (Open Doors, 2020b). The financial contribution was significant given many US HEIs were facing financial challenges and a decline in domestic enrollment. Previous research shows that the growth of the Chinese economy has made it financially feasible for Chinese parents to send their children to study abroad (Falcone, 2017). Chinese international students consider studying abroad in the US as an opportunity to broaden their horizons, receive a world-class education, and develop their global citizen identities. Some Chinese parents are also considering the US HEIs because of the post-graduation employability and migration opportunities. However, Chinese international students have experienced unpredictable challenges studying in the US ever since the Trump administration's inauguration in 2017 (Bartram, 2018; Forbes, 2020; Rose-Redwood & Rose-Redwood, 2017). Multiple foreign policies aimed at scrutinizing Chinese international students both in the US and those who were preparing for their applications to the US HEIs were implemented (Time, 2019). In addition to the hostile political environment, a global pandemic also brought uncertainty to Chinese international students (Cheng, 2019; Mok et al., 2021; Wan, 2020). The combination of these challenges has created additional obstacles to international recruiters who are responsible for the China recruitment market. This study helps to fill the gap in the literature and provide insights into HEIs administrators and international China recruiters' experience during the COVID-19 pandemic.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The Importance of International Enrollment and Marketing

Student enrollment is a fundamental operating component of US HEIs. The enrollment trends developed by HEIs offer insights for institutional budgeting and provide one of the earliest and most accurate indications of the current and future financial health of an institution (Gyure & Arnold, 2001). Student enrollment departments and the admissions office are often considered the engine of a HEI's operation (Huddleston, 2000; Kim et al., 2020). For the past decade international student enrollment has become a focus of many institutions' overall enrollment management strategy (Dennis, 1998; Meyer et al., 2007). Research shows that US HEIs have greatly benefited from hosting international students on their campuses (Chankseliani & Hessel, 2016; Choudaha et al., 2013). Besides the economic benefit, other benefits of enrolling international students include increasing financial revenues for institutional development, enhancing domestic students' global

perspective, and promoting cultural and international understanding (Kwenani & Yu, 2019; Knight, 2012).

The marketing and recruitment activities strategically planned by admissions officers provide sustainable growth for their institutions (Briggs, 2006). They have also become resources for international students and their families to stay informed about their options to study abroad (Briggs, 2006; Eder et al., 2010). Many HEIs around the world have strategically integrated international admissions offices to support international marketing and recruiting efforts (West & Addington, 2014; Zinn & Johansson, 2015) and promote their institutions in a complex, ever-changing, and culturally diverse market to compete for global talents (Assad et al., 2013; Briggs, 2006; Goralski & Tootoonchi, 2015).

The Role of International Recruiters

When HEIs around the globe are competing in the market for international students, the role of international recruiters is no doubt a key for the success of international student enrollment. To acquire the best student talent, HEIs have developed diversified strategies and invested financially to increase international student enrollment (James-MacEachern, 2018; Knight, 2004). Hiring international recruiters is the most commonly used approach among HEIs when executing institutional international recruitment strategies (James-MacEachern, 2018). Research shows that the recruitment outcomes are connected to the characteristics of the recruiters, such as the “informativeness, personalness, and trustworthiness” (Alderfer & McCord, 1970; Chapman et al., 2005; Denzin & Lincoln, 2005). Besides those personal traits, international recruiters are also expected to be highly knowledgeable and resourceful in helping international students and their families with their decision-making process, as the process is complex and highly stressful due to the diverse cultural and educational backgrounds of the international students (Briggs, 2006). Therefore, international recruiters need to acquire sufficient admissions and institutional knowledge to provide appropriate guidance to international students and their families at various stages of the admissions process.

Challenges Faced by International Recruiters

International recruitment is a challenging and stressful profession due to the repetitive admission cycle and constant long distance travel during the recruitment season (Herget, 2013). International recruiters encounter different challenges when working with international students. For example, what is considered as the “big picture” of an applicant’s enrollment process for the domestic market is very different for the enrollment process in a global context for international recruiters. International enrollment process requires not only the pursuit of diversity, equity, and inclusion as domestic enrollment does, but it also involves additional efforts to compete for global talents in a political and culturally complex environment (Ramos, 2019; Shields, 2019). Additionally, the diversity and equity issues, complex overseas recruitment practices, international traveling policy, and the differences in foreign education systems are related challenges to the international recruiter profession. International recruiters also face an additional challenge on how to diversify their international student population based on their country of origins (Altbach, 2015; Andreson & Svruga, 2019; ICEF Monitor, 2017; Mok et al., 2021). Research shows that the global pandemic has also altered the landscape of international recruitment practices (Mok et al., 2021). The scope and severity of the COVID-19 pandemic has created a profound public health crisis that negatively impacted international students in the US (Cheng, 2019; Meyer et al., 2007). Recruiting international students was further complicated by travel restrictions and closures of high school campuses during the COVID-19 pandemic. The impact on international students was especially profound due to the legal requirement of maintaining their immigration status as nonimmigrants (Mok et al., 2021). International students’ preferences for universities may involve course options, academic reputation, career outcomes, teaching qualities, and more (Soutar & Turner, 2002). As

international recruiters, they must address all the concerns and issues faced by international students and their families. Tough questions including the safety of the campus and racial discrimination among Asian students have to be addressed as part of recruitment practice during the pandemic (Mok et al, 2021). As a result, international recruiters must have an accurate working knowledge of enrollment management that they can integrate into their recruitment activities (Gyure & Arnold, 2001).

Job Stress

The University of Connecticut's study (2020) reported that 41 million US workers filed for unemployment between February and May of 2020, which was the highest unemployment rate since the Great Depression. The COVID-19 pandemic has caused US workers to experience job insecurity and financial concerns which eventually led to depression and anxiety. US workers were fearful of the effects of COVID-19 on their employment (University of Connecticut, 2020). In Park and colleagues' (2020) study, they found some of the most common stressors experienced by their US participants were reading and hearing about the severity and contagious nature of the COVID-19 virus, uncertainty of the length of quarantine and social distancing requirements, changes to social and daily personal care routines, and financial concerns. Of all the stressors, loss of job security or income was also the biggest concern among the participants followed by the risk of a loved one's illness, stigma related to being high risk, loss of job, and lack of access to information.

Song and colleagues' research (2020) revealed that the pandemic has also caused an economic downturn and increased the unemployment rate in China. Similar to Park et al.'s (2020) study, many working adults in China were experiencing mental health and work attitude issues due to the fear of losing their jobs or having salaries cut. 20.7 percent of the participants experienced regular insomnia and 13.5 percent recognized that they experienced depression during the pandemic (Song et al., 2020). Aligning to the findings, researchers from a university in Brazil also found their university staff was also experiencing psychological distress during the pandemic (Serralta et al., 2020). The transition to working from home has led university staff to experience work overload, digital fatigue, and loss of boundaries between personal and professional life. However, the study revealed that the older staff exhibited less psychological distress because of their maturity and financial stability. This aligns with the results from a national study conducted in the US (De Bruin, 2021).

Job Security

Job security is "employee's expectations about the stability and longevity of their job in an organization" (Lu et al., 2017). Job security is an important indicator of work performance and organizational commitment (Yousef, 1998). Several research studies have been conducted to examine the importance of job security and its correlation between employees' wellbeing (Burke, 1991; Pacheco et al., 2020; Silla et al., 2009), retention (Raub & Streit, 2006, Samuel & Chipunza, 2009; Griffeth et al, 1997), and job satisfaction (Ahmed & Jameel, 2018; Lacy & Sheehan, 1997).

Natural disasters and public crises can affect the level of job security (Mastroianni, 2009). Pacheco et al. (2020) conducted a study two weeks after the social distancing measure took place in Canada during COVID-19. Their research shows that the COVID-19 pandemic negatively impacted the employees' job security and wellbeing. Staff members who worked in HEIs and supported students during COVID-19 also experienced a higher level of anxiety about job security (Bauman, 2020). According to Bauman (2020), besides the stress of handling the pandemic, university staff was also concerned about being furloughed. Additionally, staff were reluctant to express their health and safety concerns, even as they were tasked with additional roles and responsibilities (Anderson, 2020).

RESEARCH METHOD

In this qualitative study, we aim to understand the phenomenon of China recruiters' experience with Chinese international student recruitment, their job stress, job security, and the new norms with Chinese international student recruitment post COVID-19 pandemic crisis. To develop an understanding of participants' recruitment experience during the pandemic, a purposive sampling technique was applied to recruit participants who met these criteria: a) responsible for Chinese international student recruitment, b) responsible for China recruitment during the COVID-19 pandemic, and c) recruited for a US HEI. With the aim of getting more in-depth knowledge and perspective of China recruiters' experience, the participants were also selected based on their geographical location. The participants were based in China and outside of China.

Participants

Upon receiving IRB approval from Texas A&M University-Commerce, the authors shared the study and purpose of the study via emails with international recruitment colleagues whom they have met through professional recruitment associations and networks (e.g., International IACAC, Education USA, and LANTO China). Additionally, the first author shared the research with other international recruiters through the Chinese International Student Recruitment social media group (WeChat). The first author emailed all interested participants a brief description of the purpose of the research and a consent form. For a variation in sampling, three participants were based in China and the other three were based outside of China when the interviews took place. Among the three participants who were based outside of China, two of them were living in the US and the other one was living in the U.K. The demographics and characteristics of the participants are summarized in Table 1 (Results). Three out of six participants recruited for a US private institution while the other three participants recruited for a US public research institution.

Data Collection

The data collection process consisted of two phases. For the first phase, a demographic survey link was distributed to the participants individually via e-mail. In the demographic survey (Appendix I), the participants were asked to rate their job stress level and job security level during the pandemic on a 10-point Likert scale (1 = being extremely low to 10 = being extremely high). The second phase of the data collection process included semi-structured interviews conducted individually with the participants via Zoom. The following research questions were predetermined based on the review of the literature to guide the study:

1. What were the challenges faced by Chinese student recruiters during the COVID-19 pandemic?
2. What institutional support did Chinese student recruiters need or find helpful during the pandemic?
3. What are the new norms of Chinese international students' recruitment post-pandemic crisis?

Additional probing questions (Appendix II) were conducted with participants individually during the interviews to gain a deeper understanding of their overall recruiting and work experience during the pandemic crisis. Each interview lasted about 45 minutes. The first author led all the interviews while the second author listened to all the interviews. Per IRB guidelines, we assured each participant that their participation is voluntary and that they could stop their participation in the study at any time. The participants provided consent to have their interviews recorded for transcription and data analysis.

Data Analysis

Descriptive data analysis was used to describe the background of the participants. The qualitative data were analyzed and interpreted using Creswell's (2014) qualitative analysis

approach. We triangulated our data using the member checking process. The recorded interviews were transcribed verbatim. The interview transcripts were read multiple times before the data was assigned codes and themes such as recruitment challenges, job stress, job security, solutions and support services, and new norms of China recruitment. Finally, the interpreted data and findings were used to elaborate on each emerging theme. Relevant quotes from the participants were included to provide more details to illustrate the findings of the study.

RESULTS

Demographic Descriptions

The demographic descriptions of the participants are summarized in Table 1. The study consisted of three male and three female recruiters representing three different types of institutions – Public, Private not-for-profit, and Private for-profit. All the participants were seasoned recruiters. They had three years to 15 years of experience recruiting Chinese international students for US HEIs. Four recruiters were self-identified as Asian descent, one Black, and one White. Three recruiters were based in China and the remaining three were based outside of China. In this section, descriptive analysis was used to summarize the participants’ responses to the research topics.

Table 1
Demographic Description of Participants

| Participant | Gender | Race | Total Years of Experience | Types of Institution | Location of Institution | International Student Population |
|-------------|--------|-------|---------------------------|------------------------|-------------------------|----------------------------------|
| John | M | Asian | 8 | Public | Midwest | 11% |
| Cristi | F | Asian | 7 | Private not-for-profit | Midwest | 3% |
| Adam | M | Asian | 3 | Public | Northeast | 14% |
| Sally | F | Asian | 4 | Private for-profit | South | 1% |
| Sharon | F | Black | 6 | Public | West | 13% |
| David | M | White | 15 | Private not-for-profit | East | 10% |

Recruitment Challenges

Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, China recruiters had experienced different challenges in recruiting Chinese international students to study in the US. The participants indicated the political climate in the US was a primary concern among Chinese students with parents who were seriously considering the US as a study abroad destination. Several executive orders initiated by the Trump’s administration had restricted Chinese students’ access to study in the US. Those policies had directly impacted Chinese international and prospective students (Forbes, 2020). On top of the

challenging political environment, the COVID-19 pandemic also hindered Chinese international students' study abroad journey. Chinese international students experienced challenges in applying for a student visa to study in the US due to the temporary closure of the US embassies and consulates. Additionally, Chinese parents and students perceived that Chinese international students were not welcome in the US as Adam indicated:

...a lot of times, parents are worried about whether they should still send their kids to United States because they're worried that due to the political climate between China and US the US citizens will not treat their children as well as before...

Sharon also added:

There was this perception that I gathered when meeting with students and parents, while in China, ...the idea of the Trump administration not wanting Chinese students in the US so that caused the fear and some reluctance to apply to US schools.

The other challenge the participants encountered was the university's ranking in the U.S. News & World Report plays a major role in their ability to schedule a campus visit or meeting with high school counselors and students. A participant who represented a lower-ranked institution voiced his opinion:

I think the Chinese people want to "save face" so you've got kids go to a more reputable or higher-ranking university, both the students, counselors and the parents felt very proud.

On the other hand, another participant who represented an institution that ranked higher in the U.S. News & World Report experienced a different type of struggle, she shared,

[it] was difficult to get to all the schools that we were invited to attend, so that was a good problem to have, but also I didn't have the opportunity to visit a lot of the rural schools that I would have liked to get to.

During the pandemic, the participants experienced a different set of challenges. Many high school counselors, students, and parents were concerned about the safety of their children who were interested to study in the US due to the Asian discrimination caused by the COVID-19 virus. For example, Sally shared, "10 out of 10 Chinese students will ask me am I going to be safe in America?" and Adam added, "[parents] are worried that more discrimination will happen in the United States." David also added:

Crime against Asians in the US has definitely gotten a large play in the press here and that's an issue so it has become more challenging as time has gone on, especially with the mishandling of the pandemic in the US. The US isn't welcoming and the US isn't safe, especially this is a concern for parents.

With the closure of high school campuses in China due to the COVID-19 pandemic, virtual recruitments via Zoom and other online platforms were the only ways to reach Chinese students. Unfortunately, it was not an easy process for international recruiters globally because Chinese high schools have put in place a rigid and selective process before allowing university recruiters to reach their students virtually. Participants who were based outside of China also expressed concern about the time zone difference. John stated:

I was based in the Midwest of United States, there's always a 13- or 14-hour time difference so most of the events I organized are at 1 AM, 2 AM, 3 AM, 5 AM...it was very tough for me. It's at night that I need work to do the recruitment.

On the contrary, participants who were based in China experienced the uncertainty of organized high school campus visits and education fairs. Participants had to be agile and learn to deal with last minute schedule changes. For instance, Cristi said:

There are starting to be things [recruitment events] that we can do, maybe at 50, 60, or two-third of the capacity as before pandemic, but the tricky thing is, I think for the second

phase of the pandemic, is that everything is subject to a last-minute change or a lot of variables.

Also, Adam shared his concern:

Different schools require COVID testing before I visit and a lot of times I'll get uncertain answers from counselors because they're not sure if their COVID policy is cleared at the local government or they're not sure if they are able to host in-person visit.

Job Stress

The COVID-19 pandemic had increased the stress level of China recruiters despite where they were based at during the pandemic. Two out of six participants indicated a stress level of seven (out of 10) during the pandemic. The other four participants indicated a stress level of eight. With China being on lockdown, schools moving to the online learning format, and US HEIs restricting international traveling, these caused stress among the participants particularly recruiters who experienced severe pressure from their institution to meet the set enrollment goal. A couple of participants indicated that their institutional leadership had different perceptions about the Chinese international student recruitment market and developed unrealistic expectations. For instance, a participant shared,

I think they have this illusion about China because we are giant bubble, so people see China is a big market with a huge population...big market means big giant prospective students or audience.

Another participant also expressed her institutional leadership's perspective on China recruitment "As long as you have online virtual thing, so the number should go up."

Participants who were based outside of China experienced an additional level of stress due to overwork. Time zone differences forced participants to work early in the morning and late in the evening to accommodate the needs of high school counselors and students. For example, a participant complained:

It's at night I need to do the recruitment and then in daytime I also have meetings, emails come in that I need to answer. Then, there's a phone call coming from a student or parent that wakes me up and that I need to answer. No daytime or nighttime, it is going all of the time, so it was very difficult.

Additionally, Sharon also expressed:

[I] was not being able to properly balance work-home life because I'm home 100% of the day. And I'm working during the day, and you're at home, for me it was just hard to cut it off at five o'clock. If I'm sitting in front of the TV I may just be okay, well I'm going to read a few applications or I'm going to you know schedule some sessions or answer emails, so it seemed that I was always trying to keep busy with work.

The other factor that triggered stress among the participants was the individual expectations of their job performance. Several participants had high expectations to excel in their work so when the outcomes did not meet their expectations, they began to experience stress. For example, John shared:

I want to increase [the number] no matter how hard I tried it still the number that doesn't get an increase dramatically, so that's the pressure...so that's probably the reason I couldn't bring the numbers up so that give myself pressure, that probably put on myself...probably because I didn't do it the right way or didn't work hard enough.

Adam also commented:

I was probably the busiest one. I still feel that I could do more because I want to exceed US expectations...I will say this part of stress well actually came from myself because I am a self-motivator...I wanted to do better because I love [institution] way too much and I want more schools to get to know [institution] in a sense and if I can get to travel to four schools each day out and four schools, if I can get five I would do five.

Job Security

Two out of six participants had identified their job security as a five or lower (on a 10-point scale). A participant was particularly troubled by the budgetary restrictions of her institution, as a result, she was limited on the work she could complete based on the limited budget that she had, yet the institution was expecting the same enrollment outcome. The other participant was concerned about his job because his institutional leader had proposed to hire a recruiter based in China. This led to a fear of losing his position.

On the other hand, two out of six participants rated their job security with a 10. They were very confident about their position. One of the participants stressed that his institution even had to hire an additional staff member last winter to support the additional workload. The other participant claimed, "...because we started our China market, right after the pandemic happened..."; therefore, he did not feel pressured or insecure about his position. He also had prior experience working for the same institution before the institution decided to establish an office in China. Additionally, these two participants also expressed that their institution focused on the long-term recruitment strategy instead of the short-term enrollment result. They experienced less pressure from their institution during the pandemic, as a result, they felt secure about their position.

Solutions and Support Services

Despite the different challenges the participants experienced during the pandemic, participants had found different ways to overcome their challenges. In addition, US HEIs also provided different resources to assist and support their recruiters during challenging times.

Communication

Communication was crucial to the participants during the pandemic. With the limitation of what the participants were able to do, they had to rely on their colleagues from their institutions and other institutions (e.g., university recruiters, recruiting agents, and education fair companies) to help and support their recruitment initiatives. Sally suggested, "Reaching out to every single resource you have. I don't really have an excuse or like trick to do something easy and quick and smart, just reaching out all the resources we have." Additionally, it was crucial for the participants to maintain close communication with recruitment agents, high school counselors, and prospective students, as Sally commented "...you know if you really don't talk with agencies and students and the parents and the teachers in person, they don't really remember you very well. They can really forget you." David also agreed, "The first thing was to keep contact, the most important thing was to keep contact, and this mostly involved that Weixin, of course, what's a Weibo."

Institutional Support

Participants encountered different challenges with their recruitment during the pandemic. To better serve the China recruiters, US HEIs had provided different types of resources and support systems to assist their recruiters. For example, Sharon shared:

The institution was incredibly supportive and when I even talked about the stress of balance that was one of the first things that they wanted to make sure we all maintained...they wanted us to every so often pull away to take give ourselves a break, take a lunch, even though we're at home, go for a walk to get out of the four walls so there's a lot of support with mental health and having that balance while working at home...There was a lot of support, with more one-on-one meetings, just to really be able to unplug.

John also expressed the support that he received from his supervisor and colleagues:

Sometimes my supervisor even as, for example, two events in the same night or in the same early morning, my supervisor will take one, and then I take one, and then

sometimes it is like a very long or two or three hours or some events that very busy one couldn't handle, then I asked my colleague...from India...depends on when she is available.

New Norms of China Recruitment

The COVID-19 pandemic had taken a toll on university recruiters who were responsible for international student recruitment. With China being on lockdown, limiting foreign travelers from entering the country, and high schools limiting university recruiters visiting prospective students, the participants were forced to explore alternate ways to reach out to high school counselors, students, and parents. When asked what are some of the new norms of China recruitment in a post-pandemic era, the participants consistently shared that utilizing a hybrid recruitment model, collaborating with other university recruiters, creating joint programs with Chinese institutions, and hiring a university recruiter based in China are the new norms with China recruitment.

Hybrid Recruitment Model

The virtual platform was the primary tool the participants utilized to conduct information sessions and workshops for high school counselors, students, and parents during the pandemic. Even post-pandemic participants who were based outside of China continued to utilize the online platform to connect and engage with high school counselors and prospective students. Sally utilized the virtual platform to stay connected with her former students who enrolled at US institutions. She was able to assist the students with their questions and transition virtually. Also, Sharon claimed:

In the virtual space, I can meet with those students that are much farther out in China's countryside, in those rural areas and I am able to get to many more students and have more personable conversations one-on-one or in group settings.

The virtual recruitment platform may be a valuable tool for recruiters, particularly those who are based outside of China, but high school students are experiencing digital fatigue. John shared, "So we attended a lot of online events organized by the event organizers...nobody showed up, very frustrating to waste my time, but also waste the cost..." In addition, Adam had a similar experience when interacting with high school counselors:

I reach out to counselors a lot of times because in September and October last year, we were actually experiencing zoom fatigue, so if you try to do a virtual visit with them it's tough, counselors don't really want to schedule a virtual visit because they know their students won't be paying attention to it.

Despite the benefits virtual recruitment platforms have to offer, David emphasized that virtual platforms "are just placeholders, online just simply doesn't work in China." The in-person visit remains important to successfully recruit in China. It can add another layer of richness to the overall recruitment experience of the recruiters and students. For instance, Adam pointed out:

I really love the hybrid model because it gives us a wider reach so, for example, I will probably never go to Xinjiang forever to recruit or even Lanzhou, that's out of my reach...I don't have the time to travel there to do an in-person visit, but with the hybrid model, more counselors are open to a virtual visit so I get to schedule visits with those schools that I'm not able to visit in person.

Additionally, an in-person meeting may also be a tool that recruiters use to engage and retain prospective students as John mentioned, "I think a lot of universities they will do international travel and later they will do online small one-on-one while following up sessions they will do many of that." Cristi summed up "I think the hybrid of online workshop and in-person workshop will be a new norm, but I think that's not only in China, that's just overall."

University Collaboration

The COVID-19 pandemic forced recruiters to view their work responsibilities differently compared to pre-pandemic. Despite the fact recruiters are competing for students, recruiters may have to work more collaboratively with one another to reach their recruitment goal. For instance, Cristi shared:

I think for me to do one school presentation is hard because you can't really have 20 or 30 audience that are necessary interested in [institution], so what I've been trying out for the past semester, the academic year is to line up with a few liberal arts universities...so that can benefit a larger group of audience.

In order to meet the needs of the students, Sally had also tried to be more strategic when collaborating with other university recruiters. She shared,

...you can talk with a different university representative working together as long as you are different type of universities...we offer different kinds of programs, which are really attractive those students and...we need each other.

University collaboration efforts not only attract prospective students to attend the different virtual sessions, but also to improve the effectiveness of the virtual recruitment sessions and outcomes. For example, Sharon shared her experience working with three other university partners,

“We created dates that we share with our key schools that we wanted to reach out to and planned individual sessions with those schools, we did probably about 14 sessions together, along with a panel discussion...”

Additionally, David thought that university collaboration initiatives may be an opportunity for China recruiters who are based outside of China to have a better representation in Chinese high schools given the restricted traveling policy China is enforcing.

Joint Programs

As universities across the globe compete for international students, some US HEIs have stepped up to this challenge by initiating joint programs (also known as partnership programs) with international high schools and HEIs in China with the intention to enroll and retain international students. During the pandemic, David attested that the joint programming his institution developed is a “silver lining to the pandemic”. He shared, “During this time, [parents] have wanted their child to begin their studies in China and so joint programs have done very, very well under this situation.” Sally shared, “...we never ever had any cooperation with any Chinese universities in China...we start to have a first cooperation with the university in China...is not easy for them to accept a new mode, but they try their best.” Cristi's institution also developed academic partnerships with universities and high schools on pathway programs. Additionally, Sharon also speculated:

We're going to see more of our pathway programs with international schools where that will allow international students to study in their home country...you know of where we are now it has been there's still a level of uncertainty and apprehension with coming to the US. And we still want and need international students, so I do see schools exploring those opportunities and expanding those type of pathways into their portfolio in order and offerings for students.

Domestic Recruiter

Virtual tools (e.g., Zoom, Skype) and virtual platforms including Cialfo and self-organized virtual events by high schools and associations, such as Education USA may have provided an alternative solution for China recruiters based outside of China to conduct virtual information sessions and fairs to high school counselors, students, and parents; however, this may not be a permanent solution for US HEIs that rely heavily on international student enrollment. Even

though the Chinese government has restricted foreign travelers from entering the country during the pandemic, people who live in China have the flexibility to travel around China. This allows a domestic recruiter to have the privilege to schedule high school campus visits that recruiters based outside of China are not able to complete. As David shared:

Fortunately, for us, we were able to go back to in-person relatively quickly, very quickly, in fact, by summer of 2020 we were largely back face-to-face and by the autumn of 2020, you know exhibition traveling schedule was completely back to normal, same as it was before the pandemic and that has kept up again until last week.

John arguably said:

[Students and parents] are eager to meet those university representatives...any university, who has a representative in China, they do have a lot of advantages...and that's why [institution] was very much determined to hire somebody to be based in China to recruit out there because within the country they can travel as no problem.

Additionally, David emphasized "I don't know how you can survive if your job is only to recruit in China and you're based in the US...I think you know institutions that don't have representation here are at a huge disadvantage at this point."

Limitation

The major limitation of this study is the small sample size. We believe that in-depth studies using a small sample size must not be overlooked as they provide nuanced details of sub-populations within larger systems such as HEIs. Second, all the participants recruited were from US HEIs so the findings, discussion, and implications are presented within the US context and may not be generalizable for international institutions.

DISCUSSION

This study explored China recruiters' experience during the COVID-19 pandemic. Our findings indicate that China recruiters experienced challenges in addressing the concerns that Chinese high school counselors, Chinese international students and their parents have pertaining to the safety and values of studying in the US during the pandemic. The US political and social climate and the pressure to deliver short-term recruitment results had added a layer of stress on the participants. Our participants indicated that finding a work-life balance was relatively challenging when working remotely from home because of the difficulty separating their work and personal lives. This aligns with the research conducted by Serralta and colleagues (2020) when they discussed the effects of psychological distress due to work overload, digital fatigue, and loss of boundaries separating personal and professional life. Additionally, the concerns that some of the participants had about their job security supported Bauman's study (2020) that describes how the pandemic has pushed hundreds of thousands of higher education employees out of the workforce.

On the contrary, the findings also address that maintaining close communication with high school counselors and education agents during the pandemic was crucial for them to schedule in-person or virtual meetings with the students. This echoes Herget's (2013) perspective on the values of developing relationships with guidance counselors and following up with the students and counselors. The participants also suggested using the hybrid recruitment model, promoting university collaboration, initiating joint programs between US and Chinese institutions, and hiring domestic recruiters are new norms of recruitment in China. International recruiters have experienced different challenges with international recruitment, trying to recruit international students during the global pandemic was a new challenge to many international recruiters. Therefore, HEIs administrators and leaders need to be sensitive to the needs of their international recruiters so that they can provide adequate resources to support their recruiters. The participants revealed that despite the chaos and stress they endured, they were grateful that their supervisors would help with some recruitment events and encourage them to find time for self-care.

Based on the findings of the study, four potential implications for practice were identified. First, China recruiters should seek out recruitment collaboration opportunities with other university or college recruiters to gain traction and interest of Chinese high school counselors and students. Second, China recruiters who are based outside of China should consider collaborating with recruiters who are based in China if they plan to recruit Chinese international students using the hybrid recruitment model because this will allow them to establish a connection with high school counselors, students, and parents. Third, US higher education leaders should consider developing joint programs with Chinese's partner institutions should the institution's long-term goal be to recruit and retain Chinese international students to study in the US. Fourth, US higher education leadership may consider hiring a recruiter who is based in China or establish a recruitment office in China to have a stronger foothold in recruiting Chinese international students.

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APPENDIX I

Demographic Survey

1. First Name: _____ Last Name: _____
2. Email address: _____
3. What gender do you identify as:
 - a. Male
 - b. Female
 - c. Non-binary
 - d. Other: _____
 - e. I prefer not to say
4. What is your ethnic background:
 - a. White
 - b. Hispanic or Latino/a
 - c. Black or African American
 - d. Native American or American Indian
 - e. Asian or Pacific Islander
 - f. Mixed race
 - g. Other: _____
5. What is your marital status?
 - a. Single
 - b. Married or domestic partnership
 - c. Widowed
 - d. Divorced
 - e. Separated
 - f. I prefer not to say
6. How many dependent do you have?
 - a. No dependent
 - b. 1
 - c. 2-3
 - d. 4 or more
 - e. I prefer not to say
7. Name of the institution you were employed during the COVID-19 pandemic:

8. Total years of experience as a university recruiter (including previous institution):

9. Years of employment at the institution listed above: _____
10. I am a China recruiter based in:
 - a. U.S.
 - b. China
 - c. Other: _____
11. Please rate the following statement based your experience during the pandemic (1-10; 1 being extremely low and 10 being extremely high)
 - a. Job stress: _____
 - b. Job security: _____

APPENDIX II

Interview Questions**1. What were the challenges faced by Chinese student recruiters during the COVID-19 pandemic?****Recruitment Experience**

- a. How would you describe your recruitment experience prior to the pandemic?
- b. What were some of the challenges that you faced as a Chinese student recruiter prior to the pandemic?
- c. How would you describe your recruitment experience during the pandemic?
- d. What were some of the challenges that you faced as a Chinese student recruiter during the pandemic?
- e. Politics can play an important role in your work as an international recruiter. When Donald Trump was in presidency, did the US- China relationship affect your work as a recruiter in China? If yes, how did it affect your work?
- f. Can you think of any challenges that you encountered as you were recruiting Chinese students to study in the US when Donald Trump was the president?
- g. After President Biden's transition into the administration, has the US-China relationship affected your work differently as a recruiter in China? If yes, how did it affect your work?
- h. Can you think of any challenges that you have encountered with recruiting Chinese students to study in the US after Joe Biden takes over as the US president?

Job Stress

- a. How would you describe your job stress level during the pandemic?
- b. In your opinion, what were some factors that led you to experience such stress level?
- c. Do you still experience this level of stress now?
- d. Did you feel or experience any pressure from the institution during the pandemic in terms of meeting your recruitment goal?
- e. Did you receive any support from your institution during the pandemic?
- f. If yes, what type of support did you receive? Were there any other support or resources that you wish you had received from the institution?
- g. If no, what type of support would you hope to receive from your institution?
- h. In your opinion, why do you think your institution responded this way?

Job security

- a. Given the changes with Chinese high schools' campus climate and also the restricted traveling policy during the pandemic, were you concern or nervous about your job security? If yes, why were you concern or nervous?
- b. Had you thought about changing jobs during the pandemic? Why or Why not?

2. What institutional support did Chinese student recruiters need or find helpful during the pandemic?

- a. Did the institution hold you to a recruitment standard during the pandemic?
- b. Did you receive any support from your institution during the pandemic?
 - i. If yes, what type of support did you receive?
 - ii. If not, what type of support would you hope to receive from your institution?
- c. In your opinion, why do you think your institution responded this way?

3. What are the new norms of Chinese international students' recruitment post-pandemic crisis?

- a. With Chinese high schools moving to an online learning format and high schools restricting campus visit and college fair, what were some strategies that you found useful or helpful to your work during the pandemic? How did these strategies help you with Chinese student recruitment?
- b. What had you seen other university recruiters do differently with Chinese student recruitment during the pandemic?
- c. What would you say are the new norms for Chinese recruitment after the pandemic crisis? Can you provide some examples?