

Graduate Students and the U.S. China Initiative

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Abstract

The 2018 China Initiative systematically targeted international Chinese scholars as possible spies for China. Previous research has demonstrated ways that the China Initiative engaged in racial profiling, resulting in scholars of Chinese descent feeling unwelcomed in U.S. higher education institutions and insecure in their engagement as researchers. Graduate students were not exempt. Using descriptive analyses and proportion tests, this study explores the nuanced ways that Chinese graduate students felt discriminated against and racially profiled in comparison to their non-Chinese peers during the height of the U.S. China Initiative. Framed by neo-racism, this research also assesses how those experiences impacted students' future educational mobility plans. Chinese graduate students feel more targeted than their non-Chinese peers and they express an interest in leaving the United States due to these negative perceptions. As international Chinese enrollments in the United States are declining, our study seeks to identify the factors that may contribute to this trend.

Keywords: Chinese students, discrimination, geopolitics, international student mobility

Introduction

The China Initiative, established under the Trump Administration in 2018, had a chilling effect throughout the scientific research community. Although racially profiling Asian people existed long before the COVID-19 pandemic or Trump's admittance into the Oval Office (Hvistendahl, 2020; Kim, 2021; Ruiz et al., 2021), the China Initiative expanded federal investigations into Chinese nationals and their affiliated organizations (U.S. Department of Justice, 2020), resulting in over 162 cases (MIT Technology Review, 2021; Pelham & Sun, 2022). Of these, the Department of Justice (DOJ) brought forth 12 cases involving fraud and economic espionage within higher education. Notwithstanding the concerning fact that "significantly more than 12 research integrity cases" were listed on the DOJ's prosecutions list before records were deleted (Guo et al., 2021, para. 17), the integrity and transparency of the China Initiative have been and continue to be criticized.

The opaque investigatory processes paired with President Trump's antagonistic language toward China fostered "a climate of fear among Asian Americans" (Lucas, 2022, para. 1) and trepidation within the scientific community (Lee & Li,

2021, Lin & Sun, 2021; Mervis, 2023; Xi et al., 2023). Following several concerning reports (Lee & Li, 2021; MIT Technology Review, 2021) and petitions to end the China Initiative (Winds of Freedom, 2021), Assistant Attorney General Matthew Olsen announced that the China Initiative would be terminated, stating:

While I remain focused on the evolving, significant threat that the government of China poses, I have concluded that this initiative is not the right approach...by grouping cases under the China Initiative rubric, we helped give rise to a harmful perception that the department applies a lower standard to investigate and prosecute criminal conduct related to that country or that we in some way view people with racial, ethnic or familial ties to China differently (U.S. Department of Justice, 2022, para. 46).

While the 2018 China Initiative policy formally ended under the Biden administration, the “anti-Asian scrutiny has only intensified” (Gilbert, 2023, para. 1) and racial profiling continues to permeate academic research. In the Summer of 2024, the U.S. House of Representatives voted to reinstate the China Initiative under a new provision called the Protect America’s Innovation and Economic Security from CCP Act, which would similarly target scholars with perceived strategic connections to the Chinese Government (McKenzie, 2024). This decision followed the death of Dr. Jane Wu, a leading neuroscientist at Northwestern University who was previously targeted for her connections to China and completed suicide in July 2024. According to her colleague, Dr. Xiao-Fan Wang, a Cancer researcher at Duke University, the China Initiative “killed her career” (para. 12) and “denying her the right to do research was like taking away the most important thing in her life” (as cited in Xin, 2024, para. 13). Although the outcome of the recent legislative bill is unknown during the writing of this article, the negative effects of the 2018 China Initiative are still felt today.

Broadly defined, racial discrimination occurs when individuals receive unfair treatment due to personal characteristics associated with their race (U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission, n.d.). Racial profiling occurs when the political and legal apparatus targets individuals based on racial discrimination (ACLU, 2005). Within the context of the China Initiative, Chinese students and scholars faced racial discrimination and racial profiling instigated by U.S. federal government policies and practices. Within this paradigm, Chinese graduate students were caught in the crosshairs of political strife. On the one hand, the success of U.S. scientific output relies on collaboration with Chinese scholars (Haupt & Lee, 2021), while on the other hand, Chinese scholars have been systematically targeted by niche, albeit powerful, political discourse that accuses them of economic espionage. Chinese students are not exempt from this narrative (Redden, 2018). The purpose of this research paper is to 1) examine Chinese graduate students’ experiences with discrimination and 2) review their mobility plans in comparison to their non-Chinese counterparts following controversial policies stemming from the 2018 China Initiative and extending into the post-Trump presidency.

Literature Review

Scientific research is fundamentally borderless and necessitates open collaboration as well as the free exchange of ideas. This is often at odds with U.S. protectionist strategies. The Department of Justice is quick to assume that U.S. scientists who engage with Chinese researchers export information to benefit the Chinese government, regardless of the nature of the collaboration. While the academy, by and large, supports collaboration, the DOJ “does not understand the ethos of science” (Schaefer, 2023, p. 9) and thus makes inaccurate assumptions about U.S. scientific conduct. Sharing information with support staff, including graduate students, is vital for the success of many research projects and programmatic interventions. To avoid being targeted by the U.S. government, many U.S.-American researchers have considered suspending or terminating their collaborative projects with Chinese affiliates (Lee & Li, 2023), while other scientists, specifically those of Chinese ethnic heritage, have avoided applying for U.S. federal grants (Lin & Sun, 2021; Xi et al., 2023). As Chinese scholars pursue research with collaborators in less hostile nations (Silver, 2020), graduate students’ opportunities have been impacted.

Over the years, the body of literature highlighting the consequences of the China Initiative has grown extensively. Research by Lee and Li (2021) and supported by the Committee of 100, a U.S.-based non-profit organization promoting

Chinese American leadership and civic engagement, briefly discussed the impact that the China Initiative and its concurrent U.S. policies have had on international Chinese graduate students. For example, in their study, one Chinese graduate student pursuing biochemistry noted the research field felt isolating due to increased fear around engaging with Chinese scientists. In another example, a Chinese graduate student studying Geological and Earth Sciences reported feeling unsafe conducting their research despite the fact that the data was public information (Lee & Li, 2021). While these findings provide insight into the graduate student experience, this was not the primary study focus, and the authors encouraged additional empirical research into these effects. Expanding upon this whitepaper, the authors' subsequent research (Lee & Li, 2023) assessed the sociological and geopolitical effects of the China Initiative and argued that U.S. educational policy has made it increasingly difficult for Chinese students to enter the United States and pursue higher education. For example, Proclamation 10043 suspends entry into the United States for Chinese graduate students whose focus may support the Chinese government's military strategy (Proclamation 10043, 2020), and student visa restrictions have been imposed on Chinese graduate students pursuing research in sensitive disciplines, such as aviation and robotics (Mervis, 2018), reducing the duration from five years to one year. The negative outcomes these policies espouse, such as reduced student enrollment (Redden, 2019), were well documented among U.S. news media outlets.

Supporting the authors' past findings, other research teams have sought to further examine the effects of the China Initiative. In one such study, an online survey featuring responses from 1,304 U.S. researchers of Chinese heritage found that respondents frequently felt unwelcomed, targeted, and unsafe to conduct their research in the United States. Respectively, "65% are worried about collaborations with China, and a remarkable 86% perceive that it is harder to recruit top international students now compared to 5 years ago" (Xie et al., 2023, p. 3). These findings substantiate an earlier institutional survey conducted by Lin & Sun (2021), which also warned against "brain drain" within U.S. scientific research and highlighted that 31% of faculty witnessed a decline in student and postdoc enrollment who turned down their U.S.-based opportunities due to its unwelcoming environment. Brain drain poses a risk to higher education research and international collaboration. Rather than embracing the benefits that accompany the knowledge and experiences that international students and postdocs bring to U.S. higher education, the United States suffers loss when these scholars instead pursue educational opportunities in more welcoming environments.

It is common for Chinese graduate students to gravitate to ethnically Chinese faculty when selecting an advisor and research collaborator (Borjas et al., 2018). However, if newly awarded PhD recipients pursue professional positions and academic appointments outside of the United States, and those who stay resist research engagements with Chinese affiliates (Xie et al., 2023), then Chinese graduate students could face diminished learning, research, and mentorship opportunities. Stated another way, Chinese graduate students may have limited choices when selecting a research advisor if the faculty they would prefer to work with are migrating outside the United States or are unwilling to collaborate with Chinese scholars. To this end, some Chinese faculty have reduced their laboratories and halted taking on new advisees out of concern they will not be able to support their graduate students (Mervis, 2023).

Although previous research illustrates the negative sociological effects of the China Initiative, the paucity of empirical evidence regarding international and domestic Chinese graduate students' 1) direct experiences with racial discrimination influenced by the China Initiative and 2) mobility plans pertaining to higher education enrollment, highlights the need to explore these challenges. To our knowledge, this research is the first attempt to investigate and document these experiences and educational mobility decisions in tandem.

Asian Discrimination

It is common for international students to experience discrimination on campuses, particularly for those transitioning to the United States from non-Western cultural contexts (Lee, 2010). Asian American and Pacific Islander (AAPI) students are more likely to experience racial discrimination than ethnically European students (Chen et al., 2014), and the variable experiences between Asian students who were raised in the United States versus Asian students raised abroad, including international Chinese students, are prominent. For example, the latter population experiences "lower

levels of perceived discrimination and higher racial color blindness,” which can largely be attributed to a narrow understanding of U.S. systemic racism and the limited opportunities to feel its effects in comparison to their U.S.-based counterparts (Wang et al. 2019, p. 27). Chinese graduate students, who come from ethnically homogenous backgrounds, often feel that racism is a distant problem that affects other societies and populations until they transition to the United States (Wang, 2010). Upon facing a loss of privilege along ethno-racial identity lines, many find they are racially profiled along one of two categorizations: as a model minority or as a nefarious spy (Chen & Wen, 2021). The model minority myth pressures students into behavioral compliance with stereotypical notions that partly safeguard them from being targeted by the U.S. federal government.

Briefly, the model minority myth is a harmful social construct imposed on Asian students, which classifies this population by their high achievement (Poon et al., 2016), predilection for math and science (Cheran & Monin, 2005), and cultural context that emphasizes grit and perseverance (Yoo et al., 2010), among other sweeping generalizations. These assumptions extend to Chinese graduate students, who are often labeled under this social group within academia. Facing prejudice, Chinese graduate students may experience increased pressure to perform to elevated and untenable levels to uphold this stereotype (Wang, 2010). Simply stated, the inaccurate and misleading nature of the model minority myth is damaging to Asian students (Yoo et al., 2010), including those of Chinese ethnic heritage.

Many positive, albeit damaging, characteristics outlined in the model minority myth are also leveraged in the U.S. political discourse. As reported by Elizabeth Redden (2018), during his first presidential term, Trump claimed that the majority of Chinese students living and studying in the United States were spies for China. He later explained his intention to address current immigration policies and allow the top international students to retain residency in the United States for up to five years. Trump’s characterization of Chinese students, paired with his proposed *dangling-the-carrot* immigration policies, is a prime example of how some U.S. political leaders have exacerbated racial profiling and forced students to overcome additional social hurdles. In the Trump multiverse, international Chinese students were profiled as adversaries to U.S. interests unless they embraced the model minority myth and rose as “top performers,” demonstrating a level of goodness and worth to U.S. interests (Chen & Wen, 2021). This construct frames the model minority myth as both a social and political pressure that is necessary to endure in order to stay in the United States.

Such language and policies enacted over the last five years have resulted in negative consequences for international Chinese students. Racial profiling, exemplified through the Trump lexicon, is a tool for the United States government to target Chinese students and faculty under the guise of U.S. national security when, in reality, it is “warranted to preserve the U.S. imaginary of a safe, White-European country...[where] immigration is still allowed and even encouraged, but only for a certain kind of immigrant – those who resemble the dominant race and culture” (Lee, 2020, p. 3). White students, even those who are international, generally feel more comfortable, welcomed, and supported in their higher education environments as opposed to students whose cultural backgrounds are less valued in U.S. society (Lee & Rice, 2007). Chinese students in particular have faced challenges due to negative stereotyping, accelerated by COVID-19 (Chen & Wen, 2021; Koo et al., 2021) and aggravated by the China Initiative (Chen & Wen, 2021; Lee & Li, 2023).

A recent survey found that over the last 30 years, rising tensions between the United States and China have contributed to an increase in the number of incidents of anti-Asian xenophobia and perceived discrimination (U.S.–China Education Trust, 2023). As the China Initiative overlapped with the COVID-19 outbreak, much of the literature on Chinese students’ experiences with discrimination focused on the latter. In some instances, international Chinese students were profiled as “backward and contagious...[and] a threat to public wellbeing” (Chen & Wen, 2021, p. 85). Other incidents included threats of violence, verbal assaults, and demands to return home (Koo et al., 2023). Chinese students are facing discrimination on U.S. college campuses, and there appears to be an increase in incidents over the last few years.

Mobilization

Within higher education, international student mobility refers to students’ transition from one country to another to pursue college or university enrollment within a host country for which they are not citizens (OECD, 2023). A variety of

factors influence international students' decisions to study in the U.S. and their mobility plans upon graduation. Although positive sociological factors, such as personal development, educational attainment, and career preparation, encourage Chinese students to enroll in U.S. institutions (Bartlett et al., 2018; Chao et al., 2017; Wang, 2021), social, familial, economic, and career-based factors support student decisions to either stay in the host country or return to their home country following their time abroad (Mok et al., 2022; Zweig, 1997). In both of these contexts, the literature on international student mobility decisions resulting from political factors remains underexplored.

Mobility into the United States

Chinese students were the largest population of international students in the United States (IIE, 2022a) until the 2023/2024 academic year, in which India surpassed China as the top sender of international students to the U.S. (IIE, 2024). The COVID-19 pandemic was the most direct cause of declining Chinese student enrollments at the time (Baker, 2020); however, this was not independent of the intertwined geopolitical tensions between the U.S. and China that existed before the pandemic (Guiake & Felix, 2023). Political activities such as “rising anti-Asian racism [and] rocky U.S.–China relations” (Chen, 2023, para. 6), exemplified by Proclamation 10043 and visa duration reductions, imposed myriad challenges for Chinese international students to enter the United States and pursue their education in U.S.-based higher education institutions.

According to Holland et al. (2020), when Proclamation 10043 was first enacted, it had the potential to affect between 3,000 and 5,000 Chinese graduate students who were under U.S. suspicion of supporting the Chinese military. While the China Initiative was dismantled (Lucas, 2022) and President Biden demonstrated less verbal antagonism towards China than President Trump, the political structures enacted by the latter president continued to impact Chinese student mobility plans relevant to entering the United States and pursuing an advanced degree in a range of academic disciplines. Under the Biden administration, Chinese student mobility into the United States continued to be scrutinized. For example, in the summer of 2021, as Chinese students were preparing to secure their visas, 500 individuals were denied entry into the United States (Normile, 2021; Yu, 2021). In response, a group of 2,500 Chinese student activists facing similar visa issues assembled to address the “arbitrary and discriminatory policy” barring their access to the U.S. education system (Normile, 2021, para. 4). The number of nonimmigrant student visas issued to people from the People’s Republic of China declined from 105,775 in FY2019 to 61,894 in FY2022 (U.S. Department of State, n.d.), reflecting a 41.48% decrease.

Many Chinese students remain motivated to pursue their education in the United States. However, U.S. policies, such as Proclamation 10043, reflect at their core an arms race between the United States and China. Chinese students are the casualties of such geopolitical antics (Anderson, 2021). As we emerge from the pandemic, the United States has looked to other countries, including India, to increase its international student enrollment (IIE, 2022b). Chinese students are a vital population within U.S. academia, and we will have to wait to see whether the United States implements more attractive and inclusive educational policies to recover from lost enrollment over the last three years or if the trend to make it increasingly difficult to pursue mobility prevails.

Mobility Plans After Graduation

Resoundingly, scientists facing discrimination intend to leave the United States (Lee & Li, 2021; Lin & Sun, 2021; Xi et al., 2023). However, the literature on whether Chinese students and recent graduates feel the same is an area for additional inquiry. Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic or the China Initiative, research on international student mobility has focused on movement from home country to host country and vice-versa that often neglected other conceptions, such as feeling a sense of belonging in multiple places or feeling nowhere to be home. Student mobility plans are driven in part by a need to establish place. This process may be disrupted by negative experiences, including discrimination or loss of culture, motivating individuals to move back to their home (ancestral) country (Wu & Wilkes, 2017). In the wake of increased discrimination and anti-Asian hate, to what extent are Chinese graduate students feeling this urge to migrate to more welcoming environments?

Historically, there have been a host of political factors that impact student mobility decisions. In a recent survey, 359 participants, reflecting 58.2% of the total number of participants, indicated that cultural challenges were a factor driving their mobility decisions. Furthermore, 153 participants, reflecting 24.8% of the total number of participants, indicated that their motivation to move was based on racial challenges (Gesing & Glass, 2019). Generally, mobility decisions are not separate from the social and political contexts of students' home and host countries.

As U.S.–China geopolitical tensions escalated, Li (2023) found that Chinese international students who intended to stay in the U.S. after graduation encountered many obstacles. These challenges included a delayed optional practical training (OPT) application process, diminished prospects for securing a U.S. work visa, and a reluctance among employers to hire them. Although most students persevered through these challenges and adhered to their original plans of staying in the U.S., the author cautioned that Chinese students' resilience might not endure if U.S.–China geopolitical tension persists. In addition, considering that more than half of the participants in Li's study were undergraduate students, it is likely that graduate students could be more affected by political circumstances, given U.S. federal scrutiny into their research and connections to China.

Research conducted by Wang (2021) looked at the push-pull factors, as well as reverse push-pull factors, that influenced both undergraduate and graduate Chinese students' mobility plans. Broadly defined, push-pull factors are the various attributes, interventions, and activities that encourage migration out of one country and into another, or vice versa. The findings suggested that the political factors that determine student mobility are dependent upon U.S. and Chinese travel regulations, geopolitical tension, and considerations for safety and security. Furthermore, coming out of the pandemic, rising gun violence, increased prestige of Chinese universities, and less hostile immigration policies in other countries have motivated students to look outside the United States (Chen, 2023). Again, because the political factors affecting Chinese student mobility overlap with the United States' management of the COVID-19 pandemic, it is increasingly difficult to parse through the root causes, warranting additional research into the specific political factors that drive student mobility decisions amidst the China Initiative sociopolitical landscape.

Conceptual Framework

Neo-racism, which “refers to discrimination against particular populations on the basis of culture between ethnic groups” (Lee, 2021, p.12), is the principal theoretical framework guiding this study. Conceptually, neo-racism highlights the social hierarchy of culture and national identity framed through a Western lens, which extends beyond racial identity. This manifests in how individuals, families, groups, and communities navigate U.S. social constructs, which benefit those who assimilate into the dominant culture above those who do not. Students from Western countries are placed higher along the cultural hierarchy above students from non-Western countries (Hou, 2023; Lee & Rice, 2007), and international Chinese students generally fall within this latter category.

As “neo-racism justifies discrimination on the basis of cultural difference or national origin rather than by physical characteristics alone” (Lee, 2006, p. 4), we suggest that ethnically Chinese students who were raised in China and transition to the U.S. as international students have different experiences with discrimination than ethnically Chinese students who were raised in Western countries. These differences, underpinned by neo-racist political and social pressures, are at the heart of our analysis toward determining how international Chinese graduate students contextualize their experiences in U.S. higher education institutions.

Data & Methodology

To examine Chinese graduate students' experiences and mobility plans as opposed to their non-Chinese counterparts, we drew the data from a larger national survey carried out between May and July 2021 among scientists in 83 prominent U.S. universities (Lee & Li, 2023), following the University of Arizona's research ethics approval. Designed to uncover the impact of the China Initiative and FBI investigations on the scientific community, the survey encompassed questions addressing participants' experiences and perspectives related to collaborations with China, racial profiling, and mobility plans concerning China. For this study, we specifically focused on the questions related to sentiments of racial profiling and mobility plans.

With a particular emphasis on graduate students, this study focused on a subset of the participants from the larger project. The original sample consisted of 1,949 scientists in STEM fields, among which 1,448 reported their roles as graduate students, postdocs, faculty members, or others. This study included 544 graduate students who reported their ethnicity, reflecting 37.6% of the larger sample. Table 1 shows the number of participants by ethnicity and citizenship. Since Chinese scientists were purposefully oversampled in the survey (Lee & Li, 2023), half (49.3%) of the graduate students self-identified as Chinese. A majority (86.2%) of the Chinese graduate students were foreign citizens.

Table 1

Graduate Student Participant Demographics

Ethnicity	Citizenship	Number of Participants
Chinese	Foreign citizen	231
	U.S. citizen	36
	Did not identify citizenship	1
Non-Chinese	Foreign citizen	69
	U.S. citizen	207
Total		544

We used descriptive analyses and proportion tests to examine the differences between Chinese and non-Chinese graduate students, as well as between Chinese students with and without U.S. citizenship, in their sentiments of racial profiling and intentions of leaving the U.S. due to the China Initiative and/or the FBI investigations. Specifically, our analysis involved summarizing the results by using percentages. For example, we examined the percentages of both Chinese and non-Chinese graduate students considering leaving the U.S. in response to the China Initiative or FBI investigations. We used proportion tests to determine the statistical significance of the differences in these percentages between Chinese and non-Chinese graduate students. Additionally, we employed structural equation modeling (SEM) to explore the mediating effect of racial profiling on graduate students' mobility plans. The SEM comprised three variables: being Chinese, feeling racially profiled, and considering leaving the U.S. due to the China Initiative and/or the FBI investigations. While being Chinese and considering leaving the U.S. due to the China Initiative and/or the FBI investigations were directly observed through respective survey questions, feeling racially profiled was a latent variable. We adopted the composite variable of feeling racially profiled from Lee & Li's (2023) study. This variable indicates that a participant reported at least one of the four items related to racial profiling. These four items are (a) feeling racially profiled by the U.S. government, (b) feeling considerable fear and/or anxiety of being surveilled by the U.S. government, (c) having experienced difficulty obtaining funding for a research project in the U.S. as a result of race/nationality/country of origin, and (d) having experienced professional challenges (i.e., promotion, professional recognition) as a result of race/nationality/country of origin. The composite variable of feeling racially profiled was validated through a confirmatory factor analysis (Lee & Li, 2023).

Results

Chinese graduate students, regardless of their citizenship, were more likely to feel racially profiled than their non-Chinese counterparts. Among Chinese students, 48.7% felt considerable fear and/or anxiety of being surveilled by the U.S. government, 40.7% felt being racially profiled by the U.S. government, 34.8% had experienced professional challenges (i.e., promotion, professional recognition) as a result of race/nationality/country of origin and 29.1% had experienced difficulty obtaining funding for a research project in the U.S. as a result of race/nationality/country of origin. The percentages were only 13.8% ($z = 74.14, p < 0.001$), 10.7% (62.0%, $p < 0.001$), 17.6% ($z = 15.09, p < 0.001$), and 14.4% ($z = 12.05, p < 0.05$), respectively, for non-Chinese graduate students. Using the composite variable of feeling racially

profiled, the results for Chinese and non-Chinese graduate students differed significantly. Approximately two-thirds (68.1%) of the Chinese students reported at least one of those four issues, while approximately one-third (34.6%, $z = 41.3$, $p < 0.001$) of the non-Chinese students did so.

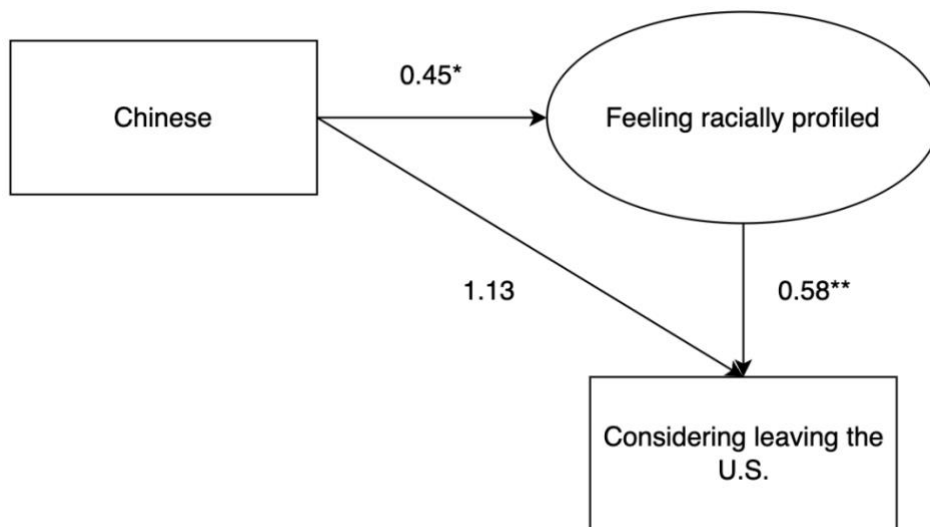
When further breaking down the data by citizenship, racial profiling was a particularly concerning issue among Chinese international graduate students as opposed to Chinese American students. More than half (53.3%) of the Chinese students with foreign citizenship felt considerable fear and/or anxiety of being surveilled by the U.S. government, while only 16.7% of the Chinese American students reported having such fear and/or anxiety ($z = 15.46$, $p < 0.001$). The discrepancy between foreign and U.S. citizens was also salient, although not statistically significant, in their perceptions of racial profiling by the U.S. government (42.9% vs. 25.0%, $z = 3.43$, $p = 0.06$) and experiences of having difficulty obtaining funding for a research project in the U.S. as a result of race/nationality/country of origin (33.1% vs. 6.9%). In terms of experiences of professional challenges as a result of race/nationality/country of origin, there was no significant difference between Chinese students with foreign and U.S. citizenship (35.4% vs. 32.3%, $z = 0.02$, $p = 0.89$). Overall, there was a significant difference between these two groups by using the composite racial profiling variable (72.8% vs. 41.4%, $z = 9.69$, $p < 0.05$).

Among foreign citizens, 39.1% of Chinese graduate students considered leaving the U.S. due to the China Initiative and FBI investigations, while only 5.8% of non-Chinese graduate students reported so. The SEM results revealed that racial profiling was an essential factor that resulted in graduate students' changing mobility plans (Figure 1). Being Chinese did not have a significant direct effect on considering leaving the U.S. due to the China Initiative and/or FBI investigations ($b = 1.13$, $p = 0.474$). However, confirming the descriptive analysis, Chinese graduate students were significantly more likely to feel racially profiled ($b = 0.45$, $p < 0.05$). Additionally, feeling racially profiled significantly led to considering leaving the U.S. ($b = 0.58$, $p < 0.001$). This result suggests that one's Chinese ethnic identity itself did not necessarily lead graduate students to consider leaving the U.S. under the political circumstances of the China Initiative and/or FBI investigations unless they felt that they were being racially profiled.

Figure

1

SEM Direct Effect Results on Considering Leaving the U.S.



Notes: * $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.001$

Proportion test was not conducted because assumptions were not met.

Discussion

The results of this study are concerning. However, neither the methodology of our analysis nor the results of our findings equip us to suggest direct causation between policies such as the 2018 China Initiative and adverse social interactions, including discrimination. However, during the peak of the China Initiative between 2018 and 2021, Chinese graduate students living in the United States felt more targeted by the U.S. government and more racially profiled at their institutions in comparison to their peers of non-Chinese heritage. Additionally, the differences between U.S.-American Chinese students and international Chinese students further delineated these variable experiences, suggesting that the neo-racist political discourse targeted the latter population more pointedly. Our research suggests that racialized policies enacted by the U.S. federal government, such as visa restrictions, limited work opportunities, and FBI investigations, influenced Chinese graduate student mobility patterns. While the relationship between Chinese identity, feeling racially profiled, and considering leaving the United States yielded a positive result, we encourage additional qualitative research to further explore the root cause that led to negative student perceptions and motivations to leave the U.S.

Exploring how policies such as the China Initiative directly contributed to feelings of discrimination may lead to more inclusive policy interventions in the future. Additionally, because the China Initiative coincided with the COVID-19 pandemic, the need to further understand students' feelings of discrimination and future mobility plans is necessary. While our research notes that international Chinese graduate students felt discriminated against in comparison to non-Chinese peer groups, our research does not delve into the nuanced activities that led students to feel racially profiled. Furthermore, we were unable to fully disaggregate the negative experiences that resulted from U.S. targetization related to the China Initiative versus the COVID-19 pandemic. Addressing this limitation, a future narrative inquiry that captures student experiences would help to contextualize racial profiling. For example, exploring the specific circumstances and activities that make international Chinese graduate students feel that they are under U.S. government surveillance would add additional depth to the current literature.

Regarding mobility, international Chinese graduate students expressed an interest in leaving the United States due to feelings of being targeted by the U.S. government, which did not exist to the same degree for international non-Chinese graduate students. Furthermore, while feeling racially profiled was a motivating factor for disclosing an interest in leaving the U.S., ethnic identity in and of itself was not a contributing factor. Our research speaks to how feelings of discrimination are linked to students' self-identified interest in leaving the United States.

The findings from our study suggest that Chinese international students considered leaving the United States under conditions in which they felt racially profiled. Given the state of the current social-political landscape, paired with recent enrollment trends, the data suggest that these conditions have been met, motivating international Chinese graduate students to move elsewhere. However, the myriad reasons why students pursue education at home or abroad necessitate further inquiry into student mobility motivations and enrollment patterns in response to political influences.

Chinese students represent an important population within U.S. higher education. As discrimination against Chinese graduate students persists, the U.S. is likely to lose its Science and Engineering (S&E) workforce from China, which would have a negative impact on its economy and innovation. As such, colleges and universities must be aware of these trends and create appropriate support structures to meet student needs. To this end, we recommend that higher education institutions consider ways to combat the negative effects of discrimination. Increased positive social interaction to buffer against the negative effects of discrimination (Cohen & Wills, 1985; Sun et al., 2021; Trice, 2004;) is one such strategy, although additional research into this area is necessary. In the interim, assessing current enrollment patterns and exploring the root cause for feelings of discrimination may help inform institutional practices to recruit and retain qualified international Chinese graduate students to U.S. higher education institutions.

Conclusion

The 2018 China Initiative unduly targeted Chinese scholars, including Chinese graduate students. The empirical literature shows that international students have consistently faced discrimination in higher education, which was exacerbated by U.S. policies such as Proclamation 10043 and newly instated visa restrictions. Furthermore, while the United States remains a top destination for Chinese graduate students, U.S. policies that limit migration impact students' ability to migrate to the United States for their education. Our research shows that international Chinese students, on the whole, felt racially profiled by the U.S. government. These experiences were more common for ethnically Chinese students than for non-ethnically Chinese students, and the differences between international and domestic Chinese students were also prominent. Broadly speaking, racially targeting students impacted student motivations to stay in their U.S. postgraduate program.

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