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Caught in the Geopolitical Tensions between China and the United States: Impacts on Chinese Students Pursuing American Higher Education

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ABSTRACT

Drawing on the survey data from 259 students enrolled at American universities, the study explores how recent tensions between China and the U.S. and issues of public safety would affect Chinese students' perceptions and aspirations for American education. The findings of the research identify significant correlations between the effects of U.S. policies regarding Chinese students, concerns about U.S. public safety, and the impact of U.S. foreign policy toward China on Chinese students at American universities. Students' responses reveal how the pursuit of an American college education remains deeply intertwined with broader societal dynamics and geopolitical realities, which challenge the aspirations of Chinese students for education abroad in an increasingly deglobalizing world.

Keywords: American universities, Chinese Students, US-China Relations

The intersection of the recent global COVID-19 pandemic and geopolitical shifts has created profound impact on global student mobility and international education (Mok et al., 2021). Much focus has been given to the decrease of international student mobility due to the recent global pandemic (Mercado, 2020; Yildirim et al., 2021; Bista et al., 2021). Beyond this, international student migration and mobility, once shaped by neoliberal logic and ideology in the Post-Cold War era (Shields, 2013), now faces challenges from deglobalizing forces, including heightened protectionism, isolationism, populism and nationalism in multiple countries and areas (Westermann, 2024). Studies and literature have discussed how these deglobalizing forces, particularly policies from the Trump era, have the potential to reshape international students' mobility and international education with factors such as perceived political stability, immigration policies, and economic opportunities (Song & Li, 2022). Moreover, ongoing geopolitical

tensions and conflicts, notably exemplified by conflicts such as those in Ukraine and Gaza, have played a pivotal role in shaping global education. Traditionally, the push-pull framework tends to focus on the factors within the boundaries of the sending countries and destination countries. However, there is a growing recognition of the need for more empirical evidence to fully address and comprehend cross-border geopolitical ramifications on education and global student mobility (Choudaha, 2017). For instance, deteriorating relations between China and the U.S. have added a new layer of complexity to Chinese students' desire for studying in the U.S. Chinese students, constituting the primary cohort of about a quarter of the world's international students (UNESCO, 2020), have experienced the impacts of changing geopolitical landscapes. A recent study conducted by New Oriental Education, China's largest English tutoring and studying abroad preparatory agency, revealed a significant decline in interest in studying in the U.S., dropping from 51 percent in 2015 to 30 percent in 2022 among 8,610 respondents (New Oriental Education, 2023).

Prior to the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, Chinese student enrollment in the U.S. had reached 373,000 in 2019-2020, tripled the enrollment number in 2009-2010 (IIE, 2021). This growth was propelled by improved diplomatic relations with the U.S., China's ambition for global economic integration, and aspirations for global cosmopolitanism (Li, 2024). Chinese students represent the largest foreign student group in the U.S. The majority of today's students are self-funded degree-seeking ungraduated students (IIE, 2021). Their contribution to the U.S. economy alone exceeded \$15.9 billion to the American economy during the 2019-20 academic year (NAFSA: Association of International Educators).¹ Moreover, the educational, social, and cultural impact of a large international student population on American campuses has also been studied extensively (Barger, 2004). International students, including those from China, are integral to academic internationalization and play an important role in fostering cultural diversity, facilitating intercultural exchanges, and increasing global awareness among American students (Lumby and Foskett, 2016).

However, in the post-Covid era, Chinese students' enrollment in the U.S. has not recovered to its peak in 2019. According to the Institute for International Education's (IIE) annual report in 2022, Chinese student enrollment has sharply declined over the last two years, dropping to 290,086 in 2021 and further declining to 226,000 in the fall of 2022, representing a 22 percent year-over-year decrease (IIE, 2021). In addition, the number of entry visas issued to Chinese students has also decreased significantly from over 80,000 visas issued in the fall of 2021 to only 44,000 issued in the fall of 2022, marking a 48 percent decline. This marks the first decline in Chinese student enrollment in the U.S. in the last 25 years. Such decline is not solely attributed to the global COVID-19 pandemic, but also

¹ Data available from NAFSA's economic analysis, accessed from <https://www.nafsa.org/policy-and-advocacy/policy-resources/nafsa-international-student-economic-value-tool-v2>

likely reflects the current state and trajectory of the deteriorating relationship between China and the U.S.

The growing interest of Chinese students in studying abroad has fueled an increase in scholarly research. Several studies have examined the motivations and aspirations driving the pursuit of education overseas, a subject that garnered considerable academic and media attention prior to the COVID-19 pandemic. Studies have attributed the growing interests to the desire for accumulating cultural capital (Collins, 2013; Findlay, et al., 2012; Fong, 2011; Ganotice, et al., 2020; Wang, 2024); or an alternative strategy to get into a prestigious university in China (Bodycott, 2009); improving employability (Beine et al., 2014; Fong, 2011; Waters, 2009); and a gateway to migration (Thieme, 2017). Ortiz, Chang, and Fang's (2015) research finds the significance of achieving economic well-being as a primary motivator for Chinese students seeking education in the U.S. Other studies reveal a desire among Chinese students studying abroad to develop critical thinking, departing from the emphasis on rote memorization prevalent in their home country's education system (Jürgen & Zhu, 2012; Soria & Troisi, 2014; Wu, 2014). Two studies conducted by Chao and Hegarty further illuminate this trend, suggesting that Chinese students in the U.S. intend to break from the competitive nature of Chinese education and the *Gaokao* examination system (Chao & Hegarty, 2014 & 2017). While these studies acknowledge the academic dimension of studying abroad, they also highlight broader motivations that extend beyond purely educational pursuits. Wang's research, for instance, reveals that students from middle-class backgrounds are driven by aspirations of cosmopolitanism and resonate with the ideas of the *suzhi* discourse when choosing to study in the U.S. (2020). Martin's (2022) study provides additional depth with nuanced narratives about female students who chose to study in Australia as a means of flight and escape to avoid various societal pressures, including expectations related to marriage, family circumstances, academic expectations, and social and political conditions.

These studies provide valuable insight into the diverse motivations that drive students to pursue educational opportunities abroad, particularly in the U.S. They reveal the complex interplay between personal aspirations, societal expectations, and global dynamics in shaping students' desire for international education, including socio-economic forces and individual factors. However, the evolving global context, marked by the escalating geopolitical tensions and political and social issues in both China and the U.S. presents new complexities in affecting Chinese students' motivations for studying in the U.S. It is crucial to examine these new developments as new push-pull factors shaping the decision-making process of Chinese students.

IMPACT OF GEOPOLITICAL TENSIONS ON STUDENT GLOBAL MOBILITY

Previous research has examined the impact of geopolitical tensions and conflicts on global student flows (Mohanty, 2019). In recent years, academic exchanges and student mobility between China and the U.S. have faced unprecedented

challenges due to escalating geopolitical tensions and conflicts between the two countries. As the two countries continue to diverge in economically and technologically, this decoupling has extended to academic exchanges, including student and scholar exchanges and collaborative research (Tang et al., 2021). During the Trump administration, speeches made by President Trump and senior officials of his administration, such as Secretary of State Pompeo and Vice President Pence, characterized China as a nation of intellectual thieves and economic predators, casting suspicion on Chinese students and scholars as spies (Redden, 2018). This rhetoric culminated in the launch of the China Initiative by the U.S. Department of Justice, ostensibly aimed at combating espionage but disproportionately targeting Chinese and Chinese-American scholars with ties to Chinese institutions (Guo et al., 2021).² The Initiative led to a number of high-profile cases, predominantly involving scientists of Chinese descent, with many accusations that ultimately resulted in acquittal or dismissal (Guo et al., 2021).³ These cases, widely reported in both Chinese and Western media, have had a chilling effect on the morale of Asian American scholars. Such racialized treatment confirms what Ahmed described that suspicion towards marginalized or perceived “outsider” groups is socially constructed within American society and suspicion of outsiders is actively produced through cultural narratives, historical contexts, and institutional practices (Ahmed, 2012).

In addition, the Trump administration issued policies specifically targeting Chinese students. Proposals to ban all Chinese students from obtaining visas to the U.S. were considered during the trade war with China (Financial Times, 2018). Former President Trump signed Proclamation 10043 in May 2020 to prohibit Chinese students who graduated from colleges that have connections with the People’s Liberation Army from obtaining F visas or J visas. Furthermore, the administration proposed immigration and visa policies disproportionately affecting Chinese students, such as imposing a four-year limit on visas for international students and scholars and increasing scrutiny on H-1B visa applicants, which affected student’s application for the Optional Practical Training (OPT) (Burke, 2021). In contrast to 31,124 Chinese nationals hired on STEM OPT alone in 2019, this figure has decreased to 29,465 in 2021 and further to 27,710 in 2022.⁴ Additional data supports this deceleration, showing that only 18 percent of Chinese students participated in the OPT program in 2021, whereas

² The article reveals that allegations have disproportionately targeted scientists of Chinese descent. By the end of 2021, a total of 77 cases had been filed at FBI, 150 defendants are involved with over 90 percent of Chinese-born scholars.

³ Academic institutions, and civil rights organizations have denounced FBI’s China Initiative as racial profiling. The MIT’s database of these alleged cases shows that only a small percentage of cases have been convicted. Over two thirds of high-profile cases ended in acquittal or dismissal.

⁴ Data are available from https://www.ice.gov/doclib/sevis/pdf/data-CitizenshipSTEMOPT_2021.pdf, and https://www.ice.gov/doclib/sevis/pdf/2022_AllCOC_StemOPT.pdf.

more than a third of Indian students did (Fischer & Bauman, 2023). State legislatures in Florida and Texas further fueled anti-China sentiment by banning Chinese citizens from purchasing properties, and Florida enacted a law in 2023 banning public universities from hiring Chinese graduate students and postdocs (Mervis, 2023).

Some studies show how Chinese students were concerned about the safety issue and changing visa application policy (Yang, et. al., 2020). For instance, in January 2020, then-President Trump issued an executive order and travel ban barring Chinese travelers from entering the U.S., exacerbated by U.S. consulate closures and subsequent backlogs in visa processing due to the pandemic. Such border-control policies have intensified Sinophobia in American society, creating an unwelcoming environment for Chinese students and researchers (Shesgreen, 2020). Reports of Chinese students being subjected to examination by the U.S. Border Control agents prompted China's Foreign Minister Wang Yi to address the issue in a meeting with U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken at the Munich Security Conference in 2024 (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2024).⁵ This reflects a form of "border imperialism" where migration control is used to manage geopolitical rivalries and perceived security risks (Walia, 2014). In this case, borders are not just physical boundaries but also ideological and regulatory mechanisms that reinforce hierarchies of power and privilege.

Though no empirical data has been collected on how such policies, political rhetoric, and the increased scrutiny of Chinese students and researchers have affected students' desire to pursue their education in the U.S, some surveys conducted by various groups shed light on the concerns among students and scholars regarding geopolitical tensions (Anderson, 2018). For instance, a survey conducted by the American Physical Society among 3,200 physicists in 2021 shows that over 43 percent of foreign-born early-career researchers perceived that the U.S. is unwelcoming to international students and scholars (2021).⁶ Similarly, a survey conducted by the University of Arizona and the Committee of 100, an advocacy group that focuses on U.S.-China issues, found that 51 percent of scientists of Chinese descent, including U.S. citizens and noncitizens, experience considerable fear and anxiety about being surveilled by the U.S. government, compared to only 12 percent of non-Chinese scientists (Committee 100, 2021).⁷

⁵ Both Chinese and Western media have reported that Chinese students with valid visas were subjected to secondary inspection at airports, known as the 'Little Black Room' among Chinese students, by the U.S. Immigration Office. Xinhua News Agency, Nov. 3, 2021, 'The Ministry of Foreign Affairs responds to the deportation of multiple Chinese students and scholars visiting or studying in the U.S.' Wang also mentioned that since August 2021, nearly 30 Chinese students or visitors in the U.S. have encountered such incidents. Retrieved from http://news.cn/world/2021-11/03/c_1128027556.htm

⁶ Survey data is available at <https://www.aps.org/policy/analysis/upload/APS-Research-Security-Survey-Key-Findings-2021.pdf>

⁷ Survey data is available at <https://www.committee100.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/10/C100-Lee-Li-White-Paper-FINAL-FINAL-10.28.pdf>

The impact of these sentiments is observable in the decisions of some high-profile Chinese scholars who have chosen to relinquish their tenure and permanent positions in the U.S. to return to China and work for Chinese universities in recent years (Zuo, 2022).

The Biden administration has largely continued Trump administration's trade and foreign policies toward China (Haass, 2021; Fang et al., 2022). It has continued the narrative portraying China as a threat to Western democracy and the U.S. national security (Kim, 2023). Trump-era policies targeting China have not been rescinded, and academic exchange programs, such as Fulbright programs with China, remain suspended. Political rhetoric and narratives from both administrations have also influenced American public opinion on China and Chinese students, as evidenced by surveys such as the Pew survey, which indicates that 83 percent of Americans have negative views of China (Pew Research Center, 2023). The Chicago Council Survey on Global Affairs further suggests a growing preference for restrictions on Chinese students (2020). Some scholars argue, despite Chinese students' contribution to American economy, scientific research, and campus diversity, that American media, along with political rhetoric on China, used colonial lenses to portray Chinese international students as racialized inferior "the other", which has produced a harmful effect on campus climate, culture, and internationalization of American campuses (Suspitsyna & Shalka, 2019). Chinese international students and researchers are socially constructed as bodies out of place or strangers with respect American notions of citizenship and migration governance (Suspitsyna & Shalka, 2019). U.S. policies, including visa restrictions and scrutiny of research collaborations, illustrate political efforts to regulate the flow of "desirable migrants" and categorize Chinese students as potential threats. Some scholars have also pointed out that North American universities are structured according to neo-colonial frameworks which replicate historical hierarchies and power dynamics, and perpetuate exclusion and unwelcoming environments, particularly for international students with non-Western backgrounds (Thobani, 2022). Therefore, the impact of geopolitical tensions on student exchange, particularly on Chinese student's desire to study in the U.S., needs to be examined.

PUBLIC SAFETY IN THE U.S. AS A NEW CONCERN

In addition to the escalating geopolitical tensions, previous research has highlighted domestic social instability and public safety issues of the destination country as significant factors affecting international students' decision to study abroad (Beine et al., 2014). Safety consistently ranks as the top concern of international students (Marginson, et al, 2010). Gun violence in the U.S. has emerged as a primary concern among Chinese students (Gelzhiser, 2019). With over 30 states permitting open-carry laws, gun violence and mass shootings are among the foremost safety concerns for international students, as underscored by surveys conducted by the Institute of International Education (IIE) (IIE, 2018). The deaths of Chinese students in the U.S. have deepened concerns among Chinese parents as many of these students come from single-child families. In

today's interconnected world, news of gun violence and hate crimes can be rapidly disseminated on social media, exacerbating worries about in the U.S. (Fischer, 2019). The Chinese government has also expressed concerns about the safety of its citizens traveling to the U.S. China's Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Ministry of Culture and Tourism, and Ministry of Education have issued separate alerts cautioning against frequent shootings, robberies, theft, and harassment, urging travelers and students to take precaution (Xinhua News Agency, 2019).

Moreover, studies indicate that racial discriminations in the U.S. significantly influence students' decisions to study there (Lee & Rice, 2007). Studies discussed the rising number of cases the racial discrimination against Chinese in the U.S. (Ma & Miller, 2020). The racial reckoning following George Floyd's death has brought attention to the longstanding history of anti-Asian violence in the U.S. (Lee & Huang, 2021). During the COVID-19 pandemic, anti-China rhetoric and scapegoating of Asians by figures like former President Trump fueled a surge in hate crimes and violence against Asian Americans (AAPI, 2022). The use of derogatory terms like "The China Virus" and "Kung Flu" exacerbated anti-Asian racism and violence, exemplified by the tragic mass shootings in Atlanta in 2021 that claimed the lives of six women of Asian descent. Stop AAPI Hate, a nonprofit organization, has documented over 11,500 incidents of anti-Asian bias from March 2020 to December 2022 (AAPI, 2022).

The intersection of gun violence, anti-Asian racist rhetoric, Sinophobia, and xenophobia presents formidable obstacles to the fundamental tenets of global education. These factors profoundly shape individuals' perceptions of the benefits and advantages, as well as risks and dangers, of studying abroad.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS AND SIGNIFICANCE

Geopolitical tensions and the evolving dynamics of U.S.-China relations have disrupted conventional understandings of global student mobility and introduced new variables that may significantly influence the desires of Chinese students for global education and mobility. These issues, started before the Covid, but continued and intensified in the post-pandemic era, offer a unique context to examine the impact of these factors on students' aspirations and desires, and how these factors shape the evolving landscape of international education, particularly within the context of U.S.-China relations.

It is worth noting that most studies on Chinese students pursuing education overseas were conducted prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, demonstrating a knowledge gap that must be addressed to gain a comprehensive understanding of how these issues—structural or non-structural—affect the desires of Chinese students for overseas education in the post-pandemic era. Against the backdrop of the increasing deglobalizing forces, such as the rising populism, protectionism, isolationism, and nationalism, compounded by escalating U.S.-China tensions, it is important to explore whether students still perceive the U.S. as a vital destination. Therefore, this research aims to investigate the interplay between external factors such as geopolitical dynamics and socioeconomic contexts, and the educational aspirations of Chinese students studying in the U.S. Specifically,

it tries to answer how the aspirations and experiences of Chinese students have been shaped by the constraints and disruptions stemming from geopolitical tensions, and socioeconomic conditions in the U.S. and China.

Research on Chinese students illuminates their individual experiences but also serves as a lens to understand broader aspects of Chinese society and global dynamics. Students come from diverse backgrounds and represent a cross-section of society, providing an opportunity to examine how broader societal changes manifest at the individual level. As China continues to integrate with the world, studying Chinese students can provide insights into how globalization and de-globalizing forces shape their identities, aspirations, and worldviews, global student mobility in the post-Covid era, and how their motivation for education in the U.S. intersects with global public health crisis and geopolitics.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study draws quantitative data over a four-year period, starting from June 2020 and ended in May 2024. A Chinese-language survey was made available online and disseminated to Chinese student organizations at universities in Texas during this timeframe. During the design and implementation of the survey project, strict adherence to ethical considerations was ensured. This included guaranteeing anonymity and voluntariness of participation, as well as obtaining informed consent from all respondents and secure storage of research data. A total of 259 questionnaires were submitted online through the Qualtrics platform. These responses represented 11 universities across Texas, including five private and six public institutions, reflecting a diverse range of perspectives from Chinese students in Texas. These universities varied in size, with student enrollments ranging from 4,000 to over 45,000. Some of the public universities are among the nation's top 20 universities with the largest number of international students, such as the University of Texas at Dallas, which had an international student population of 10,157.⁸ The survey project also included midsize private universities with student enrollments exceeding 15,000, where approximately 5 percent of students were international. Additionally, the sample included small Christian universities with international student populations of less than 3 percent. Texas, being home to one of the largest higher education systems in the U.S., is one of the nation's top five destinations for international students and an ideal location for sampling. It hosts a total of 102,426 international students enrolled at 148 post-secondary colleges and universities in 2021-22, representing 7.5 percent of all international students in the U.S. (U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement, 2022).

The questionnaire comprised 37 questions, including demographic and socioeconomic information of the students and their family as well as information about academic interests, and extracurricular activities. Open-ended questions include their desires for pursuing education in the U.S., and the challenges they perceive during the study. The survey included specific questions regarding the

⁸ Data available from <https://www.ice.gov/doclib/sevis/pdf/sevisBTN2022.pdf>.

impact of domestic issues in the U.S., and geopolitical tensions on their current study in the U.S. The study then used SPSS for statistical analysis, including covariate analysis to explore correlations between various demographic factors (gender, household income, parental education levels, and parental employment) and dependent variables such as the effects of public safety, the U.S. foreign policies toward China, and U.S. policies toward Chinese students.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

The findings of this study reveal a diverse socioeconomic background among the respondents, with the majority coming from middle to upper-middle-income families in China (See Table 1). Approximately 85 percent of students come from households with an annual income of over 200,000 RMB (US\$30,000), significantly higher than the national average (See Table 1) (National Bureau of Statistics of China, 2024).⁹ While household income plays a crucial role in determining socio-economic class in China, it is important to consider other factors such as parental education, employment status, and residential location in understanding the socioeconomic context of the participants. Regarding parental educational levels, approximately 75 percent of respondents' parents have completed a college degree, underscoring their middle-class family backgrounds. This is notably higher than the 18.5 percent of the tertiary education attainment rate in 2022 in China (OECD, 2023). Though the study does not depict a traditional urban-rural divide among respondents, it shows a significant proportion coming from tier one cities and new tier-one cities, known for their economic prosperity and affluent populations.¹⁰ In contrast to previous studies in this field which often neglects parental employment information, the findings highlight the diverse employment backgrounds of parents of Chinese students. A notable portion of these parents are business owners, including both small and private enterprise owners, as well as professionals in various sectors. These occupations are typically associated with higher social and economic status, indicating a stable financial foundation that facilitates their ability to support their children's education abroad.

⁹ The national average of annual per capita disposable income of households is 39,218 RMB in 2023, or 117,654 RMB for the household of three.

¹⁰ The original four recognized first-tier cities in China are Beijing, Shanghai, Guangzhou, and Shenzhen. Household income in Beijing and Shanghai is around 247,284 RMB in 2021. A list of 15 new first-tier cities was added by China Business Network Research Institute (CBNRI) in 2019. CBNRI ranks 337 cities at and above the prefecture level in China and defines the top 15 cities as the new first-tier cities (China Business Network, 2019, retrieved from https://baike.baidu.com/reference/12702007/b23bW7-eOFBYkkTu2nnjoOfSN9XC0X9VEbixNXIsFP47W58%20RBWB7arGUpC5XXI_tmpXLhWbV-IJgJmCshCLi6z9ey2KF4Q).

Table 1: Demographic Information of Respondents (N = 259)

Factors	Categories	Frequency	Percentage
Age	< 18	1	0.4
	18-22	231	89.2
	>22	27	10.4
Classification	Freshman	53	20.5
	Sophomore	102	39.4
	Junior	64	24.7
	Senior	40	15.4
Size of Immediate Family	< 3 people	6	2.3
	3 people	124	47.9
	4 people	79	30.5
	> 4 people	50	19.3
Household Income Levels	Less than 100,000 RMB	15	5.8
	100, 000 < 200, 000 RMB	23	8.9
	200,000 to 400,000 RMB	64	24.7
	400, 000 to 600,000 RMB	69	26.6
	More than 600, 000 RMB	88	34
Parental Educational Levels	Without College Degree	61	23.6
	College Degree	134	51.7
	Graduate Degree	64	24.7
Parent Employment Status	Small Business Owners	49	18.9
	Private Enterprise Owners	63	24.3
	Private Business Managers and Employees	42	16.2
	SOE Employees and Managers	20	7.7
	Foreign Enterprise Employees and Managers	11	4.2
	Government Employees and Cadres	13	5.0
	University professors, scholars and researchers	9	3.5
	Artists, writers, people in creative industry, informally employed freelancers, etc.	9	3.5
		41	15.8

	Other professionals	2	0.8
	Unemployed		
Students' Classification by Majors	Sciences	78	30.1
	Humanities and Social Sciences	32	12.4
	Business	97	37.5
	Engineering and Computer Science	21	8.1
	Pre-med	16	6.2
	Art, music, theatre, film	9	3.5
	Education	2	.8
	Undecided	4	1.5
	Students' Post- Graduation Decisions	Returning to China	59
Staying in the US for graduate studies		120	46.3
Staying in the US for work		8	3.1
Undecided		67	25.9
Go to the 3 rd country		5	1.9
Does U.S. public safety concern you or your Parents about your study and living in the U.S.?	Yes	165	63.7
	No	94	36.3
Do you feel whether the U.S. foreign policies toward China would affect or have affected your study in the U.S.?	Yes	110	42.5
	No	128	49.4
	Not Much	14	5.4
	Unsure	7	2.7
Do you feel whether the U.S. policies on Chinese Students would affect or have affected your study in the U.S.?	Yes	100	38.6
	No	153	59.1
	Unsure	6	2.3
	Total	259	100.0

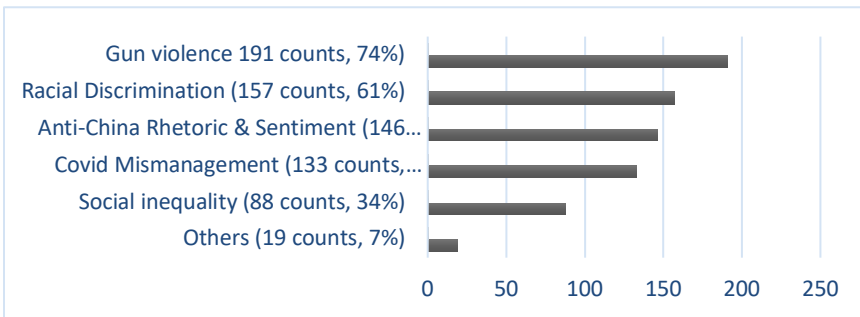
A significant number of the students, about 38 percent of the respondents, have chosen majors in the sciences, engineering and computer science (See Table 1). This finding suggests a persistent interest in STEM fields among Chinese students, despite the geopolitical tensions and policy debates surrounding their

enrollment in such programs. Additionally, business-related fields are popular choices, with 39 percent of students opting for majors in this domain, reflecting a desire for economic prosperity and enhanced employment prospects, both in China and abroad.

Regarding post-graduation plans, approximately 22 percent of students intend to return to China after completing their studies in the U.S. (see Table 1). Factors influencing this decision may include career opportunities, familial ties, and a desire to contribute to China’s development. Notably, 46 percent of respondents plan to continue to pursue graduate studies in the U.S., indicating a strong interest in further academic and career advancement in the country.

The research studies the concerns of public safety in the U.S. among Chinese students. A significant majority, comprising 66 percent of respondents, identified public safety and security as their primary concern, underscoring the overarching significance of this issue. Results of analysis also shows gun violence, racial discrimination, and anti-China rhetoric emerging as the top concerns, a consensus among respondents, depicted in Table 2. Gun violence, resonated as a major concern, can be attributed to the prevalence of firearm-related violence in the country. Chinese students express their heightened anxiety and safety concerns, among Chinese students. These incidents have been widely reported in Chinese media and social media. Notably, over 50 percent of the respondents are from single-child families, potentially amplifying safety concerns among this demographic.

Table 2: Concerns of Public Safety and Social Issues in the U.S. (N = 259)



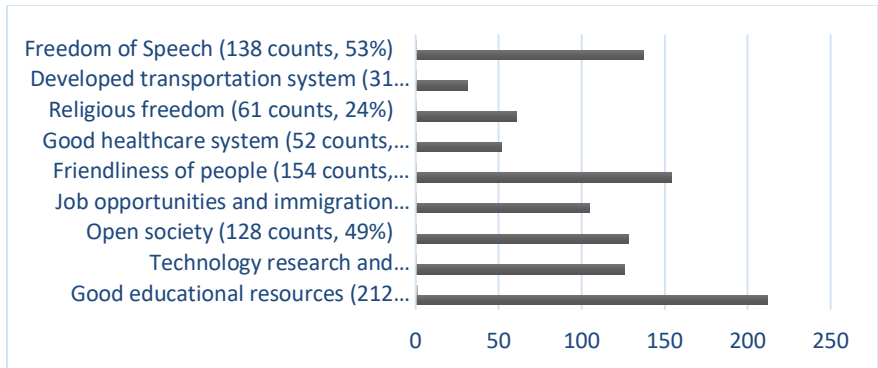
Note: Survey Question: What public safety and social issues in the U.S. would concern you and your parents the most? (Choose multiple answers).

Moreover, the research unveils the impact of anti-China rhetoric and sentiments on students. Tensions between the U.S. and China across political, economic, and social realms contribute to an environment where Chinese students face discrimination, stereotyping, or even hostility, jeopardizing their sense of belonging and safety. Nearly half of the respondents (47.1 percent) of the respondents admit feeling the effects of current U.S. foreign policies on China on their study experience, underscoring the pervasive influence of geopolitical

tensions (see Table 1). When assessing U.S. policies specifically targeting Chinese students, diverse perspectives emerge among respondents. While a notable portion, 40 percent, perceives an impact on their study in the U.S., others, 58.5 percent, express no discernible effect (Table 1). Factors contributing to these perspectives range from awareness of policy specifics to direct implications on academic pursuits, such as visa delays and restricted access to programs or research opportunities, particularly in STEM fields (Burke, 2021; Mok, 2021). Reports of discriminatory treatment at airports and the enactment of restrictive laws, like Florida’s 2023 ban on hiring Chinese graduate students, further underscore the complexities surrounding U.S. policies affecting Chinese students (Table 1) (Mervis, 2023).

Despite these concerns, respondents acknowledge several factors that attracted them to study in the U.S., including educational resources, technological advancement, social openness, freedom of speech, and the friendliness of people (Table 3). The reputation and quality of American educational institutions emerge as the primary draw for approximately 82 percent of respondents, affirming the enduring allure of the U.S. as a destination for academic pursuit.

Table 3: Socio-cultural-economic Factors in the U.S. Attracting Students (N = 259)



Note: Survey question: What have attracted you to pursue your undergraduate study in the U.S.? (Choose multiple answers).

Different from other studies on Chinese students, this study provides rich data for covariate analysis to examine correlations between various demographic factors (gender, age, household income, parental education levels, family size, and student classification) and dependent variables such as perceived effects of public safety in the U.S., U.S. foreign policies toward China, and U.S. policies toward Chinese students (See Table 4). The analysis revealed several significant correlations. There is a significant positive correlation ($r = 0.349, p < 0.001$) exists between perceived effects of U.S. foreign policy on China and perceived effects of U.S. policies on Chinese students, indicating students who perceive the effects of the U.S. foreign policies on China are also more likely to perceive a greater

effect of the U.S. policies of Chinese students on them, suggesting strong perceptions of how U.S. foreign policies and policies on Chinese students would impact them. There is also a significant positive correlation ($r = 0.158, p = 0.011$) between the concerns about U.S. public safety and the effect of U.S. foreign policy ($r = 0.182, p = 0.006$), indicating that students who are more concerned about U.S. public safety are also more likely to perceive a greater effect of the U.S. foreign policies toward China on them. These findings underscore the interconnectedness of perceptions surrounding safety within American society and the broader impact of U.S. China policies on students related to their study in the country. Further research is needed to explore the underlying reasons for this correlation and its implications for policy-making and international student mobility.

Table 4: Correlation analysis of Demographic Factors, and Effects of U.S. Public Safety, U.S. Foreign Policies on China on Chinese Students (N = 259)

		Gender	Family Size	Age	Household income	Parental education level	Decision to return to China	Perceived Effect of US Foreign Policy on China	Perceived Effect of US Public Safety	Perceived Effect of US Policies on Chinese Students
Gender	Pearson Correlation	1	-.142*	-.149*	-.085	-.032	.041	.092	-.009	-.052
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.022	.017	.172	.611	.512	.141	.880	.406
Family Size	Pearson Correlation	-.142*	1	.029	.080	-.061	.027	.039	.121	.089
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.022		.638	.201	.326	.664	.527	.051	.155
Age	Pearson Correlation	-.149*	.029	1	.041	-.035	-.083	-.071	-.015	.069
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.017	.638		.508	.573	.183	.253	.805	.266
Household income	Pearson Correlation	-.085	.080	.041	1	.069	-.061	-.034	-.073	.079
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.172	.201	.508		.266	.324	.588	.244	.207
Parental education level	Pearson Correlation	-.032	-.061	-.035	.069	1	-.017	-.060	.077	-.035
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.611	.326	.573	.266		.780	.336	.216	.572
Decision to return to China	Pearson Correlation	.041	.027	-.083	-.061	-.017	1	.101	.010	-.022
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.512	.664	.183	.324	.780		.104	.873	.726
Perceived Effect of US Foreign Policy on China	Pearson Correlation	.092	.039	-.071	-.034	-.060	.101	1	.158*	.349**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.141	.527	.253	.588	.336	.104		.011	<.001
Perceived Effect of US Public Safety	Pearson Correlation	-.009	.121	-.015	-.073	.077	.010	.158*	1	.002
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.880	.051	.805	.244	.216	.873	.011		.977
Perceived Effect of US Policies on Chinese Students	Pearson Correlation	-.052	.089	.069	.079	-.035	-.022	.349**	.002	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.406	.155	.266	.207	.572	.726	<.001	.977	
	N	259	259	259	259	259	259	259	259	259

Note: *. Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed). **. Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

CONCLUSION

The global health crisis in 2020 and subsequent economic recoveries, coupled with deteriorating geopolitical tensions between China and the U.S, have significantly impacted student mobility patterns, prompting scholarly inquiry into this important issue. This study has contributed valuable insights into the complexities students face, including changing geopolitical landscapes, socio-economic changes, and public safety concerns in the U.S. Specifically, this research has revealed some significant correlations between the perceived effects of U.S. policies regarding Chinese students, concerns about U.S. public safety, and the perceived effects of U.S. foreign policy toward China on Chinese students at American universities. These findings underscore the multifaceted nature of the student experience and highlight the importance of considering broader geopolitical dynamics in understanding students' studying experience in the U.S. Further research is needed to explore the underlying reasons for this correlation and its implications for policy-making and international student mobility. Understanding how these new factors interact with individual student characteristics, such as socioeconomic background and academic interests, can provide further insights into the differential experiences of students studying in the U.S. By addressing these research gaps, policymakers and stakeholders can develop more holistic strategies to support and enhance the educational experiences of international students, fostering cross-cultural understanding and academic exchange in an increasingly deglobalizing world.

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