

CHINESE INTERNATIONAL STUDENT EXPERIENCES IN UNITED STATES HIGHER EDUCATION DURING PANDEMIC: PREPARING FOR A POST-PANDEMIC ERA

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ABSTRACT: Internationalization has become a substantial part of higher education worldwide, especially in the U.S. Moreover, Chinese students make up the largest portion of the U.S.'s international higher education students. The COVID-19 pandemic has caused a disruption in higher education, especially posing considerable challenges to international students. Given the emphasis of international higher education in the U.S. and the prominence of Chinese international students in this country, as well as the sparsity of research outside large cities, this study sought to examine particular challenges posed to Chinese international students studying at universities in smaller cities in the U.S. Results indicate that this group of students experienced a myriad of hardships and challenges during the pandemic. Understanding these effects can inform international higher education programs perhaps worldwide, ultimately improving such programs to better manage crises, but also to improve normal practice.

Keywords: Globalization, internationalization; international higher education, Chinese students, pandemic

Internationalization of the student body has become a prominent feature of 21st century higher education, particularly in the U.S. (Chow, 2015; Foskett & Maringe, 2010; Weber & Duderstadt, 2008). Globalization has fed the internationalization of higher education world-wide, resulting in increasing numbers of students seeking to capitalize on opportunities preparing them for, and placing them in advantageous positions within, the expanding global marketplace, and institutions of higher education have increased efforts to accommodate this trend (Foskett & Maringe, 2010; Woodfield, 2010). U.S. higher education has led the movement toward internationalization in recent years, as its institutions hosted record numbers of higher education students from other countries, especially from China (Ge et al., 2019; Institute for International Education, 2019). Of course, the outbreak of COVID-19 recognized in early 2020 has disrupted this trend in its myriad facets – resulting in a considerable decline in international student enrollment despite acute efforts to facilitate the continuity of programs (Open doors, 2020) – leaving the future of globalization and internationalization of higher education unclear (Dorasamy & Dorasamy, 2021; Feng et al., 2021; Koo, et al., 2021; Shoukat et al., 2021; Yue et al., 2020). Because the COVID-19 disruption substantially affects the U.S. in terms international higher education, especially involving the influx of students from China, this qualitative research project probes the questions of how Chinese international higher education students perceive their experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic, and how these students make meaning of their experiences as they relate to the post-pandemic era. The research anticipates that results and discussion will generalize to a substantial portion of international higher education students and inform action toward the continuity of globalization and internationalization efforts.

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Literature Review

Globalization and internationalization are complex, multifaceted notions. Notwithstanding, at the risk of oversimplification, they are defined here along with diversity, as the three terms are closely linked and the definition of each provides context for, and thus enhances, the others. *Diversity* has been evolving as a concept for decades. Simply put, it espouses the idea that people differ and identify in almost innumerable ways, including, and reaching beyond, ethnicity, age, ability, education, skills, social identity, gender identity and expression, sex, sexuality, political affiliation, religion and socio-economic status (Queensborough Community College, 2020; Smith, 2016). In short, decades of research show that embracing and promoting diversity fosters social well-being, while avoiding discouraging diversity impedes social well-being (Tienda, 2013; Vos et al., 2016). Seemingly to the contrary, *globalization* entails “the opening up and coming together of business, trade and economic activities between nations, necessitating the need for greater homogenization of fundamental political, ideological, cultural and societal aspects of the life across different countries of the world” (Maringe & Foskett, 2010, p. 1). Such homogenization takes many overt and subtle forms; English being adopted as the language of business and science, and the integration of international knowledge being more obvious examples (Altbach et al., 2016; Rumbley et al., 2012). Controversial as the practice is, for putting identities and cultures in currently less powerful and wealthy countries risk of cooption, (Altbach et al., 2016), globalization has been largely accepted as an irreversible truth (Altbach & Knight, 2016). *Internationalization* perhaps may be interpreted as an attempt to strike a balance between diversity and globalization. It consists of the various methods used by higher education and government to understand and manage globalization and its effects to achieve and maintain overall positive outcomes (Altbach et al., 2016). Regarding higher education, these measures aim to infuse intercultural and international aspects and properties into practices of teaching scholarship and service and include such activities as internationalizing curriculum, cultivating international partnerships and relationships with various other institutions, developing programs and opportunities of study in other countries (such as international exchange programs), transnational research, and generally increasing the number and mobility of international students and faculty (Altbach et al., 2016; Foskett & Maringe, 2010; Rumbley et al., 2012). Because of vast globalization, internationalization has become crucial for higher education institutions world-wide to remain competitive (Altbach, et al., 2016; Maringe & Foskett, 2010).

U.S. higher education institutions use internationalization to fulfill their missions of graduating people ready to function and serve in diverse and global environments, but also to increase revenue through international student enrolment and to bolster their own viability by boosting reputation throughout a broadening pool of potential students (Adams et al., 2012; Cantwell, 2015; Rumbley et al., 2012). Internationalization efforts along with the nation’s notoriety as an advanced country conducting cutting edge research in numerous fields has made U.S. higher education a top choice among international students (Chow, 2015). Indeed, the U.S. has remained a cardinal destination among international students for decades (Chow, 2015). International students coming to the U.S. exceeded a million in 2016 until the pandemic in 2020, setting an all-time high

in 2019 (Institute for International Education, 2019), with Chinese international students routinely constituting the largest single group (Ge et al., 2019). The onslaught of the COVID 19 pandemic in 2020 disrupted the world in most if not all aspects, including the abovementioned trends in international higher education.

In late January 2020, the World Health Organization declared the outbreak of the coronavirus now popularly known as COVID-19 an international public emergency (World Health Organization, 2020). As of July 4, 2022, 546,357,444 cases of the virus, and 6,336,415 resulting deaths, have been confirmed (World Health Organization, 2022). Since the outbreak, societies world-wide have implemented various levels of preventative measures, including quarantines, travel restrictions, business closings, curfews and other social distancing and hygiene mandates in attempts to control the spread. The overall situation – the outbreak of the virus combined with the various wide-spread measures to get it under control – has disrupted social, political, economic functioning, altering every aspect of human life from the condition of the environment to the state of individual mental health (Alqabbani et al., 2021; Dorasamy & Dorasamy, 2021; Feng et al., 2021). The world may never return to what may be considered pre-pandemic normality, as resurgences caused by newly mutated strains of the virus eaves the future of pandemic affects uncertain.

No less impacted by the pandemic is international higher education. According to UNESCO, effects of the pandemic on world education are unprecedented (UNESCO, n.d.-a; UNESCO, n.d.-b). As the pandemic ensued, institutions of higher education reacted by cancelling experiential learning experiences, internships and courses, closing or restricting campus housing, abruptly shifting to online, remote learning platforms and technologies, and modifying various assessments (Dorasamy & Dorasamy, 2021; Hamza et al., 2021; Krishnamurthy, 2020). The U.S. was no exception, as institutions in different states applied varying newly devised protocols, and an estimated 99% of institutions switched to online or hybrid course delivery by fall 2020 (Open Doors, 2020). Notwithstanding, US international student enrollment (including online delivery options) declined only 16% in Fall 2020 (Open Doors, 2020), with Chinese international U.S. enrollment numbering approximately 317,000 (Open Doors, 2021).

As might be expected, international higher education students experienced numerous challenges created or exacerbated by the pandemic (Coffey et al., 2021; Feng et al., 2021). Hastily implemented travel policies were inconsistent and subject to change (Hari, et al., 2021; Koo et al., 2021; Shoukat et al., 2021). As a result, some students were stranded in countries away from home, unable to return to reconnect with the comforts of family, friends and cultures of origin (Ge et al., 2019). Others were stuck in home countries unable to continue, in person, their planned international study experiences and programs. Both sets of students were forced to change the way they received, their education, as most institutions remaining open switched to online instead of face-to-face, delivery modes (Tan et al., 2022). Primary online delivery was new to the bulk of international students, many of whom come from cultures heretofore averse to such learning methods, or for whom such learning methods may not be conducive to cultural norms of behavior (Karkar-Esperat, 2018; Tan, 2018). Added financial burdens and

uncertainty also added to the challenges for both groups, as students and their families were suddenly unable to work to support such educational endeavors, resulting in food and housing insecurity, as well as an ever more tenuous outlook for procuring future employment (Hari et al., 2021; Weng et al., 2021). Also, as was the rest of world society, international students were subject to a lack of the ability to socialize. Humans are social beings and need social activity for well-being (Antonsich, 2010; Weng et al., 2021; Yuval-Davis, 2006). International students are no different from the overall population in this respect; however, their well-being was perhaps more taxed, as they were not only unable to socialize generally, but unable to participate in commiseration with people in similar situations. Perceptions of connectedness to home culture, host culture or other international students is important for international students' sense of well-being (Brown, 2009; Brown & Jones, 2013; Rosenthal, 2007; Sawir et al., 2008; Tran & Gomes, 2017; Weng et al., 2021); such students were denied these opportunities during the pandemic. These and other factors led to increases in feelings of stress and anxiety for international students, resulting in compromised mental health, some to the point of mental and physical health crises (Feng et al., 2021; Hou & Hall, 2019; Ni et al., 2020; Torales et al., 2020).

Asian international students in general, and Chinese international students in particular, suffered even more challenges and anxiety. Asian students studying in Western countries experience additional language challenges as the structural differences between Eastern and Western languages are often more substantial (Ge, 2021; Tan, 2018). Asians who continued to study in host countries were also subject to increases in discrimination, especially those studying in the U.S. Asians in the U.S. suffered an increase in hate crimes against Asians during this period (Koo et al., 2021). They, particularly Chinese students, experienced increased discrimination because of the ethnicization of the virus (Ge, 2021; Kandil, 2020). Chinese people continue to make up the largest segment of international students in the U.S.; these students also arguably currently face more challenges there than anywhere else.

Despite the apparent importance of understanding them, literature on the challenges and coping mechanisms of Chinese international higher education students in the U.S. is sparse. Related existing studies tend to focus on such populations in larger cities. Little has been done to illuminate and understand Chinese international higher education student experiences in less populous parts of the U.S. during the COVID-19 pandemic. This research is important to better prepare for the “new normal” of an uncertain post-pandemic world and provide optimal higher education to all students, including the largest segment of international students studying in the U.S.

As a theoretical framework, this research uses the lens of transformative learning theory, which continues to be used and developed since first advanced by Jack Mezirow in 1978. Transformative learning theory generally comprises the experience of a disorienting dilemma, which triggers critical thinking and results in new “transformed” perspective on which one operates (Cranton, 2006; Eschenbacher & Fleming, 2020; Hof, 2017; Mezirow, 1978; Mezirow, 1991). It concerns the challenge of uncritically assimilated

perspectives and the subsequent growth of a new and improved, perspective (Mezirow, 1991).

Methodology

Creswell and Creswell (2018) suggest a qualitative research design for the exploration of varied concepts and perceptions of participants. This research project employed a qualitative methodology to answer the following research questions regarding Chinese international higher education students studying in less populated areas (i.e., within considerably smaller cities) of the U.S.: (1) How do these students perceive their experience studying in such a local during the height of the COVID-19 pandemic? And (2) How do they make meaning of their experience in anticipation of an uncertain post-pandemic era?

After securing IRB approval, the researcher used in-depth semi-structured interviews asking five Chinese international students studying at two Southern state universities nine open-ended questions. One question collected demographic information; the other eight were designed to collect information on perceptions regarding their experiences with their higher education experience during the pandemic. The questions were reviewed by colleagues beforehand and questions were revised accordingly to maximize validity. Study participants were recruited using a convenience snowball technique (Noy, 2007). Interviews were conducted (two) in-person or (three) using the WebEx, real-time distance video communication application. Each interview was recorded and lasted one to two hours. Member checking was also used during and after initial interviews to ensure the accuracy of information gleaned from responses (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Responses were analyzed using constant comparison (Glaser & Straus, 1967), Neuman's (2006) three-step coding method was used to analyze responses and identify themes.

Results

Five Chinese international students participated in the study. Three identified as male; two identified as female. Each is from a different province of China; all are the only child in their families. The average age of the five is 24.5 years. All are graduate students – two attending the main public institution, three attending a regional institution within the same Southern state – who have studied during the pandemic, and spent one to three years in the U.S. Two participants are in art programs, two are in computer science programs, and one studies business.

Seven themes were identified from responses to the eight interview questions (question one collected demographic information; two through nine collected information more directly relevant to the research questions). Five themes (themes one through five) relate to the first research question, “How do Chinese international higher education students studying in (less densely populated areas of) the U.S. perceive their experience during the height of the COVID-19 pandemic?” Two of the themes (themes six and seven) relate specifically to the second research question, “How do these students make meaning of their experience in anticipation of an uncertain post-pandemic era?” The seven identified themes are as follows: (1) Study and Travel Plan Interruption, (2) Online Learning

Challenges, (3) Isolation and Associated Feelings, (4) Increased Racial Discrimination and Resulting Sensitivity, (5) Challenges of Increased Costs for Education, (6) Survival and Growth from the Pandemic Education Experience, and (7) Positive Outlook for a Post-Pandemic Future.

Theme One: Study and Travel Plan Interruption

Three of the five participants were admitted to their programs in 2021. As a result of travel restrictions, they had to change plans and spend one semester studying online, before procuring the necessary visas and being allowed to enter the U.S. These three consider themselves fortunate, as they all knew people not lucky enough to get visas or for whom international study plans became otherwise unsustainable because of lengthy and unpredictable delays. The two other participants were already in the U.S.; they were in a sense, stranded, unable to return to China during breaks, or for any other reason, because of travel restrictions in both countries as well as for fear contracting the disease while traveling.

Theme Two: Online Learning Challenges

Four of the five participants had never taken an online course before the pandemic. Even after being allowed in the U.S., participants had to take courses online. Three of the five preferred not to take online courses and would never have chosen this delivery mode if given the choice. Part of the expressed aversion was due to the self-directedness of the online mode. Experiencing mainly student-centered educational delivery, time and learning management was new to them. Of the three required to take online courses in China their first semester, one expressed the hardship of having to attend synchronously at odd hours (because of the time difference). The other two expressed appreciation of the asynchronous delivery, which allowed them flexibility to do the work during hours more normal for them. All expressed more comfort with the online delivery mode as they got used to and became more proficient with it.

Theme Three: Isolation and Associated Feelings

The three participants beginning their programs in China expressed severe feelings of isolation, not being able to interact in online courses as they were used to doing in face-to-face environments. Even when admitted to the U.S. and able to take some courses and have some interaction face-to-face, everyone was masked and all tended to leave premises as soon as required interactions were over. So, in both scenarios, getting to know people – making friends and having discussions – was improbable if not impossible. Even the two participants, who began their learning experience in the U.S. (and, thus were able to establish some social relationships) before the pandemic struck expressed the difficulty of exceptionally limited social interactions. Understanding (and blaming no one for) the unfortunate situation did little to mitigate the feelings of isolation from living in this “different world.”

Theme Four: Increased Racial Discrimination and Resulting Sensitivity

All participants were aware of the increased racial and ethnic discrimination occurring in the U.S. during the pandemic. They saw stories in the news, and, although not experiencing any such discrimination first-hand (aside from one who reported perceiving hostile looks in public for opting to wear a mask when not officially being required to do so), they received reports from people they know who had suffered physical or verbal attacks. This situation caused further hesitancy to be social and exacerbated feelings of isolation in addition to the fear of being attacked.

Theme Five: Challenges of Increased Costs for Education

Four of the five participants mentioned frustration and challenges of increased costs related to their experience as a result of the pandemic. They expressed stress from the rising costs of food and other living essentials making their experience less enjoyable and more precarious. One mentioned knowing a person in China who had to give up plans for study abroad because of the rising costs; another participant was unable to buy a car because of rising costs attributed to circumstances ultimately caused by the pandemic, which hindered the ability to go out and experience the land beyond campus (public transportation being limited even in pre-pandemic times for small U.S. cities).

Theme Six: Survival and Growth from the Pandemic Education Experience

Put into the framework of Transformative Learning Theory, all participants expressed perceptions that they had successfully navigated the situation and grown as a result. They all experienced the dilemma of the pandemic in all aspects previously discussed. Upon reflection, they realized that the situation was not going to acutely change for better and may never go back to pre-pandemic conditions. As a result of these critical reflections, they all changed their expectations, attitudes and practices to manage the (possibly lengthy) situation. At this point, they are happy with their academic performance and abilities to adapt to new learning conditions.

Theme Seven: Positive Outlook for a Post-Pandemic Future

All participants are hopeful that conditions will continue to improve and look forward to a return to a situation more aligned with the pre-pandemic era. The three participants who began their programs in China are hopeful that the rest of their experiences will adhere to what was expected pre-pandemic – that they will be able to make American friends and experience the culture more richly through increased socio-cultural interactions. Two participants suggest that universities re-establish international programs, activities, and relationships to pre-pandemic proportions as soon as possible for the health of international societal relationships and individual well-being.

Discussion and Conclusion

Responses gathered from in-depth interviews with five Chinese international students studying at two Southern U.S. universities supports more general literature suggesting that such students have experienced greater challenges during the pandemic (Feng et al., 2021; Ge, 2021; Hari et al., 2021; Tan et al., 2022; Weng et al., 2021; Yue et al., 2020). Moreover, this research enumerates more clearly the challenges of specific Chinese international higher education students studying at universities in smaller U.S. cities. The research also displays the pertinence and benefits of transformative learning theory (Cranton, 2006; Eschenbacher & Fleming, 2020; Hof, 2017; Mezirow, 1978; Mezirow, 1991) as it applies to the experiences of international students in general, and Chinese international students studying in the U.S. under heretofore unprecedentedly challenging circumstances in particular.

This study is limited to a small number of five participants specifically from China studying in the U.S. Also, the investigator is Chinese, which presents the possibility of injected cultural subjectivity that must be acknowledged. Notwithstanding, results confirm and inform conditions that must be considered if the U.S. is to continue to effectively accommodate and educate its largest segment of international students; and protocols to protect the validity, integrity, and, thus, the usability of the generated information in terms of its generalizability were strictly followed.

Future research should expand to more U.S. universities. To the extent practicable, it should include gathering information about international students from many more ethnicities studying in the host countries and include longitudinal studies of students' post-educational activities and perceptions. Such research should be done to inform all international higher education, which is presumed to have the altruistic goal of improving international understanding, and, thus, fostering healthy, peaceful international relationships.

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