



## THE IMPACT OF COVID-19 ON CHINESE PARENTS AND STUDENTS: SHIFTING PERSPECTIVES ON HIGHER EDUCATION AMIDST THE CRISIS

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## ABSTRACT

Since 2020, Chinese students studying in the United States have suffered a precipitous decline in enrollment. The restrictive nature of Chinese and American student visa policies during COVID-19 impacted Chinese international students' travel and admissions patterns. The result was an increased number of Chinese students studying in the U.K. and the European Union. This study employed approximately 60-minute ethnographic interviews with 15 participants to investigate Chinese parental decision making during the COVID crisis regarding their children's study abroad. The semi-structured audio-recorded interviews were conducted both remotely and physically. Interview data identified six major factor themes directed toward these fifteen parent participants: 1. Physical Safety, 2. Gender of Applicant, 3. Familial Financial Concerns, 4. Likelihood of Return, 5. Elite Education, and 6. "Conor Overtaking". These were strong indications that factors impact decision-making, and the COVID crisis has been involved in the process. Implications are discussed.

**Keywords:** *Higher Education; Study Abroad; COVID-19 Pandemic; Parental Involvement*

## RESEARCH HIGHLIGHTS

Since the COVID-19 global health crisis exposure, Chinese students studying in the United States have suffered a precipitous enrollment decline for multiple reasons. Although COVID-19 may not be the only reason, it results in students shifting their study abroad destinations. Meanwhile, Chinese students in the U.K. and the European Union have increased.

As the pursuit of excellence within higher education is deeply rooted in Chinese traditions, Castleman and Page (2017) found a significant influence of parental involvement on postsecondary decision-making. Studies Bodycott (2009), and Mok et al. (2022), have drawn attention to factors for Chinese parental support for studying abroad, such as destination recognition, academic reputation, and teacher quality.

This study highlights the parental role in Chinese students' College decision-making processes. Chinese parents assert the final authority in decision-making, drawing on their broader life experience, understanding of Chinese universities, insight into labor market requirements, and knowledge of prospective cities.

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## Research Objectives

The COVID-19 pandemic has dramatically reshaped the global landscape, influencing various aspects of life, including how Chinese parents perceive the Western world. As the pandemic unfolded, Chinese parents became exposed through extensive media coverage to Western countries' responses, healthcare systems, and societal structures, leading to a significant impact on their understanding and attitudes towards the West.

As China's economy has grown, leading to increased capital gains and more incredible net personal wealth among its populace, many affluent parents have emerged. Salisbury et al. (2009), suggest that students from higher-income homes and with well-educated parents are more likely to aspire to study abroad. These Chinese parents are now actively seeking ways to give their children a comprehensive competitive edge, often opting for educational

opportunities beyond the tightly regulated public system. Recognizing the distinct significance of the parent's role in the decision-making process of Chinese students studying abroad (Li, 2019), this essay explores the tension and resultant impact of how the COVID-19 pandemic shaped Chinese parents' perceptions of the Western world and, consequently, the impact of those perceptions on their decisions to send university-age children to study abroad.

## Methodology

This study employs individual ethnographic interviews to investigate parental involvement in deciding children's study abroad from December 2022 to July 2023. The semi-structured audio-recorded interviews were conducted remotely and physically, per the participants' preference. Although the Chinese government has lifted the COVID restriction, remote interviews increased accessibility to participants who may be geographically distant (Deakin & Wakefield, 2014).

A semi-structured interview was preferred to investigate and elucidate the phenomenon (Morse, 1991). The interview protocols were meticulously crafted, drawing upon an extensive review of relevant literature with a preliminary social media platform search. This approach allowed for a deeper understanding of the societal implications and the temporal shifts brought about by the COVID-19 pandemic within various families (Kim, 2023; Qin et al., 2020).

The interview questions included a mix of open-ended queries and short-answer questions. This combination was designed to accommodate Chinese parents who might not be accustomed to the interview process. Patton (1990), claimed that the interviewer would significantly impact the quality of information gathered during an interview. Creating a comfortable, relaxed, and confidential environment facilitates data collection and extracts valuable insights (Bailey, 1996). The study involved 15 participants, comprising two male and 13 female individuals.

## Results

Interview data identified six major factor themes directed toward these fifteen parent participants: 1. Physical Safety, 2. Gender of Applicant, 3. Familial Financial Concerns, 4. Likelihood of Return, 5. Elite Education, and 6. "Conor-Overtaking".

Safety concerns were generated most often by the participants. The emergence of the COVID-19 pandemic catalyzed Chinese parents' exposure to how Western countries handled and managed the crisis. In addition, parents also believe that the United Kingdom is comparatively safer, not only because of the government's control of COVID-19 but also because of the gun violence issue and Asian hate crimes. Thus, they prefer to have their sons go to the US while their daughters go to the UK or other safer countries.

It is also important to note that "Conor-Overtaking" has been emphasized by parents since they believe fighting for a seat in the top university in China has become an indicator of lifelong success. The competitiveness of Chinese College Entrance Examination has made

these parents to send their children study abroad. Due to the flexibility of the Western college application process, parents may shift to the destination country with the same application materials to secure a better-ranked institution.

## Findings

The research confirmed Chinese parental involvement in their children's academic and university decision-making. While parents believed it was their responsibility to navigate their children's future, children largely acquiesced, particularly considering traditional mores and the significant financial burden being shouldered by families to fulfill educational expenses. These findings granted insight into the priority of parents and their families to facilitate their children's international experiences and cultural learning—indeed, global competence.

As to parental concerns, two were overwhelmingly noteworthy: 1) safety and well-being; Chinese parents were troubled by recent U.S. incidents of discrimination and violence against Asian Americans; and 2) geopolitical tensions between the U.S. and China impacted parental attitudes and behaviors.

To a lesser degree, there have been growing concerns among Chinese students about domestic political tensions and racial discrimination in the U.S. This may have influenced some Chinese students, in distinction to their parents, to urge reconsideration of the decision to study in the U.S. or in the alternative to seek an alternative destination.

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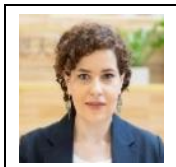
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**Dr. Junjian Gao** received his Ed.M and Ed.D from the Teachers College, Columbia University. He currently serves as an assistant professor in the Program of Educational Leadership at Wenzhou-Kean University. His research interests are comparing and contrasting higher education models between the United States and China, international students' study abroad experiences, the impact of families on higher education perceptions, and global competency. He has previously worked in higher education as a lecturer and administrator in China and the United States. He is particularly interested in the United States' higher education satellite campuses in China.



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