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Impact of Covid-19, Economic, Racial and Political Tensions on Chinese Student Pursuit of Education in US

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I. Introduction

Chinese international students account for a significant portion of the US higher education system. This impact is amplified by the fact that many of these students are paying higher out of state tuition costs that many universities rely on to meet their pecuniary needs. This past year has undergone significant changes in the area of China-US relations which could jeopardize the prior model used by US universities. This article examines four of the key political issues affecting the China-US relationship and measures the extent Chinese students are influenced by these factors when deciding to pursue education in the US. The four factors analyzed are the US Covid-19 situation, the China-US trade war, the social upheaval associated with the Black Lives Matter movement, and the most recent political tensions between the US and China. This study also compares results to research extrapolated from the same population a year earlier to assess any change over time. Key findings indicate that only about half as many students are willing to consider studying in the US and that Covid-19 seems to be the most influential factor in most student's reasoning.

II. Literature Review

During the Trump administration, the relationship between the US and China has undergone considerable changes. Beginning in 2018 with a retaliatory series of increasing tariffs, the two countries engaged in what has been popularly described as the US-China trade war (Avadaliani, 2019; Delaney, 2018; Kuo, 2018; Lukin, 2019; Sachs, 2019; Wong and Koty, 2020). Over the course of multiple years and continuing to the present day, both sides implemented numerous measures to alter the economic situation between the two countries (De Graaff and Apeldoorn, 2018; Herrero and Iwahara, 2019; Liu, 2018; Liu, 2019; Morrison, 2018; SBS News, 2019; Tang, 2019).

As the trade war continued to escalate, China's Hubei province became the epicenter for the worldwide Covid-19 pandemic (Chakraborty and Maity, 2020; Gorbalenya et al., 2020; Huang et al., 2020; Wang, Horby, Hayden, and Gao, 2020; WHO, 2020). This pandemic ultimately led to the systematic closure of nearly every nation in the world and unprecedented strain on the world's economy (Ahmad, et al., 2020; Guo, 2020; Kabir and Muhammad, 2020; OECD, 2020; Zekra, 2020).

Amidst this Covid-19 lockdown in America, a political protest coined the "Black Lives Matter" movement (BLM) erupted throughout America and abroad (Del Real, Robert, & Tim, 2020; Dennis and Dennis, 2020; Hua, 2020; Hua and Yang, 2020; Oborne and Cooke, 2020; Pierce, 2019; Rickford, 2015; Ridgwell, 2020). The BLM movement led to heightened political unrest in many parts of the US and induced a perception by many foreign medias that the US has serious weaknesses in the areas of racism and safety (Arora, Maneesh, and Stout, 2018; Blain, 2020; Cave & Kwai, 2020; Harris, 2020; Holt and Sweitzer, 2020; Hua, 2020; Roth and Ritter, 2020; Winsor, 2016; Younge, 2020).

Most recently, the US and China each closed an embassy managed by the other party, the US closing the Chinese consulate in Houston, and China closing the US embassy in Chengdu (*Briefing With Senior U.S. Government Officials On the Closure of the Chinese Consulate in Houston, Texas - United States Department of State* 2020; Feng & Lucas, 2020; Marcus, 2020; *US consulate: China orders US consulate closure in tit-for-tat move* 2020; Weiss and Saunders, 2020; Wong, Jakes, and Myers, 2020). These events are largely symbolic of the intense political tension currently existing between the two countries (Board, 2020; Bradsher and Myers, 2020; *Endgame, Sino-American commercial relations*, 2020; Griffiths, 2020; Modebadze, 2020; Reuters, 2020; *Timeline: U.S. Relations With China 1949-2020,* 2020; Vander Klippe & Morrow, 2020; Wang, Hong, and Ge, 2020; Zhao and Zhou, 2020).

According to research from 2018, one in three international students in the US were Chinese nationals, totaling over 360,000 students and bringing in an estimated $14 billion per year (OECD 2014; Fischer 2019; IIE 2018; Redden 2019; Reuters 2019). Chinese students traditionally pay out of state tuition and provide considerable revenue for US universities (Musgrave 2019; Magnier and Bases 2019). Recently, there has been increasing competition from other foreign

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countries for this Chinese student population. (D. Liu and Morgan 2017, Project Atlas 2017; New Oriental 2019).

Myriad studies have examined Chinese and international students' motivations for going abroad (C. K. C. Lee and Morrish 2012; Chen 2014; Shu and Scott 2014; To et al. 2014; Wu 2014; Chao 2017; D. Liu and Morgan 2017; Bartlett, Han, and Bartlett 2018; Rafi 2018; Abubakar, Shanka, and Muuka 2010; Fang and Wang 2014; Ghazarian 2014; M. Yang 2007; Y. Yang, Volet, and Mansfield 2017). Numerous scholars have studied the various push and pull factors that motivate students to leave their home country or travel to a new country (Chen 2014; Chao 2017; D. Liu and Morgan 2017; Bartlett, Han, and Bartlett 2018; C. K. C. Lee and Morrish 2012; Rafi 2018). This research provides educational institutions insight into how they may attract students to a particularlocale (Shu and Scott 2014; To et al. 2014; Wu 2014; Fang and Wang 2014; H. Liu and Fang 2011).

III. Methods

This case study is designed to provide guidance into the Chinese university student perspective on studying in America, specifically as it applies to the four, previously-mentioned political factors: trade war, Covid 19, BLM movement and political tensions. The research was conducted in two parts: a survey and interviews.

624 students participated in the survey. The survey was administered through the Chinese social media app, WeChat. The students who took the survey were predominantly from Henan province in central China. The survey was shared across multiple age groups, majors and universities, though the bulk of participants are from Sias University in the city of Xinzheng. The survey was administered in Mandarin and results were translated to English.

The survey consisted of three questions. The first question stated "Are you planning to study abroad to attend gradate school?" If a student responded in the negative, then they were politely withdrawn from the survey. Students that answered in the affirmative were progressed to question two, which used a 5-point Likert scale to query, "On a scale from 1 (little influence) to five (large influence), how important is the foreign country's current Covid-19 situation in making your decision?"

The final question inquired, "If you are considering a university in America, please rank the following factors based on their importance in your decision-making process for graduate school. (1 is most important, 4 is least important) A. Economic trade war, B. Covid -19 situation, C. Racial issues like Black Lives Matter protests, D. Political issues such as closing embassies." Statistics were compiled and analyzed via the Chinese application Jinshuju, which electronically records and anlayzes data.

The interviews were also conducted via the We Chat app. In total, 50 students were interviewed. Interviews were conducted with a video call, a voice call or in the form of written dialogue, in a combination of English and Mandarin, to accommodate the interviewee's preference. Participants were self-selected on a voluntary basis. The interviews began as an opportunity to elaborate on any of the scores or rankings mentioned in the survey. Follow up questions were then asked for clarification purposes and to elucidate additional perspectives. As common themes emerged, some students were asked to evaluate ideas expressed by previous participants and state to their opinion regarding to what extent those views were indicative of an average Chinese student.

IV. Results: Survey

Of the 624 students that participated in the survey, 161(25.8%) stated they intended to study abroad for graduate school. Students were then asked "On a scale from 1 (little influence) to 5 (large influence), how important is the foreign country's current Covid-19 situation in making your decision?" Students responded as follows: 56 students (36.6%) chose 5, 46 students (28.6%) chose 4, 34students chose 3 (21.1%), 9 students (5.6%) chose 2 and 13 students (8.1%) chose 1.

The next question asked students to rank the four political factors (trade war, covid-19, racial issues and political issues). The rankings were as follows. For economic trade war, 32 (20.6%) participants ranked it as the most influential factor, 33 (21.3%) ranked it as the second most influential factor, 33 (21.3%) ranked it as the third most influential factor and 57 (36.8%) ranked it as the least influential factor.

For Covid-19, 91 (57.6%) participants ranked it as the most influential factor, 41 (25.9%) ranked it as the second most influential factor, 15 (9.5%) ranked it as the third most influential factor; 11 (7%) ranked it as the least important factor.

For racial issues like Black Lives Matter protests, 6 (4.0%) participants ranked it as the most important/influential factor; 31 (20.7%) ranked it as the second most influential factor; 55 (37.7%) ranked it as the third most influential factor; 57 (37.7%) ranked it as the least important factor.

For political issues such as the closing of embassies, 30 (19.7%) participants ranked it as the most important/influential factor; 51 (33.6%) ranked it as the second most influential factor; 49 (32.2%) ranked it as the third most influential factor; 22 (14.5%) students ranked it as the least important factor.

The results were adjusted to show the relative weight of each factor. If a student ranked a factor as

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first, the factor was given a score of four. If a student ranked a factor as second, it was given a score of 3. If a student ranked a factor as third, it was given a score of 2. If a student ranked a factor as 4, it was given a score of 1. The total scores were added together to arrive at a final sum depicting the student's relative weighting for each factor. The final sums were as follows: trade war (350), covid-19 (528), racial issues (288) and political issues (393).

The sums were converted into a score based on the total number of one for simplification of comparison. To arrive atthis one-dimensional variable, the total number of respondents for each question was multiplied by four then divided by the sums mentioned in the above paragraph to arrive at X. Finally, the results were divided by 1/Xto arrive at the final decimal value. The results were as follows: trade war (.56), covid-19 (.84), racial issues (.48) and political issues (.65).

V. Results: Interview

Since the survey already provides the quantitative data for the students, the interview was designed to provide supplemental information to elucidate some of the underlying motivations for the students' selections. In order to limit redundancy, quotes are incorporated directly into the discussion section. The opinions were varied, but several common themes emerged and students provided insights into underlying reasons for the mindset of Chinese students regarding the four factors.

VI. Discussion

Question 1: Are you planning to study abroad to attend graduate school?

The first question revealed that only 25.8% of the students were considering going to a graduate school in a foreign country. Three quarters had no intention of attending graduate school abroad. In June 2019, the authors asked an identical question to a very similar population in the same province of China. At that time, only thirteen months earlier, 45% expressed interest in going to graduate school abroad. This represents a 42.6% reduction in desire to study abroad in only on year's time (Swanson, 2020).

There are myriad potential reasons for this dramatic decline. According to interviews with the students, the primary motivation for many students is to pursue the course of action which they believe to be safest. Since the first survey was conducted, Chinese student perception of safety abroad has shifted considerably. First, the majority of Chinese students interviewed expressed a sincerely held belief that China, as compared to other countries, was uniquely the safest from dangers associated with Covid-19.

Additionally, as pertains to the political unrest associated with the BLM protests, multiple respondents expressed their opinion that there was no racism in China, and thus violent protests such as those associated with the US' BLM movement would never occur. "Chinese are harmonious people and we respect the police," "the [authorities] would always treat us fairly," and "China doesn't have black people so this isn't an issue" are some specific viewpoints of interviewees pertaining to why such protests would not be a risk in China, but could be if they went abroad.

One student expressed a fear that political tensions such as embassy closures could have a direct impact on her ability to complete her education, or even more serious, return home to her family. No student directly linked the trade war to their personal safety. Thus indirectly, three of the four factors were occassionally characterized as safety issues.

An additional factor that seems to have influenced the Chinese student perception of safety is the decrease in access to information beyond China's "Great Firewall" (Zhong Z., Wang T., Huang M., 2017). As a result of the Covid-19 lockdown, students had even less exposure to outside news or information. Students consistently expressed receiving almost daily "news pop-ups" on their social media applications regarding the success of the Chinese Communist Party in dealing with the Covid-19 pandemic. Additionally, Chinese state media had a strong emphasis on the globally uncontrolled situation in Covid-19 management and students explained that this directly contributed to an increased fear for safety outside of China's borders.

Question 2: On a scale from 1 (little influence) to 5 (large influence) how important is the foreign country's current Covid-19 situation in making your decision?

The plurality of students (36.6%) selected the highest option and 28.6% selected the second highest option. Consequently, almost two thirds (65.2%) of respondents deemed the Covid-19 to have a strong influence. Approximately one fifth (21.1%) expressed it had a medium influence and only 13.7% deemed the influence to be among the bottom two options.

While opinions about the severity of Covid-19 throughout the US and many other countries vary considerably across different segments of the population, all students in the interviews conveyed a similar perspective (Lopez, Rainie, & Budiman, 2020). As one student explained, "Covid-19 is extremely dangerous and all precautions should be taken to protect oneself and one's family." Multiple students expressed potentially changing their future plans for graduate school abroad as a direct result of the fact that "China is very safe from Covid-19, but other countries (US) did not manage it well and are not very safe." Seven students expressed their "parents wouldn't want [them] to go to the US in case [they] become sick."

Of note, although 8.3% of students chose 1, that Covid-19 has minimal influence on their decision

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making, interviewers were unable to find a respondent to express this sentiment during the interviews.

Question 3: "If you are considering a university in America, please rank the following factors based on their importance in your decision-making process for graduate school. (1 is most important, 4 is least important) A. Economic trade war, B. Covid -19 situation, C. Racial issues like Black Lives Matter protests, D. Political issues such as closing embassies."

Covid-19 was the highest ranked factor (.84) by a significant margin. The second highest factor was political (.65) followed by the trade war (.56) and BLM protests (.48). As discussed previously, a significant portion of students believed that safety concerns are paramount and that Covid-19 was the most directly related to safety.

The division across the four scale rankings for the trade war factor was very even at approximately 21% choosing each of the first three levels of influence and 37% choosing least influential. To the extent any conclusions can be drawn, those that are less influenced by the trade war are the most prevalent, while students are very divided to the extent it does have influence.

BLM had the opposite ranking, with only 4% considering it the most influential, 20.7% considering it second most influential, but the three quarters of respondents choosing the two least influential options (37.7% and 37.7%). In the unprompted portion of the interviews, only a handful of students volunteered any opinions regarding BLM, instead prioritizing their time to discussing the other factors. Well over half of respondents (57.6%) believed Covid-19 to be the most significant, with 25.9% ranking it second. Nearly every respondent referenced this factor in the unprompted portion of their interview.

Regarding the political factor, the bulk of students believed it to be neither the greatest (19.7%) nor least (14.5%) influential, but somewhere in the middle (33.6%, 32.2%). From the interview, respondent "H" specified that the trade war was less important because unlike other factors that affect safety, the trade war was simply about money. "H" commented that it "is not hard to adjust spending habits, but if there is danger, it's harder to control."

As addressed above, health and safety seemed to be the most important issue for at least 32 of the students interviewed. Respondent "M" mentioned, "My father has always told me that the body should come first, and the study should come second." Similarly, Respondent "F" expressed the idea that "the coronavirus is a priority right now, and if it's not addressed at the root, no other option will exist." He adamantly believed that this issue should take precedence over any other foci so the world could return to normal. "F" suggested that the other issues like BLM protesting could be directly linked to the Covid-19 lockdown because people are "more stressed" and pugnacious. Additionally, the US' continued reference to China's fault in the Covid-19 origins might exacerbate the trade war and political escalations. F believed that once Covid-19 was quashed, all factors could become less salient, but wasn't confident Chinese students could return to their former viewpoints easily.

Respondent "A" suggested these factors could potentially be affected by their immediate relevance to students. For example, at the time of these interviews, Covid-19 seems to be the greatest threat to the world. While vaccines are allegedly on the horizon, no countries feel as if they currently have the Covid-19 crisis completely defeated (Pagliusi, et al., 2020). On the opposite end of the spectrum, according to "A," Chinese students are unlikely to have ever met a black person and don't see any direct connection between themselves and BLM issues, beyond potentially being collateral damage in a riot.

Three students feared there would be racism against Chinese people, which would ultimately contribute to diminished safety and an inferior quality of life. Two referenced hearing news about racism targeting Asians in the US. One believed that police would deliberately target Asians for racism.

Respondent "S" remarked, "the Sino-US trade war and the closure of embassies are political issues, but the former is more macro, it is difficult for foreign students to feel the personal impact of the trade war, but the closure of embassies will affect all Chinese in the United States, people may be forced to return home because they cannot get visas, so for the Chinese in the United States or the Chinese who are about to go to the United States, the embassy issue is more important." This sentiment was echoed by Respondent "Z," who believed that each side was trying to portray strength and that individual citizens could be sacrificed for the sake of bigger political posturing between the two countries.

VII. Conclusion

This case study can provide some insights into the potential perspectives of Chinese students at the present time. If this population is indicative of Chinese students as a whole, then there appears to be a significant reduction in willingness to study in the US compared to the previous year. With numerous US universities dependent on Chinese international students paying out of state tuition rates to meet their fiscal needs, a decline in demand can have a devasting effect on the US educational system. While many of the issues related to reduced interest is beyond an individual university's control and attributable to large scale political issues, US universities could take small efforts to mitigate some of the damage and improve the

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perception of their university to prospective Chinese applicants.

Based on the data, it appears safety is the students' primary concern, so a robust Covid-19 precaution plan could have a positive influence on student outlooks. Additionally, ensuring that Chinese students feel sheltered from racial discrimination or sudden changes to the US-China relationship that could jeopardize their ability to finish their degree, could potentially diminish some of the perceived disincentives for pursuing education in the US. The Covid-19 situation and current political climate are still very much in flux and considerable changes could occur in the upcoming months. It will be important for American higher education institutes to continue tracking this situation as it continues to evolve.

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