

## RESEARCH ARTICLE

# Changing Chinese parental and student responses to higher education for study abroad during the Covid 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. Meanwhile, Chinese parents have a reputation for their significant involvement and influence in the educational decision-making domain concerning their children's academic trajectories and developmental pathways. This study employed approximately 60-minute ethnographic interviews with 15 participants to investigate Chinese parental decision-making regarding their children's study abroad during the COVID crisis. 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 impacted the decision-making process regarding study abroad among Chinese families during the COVID crisis, and the "one child" has been a common factor involved in the decision-making process across these themes. Implications are discussed.

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

## 1. Introduction

The Chinese national government lifted the restrictive COVID-19 policy on 9 January 2023. The COVID-19 pandemic protocols have significantly impacted the number of Chinese students studying abroad. The outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic in early 2020 triggered unprecedented disruptions in various aspects of life, including the global education landscape. Chinese students, renowned for their pursuit of international education opportunities, were significantly impacted by the pandemic. Since 2020, the number of Chinese students in the U.S. has declined precipitously, which has been the most popular destination among Chinese students and parents for studying abroad. According to the Institute of International Education's Open Doors report<sup>[1]</sup>. At the same time, China remained the largest source of international students in the U.S. the number has suffered a 20% drop from 372,532 students during 2019/20 to 290,086

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students in 2021/22, slightly lower than the 304,040 Chinese study abroad students in the U.S. during 2014/15. In the aftermath of COVID, more Chinese students are choosing to attend university in the U.K. and European Union. There are presently 151,000 Chinese students in the U.K., which represents a 41% increase in Chinese students over five years, followed by five-year rate increases in Germany (24%)<sup>[2]</sup>, France (24%)<sup>[3]</sup>, and Spain (10%)<sup>[4]</sup>.

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. The pandemic also triggered Chinese parents to observe how Western nations dealt with and controlled the crisis. These experiences significantly contributed to shaping their understanding of Western societies and the efficacy of their healthcare systems.

Meanwhile, the pursuit of excellence within higher education is deeply rooted in Chinese traditions, particularly within Confucian ideals, and holds significant esteem within the broader context of Chinese culture. Historically, Chinese parents have paid the entirety of their children's higher education, tuition, and living expenses. Throughout the Chinese educational system, from primary school to graduate school education in universities, the design, funding, and primary operations are under the purview of national and provincial governments. In addition, Chinese families have exhibited fierce competition in their endeavors to secure top-tier public education opportunities for their children, reflecting the profound importance placed on education and its potential impact on future success and social mobility.

As China's economy has grown, leading to increased capital gains and greater net personal wealth among its populace, a rising number of affluent parents have emerged. Salisbury et al.<sup>[5]</sup> suggest that students from higher-income homes and with well-educated parents are more likely to aspire to study abroad. While most recent studies<sup>[8, 30]</sup> focus on the impact of COVID-19 on study abroad and international students or students' perspectives from the academic decision-making process, limited research reveals parental roles in the decision-making process and the critical factors required for parents to decide. Therefore, this research aims to explore how the disruptions caused by COVID-19 affected Chinese students' pursuit of studying abroad, the decision-making patterns within Chinese families regarding university choices, and the response from the Chinese Ministry of Education in handling these changes.

## **2. Literature review**

### **2.1. Patterns of Chinese familial university decision-making**

Historically, the extensive financial support and administrative engagement of national and provincial governments in China's education system, from mandatory schooling to tertiary levels, has spurred Chinese parents to vigorously vie for top-tier public education opportunities for their children. Most Chinese parents actively participate in their children's college application journey, often providing hands-on support and guidance. Castleman and Page<sup>[6]</sup> found a significant influence of parental involvement on postsecondary decision-making, particularly in increasing on-time college enrollment rates.

Family plays a pivotal role in shaping Chinese students' educational choices and deciding on domestic and international universities. Studies<sup>[7-9]</sup> have drawn attention to multiple factors that support Chinese parental support for studying abroad, such as destination recognition, academic reputation, teacher quality, cost, family involvement, and friends' choices. Li<sup>[10]</sup> also confirmed that parents still took control of the final decision on the selection of country, program, and university choice. However, they tried to leave the

impression that their children were in charge of the whole process. Bodycott and Lai<sup>[11]</sup> documented this apparent reality: “No matter who initiated the discussion about cross-border or trans-local (university) study, there was evidence that students did feel they had a say in the decision-making process” (p.264). Typically, Chinese parents assert the final authority in decision-making, drawing on their broader life experience, understanding Chinese universities, insight into labor market requirements, and knowledge of prospective cities. This practice is often perceived in China as acting in the child's best interest, encapsulated in the common saying, “I eat more salt than you eat rice,” implying their greater experience and wisdom in life's various facets.

## **2.2. Financial consideration**

Financial considerations became more critical as families evaluated the economic impact of the pandemic on their ability to support their children's international education plans. A study<sup>[12]</sup> highlights that financial stress and fears of unemployment during the pandemic have more significant consequences for families with pre-existing economic hardship, emphasizing the heightened significance of financial considerations during this time. As current college-age children are mostly born under the one-child policy, parents and grandparents from both sides want to support the child in education and other life engagements<sup>[13]</sup>. Families with only one child could concentrate their resources, potentially providing more opportunities for their child, including better education and the possibility of studying abroad<sup>[14]</sup>. This financial support is crucial, as international education can be expensive.

In addition, over the last few years, there has been a minimum 15 percent disparity between the peak and trough levels of the dollar, exclusive of inflation considerations and price hikes. As CNN reports, in cities like New York, there was an average surge of 25 percent in rental costs before and after the pandemic, a figure that stands apart from considerations of rent-controlled properties<sup>[15]</sup>. This substantial increase has compelled numerous families to deliberate more cautiously when selecting a place to settle<sup>[16]</sup>. With the fluctuating currency exchange rates and inflation increase (nearly 7% compared to 2019) over the past few years, Chinese parents have begun to examine the financial advantages of cost (tuition, housing, and travel), familial impact, and the cultural security of sending their children to foreign universities.

## **2.3. One-child policy**

In addition to financial considerations, the “one-child policy” significantly influences the decision-making process of studying abroad. Given the cultural, language, and societal differences<sup>[5]</sup>, some parents may worry about their children's safety and well-being abroad. Since students currently in college or around pre-college ages were mainly born under “the one-child policy” (1982-2015), parents may not be willing to take any chance by risking their only child's safety for specific destinations. Issues like racial discrimination, political tensions, or crime in certain countries can be a deterrent. One set of parents contemplates sending their children to destinations deemed relatively safer for studying abroad, while another set seeks domestic options, such as satellite campuses of foreign universities. The latter group particularly values international higher education quality and sees this alternative as a means to access it within their own country. Bodycott<sup>[7]</sup> emphasized that the satellite campuses also satisfied parents who want their children to stay closer to them without leaving the country.

Studying abroad might not be conducive to these family dynamics, especially if it leads to the child settling permanently in another country. Parents also express concern regarding the probability of their children returning home after completing their studies<sup>[17]</sup>. Fischer<sup>[18]</sup> underscores that Chinese families comprehensively evaluate multiple factors to determine the suitability of pursuing higher education abroad. Although financial aspects often play an essential role in the decision-making process<sup>[19]</sup>, they do not

constitute the sole consideration, with issues such as safety, family, and cultural elements also being significant concerns that influence decision-making.

## **2.4. Historical and societal impacts**

Shaped by thousands of years of Confucian influence, Chinese society harbors a profound reverence for education and a persistent pursuit of scholarly excellence<sup>[6, 7, 20]</sup>. Access to higher education has been and continues to be influenced by traditional gender stereotypes, often affecting the opportunities available to different genders<sup>[21]</sup>. Tsui and Rich<sup>[22]</sup> contend that the "One-Child Policy" has ameliorated these traditional biases to some extent, as, irrespective of gender, an only child in a family typically receives undivided parental support for educational opportunities. Although it falls outside the purview of this review, it is crucial to acknowledge that this shift has profoundly influenced decision-making related to studying abroad.

Given that a substantial number of Chinese students who study abroad are "only children," predominantly born after the 1980s, parents are often hesitant to send their children to colleges or universities outside their home province, much less to a foreign country. Studies<sup>[11, 23]</sup> suggest that cultural values, such as filial piety and the importance of education, significantly shape the decision-making process of Chinese students and their parents. In cultures like China, where filial piety is deeply ingrained, there is often an expectation for children, particularly an only child, to care for their elderly parents. The study discusses the cultural expectations and practices related to filial piety, which include the responsibility of children, particularly only children, to care for their elderly parents<sup>[24]</sup>. The prospect of studying abroad may disrupt these familial obligations, especially if it results in the child establishing a permanent residence in another country. Parents are concerned about their children choosing to stay abroad post-graduation, potentially marrying a foreign national, and not returning to China, straying from traditional family expectations and responsibilities<sup>[25]</sup>. Adding to the parents' preference for keeping their children close to home is the deeply ingrained belief in Chinese society and history that marriage is a duty; choosing not to have children is often viewed as neglecting traditional family responsibilities.

To Western cultural analysts, the Chinese emphasis on family, ancestry, and descendants might seem unique. It is essential to highlight that the annual homecoming during the Chinese New Year, known as the Spring Festival Transport Season (Chunyun), triggers the world's largest yearly human migration. In 2019, passenger trips nearly reached 3 billion<sup>[26]</sup> as individuals traveled to fulfill their family and ancestral duties. This phenomenon underscores the profound commitment to familial and cultural traditions. To this point, Leichter<sup>[27]</sup> argued that "the family is always a setting in which important educational encounters occur" (p. 2). Bodycott<sup>[28]</sup> finds that the desire to fulfill parental expectations and maintain parent-child solid relationships influences Chinese students' decisions to study abroad. How such decision-making is processed, the decision matrix, and the decision tree within the family are not particularly well-known<sup>[29]</sup>.

## **2.5. Impact of China-US relations on Chinese students**

As countries implemented travel restrictions and universities shifted to online learning modalities, prospective students and their families faced heightened uncertainty and apprehension. Former President Trump's accusatory statements, such as labeling COVID-19 as the "Chinese virus" or "China virus," towards China for the origins of COVID-19, further exacerbated these concerns, particularly among Asian communities. This led to a surge in anti-Asian discrimination in the United States<sup>[30]</sup>. Moreover, Trump's framing of China and Mexico as enemies of America extended to portraying Asian and Latino Americans as carriers of COVID-19, further fueling tensions<sup>[31]</sup>. Studies have shown that Trump's use of terms linking COVID-19 to China, such as "Kung-flu" and "Chinese virus," contributed to the rise in animosity directed at Asians, particularly on days when Trump mentioned China and COVID-19 in his tweets<sup>[32, 33]</sup>. The resulting

environment of fear and discrimination significantly impacted perceptions of safety and inclusivity, ultimately influencing students' decisions regarding their study abroad destinations. Whatley & Raby<sup>[34]</sup> found that minoritized students, in particular, expressed concerns about experiencing racism and general safety in the study abroad environment. It potentially shapes their decisions on where to study overseas.

The confluence of Trump's rhetoric, the COVID-19 pandemic, and heightened discrimination have had profound implications for international student enrollment in the United States<sup>[35]</sup>. The uncertainty surrounding the pandemic and concerns about safety and discrimination led many students and their families to reconsider their study-abroad plans. In addition, the Trump Administration introduced immigration policies aimed at Chinese students and scholars, including reducing visa durations for specific high-tech fields and implementing a ban on entry for Chinese students and scholars affiliated with military connections. Research indicates a significant decline in international students, particularly from Asian countries, choosing the United States as their preferred destination<sup>[36]</sup>. Instead, students have increasingly turned to countries perceived as safer and more welcoming, where they can pursue their academic goals without fear of discrimination or hostility.

## **2.6. Theoretical framework**

Education in China is understood roughly in the context of "human capital theory," along with the concept of educational capital introduced by Nobel laureate Theodore Schultz<sup>[37]</sup>. Tan<sup>[38]</sup> later expanded on the application of human capital theory in the context of education, emphasizing that education holds a central role and is viewed as the primary driver of economic development. The human capital theory is consistent with long-standing views of the Chinese family's perspective toward educational investment. Parents who support and finance their children's study abroad programs facilitate exposure to diverse academic and professional environments, allowing them to develop global competencies and adaptability, which are increasingly valuable in today's interconnected world<sup>[39]</sup>. By investing in study abroad, parents enable their children to acquire unique skills and experiences that can set them apart in the global job market. Chinese parents understand that university education has been increasingly understood as providing "global competency" for Chinese students to engage in international commerce successfully.

Furthermore, study abroad experiences also contribute to the acquisition of soft skills, such as adaptability, communication, and intercultural competence, which are integral to enhancing human capital<sup>[40]</sup>. When parents recognize the value of these intangible skills, they are more inclined to support and invest in their children's study-abroad journeys. This study aims to enhance our comprehension of this matter by conducting a comprehensive examination, evaluating and exploring parental involvement and the influencing factors in their children's decision-making process when studying abroad in the post-COVID era. This investigation focuses on how parents engage in this process, considering various governments' approaches to managing international health emergencies.

## **2.7. Research question**

Recognizing the distinct significance of the parent's role in the decision-making process of Chinese students studying abroad<sup>[10]</sup>, the research questions, stemming from initial observations, are:

1. How do the concerns regarding the role of Chinese parents in higher education decision-making change during and after the COVID-19 pandemic?
2. What are the impacts of the American restrictions on student visas and air travel, specifically the sanctions targeting China, during the Trump Administration?

3. To what extent has Chinese national policy regarding the COVID pandemic affected foreign university recruitment, enrollment, and international travel?

Lastly, be mindful of the two principal cohorts of Chinese students seeking to study in the West: 1. students who have not performed at the highest public levels in lower forms, thereby being potentially excluded from the top tier of Chinese universities, and 2. the highest-performing students who possess the desire to access an elite Western university education. As China has developed increased affluence with increased access to market capital, foreign disposable capital has impacted Chinese students deciding to leave the Chinese public education system. Disposable income has created historically unanticipated options for higher education, given that study abroad was previously only for those elite students most often sent abroad and supported by the national government.

### **3. Materials and methods**

To address these questions, 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 <sup>[41]</sup>. The interview participants are selected without compensation.

Parental observations, experiences, and insights into foreign university understanding served to provide a context for contemporary university selection as well as the character of the respective academic and non-academic learning experiences, including language, culture, critical thinking, broadly global competence, and a delineated set of observations of both positive and negative attributes of the foreign university. Once the analysis was completed, the findings and interpretations of the data were synthesized in regular patterns, aligned with the research methodology, and referenced to the appropriate research theories.

#### **3.1. Participants**

Researchers suggest that a sample size of around 10 to 20 interviews may be sufficient for achieving data saturation and capturing diverse perspectives on a specific phenomenon <sup>[42]</sup>. Researchers need to prioritize the quality of data over the quantity of interviews<sup>[43]</sup>. Conducting in-depth, open-ended interviews with participants who can provide valuable insights and experiences related to the research topic is essential for obtaining rich and meaningful data<sup>[44]</sup>. Participants were recruited through random samplings. I extend my invitation through social media platforms, international schools, and international education consultants. The initial invitation was delivered to 20 parents, with five rejections. The study involved 15 participants, comprising two male (fathers) and 13 female (mothers) individuals. Among them, these participants were coming from 4 different provinces in China. These 15 parents (**Table 1**) self-acknowledged having their children study in other destination countries, including the United States, the United Kingdom, Australia, Japan, and a British University satellite campus in China. Among these participants, six parents claimed their children were sent abroad for study during and post-COVID, eight parents claimed their children were sent abroad after the Chinese government lifted the Covid restrictions, and one parent changed their mind about studying in the UK to the satellite campus.

**Table 1.** Participants list.

Participant	Age	Occupation	Number of children	Age of the child	Destination
Mrs. Huang	46	Self-Employed	2	19	Illinois, USA
Mrs. Chen	53	Self-Employed	2	27	New York, USA
Mrs. Yu	47	Sales Manager	1	18	Alberta, Canada
Mrs. Li	46	Civil Servant	1	19	Melbourne, Australia
Mrs. Zhang	45	Civil Servant	1	19	London, UK
Mrs. Chen	48	Teacher	1	19	Ohio, USA
Mrs. Meng	47	Civil Servant	1	23	Manchester, UK
Mr. Zhou	49	Self-Employed	1	20	Ningbo, China
Mrs. Zheng	46	Housewife	1	19	Edinburgh, UK
Mr. Jin	46	Businessman	1	20	California, USA
Mrs. Cai	49	Civil Servant	1	21	New Jersey, USA
Mrs. Chen	47	Teacher	1	18	Leeds, UK
Mrs. Tong	47	Teacher	1	20	Tokyo, Japan
Mrs. Liao	51	Self-Employed	2	25	New Jersey, USA

### 3.2. Data collection

A semi-structured interview was preferred to investigate and elucidate the phenomenon<sup>[45]</sup>. The interview protocols were meticulously crafted, drawing upon an extensive review of relevant literature with a preliminary social media platform search. Lungu<sup>[46]</sup> emphasizes the value of conducting a thorough literature review to inform the development of interview protocols. These protocols were also shaped by an initial exploration of publicly available social media posts about studying abroad. 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<sup>[47, 48]</sup>.

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. These short-answer questions served as prompts at the beginning of the interview, helping to alleviate parental concerns and, in some cases, anxiety while encouraging the collection of more research data. Patton<sup>[49]</sup> 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<sup>[50]</sup>.

All participants were offered multiple interview methods: physical, face-to-face, video, and audio. The study highlights that the quality of data obtained through telephone interviews can be comparable to face-to-face interviews<sup>[51]</sup>. The interview was administered as a one-to-one interview process. Interviewing Chinese Mandarin helped participants better comprehend the investigative process's design, purpose, and comparative

intricacies, leading to more active and engaged participation. Researchers<sup>[52, 53]</sup> highlight the importance of considering participants' language proficiency as it can influence the accuracy and reliability of the research.

## 4. Results

The following section will provide examples of the themes generated from the combined interview transcripts. Six decision factors' themes were identified. However, several safety incidents could not be classified under these themes and did not receive an individual consensus to develop an additional category.

### Theme 1: Physical Safety

The participants most often generated this theme of safety concern. The emergence of the COVID-19 pandemic catalyzed Chinese parents' exposure to how Western countries handled and managed the crisis. With widespread media coverage and information sharing, parents witnessed varied approaches to combating the pandemic across Western countries. These experiences significantly contributed to shaping their understanding of Western societies and the efficacy of their healthcare systems.

"I could not sleep day by day seeing from the news how the (US) government handles the COVID and people die. I wish my son could leave immediately, but I did not want him to know I was very worried." Mrs. Chen sent her son for graduate study in New York City the semester before the pandemic. "I wish I had not sent him to the US, and you could not imagine how worried I was then. I asked him to drop out of school and reapply somewhere else, but he refused." The pandemic highlighted decision-making, as parents sought to safeguard their children's health and well-being amid the uncertainty surrounding study-abroad opportunities. Mrs. Li added, "I transferred my daughter from the US to Australia just to see how the US government handles Covid-19. The millions of deaths have scared me already with other safety issues along with COVID-19, such as Asian Hate Crimes." Mrs. Zheng shared a similar decision: "The US was our first option, but seeing the wide spread of Covid and millions of deaths, her dad (Mrs. Zheng's husband) and I believed commonwealth countries fit us better, such as the UK or Australia. It is much safer than the America."

Mrs. Dong sent her daughter to Japan for undergraduate study and responded, "Japan is fairly safe and well-managed. I also visited Japan previously, so I was not too worried about my daughter while she was there during the pandemic." Mrs. Dong is the only participant with a child study in Japan, and her experience has been unique among all the participants. She further explained, "Since the Japanese government has good management of COVID, I was not too worried." Her response echoed those parents who have children in the US, and those parents believed that the US was not managing well of the COVID. Mrs. Feng added, "We had a lot of thought over the past two years, as the COVID was so bad. And it had an impact on the international students. As parents, safety and security first, life first, surely." The diverse responses of foreign countries to the pandemic left a lasting impact on Chinese parents' perceptions. However, none of the parents have experienced how foreign governments handle the Covid issue, reading news from social media, watching national TV, and hearing from their children. As most of the participant's children are the only children in their families, parents are unwilling to take risks.

### Theme 2: "Daughters go to the UK, sons go to the US" (Gender of Applicant)

The majority of the participants also generated this theme. These participants believed 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. In addition, about 1/3 of the parents provided another interpretation of the two countries: "I think the UK fits better to educate my daughter to be an elegance lady, while the US is too open for my daughter," "Boys need to be bold, so I think it is ok for my son to go to the United States, but for my daughter, I do not think so. I want her to be somewhere safe."



Multiple parents expressed that boys (sons) "could eat some bitter," meaning they could experience societal difficulty, but girls shall be well-protected. Mrs. Meng shared, "To be honest, our first thought is to send our kid to the United States. But now when you see the safety issue in America and the geopolitical tension between our country (China) and them (the US), the US is no longer our priority. People around us who have children abroad all recommended that the first is the UK. "

These perceptions might be based on media portrayals, word-of-mouth experiences, or personal beliefs about each country's cultural and social experiences. However, almost all of the parents who have daughters choose the UK over the US due to safety concerns, especially after they experienced the COVID situation, and then followed with other understanding regarding personal preferences or country image.

Besides the traditional perception towards different genders, parents expressed concern regarding age and marriage to their children, especially daughters.

Mrs. Zheng said, "Girls attending doctoral studies is a kind of joke," and further explained, "Once she (my daughter) completes the doctoral study, she will be too old for all aspects, namely marriage and pregnancy. I am too traditional, but I still feel that girls do not have to be outstanding." Mrs. Zhang shared a similar point of view from an employment perspective: "Girls' employment is best to be stable. Do not be too spellbound; it is best to have security (position with tenures)." Both parents believe receiving too much education may result in older age and pressure on the male partner, which may result in a disadvantage in the "dating and marriage market." This may be different from a Western point of view as Women receiving higher education and excelling in their careers are more accepted and often celebrated.

### Theme 3: Familial Financial Concerns

At least half of the parents mentioned that financial reasons have been a significant factor in sending their children to destinations other than the United States since the pandemic. The pandemic brought about economic hardships for many families. Parents now carefully assess the financial implications of decisions to study abroad, considering currency fluctuations, job uncertainties, and potential financial assistance available in the destination country <sup>[54]</sup>. Mrs. Meng stated, "I have to commit that we have to be practical for sending my kid to study in the destination country I could afford also. With US dollars getting stronger and British Pounds getting weaker, I think studying in the UK is more cost-effective." With policy enforcement by the Trump administration due to COVID-19, minimal visa service centers remained open within Mainland China during the pandemic, and airline operations were reduced due to Chinese government policy, so a certain number of Chinese students were kept away from the United States. According to the Wall Street Journal <sup>[55]</sup>, a one-way air ticket between the US and China during COVID-19 has cost more than \$5,000.00 in economy class, which is about ten times compared to before the pandemic.

Not only did the COVID policy impact financial hardship for Chinese families, but the trade conflict between China and the US, initiated by the Trump administration, had significant impacts on both economies and global trade dynamics, which resulted in economic slowdown and export decline. As China heavily relies on exports to fuel its economic growth, the trade tension, lockdowns, and travel restrictions have disrupted supply chains, leading to shortages of goods and services. When supply decreases while demand remains constant or even increases, prices can rise, leading to inflation. Li's study on inflation in the US during the COVID-19 crisis provides insights into the inflationary trends observed in the United States amidst the pandemic <sup>[56]</sup>. Chinese parents see that inflation can affect the cost of living, tuition fees, and other expenses associated with studying abroad and their financial stability during an economic downturn, prompting parents to consider alternative education options or destinations, such as domestic satellite universities.

Mrs. Zhang claimed, “The cost of living in the US is also comparatively higher, such as in New York City, than in London.” Mr. Zhou convinced her daughter to choose a satellite campus in China instead of the main campus abroad. “... not only for safety reasons, but also tuition fees, living expenses, and travel costs are much lower for attending a satellite campus within China, making it a more financially feasible choice for my family...It is expensive to go abroad all at once. It is comparatively more cost-friendly to have her receive her undergraduate education in China and graduate-level education in the UK.” Satellite campus as an alternative option expanded parents’ choices as a new option for their children. (The Chinese Ministry of Education released special permission for students who were interrupted by COVID-19 to be enrolled in a satellite campus without a “Gaokao” Score as a way to accommodate for their higher education opportunities.) Not only would the living cost be comparatively lower, but the tuition would also be lower than at the main campus. (**Table 2**)

**Table 2.** University satellite campus and host campus tuition.

University	Chinese Satellite Campus Rate (Approx) USD	Foreign Host Campus Rate (Approx) USD
University of Nottingham	\$13,750	\$15,500 - \$44,350
Hong Kong Baptist University	\$13,750 - \$16,500	\$18,500
The University of Liverpool	\$12,100	\$27,800 - \$55,320
New York University	\$ 29,000	\$60,000
Duke University	\$11,680	\$63,450
Kean University	\$9,000	\$20,000
The Chinese University of Hong Kong	\$15,800	\$18,500
Lomonosov Moscow State University	\$5,500	\$7,500
Israel Institute of Technology	\$13,000	\$15,000
The Hong Kong University of Science and Technology	\$13,750	\$21,030

#### Theme 4: Likelihood of Return

A fourth theme found among most parents expressed concerns about whether their children will remain abroad after graduation. Mrs. Liao shared, “My children have to return. We discussed this condition before I sent them to the UK.” Mrs. Chen added, “One of the reasons for choosing the UK is the difficulty of remaining due to immigration policy and limited job opportunities.” Parents shared their ways of having their children return after studies. As most of the children were born under the one-child policy, having them return to China becomes a big worry which impacts their decision-making process. To parents, this is also a dilemma. On the one hand, they wish their children to secure a competitive position abroad, especially in big cities. On the other hand, as the only child in the family, they also want their children to stay at their side after studying abroad.

To balance this dilemma, some parents choose Hong Kong or Shanghai as their destination city after returning as a compromise since both cities are believed to be the most international cities in China. Mr. Jin emphasized, “I told her that she has to return to China, and she told me she would have to be in Shanghai or Hong Kong. But she preferred Hong Kong.” Another example replied by Mrs. Yu, “I do think she should go to see the world, as to where she stays, that is her decision, but one thing I do remind her is that it is best to come back to China, as to say that you go to Hong Kong or any place in China, it does not matter.” Mr. Jin added, “She is my only daughter; she has to be close to me. If something like the travel ban happens again, I know she is safe, and I am reachable.”

With the increasing tension between China and the US, limited flight schedules, and uncertainty of quarantine policy, parents were also concerned about their children's capability of return. According to He<sup>[57]</sup>, from CNN, there were more than 300 weekly flight round trips between China and the US before curbs were imposed in early 2020 due to the coronavirus, which is down to 12 weekly round trips by each side. In addition to the limited flight schedule, there were governmental requirements for onboarding, such as two "Negative" COVID reports within 48 hours, and the report shall be from designated test labs. Mrs. Chen said, "I bought 4-5 air tickets for my son to return, which cost more than USD 30,000. You never know which one will be canceled due to government policy, and all I want is for my son to return. People say daughters are pearls in the palm, but sons are the same. He is everything to me." During the COVID, the Chinese central government introduced circuit breaker measures for scheduled international passenger flights, limiting international flights to a minimum operational level, plus a multi-layer test for COVID-19 to get on board. These policies result in difficulty securing an air ticket at a reasonable price and successfully getting on board. Millions of Chinese international students have been kept away from China for these years due to the policy until the COVID policy was lifted in 2023.

Through the interview, parents were not only involved with their children's college decision-making but also involved in their children's career and life decisions, which may foster a deeper understanding of their choices and provide reassurance about their intentions to maintain a connection to their Chinese roots despite studying abroad, and being as the only child in the family may also deepen the desire from the parent for connection. While keeping them apart due to the national policy, parents must reconsider their destination for studying abroad. Balancing individual aspirations and familial ties can contribute to making informed decisions that best suit the students and their families' long-term interests.

#### Theme 5: Elite Education

Through the interviews, it was possible to see that elite education was understood as the best education resource a student could obtain. As all participants do not have experience studying abroad, ranking is the most direct image of a prestigious foreign university. Mrs. Zhang told the interviewer that one of the reasons they chose London was because of university ranking: "In the end, she went to London because we thought it was better ranked." Mrs. Zheng emphasized, "The goal is always to move forward; there is 100 towards 50, and the ranking is still essential to measure." Mrs. Yu added that it was not from the school ranking but the school facilities. "This school laboratory is very famous and well-known worldwide." Mrs. Li shared that ranking was the priority once she transferred her daughter from the US to Australia, which was "a comparatively safer place." Although all the parents acknowledged safety concerns for their children while abroad, having them receive a foreign education is the risk "they are willing to take." As elite educational institutions are often associated with prestige, academic excellence, and enhanced career prospects, choosing a comparatively safer destination is one of the keys to securing a high-quality education abroad.

As Fong<sup>[14]</sup> described, these children were born as the "only hope." Parents expressed that they would unequivocally support their children. Chinese parents provide support to help their children succeed. Parents believed that the foreign experience would foster their children's further development in cross-cultural learning, graduate school applications, acceptance, and beyond.

In addition, most participants also expressed that it is a "MUST" for their children to attend graduate school (Master level). Mrs. Zhang explained from her work experience, "According to current societal requirements, even where I am working, a master's degree is a minimum requirement." Although most participants did not specify the reason for the "MUST," most college students who studied abroad obtained a graduate degree. A few parents pointed out a similar situation in their own experience at the workplace due

to the minimum hiring requirement being a graduate degree in some so-called “white-collar” jobs. Moreover, these jobs bring a certain level of social status, especially those associated with the Chinese Nation Labor System (Bianzhi), a kind of tenure. While parents typically exhibit reluctance towards exposing their only child to any form of risk during overseas studies, an intriguing dichotomy arises when contemplating elite education. Despite their aversion to risk, parents often express a preference for relatively safer study destinations when it comes to securing elite educational opportunities for their children.

#### Theme 6: “Conor-Overtaking”

The “Conor-Overtaking” was understood in the context of taking the opportunity to take shortcuts to make swift progress. The sixth theme was found among more than half of the parents who stated they prepared “early enough” to have their children avoid the Chinese College Entrance Examination (GaoKao). Mrs. Chen said: “It is fairly difficult to have my kid be admitted into “985 projects” or “211 projects” universities, but attending international high schools eligible my kid applies for and very likely be enrolled into the world's top 100 universities, which is a Conor-Overtaking.” Fewer than ten universities in mainland China are ranked in the top 100 in Times, US News, or QS world university rankings.

As a country with a large population (in 2023, there are more than 10 million students attending college entrance examinations), fighting for a seat in the top university in China has become an indicator of lifelong success. Mrs. Li also added, “Competing within the environment under Chinese educational policy, it was fairly difficult once you were sidetracked academically.” It was expected to find job descriptions, and municipal talent import programs that graduated degree requirements and top school rankings (mostly world ranking top 100-200) are specifically highlighted. Thus, the matrix that the parents were using to determine “progress” was primarily based on university ranks.

Thirteen parents acknowledged that their children will not attend Chinese national college entrance examinations. Unlike the previous generation's study abroad rationales, in which students “failed” the Chinese national college entrance examination, parents of this generation have been prepared to send their kids to study abroad at their earliest convenience. A few parents also stated that they would have their children attend foreign university satellite campuses in China if COVID-19 could not be attained. In addition, although schools provide college consultants to assist students’ applications, more than 10 participants admitted they used private educational consultants to help with their children’s applications. Covid may not cause this. However, 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. Thus, by choosing a safe destination for study abroad, students can secure access to these superior educational resources while mitigating political instability or discrimination risks, which is essential for parents and their children.

## 5. Discussion

Since the qualitative sample size was comparatively small, the data collected spoke for those participants, offering insight into the Chinese parents’ role in the college decision-making process, the impact of COVID-19 on Chinese students’ pursuit of study abroad, and the bureaucratic response of the Chinese Ministry of Education. The results of the questions showed that Chinese parents were deeply involved in all aspects of their children’s college decision-making process, and the COVID-19 pandemic significantly impacted destination choices. The qualitative data from parents indicated that approximately one-third of participants reported the decision was their choice, although they claimed their children were involved in the decision-making process. However, one of the most significant impacts of the pandemic on

parental decision-making is the heightened focus on health and safety. All parents acknowledged that safety issues and accessibility to their children are the priorities for their children's study abroad destination. The spread of COVID-19 has raised concerns that have not only been observed in domestic healthcare systems but have also affected potential study-abroad destinations, raising concerns about the quality of healthcare systems in these locations and the risk of exposure to infectious diseases<sup>[58]</sup>. It has highlighted the importance of harmonized public health strategies and competencies for infectious diseases across international boundaries<sup>[59]</sup>. The COVID-19 pandemic has led to adaptations in healthcare services to meet changing demands, maintain service quality, and ensure safety<sup>[60]</sup>. Thus, parents favored destinations with resilient healthcare infrastructures and adept strategies for handling pandemics. In addition, accessibility is one major factor in choosing a destination for their children to study abroad.

Meanwhile, the pandemic has led to widespread travel restrictions and visa complications in many countries<sup>[61]</sup>, and geopolitical tension between China and the US has worsened this situation, especially for those initially preparing to study in the US or already in the US higher education institutions. Parents are cautious about selecting destinations with uncertain entry requirements and potential difficulties returning home during emergencies. They consider countries with flexible visa policies and clear contingency plans to address unexpected situations. Although geopolitical tensions are one of the major factors for parents to consider, the Chinese national quarantine policy and circuit breaker measures for scheduled international passenger flights also significantly impact parents' decision-making; half of the parents thought the international satellite campus as an alternative if the COVID was not detained and one parent persuaded her daughter to study at the satellite campus in China rather than go abroad.

In addition, due to the restriction on sensitive primary students who graduated from a list of Chinese Universities that the Trump administration believed were tied to the Chinese military and National Defense, Sino-US satellite campuses became their only option if they were seeking further education at the US higher education institutes.

Meanwhile, in response to the travel restrictions on student visas and air travel due to COVID, the Ministry of Education (MOE) granted special permission for higher education admissions to ten foreign satellite campuses and specific cooperative programs with self-admission permissions for those students who have difficulties for studying abroad due to multiple international policies impacting Chinese students study abroad. In addition, according to government policy<sup>[62]</sup>, these schools are allowed to set their admission requirements, and the admission committees from individual institutes will review the applications. Frankly, students who obtained a university offer will be eligible to apply for a seat in China to continue their studies. A few interviewed parents committed to sending their children to these satellite campuses, e.g., Ningbo Nottingham University, to receive a Western education, but without leaving the country.

Zhao<sup>[63]</sup> observed that Chinese parents place significant value on external educational indicators, such as university rankings, with academic performance facilities, particularly standardized test scores, being a key measure of success in their eyes. While parents did not perceive their involvement in their children's college decisions as unjustified interference, they maintained that participating in the process was in the best interest of their children. In conversations with parents, they expressed feeling comfortable. They are instinctively obliged to assist with their children's application process and future career and life plans, viewing it as an integral aspect of their parental responsibility.

This result aligns with earlier research by Bodycott and Lai<sup>[11]</sup>, which confirmed that parents were perceived as authoritative figures. Obedience, deeply ingrained in family traditions, provided stability, monetary assistance, and career advice. The study highlighted that the cultural position of Chinese parents

was shaped by financial background, Confucian cultural values, and job-related factors, encompassing global proficiency and international market dynamics. Since the current generation of college students is mostly born under the One-Child Policy, parents also expressed their unwillingness to have their children take safety risks. It is important to note that “Only Child” has been a common theme across the other themes. Parents with only one child may have been more cautious about sending their child overseas for studies due to concerns about safety and well-being during a global health crisis. The one-child policy and the pandemic likely heightened parental worries about their child's health, access to healthcare, and overall safety while studying in a foreign country<sup>[59]</sup>.

Furthermore, the one-child policy has also shaped societal attitudes towards education and success in China. Parents prioritize their children's education and future opportunities, leading them to prefer destinations with robust healthcare systems and effective pandemic response strategies<sup>[64]</sup>. The policy's influence on family dynamics and parental decision-making may have played a role in determining whether to send their only child abroad for studies during a global health crisis like COVID-19.

Lastly, as Chinese parents gained insights into how Western countries managed the pandemic, their preferences for study-abroad destinations evolved, often significantly. Nations perceived to have successfully contained the virus and offered a safe and stable environment garnered heightened potential university interest. Conversely, countries facing significant challenges in controlling the outbreak experienced decreased safety appeal in the eyes of Chinese parents.

## **6. Conclusion**

The pandemic caused disruptions in education systems globally, creating uncertainties and challenges for students planning to study abroad<sup>[65]</sup>. This study provided a lens through which to study parental involvement in Chinese international students' college decision-making process and the interruption of COVID-19 in China. We examined the tensions between traditional parental decision-making within the context of university selection, despite those factors, which may, in principle, dictate the importance and value of a university education premised only upon academic excellence, cultural understanding, and global competence.

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, especially under international health crises such as COVID-19. 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 due to COVID; 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.

This study examined parental perspectives on Chinese students studying abroad after COVID emergency, which may draw the attention of academic researchers, higher education institutions, parents and

students, and government education bureaucracies to review their decision-making hypotheses, research, suppositions, and decisions as to "study abroad" principally during the post-pandemic period, to recommend areas of further research potentially, and to encourage the establishment of "best practice" protocols for "study abroad" in an increasingly challenged global environment.

## **Conflict of interest**

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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