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A Phenomenology Study of the Lived Experiences of Chinese International Students in the US During the COVID-19 Pandemic

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This phenomenological study investigates the lived experiences of Chinese international students during the initial outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic. It aims to delve into how these individuals articulate their experiences during the pandemic, with a particular focus on how their geographical location influenced their experiences. To achieve this, the study employs an innovative approach, integrating a phenomenological method with comparative analysis to elucidate the similarities and differences between students who remained in the US and those who returned to China.

The analysis identified four principal themes among students in the US: (1) Online Learning Challenges, (2) Social Life Adaptation, (3) Self-Coping and Entertainment, and (4) Support and Resource Needs. Conversely, three themes emerged for students in China: (1) Online Learning Challenges, (2) Social Life Adaptation, and (3) Opportunities for Development. While certain experiences, such as (1) Online Learning Challenges, (2) Impact on Academic Discipline, (3) Technological Challenges, (4) Communication Challenges within School, and (5) Reflections on Decision, were common across both groups, distinct differences were observed in several areas, including (1) Social Life and Interaction, (2) Self-Care and Entertainment, (3) Racism and Safety Concerns, and (4) Reflection and Personal Growth.

This study pioneers in exploring Chinese international students' experiences across different locations, offering insights for educators to enhance teaching and support strategies. As online learning solidifies its role, this study's findings can equip future students with essential guidelines for navigating university life in the US, aiming for better academic and personal outcomes.

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A Phenomenology Study of The Lived Experiences of Chinese International Students
in The US During the COVID-19 Pandemic

A Dissertation

Presented to

the Faculty of the Morgridge College of Education

University of Denver

In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree

Doctor of Philosophy

by

Linlin Wu

June 2024

Advisor: Dr. Robyn Thomas Pitts

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Author: Linlin Wu

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Chapter One: Introduction

At the end of 2019, a new type of virus—later named COVID-19—began spreading first in China and then around the world (Cennimo, 2021). As the World Health Organization (WHO) declared a public health emergency, the COVID-19 pandemic struck the world in every aspect (AJMC Staff, 2021; Cennimo, 2021). Schaul et al. (2020) showed that, on April 7th, 2020, people in the US spent 93% of their time at home. This largely affected learning centers, as both K-12 and university students alike were rapidly required to remain at home. While many universities adopted the online teaching method, the effects for the students were still there. Moreover, international students were affected more than their local counterparts. As a Chinese international student myself, I am interested in learning of the lives of other Chinese international students during the pandemic. The purpose of this phenomenology study is to identify the lived experiences of Chinese international students. As illustrated in the literature review, some research has been conducted on related topics since the pandemic, but the reasons why Chinese students chose to reside either at home or at school during the pandemic, as well as their lived experiences during that time, have remained largely unanswered. Therefore, this study aims to gain insights into the lived experiences of this group of students.

Background of the Problem

The COVID-19 pandemic clearly caught the world off guard, but how did it start? What caused the pandemic? These give rise to further questions: What has changed for the world? How was higher education been impacted by the continued effects of the pandemic? What difficulties have been faced by international students?

The Rise of a Global Pandemic

In December 2019, a new type of coronavirus (similar to SARS), called COVID-19, began spreading in Wuhan, China. This virus was reported to the WHO on December 31st, 2019 (Cennimo, 2021), yet it was not taken seriously as there were only 59 cases at the beginning of January 2020 (AJMC Staff, 2021). At that time, according to AJMC staff (2021), experts were already concerned over travel precautions. However, three international US airports began screening 10 days later. Still, this precaution appeared to already be too late, since the first case of COVID-19 was confirmed in the US only one day later. On the same day, four were killed due to the virus and over 200 people were infected. Meanwhile, Chinese scientists announced that COVID is transmitted through human contact. Despite this information, the WHO did not determine whether this constituted a public health emergency (AJMC Staff, 2021). However, China acted quickly by placing Wuhan under quarantine on January 23rd as 13 people had already died, with a further 300 infections reported. Finally, at the end of January 2020, the WHO declared a public health emergency as there had been over 200 deaths and almost 10,000 cases of COVID-19 reported (AJMC Staff, 2021; Cennimo, 2021). In February, starting with the US, Australia, Italy, and many more countries, travel restrictions began to be implemented. Meanwhile, the US also declared COVID-19 as a public health emergency.

Later, at the end of February, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) stated that COVID-19 was almost a pandemic as it met most of the requisite factors for such a classification (AJMC Staff, 2021). With an increasing number of confirmed cases worldwide, the WHO finally declared COVID-19 a global pandemic on March 11th, 2020 (AJMC Staff, 2021; Cennimo, 2021). However, this was only the beginning.

This pandemic spread dangerously quickly and caught many countries off guard. Not only did COVID-19 disturb people's daily lives, but it also caused governments to take quick decisions, such as lockdowns. As mentioned above, in January 2020, China locked down the city of Wuhan first to stop the spread of the virus (AJMC Staff, 2021). Unfortunately, as Neilson and Woodward (2020) stated, the lockdown did not occur soon enough, as cases began to be reported around the world. People began testing positive for COVID-19 in Europe, Egypt, Iran, and many more countries. Very soon, Italy announced a nationwide lockdown, followed by the UK just a week later (Safi, 2020). The whole world shut down in March to stop the spread (Safi, 2020). The US was no exception as, by the end of March, it had the most confirmed cases of COVID-19 in the world (Neilson & Woodward, 2020). Meanwhile, roughly one-third of the world population was under lockdown. By April, 80% of American states had issued stay-at-home orders, set curfews laws, and ruled that people only could only leave their homes for essential needs (Neilson & Woodward, 2020). Accordingly, daily life had become strongly affected by COVID-19. As Haleem and Javaid (2020) described, people began to regularly wash their hands, wear masks, maintain social distancing, and keep other preventative practices.

A Continuing Crisis

Up until February 2021, the pandemic continued and the effects of day-to-day life saw no change. People still had to wear masks to enter any public spaces and hand sanitizers were provided everywhere. Socially, restaurants only opened 25–50% of their dining areas, and movie theaters, clubs, and gyms remained closed. Even traveling was to be avoided, with social distancing being maintained even with family members during holiday seasons (Haleem & Javaid, 2020). At the same time, healthcare was naturally being greatly impacted by the virus. Not only did COVID diagnosis and treatment impact the healthcare system, but the high burdens associated with the virus made it hard to treat other patients, especially for the healthcare professionals facing high risks, who needed constant Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) (Chriscaden, 2020; Haleem & Javaid, 2020). Since almost everything was affected by the pandemic, it was no surprise that the economy was severely impacted.

The economy was affected in multiple ways. Due to worldwide closures, the cash flow on the market drastically reduced (Haleem & Javaid, 2020). On the other hand, as Chriscaden (2020) mentioned, approximately half of the workforce faced layoffs. Not only were these people defined as being in a vulnerable group due to lacking essential goods, but also they lost their income, resulting in shortages of food and goods. Moreover, the manufacturing of essential goods was also slowed because of social distancing. Supply chains were interrupted in every industry, and losses could be seen in the reduction of both national and international businesses (Haleem & Javaid, 2020). According to the US Bureau of Labor Statistics (2020), the unemployment rate in April 2020 increased to 14.7%, the highest rate since 1948. However, manufacturing was not

the only industry to be effected, K-12 schools were forced to close and universities also had to implement some quick changes.

The Effects of COVID-19 on Higher Education in the United States

US universities quickly moved to online teaching. Smalley (2020) stated that, in the spring semester of 2020, 1,300 more universities transferred to online teaching instead of in-person. In the fall of 2020, 44% of universities kept online teaching while 21% enforced a hybrid model, and 27% offered in-person teaching with social distancing. Yet online teaching caused problems for international students in the US. In July, the government announced a plan to deport international students who were exclusively taking classes online. This caused panic and anxiety among international students, and was also negative for universities. According to Mitchell, Leachman, and Saenz (2019), university funding had seen cuts over the last decade. To solve this issue, universities raised tuition fees for students. Moreover, international students receive higher tuition bills compared to local students. Their tuition and living expenses contributed not only to university funding, but also to the US economy in general—especially for Chinese international students, who constituted 35% of all international students in the US (Wang, 2021).

In 2019, before the pandemic, almost 370,000 Chinese international students were studying in the US for the 2018/2019 academic year. This was the tenth year where Chinese students were the largest group of international students (Number of International Students in the United States Hits All-Time High, 2019). In the following academic year (2019/2020), Chinese international students increased by nearly 3,000, thus keeping their status as the largest group of international students in the US.

Bustamante (2020) showed that only some of the top-20 schools in the US did not host international students from China. However, things began to change after the outbreak. Starting from March, when travel restrictions had been implemented around the world, the Chinese government sent out flights for Chinese students seeking to return home. By June, roughly 7,000 Chinese students in the US returned to China (Zhang, 2020). For those who chose to stay, the Chinese government provided PPE and pandemic pamphlets in order to help keep them safe (Pang, 2020). The Chinese government sought to provide help for students abroad, but not every situation could be ameliorated. Indeed, Chinese international students encountered many problems.

Statement of the Problem

Chinese international students faced many barriers. As mentioned above, the Chinese government helped many of these students return home, but many also chose to remain in the US.

For those students who decided to stay, racism was one of the biggest issues. This was not exclusive to in-person occurrences, but was also rampant on social media. Another issue was the announcement to deport international students who were taking classes fully online. They faced multiple difficulties due to not being able to simply return home and leave everything behind. As for those students who did return, several issues occurred as well. They faced time differences during their classes, VPN issues in China which hindered their access to many school resources, and cultural differences. All of these issues, as well as the stress and mental health levels of Chinese international students, must be explored in detail, particular in the context of the year following the pandemic.

Distance Learning Challenges Faced by Students Residing in the US

For those students who decided to stay in the US, the first problem they faced was racism. Due to COVID-19 being first discovered in China, racism toward Asians escalated after the pandemic (Boyle, 2020; Gibson et al., 2023). Indeed, Chinese people were physically and verbally assaulted on the street. Up until July 2020, thousands of hate incidents were reported (Donaghue, 2020). Students were yelled at on buses, being told that the virus was their fault (Gallagher, Doherty, & Obonyo, 2020). They were physically assaulted and had such abuse hurled at them as “Go back to your country” (Boyle, 2020). Moreover, some Asian people were even refused entry to public places or transport (Covid-19 fueling Anti-Asian racism and Xenophobia Worldwide, 2020; Gibson et al., 2023). Naturally, this absolutely caused problems for international students. Indeed, how could they shop for groceries or school materials? Especially those Chinese international students who did not own a car. Students were not only starving, but also suffering from stress and anxiety (Gallagher et al., 2020).

Unfortunately, the racism spread to the virtual domain of social media. The problem escalated when then-President Donald Trump used such phrases as “Chinese virus” and “Kung-flu” on Twitter. People began copying his actions, which created a dangerous environment for Asian-Americans (Donaghue, 2020; Gibson et al., 2023). Moreover, following the aforementioned deportation announcement, international students began to panic. This announcement was both disappointing and problematic. For those Chinese international students who chose to stay in the US, they were confused and worried about this ruling (Evans et al., 2020). International students faced being rejected from their scholarship, or even worse, having to leave everything they had become familiar with

behind. Indeed, such deportations would apply immediately, meaning that those students who did not live in the dorm would have to vacate their apartments despite still having months left on their leases. Moreover, what would they do with their furniture, cars, and possessions?

Distance Learning Challenges for Students Residing in China

However, things were not easy for the Chinese students who returned to China either. These students faced four main challenges: time differences, lack of access to technology, connectivity and internet bandwidth issues, and cultural differences. First of all, the time difference between China and the US is approximately 12 hours depending on the state. This meant that Chinese students would have to take their classes at around mid-night or even later (Zhang-Wu, 2020). As Zhang-Wu (2020) stated, this was unfair to the international students as they were already struggling during their remote learning and “burning their midnight oil.” They also had no access to professors during their office hours due to the time difference. For some students, they had both morning classes (evening in the US) and midnight classes (morning in the US) on different days, to which it was even harder to adapt. The second problem arose due to the nature of the country, where Chinese students had trouble accessing school resources. For instance, they could not use any Google products, including Google Drive, Docs, and Sheets. Moreover, they had no access to YouTube for viewing online learning videos (Zhang-Wu, 2020). Zhang-Wu (2020) mentioned that she adjusted teaching materials and platforms to adapt to the students’ needs, but some students even had trouble accessing Zoom, Canvas, or Blackboard, where either the connection could be very slow, or some type of VPN was required. A third problem with studying in China is the culture differences. The time

differences and the difficulties of accessing materials may be easy to recognize for younger students, but not so for older generations. Indeed, they might not understand why the students had to stay up late or need to purchase expensive VPNs. Moreover, because the US and China do not share the same holiday seasons, certain assumptions may be made. For instance, as a Chinese international student, I remember returning home during the Christmas break, only to be asked by my grandmother why I was at home when everyone else was studying. I explained that it was my winter break, yet she did not believe me, instead thinking that I had dropped out of school. I can imagine the same for the students who went home during the pandemic. In the meantime, Chinese New Year is around February, but Chinese international students cannot take a break this falls in the middle of a semester and midterm exams may need to be taken. Moreover, their family members might even blame them for not spending time with family as this is the most important holiday in China.

Persistent Challenges for All Chinese International Students

These problems were faced by Chinese international students every day. While there were some improvements after the deportation plans were dropped (BBC, 2020), and students began adapting to the new normal a year on from the outbreak, the difficulties persisted, and would disappear entirely until the end of the pandemic. Moreover, international students' stress levels and mental health were often ignored (King, Cabarkapa, Leow, & Ng, 2020; Chen, Li, Wu, & Tong, 2020). Indeed, this topic remains relatively under-explored in the literature, especially on Chinese international students in the US. On the other hand, as we entered the second year of the pandemic in 2021, the research on COVID-19 began to stall. Among the literature found on international

students in the pandemic, almost all the data were collected from April to June 2020, with no further studies found or even proposed. Furthermore, in the beginning of 2021, COVID-19 had mutated and variants had already started spreading in the US, which were considered deadlier to the original strain (Steinbuch, 2021). Accordingly, as this was certainly impactful, more research is needed into the stress levels of Chinese international students.

Significance of the Study

Fortunately, scholars around the world began to notice this problem, with several themes emerging in scholarly works.

A relatively straightforward theme to find is online learning for all international students regardless of where they are residing. For the international students who transferred from face-to-face to online in 2020, some had negative experiences. These included unavoidable issues, such as poor internet connection (Novikov, 2020). Another problem with online learning is that the students noticed a decline in interaction compared to in-person classes (Thomas et al., 2020). As for Chinese international students, they faced issues with censorship, as they could not access YouTube or Google products (Zhang-Wu, 2020). Moreover, they also encountered financial problems due to their families having lost their jobs due to the pandemic (Gallagher et al., 2020; Nguyen & Balakrishnan, 2020). Other than these, the international students also felt sad and anxious. As Chen et al. (2020) stated, international students were a minority group during the pandemic, and their mental health was often neglected. They already face difficulties, such as language and cultural differences, which were exacerbated by the pandemic. Further compounding these was the extreme level of racism that Asian international

students had to face and the effects this had on their mental health (Gibson et al., 2023; King, Cabarkapa, Leow, & Ng, 2020). Adams and Vanderleeuw (2020) specifically pointed out that counseling services should be available for the students to support their mental health.

While many studies on international students' experiences during the pandemic have been conducted in recent years, few have focused on the US in comparison with other countries. For those conducted in the US, the researchers focused on the challenges of all university students during the pandemic (Adams & Vanderleeuw, 2020), but few have specifically explored international or Chinese students. Among the studies on international students' difficulties, most were conducted in Australia (King et al., 2020; Parkes, 2020; Gallagher et al., 2020; Nguyen & Balakrishnan, 2020; Ma, Heywood, & MacIntyre, 2020). They focused not only on the experiences during the pandemic, but also on the mental health of the international students. Research has also been conducted on international students and their stress levels, anxieties, and loneliness in European contexts (Theoni et al., 2020; Bilecen, 2020; DeMan et al, 2021; Pappa et al., 2020; Misirlis et al., 2020; Kappe et al., 2020). One study even focused on the international students from China and other parts of Asia to discuss the discrimination and social exclusion they experienced (Bilecen, 2020; Gibson et al., 2023). As such, there is clearly a gap to be addressed regarding Chinese international students in the US.

Across all of these studies, the researchers used either quantitative or qualitative design—to date, no phenomenology research studies of Chinese international students' experiences during the pandemic have been conducted. As a result, the existing studies provide a limited view of the issues students are facing, and their lived experiences

during that time have been neglected. Studies that have employed a qualitative design have tended only to focus on small groups of students, offering limited perspectives, and the particular challenges they faced may not apply to Chinese international students (Gallagher et al., 2020; Jurcik et al., 2020). Among those qualitative studies, only one focused on Chinese international students (Ma et al., 2020). However, the researchers focused more on the travel health risks, not their stories or experiences during the pandemic. As for quantitative studies, large scale research has been conducted in Europe, discussing the mental health issues of all higher education students (Super & Van Disseldorp, 2020; Theoni et al., 2020; DeMan et al., 2020; Pappa et al., 2020; Misirlis et al., 2020). On the other hand, some research has addressed the difficulties of online learning (Novikov, 2020; Thomas et al., 2020). Quantitative studies have provided some evidence of generalization of students' mental health and difficulties of online learning. However, once again, these studies did not focus on Chinese international students, thus emphasizing the need for broader insights focused on the experiences of this student group.

Due to my desire to explore the lived experiences of the Chinese international students, I deemed phenomenology advantageous for this research as this method describes a phenomenon by discovering the perspectives and commonalities of those who lived through it, and discovers the essence of the phenomenon (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Neubauer et al., 2019; Van Manen, 1990). Furthermore, I seek to investigate the experiences of Chinese international students who were studying in a US institute specifically. With this measure, I especially would like to explore those students who resided in the US and those who returned to China. As these two groups lived through the

same experiences during the pandemic, the place of residence became a key factor regarding their different experiences. Therefore, this study hopes to examine the similarities and differences between these two groups of students.

I found no phenomenological investigation comparing two groups in the literature. Regardless, detailed theories and research will be described in Chapter 2.

By using phenomenology to investigate Chinese international students' experiences during the pandemic, I hope to explore more shared views and lived experiences of the Chinese students who are currently studying at a US university. Ideally, this study will benefit those Chinese international students studying in an American university, and help them recognize that they are not alone in feeling anxious or stressed. They all face similar difficulties every day and misunderstandings from family are common. These insights may also be beneficial for educators of Chinese international students to integrate practical methods to teach and help them. After a period of time, these changes may influence the overall cultural of the educators of the Chinese international students, which will provide an underlying foundation for future Chinese international students to have a better learning environment at their school. As online learning is the new normal, this study's findings may also prepare future Chinese international students with valuable guidelines for adapting during their study abroad.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this phenomenological study is to explore the lived experiences of the Chinese international student who engaged in distance learning while studying at a US university—both for those who resided in the US or China—and to compare the

difficulties they faced. Moreover, the study seeks to capture the essence of life of Chinese international students during the pandemic.

Research Questions

As I would like to explore as many aspects as I can for the Chinese international students, the main question I would like to focus on is: What were the lived experiences of Chinese international students during the COVID-19 pandemic? To answer this question, I employed a phenomenological methodology to explore the shared characteristics and experiences between students. Due to my interest in investigation any differences based on country of residence, this study further explores the commonalities and differences between these two groups of students.

The following research questions guided this phenomenological study:

1. What are the lived experience of the Chinese international students who lived and studied in a US university during the COVID-19 pandemic?
2. What are the lived experience of Chinese international students who studied in a US university but lived in China during the COVID-19 pandemic?
 - 1a. What are the similarities and differences in the experiences of those who resided in China and those who resided in the US?
 - 1b. What can we learn methodologically when using comparisons in sample populations?

Summary

This research seeks to understand the lived experiences of the Chinese international higher education students who studied in the US during the pandemic. It also discusses the differences and commonalities between those who resided in the US or China. As

prior research has covered different countries, this research aims to fill this gap. Moreover, no qualitative research has yet focused on learning the experiences of Chinese international students during the pandemic, and some quantitative research only included limited Chinese students, who were then not explored. This evidences a knowledge gap regarding the Chinese international students who were studying in the US, not only on their lived experiences during the pandemic, but also in terms of the differences of where they were residing. Ultimately, the results of this research may serve multiple people, such as both current and future Chinese international students, Chinese parents, and Chinese international students' educators.

In what follows, Chapter two provides a comprehensive review of the existing literature on Chinese international students during pandemic. In the chapter, the primary topic discusses the gaps in the literature and how these can be filled. Chapter three then discusses the research design and method, as well as how the study was conducted. The remaining chapters present, interpret, and discuss the findings.

Chapter Two: Literature Review

After the COVID-19 pandemic struck the world in 2020, a great amount of research was published in many areas. Aside from medicine (perhaps the most obvious field), many studies on education emerged related to the closure of schools and universities. Due to their experiences differing significantly from those of local students, international students suffered more mentally due to such issues as racism and financial burdens. Moreover, it is worth bearing in mind that Chinese international students faced more racism than most, since COVID-19 were first discovered in Wuhan, China. Consequently, the mental health of international students became a major topic in education-related COVID research. Despite the fact that the US has the world's largest number of Chinese international students, the majority of published studies were conducted in Europe. The number of studies focusing solely on Chinese overseas students conducted in the US is rather limited. As such, a gap in the literatures exists regarding the Chinese international students in the US.

This review seeks to summarize the current (and rapidly-expanding) literature on the experiences—both global and in the US—of Chinese international students. The review begins by discussing the history of the pandemic for university students. Then, the theories related to this research are discussed, followed by such issues in the literature as the problems faces by all university students, by all international students, and by

Chinese international students in the US. Finally, a section will be focused on methods of current analysis because this study tries to compare the differences in results in quantitative and qualitative methods.

Search Strategy

The search strategy for this study began with determining the research question, then creating an outline for this literature review. With this information, keywords emerged and were then used to search the databases. Keywords included, but were not limited to, “COVID-19,” “pandemic,” “coronavirus,” “Chinese students,” “international students,” “university,” “Zoom,” “distance learning,” “Personal coping,” “mental health,” and etc. Specific databases, such as ProQuest, PsycINFO, and SAGE, were searched. Google was also used to search for news and facts. Information sources included peer-reviewed journal articles, government statistics, news, and dissertations. Due to this study’s focus on the COVID-19 pandemic, the sources were only published within the last three years. However, the H1N1 in 2009 was also considered as a pandemic (although not as impactful as COVID-19). Therefore, certain studies from 2009 and 2010 were also included in this literature review to discuss the history of international students reacting to pandemics.

Ultimately, the reference section of this study presents the most relevant sources for this dissertation, which is the foundation of this literature review.

It is worth noticing that most of the studies were conducted in 2020 and 2021, as the pandemic lasted for only three years. Hence, due to the recency of this topic, the literature under review may appear limited.

History of the Pandemic for University Students

Someone who lived through 2020 may find it hard to remember, or even believe, that the WHO declared a global pandemic back in 2009. Raguram et al. (2009) mentioned that this type of virus—swine flu, which affects human beings and acts like influenza—is a subtype of H1N1. Swine flu has all of the characteristics of a pandemic: Contracting the virus may result in death, can be spread person-to-person, and spread across the world (AJMC Staff, 2021). Somewhat unbelievably now, in 2009, there were over 90,000 cases in 100 countries (Chan et al., 2009).

With those cases, university students also experienced higher rates of hospitalization and deaths (Schlenker et al., 2013). However, according to Schwartz and Bayles (2012), only 28% of the sampled universities had a pandemic plan linked to their university website. Meanwhile, almost 75% of the universities used no CDC or WHO alert levels at all. Further still, 57% of the universities had no recommendations for planning activities during the pandemic. Since the students were one of the most important factors in the university, 67% of the universities had some plan or information for the students on campus, yet only 14% had a plan or information for their students studying abroad.

This clearly shows that some US universities did not take the 2009 pandemic at all seriously. Furthermore, other articles related to university students in the US were unable to be found. No further studies focused only on international students in the US, not to mention Chinese international students and their mental health.

Some studies can be found for universities in Sydney, Australia. Vans et al. (2009) found that, although almost all of the university's students were informed about the current situation of the pandemic, 64% of the students were either not interested or not

feeling anxious. Similarly, Seale et al. (2012) found that university students did not identify themselves as having high risks in the pandemic.

Interestingly, among the studies conducted for the 2009 pandemic, Asian students were statistically significantly more concerned than students of other races (Griffiths et al., 2010; Seale et al., 2012; Vans et al., 2009). Both Seale et al. (2012) and Van et al. (2009) stated that the ratio of Asian students who believed that the pandemic was serious was significantly higher than other races. Van et al. (2009) also added that the ratio of anxiety was also higher. Griffiths et al. (2010) conducted a more detailed study in Hong Kong. They concluded that students who studied in Hong Kong and Singapore were more likely to have some sort of safety package with them and wear face masks than those who studied in the US. Students from Singapore were also more likely to agree to quarantine and take online courses during outbreaks than their US counterparts.

However, no studies focusing on Chinese students—and specifically Chinese international students studying in the US—were found. Moreover, almost no research was focused on their lived experiences or their coping strategies during this special time. Only one study, conducted in China, focused on mental health (Xu et al., 2011). They discovered that females tended to have higher rates of stress during the H1N1 pandemic. Other predictors of stress during the pandemic related to personally contracting the virus, loved ones doing so, and a general fear of contracting H1N1.

No more journals targeted at university students' mental health or coping strategy were found as well. As Maalouf et al. (2020) found, among 3,524 journals that discussed mental health during the pandemic, less than 10% of them were for H1N1. While journals related to the H1N1 on mental health were limited, the amount on COVID-19 was

enormous with almost 87%. It may seem that researchers learned from the H1N1 pandemic and began to focus on mental health in COVID-19 more quickly—a rationale that proved correct. However, this situation only slightly improved for Chinese international students, especially for those studying in a US university.

Noticeably, because the 2009 H1N1 pandemic was not as widespread as the COVID-19 pandemic, comparatively few studies were conducted during that time. Moreover, it was clear that the 2009 pandemic had a much smaller impact on daily life compared to that of 2020, which could also explain the limited number of studies for the 2009 pandemic. As such, researchers in 2020 may have found it difficult to learn from previous pandemic experiences, specifically for the lived experiences of international university students.

Theory Relevant to the Research Questions

As mentioned previously, the topic of the pandemic is relatively new. Given that this research was conducted between 2021 and 2023, the available literature was limited at the time. Considering the pandemic spanned a duration of just under three years, it could well be that fewer studies on this specific period will emerge after 2024. However, based on current studies, theories still can be developed connecting to the research questions this study proposed.

Theories on International Students' Experiences

According to Erudera College News (2020), the US had over one million international students at the time, which was the largest number of students from other countries. As King and Bailey (2021) highlighted, international students encounter significant challenges when they leave their families and move to a foreign country to

pursue a degree in a second language. These students often require support from their classmates and teachers to adapt to their new academic environment. Teachers, in particular, can play a crucial role in facilitating this transition. By adopting such measures as speaking more slowly, avoiding idioms that may be confusing, and making various other adjustments, teachers can significantly aid in meeting the students' needs, thus ensuring a smoother adaptation to US classrooms. Prieto (2016) added that although international students come from different countries, they experience similar stresses, anxieties, and challenges as local students. Moreover, Prieto (2016), Evans-Lacko and Thornicroft (2019), and Anandavalli et al. (2021) discussed that international students' experiences were predominantly negative, characterized by feelings of loneliness and concerns over financial issues and relationships with local students. Cao et al. (2021) and Anandavalli et al. (2021) added that language difficulties are a problem unique to international students, which often leads to other negative experiences, such as cultural adaptation, socialization issues, and finding a work–life balance. All of these factors cause stresses, anxieties, and other mental health issues (Anandavalli et al., 2021; Cao et al., 2021; Evans-Lacko & Thornicroft, 2019; Prieto, 2016).

The lived experiences of international students have been mostly negative, significantly impacting their mental health and making it a more pronounced issue compared to the general population (Evans-Lacko & Thornicroft, 2019). Further, Cao et al.'s (2021) review of the literature found an increase in mental health problems among international students, elevating it to a major concern. They identified international students as a vulnerable group facing significant mental health challenges.

Anandavalli et al. (2021) interviewed eight international students and found that they lived in fear of many things, such as racism, gun control, and the threat of deportation. They felt depressed and some even expressed suicidal thoughts, however, they chose not to tell anyone out of a perception that no one would understand. Regardless, there are a limited number of studies focusing on the mental health of international students during times of crises.

However, some researchers have shown concern over the physical and mental health of international students (Cao et al., 2021). Minutillo et al. (2020) stated that it is necessary to provide enough support to international students, which should cover all aspects of their school lives and improve their experiences.

Theories on International Students During the COVID-19 Pandemic

When COVID-19 was discovered, the medical field began to learn more about the virus. The data and results were published as open access so that researchers all over the world could study the virus together. Soon enough, the pandemic hit the world hard and universities transferred from in-person to online. Studies focused on university students appeared. As a vulnerable group, international students were also included in research.

Van de Velde et al. (2020) conducted a survey at the beginning of the pandemic on international students' well-being, called "The COVID-19 International Student Well-being Study" (C19 ISWS). They surveyed international students around the world in over 20 countries and 100 higher-education institutes (HEI). This survey included many aspects of international students during the pandemic. They asked about the students' living, financial, and academic conditions, as well as their mental health, such as stressors and anxieties.

This survey was used by many researchers in 2020. Super and Van Disseldorp (2020) used this data and found that HEI students in the Netherlands suffered financially after the outbreak of COVID-19. In the meantime, students reduced the amount of physical activity and increased tobacco and alcohol use. Mentally, more negative emotions were observed for the students. Stathopoulou et al. (2020) used the same survey and focused on students in Greece. Similarly, they found that the students' financial resources also suffered. Mentally, approximately 55% of the students reported feeling lonely occasionally or even constantly. Depression and anxiety were also reported by the students. They are also reported tobacco and alcohol use, and physical activity.

While the results showed similarities for HEI students in Europe, would these be the same for students in other countries? Additionally, and as mentioned earlier, the US has the most international students in the world (Erudera College News, 2020), so will these same results hold true? Furthermore, 35% of international students in the US were Chinese (Wang, 2021), so will the results be the same for these students?

The C19 ISWS data investigate the association between depressive severity scores and a set of mental health stressors during the academic year of pandemic, and the correlation with loneliness, anxiety, depression, university satisfaction, and social media use. Hence, the survey was deemed suitable for this research as a secondary dataset. It included 26 countries in the world, including the US (Van de Velde et al., 2020). Researchers using this dataset have already answered plenty of questions about international students' financial, academic, and mental health.

However, there has been a scarcity of research targeting international students in the US. According to Zhang et al. (2023), the pandemic amplified pre-existing pressures,

such as limited social support owing to familial distance, complex visa requirements, the competitiveness and scarcity of employment prospects, along with experiences of discrimination and xenophobia, notably against Asian students, and heightened financial difficulties. Similarly, Whatley and Fischer (2022) found that international students faced significant impacts on their finances and housing, indicating a critical need for support in these areas.

As the largest international student group in the US, Chinese students were already vulnerable due to facing mental health issues while studying abroad (Yu, 2023). Lai et al. (2021) conducted interviews with Chinese international students from Hong Kong and discovered that they experienced stress from various sources, including concerns over health and academic performance, a deficiency in social support, and the vagueness of information related to COVID-19. These students continued to confront the existent challenge of cultural differences. Amid these challenges, there was a pressing need for effective emotional and problem-solving coping strategies, yet the psychological impact remained predominantly negative. A study on Chinese exchange students found that these international students missed out on learning opportunities in their academic, social, and cultural lives, and lacked social and emotional support (Nam & Jiang, 2023).

However, research remains limited despite Chinese students constituting the largest group of international students in the US. Consequently, critical questions regarding these students' financial situations, academic conditions, coping strategies, and more, need to be addressed to better support their lives in the US. This study seeks to add value to the field by investigating the mental health of Chinese international students.

The following section will discuss more details about current studies. And hopefully, this research can answer the missing question about the living and mental conditions of Chinese international students studying in the US during the pandemic in 2020.

Current Empirical Literature Relevant to Research Questions

At this time, only limited research can be found on the topic of Chinese international students in the US during the COVID-19 pandemic. However, this is not to say that no informative literature can be found on this topic. Indeed, plenty of studies were found to guide the current research.

University Reports by Continents/Countries During the COVID-19 Pandemic

As Bozkurt et al. (2020) stated, there are many similarities between countries on how they responded to COVID-19, such as the decision to move school and university education online. Nevertheless, when the education system was interrupted by the pandemic, different countries responded in several different ways. Indeed, research showed that even when the challenges, stress factors, and stress levels were similar for university students in different continents (Adams & Vanderleeuw, 2020), the students responded differently due to their being in different places and cultures.

US

By the middle of 2020, the US already had the most cases of COVID-19 in the world. However, the country's education departments acted quickly (Bozkurt et al., 2020). By March, the majority of colleges and universities began switching to remote learning, closing campuses, and cancelling travel (Bozkurt et al., 2020; Cevasco et al., 2020). As Adams and Vanderleeuw (2020) stated, university students have high stress levels, which

were specifically increased after the COVID-19 pandemic (Fruehwirth et al., 2021; Son et al., 2020).

However, as mentioned before, although there were about 1.1 million international students in the US during the 2019–2020 academic year (Israel & Batalova, 2021), not many studies have solely focused on their lived experiences. Zhang-Wu (2020) briefly mentioned the difficulties she encountered during teaching international students and pointed out that universities should support them more, which Whatley and Fischer (2022) echoed. Lai et al. (2020) also found that international students often experience insomnia and depression.

But the situation of international students did not improve, as in July 2020, the US government planned to deport and/or limit the duration of international students' visas as all courses were being taken online (He & Xu, 2020). International students expressed their concerns and disappointments about the ruling as it came out, but they could not do anything about it (Evans et al., 2020).

Europe

European university students experienced similar stressors to those of their global counterparts. Interestingly, more research can be found for international students during the pandemic in the European context. Super and Van Disseldorp (2020) conducted a survey called the “COVID-19 International Students Well-being Study,” in which many universities participated. Many researchers used these data to perform further analyses.

Pappa et al. (2020) found that, in a Finnish university, the international students' major concerns were the health of their friends and family. They also worried about their academic performance. These concerns led to stress, anxieties, and loneliness during the

COVID-19 pandemic (De Man et al., 2020; Misirlis et al., 2020). Meanwhile, Kappa et al. (2020) also found that 20% of the students worried about contracting the virus themselves. Students also reduced their exercise during the pandemic.

Australia

At the beginning of the pandemic, Australia implemented a travel ban during the school break and many Chinese international students were forced to leave the country almost immediately after their arrival (Fernandes, 2020).

Boyle (2020) pointed out that Asian students faced racism not only on social media, but also in their real lives, sometimes even escalating to violence. On the other hand, international students faced major difficulties, such as having no food and/or shelter during the pandemic while the government refused to provide any help (Gallagher et al., 2020; Nguyen & Balakrishnan, 2020). Gallagher et al. (2020) found that international students reported stress, anxiety, and hopelessness. Parkers (2020) pointed out the significance of international students, and argued that they should not be abandoned during crises. King et al. (2020) seconded this statement by adding that there was already a gap in mental health care for international students during the COVID-19 pandemic. Despite this, not many studies can be found that focused only on international students or their mental health.

University Students During the COVID-19 Pandemic

In 2020, after outbreak, researchers everywhere began conducted pandemic-related research. Maalouf et al. (2020) found that, among the massive amount of published research, 23% were being produced by authors from different countries, which again show this pandemic affected the world in every way.

Problems Faced by All University Students

Bozkurt et al. (2020) suggested that, in the middle of 2020, schools and universities' decision to switch to online distance learning was an emergency practice, which differed from planned distance and/or online learning. All teachers and students who were not familiar with the technology were forced to learn it quickly. Fernandes (2020) seconded the statement by adding that they also needed to collaborate and think critically. Adams and Vanderleeuw (2020) found that, for students at a US university, 69% worried about their studies since education was switched to online, 47% were concerned over their financial situation, 35% were disturbed by the lack of human interactions, and 28% worried about the accessibility of online learning. Thomas et al. (2020) also found that 61% of the students they studies disliked the lack of human interaction. Roberts et al. (2023) identified that mental health issues in university students negatively correlated with their engagement in academic and extracurricular activities. However, a positive correlation existed between these mental health challenges and the duration of social media usage.

Although universities tried to make all of their materials easy to access for students (Fernandes, 2020), problems still emerged. Bozkurt et al. (2020) and Li et al. (2020) stated that unpredictable interruptions arose for students and educators alike. Moreover, the students were concerned that access was not equal. Some students suffered with the price, network speed and problems, and/or software, and, worst of all, some students did not even have the tools to get online and obtain the materials the teachers provided (Bozkurt et al., 2020; Fernandes, 2020; Li et al., 2020; Novikov, 2020; Thomas et al., 2020).

Furthermore, 10% of the students were concerned about whether they would have enough food to eat (Adams & Vanderleeuw, 2020). Fernandes (2020) also discussed students' concern on food, where he mentioned that many university students had meal plans. Once the schools closed, they were not able to afford their daily food supplies.

Another aspect faced by the university students was their mental health. Adams and Vanderleeuw (2020) found that only 14% of the students felt little or no stress, where the rest felt some or "a great deal" of stress. Lack of human interactions either with friends or teachers was another key stressor (Lai et al., 2020; Li et al., 2020). Other significant stressors were the students' concerns over their academic performance one education switched to an online format (De Man et al., 2020; Lai et al., 2020; Roberts et al., 2023). Another frequently-mentioned factor was the fear that either the students themselves or their family and friends would contract COVID-19 (Adams & Vanderleeuw, 2020; De Man et al., 2020; Li et al., 2020).

Due to the severity of the COVID-19 pandemic during the beginning of 2020, almost all of the world's major countries imposed a type of lockdown and transitioned to distance learning for schools (Bozkurt et al., 2020). In this case, overall, the problems mentioned above were reported from university students all over the world.

Problems Faced by International Students

International students were one of the major groups in universities. There were over one million international students in the US along during the 2019–2020 academic year (Israel & Batalova, 2021). Firang (2020) expressed his concerns for the international students and highlighted a major research gap on international students in the pandemic. These students experienced significant difficulties during the pandemic due to being far

from home (Bilecen, 2020). They had similar problems as local students, such as academic performance, online learning, financial, and health, yet they experienced more stress/anxiety, and even racism for Chinese and other Asian students (Bilecen, 2020; King et al., 2020; Ma et al., 2020; Novikov, 2020; Wang, 2020; Zhang-Wu, 2020; Zhang et al., 2023).

Chinese International Students' Experiences

As the first case of COVID-19 was discovered in Wuhan, China, Chinese international students faced more difficulties than other such students. In total, six challenges were discussed by different studies among Chinese international students across the world.

Racism

A key challenge faced by Chinese students was racism during the pandemic. Unfortunately, racism was inevitable because the first case was found in China. The situation was aggravated when the president of the US at the time referred to COVID-19 as the “Chinese virus” (Boyle, 2020). This act only made Chinese students suffer, especially those who were studying in the US. Students felt exclusive at that point (Wang, 2020).

Research has pointed out the discrimination against Asian students (Bilecen, 2020; Gibson et al., 2023; Chen et al., 2020; Zhang et al., 2023). The students experienced social exclusion, and sometimes even verbal assaults. Boyle (2020) seconded Bilecen by describing some of the incidents of attacks in Australia. Not only were the victims stalked, but they even had verbal abuse hurled at them. Worse still, one of the stalkers

punched and kicked an Asian woman. This showed that the racism was not just verbal, it also became violent in multiple situations.

However, racism did not stop there. Discriminations against the Chinese circulated on social media as well. Even a “COVID-19 racism online reporting tool” was developed in Australia, which reported roughly 180 incidents in only 2 weeks—a number which continued to rise.

As Boyle (2020) quoted, countries should not “point fingers at China,” but instead worry about the health risks of their own country. Sadly, the racism continued.

Residing Country Decisions

The pandemic itself already caused many problems for Chinese international students. After the outbreak, they began to experience difficulties caused by their residing countries.

Australia, for example, issued travel bans on Chinese students. As these were implemented during holiday breaks, some Chinese students were back in China. Due to this ban, some were forced to fly back to their home country where they were not able to return to continue their studies (Fernandes, 2020). Nguyen and Balakrishnan (2020) found that the Australian government provided no funding for these international students and, further, advised them to go home. Some international students aiming to return to their home countries were met with flight cancellations, effectively trapping them in the US. A different set of students either could not return home or were reluctant to do so, concerned they might face difficulties re-entering the US. Moreover, financial hurdles barred some international students from making the journey home (Whatley & Fischer, 2022).

The US implemented a similar deportation plan. The US government stated that they would deport the international students who were taking their courses fully online. Meanwhile, universities transferred to online education to avoid the spread of the pandemic (BBC, 2020; Fernandes, 2020). Although the US government later revoked this decision, some Chinese international students still returned home. Surprisingly, according to Lai et al. (2020), almost 76% of the international students decided to go back to their home country.

However, for those Chinese students returned, they faced difficulties where some people in their hometown referred to them as “virus carriers,” saying they brought the virus back to China from other countries (Wang, 2020). For those who stayed, they reported high stress levels and felt a lack of social support (Lai et al., 2020; Son et al., 2020). Moreover, Ma and Miller (2020) mentioned that social support and anxiety were actually negatively correlated. These studies showed that students need support from their residing country.

Noticeably, the decisions made by the countries placed the Chinese international students in a dilemma (Ma & Miller, 2020). Indeed, it seemed that whatever decisions they made were wrong.

Financial

As Bilecen (2020) mentioned, international students were experiencing financial hardships, which were only exacerbated by the pandemic.

Gallagher et al. (2020) interviewed multiple international students in Australia, many of whom expressed having financial difficulties, especially when the government refused to provide relief packages. Some international students mentioned not being able to even

afford food and/or shelter. Moreover, they needed to pay for private insurance, which tended to be higher than for local students. Additionally, during the pandemic, some international students lost their jobs and/or scholarships because public places, such as school libraries or restaurants, closed (Bilecen, 2020). Adams and Vanderleeuw (2020) also stated that university students faced many problems, including financial ones.

With the financial problems, helpless international students found themselves having more anxieties and higher stress levels. This inevitably hindered their academic lives (Nguyen & Balakrishnan, 2020).

Financial problems are key issues for all university students, regardless of their being local or international. Lai et al. (2020) supported this by revealing that economic woes are key stressors for international university students in the US and UK. Whatley and Fischer (2022) also provided evidence of financial problems for international students.

However, it is worth noting that no studies were found to discuss the financial problems encountered only by Chinese students.

Time

As mentioned above, roughly 76% of international students in the US and UK chose to return home during the COVID-19 pandemic (Lai et al., 2020).

For Chinese students, returning home means that the time difference becomes a problem. Due to the different time zone, if a teacher holds a course at noon, it will usually be midnight for Asian students. This situation created an uneven learning condition as taking classes at night is very different from in the daytime (Zhang-Wu, 2020). As Zhang-Wu (2020) stated, more problems emerged from international students having to manage time differences throughout either an entire semester or year. While this problem

may appear trivial at first glance, it can create significant problems in the long run. However, this factor appears to have been neglected in the literature.

Accessing Resources

Due to the pandemic, many schools transferred to online teaching to avoid crises (Fernandes, 2020; Smalley, 2020). However, online teaching is a great change, to which both teachers and students needed to quickly adapt.

Thomas et al. (2020) stated that one reason students enjoyed online classes was learning at their own pace. However, there were multiple reasons for not enjoying online learning. Network connections are a prime example. Bad connections hindered students from accessing their live classes and resources (Novikov, 2020; Thomas et al., 2020).

Thomas et al. (2020) mentioned that online learning led to insufficient interaction. Zhang-Wu (2020) also mentioned this by pointing out that, due to the nature of the online environment, the students were more nervous to talk to each other. As for Chinese international students, Zhang-Wu (2020) specifically mentioned that the language barrier decreased international students' willingness to speak in class.

For Chinese international students, there was another problem needing to be solved. This problem was only encountered by Chinese international students who returned to China. Due to the specifics of the Chinese government and its VPN, the students had difficulties accessing certain websites, such as Google and YouTube. This required the teacher to alter their way of delivering class handouts and other materials (Zhang-Wu, 2020). This problem has not been widely discussed in prior research.

Among all the studies discussing international students' problems with accessing class materials, the network problem was mostly discussed, yet many of the problems Chinese students faced were ignored.

Mental Health

Parkers (2020) first discussed the importance of international students and that they should not be neglected, especially during a pandemic. Firang (2020) agreed with the statement by pointing out international students were a vulnerable group and have often been ignored by research on COVID-19 in Canada. However, not only Canada, but all universities across the globe should take care of international students (Chen et al., 2020).

Chen et al. (2020) explicitly mentioned that international students are more exposed to mental health issues and that, during the COVID-19 pandemic, they were confronted with increased challenges in how to sustain their mental health. Meanwhile, King et al. (2020) also stated that the mental health of Chinese international students should be paid increased attention.

During the pandemic, Super and Van Disseldorp (2020) sampled university students from 26 schools in the world, which included almost 300 international students. The students reported that they increased their tobacco and alcohol usage during the pandemic. Moreover, they felt their stress level increased.

In Europe, studies focusing on the mental health of international students can be seen with the C19 ISWS data mentioned earlier. Misirlis et al. (2020) found that, in English schools in the Netherlands, anxiety, loneliness, and COVID-19-related stress were strongly correlated with each other, and that university satisfaction and social capital also correlated with them. Likewise, De Man et al. (2020) studied university students in

Belgium on their stressors during the pandemic. They found that “perceived academic stress,” “institutional dissatisfaction,” and the “fear of being infected” were the main stressors causing depression for the students. This confirmed Misirlis et al. (2020) results where university satisfaction was one of the stressors for university students. Similarly, a study conducted in Australia also stated that international students experienced stress, anxiety, and hopelessness during the pandemic (Gallagher et al., 2020).

As for university students in the US, Adams and Vanderleeuw (2020) found that they had higher stress levels after the outbreak. Furthermore, Son et al. (2020) reported that students at a large public university found themselves worried about their academic performance, and experienced disrupted sleeping patterns and other stressors, which were all negative impacts of the pandemic.

Lai et al. (2020) also found that international students in the US and UK had high-stress levels. As with as the international students in Europe and Australia, the stress was related to university satisfaction, as well as the changes from face-to-face to online teaching, pandemic-related health fears, and lack of social support. Accordingly, these studies are consistent with those for other countries. Due to high stress levels, both Adams and Vanderleeuw (2020) and Son et al. (2020) proposed that counseling services should be provided to students to help their mental health.

Chinese international students, in particular, reported similar stressors as other university students around the world. They experienced a high level of stress and anxiety, especially due to the fear of COVID-19 and discrimination (Ma & Miller, 2020). Ma and Miller (2020) described how the Chinese students were trapped in a double-bind situation, which led to great stress and anxiety, much like other university students across

the world. Lai et al. (2021) studied the experiences of international students from Hong Kong, revealing that these individuals faced stress in multiple areas of their lives and experienced adverse psychological effects during the global crisis.

However, literature focusing only on Chinese international students' mental health is highly limited—this despite Chinese international students forming the largest international student group in the US.

Personal Coping Strategies

The COVID-19 pandemic has presented numerous challenges for Chinese international students studying abroad. However, the literature suggests that these students have used various coping strategies to deal with the pandemic and its effects.

One common coping mechanism identified in the literature is the use of substances, such as tobacco and alcohol. Super and Van Disseldorp (2020) found that some Chinese international students increased their usage of these substances while reducing their physical activity levels during the pandemic. Similarly, Stathopoulou et al. (2020) reported that students in Greece experienced depression and anxiety related to increased tobacco and alcohol usage, and decreased physical activity.

On the other hand, Chinese international students have also demonstrated a reliance on religious and community support during the pandemic. Weng et al. (2021) found that Chinese students supported each other in their communities and attended religious gatherings, such as in Christian churches and Buddhist temples. Xu and Zhao (2022) reported that students coped with the pandemic by sharing their experiences and feelings with their peers. Likewise, Lai et al. (2021) observed that students from Hong Kong used comparable strategies for coping with their challenges. These methods encompassed

talking to family and friends as a way to improve feelings of loneliness, seeking connections with others facing similar circumstances for mutual understanding, and practicing positive thinking to maintain mental well-being.

Furthermore, digital platforms have emerged as a means of coping for Chinese international students during the pandemic. Students from all over the world have created vlogs to discuss various topics, such as returning to China, and government and school policies (Xu & Zhao, 2022).

Overall, the literature suggests that Chinese international students have demonstrated resilience and adaptability in the face of the pandemic. While they have faced numerous challenges, social support and the use of various coping mechanisms have helped them navigate this difficult time.

However, despite the range of coping strategies adopted by university students during the pandemic, Reid et al. (2022) found that adaptive coping mechanisms did not change the relationship between COVID-19 stress and depression in students. Thus, it is important to investigate the personal coping strategies of Chinese international students and examine their effectiveness in managing crisis situations, such as the COVID-19 pandemic. This study aims to explore the coping mechanisms used by Chinese international students during the first wave of the pandemic and assess whether these strategies have been helpful in mitigating stress and promoting well-being.

Methods in Current Literature

Among the literature reviewed, up to February 2024, only one phenomenological study has been conducted on Hong Kong international students during the pandemic. Furthermore, no other research has been found on the topic of Chinese international

students in the US during the pandemic. In particular, no studies were focused on the different experiences of Chinese international students who resided in different places.

Some letters to the editor were published in order to bring international students' hardship to the public's attention (Chen et al., 2020; Firang, 2020; Parkers, 2020). The majority of studies employed quantitative approaches to search for correlations between the students' stressors (Adams & Vanderleeuw, 2020; De Man et al., 2020; Lai et al., 2020; Ma & Miller, 2020; Misirlis et al., 2020; Pappa et al., 2020; Son et al., 2020; Super & VanDisseldorp, 2020), with just a few qualitative studies, such as Jurcik et al. (2020), reporting on how mental health services changed during the pandemic. Gallagher et al. (2020) conducted interviews with international students and described their difficult experiences throughout the pandemic. Meanwhile, Lai et al. (2021) focused on Chinese international students from Hong Kong only. Clearly, no additional analyses were conducted for Chinese international students, despite the fact that their voices must be heard. This indicates that phenomenology research on the lived experiences of Chinese international students—particularly those who were studying in the US—is urgently needed.

Rationale for the Current Study

The purpose of this study is to explore the lived experiences of Chinese international students, particularly those who were studying in the US during the first wave of the COVID-19 pandemic. According to recent studies, university students were more stressed and anxious than before: They increased their tobacco and alcohol consumption, and were concerned about a variety of topics, including health and academic matters. However, as previously indicated, research focusing solely on Chinese international

students in the US is rare. Chinese international students suffered more difficulties during the pandemic as they not only received inadequate support from their host country, but also faced additional challenges when they returned home. Prior research has either concentrated on all international students around the world or all Chinese students studying abroad. Therefore, this research aims to fill this research gap.

As mentioned earlier, no phenomenology research with a comparative analysis has been conducted on the critically-important topic of Chinese international students as a whole. This method will help the readers understand the lived experiences of Chinese international students in the US, and appreciate the similarities and differences of those residing in different places. This research will help Chinese international students studying in the US by demonstrating that they are not alone in feeling concerned or stressed. Every day, they encounter similar challenges, and it is a normal phenomenon. They have no reason to be worried or stressed.

Summary

More research is needed to understand and address the lived experiences that Chinese international students faced during the 2020 pandemic. For Chinese students, the issues were far more widespread than a single person or university. They required assistance in a variety of ways.

During the H1N1 pandemic of 2009, universities failed to provide adequate support for students, particularly the international variety. Ten years later, Chinese students faced more challenges than ever before. The COVID-19 pandemic was bad enough, but problems were only worsened when universities transferred to online teaching, which made students felt isolated. Moreover, students experienced financial problems,

difficulties with networks, and even basic food problems, and international students faced even more difficulties due to being separated from their families. The fact that COVID-19 was first discovered in China made Chinese (and, in general, Asian) international students suffer from racism both in-person and on social media. The resident countries of Chinese international students did not provide enough assistance when they were attacked by random strangers. In addition, several governments began to implement deportation plans for international students. Chinese international students who chose to stay in the US suffered financial difficulties and were unable to pay bills. Those who returned to China, on the other hand, confronted such challenges as the time difference and access to academic materials. Overall, their mental health conditions have generally been ignored by researchers.

The difficulties for Chinese international students appear to have remained relatively constant throughout time. However, with the pandemic, they were confronted with greater difficulties than ever before. Their mental health conditions and personal coping strategies were frequently overlooked. Existing studies have not addressed the challenges faced by Chinese international students or their lived experiences. Therefore, this research seeks to uncover new insights on how to overcome barriers for Chinese international students and investigate their experiences during this time of crisis. Consequently, all Chinese international students would know they were not alone during this unique time.

The topic covered in the literature review addressed university students' reactions to the 2020 COVID-19 pandemic, as well as their challenges and lived experiences. However, no known research has examined Chinese international students who were

studying in HEI in the US. The goal of this study is to discover the lived experiences and the essences of the Chinese international students through interviews. An overview of the phenomenology with a comparative analysis approach is offered in Chapter three.

Chapter Three: Methodology

This chapter introduces the research method for this phenomenology comparative study, which focuses on the lived experiences of higher education Chinese international students in the US during the COVID-19 pandemic. This method establishes a deeper understanding of Chinese international students' experiences during the pandemic. This chapter discusses the reason for choosing the interpretive phenomenology, the contribution of conducting a comparative analysis with phenomenology, and how this particular method was applied. Further, this chapter reviews the study participants, the procedures, and the analysis methods of this research.

Methodology

As a type of qualitative research, phenomenology has been differently defined by researchers. In general, phenomenology transforms the lived experiences of the participants into an expression of their essence (VanManen, 2007). As Neubauer et al. (2019) argued, phenomenology describes a phenomenon by discovering the perspectives of those who lived through this experience.

Lived experiences are key to phenomenology. In this case, the purpose of phenomenology is to help the researchers understand the meaning of people's lived experiences. Van Manen (1990) mentioned that there are four criteria of lived experiences: lived space, lived body, lived time, and lived human relations.

Phenomenology was deemed suitable for this research due to its goal of understanding the lived experiences of Chinese international students. This research seeks to explore all four of the criteria while understanding the participants' past and recollecting their lived experiences. As mentioned by Van Manen (1990), phenomenology transforms the lived experiences into an expression of essence and creates a meaningful reflection for the readers, which can bring their own lived experiences back to the fore—which is what this study seeks to accomplish.

Van Manen (1990) also stated the essence may only be grasped through studying the lived experience. Therefore, another key word for phenomenology is essence. To describe essence, Teherani et al. (2015) explained that the researcher needs to describe what was experienced and how it was experienced. After all, phenomenology tries to shape and give structures to the lived experiences and present it through words, concepts, and theories (Van Manen, 2014). Exploring Chinese international students' experiences during the pandemic using phenomenology can help others understand what they experienced through textual descriptions.

Hermeneutic Phenomenology

Hermeneutic phenomenology is also defined as an interpretive approach (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Neubauer et al., 2019). Heidegger stated that this method studies the meanings of the people being in the world as their experiences influence their life choices (Guillen, 2019). Therefore, this type of phenomenology transcends the descriptive approach and studies how objects are constituted in pure transcendental consciousness, and sets aside questions of any relation to the nature of the world around them (Lavery, 2003; Neubauer et al., 2019). Unlike the descriptive approach, some researchers choose

not to bracket themselves out from the research. Indeed, they agree that they cannot rid themselves of their life experiences and biases, and thus acknowledge their experiences, which lead them to think that a given phenomenon is worth exploring (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Neubauer et al., 2019).

As mentioned earlier, because I also lived through the same experiences as the participants, I will not try to bracket myself out of the study. Instead, I acknowledge my experiences and biases.

Comparative Analysis

Due to the unusual situation during the COVID-19 pandemic, Chinese international students were faced with deciding where to stay during the pandemic. Due to the switch to online teaching in 2020 (Smalley, 2020), some returned to China while others chose to continue in the US (Pang, 2020; Zhang, 2020). In this case, to learn the lived experiences of Chinese international students who were studying in a US university during the pandemic cannot be focused exclusively on one group of students. Both sides of the stories need to be explored. This means the essence of the phenomenon should be discussed for students who resided in China and in the US. As such, a simple phenomenology is insufficient for exploring this particular phenomenon.

Accordingly, I selected a method of phenomenology with an embedded comparative analysis. I conducted the research by exploring the lived experiences of Chinese international students from both groups (i.e., those residing in China and in the US). I thus split the participants into groups and analyzed each separately. Once done, I compared both groups with a comparative analysis to systematically examine their similarities and differences. In so doing, I hoped to explore the lived experiences of

students with different locations and perspectives. This strategy served as my methodological contribution, which helped me understand the lived experiences and the essence of the phenomenon in order to reach a comprehensive, and more holistic, understanding of the phenomenon.

To ensure the novelty of this method, I first researched it thoroughly. First, a general search in DU Library Compass was conducted by using the keywords “phenomenology,” “phenomenon,” “qualitative study,” “compare groups,” “comparative analysis,” “comparison,” and other related words. Among the studies found in the search, many were identified which used the comparative analysis method in qualitative research only, which is not the focus of this method. Other studies compared the method of phenomenology and other qualitative research methods, or compared different approaches of phenomenology. Some research used the word “phenomenology”, but in fact were quantitative research. As for research related to phenomenology, only one study was found, which focused on comparing the results from different studies. Ryles et al. (2017) mentioned phenomenology with comparative analysis. They focused on the topic of manic symptoms of bipolar disorders from different age groups. They searched literature using phenomenology in the topic and compared them. The research specifically stated that none of the studies in their topic using phenomenology made direct comparisons of phenomenology between age groups. Due to the research having been conducted by different authors, the cross-study comparison between groups was weakened in terms of reliability. They also pointed out that a lack of comparative studies in the topic was one of their study’s main limitations.

To find more literature, I used Google Scholar, which tends to have wider results. Interestingly, I found one study with a comparative analysis using phenomenology. Yan (2022) discussed the critical-thinking experiences of Chinese and US college students. Her design was to compare the combined descriptions from two groups and analyze the different meanings of critical thinking in groups. This design is similar to this study, however, differences can be seen. One difference is that Yan (2022) only sought differences in critical-thinking experiences, while this study examined both similarities and differences between two groups' experiences. Another difference is that Yan (2022) used interviews from previous research. This raises the question of whether these data were actually appropriate for this particular method. The interview questions were only designed to learn the lived experiences of the students, but did not seek to compare groups, which may have led to missing information or redundant answers. The analysis may not have been saturated, which would have led to inaccurate comparisons. Moreover, Yan's (2022) study compared students from different backgrounds, while the current research included students from the same background.

Then, to narrow the search on the keywords, specific databases, such as ProQuest and SAGE, were used. From this, I that found Lugo (2020) also conducted a comparative phenomenological study on the effect of parental alcohol use disorder. However, his study focused more on people with different numbers of siblings and comparing three life phases of the participants, while this study focuses on participants with the same background and experiences, but in different locations with different cultures.

No other studies were found related to comparative phenomenology analysis. While one study used a similar method, it explored the comparative phenomenology analysis

from a different angle. Instead of examining participants with different backgrounds, this study explored the lived experiences of people with same cultural background in the pandemic but reside in different places. It could be argued that the COVID-19 pandemic was a special situation, meaning that the current study could be performed under the unique circumstance where location was the only key factor.

Comparing groups in qualitative research can help scholars find the similarities and differences between the participants (Lindsay, 2018; Blackwell et al., 2009). Particularly, Lindsay (2018) quoted that qualitative research is lacking in comparison which, if used, could help strengthen its design. By comparing groups, the researcher can investigate how the phenomena vary between them (Lindsay et al., 2017). On the other hand, Morse (2004) stated that comparisons allow researchers to discover important differences between groups, which helps them understand the experiences as a whole. This is exactly what this study aims to achieve. The existing literature shows that comparing between groups with different backgrounds is possible in research, but studies comparing participants with only differences in location are lacking. Therefore, I focused on participants with the same background and experiences, but in different locations.

This method was deemed suitable for helping me understand the lived experiences of Chinese international students in a more comprehensive and nuanced way. Not only does it carry the benefits of phenomenology, but it also includes the features of comparing groups. This method transforms lived experiences into an expression of essence and creates meaningful reflections for the readers (Van Manen, 1990). It also helps the readers understand how different people in different locations reflect on the same

experiences, and thus understand the phenomenon holistically (Lindsay et al., 2017; Mores, 2014).

Among the studies using comparative phenomenology, the authors only examined participants with different backgrounds. However, for people who shared the same lived experiences but in different location was ignored. This study using the similar method but with the key factor of location provided a different theoretical understanding of the method and fill the gap in current literature.

Research Questions

This phenomenology study with a comparative analysis was designed to answer the following research questions:

1. What are the lived experience of Chinese international students who lived and studied in a US university during the COVID-19 pandemic?
2. What are the lived experience of Chinese international students who studied in a US university, but lived in China during the COVID-19 pandemic?
 - 1a. What are the similarities and differences in the experiences of those who resided in China and those who resided in the US?
 - 1b. What can we learn methodologically when using comparisons in sample populations?

Interpretive phenomenology was selected because the research questions seek to gain insights into the lived experiences of Chinese international student during the first wave of the COVID-19 pandemic. As a Chinese international student who lived through the pandemic, my preconception and bias cannot be ignored as this experience led me to choose this phenomenon (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Neubauer et al., 2019).

Philosophical Assumptions and Frameworks

Prior to delving into the specifics of data collection and analysis, it is crucial to explore the underlying philosophical assumptions that have influenced and directed this research. Philosophical assumptions encompass a fundamental set of beliefs that guide the researcher's actions, inform the formulation of research questions, choice of research strategy, and data collection and analysis methods (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Crotty, 1998).

This research posture during the study was informed by the social constructivism interpretive framework. According to Burrell and Morgan (1979), researchers will inevitably bring their own philosophical assumptions to their work. Social constructivism, meanwhile, aids researchers in comprehending the world in their surroundings and constructing subjective meanings of their experiences, and acknowledging the influence of background on interpretation, and the interpretation of the participants' constructions of meaning. (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Based on Creswell on Poth (2018), the four beliefs of the interpretive frameworks are ontological, epistemological, axiological, and methodological beliefs. Corresponding to social constructivism, I followed the ontological belief, where I accepted that individuals construct their own understanding of the world based on their interactions with their environment. I recognized that the participants were trying to understand their own world, while I was attempting to understand the nature of their subjective experiences, that is, the reality shaped by individual experiences. From an axiological perspective, I valued the beliefs of the individual participants and acknowledged that their subjective experiences were shaped by the historical, social, and situational context in which they occurred (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Brey (1997) stated that social constructivism often

incorporates the principle of methodological beliefs. This study relied on an inductive approach, meaning that the theories and patterns of meaning developed and evolved as the study progressed.

Overall, the goal of social constructivist research is to understand the complex nature of the participants’ subjective experiences, and use data collection and analysis to offer an interpretation of the phenomenon—which was applicable to this study.

The theoretical framework for this study was based on the experiences of the Chinese international students during the COVID-19 pandemic in the US, with a focus on the similarities and differences between those who resided in China and those who resided in the US. The experiences of the participants were influenced by a variety of factors, such as their day-to-day experiences, challenges, and coping strategies.

The conceptual framework for this study is presented in the following diagram:

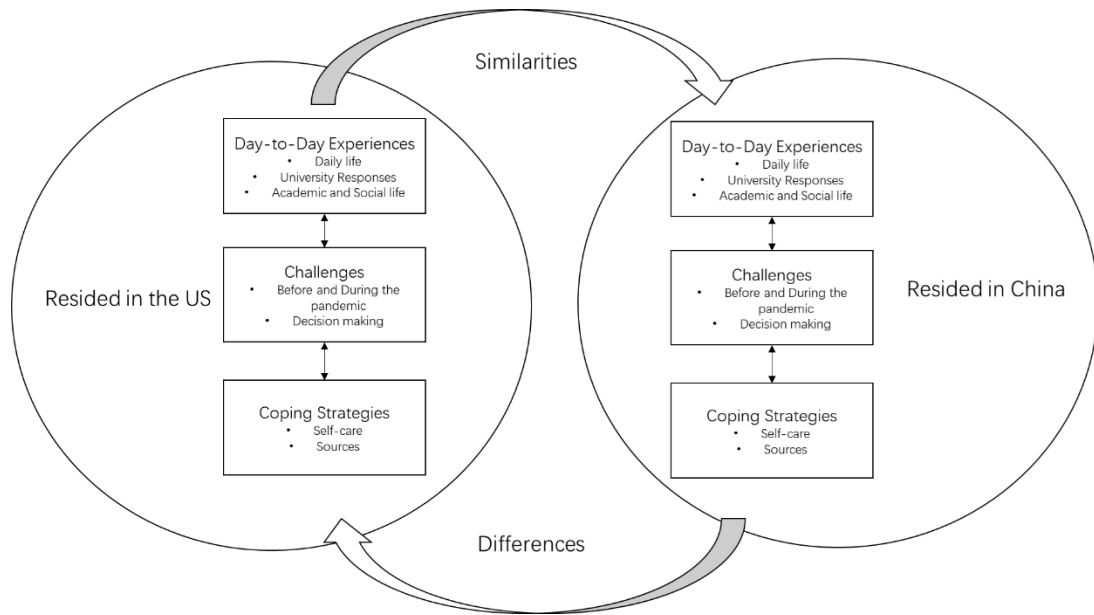


Figure 1: Conceptual framework for this study

In this framework, the central focus is on the experiences of Chinese international students during the COVID-19 pandemic in the US. The main factors that influence these are the day-to-day experiences, challenges, and personal coping strategies. These factors interact with each other to shape the participants' experiences and decision-making processes in challenges.

By using a phenomenological approach to investigate the experiences of Chinese international students during the COVID-19 pandemic in the US, with a focus on the similarities and differences between those who resided in China and those who resided in the US, this study aims to contribute to the understanding of how day-to-day experiences, challenges, and personal coping strategies play a role in the experiences of international students during times of crisis. Ultimately, the similarities and the differences of the two groups of the participants are compared, which can enhance our understanding of how to use comparisons in sample populations in a methodologically-sound manner.

Positionality Statement

As a Chinese international student who studied in the US before and during the COVID-19 pandemic, my experiences fundamentally inform the direction of this study. While my own journey was marked by the unique experience of getting married during the pandemic, providing me with a close relational support system, I recognize that my experiences may not reflect those of my peers who might not have had similar support. This difference has deepened my interest in exploring the broader impacts of the pandemic on other Chinese international students who navigated this period without similar relationships and experiences.

To manage my inherent biases and preconceptions, I maintained a reflexive journal throughout the research process. This was crucial in recognizing my assumptions to prevent them from influencing the study's outcomes. Prior assumptions that influenced the approach to this study include the belief that students residing in China would face racism, an assumption informed by social media posts and literature indicating attacks on Chinese international students. Additionally, I held the bias that the students in China would experience greater isolation compared to their peers in the US, where pandemic restrictions were generally less stringent, possibly allowing for a more active social life. These assumptions were continually checked against emerging data to ensure that the research remained grounded in the actual experiences of the participants, rather than being shaped by prejudiced notions.

As for my credentials, I am currently a PhD student majoring in Research Methods and Statistics, equipped with the necessary skills to conduct this study. My academic training ensures a robust methodological approach, allowing for a detailed and sensitive exploration of the experiences of other international students during the pandemic. Clearly, my background is suited for conducting this study. I have specialized knowledge in this research area and am dedicated to supporting and advocating for families. Phenomenological research is well-suited to my goal of providing a platform for Chinese international students during the pandemic, allowing their experiences to be recognized and valued.

For the participant and researcher-participant relationship, no participant in this study had a direct relationship with me that could represent a conflict of interest or impart bias,

such as a reporting relationship or contract. This ensures that the findings are based solely on the participants' experiences without undue influence.

Participants

For a phenomenology study, Polkinghorne (1989) and Creswell and Poth (2018) recommended that researchers interview between 5–25 individuals who lived the experiences, and Ellis (2016) suggested that 6–20 participants would be sufficient. Due to the study's focus on students were residing either in the US or China, two groups were formed, each with three participants, meaning that there were six participants in total.

The first criteria was that the students should be Chinese international student who were studying in a US university during the first wave of COVID-19 pandemic. As this study sought to examine Chinese students who were studying in the US in an HEI, the age of the participants have to be over 18 during 2020. Moreover, due to the ethical concerns regarding children and human subject requirements, any participants under the age of 18 during 2020 were excluded during the recruitment. Another participation criterion was that the students had not immigrated to the US with their parents. Moreover, no Green Card could be held and they could not have had other family members living with them during the pandemic. Finally, this study inquiries about students' life experiences prior to COVID-19 by examining how their lives changed during the pandemic. Therefore, participants had to possess some prior experience of studying in the US before the pandemic.

As a Chinese international student myself, I have some personal relationships with other Chinese international students, but, due to ethical reasons, I chose only those who had no direct relationship with me so as to avoid conflicts of interest or biased responses.

Collecting Participants

A Chinese social media platform was used to collect participants. Xiaohongshu is largely used by Chinese students in the world. Different from a regular forum, students on Xiaohongshu tend to be more expressive about their anxieties and depression, can post pictures, and hope to find other students who shared similar experiences. I shared a recruitment post with popular hashtags used by Chinese international students. Accordingly, students interested in the topic would privately message me, and thus choose to participate. In the private messages, I asked questions to check their inclusion and exclusion criteria. If they were eligible for the study, contact information, such as email, WeChat, or phone was collected.

Among the Chinese students I contacted from my posts, a total of four students were eligible for this phenomenology study.

Due to the lack of responses from social media, a snowball sampling method was employed with the existing participants. Snowball sampling, also known as convenience sampling, allows researchers to reach participants through existing study participants' networks. According to Emerson (2015), this method involves asking participants to refer their friends and acquaintances to the study, thus facilitating the recruitment of a desired number of participants. Much like a snowball increases in size as it rolls downhill, this technique can rapidly expand the pool of participants. It is particularly effective for studying hidden populations—those with rare characteristics or who are difficult to access (Leighton et al., 2021). However, despite its advantage in accessing hard-to-reach groups, snowball sampling comes with inherent biases. Cohen and Arieli (2011) pointed out that the sample may overly rely on the initial participants and their networks, which

can limit the diversity and representativeness of the study population. Moreover, the method's dependence on participant referrals may introduce a homogeneity bias, potentially resulting in a sample that does not accurately represent the broader population's diversity.

Participant Selection

After reviewing the recruitment results, I eliminated several respondents. First, I eliminated those who failed to leave contact information or clearly expressed that they were not interested in participating. I also eliminated students who did not attend university for the whole period. Moreover, those who graduated in spring or summer 2019 or those who attended as freshman in fall 2020 were not included.

Ultimately, I selected three participants for each group, guided by my desire for diversity in such aspects as major, location in China or the US, and gender balance. I acknowledge that achieving a perfect match between the groups was not possible; however, I made efforts to ensure that each group consisted of participants with similar academic backgrounds. This included both science and literature majors, as well as a balanced representation in terms of the participants' geographical locations (be it rural or urban) and gender distribution. Each group included one student identifying as female, majoring in business from the southern part of China, one undergraduate student identifying as male, also from southern China, and one graduate student also identifying as male, majoring in a science-related field. All were attending a university located in the midwestern US.

Data Collection

The second phase of phenomenology is to collect the lived experiences (Guillen, 2019). This phase involves collecting data from people who have lived the phenomenon. Creswell and Poth (2018) specifically mentioned the method should use in-depth and multiple interviews. As such, I interviewed the participants at least twice, for approximately 60 minutes each time.

This study involved six Chinese international students who attended universities in the US during the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020. First, the consent form was signed by the participants (Appendix A). Once done, the interview protocol (Appendix B) was then sent to the participants if they would like to see it and schedule a time.

Prior to the formal interviews, a pilot interview was conducted with a friend who was also a Chinese international student who studied in the US during the pandemic, and thus shared the same experiences. This pilot was designed to refine the interview protocol by incorporating feedback from the pilot participant, thereby enhancing the clarity and effectiveness of the interview questions. The insights gained from this pilot interview enabled a more profound and comprehensive exploration during the subsequent interviews with the actual participants.

Each participant was interviewed individually with open-ended, guided questions (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Guillen, 2019). The interviews began with questions about the participants' initial experiences with the pandemic. Guillen (2019) suggested that questions concerning the experience and its pedagogical value should be asked. Similarly, Creswell and Poth (2018) mentioned two necessary questions: "What have you experienced in terms of the phenomenon?" and "What contexts or situations have

typically influenced or affected your experiences of the phenomenon?” These two are focused on gathering data and help the researcher understand common experiences. Van Manen (2003) mentioned that, during the interview, it is acceptable to ask limited questions and prepared questions do not have to be asked, meaning that silence is also acceptable. Ultimately, the interview should be a correct description of the lived experiences of the participants (Guillen, 2019).

After each interview, I completed my memos, cleaned and refined the interview transcript, and engaged in a reflexive memo exercise while my recollection remained vivid. The use of a predefined reflexive memo template (Appendix C) following each interview served the dual purpose of ensuring the accuracy of interview content capture and maintaining the integrity of the data (Malterud, 2001). Especially, according to Peshkin (1988), as a researcher who did not employ bracketing, it was crucial for me to actively explore the subjectivity of participants throughout the interview process, well before the data collection and analysis were finalized. This practice helped me understand how the participants’ subjectivity could potentially influence the course of their inquiry and its ultimate outcomes. Consequently, to accommodate the necessary time for interview transcript completion and the reflective procedures, I refrained from scheduling multiple interviews in a single day.

The interviews could either be in-person or by Zoom or phone, where all the participants chose to conduct by Zoom, WeChat video, or phone based on our time schedule. As two of the interviews were planned, they were scheduled accordingly based on my notes and memo after each interview.

Table 1 outlines the interview structure of this study, which includes the topics, purpose, and focus of each interview. Full interview protocols are included in Appendix B.

Table 1: Interview structure

	Interview 1	Interview 2
Topics	Demographic information and COVID-19 experiences	Personal coping strategies and long-term effects of the pandemic
Purpose	To learn about participants' history and background, why they made the choice of staying in the US or China, what they experienced during the pandemic and how they described their challenges	To examine the individual coping strategies used by the participants, gain insight into their experiences during this time and how these experiences may have influenced their current decision-making processes in challenges.
Focus	To gain an understanding of the general experiences and challenges of the participants during the pandemic.	Learn their coping strategies. examining how the pandemic may have impacted their current decision-making processes, as well as any additional insights or perspectives that the participants may wish to share.

During the interview, I took notes to capture the memories and experiences of the students, and after each interview, I wrote memos to capture my emerging insights regarding their comments in relation to my research questions. Moreover, I closely observed the participants as they described the phenomenon. This helped me avoid formulating biases and place myself into their situation to better immerse myself in the phenomenon (Greening, 2019; Guillen, 2019)

Additional data were collected from the participants. To aid the participants recall the experiences, they were allowed and encouraged to provide photos, diaries, and social media posts during the time period, which could offer another perspective of the lived experiences (Creswell & Poth, 2018). With the participants' consent, I analyzed these photos and posts. I linked the photos to the interview transcripts, then analyzed why they chose the photo and the meaning they attributed to the post. The interviews lasted for approximately one hour and were conducted in a two-month period.

In an effort to minimize differences between the two groups of participants, I used the same interview protocol for the first interview for all of the participants. For the second interview, the first section focused on the challenges faced by the participants, therefore, two sets of interview questions were used for the challenges based on the location. The last part of personal coping strategies was the same for both groups.

Validation

According to Adamy et al. (2018), validation is an important step for investigating phenomena. Several steps can be taken to ensure the validity of qualitative research, of which I implemented two. When conducting the interviews, I asked the participants for other artifacts that reflected their COVID experiences, such as pictures, diary, and social

media posts to provide the adequacy of the data (Sousa, 2014). Reflexivity is one of the important processes (Pyett, 2003).

Data Analysis

I recorded the interviews with Zoom and an iPad as a backup device and transcribed the interview by myself. Given that all participants were Chinese international students, Mandarin Chinese was the primary language of communication during the interviews. Consequently, the intended approach involved conducting the interviews in Mandarin Chinese, analyzing the gathered data in Mandarin, and subsequently personally translating the identified codes, themes, and significant quotations into English (Larkin et al., 2006).

For phenomenology, Guillen (2019) defined the analysis part as reflecting on the lived experienced—i.e., the structural stage. This phase is used to grasp the essence of the phenomenon and seeks to make a direct connection to the lived experiences.

I began the analysis with coding. Greening (2018) summarized that coding is to categorize and make sense of the significant meanings of the phenomenon. Groenewald (2019) stated that, after the interviews, only useful and meaningful codes should be kept. The criteria defining whether something is useful relates to the literal content, the number of times it was mentioned, and how it was stated. To do so, I examined the interview transcripts to find the significant statements that would help me understand the participants' experiences of the phenomenon (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Once done, I used the significant statements to develop a cluster of meaning (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Greening, 2018; Groenewald, 2019). Two methods of describing were used. The first was textural description, where I used the significant statements and themes to write out what

the participants had experienced (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The second was structural description, where I noted down the things that influenced how the participants experienced the phenomenon (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

After obtaining the codes, I clustered them and formed themes (Greening, 2018; Groenewald, 2019). The function of the codes is to categorize and make sense of the meaning of the phenomenon, which help the lived experiences merge into the essences of the phenomenon (Greening, 2018). I determined the central subject of each theme (Guillen, 2019). Looking through them, I removed duplications and found shorter phrases of the central theme that could represent it accurately. Moreover, based on Groenewald (2019), I did not integrate similar codes and themes when differences could be spotted, but rather included both for the analysis. Furthermore, even if the code or theme were only mentioned once or twice, I did not exclude the minority voice. As Creswell (2013) mentioned, all statements and voices should be treated equally as long as they do not have the exact same meanings.

In general, I used NVIVO software to manage the data, which was helping for storing the data, and recording the connections, annotations, and memos. However, as computer software lacks human imaginative exploration, I mostly conducted the analysis myself (Maher et al., 2018).

After finding the codes and themes of both groups, a comparative study between the two was conducted. As mentioned earlier, the students residing in different places faced different difficulties. Therefore, the purpose of this phase was to see the similarities and differences between the two groups. I examined the themes and decided which were common to Chinese international students and which differed by residence. This method

not only helped me examine the differences between two groups (Lindsay et al., 2017), but also helped me understand the essence of the experiences with more perspectives.

For the next step, I wrote out the lived experiences (Guillen, 2019). During this step, I integrated all the themes into a general structure, where I summarized all the lived experiences I obtained from the interviews. Greening (2018) stated that this is the phase of describing. I only defined the phenomenon and presented the essence of lived experiences (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Groenewald, 2019). I also sought to present the phenomenon that usually cannot be presented in plain, simple words (Van Manen, 2014). The essence of this phenomenon presents the underlying structure of the lived experiences of the Chinese international students during the first wave of COVID-19 pandemic.

In the end of the analysis, I conducted the comparative analysis to answer the research question: What are the similarities and differences in the experiences of those who resided in China and those who resided in the US?

I began by listing out the codes and themes of the two groups. By examining the data collected from the two groups, I could identify the common themes and highlight the notable differences in the responses of the two groups. I highlighted notable differences in these responses, and compared and contrasted the experiences of those who resided in China with those who resided in the US. I also examined the unique perspectives and insights from each group.

After synthesizing the findings, I drew conclusions about the similarities and differences in the experiences of the two groups. I identified notable trends or patterns that emerged from the data and offered insights or recommendations for future research

or policy. This comparative analysis approach provides a robust and comprehensive understanding of the experiences of Chinese international students during the initial wave of the COVID-19 pandemic in the US, and how these experiences differed for those who resided in China versus those who resided in the US.

I also used these results for a more detailed discussion of the methodology regarding what I learned through its use when employing comparisons in sample populations. This comparison allowed for a more nuanced understanding of the phenomenon being studied, as well as the identification of potential variables that may have influenced the experiences of these students. By examining similarities and differences between the two groups, I could also provide a more comprehensive analysis of the phenomenon, which can inform future research and help develop more effective strategies for supporting these students.

Ethical

I obtained approval from the Institution Review Board (IRB) at the University of Denver to ensure compliance with IRB regulations and ethical standards. Before the interviews, I reviewed the consent form with the participants (Appendix A). No risks were associated with the participants in this study. All the participants were adults over the age of 18. Moreover, since the participants were Chinese international students, they were able to choose the interview language (Kang & Hwang, 2021). Five years after the research is complete, I will destroy all the data sources.

Pilot Study

In preparation for this study, I conducted a pilot study with a friend experienced in online learning in the US during the pandemic. The primary goal was to assess the

effectiveness of my interview protocol and gain preliminary insights into the expected nature of responses.

Throughout the interview, I systematically documented observations, jotted down notes, and recorded thoughts on the interview protocol. Following the interview, I refined the protocol by rephrasing questions for clarity and incorporating more detailed probing inquiries. Despite the pilot study being limited to only one participant, it heightened my awareness of personal biases. Additionally, the pilot study confirmed my keen interest in this topic, further reinforcing my motivation to delve deeper into the distinct and diverse lived experiences of Chinese international students.

Summary

This chapter has discussed the research methods used to answer the research questions of this study. The chapter outlined the methodology of this study, and also mentioned the participants, data collection method, and analysis for both quantitative and qualitative analysis. Phenomenology with a comparative analysis was deemed effective for exploring the lived experiences of Chinese international students studying in a US university during the COVID-19 pandemic, and for discussing the similarities and differences between the students who resided in the US and in China. This chapter serves to guide Chapter four, which presents the results of this study.

Chapter Four: Results

This chapter presents the results of the phenomenological study. The following section reviews the study, summarizes the participants, presents themes found in the research of each group, compares both groups using a comparative analysis, addresses the methodological discussion, and provides a summary of the findings of the research questions.

Overview of the Study

The purpose of the study is to identify the lived experiences of Chinese international students who were involved in distance learning while enrolled in a US university. This exploration encompasses students residing in the US and those who returned to China, allowing for a comparative analysis of the experiences they had. The overarching objective is to capture the essence of the lives of Chinese international students during the COVID-19 pandemic. Purposeful sampling was employed to select six Chinese international students, three of whom resided in the US and three who returned to China in 2020 during the pandemic. To ensure anonymity and confidentiality, pseudonyms were chosen by the participants.

The overarching research question of this research guided this study: “What were the lived experience of Chinese international students during the COVID-19 pandemic?”

This was further accompanied by detailed questions:

- What are the lived experience of Chinese international students who lived and studied in a US university during the COVID-19 pandemic?
- What are the lived experience of Chinese international students who studied in a US university but lived in China during the COVID-19 pandemic?

Additional sub-questions focused on the method of the study:

- What are the similarities and differences in the experiences of those who resided in China and those who resided in the US?
- What can we learn methodologically when utilizing comparisons in sample populations?

This study employed a phenomenological methodology, incorporating a comparative analysis where participants were divided into two groups based solely on location differences, aligning with the research questions stated above.

Through the analysis process, interviews were conducted with six participants in mandarin Chinese, which was preferred by the participants. By analyzing transcripts, the study aimed to unveil codes and themes capturing the lived experiences and essence of Chinese international students. Graphics provided by participants are introduced so as to emphasize these themes. Subsequently, a comparison of themes between the two groups was conducted, accompanied by a methodological discussion on the use of comparisons among Chinese international students who lived through the pandemic. The analysis was conducted in Chinese (including the identification of codes and themes), after which it was translated into English to ensure that the codes, themes, and essence of the experiences of the Chinese international students were not lost in translation during the analysis.

Summary of Participants

Four participants were recruited for this study through the Chinese social media platform Xiaohongshu, which is widely used by Chinese international students. However, due to lower-than-expected responses from this platform, a snowball sampling method was implemented. Using existing participants, an additional two participants were recruited.

The participants included four men and two women, all of whom were Chinese international students at a US university during the first wave of the COVID-19 pandemic. Among them, three participants (two men and one woman) engaged in online learning while residing in the US, while the remaining three (two men and one woman) returned to China to pursue online learning. Despite sharing a common background as Chinese international students, the participants also exhibited diversity in terms of their majors, schools, and hometowns.

As the participants were divided into two groups, I took measures to ensure comparability by aligning gender and attempting to match at least one characteristic, such as major or hometown, between both groups.

Pseudonyms assigned to study participants residing in the US were Julia, Warren, and Gary. For participants residing in China, the pseudonyms were assigned as Emily, Ted, and Victor.

Julia

Born in the northern part of China, Julia developed a penchant for moving early in life. Having relocated to southern China with her parents during her youth, Julia continued her journey by studying in the US from high school onward, accumulating

several moves by the year 2020. In 2019, she was a junior student in the northwest region, majoring in business. Julia decided to transfer from community college to a university, gaining admission to a midwestern university and several others in larger, more populous, cities. She chose to move to the Midwest primarily due to the perceived safety of the area during the pandemic, as larger cities carried greater infection risks.

During this period, Julia opted to stay in the US, not only because of the need to move to a new city with her pets and then-boyfriend, but also due to the expiration of her visa. Returning to China would require redoing the visa process, and given the lengthy waitlist, it seemed impractical within a year.

Warren

Warren embarked on his journey as an international student in 2019, initially starting as an ESL student to overcome language barriers. Driven by his goal of attending business school, he worked diligently and transitioned to full-time student status in mid-2020. While he officially stated that his decision to remain in the US during the COVID-19 pandemic was motivated by his dedication to studying and immersing himself in the language and cultural environment, he humorously admitted that the real reason was that he enjoyed the independence of being away from his parents and managing his own time. The logistical challenge of obtaining expensive flight tickets during the pandemic also played a role and, after discussions with his parents, they mutually agreed that it was best for him to remain in the US.

In the summer of 2020, Warren began his freshman year in business at a university in the midwestern region of the US. Adapting to the circumstances of the pandemic, he left the school dormitories and opted to live with friends for online learning. Originating from

the southern part of China, Warren found himself sharing living space with roommates from both the northern and southern regions of China.

Gary

Gary had been studying in the US for an extended period. As a senior student in a university in the western US, when the COVID-19 pandemic hit, he only had one semester left to obtain his bachelor's degree. Opting to stay in the US, he wanted to finish school without the hassle of moving back to China, avoiding the expenses and risks associated with securing tickets, and potential exposure during travel.

In the spring of 2020, Gary already received an offer from a university for his master's degree and was ready to move with his girlfriend in summer. As someone from the middle part of China, he chose a university in the midwestern US. He spent the rest of the year in a small apartment with his girlfriend, engaging in online learning for his new degree.

Emily

Emily was an international exchange student and decided to become a full-time student in her university immediately before the COVID-19 pandemic hit. Interestingly, she chose not to reside in China entirely by her own personal preferences. She returned to China at the end of 2019 during the winter break, to update her visa as she made the transaction with school. However, as the pandemic unfolded after her visa was approved, she faced a dilemma. Due to the high cost of plane tickets and concerns about the pandemic, after careful consideration, she decided to stay at home and engage in online learning.

During the fall of 2020, Emily was a senior student majoring in business at a university situated in the midwestern US. Hailing from southern China, she chose to stay with her parents in her hometown throughout the academic year of online learning.

Ted

In the fall of 2019, Ted started his university journey in the US, electing a midwestern university with a major in physics. Despite his family's belief in the US offering superior education, Ted seemed unconcerned by this. They chose the Midwest for its fewer Chinese students, in the hope that Ted could immerse himself in the language and culture. Upon the outbreak, Ted remained unconcerned about his location. His anxious mother, however, insisted he return to China for safety.

Originally from southern China, Ted acquiesced and returned. Surprisingly, he did not stay with his family but chose a small condo, relishing solitude and frequently hosting visits from friends.

Victor

In 2019, Victor embarked on his journey as a graduate student in what he believed to be the top program, best suited for him. His term began in January 2020, filled with excitement about being in the US. However, as the pandemic hit in March, his plans took an unexpected turn. One of the primary reasons he chose this university and program was to engage in hands-on experiments within their labs. Unfortunately, with the shift to online learning in March and no more lab experiments, staying in the US seemed no different from returning home. After discussing the situation with his sister, who was also an international student in the US, they decided to return home.

In 2020, Victor moved from southern China and began his master's program at a midwestern university. After spending less than four months in the US, he moved back home to live with his parents and began an internship while continuing his master's program remotely.

Themes

To identify themes in the data, I initiated the analysis with coding, primarily focused on categorizing and making sense of the significant meanings of the phenomenon (Greening, 2018). While navigating the NVIVO 14 software, I selectively retained words pertinent and meaningful for this study, transforming them into codes. I also included codes that were mentioned only once, as it is essential to consider the minority voice in capturing the diverse range of perspectives within the data (Groenewald, 2019).

Throughout the transcript review, I documented noteworthy statements, noting the frequency and articulation of each code.

Consequently, I identified 11 unique codes for participants residing in the US and nine unique codes for participants residing in China. After reviewing the codes, I developed four themes for the first group (US) and three for the second (China), which allowed me to capture the lived experiences and essence of Chinese international students during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Analysis 1: Student Residing in the US

This section presents the findings of a phenomenological study aimed at exploring the lived experiences of Chinese international students who remained in the US during the COVID-19 pandemic.

As the world struggled with unprecedented challenges, these students navigated the complexities of continuing their education far from home, under rapidly changing circumstances. Through a detailed analysis of interview transcripts, this section reveals the essence of their experiences, categorized into several emergent themes that capture the essence of their academic, social, and personal journeys during this global crisis. The interviews not only explored the adaptability and strength of these students, but also contributed to a deeper understanding of the pandemic's broader impacts on international higher education.

The following analysis delves into the lives of the students, providing a narrative that reflects their voices and experiences.

Theme 1: Online Learning Challenges

As indicated in the literature, Online Learning Challenges was the first theme that emerged as essential to the phenomenon.

The shift to online learning required significant adaptation from students, who found themselves navigating an entirely new learning environment. Participants described a range of emotions, from initial frustration and technical difficulties to gradually finding their footing in the digital classroom.

Code 1: Change in Educational Experience

The transition from in-person classes to online learning posed significant challenges for all three participants, particularly given their extensive experience with classroom learning at US universities.

Gary highlighted the clarity issues encountered during online classes, saying, "While attending online classes, many things felt unclear and somewhat uncertain." He further

expressed his post-graduation sentiment, stating, “Being unable to attend classes in person led to a somewhat hazy and confused learning experience, till now, I still feel somewhat perplexed about many things (I learned during the pandemic).”

Julia reminisced about her pre-online learning routine: “I used to at least go to the library to study, where I wouldn’t be disturbed, and it was easier to research on the computer and print materials. If you needed a book, you could simply borrow it from the library.” However, after the pandemic necessitated a shift to online learning at her new school, she laughed, “For a year and a half, I didn’t even know what our library looked like.”

Warren truthfully shared his drastic challenges with online learning: “I ended up playing video games crazily to the point where I stopped listening to the classes altogether, just leaving the class on in the background while I played games.”

He also acknowledged that online learning significantly reduced his study time:

“Normally, you would need to go to school and sit in front of the professor to attend classes. But with online classes, I wouldn’t listen, essentially leaving the class running in the background as if it were just background noise. Occasionally, I’d nod off when the professor called attendance, saying, “Okay, no problem, professor.” However, a change occurred when the professor started requiring us to turn on our cameras to ensure we were paying attention. That made things slightly better, at least forcing us to listen to the class. Also, after the switch to online classes, some exams and assignments moved online, which, in some cases, led to a decrease in workload since professors considered that some students might be unwell, thereby adjusting the workload accordingly.”

Warren continued, sharing the sole reason he managed to keep up with school was a wake-up call he received after getting an F:

“After receiving a warning email from the school stating my GPA had fallen below 2.0 and they were considering academic dismissal, I realized something was wrong. Despite my low GPA (compared to before), it shouldn’t have been below 2.0 to warrant dismissal. After inquiring, I found it was a mistake, but it was indeed a wake-up call to start studying seriously. It marked a turning point for me.”

Gary echoed Warren’s sentiments regarding online classes’ impact on self-discipline, “Even during in-person classes, I’m not someone with strong self-control. So, when I’m at a computer, I might end up doing other things while attending an online class, which significantly affected me.”

Regarding midterms and finals, Warren added, “When it came to exams or certain assignments, I’d just cram at the last minute. I wasn’t aiming for top grades, just hoping for a B, so it was more about getting by with the bare minimum effort.”

Code 2: Classroom Interaction

The importance of effective communication and the need for adaptability relates to both instructors and students during the transition to online learning. The participants faced challenges in adjusting to new modes of learning and needed support from the instructors in their academic success.

Gary spoke of his frustrations with the online learning format, noting the challenges of seeking clarification on doubts:

“When you have questions, you can’t just grab your backpack after class and ask the teacher before they leave, like before. During the pandemic, you had to resort to various messages or emails, right? But many professors, especially the older ones, might not check their emails frequently.”

Warren struggled even more when it came to communications. He admitted:

“I wouldn’t look at the syllabus and essentially didn’t care. I just looked at the to-do list on the website and completed tasks one by one. For some reason, (for one course) the discussion assignments wouldn’t show up there, so I completely missed that there was an assignment to do.”

Despite missing the entire assignment, “The professor was very understanding and still gave me partial credit for the discussions I missed. Thanks to my three papers, I was able to score a 90, an A-, which was the first A-level grade I received since officially starting university.” Warren was proud when he talked of his final grade.

Julia highlighted the importance of communication, “Whether it’s in work, study, or life, communication is crucial. Without it, progress in tasks can be slow, and various aspects of schooling can be negatively impacted.”

Code 3: Technology

The participants shared stories which highlighted the unexpected challenges and adjustments they had to make during the transition to online learning, from dealing with

technology and internet data limitations to adapting traditional learning methods to digital platforms.

Warren recounted his frustrating experience with technology during online learning:

“After moving into a rental house, for online classes, we couldn’t go without the internet. Our plan was \$70 a month, which was already on the expensive side, but because our courses were online, we had to use the internet frequently, especially for video communications on platforms like Zoom, which consume a lot of data. One day, our connection suddenly dropped. We checked the modem and saw it indicated everything was working fine. Because our classes were happening right then together, we had to quickly switch to using our mobile data to join them. After the class, my friend and I drove to the internet service provider to find out what happened, only to learn we had exceeded our data limit. With no other choice, we upgraded to a much more expensive plan with unlimited data to meet our daily internet needs. It was quite an embarrassing situation.”

On the other hand, Julia found online learning challenging, especially for such subjects as mathematics:

“Studying math involves a lot of formulas, which are hard to grasp in online teaching. It’s easier to understand complex concepts when a teacher slowly explains them on a blackboard, step by step. But the main issue with online classes is that even the problems you could easily solve on paper have to be typed into a computer, and it’s incredibly difficult to write those formulas digitally.”

Theme 1 Summary

The theme Online Learning Challenges reveals the overarching challenges faced by Chinese international students during their transition to online learning, emphasizing adaptation to a new educational format. It outlines the struggle with technical difficulties, the need for significant self-discipline, and the importance of effective communication with educators (Thomas et al., 2020). The shift from traditional classroom settings to digital platforms introduced a range of issues, from reduced clarity in learning materials to difficulties in engaging with coursework and maintaining academic performance, as well as technological challenges (Novikov, 2020). Overall, Online Learning Challenges captures the complexity of transitioning to online learning, underscoring the critical need for adaptability among students and educators alike.

Theme 2: Social Life Adaptation

This theme explored the social lives and experiences of the Chinese international students in the US during the COVID-19 pandemic, highlighting their challenges with socialization, racism, and safety. Participants shared their feelings of loneliness and stress due to social restrictions and the lack of in-person interactions. These narratives underscore the complex impact of the pandemic on their lives, intertwining concerns about health, safety, and social belonging.

Code 1: Social Restrictions

When the pandemic began, all three participants experienced different levels of restrictions as curfews were implemented in the US.

Julia began stockpiling supplies:

“We Chinese like to prepare foods that we enjoy eating, and many of the items are sold quite far from where we live. It’s not very convenient to go there; it takes over an hour by car. Then, with the pandemic, it felt like such a hassle. In the US, people might buy a week’s worth of groceries at a time, but during the pandemic, if the fridge wasn’t full, I’d feel quite anxious.”

She further explained, “The main reason is that I saw many people online panic-buying various items, including paper products and all sorts of food. I was afraid that stores wouldn’t be able to restock later on.” Even after the pandemic passed, she admitted that she still maintained the habit of stockpiling supplies.

Warren started with a more optimistic view, “After all, I’m a homebody, so whether I can go out or not doesn’t really affect me much. [pauses to think] I felt that with fewer people going out, I would go out even less, preferring to stay home whenever possible.”

However, as the situation evolved, he reflected:

“But later, every time I went out, I had to wear a mask. For instance, if I was going to a less crowded place, a regular mask would suffice. But for more crowded places, like malls or any densely populated areas, I would wear an N95 mask, especially since masks were quite expensive at the time.”

His family attempted to mail him masks, but they were returned, possibly due to issues with the mailing address or customs.

The situation became more serious once curfews and panic-buying began: “There was panic-buying of all sorts of essentials, even toilet paper. I remember going to Costco with

a friend, and you'd see signs limiting paper products to one package per person. It was all so strange to me.”

Warren showed me a picture he had taken of people waiting in line to shop at Costco (Figure 2) and then laughed, “I never understood why people were hoarding kitchen paper towels. I could understand buying toilet paper or tissues, but the purpose of stockpiling kitchen paper towels eluded me.”



Figure 2: Many people were waiting in line to get into Costco.

Warren also pointed out how shopping became more inconvenient after the pandemic, referring to the picture he took:

“When you go to shop at some places, every store has a sign outside indicating how many people are allowed inside at the same time. This leads to us standing around waiting to enter. If the store is full, they tell us we have to wait until

someone leaves before we can go in, making shopping not as convenient as before.”

Gary, on the other hand, took the situation more seriously.

“Gradually, I saw schools closing down and classes being canceled. The streets became emptier, and many cities in the US implemented curfews. It felt a bit like living in a biohazard scenario. But truly, due to the pandemic, we hardly ever went out to dine at restaurants from the outbreak until the end. Although there wasn’t mandatory control, we consciously chose to stay home. The apartment complex we lived in was very quiet, almost deserted.”

He did not enjoy the quiet and deserted atmosphere, but remained serious about the pandemic. Even during the second or third wave in 2021, he continued to wear masks. Without the social restrictions, he encountered weird looks: “At that time, I wanted to protect myself and avoid getting COVID as much as possible. Most Americans had indeed stopped wearing masks by then, but we continued to wear ours.”

Julia expressed a sentiment applicable to both Warren and Gary: “That period seemed to pass very quickly. At the time, it felt like the days were dragging, but in hindsight, it feels like we didn’t do much of anything. There was no social interaction, and even usual activities like attending classes felt boring.”

Code 2: Loneliness and Emptiness

“I feel like there was a gap during these two years of the pandemic.” Julia stated, highlighting how socialization became a problem for those who stayed in the US, leading to inevitable feelings of loneliness and stress among the participants.

Julia added in a tone of resignation:

“There was no initiative on our part to socialize with others, nor from others to socialize with us, because the entire means of communication was effectively cut off, as if in-person interactions were completely blocked. There was no way to meet new friends or even go to school.”

“That was very genuine.” Julia described the loneliness:

“During the entire pandemic, I didn’t return to my home country, nor did I see my parents or family. It was just my boyfriend, who is now my husband, and I staying in the house with our cat and dog. Even though there were quite a few of us, it sometimes felt very empty.”

She repeated the word “empty” several times.

“(The effect of social life during the pandemic) is absolutely real.” Gary said affirmatively, echoing Julia’s sentiments. He repeatedly talked about his lack of social life and inability to make new friends. When he moved to his master’s degree school, “Consider that during the pandemic, we even hardly went out, and the school’s orientation for new students was barely held, right? Even including not going to school for classes, everyone’s social life was definitely affected.”

He experienced a high level of loneliness: “I almost isolated myself at home, didn’t want to go out, and there weren’t many other options either.” For him, gaming with friends online did not count as socializing either.

Although he was not living alone, but with his girlfriend at the time, he still felt the loneliness: “It’s not like I was just staying at home by myself, but still...”

“It feels like I don’t have any new friends, just like that.” Gary summarized with a bitter smile.

Warren was in a different situation. He described it as “okay” because he was renting a house with friends: “Just by looking up or down, I could see them, which relatively speaking, made it less likely for me to feel lonely. We were a small group who could communicate and support each other, so it wasn’t easy to feel lonely.” He also maintained the habit of calling his parents in China once a week.

However, he too experienced some level of loneliness:

“I called my parents, and they told me my dad had caught COVID. I was particularly worried at that time, and I would send messages every day to ask about the situation at home or something like that. But during that time, I indeed felt quite helpless because I was in the US and couldn’t really help them. It was a tough time.”

Fortunately, his father quickly recovered.

Code 3: Racism

Many researchers have highlighted the racism faced by Chinese international students during the pandemic (Boyle, 2020; Doherty & Obonyo, 2020; Donaghue, 2020), and the participants encountered direct racism from stranger and some level of unfriendly experiences.

Julia shared an experience while waiting at a red light near her school: “The people around me were generally nice, but sometimes on the street, some would say to me that ‘it’s all the Chinese people who brought COVID to the US’, shouting it out loud.”

However, she would laugh these comments off and not take them seriously: “I would just

think that those people were too stupid, so I'd leave," before adding, "I wasn't particularly afraid, nor overly concerned about my personal safety."

Gary continued wearing masks after the first wave of the pandemic and mentioned that he encountered some strange looks: "Although we didn't face any verbal discrimination, there were times when people looked at us differently, like when we were shopping or at a restaurant. You could feel it, but there wasn't any substantial discrimination."

Warren did not encounter direct racism, which he attributed to mostly staying around the school area: "Perhaps it's because most of my activities were centered around the school, where people generally have a higher level of decency, and there were fewer homeless people around."

However, he experienced a robbery during one of his shopping trips:

"Two people rushed into the store and directly pulled the phones off the display right in front of me. The alarm went off immediately, and several employees, about three or four that I saw, tried to intercept them [...] But eventually, they didn't physically engage. The robbers simply walked around them and left. I saw them take at least four phones and a computer, which was damaged during the theft to the point of being unusable, but they stuffed it into a bag and left. After the robbery, I felt it wasn't safe to stay and quickly left the scene."

He was too frightened to take a video because it happened right in front of him. "This prompted me to buy some self-defense weapons." Warren added, as he and his friends tried to protect their house, "After all, the most popular saying on the internet at that time

was ‘You stockpile food; I stockpile guns, and your house becomes my pantry.’ So, we went out and bought some weapons for self-defense.”

Gary had similar experiences, recalling seeing stores being smashed and looted. It was sunset and getting dark, so he decided to leave and not engage further.

Theme 2 Summary

In the theme Social Life Adaptation, the narratives of Chinese international students in the US during the pandemic vividly illustrate their resilience in the face of unprecedented challenges. Despite encountering racism—as highlighted by prior research (e.g., Bilecen, 2020; Gibson et al., 2023; Chen et al., 2020; Zhang et al., 2023)—the students also experience significant social isolation. They also navigated safety concerns, which required them to adjust their daily habits and adopt protective measures. Their stories shed light on the broader implications of the pandemic on international communities, emphasizing the importance of understanding, empathy, and support in overcoming global crises. As they navigated through these turbulent times, their experiences highlight the enduring spirit of individuals facing adversity, underscoring the collective need for solidarity and compassion.

Theme 3: Self-Coping and Entertainment

This theme, Self-Coping and Entertainment, delves into the personal experiences of three participants during the COVID-19 pandemic. Their narratives shed light on how their day-to-day activities were significantly curtailed, leading to a lifestyle marked by repetition and confinement. Despite the challenges posed by the pandemic, each student adopted distinct coping strategies to mitigate feelings of isolation and monotony.

Code 1: Lack of activities

The implementation of curfews significantly changed the lives of the participants. Indeed, all three expressed that their activities were severely limited.

Julia humorously summarized her life in one simple sentence:

“Apart from attending classes during the normal school period, my routine consisted of attending classes, sleeping, doing homework, eating, and playing video games. During vacations, it was entirely about playing video games, sleeping, cooking, eating, and then sleeping and playing games again.”

She added, “I just stayed at home (all the time),” emphasizing that she never went out for fun, describing her life as just boring and dull.

Gary’s lifestyle mirrored Julia’s. He laughed and described his life similarly to Julia: “A typical day for me starts with waking up to attend online classes. Yes, after finishing online classes, I would do some homework, play video games, and binge-watch TV shows. That’s pretty much it [laughs].”

Warren’s experience was similar. Before COVID-19, he would go out to eat with friends or go to karaoke. However, after the outbreak, his life was confined to his home:

“Because at that time, it was simply not possible to go out. What you could do at home was either to exercise, to vent out the anxiety through physical activity, or to find other ways to express those emotions, such as playing video games, playing cards with friends, or watching movies and TV shows.”

He later admitted that, when the pandemic situation improved, he started going hiking with friends, which was something he would certainly not have done before, thinking, “What’s wrong with staying home?” However, later that year, whenever his friends

invited him, he would agree to go out immediately due to his frustration with the curfew and not being able to enjoy life outdoors. He acknowledged, “At first, I was quite resistant to the idea of going out. I didn’t want to leave the house. But later on, the question became ‘Shall we go out?’ and if they asked, I would definitely join them.”

During that year, he also “reduced the time spent on my phone and instead increased the time spent on my computer” due to being at home all the time.

Code 2: Self-Coping Strategies

To address the lack of activity and feelings of loneliness, the three participants adopted their unique methods to cope.

Gary was on the pessimistic side, where he felt helpless about the absence of a social life. When asked if he had more coping strategies, he replied resignedly: “Isn’t that just playing video games and watching shows? There’s nothing else.” He acknowledged that playing video games helped him since he was playing with friends online, which afforded him some degree of social interaction even though he doesn’t think this necessarily same as social interaction. Ultimately, he spent most of his time on video games and reduced his time watching TV or movies.

However, Julia and Warren were more optimistic and shared several coping methods.

Julia, who loved cooking and baking, used her time to engage extensively in these activities: “Since we couldn’t go out (to eat) anyway, we had to eat at home. Being someone who enjoys gourmet food, I found that cooking and baking things, like desserts, small cakes, and such allowed me to relax to some extent.”

Additionally, she mentioned: “Playing games occasionally and having cats and dogs at home to pet also served as a way to adjust to life.” She also enjoyed engaging in Lego

and handicrafts, but due to slow delivery times during pandemic, she acknowledged that she could not participate in these activities as much as she would have liked. Later, she also attempted to incorporate exercise into her routine within her apartment, which turned out to be beneficial for her. She reflected: “I think exercise has been a good change for me in the later stages, [pondering] I feel physically healthier and more mentally relaxed.”

She enjoyed her life and shared it actively. She posted on social media platforms, like Xiaohongshu, where international students share their daily lives (Figures 3 and 4).

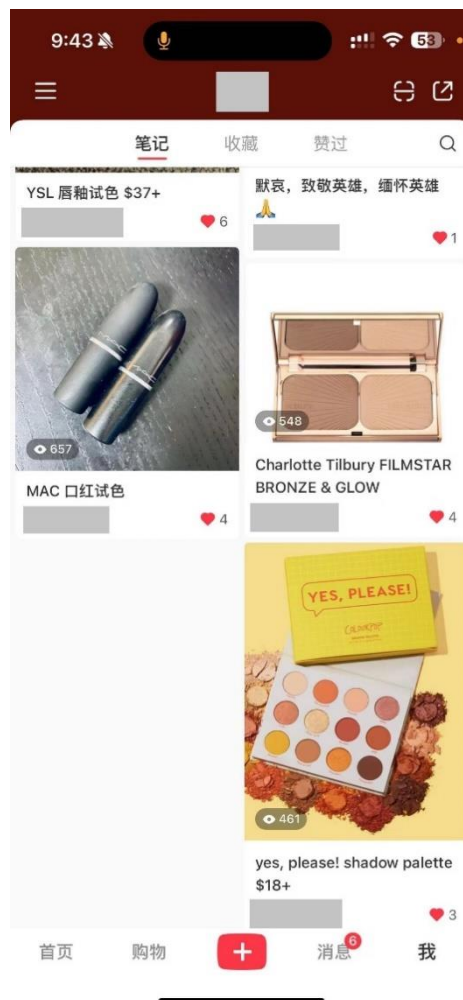


Figure 3: Julia shared her experiences with different makeups, which were a trend on Xiaohongshu. These are some of her first posts on this platform, which began during the pandemic.

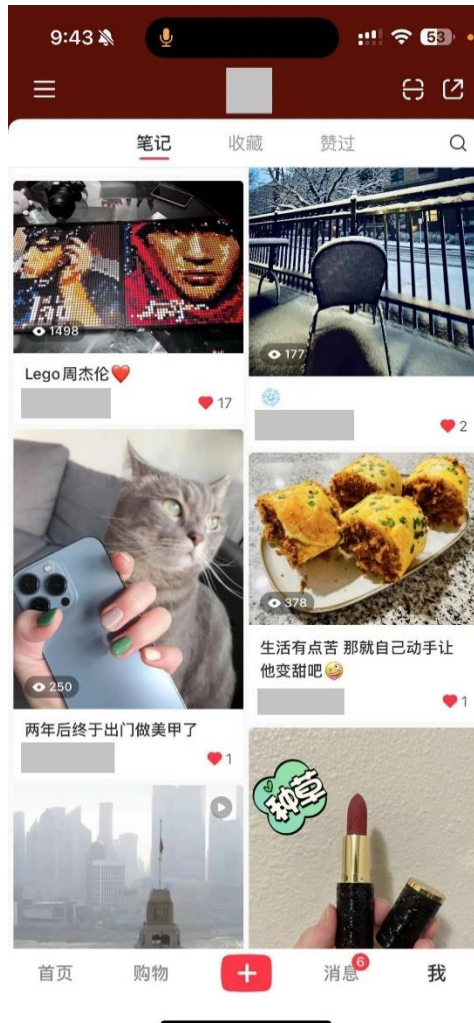


Figure 4: Julia's posts on cooking, nail art with her cat in the background, and Lego. She also shared posts on WeChat, which is more private and visible only to her friends (Figures 5 and 6).



Figure 5: A glimpse of Julia's cooking during 10 days of the year.



Figure 6: More cooking and her cat.

However, Warren viewed cooking, especially Chinese cuisine, as a time-consuming activity rather than as a coping mechanism for loneliness. He explained:

“Especially if you want to cook Chinese food, it requires a considerable amount of time for the preliminary preparations, such as chopping vegetables, washing

them, and defrosting meat, all of which take a significant amount of time. You might find that two to three hours have passed while you're cooking. At least one to two hours are spent on the initial preparations, then another hour or so on cooking, and then another hour eating. A considerable portion of the day is wasted, spent on cooking and eating.”

But he did not seem overly concerned about the pandemic and the lack of activities: “I tried to distract myself, for example, by playing games with my friends to relax and release some of the pent-up negative emotions.” He emphasized trying not to dwell on certain thoughts and listed his activities:

“Like playing games, playing cards with friends, watching movies and TV, and communicating more with friends as a way to express and acquire positive emotions [...] Going to the mountains with friends and walking around the car for a few hundred meters back and forth was like wandering around.”

He added, “I would also talk more with my family, discussing what was happening here or back home, or chatting about my brother's specific situations, or the fact that he had been stuck at home for a month and was going crazy with boredom.”

Gradually, he increased his activities:

“It's somewhat similar to meditation, which I usually do before sleeping [laughs]. I learned some meditation techniques online, and there's a trick that you might need to try multiple times because you might fall asleep while meditating, which is great [excited, laughs]. So, it's like I'm using meditation not just to relax but to help me sleep.”

He also noted a decrease in his activities:

“Compared to the pandemic period, I used to read books and found it effective, but now I’ve chosen not to. Partly due to objective conditions, since most of the books I read were in Chinese and, after moving to the US, I had to switch to American books. The options for purchasing Chinese books are fewer, so I’ve been reading fewer physical books. However, I’ve increased my frequency of reading e-books, so it’s a balance of sorts.”

Clearly, he took good care of himself during this challenging period.

Theme 3 Summary

In response to life during the COVID-19 pandemic, all participants experienced a significant reduction in their activities, leading to monotonous routines dominated by online classes, sleeping, and such leisure activities as video games and TV shows. Despite the restrictions, each student found unique ways to cope with the isolation and monotony. This theme, Self-Coping and Entertainment, highlights the various strategies young individuals employed to navigate the challenges of the pandemic, balancing the need for social connection. As Lai et al. (2021) noted, students primarily coped by maintaining connections with friends and family.

Theme 4: Support and Resource Needs

Various support was received by students from their schools during the pandemic, highlighting the minimal and sometimes lacking assistance provided. The experiences revealed a common theme of disappointment in the institutions’ efforts to accommodate and support them through challenging times. In contrast, embassies and personal connections offered significant aid, including medical supplies and emotional support.

The theme of Support and Resource Needs underscores the students' resilience in navigating the many hurdles experienced during a global crisis, while also critiquing the institutions meant to guide them through such unprecedented times.

Code 1: School support

Reflecting on their experiences, all three participants mentioned receiving some form of support from their schools during the pandemic, although they felt it was minimal.

Julia spoke in a somber tone:

“The school did send out generic emails saying that, if you're worried about COVID-19, you have the option to attend classes online. But if you want, you can still attend physical classes as they are being held normally. If you're scared, you just need to inform your teacher, and they'll accommodate you.”

Pausing for thought, Julia recalled: “Besides sending emails, I think the school also distributed some supplies, maybe even masks? [pondering] I can't quite remember clearly, as they didn't initially place much emphasis on this aspect at the school.”

She did not blame the school's lack of support and added: “Since I didn't feel the need for much help, I didn't seek any. So, I'm not very clear about what exactly they did because I just stayed at home.”

Gary shared a similar sentiment to Julia:

“The school didn't seem to offer much official support, except when I was applying for my master's program during the pandemic. They helped me a bit by quickly forwarding my information to <my graduate school> without letting the pandemic cause any delays. That's about it.”

Warren, on the other hand, felt the school was not very supportive:

“The school just sent me an email, considering that, as an international student, if you need any psychological consultation or anything, you can access it through some channels provided by the school. Other than that, I don’t recall receiving much else.”

Warren also had to move out of the dormitory because it was closed, as not many students remained there during the pandemic year:

“To move out from the school, we needed to meet certain criteria, such as having a medical condition that required leaving the school or being over the age of 21. At that time, we didn’t meet any of those conditions, so we had to apply to the school to consider letting us move out because of COVID-19. After some negotiation, the school agreed. However, another issue arose because we had signed a contract when we moved into the dorm, implying that breaking it would result in a penalty. The school initially sought to impose a penalty fee on us, but after we appealed, they decided not to pursue the penalty fees.”

He specifically mentioned the period when the US government considered deporting all international students. He expressed his anxiety, stating:

“I was quite panicked when the US government began suggesting the possibility of deporting international students. Initially, to maintain our status as normal international students, we needed to physically attend classes at the school. After arriving here, the direct impact on me could either be a notification from the US government that my visa was revoked, allowing me to be expelled, or from the school itself. Then, there were instances where some teachers and others around

us, in fact, the school's approach to a significant extent, was merely to inform us about such matters through emails or even to the point where the entire school was shut down. We were all told not to come, and all courses were moved online. Essentially, it felt like the school was absolving itself of any responsibility toward us. At that time, I indeed paid attention to similar situations, such as the collective actions of some schools and their communications with the US government. I really spent time focusing on these issues because, after all, I was worried about losing my international student status."

Warren felt that he had to fight for his rights and described the school's support as lacking, summarizing his feelings about the institution's response as: "If anything happens, don't expect the school to take care of you. It's somewhat like the school trying to shirk the responsibilities it should have assumed."

Code 2: Community support

In terms of community support, the participants expressed a markedly different opinion compared to their experiences with school support.

They received assistance from their respective embassies, which was a significant source of aid during the pandemic. Julia recalled: "It was the Consulate General that made contact with student associations at the school. They then distributed medication, masks, and some COVID-19 test kits among us." Warren also mentioned receiving support from the embassy: "The embassy distributed items, like Lianhua Qingwen [a traditional Chinese medicine used for COVID-19 symptoms], masks, and other medical supplies." Gary echoed this sentiment: "The embassy got in touch and arranged a large

supply of goods. At that time, the pandemic had just started, and everyone was scrambling for masks.”

Julia shared a heartwarming experience with a neighbor who offered help during a difficult time:

“A neighbor, whom I met online and lived in the apartment below, helped us by bringing food, water, essentials, and medicine when my boyfriend and I were both feeling very ill. It was a very warm and comforting gesture. When they later became sick, we also helped them with supplies [laughs].”

Warren shared a similar experience of mutual support among roommates: “We supported each other, like sharing how much medicine we had left or borrowing some if needed.” He further reflected on the importance of having close friends when experiencing illness abroad: “The only people you can really rely on are your close friends. Even though you know they’ll help you, deep down, you still wish for your family, like your parents, to be by your side.” This sentiment led him to wish he could have attended classes back in his home country.

Code 3: Reflect Lives Now

Despite these challenges, Warren believed that staying in the US was the right decision:

“Considering my initial goal (to avoid getting COVID-19 in 2020), and the fact that I managed to avoid it during that period and was vaccinated before I eventually caught it, I had developed resistance to the infection. For me, staying in the US was the correct choice.”

Julia and Gary also did not regret their decision to stay in the US. For Julia, the only reason for wanting to return to China was because she missed her parents, but staying was the best decision at the time due to visa expiry concerns. Gary felt the same, emphasizing that, even if the situation was slightly better in China, he did not want to risk long-distance travel. He summarized “I can only say that it is suitable for myself. As we discussed before, I don’t want to take risks. If I really go back, there is the same risk of returning here because of the pandemic. It’s not very good, just relatively suitable for myself.”

Theme 4 Summary

During the pandemic, the students experienced minimal support from their schools, often limited to generic emails and the option for online classes. In contrast, they received significant aid from their embassies, including medical supplies and masks, highlighting a stark difference in the level of assistance. Community support, especially from neighbors and fellow students, proved invaluable, offering practical help and emotional solace. As Whatley and Fischer (2022) discovered, one of the key themes was the students’ need for support. Accordingly, Support and Resource Needs underscored the role of community support in filling the gaps left by educational institutions, providing both tangible resources and a sense of belonging during a challenging period. Reflecting on their current lives, none of the participants regret the choices they made. Even though they acknowledged that their decisions might not have been the best, they still believe that those choices were the most suitable for their situations at the time.

Analysis 1 Conclusion

The lived experiences of Chinese international students in the US during the COVID-19 pandemic reveal a complex journey of adaptation, resilience, and challenge.

Transitioning to online learning posed significant hurdles, requiring students to navigate technical issues and adapt to a new learning environment, impacting their engagement and academic discipline. Additionally, the pandemic severely restricted their social interactions, leading to feelings of isolation and loneliness, despite efforts to find solace in hobbies and limited social engagements within their immediate circles. The importance of support and resources became evident as institutional aid often fell short of students' needs, highlighting the critical role of community and embassy assistance in providing emotional and practical support during these trying times.

In essence, these experiences underscore the multifaceted challenges faced by Chinese international students stayed in the US, from adapting to online education and coping with social isolation to navigating support networks. Their resilience and adaptability shine through as they managed to navigate the uncertainties and disruptions of a global health crisis, reflecting the lived experiences of international students during the pandemic.

Analysis 2: Students Residing in China

This section delves into the nuanced experiences of Chinese international students who navigated their academic and personal lives amidst the unprecedented challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic.

Drawing upon in-depth interviews, I identified three core themes that encapsulate the essence of their lived experiences during this chaotic period. These themes not only shed

light on the multifaceted challenges faced by these students, but also highlight their resilience, adaptability, and the unexpected opportunities that emerged. By closely examining the participants' narratives, I aim to provide a comprehensive understanding of how the pandemic has reshaped the educational and psychological landscapes for international students studying in a US university but living in China.

The following analysis results offer a window into their world, revealing the depth of their struggles, adaptation strategies, and paths to personal growth.

Theme 1: Online Learning Challenges

As with their counterparts who stayed in the US, Chinese international students residing in China faced similar challenges during the pandemic. However, their difficulties were compounded by additional factors unique to their situation. Not only did these students have to navigate the universal hurdles of online learning and social isolation, but they were also forced to deal with the direct impacts of local pandemic responses, including lockdowns and quarantine measures. Moreover, the digital divide and internet censorship in China posed further obstacles to accessing educational resources and maintaining connections with their institutions abroad.

Code 1: Shift to Online Learning

Emily specifically mentioned that, for the entirety of the pandemic, “I have always been in my home country, completing almost all of my credits through online courses (for my undergraduate degree during and after the pandemic)”. However, it took her some time to adapt to online learning. Before the pandemic, Emily enjoyed her university life, wandering around the campus. She said, “In my dorm room, I mainly did only one

thing: sleep. Occasionally, I ate, and then all my studying was done either in the library or, especially, in those shared common buildings.”

When discussing her challenges, she mentioned giving herself time to gradually adapt to online classes:

“I just had to get used to the rhythm of studying at home or in my bedroom, which was quite a challenge for me. It was a matter of adapting whether I liked it or not, you know. The first thing I had to adapt to was online learning, and I deliberately only took 6 or 9 credits, not the full 12, at that time. Moreover, it was indeed my first semester as a transfer student because I had been in a preparatory phase before. At that time, I wasn’t very confident about my studies, so I intentionally took fewer credits. Then, in the following semesters, I took the standard 12 credits each, plus summer courses.”

Ted found himself having trouble particularly in visualizing what the teacher was writing on the board: “During my math class, which was online, the teacher had to write mathematical formulas on the whiteboard, but the camera was so blurry that I could hardly see what was being written,” but there was nothing he could do about it.

Victor encountered difficulties with taking exams, as he disliked the extra work involved: “For exams, you basically had to turn on your camera and microphone, and you had to set up the environment in advance.” He found this to be somewhat troublesome, as he specifically mentioned: “This was a little bit inconvenient.”

Victor also faced the disappointment of missing out on the opportunity to visit a famous laboratory at his school—a pivotal factor in his decision to enroll in the program. He lamented, “Our school has a very famous lab, which, under normal circumstances,

students would be able to visit every semester or academic year. However, due to COVID, I was unable to visit it at all during my time at the school.” This loss was particularly poignant for him, as it represented not only a missed educational opportunity, but a missed experiential one as well.

His disappointment was compounded by the shift in teaching methodologies due to the pandemic. He reflected, “The teaching methods in the US are different from China, but after COVID led to everything becoming remote, I couldn’t attend (classes) in person, which failed to meet my initial expectations of what studying in the US would be like.”

Code 2: School Aspect

All three individuals highlighted challenges in communicating with teaching assistants and professors, noting that it was not as straightforward as in-person interactions. They shared the same experiences when navigating the complexities of remote learning, emphasizing the communication barriers encountered in online environments and the impact on collaboration and understanding in their coursework.

Ted specifically brought up the issue of group assignments with his classmates. He expressed, “Communicating with classmates was quite difficult. We could only correspond through emails, and sometimes the time difference posed a challenge. For some group assignments, communication could be particularly hard.”

Victor shared similar thoughts:

“In one of the courses, the first assignment was extremely difficult, and the instructor did not explain it well. Additionally, due to the remote nature of the course, it was also challenging to reach out and discuss with other students. From

an academic perspective, this reduced the interaction between students or between students and teachers, making the beginning of that course particularly troubling.”

Emily also mentioned a class where her teacher told her she could send emails if she encountered any difficulties, and that there was no other way to communicate.

The supportive gestures from their schools played a significant role in the students’ experiences during the shift to online learning. Both Emily and Ted acknowledged their institutions’ efforts to alleviate some of the financial burdens associated with remote learning.

Emily shared that, after more than a year of online classes, she received an email from her school notifying her that certain campus facility fees had been waived. This gesture was in recognition of her continuous registration for online courses, as noted in her course selection status. She mentioned: “They saw that I was always registered for online classes and waived these fees for me, but this was because I was taking online classes.”

Ted noted a modest reduction in tuition fees: “My school only reduced the tuition by about \$1000 or so, nothing more.” However, he highlighted a significant academic support mechanism his school implemented:

“Our school gave us two options. One was to change all grades to a “Pass/No Pass” system, and the other was to keep the original A, B, C, D grading system. I think this was good because you might not pay as much attention in online classes, and your grades might slip. So, it was possible to convert some of the less satisfactory grades to “Pass” or “No Pass,” which I think was a big help to us.”

Victor's experience offers insights into the academic adjustments made to accommodate remote learning. His school mandated professors to record their lectures, enabling students to attend classes asynchronously. "The school forced our professors to record their classes, then let students watch," he explained. This approach was slightly similar to Emily's situation, where recorded classes were available, but not explicitly required.

Additionally, Victor appreciated the support from the international student services at his school, which provided valuable information regarding visa implications and remote learning from abroad. "The international student service at our school provided us with a lot of information, like being able to return to our country and attend classes remotely without affecting our visa. They gave us quite a lot of this type of information."

Code 3: Technology

The technological challenges occurred for Chinese international students and impacted their academic experiences as VPN issues were a significant hurdle for them. Both Emily and Ted encountered similar problems.

Emily, in particular, was frustrated when discussing VPNs, as evidenced by her sighing and raising her voice. She explained:

"VPN was indeed the biggest problem. Many professors used materials they'd created or those from other universities that they considered good, which were often available on YouTube. I needed a VPN to access this content, which [sighs] was a huge obstacle. Initially, I used a brand of VPN that was really unstable. The most nerve-wracking moment was when I had to submit an assignment through a webpage I created on Google. Just around the submission deadline, my VPN

failed. It was for a writing class. My VPN crashed, and I even contacted the professor to explain my situation, asking if I could submit my assignment in another way. The professor was understanding, but fortunately, my VPN reconnected in time for me to submit my final assignment.”

Eventually, she decided to switch to a different, more stable VPN brand, but the frustration persisted:

“Finding VPNs that work on both PCs and mobile devices is not easy, and almost all VPNs crash at some point. There’s no such thing as an absolutely stable VPN, whether free or paid. They all have their moments of failure. After some time, I switched to a more stable VPN.”

Ted’s attitude was more indifferent. He acknowledged the inconvenience but felt powerless to change the situation:

“So, using a VPN is okay, but it’s still inconvenient because you might need it for some assignments. If your VPN doesn’t work well, it can significantly affect your studies and research. For example, you might be in the middle of a class, and then [laughs] it just crashes, and you can’t reconnect. Eh... You just keep trying to reconnect over and over.”

Code 4: Time Difference

The experiences of these three participants highlight the diverse challenges and opportunities presented by online learning across different time zones. Each found unique ways to navigate the complexities of distance education, with varying degrees of success and difficulty.

Victor capitalized on the time difference by interning and taking extra credits at a local university during the day, and attending his master's courses in the evening. This strategic use of time allowed him to maximize his learning opportunities while simultaneously gaining practical experience.

Emily found a silver lining in the recorded nature of her courses, which allowed her to manage her learning pace more effectively. She appreciated the ability to control the speed of lecture playback, stating:

“When it comes to online classes, some aspects allowed me to take control. For example, I found that some professors would speak too slowly in my perspective, so I'd listen to their recorded lectures at double- or 1.5-times speed. That way, I could manage the pace myself.”

She also saw the time difference as an advantage, explaining:

“Moreover, because I was in China, on Beijing time... I sometimes can use this time difference to my advantage, essentially gaining an extra 13–14 hours compared to those in the US. Sometimes, this meant I had a bit more time to work on particularly demanding assignments overnight without missing deadlines or needing to delay.”

One of her courses was live, but her professor allowed her to skip classes as long as she completed all her homework, offering flexibility in managing her studies.

Ted's situation was similar, with only one professor allowing him this flexibility. However, he had to lead a nocturnal lifestyle, attending classes at midnight or in the early hours of the morning. He described his schedule as highly irregular:

“My schedule was quite chaotic. I might have a class from 10:00 PM to 12:00 AM, after which I’d hang out with friends, possibly until 2:00 AM, then continue with classes. If there were any activities with friends afterward, I’d grab a late-night snack with them before heading home to sleep. I usually woke up in the late afternoon, around 2:00 or 3:00 PM.”

To avoid disturbing his family with this schedule, he moved to a small condo to live alone.

Ted expressed constant fatigue due to his disordered schedule, illustrating the physical and mental toll of adjusting one’s life to fit an educational schedule set in a completely different time zone. Luckily, his academic grade was ultimately not affected.

Theme 1 Summary

In summary, the theme of Online Learning Challenges was a central element in the narratives and lived experiences of the participants, resonating with previous findings on online and distance learning in China (e.g., Novikov, 2020; Thomas et al., 2020; Zhang-Wu, 2020). This theme encompassed various aspects, including difficulties in connecting with classmates and professors, navigating time differences, managing expectations of the educational experience, and overcoming technological barriers. The stories and experiences shared by the participants underscore the pervasive impact of these challenges on their academic journey. As the primary theme identified in this study, Online Learning Challenges are crucial to understanding the experiences of those students residing in China, serving as a comprehensive framework that encapsulates the core issues they faced during the pandemic-induced shift to online education.

Theme 2: Social Life Adaptation

The theme of Social Life Adaptation reveals varying experiences among Chinese international students residing in China, showcasing a spectrum of responses to the challenges and opportunities presented by their circumstances.

Ted and Victor had notably positive experiences, giving a more favorable view of their social interactions despite the physical distance from their campuses. Conversely, Emily's more negative experience highlights the challenges and potential feelings of isolation or disconnection that can accompany remote study.

Code 1: Negative Experiences

During 2020, Emily felt as if time stood still due to prolonged periods spent indoors without venturing outside. She described this time as though it “simply did not exist” for her. Delving into her social life, Emily admitted to being more introverted, characterizing herself as a “nerdy” student with a very simple social life, stating, “Back in China, I’m the type of student who’s quite nerdy” and “My social interactions are very simple; I don’t really have any special social activities.” She did not feel particularly lonely during the pandemic, as she mentioned not having friends at school either.

Emily described her daily life during the pandemic as “aimless and muddled,” starting her days by looking over GRE and TOEFL vocabulary for her master’s degree, sometimes memorizing words, and reviewing example questions and model essays. Her afternoons were equally unstructured, occasionally taking breaks, daydreaming, or engaging in minor activities. Once her studies resumed, her routine became centered around waking up in the morning to do homework and watching recorded lectures,

focusing primarily on maintaining her GPA. She confessed, “I’m not a master of time management; when I’m studying, that’s all I can do.”

As the pandemic restrictions eased, Emily began to venture outside occasionally, sometimes meeting up with high school classmates for meals, but nothing particularly special. Her digital life was equally casual, browsing through meaningless content on her phone, watching random videos without any specific interest. She emphasized her disconnection from her peers’ activities, stating, “I never watch what others are doing, nor do I know exactly what they’re up to. I just focus on earning my credits and improving my GPA.”

Given the sensitivity around Emily’s identity and her preference not to discuss her family in detail, it is important to approach the descriptions of her photos and narratives with care. The photos Emily shared were taken during a walk with her parents, and likely capture a moment of everyday life, subtly reflecting the nuances of family dynamics and possibly the frictions present within all family relationships. Without revealing personal details or specific content of the photos, I inferred that these images were significant to Emily, offering a glimpse into her personal life and emotions during her time in China.



Figure 7: The foggy day Emily encountered serves as a poignant metaphor for her mood and her nuanced relationship with her parents, marked by a certain distance and a perpetual struggle for effective communication.



Figure 8: During the first lifting of lockdown restrictions, Emily witnessed beautiful flowers blooming, symbolizing renewal and hope amidst challenging times.

Both Ted and Victor experienced difficulties in securing tickets to return home.

Tickets were extremely hard to obtain, with prices having doubled.

Upon his return to China, Ted had to undergo a mandatory two-week quarantine, a precaution taken to prevent the spread of the virus (Figure 9). Ted described the inconvenience of this process: “After purchasing my ticket back to China for April, the main hassle was having to check in daily through a certain app. You had to complete a 14-day health code or health declaration of some sort before you could actually fly back to China.”



Figure 9: The food provided during Ted’s quarantine before returning home.

Code 2: Positive Experiences

During the pandemic, Ted and Victor experienced a marked improvement in their social lives, contrary to what many might have expected, and, indeed, what Emily experienced.

Ted observed that he actually spent more time with his friends during the pandemic than before, stating, “Back in China, I had many friends, and compared to before the pandemic, I actually socialized more during it.” Similarly, Victor found solace in

physical activities with friends, noting, “I would meet with friends to play basketball. At home, I would exercise twice a week, each time with at least four or five people.”

Despite the global crisis, both Ted and Victor sought and found increased opportunities for social interactions. Victor mentioned that the frequency of playing basketball remained the same as before the pandemic, but he was more inclined to initiate plans with friends, whether it was for sports, karaoke, or table tennis, enjoying these activities more frequently.

Acknowledging the stress induced by the pandemic, Victor emphasized the importance of staying occupied to avoid overthinking, dedicating significant time to his studies. When he returned home, his social activities expanded to include basketball, singing, and table tennis.

Before returning home, Ted spent time with friends in the dormitory, using common rooms for movie nights, especially as local students had left, leaving international students behind (Figure 10).



Figure 10: Ted enjoyed his pandemic time immensely, spending it with friends in the dormitory's common room watching movies on a big screen, not on a computer, which made it feel like being in a movie theater.

Additionally, Ted's experiences outside the dormitory reflected the broader challenges posed by the pandemic. When he went shopping with friends, they encountered eerily-empty grocery stores, a stark reminder of the situation's severity (Figure 11). This scarcity not only heightened the sense of urgency and concern for their immediate needs, but also induced stress and panic, particularly for Ted's mother.



Figure 11: At the beginning of the pandemic, all the shelves were empty in the grocery store.

After returning to China, Ted experienced a rapid improvement in his social life. He engaged in various activities with friends, such as playing video games, drinking, playing cards, and chatting, as well as going out together. This resurgence of social interactions marked a significant shift from the isolation of quarantine to a more connected and fulfilling lifestyle.

Ted acknowledged the presence of stress during this transition with his nontonal life for school. For him, the most effective method of alleviating stress was through sleep:

“Time spent with friends was more joyful, because being with friends usually means not just one or two of them, but a whole group. Maybe six or seven friends would come over to my place, we’d play cards together, chat, and I would feel quite happy during those times.”

Therefore, they rarely felt isolated or disconnected from anyone. Ted relished his life with friends, laughing and acknowledging that one of the key reasons he enjoyed life in China was meeting his ex-girlfriend.

Code 3: Racism

Prior research has found that students who returned to China also encountered racism through claims that they had brought the virus back to the country (Wang, 2020). However, all of participants emphatically denied experiencing racism when questioned. Victor even laughed at the notion, surprised that it was an exaggeration. Emily added that, in conversations with her classmates, none reported encountering racism either.

Theme 2 Summary

The theme of Social Life Adaptation among Chinese international students during the pandemic highlights varied experiences, with some students finding positive aspects in increased social interactions, while others faced challenges and isolation. Broader issues, such as the lack of racism experienced by the students, were also part of their Social Life Adaptation, indicating a complex array of personal growth and missed opportunities.

Theme 3: Opportunities for Development

The third theme that emerged for Chinese international students residing in China was Opportunities for Development. This theme highlights how these students identified and capitalized on new opportunities for personal and professional growth during their time in China.

Code 1: Academic Performance

Both Emily and Ted clarified that their GPAs were unaffected by the pandemic or their stay in China, although they encountered various challenges in maintaining their academic performance.

Emily managed to improve her GPA by making use of her time at home. As mentioned earlier, she took advantage of the recorded classes, which allowed her to learn the material at her own pace and thereby improve her understanding of the subjects. Despite not enjoying studying there, she focused on her grades:

“For me, it was all about improving my GPA, and my approach to doing so was pretty much the same in both China and the US—solving problems and consulting professors, mainly via email. So, I didn’t feel that being in China or the US made a big difference to my study habits. However, studying at home in China sometimes felt uncomfortable due to the different rhythm.”

However, the cultural expectation to leave her house for holidays and visit relatives did have an impact on her study routine. She stated: “Although the pace of my studies was indeed affected, fortunately, my final GPA remained high.” Emily emphasized her focus on her own performance over comparing herself with others.

Ted described a bittersweet experience regarding his academics. Being in China had its advantages, such as support from friends:

“For example, if there were problems I couldn’t solve, I could ask my friends in China. Given that some of the online math courses were challenging for me, friends who had completed high school and college in China found those problems to be as simple as 1+1.”

However, he also noted a decrease in his motivation and a change in his study habits, attributing this to the nocturnal schedule necessitated by time differences:

“Studying from China meant attending classes at midnight, right? The primary impact was on my motivation towards studying because of the time reversal, day and night flipped. Asking me to study at night, when one is naturally supposed to sleep, just completely killed my interest.”

Despite these challenges, Ted asserted that his final grades were unaffected.

While Ted regretted the decision to return to China from an academic standpoint, when he thought back to the wonderful times spent with his friends and the relationships he nurtured, he stated that the happiness overshadowed the regrets.

Victor, unlike Ted, did not regret moving back home at all. He used his time in his hometown effectively by taking courses at a local university and starting an internship:

“Academically speaking, after my internship <in my hometown>, the research institution offered me an extension for another year to work as a RA [Research Assistant], which I accepted. In addition to that, I would take some courses at the <local university> in the morning, allowing me to gain more skills beyond optics. Then, at night, I would attend classes for my American university. I feel these experiences significantly contributed to my overall improvement.”

These improvements proved beneficial for him in the long run:

“Perhaps because I took quite a few courses related to a special topic during my time back home, whether it was for work or study, it substantially enhanced my skills in this area. It even allowed me to quickly publish papers and graduate

sooner after rejoining the lab. This also significantly helped me in my job search later on.”

He humorously noted that, in terms of personal life, living at home saved him a lot of money compared to renting an apartment in the US.

Despite having no regrets, Victor still remembered his initial urge to return to his American university:

“I felt a strong desire to return to the US around the beginning of 2021. One reason was that we were supposed to write papers and publish, but I hadn’t officially joined a lab yet, so I couldn’t do anything. If I had been in the US at that time, perhaps I could have started my experiments and begun writing my papers much sooner. Yes, that’s probably the only thing I regret not being able to do sooner.”

Code 2: Reflect Lives Now

Three years after the pandemic, as they reflected on that particularly special period, Emily and Victor shared their wishes to have approached things differently.

Emily expressed her desire to venture out more. She said, “If I could have pushed myself to go out more at that time, it might have made things somewhat better.”

However, she also acknowledged the challenges: “But indeed, when the pressure hit, and with the academic tasks at hand, not to mention being at home without the open environment like school <in the US>, it was really hard to push myself out in that way.”

She further elaborated on the difficulties of finding places to go while at home:

“After staying at home, it was hard to find anywhere to wander. In China, the parks are so crowded, or the cities are too congested. Plus, the air pollution

around my home is quite severe. Sometimes, it truly felt like there was nowhere to go. This was also one of the impacts of the pandemic, this feeling of being at a loss when facing stress, as if sometimes in China, you're just stuck in this helpless state.”

Victor, on the other hand, was hoping to have acquired new skills or hobbies:

“Indeed, looking back, I think that was a time when I should have seized the opportunity <in my hometown> to perhaps take up golf or table tennis. Now, being immersed in work, it's quite challenging to find time for sports, whether by myself or with friends. Why table tennis? I've noticed that many people at my company enjoy playing it. But since it's been a long time since I last played, starting again feels like beginning from scratch. My hometown has many affordable table tennis facilities, and if I had maintained or developed my skills in this sport while there, maybe I could be playing much better now. Golf is another example; it's popular here, and having developed that skill at home could have been beneficial, not just for making friends but also for entertainment.”

Ted, however, had a different perspective on his time in China, feeling no desire for change. He acknowledged his lack of physical activity but expressed no regrets: “Even though I didn't engage in any physical activities, I wouldn't want to change that. I was exhausted at the time, with evening classes and sleeping during the day. It felt like there was neither time nor energy left for exercise.”

On the academic front, Ted expressed his regrets:

“If I had stayed in the US, I could have graduated earlier. This thought crossed my mind, especially when I returned to the US last year. That's when I realized

how far behind I had fallen, how many classes I had missed. It was as if I should have graduated the previous year, but now I had to spend an additional year making up for the time lost due to the pandemic when I went back to my home country.

Indeed, and speaking of academics, I also felt a significant gap. Maybe in 2019 or 2020, while I was in the US, I felt a strong sense of academic atmosphere and passion. But, after spending a long time back home due to the pandemic, and gaped a semester, when I returned to the US last year to resume my studies, I felt as if I had let myself go a bit.”

In the end, the happiness overshadowed the regrets. Ted still thinks he made the right decision to return home.

Theme 3 Summary

Although numerous studies have highlighted concerns about the academic performance of Chinese international students during the pandemic, the experiences of those residing in China did not align with these concerns (Bilecen, 2020; De Man et al., 2020; King et al., 2020; Lai et al., 2020; Ma et al., 2020; Novikov, 2020; Pappa et al., 2020; Wang, 2020; Zhang-Wu, 2020). These students faced minor obstacles, but managed to overcome them and even leveraged their circumstances to their advantage. They also reflected upon how they might have approached the pandemic period differently. This gave rise to the theme of Opportunities for Development, which, rather than presenting a challenge, offered a beneficial experience for the participants. This theme emerged as crucial, showcasing how the students found ways to turn potential setbacks into opportunities for growth and improvement.

Analysis 2 Conclusion

The essence of the lived experiences of Chinese international students during the COVID-19 pandemic reflects a complex journey marked by online learning challenges, adaptation to social life changes, and seizing opportunities for development. These students faced challenges with online learning, including such technical issues as not being able to easily communicate with teachers and classmates. Moreover, they lost access to the typical college experience, but found ways to keep up with their studies and even improve their grades using online resources.

These students also found new ways to connect with friends and stay active, despite being far from their university. Some felt isolated, but others found more time to spend with friends in China, engaging in such activities as playing basketball and video games. They did not face the racism some people thought they would when they returned to China.

Besides keeping up with schoolwork, these students used the situation as a chance to improve in their fields. Some took extra courses and started internships in China, which helped them in their careers later. They looked back on this time as a special period that, despite its difficulties, brought valuable lessons and opportunities.

In short, Chinese international students residing in China faced many challenges during the pandemic, from adapting to online learning to dealing with social changes. However, they used these challenges to grow both academically and personally, showing how tough situations can also bring new opportunities.

Analysis 3: Comparing Chinese International Students' Pandemic Experiences

All the participants were Chinese international students studying at a university in the US, sharing similar experiences. Nevertheless, variations in their experiences emerged due to differences in their places of residence.

This section addresses the third research question: What are the similarities and differences in the experiences of those who resided in China and those who resided in the US? I here compare both groups of participants. Table 2 provides a quick comparison of the similarities and differences experienced by Chinese international students based on their place of residence. The details of these findings are discussed in the following section.

Table 2: Comparison table

Category	Residing in the US Only	Similarities	Residing in China Only
Online Learning	N/A	Difficulties adapting to virtual classrooms and technical issues.	N/A
Academic Discipline	N/A	Both groups faced challenges in maintaining academic discipline, leading to decreased motivation and academic progress.	N/A
Technological Challenges	Internet issues	Both groups encountered technological hurdles.	Great Firewall and VPN instability
Communication Challenges	Specific communication barriers with school.	Struggles in effective communication with educational institutions and peers.	Time difference complicated communication.
Racism and Safety	Direct experiences of racism and safety	N/A	No specific racism was mentioned.

	issue linked to the pandemic.		
Self-Care and Entertainment	Self-care and entertainment confined largely to indoor activities.	N/A	Social activities despite restrictions; enjoyed outdoor gatherings.
Social Life and Interaction	Greater emphasis on dealing with isolation; social life notably declined.	N/A	More social and active approach to maintaining mental and physical health; less severe restrictions.
Reflection and Personal Growth	Less room for considering the period as one of opportunity and growth, focus on survival.	Despite challenges, no regrets about their choices, finding value in their decisions.	Saw the period as a chance for significant personal and professional development.

Similarities

Based on the narratives shared, five similarities can be observed between Chinese who students residing in the US and those who resided in China during the pandemic.

Online Learning Challenges

The abrupt shift to online learning was a universal challenge for students globally, including Chinese international students, regardless of their geographic location.

For those staying in the US, Julia stated, “Studying math involves a lot of formulas, which are hard to grasp in online teaching.”

Ted, as someone who returned to China, added a similar statement: “The teacher had to write mathematical formulas on the whiteboard, but the camera was so blurry that I could hardly see what was being written,” thus highlighting the technical barriers that impeded effective learning across borders.

Both groups of students struggled with adapting to virtual classrooms. The frustration with technical difficulties and the loss of in-person instruction was clear to see.

Impact on Academic Discipline

The transition to online learning tested students' academic discipline, affecting their engagement and performance.

The lack of a structured learning environment led to decreased motivation among students in the US, as illustrated by Warren's engagement in more video games, alongside receiving warnings from the university for missed assignments.

Similarly, in China, Emily's decision to take fewer credits reflects the challenges in maintaining academic discipline without the physical presence of a classroom. Ted experienced a similar predicament, expressing regret over his academic progress as he felt he had fallen behind and lost a semester. He acknowledged, "when I returned to the US last year to resume my studies, I felt as if I had let myself go a bit."

This reflection underscores the broader challenges students faced in maintaining their academic trajectory during the transition to online education.

Technological Challenges

Both groups encountered technological challenges, though the nature of these varied based on their location.

In the US, the primary concerns centered around student engagement and access to online resources. Warren encountered issues when his internet connection would unexpectedly drop, attributed to high data usage.

Conversely, in China, the Great Firewall and the necessity for VPNs presented extra challenges, highlighting technology's substantial impact as an educational barrier during

the pandemic. Both Emily and Ted shared experiences of highly unstable VPNs; Ted's connection dropped during classes, while Emily faced difficulties submitting assignments on time.

This situation underscores the varied technological obstacles students encountered in different regions, affecting students' ability to participate in online learning effectively.

Communication Challenge within School

Across all geographical locations, a significant challenge faced by Chinese international students during the pandemic was the difficulty in communicating effectively with their educational institutions and peers. Both groups reported struggles in maintaining clear and efficient communication with teachers, classmates, and administrative staff.

In the US, students felt they received less support than expected. Warren even expressed that “the school is trying to shirk the responsibilities it should have assumed.” The primary form of communication they received were emails about the pandemic, with no additional support provided. At the classroom level, communication barriers with professors were notable, as Gary mentioned that some professors “might not check their emails frequently,” thus exacerbating the communication gap.

Equally, for students in China, the challenges were compounded by the time difference. They reported having trouble communicating with their professors and classmates, which significantly hindered their learning process and academic progress.

This situation illustrates the broader communication challenges faced by Chinese international students, regardless of their location, during the pandemic.

Reflections on Decision

Despite moments of doubt regarding their decision on where to reside during the pandemic, all participants ultimately expressed no regret about their choices.

Students who stayed in the US believed their decision was the best for them, as it helped them avoid infection and the challenges of long-distance travel, not to mention the significant time differences they would have had to navigate had they returned to China.

On the other hand, those who returned felt that they enjoyed their life there and had not wasted their time, as they were able to focus on personal development. Even Ted, who had some regrets on an academic level, was generally pleased to have returned home.

This suggests that, despite the unique challenges faced by each group, the students found value and satisfaction in their decisions, highlighting the diverse ways in which individuals can adapt to and overcome the obstacles presented by the pandemic.

Differences

Four major differences were observed between students who stayed in the US and those who resided in China during the pandemic.

Social Life and Interaction

The social restrictions imposed by the pandemic significantly impacted students' ability to interact and maintain social connections, with experiences varying greatly depending on their geographic location.

In the US, the enforced isolation led to a notable decline in social life. Gary described making no new friends during this period, which dramatically affected his social life.

Similarly, Julia experienced feelings of loneliness and emptiness on several occasions, highlighting the emotional toll of isolation.

However, students in China managed to find ways to engage in social activities, illustrating the differences in social interaction opportunities. Ted and Victor, for example, enjoyed numerous gatherings with friends and participated in many outdoor activities.

It should be noted that only Emily had negative experiences, sharing a sentiment similar to Julia's. Both described that period as feeling "nonexistent," "empty," and as if it "passed by really quickly."

This contrast underscores the diverse experiences of students in different regions, with those in China finding ways to adapt to social restrictions more effectively, thereby mitigating some of the negative social impacts.

Self-Care and Entertainment

The stress experienced by students during the pandemic was universal, prompting them to seek various forms of self-care and entertainment.

For those who remained in the US, their means of self-coping and entertainment were largely confined to indoor activities, such as video gaming and meditation. Gary, expressing a sense of resignation, remarked, "Isn't that just playing video games and watching shows? There's nothing else."

In contrast, students in China experienced a different scenario regarding self-care activities. Some did not feel the need to engage in specific self-care practices, as the restrictions may have been less severe or they found other ways to maintain their well-being. For example, Victor considered playing basketball with friends as a form of self-

care, indicating a more social and active approach to maintaining mental and physical health.

This difference highlights the varied impact of the pandemic on students' lifestyles and coping mechanisms, influenced significantly by their geographic location and local pandemic responses.

Racism and Safety Concerns

The onset of the pandemic led to an increase in xenophobia and racism, significantly impacting Asian communities across the globe.

Students in the US experienced racism and safety concerns directly linked to the pandemic's association with China, marking a unique challenge for those based in the US and emphasizing a stark contrast in experiences between students in different locations.

Although the literature suggests (Wang, 2020) that students residing in China faced racism under the accusation of potentially "bringing the virus back," this specific form of discrimination was not encountered by the participants in the study.

This discrepancy highlights the varied manifestations of xenophobia and racism that individuals experienced depending on their geographic location during the pandemic.

Personal Growth

The pandemic offered a moment for reflection and personal growth, with students' experiences reflecting their unique circumstances. While those in the US reflected on overcoming immediate challenges, their counterparts in China saw the period as a chance for significant personal and professional development.

Indeed, for the latter, the pandemic became an unexpected pause in their usual academic and social lives, allowing them to explore personal interests, engage in self-

study, or gain work experience through local internships. For example, Victor's engagement with extra courses and internships not only filled the gap created by the absence of physical campus resources, but also provided him with a competitive edge in his career.

Conversely, students in the US faced a more immediate set of challenges, focusing on dealing with isolation and confronting instances of racism. This context left less room for considering the period as one of opportunity and growth. There was a heavier emphasis on survival and adaptation rather than on leveraging the situation for personal advantage.

This contrast underscores the diverse impacts of the pandemic on students' outlooks and life trajectories.

Analysis 3 Conclusion

The COVID-19 pandemic has undeniably reshaped the educational and personal experiences of Chinese international students, regardless of their location. This study employed a comparative analysis to understand the impact of the pandemic on these two distinct groups, underscoring the profound effect of geographical, cultural, and institutional contexts on their experiences during this period.

While shared challenges, such as online learning difficulties and the need for adaptability, link these groups, their distinct experiences highlight the profound impact of geographical, cultural, and institutional contexts on their pandemic journeys. For those in the US, the experience was marked by a struggle against isolation, a battle for academic engagement, and a fight against racial discrimination. In contrast, students who returned to (or remained in) China navigated technological barriers and used the period as an unexpected opportunity for growth and development. These experiences and findings

addressed the importance of recognizing and addressing cultural differences to enhance the analysis and understanding of phenomenon as a whole (Morse, 2004).

These comparisons reveal not only the resilience of students in the face of unprecedented global challenges, but also the diverse ways in which individuals can navigate, adapt to, and grow from such experiences. This comparison provides a more specific and comprehensive understanding of the lived experiences of Chinese international student who studied in a US university.

Methodological Discussion

Following the analysis, this section delves into the profound implications of conducting phenomenological research on Chinese international students during the first wave of the COVID-19 pandemic. This phenomenological analysis, embedded with comparative analysis, helped me examine the experiences of students in disparate geographical locations—the US and China. Indeed, this method allowed me to unveil the nuanced lived experiences of this unique, unparalleled global crisis, as well as to catalyze methodological, theoretical, and future research trajectories within the domain of phenomenology. It enriches phenomenological theory and practice by embedding the complexities of cross-cultural contexts into the fabric of phenomenological inquiry. This exploration also paves the way for future research directions that promise to transcend traditional boundaries and foster a deeper understanding of the lived experiences of Chinese international students. By weaving together insights from this study, I aim to contribute to the evolving landscape of phenomenological research, offering a framework upon which future studies might build to explore the intricacies of human experiences across the globe.

Contributions to Phenomenological Theory and Practice

This study advances our understanding of the impact of the pandemic on Chinese international students in the US, including those residing both in the US and China. By integrating a comparative analysis, phenomenological theory is enriched, offering a deeper insight into the participants' experiences as a whole (Morse, 2004). This research provides crucial guidance for developing practical guidelines for conducting phenomenological studies in cross-location settings, emphasizing the importance of recognizing cultural differences to enhance the analysis and understanding of the phenomenon under study. It underscores the need for researchers to respect and acknowledge the diversity of participants' experiences, thus illuminating unique insights from various cultural contexts and avoiding overgeneralizations.

The comparative analysis between two subgroups of Chinese international students has significantly enriched this study's contribution to phenomenological theory and practice. This comparison illuminated the unique, nuanced experiences of each subgroup, offering a richer, more detailed understanding of their lived experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic. Through this comparative lens, the study uncovered distinct ways in which geographical location and cultural context influenced students' coping strategies, engagement with online learning, and social interactions—findings that echo Bartlett and Vavrus's (2017) advocacy for the utility of comparative case studies.

In the broader landscape of qualitative research, comparative analysis serves as a powerful tool to highlight variations and commonalities across cases, and thus enrich the depth of understanding and interpretation. The literature on qualitative approaches generally agrees on the lack of comparison and acknowledges its value, particularly in

studies exploring phenomena across different cultures, settings, or groups (Lindsay, 2018). As George and Bennett (2005) highlighted in their discussion of using case studies for theory development in the social sciences, comparative approaches imbue phenomenology research with depth and richness. By drawing out the similarities and differences, researchers can more effectively capture the complexity of human experiences and the influence of context on these experiences (Morse, 2004; Patton, 2015).

This study used a comparative approach between two subgroups of learners so as to demonstrate its value in phenomenological research. By comparing the experiences of students based on their geographical location during the pandemic, the study not only provided a comprehensive picture of their academic and social lives, but also deepened the understanding of how such external factors as pandemic-induced isolation and online learning impact students differently. This methodological choice demonstrates the value of comparative analysis in phenomenological research, as supported by the literature on qualitative research methods showcasing how comparative analysis can be strategically employed to explore and understand complex, multifaceted phenomena (Bartlett & Vavrus, 2017; George & Bennett, 2005).

In conclusion, the incorporation of a comparative analysis between two subgroups of Chinese international students during the COVID-19 pandemic exemplifies the method's value in drawing out rich, contextually-grounded insights. This approach can enhance phenomenological research by providing a detailed examination of how different contexts influence lived experiences, thereby offering a valuable framework upon which future

studies might build to explore the intricacies of human experiences across diverse settings.

Future Research Directions

This study underscores the importance of incorporating various research methodologies into phenomenological studies.

This integration significantly deepened and broadened our understanding of a complex phenomenon, as it discussed the lived experiences of two groups of people in different locations. The study advocates for future phenomenological research to embrace interdisciplinary approaches so as to more deeply comprehend complex phenomena. For example, qualitative research could benefit from insights drawn from psychology, sociology, and public health, and thus offer more comprehensive perspectives on the phenomena under investigation. Psychological theories on stress and coping could augment phenomenological insights into students' experiences, whereas sociological perspectives on community and belonging could enhance our understanding of their social interactions during the pandemic. Future research should systematically integrate these varied disciplinary perspectives to enrich phenomenological inquiry, making it more relevant and attuned to the complex lived experiences of students.

Moreover, this study highlights the value of longitudinal phenomenological studies in capturing the evolving nature of participants' experiences over time. With the pandemic leading to changes in travel and location preferences, there is a unique opportunity to explore how people navigate and interpret ongoing challenges within a given phenomenon through longitudinal research. Future studies should consider employing

longitudinal designs to provide more detailed and nuanced understandings of how individuals make sense of their experiences over time.

Conclusion

The inclusion of location as a key factor in the study of Chinese international students during the pandemic proved to be an excellent addition to this phenomenology study. This approach enabled a comprehensive exploration of the lived experiences of students across different locations, revealing significant differences that might otherwise have been overlooked if the research had been confined to a single location. This methodology not only emphasizes the importance of adopting methodological flexibility and innovation from other research approaches, but also showcases the potential benefits of incorporating longitudinal insights into phenomenological studies. By opening new avenues for future research, this study encourages scholars to consider similar integrations in their future work, thereby enriching the understanding of complex phenomena through a more nuanced and multidimensional approach.

Trustworthiness and Credibility

To ensure the trustworthiness and credibility of qualitative research—particularly in such studies as this phenomenological exploration of Chinese international students’ experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic—rigorous methodological strategies must be applied. This study adopted several key approaches to enhance its integrity and address potential threats to its validity, and seamlessly integrating these throughout the research process to faithfully capture and represent participants’ lived experiences.

Triangulation served as a cornerstone strategy, employing multiple data sources, including in-depth interviews, participant diaries, and visual materials (Creswell & Poth,

2018). This multifaceted approach not only enriched the dataset, but also allowed for the corroboration of findings across different types of data, thus bolstering the study's reliability and depth. Complementing this, participant validation or member checking involved participants directly in the review of the findings, thus ensuring the accurate and authentic depiction of their experiences. This iterative feedback process was instrumental in refining the interpretations and ensuring they resonated with the participants' realities (Koelsch, 2013).

Reflexivity was practiced diligently, with a continuous self-reflection on my biases, assumptions, and the potential influence of my perspectives on the study. This critical self-awareness helped to mitigate the impact of personal biases on the research process and outcomes, aiming for objectivity and fairness in interpreting the data (Malterud, 2001; Peshkin, 1988; Pyett, 2003; Sousa, 2014).

Despite these strategies, the study faced potential threats to validity. Subjectivity, inherent in qualitative research, was addressed through the strategies of reflexivity and participant validation. As a Chinese international student myself, I strove to ensure that my interpretations remained grounded in participants' perspectives rather than on my own throughout the analysis (Finlay, 2002). The study used a small sample size, typical for phenomenological research, which was counterbalanced by the deliberate selection of participants to capture a diverse array of experiences (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Ellis, 2016; Polkinghorne, 1989).

Language barriers posed a significant challenge given the diversity and linguistic nuances of the participant group. To address this, all interviews were conducted in Mandarin, the participants' preferred language, so as to ensure that they could fully and

accurately express themselves. This choice facilitated a deeper engagement with the participants and allowed for a richer, more nuanced data collection. Recognizing the potential for loss of meaning in translation, the data were analyzed in Chinese to maintain the integrity of the participants' expressions and the subtleties of their experiences. Only after the analysis was complete were the findings translated into English, with careful attention to ensure that nothing was lost in translation. This approach underscored the importance of linguistic sensitivity in qualitative research and contributed significantly to the study's credibility by ensuring that the analyses were deeply rooted in the cultural and linguistic context of the participants (Larkin et al., 2006).

In conclusion, the study's methodological validity, characterized by triangulation, participant validation, and reflexivity, alongside strategic approaches to addressing subjectivity, sample size, and language barriers, underscored its commitment to trustworthiness and credibility. These efforts ensured that the study not only captured the nuanced experiences of Chinese international students during an unprecedented global pandemic, but also contributed valuable, reliable insights to the field of phenomenological research.

Summary

This chapter has presented the results of the phenomenological study's analysis, establishing connections with the research questions. I conducted interviews with six participants with the aim of capturing the essence of the lived experience of Chinese international students during the COVID-19 pandemic. I designed the interview questions to explore these students' experiences while studying at a US university, focusing on those who either remained in the US or returned to China.

All participants were Chinese undergraduate students engaged in online learning during the first wave of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020. Among them, three participants chose to stay in the US, while the other three returned to China. To ensure comparability, I carefully selected participants in each group who shared similar backgrounds, with the only difference being their location. Both groups included two female students majoring in business, two male students from the southern region of China, and two male students study a science-related major.

I detailed the process of data analysis and presented the findings through a combination of direct quotes, summaries, participant stories, and images provided by the participants. These elements collectively served to enhance the understanding of themes and the essence of this unique experience for the participants. The four themes for Chinese students who stayed in the US were Online Learning Challenges, Social Life Adaptation, Self-Coping and Entertainment, and Support and Resource Needs. The three themes for those who returned to China were Online Learning Challenges, Social Life Adaptation, and Opportunities for Development.

In the discussion of the presented themes, I also undertook a comprehensive comparison of similarities and differences between the two groups, interweaving these findings with the relevant literature. Subsequently, I established connections between the results and my central research question, offering valuable insights into the experiences of Chinese international students during the COVID-19 pandemic. Moreover, I addressed the research sub-question, “What are the similarities and differences in the experiences of those who resided in China and those who resided in the US?” Once done, I delved into a detailed discussion of the methodology employed, wherein I integrated phenomenology

with comparative analysis, and explored the insights gained from the sub-question, “What can we learn methodologically when using comparisons in sample populations?” Ultimately, the trustworthiness and credibility of the study were thoroughly examined to guarantee that the nuanced experiences of Chinese international students during the pandemic were accurately captured and interpreted.

The following chapter presents my conclusions, limitations, and future directions for research in the field based on the study’s findings.

Chapter Five: Discussion

This phenomenological study sought to explore the lived experiences of Chinese international students during the pandemic. This chapter offers a discussion of the major findings related to these experiences, delves into the essence of the phenomenon, and compares the experiences of students who lived in the US with those who resided in China. Additionally, the chapter includes a discussion on the comparative analysis method employed within the context of this phenomenological study. Finally, it concludes with a discussion of the study's limitations, suggestions for future research, and a summary.

Summary of the Problem

Chinese international students in the US have faced unprecedented challenges during the COVID-19 pandemic, ranging from the hurdles of online learning to social life adaptations.

In the US, these students encountered increased racism, with verbal and physical assaults stemming from the virus's origins, compounded by social media vitriol and policy changes threatening their stay and well-being (Boyle, 2020; Donaghue, 2020; Gallagher, Doherty, & Obonyo, 2020; Gibson et al., 2023; Evans, Mandhani, Feng, & UGC team, 2020). They also faced challenges to their social lives and methods of self-care. For those who returned to China, the difficulties included adapting to significant

time differences, accessing restricted educational resources due to internet censorship, and navigating cultural misunderstandings regarding their study schedules and commitments (Zhang-Wu, 2020). Despite the differences in their locations, all the students faced challenges related to online learning, technology, and communication with the school, which negatively impacted their academic discipline.

Therefore, I sought to explore the varied experiences of Chinese international students during the COVID-19 pandemic, focusing on geographic location. It aimed to understand how their location influenced their experiences, highlighting the similarities and differences between the two groups.

To understand their lived experiences completely, this study discussed the following research questions:

1. What are the lived experience of Chinese international students who lived and studied in a US university during the COVID-19 pandemic?
2. What are the lived experience of Chinese international students who studied in a US university but lived in China during the COVID-19 pandemic?
 - 1a. What are the similarities and differences in the experiences of those who resided in China and those who resided in the US?
 - 1b. What can we learn methodologically when utilizing comparisons in sample populations?

To answer these research questions, I conducted a series of interviews with three participants who stayed in the US and three who returned China. All of the participants were Chinese international students studying at a US university. Due to the differences in

location, I integrated the phenomenological method with a comparative analysis to examine the lived experiences of both groups, who had similar backgrounds but resided in two different locations. The existing literature shows that comparisons between groups with different backgrounds are possible in research; however, comparing participants with only location differences has tended to be undertaken less frequently. Therefore, this study focused on participants with the same background and experiences, but in different locations. This approach allowed me to delve into the lived experiences and understand the phenomena more holistically (Morse, 2004).

Discussion of the Themes

After analyzing the interviews of the six students, I found four themes for those who resided in the US (Online Learning Challenges, Social Life Adaptation, Self-Coping and Entertainment, and Support and Resource Needs) and three for those who returned to China (Online Learning Challenges, Social Life Adaptation, and Opportunities for Development).

Residing in the US

When the pandemic hit in 2020, the participants who stayed in the US did so for various reasons. Julia stayed because she and her boyfriend were moving to a new school at the time. Warren stayed for the personal freedom life away from his parents afforded and because he wanted to immerse himself with the language environment. Gary stayed in the US to avoid the risk of infection during long-distance travel, as well as to try to graduate on time.

Online Learning Challenges

This theme highlights the difficulties participants faced as they transitioned to online learning. This sudden transition presented Chinese international students in the US with considerable challenges, embodying the global struggle identified by such researchers as Bozkurt et al. (2020). Participants expressed feelings of confusion and a lack of clarity in their courses. For example, Gary mentioned, “During the period of attending online classes (during the pandemic), many things felt unclear and somewhat uncertain [...] I still feel somewhat perplexed about many things (I learned during the pandemic).” The need for self-discipline became evident, as Warren shared a wake-up call after his GPA fell, leading him to take his studies more seriously. The essence of classroom interaction was lost, leading to frustration and disconnection, where such participants as Gary noted the difficulties in seeking clarification from professors, stating, “During the pandemic, you had to resort to various messages or emails.” This echoes the findings of Adams and Vanderleeuw (2020) regarding the impact of remote learning on student motivation and academic engagement. Furthermore, the essence of classroom interaction, crucial to the learning experience, was significantly lost, leading to frustration and a sense of isolation. The reliance on technology, with its inherent challenges, such as internet connectivity issues, further complicated their academic pursuits, highlighting the critical role of equitable access to digital resources, as emphasized by Li et al. (2020). This theme underscores the struggle with maintaining academic discipline and the importance of adaptability and effective communication in the digital learning environment.

Social Life Adaptation

The pandemic severely restricted social interactions, leading to feelings of loneliness and stress among the participants. Social restrictions and curfews compounded these feelings. Indeed, as Warren noted, “When you go to shop at some places, every store has a sign outside indicating how many people are allowed inside at the same time. This leads to us standing around waiting to enter. If the store is full, they tell us we have to wait until someone leaves before we can go in, making shopping not as convenient as before.” Participants also described their efforts to stockpile supplies and adapt to the new normal of wearing masks and social distancing. This theme also delves into the complexities of maintaining social connections amidst stringent social restrictions, leading to profound feelings of “loneliness and emptiness.” Julia's reflection, “It was just my boyfriend, who is now my husband, and I staying in the house with our cat and dog... it sometimes felt very empty,” poignantly captures the isolation felt during this period. Additionally, instances of racism exacerbated the sense of alienation, with participants encountering unfriendly experiences, providing concrete examples of the trends identified by Boyle (2020) and Gibson et al. (2023). These lived experiences offer a personal perspective on the broader phenomenon of pandemic-related racism, emphasizing its impact on students' mental health and social interactions. These experiences further complicated their social lives during this period.

Self-Coping and Entertainment

In coping with the challenges presented by the pandemic, participants found consolation in hobbies and entertainment, such as gaming, which served as a temporary

escape from the realities of their situation. As Warren stated, “I try to distract myself, for example, by playing games with my friends to relax and release some of the pent-up negative emotions.” Later, they tried other forms of entertainments and found joy in limited yet recreational activities. This accords with Gallagher et al.’s (2020) finding, where students engaged in specific coping mechanisms, such as gaming, social support, and entertainment, to manage their stress and isolation. However, for Gary, despite these efforts, the sense of isolation was profound: “I almost isolated myself at home, didn’t want to go out, and there weren’t many other options either.” This supports Super and Van Disseldorp’s (2020) finding that students reduced their physical activities during the pandemic. This theme reflects the participants’ attempts to maintain a sense of normalcy and mental well-being through limited social engagements and personal hobbies.

Support and Resource Needs

The participants experienced minimal support from educational institutions. This stands in contrast to the significant aid from embassies and community organizations, and provides a nuanced view of Lai et al. (2020) and Son et al.’s (2020) findings. It illustrates the gaps in institutional support and the importance of external sources of assistance. Indeed, all three participants recalled being provided with significant aid came from their embassies and the community, including medical supplies and emotional support: “It was the Consulate General that made contact with student associations at the school... they then distributed medications, masks, and some COVID-19 test kits among us.” This difference highlights the critical role of community and embassy assistance in providing both tangible resources and a sense of belonging during this challenging period.

Together, these themes paint a comprehensive picture of the resilience, challenges, and adaptive strategies employed by Chinese international students in the US during the COVID-19 pandemic. Their experiences shed light on the multifaceted impacts of the pandemic on international higher education, emphasizing the importance of adaptability, support, and community in overcoming the barriers faced during this global crisis.

Residing in China

While some students decided to stay in the US for their academic pursuits, others chose to return to China. Emily, for instance, did not actively choose to stay in China, but decided not to return to the US after the winter break once she had completed her visa transfer. This decision spared her the hassle and expense of securing tickets back to school. Ted returned to China due to his mother's worries, and Victor decided that staying in the US would be equivalent to being at home since he would miss the hands-on experiences in the lab anyway due to the transition to online learning. Their lived experiences form the essence of the students who returned to China during the pandemic.

Online Learning Challenges

The transition to online learning posed significant hurdles for these participants, heightened by geographical and technological barriers. The participants faced a steep learning curve with the shift to online education, grappling with the loss of campus life and the need to adapt their study habits. For instance, Emily struggled to adapt to online learning in a space typically reserved for rest, and Ted experienced difficulties in visualizing mathematical formulas due to poor video quality. Indeed, he recalled: "During my math class, which was online, the teacher had to write mathematical

formulas on the whiteboard, but the camera was so blurry that I could hardly see what was being written.” The participants also reflected on the challenges in communication with faculty and peers, which served to complicate and hinder collaboration and understanding in coursework. This mirrors Lai et al.’s (2020) observations on the importance of effective communication and the need for educational institutions to provide clear guidance and support in the digital learning environment. Technology issues—particularly those regarding VPNs, as experienced by Emily and Ted—further worsened access to educational resources, underscoring the significant digital divide (Zhang-Wu, 2020). The time difference also posed a unique challenge, with students, like Ted, adjusting their schedules to attend live sessions, which impacted their motivation and overall engagement with their studies. This theme illustrates the tangible impact of these challenges on participants’ academic experiences.

Social Life Adaptation

The participants’ social lives underwent significant changes. Negative experiences were marked by isolation and the initial shock of pandemic-induced lockdowns, leading to empty grocery stores and heightened stress for Emily. However, Ted’s narrative of finding joy in simple gatherings with friends for movie nights, which recreated a sense of community and belonging, contrasts sharply with the initial scarcity and isolation highlighted by empty grocery shelves. This adaptation underscores the resilience and creativity of students in finding new ways to connect and maintain relationships. Ted and Victor’s reflections that “Time spent with friends is more joyful,” and “I would meet with friends to play basketball” encapsulate the essence of social life adaptation during the

pandemic. This finding diverges from prior research, which identified the lack of human interactions, whether with friends or teachers, as a key factor contributing to student stress (Lai et al., 2020; Li et al., 2020). Contrary to concerns, the participants reported no experiences of racism upon their return to China, challenging the narrative that they would face pandemic-related discrimination. This finding contrasts with what has been reported in the literature, where some individuals were labelled as “virus carriers” in their hometowns and accused of bringing the virus back to China from other countries (Wang, 2020).

Opportunities for Development

Despite the challenges, the pandemic period became a catalyst for personal and professional growth for the participants. Emily and Victor leveraged online resources to improve their academic performance, with Emily raising her GPA and Victor enhancing his skills in local institutes and interns. Victor also explored how the pandemic provided unique internship and research opportunities that would shape his future career. His experience highlights how these circumstances facilitated his professional development, stating, “Perhaps because I took quite a few courses related to a special topic during my time back home, it substantially enhanced my skills in this area.” Upon reflection, the participants did not regret returning to China. Interestingly, no literature was found discussing the personal and professional growth of Chinese international students.

In summary, these themes presented a narrative of Chinese international students’ journey through the pandemic while residing in China, highlighting their struggles with online learning, the evolution of their social lives, and the opportunities they found for

growth. Despite the initial challenges, the participants demonstrated remarkable adaptation to new modes of learning, and found ways to thrive both academically and personally during the pandemic.

Comparative Analysis

This study transcends a mere examination of the experiences of Chinese international students studying in the US during the pandemic through recognizing the geographical differences that resulted in varied experiences among the participants. This study enriches phenomenology research by integrating comparative analysis, which underscores the distinct experiences of students who remained in the US versus those who returned to China, provided the lived experiences of the students as a whole (Morse, 2004). Focusing solely on one group would have overlooked the nuanced experiences and coping strategies developed in response to the unique challenges posed by their locations. Therefore, employing a comparative analysis enabled this study to explore these differing experiences in depth.

Similarities

Regardless of location, the participants experienced challenges related to online learning, impacts on academic discipline, technological hurdles, communication difficulties with educational institutions, and a unanimous reflection on their decisions to stay or return without regret. Both groups encountered issues in adapting to virtual classrooms, with technical difficulties impeding effective learning. The transition to online learning tested their academic discipline, leading to decreased motivation and engagement—a finding that resonates with the broader qualitative research literature on

the value of comparison in studies across different cultures and settings (Lindsay, 2018). Technological challenges were prevalent, with students in the US facing such issues as unstable internet connections and those in China dealing with the Great Firewall and VPN instabilities. Communication challenges were also significant, with both groups struggling to maintain effective communication with teachers and peers. Despite these challenges, both groups of students expressed no regrets about their decisions to either stay in the US or return to China, finding value in their choices amidst the pandemic.

Differences

Between the two groups, differences were marked in aspects of social life and interaction, self-care and entertainment, experiences of racism and safety concerns, and opportunities for reflection and personal growth. Students in the US experienced a decline in social life and resorted to indoor activities for self-care due to enforced isolation, while those in China found ways to engage socially and maintain their well-being more effectively. Racism and safety concerns (directly linked to the pandemic's association with China) were more obvious for students in the US. In terms of personal growth, students in China viewed the pandemic as an opportunity for development through self-study and internships, while those in the US focused on survival and adaptation, confronting immediate challenges rather than leveraging the situation for personal advantage. These findings underscore the need for researchers to acknowledge the diversity of participants' experiences to avoid overgeneralizations.

This comparative analysis between two subgroups of Chinese international students during the COVID-19 pandemic exemplifies the method's value in drawing out rich,

contextually-grounded insights. By providing a detailed examination of how different contexts influence lived experiences, this approach enhances phenomenological research, offering a valuable framework upon which future studies might build to explore the intricacies of human experiences across diverse settings (Morse, 2004; Patton, 2015).

Method Reflection

The comparative analysis approach not only enriches phenomenological theory by integrating cross-location contexts into its inquiry, but also paves the way for future research that transcends traditional boundaries. The study's findings significantly contribute to phenomenological practice, offering insights into conducting research across diverse cultural settings and emphasizing the importance of acknowledging cultural differences.

Furthermore, the study advocates for the inclusion of interdisciplinary approaches in phenomenological research, suggesting that insights from psychology, sociology, and public health can provide a more comprehensive understanding of complex phenomena. The value of longitudinal studies is also highlighted, suggesting they can capture the evolving nature of individuals' experiences over time. Overall, this research enhances our understanding of Chinese international students' lived experiences during the pandemic, offering a framework for future studies to explore human experiences more deeply and broadly.

Limitations of the Study

This phenomenological study was structured for a smaller sample size in line with the recommendations of Polkinghorne (1989) and Creswell and Poth (2018), who suggested

interviewing 5–25 individuals with lived experiences, and further supported by Ellis (2016), with a recommended range of 6–20 participants. However, this carried with it certain limitations. The division of locations into two groups (the US and China), with a total of six participants—three in each group—limited the results’ ability to draw conclusions about the experiences of the Chinese international students beyond the sample.

Despite selecting all participants based on specific criteria, the response rate via social media was low, leading to a reliance on snowball sampling. This method may introduce bias, as participants might refer individuals who share similar characteristics or experiences, further limiting the scope for generalization (Cohen & Arieli, 2011; Emerson, 2015; Leighton et al., 2021).

Interestingly, all of the participants attended a university in the midwestern US, which was not an intentional design choice. This limitation omits the experiences of students living in larger cities, such as New York or Los Angeles, where policies differed from smaller cities which may lead differences in their experiences.

When evaluating decisions made during the COVID-19 pandemic by Chinese international students, it is important to recognize that they might not yet have experienced the full range of consequences of their choices as the pandemic just ended less than one year (United Nations, 2023) when the interview was taken place as their lives has not encounter major changes. Immediate reactions can be misleading as long-term impacts—both positive and negative—may not be fully apparent soon after the decision, potentially altering later perceptions of satisfaction.

Moreover, if all participants report satisfaction with their decisions, the study might face limitations in diversity and range of experiences. This homogeneity can reduce the generalizability of the findings, as it may not accurately reflect the varied challenges or regrets that could surface in a broader, more diverse population. Students with different financial circumstances, academic challenges, or social supports might experience and thus report differing levels of satisfaction. Expanding the scope of the study to include these varied perspectives is essential for a comprehensive understanding of the impacts of such decisions and to better inform future support mechanisms for international students in similar crises.

The study also acknowledges the potential for recall error, as highlighted by Patton (2002), given that participants were asked to recall events from three years prior. The act of remembering and detailing past experiences introduces the risk of omitted events or subjective interpretations.

Despite maximal efforts to mitigate biases, my position as a Chinese international student in the US may have inherently influenced the study, as Creswell and Miller (2000) suggested the possibility of transferring personal biases into research.

Recommendations for Supporting Chinese International Students in the US

The COVID-19 pandemic has significantly transformed the educational landscape, particularly for Chinese international students in the U.S., who face unique challenges in navigating their academic and social lives remotely. This section outlines comprehensive recommendations for various people involved in the educational process. These recommendations aim to enhance the academic success and emotional well-being of

Chinese international students, ensuring a supportive and enriching environment that fosters both personal growth and academic achievement.

Chinese International Students

To optimize their academic performance, Chinese international students should actively engage with available online resources and academic support services. Participation in study groups and online forums can help mitigate the challenges associated with remote learning, remember to stay connected with not only peers but also professor and their university, especially for those who resided in China with time zone differences. Students should also proactively seek clarification and assistance from faculty on course content and requirements if the online course were not as clear. On a social and emotional level, actively involving in virtual social events and workshops aimed at stress management and social interaction is crucial. Peer mentoring programs can provide valuable guidance and support, while university counseling services can assist students in addressing mental health concerns and coping with feelings of isolation.

Student Community Support

Community support groups should tailor programs specifically to the needs of Chinese international students, offering language support and tutoring that aligns with their academic subjects. Facilitating virtual academic workshops that accommodate various time zones will also be beneficial. Socially, these groups should increase outreach initiatives aimed at integrating international students into the campus community, provide cultural diversity workshops, and implement a buddy system to help new students adjust and feel welcomed.

Faculty Support

Faculty members should recognize that the Chinese international students are far from home, faculty should consider offering additional support services such as advice on local food options, safe housing solutions other than dorm, and financial aid opportunities to ensure students' basic needs are met alongside their educational requirements. The office of the faculties, such as international students' office, should consider maintain flexibility in office hours and meeting methods to accommodate different time zones. From a social and emotional perspective, faculty should strive to understand the cultural backgrounds of their international students to better support their emotional and educational needs. Regular check-ins can help monitor student well-being and academic progress, and faculty should foster an inclusive classroom environment that values diverse perspectives.

Course Professors

Professors should offer flexible office hours to cater to international students across different time zones and include recorded lectures and asynchronous learning options to aid those who face connectivity issues or need flexible scheduling. Transparency in communication regarding academic expectations and assessments is also essential. They should acknowledge the unique challenges faced by international students, such as language barriers, and adapt their teaching methods to be more inclusive. Detailed feedback on assignments will help guide students' learning processes effectively. Socially, professors should facilitate discussions and group projects that promote interaction among students from different backgrounds, providing support on managing

online learning and coping with academic pressures. Opportunities for students to share their cultural experiences within the course context should also be created, enriching the learning environment for all students.

In summary, the recommendations provided are structured to address both the academic and emotional needs of Chinese international students in the US during a challenging period. These guidelines offer actionable steps for students, community support, faculty support, and professors to enhance the educational and personal experiences of these students. By implementing these measures, this study can significantly contribute to a supportive and effective educational environment. For a detailed breakdown of these recommendations, refer to Table 3 that outlines specific actions for each group on both academic and social and emotional levels.

Table 3: Recommendations for supporting Chinese international students

	Chinese International Students	Student Community Support	Faculty Support	Course Professors
Academic Level	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Engage with online resources and support services. Remember to stay connected with peers, professor, and university. - Participate in study groups and online forums. - Proactively seek faculty assistance on course content. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Tailor programs to the needs of Chinese students, including language support. - Facilitate virtual academic workshops accommodating different time zones.* 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Offer advice on local food options and safe housing solutions. - Provide information on financial aid opportunities. - Maintain flexibility in office hours and meeting methods to accommodate different time zones.* 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Offer flexible office hours for different time zones.* - Include recorded lectures and asynchronous learning options. - Ensure transparency in academic expectations. - Adapt teaching methods to be inclusive of international students. - Provide detailed feedback on assignments.
Social and Emotional Level	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Participate in virtual social events and stress management workshops. - Engage in peer mentoring programs. - Utilize university counseling services. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Increase outreach to integrate international students. - Provide cultural diversity workshops. - Implement a buddy system for new students. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Understand the cultural backgrounds of international students. - Conduct regular check-ins for well-being and academic progress. - Foster an inclusive classroom environment. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Facilitate discussions and group projects to promote diverse interactions. - Provide support for managing online learning and academic pressures. - Create opportunities for sharing cultural experiences.

Note. Items marked with an asterisk (*) are applicable only to students residing in China

Recommendations for Methods

Incorporating comparative analysis into qualitative research enhances the depth of understanding about how context influences individual experiences, particularly in studies with participants who share a common background but differ in one significant variable. For this dissertation examining the lived experiences of Chinese international students during the COVID-19 pandemic, comparative analysis is crucial. It elucidates how the different settings—staying in the US versus returning to China—affect students' academic and social experiences.

Comparative analysis is pivotal in this study as it allows for a full understanding of the role geographical settings play in shaping the students' lived experiences during a global crisis. For researchers looking to incorporate comparative analysis into their qualitative studies, particularly useful is its ability to explore phenomena across two or more groups that share common backgrounds but differ in one significant variable.

To effectively employ comparative analysis, it is crucial to first clearly define the participant groups with respect to their key similarities and differences that are relevant to the research question. Uniform data collection methods across these groups ensure that the data remains comparable. Researchers should then perform separate analyses for each group's data to identify unique and shared themes, followed by a comparative analysis to synthesize these findings. This method enhances the depth of the findings by showing how variables such as location can influence experiences while also broadening the study's applicability, offering insights that can inform practical solutions and policy adjustments in similar contexts. Thus, comparative analysis serves as a powerful tool in

qualitative research for uncovering rich, context-sensitive insights that address complex social phenomena.

Traditional qualitative research focuses on deeply exploring a single context or phenomenon to gain a nuanced understanding of participants' experiences within that specific setting (Creswell, 2014). This approach prioritizes depth over breadth, analyzing data intensively within the same group or context. According to Creswell & Poth (2018), this type of research is particularly valuable when the aim is to uncover the complexities of a particular cultural or social environment. However, the findings are typically not intended for generalization beyond the studied group, which Flyvbjerg (2006) argues limits the broader applicability but enhances the contextual depth and richness.

In contrast, qualitative research with a comparing method involves the systematic exploration and contrast of phenomena across different contexts or groups. Baxter and Jack (2008) describe a comparative analysis as aiming to identify both unique and shared themes that emerge from comparing data across varied settings. This approach not only increases the generalizability of the findings but also provides a richer understanding of how different contexts influence the phenomenon being studied. Yin (2014) supports this, stating that comparative analysis can highlight patterns that may hold across various groups, thus broadening the scope and applicability of the research findings.

Methodologically, qualitative research with a comparing method is more complex than traditional approaches, as it involves managing and analyzing data from multiple sources and ensuring cultural sensitivity across varied contexts. There are increased challenges in avoiding biases, particularly in making cross-cultural comparisons. Despite

these complexities, the approach is highly suitable for studies that aim to draw broader conclusions about the influence of different factors on the studied phenomenon. Hofstede (2001) emphasizes the importance of considering fairness in representation and avoiding ethnocentric biases, which are crucial in comparative studies.

Overall, based on the comparison table below (Table 4), while traditional qualitative research allows for a deep, contextual understanding within a single setting, qualitative research with a comparing method offers broader insights by comparing and contrasting phenomena across different contexts. Each approach has its distinct advantages and challenges, and the choice between them should align with the specific objectives and requirements of the research study.

Table 4: Traditional qualitative research vs. Comparative qualitative research

Aspect	Traditional Qualitative Research	Comparative Qualitative Research
Focus	Deeply explores a single context or phenomenon (Creswell, 2014).	Systematically explores and contrasts phenomena across different contexts (Baxter & Jack, 2008).
Data Analysis	In-depth analysis of data within the same group or context (Creswell & Poth, 2018).	Analysis involves comparing data across different groups or contexts to identify unique or shared themes (Miles & Huberman, 1994).
Objective	To gain a deep understanding of participants' experiences and perceptions within a single setting (Creswell & Poth, 2018).	To understand differences and similarities across diverse settings, enhancing generalizability and contextual understanding of findings (Yin, 2014).
Generalizability	Limited by focus on a specific context; findings are not intended to be generalized beyond the studied group (Flyvbjerg, 2006).	Aims to produce findings that are more broadly applicable, identifying patterns that may hold across various groups (Stake, 2006).

Cultural Sensitivity	Deep engagement with the cultural context of the study group.	Requires sensitivity to multiple cultural contexts and an understanding of how these contexts influence participant experiences (Hofstede, 2001).
Methodological Complexity	Generally less complex; focuses on one group or context (Creswell & Poth, 2018).	More complex due to the need to manage and analyze data from multiple sources and contexts.
Suitability	Best suited for studies where the research aim is to explore phenomena deeply without the need to generalize (Creswell & Poth, 2018).	Suitable for studies aiming to compare and contrast phenomena to draw broader conclusions about the influence of different factors
Challenges	May include depth at the expense of breadth; findings are highly contextual (Flyvbjerg, 2006).	Includes managing larger datasets, avoiding biases in cross-cultural comparisons, and ensuring equal depth in all contexts studied (Baxter & Jack, 2008).
Data Requirements	Can work with detailed data from a single source or context (Creswell & Poth, 2018).	Requires robust, comparable data from each context or group being studied (Miles & Huberman, 1994).
Ethical Considerations	Focuses on ethical engagement and deep understanding within one cultural or contextual boundary (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).	Must consider fairness in representation and interpretation across different cultural groups, avoiding ethnocentric biases (Hofstede, 2001).

Comparative analysis in qualitative research is not suitable in several scenarios. First, it may be inappropriate when there are no meaningful commonalities between groups or when the differences are so significant that comparisons would yield misleading conclusions. This method is also less effective when the research focus is to deeply explore a phenomenon within a single context, where a detailed single-case study would provide richer insights. Additionally, comparative analysis should be avoided when data availability is limited, or when logistical constraints make it impractical to gather

sufficient data from each group being compared. This approach also requires significant resources for managing and analyzing data, making it unsuitable for projects with limited resources or funding. Thus, researchers should carefully evaluate these factors to determine the appropriateness of using comparative analysis in their studies.

Recommendations for Future Research

The research strategy employed intentionally limited variables by focusing on a small, homogenous sample size—three participants in each of the two groups. This decision aimed to achieve depth and specificity in understanding the lived experiences of Chinese international students during the pandemic. However, this approach naturally restricted the generalizability of the findings.

To enhance the breadth and applicability of future research, a more expansive study could be conducted. This would involve not only increasing the sample size, but also diversifying the participant pool to include students from various cities across different regions. Such a strategy would allow for a broader understanding of the experiences of Chinese international students, capturing a wider array of perspectives and situations.

Future research could also explore the long-term impacts of these pandemic-induced decisions on the academic and professional trajectories of Chinese international students. Investigating how their choices during the pandemic affected their career paths, and integration into either the Chinese or American job markets would provide valuable insights. Furthermore, follow-up research could be conducted in future years to revisit the decisions made by the participants. This would explore whether they have changed their views on not regretting the choices they made.

Additionally, incorporating focus groups as a methodological approach, alongside individual interviews, could offer richer, multifaceted insights into the collective experiences and perceptions of students, thus providing a more comprehensive view of the phenomenon under study.

At its core, the phenomenological analysis employed in this study served as a powerful tool for delving into the nuanced lived experiences of Chinese international students. This methodological choice was pivotal in uncovering the distinct differences attributed to the students' residing locations, offering a deep, qualitative understanding of their experiences and challenges during the pandemic. However, recognizing the limitations of a purely qualitative approach, future research could benefit from incorporating quantitative analyses or adopting mixed-methods strategies. By integrating objective standardized measures and potentially expanding to a large, randomized sample, future studies could aim to provide more generalizable findings. Such approaches as mixed-methods would not only validate the qualitative insights gleaned from phenomenological analysis, but also provide a more robust, empirical foundation to the understanding of Chinese international students' experiences, thus accommodating both the depth of individual experiences and the breadth of generalized patterns across larger populations.

Summary

This study's findings illuminate the lived experiences of Chinese international students during the initial wave of the pandemic, revealing their resilience amid a global crisis. The participants' experiences, while aligning with existing literature, also

introduced novel insights. Despite its limitations, the integration of phenomenological methods with comparative analysis was instrumental in uncovering the authentic experiences of these students.

This research aims to spark further exploration into the experiences of Chinese international students in the US, addressing not only the students themselves, but also their parents and educators. It is anticipated that these insights will contribute to a deeper understanding of the cultural dynamics within the educational sphere of Chinese international students, laying a foundation for enhancing the learning environment for future cohorts. As online learning becomes increasingly prevalent, the insights garnered from this study are poised to offer valuable guidance for Chinese international students navigating their academic journey in US universities.

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Appendices

Appendix A: Consent Form

Exempt Research Information Sheet

Title of Research Study: A Phenomenology Study of the Lived Experiences of Chinese International Students in the US During the COVID-19 Pandemic

Principal Investigator: Linlin Wu, University of Denver, Morgridge College of Education
Faculty Sponsor: Robyn Thomas Pitts, Assistant Professor, Morgridge College of Education

IRBNet Protocol #: 2117582-1

You are being asked to participate in a research study. Your participation in this research study is voluntary and you do not have to participate. Even if you decide to participate now, you may change your mind and stop at any time. This document contains important information about this study and what to expect if you decide to participate. Please consider the information carefully. Feel free to ask questions before making your decision whether or not to participate.

Study Purpose:

If you participate in this research study, you will be invited to take part in a phenomenological study that delves into the lived experiences of Chinese international students in the United States during the COVID-19 pandemic.

This study aims to gain a deeper understanding of the experiences of Chinese international students engaged in distance learning at U.S. universities, whether they were residing in the U.S. or China, and to compare the challenges they encountered. The ultimate goal is to capture the essence of Chinese international students' lives during the pandemic.

To be eligible for this study, you must have been 18 years or older during the first wave of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020 and be a Chinese international student enrolled in a U.S. university with no family living in the US (green card or US citizen is not eligible). Your location during the pandemic, whether in China or the U.S., is also relevant.

Hopefully this study will provide valuable insights to Chinese international students studying in U.S. universities, reassuring them that their feelings of anxiety and stress are shared experiences. They can find solace in the fact that they face common challenges each day, including the misunderstandings that may arise within their families.

You may choose not to answer any question during the interview or choose not to continue with the interview for any reason without penalty.

There are no expected risks to you as a result of participating in this study.

You will not benefit directly from participating in this study.

Procedures: If you agree to be a part of the research study, you will be asked to participate in two interviews, and each will take about 60 minutes of your time. During the interview, you may choose to turn the Zoom video off.

Before you begin, please note that the interview will be conducted using Zoom as per its privacy agreement. This research is only for participants over the age of 18. Please be mindful to respond in a private setting and through a secured Internet connection for your privacy. Your confidentiality will be maintained to the degree permitted by the technology used. Specifically, no guarantees can be made regarding the interception of data sent via the Internet by any third parties.

You will be audio/video recorded during the interview by Zoom itself and an iPad from my end as a backup device. If you do not want to be audio/video recorded, please inform the researcher, and only hand-written notes will be taken during the interview/focus group.

Data Sharing

De-identified data from this study may be shared with the research community at large to advance science and health. We will remove or code any personal information that could identify you before files are shared with other researchers to ensure that, by current scientific standards and known methods, no one will be able to identify you from the information we share. Despite these measures, we cannot guarantee anonymity of your personal data.

Questions: If you have any questions about this project or your participation, please feel free to ask questions now or contact Linlin Wu at Linlin.wu@du.edu at any time.

If you have any questions or concerns about your research participation or rights as a participant, you may contact the University of Denver’s Human Research Protections Program (HRPP) by emailing IRBAdmin@du.edu or calling (303) 871-2121 to speak to someone other than the researchers.

The University of Denver Institutional Review Board has determined that this study is minimal risk and is exempt from full IRB oversight.

Please take all the time you need to read through this document and decide whether you would like to participate in this research study.

If you agree to participate in this research study, please sign below. You will be given a copy of this form for your records.

Participant Signature

Date

Appendix B: Interview Protocol

Interview 1 Protocol

Introduction:

Thank you for participating in this study which focuses on the experiences of higher education Chinese international students during the first wave of COVID-19 pandemic in a US university. The study aims to explore and understand the different experiences of Chinese international students who resided in the US during the pandemic and those who went back to China. Your participation will help me to gain insights and provide recommendations to improve the support and resources for international students in similar situations.

I will use two recording devices during this interview just in case there is a problem and I need to have a back-up. In addition, I will make brief notes during the interview to supplement the recordings and to ensure that I capture the information shared by the participants comprehensively and accurately.

This interview will be mainly focused on your information and your experiences during the pandemic.

Demographic Information

Rationale: Become acquainted with the participants, understand their background and motivations for studying in the US

Please provide your basic information.

1. Can you tell me your age, gender, major, academic level?
2. How long you have been studying in the US during the first wave of pandemic?
3. What made you choose to study in the US?
4. Why did you choose this particular school, major?

5. Where did you stay (US or China)?
 - a) Why did you make that decision?

COVID-19 Experience

Rationale: Learn about their experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic, provide how the pandemics impacted their lives, both academic life and social life

First, I start with some general experiences.

1. Can you describe your experience during the first wave of COVID-19 pandemic?
 2. What were your initial thoughts and emotions when you first heard about the pandemic?
 3. What were your feelings during the pandemic when it started?
 - a) What gave you those feelings? News, social media, etc
 - b) Probe about significance of those feelings
 4. Do you have a daily routine during the pandemic?
 - a) Probe and ask for more information.
 5. Have you experienced any discrimination or stigma as a result of the pandemic?
- Then, let's focus on your university responses.

6. What kind of support did your university provide during the pandemic?
7. How did your university communicate with you during the pandemic?
8. What kind of support did you receive from the community during the pandemic?
9. Did you feel that your university was supportive enough during the pandemic?
How about your community?
 - a) Probe for more supportive materials if available

Last, I will discuss the impact on Academic and Social Life

10. How did the pandemic affect your academic life, if at all?
11. Have you experienced any challenges with online learning?
12. How did the pandemic affect your social life and relationships, if at all?
13. Did you feel isolated or disconnected during the pandemic?
 - a) What specific things gave you those feelings?
 - b) Probe for more supportive materials if available
14. Did you feel you could have better experiences if you went back to China/stayed in the US (Depend on the participants' location)?

•

Conclusion:

Thank you again for your participation in this study. Your insights and experiences are valuable and will help me to gain a better understanding of the experiences of Chinese

international students during the first wave of COVID-19 pandemic in a US university. If you have any further questions or concerns, please do not hesitate to contact me.

For our next interview, you are invited to bring any items or materials that you feel aided you in coping with the challenges posed by the pandemic. This could include social media posts, diaries, or any other relevant materials that you are comfortable sharing with me.

Thank you!

Interview 2 Protocol (Residing in the US)

Introduction:

Welcome to the second interview and thank you for your time and participation in the study.

As mentioned in the previous interview, I will use two recording devices during this interview just in case there is a problem and I need to have a back-up. In addition, I will make brief notes during the interview to supplement the recordings and to ensure that I capture the information shared by the participants comprehensively and accurately.

This second interview will be focused on the challenges and your personal coping experiences during the pandemic.

I would also like to offer you the opportunity to share any artifacts or documents that you may have brought with you to help illustrate your experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic. Additionally, before concluding our meeting, I would like to give you the chance to revisit any of the topics that have been previously discussed and share any additional insights or perspectives that you feel are important to include in our study.

Challenges

Rationale: Learn about their challenges faced during the COVID-19 pandemic, provide how the pandemics made them face all these challenge.

1. Can you describe your experience studying at a university in the US before the pandemic?
2. Have you faced any challenges specific to being an international student before the pandemic, if at all?
3. Have you faced any challenges specific to being an international student, during the pandemic, if at all?

4. How has the COVID-19 pandemic affected your experience staying in the US?
5. Comparing with students who went back to China (friends or social media post), how do you feel about your decision?
6. Were there any times you hoped that you chose to go back to China?
 - a) Why?
7. Can you share any positive experiences or outcomes from your time staying in the US?
8. Are there any other experiences or challenges you would like to share?

Personal Coping Strategies

Rationale: Explore the coping strategies of the participants

1. How did you cope with the stress and uncertainty caused by the COVID-19 pandemic?
2. Did you find any particular coping strategies or techniques to be more effective than others?
 - a) Probe more for the strategies
 - b) If no, ask what did you do, and how did it help you in your experiences
3. Did you seek out any support or resources from your university, community, or family to help you cope during the pandemic?
4. How did your cultural background or upbringing influence the coping strategies you used during the pandemic?
5. Did you engage in any self-care practices during the pandemic?
 - a) What did you do?
 - b) Were they helpful? Why?
6. How did your coping strategies evolve over time during the pandemic? Did you find that certain strategies became more or less effective as the pandemic continued?
7. Looking back, are there any coping strategies that you wish you had tried or used more frequently during the pandemic?
8. What kind of support and resources did you feel were lacking during the pandemic, if any?

Conclusion:

That's it for the interviews. Thank you very much for your participation in this multi-interview process. Your willingness to share your experiences with me over the past few months has been truly appreciated. Your insights have been invaluable in helping me gain

a better understanding of the experiences of Chinese international students during the COVID-19 pandemic in the US.

If anything comes up that you would like to share, please do not hesitate to reach out to me. Once again, thank you for your time and contributions to our study.

Interview 2 Protocol (Residing in China)

Introduction:

Welcome to the second interview and thank you for your time and participation in the study.

As mentioned in the previous interview, I will use two recording devices during this interview just in case there is a problem and I need to have a back-up. In addition, I will make brief notes during the interview to supplement the recordings and to ensure that I capture the information shared by the participants comprehensively and accurately.

This second interview will be focused on the challenges and your personal coping experiences during the pandemic.

I would also like to offer you the opportunity to share any artifacts or documents that you may have brought with you to help illustrate your experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic. Additionally, before concluding our meeting, I would like to give you the chance to revisit any of the topics that have been previously discussed and share any additional insights or perspectives that you feel are important to include in our study.

Challenges

Rationale: Learn about their challenges faced during the COVID-19 pandemic, provide how the pandemics made them face all these challenges

1. Can you describe your experience studying at a university in the US before the pandemic?
2. Have you faced any challenges specific to being an international student before the pandemic, if at all?
3. Have you faced any challenges specific to being an international student, during the pandemic, if at all?

4. How has the COVID-19 pandemic affected your experience staying in the US?
 - a) When did you went back to China?
 - b) What made you make the decision?
5. Comparing with students who stayed in the US (friends or social media post), how do you feel about your decision?
6. Were there any times you hoped that you would choose to stay in the US?
 - a) Why?
7. Can you share any positive experiences or outcomes from your time staying in China?
8. Are there any other experiences or challenges you would like to share?

Personal Coping Strategies

Rationale: Explore the coping strategies of the participants

1. How did you cope with the stress and uncertainty caused by the COVID-19 pandemic?
2. Did you find any particular coping strategies or techniques to be more effective than others?
 - a) Probe more for the strategies
 - b) If no, ask what did you do, and how did it helped you in your experiences
3. Did you seek out any support or resources from your university, community, or family to help you cope during the pandemic?
4. How did your cultural background or upbringing influence the coping strategies you used during the pandemic?
5. Did you engage in any self-care practices during the pandemic?
 - a) What did you do?
 - b) Were they helpful? Why?
6. How did your coping strategies evolve over time during the pandemic? Did you find that certain strategies became more or less effective as the pandemic continued?
7. Looking back, are there any coping strategies that you wish you had tried or used more frequently during the pandemic?
8. What kind of support and resources did you feel were lacking during the pandemic, if any?

Conclusion:

That's it for the interviews. Thank you very much for your participation in this multi-interview process. Your willingness to share your experiences with me over the past few months has been truly appreciated. Your insights have been invaluable in helping me gain

a better understanding of the experiences of Chinese international students during the COVID-19 pandemic in the US.

If anything comes up that you would like to share, please do not hesitate to reach out to me. Once again, thank you for your time and contributions to our study.

Appendix C: Reflexive Memo Template

Date & Time:

Location:

Participants' ID:

Duration:

1. Summary of the Interview

- a) Descriptive Observations
 - i. Settings (in person or Zoom)
 - ii. Personal expressions (facial or body language) for the interview in general
 - iii. General feel of the interaction
- b) Key topics
- c) Notable points or insights gained during the interview.

2. Reflection of the Interview Process

- a) Analytic Observations
 - i. Notable responses in relation to main topics
 - ii. Surprising/unexpected points
 - iii. (2nd interview) Things that broke the mold of prior interview.
- b) Interview questions
 - i. Which questions went well?
 - ii. Which questions didn't go well?
- c) Interviewer's Responses
 - i. Questioning Techniques
 1. Follow up effectively.
 2. Question could have improved.
 - ii. Listening Skills
 1. Acknowledge the interviewee's responses.
 2. Moments could have listened more attentively.

3. Reflection on Interviewee Responses

- a) Emotions and Reactions
 - i. Emotional reactions
 - ii. How did it influence the conversation?
- b) Non-Verbal Cues
 - i. Body Language
 - ii. Tone of Voice
 - iii. Did these provide additional context or meaning to their responses?

4. Personal Biases

- a) Biases had before and/or during the interview
- b) How did it affect the interview process?
- c) How did it affected my interpretation of response?

5. Conclusion

- a) Overall assessment of the interview
- b) Value to the next interview or research
- c) Actionable steps plan to take based on the insights gained.