

A Survey on Imminent Effects of the COVID-19 on Chinese Students' Willingness of Studying Abroad

Chuyun Hu

Abstract—Since its outbreak in late 2019, the COVID-19 (the new coronavirus pandemic disease) has spread throughout the globe at an unexpectedly rapid pace. It brought severe negative effects to all walks of life, and this paper analyzes especially its impacts on Chinese students studying or planning to study abroad by sending out a survey. As the United States has become the country with most confirmed cases as well as most related deaths since May 27th, 2020, the survey mainly focused on the Chinese students planning to study in the U.S. It asked the respondents about their decisions regarding their plan of studying abroad, and the reasons behind them by different scales of significance. Considering that the questions of the survey are relatively detailed and that the number of respondents (269) is limited, this paper applied qualitative analysis to the study. The hypothesis is that students making different decisions (generally either choosing in-person study or virtual/online study) are impacted by different considerations, which is generally tested as effective. However, the epidemic-related elements are the most influential among all options for those who decide not to go abroad for their studies. The result of the study is partially consistent with the hypothesis that the number of students staying home exceeds that of students going abroad. There are also unexpected outcomes, including that the deteriorating U.S.-China relationship plays an overwhelming part in the avoidance of going to the States.

Index Terms—COVID-19, Chinese students, study abroad.

I. INTRODUCTION

The COVID-19 is a new coronavirus disease with the first official outbreak in December 2019 [1], [2]. In less than a year, it has spread to 213 countries with 22,256,220 cases including 782,456 deaths around the world [3]. Among various prevention measures taken by different countries, travel restrictions and virtual teaching are common. Both of them are reasonable and effective in reducing international and domestic traffic, hence curbing the spread of the virus. However, the side effect is that a huge number of students studying abroad were forced to adjust their study plans. China has been the country with the most students studying abroad for a very long period [4], this country first suffering from the horrible disease is now widely acknowledged as one of the most efficient countries in the grand anti- epidemic process [5]. Therefore, the decisions of Chinese international students will impact not only the operations of their destination schools but also the destination countries. Regarding this matter, although it is a relatively new one, there have already been multiple surveys and studies focusing on different aspects.

In summary, there are already varied studies in this subject, but there has been little recent survey with a qualitative

analysis covering comprehensive academic levels, especially with weighted significance in different influence factors. In this context, the survey in this paper was given out to friends and classmates of the author, who are Chinese students studying abroad in different countries of different academic levels. The major theme is the effects of the COVID-19 on their study abroad plans. The questions ask respondents about the opening options of their intended programs, eight options for their final decisions, the significance of eleven affecting factors, and their supplementary comments on their personal experiences.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

Since the matter of Chinese international students' study plans affects various undertakings—from educational institutions to students' families, from education agencies to local tourism (of the destination countries), there have been diverse surveys focusing on different destination countries. One major survey conducted by the British Council in April, for instance, covered nearly 11,000 Chinese students about their study plan in the United Kingdom [6].

In this study where 85.2% of the respondents were postgraduates and 15.2% undergraduates, 41% students were less likely to totally unlikely to continue studying overseas for the coming autumn [6]. Regarding the possibility of cancelling or delaying the overseas study, 39% of the respondents were unsure, 24% were "somewhat" likely/ "very" likely/ "already cancelled or delayed" [6]. The factors rated by importance respectively were health/ wellbeing, personal safety, finances, application difficulties, and distance from home [6]. The most extraordinary advantage of this survey is its large pool of responses, and the deficiency therefore is the lack of qualitative analysis and the researchers "cannot always ask every question we would like" [6]. On the other hand, since it is heavily focused on the situation of the UK (98% have applied to UK institutions and 82% only applied to UK institutions), it is less comprehensive in analyzing the whole study abroad industry.

Another survey conducted by Daxue Consulting, a market research and management consulting firm focusing on the Chinese market [7], shows that 22.6% of its 390 participants changed their plans to study or work overseas (in detail, 2.6% respondents decided to give up studying abroad, 13% decided to return to China after graduation, and 7% decided to find a job or continue studying abroad) [8]. While 45.2% planned on continuing studies or finding a job abroad despite COVID-19, 32.2% were planning on returning to China after studies and

Manuscript received August 9, 2021; revised October 11, 2021.

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would still do so under the COVID-19 circumstance [8]. In this sense, 15.6% decided not to go abroad despite their previous plan, and 52.2% decided to go/ stay abroad regardless of their previous plan. This study is referential in its qualitative analyses since its pool is small and questions are detailed, it is noteworthy that “planning on returning to

China after studies but now going to find a job or continue studying abroad” [8] should also be counted as a huge effect on personal plan. The survey is insufficient, nevertheless, that it did not point out the academic levels of the respondents as well as their destination countries, which might cause selection bias in this study.

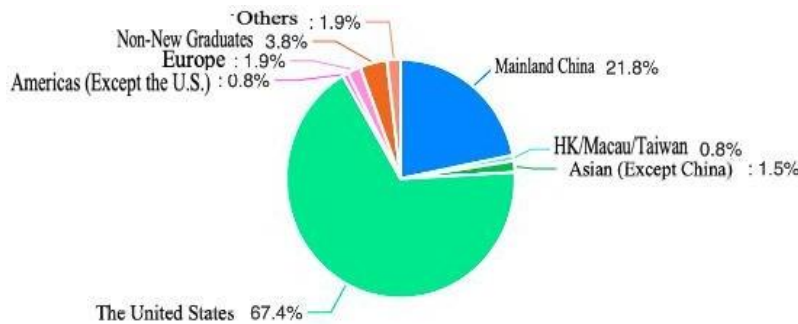


Fig. 1. The countries/ regions the respondents completed their studies.

Providing a different perspective, Beijing Overseas- Study Service Association did a survey collecting views from 8896 Chinese students abroad and 100 Chinese study abroad agencies [9]. As a result, by the date of the survey (March 2020), COVID-19 had caused 40%-60% students to be “directly blocked” in college application/ visa/ entry or exit restrictions [9]. 66% of the respondent agencies forecasted a decline in students going abroad this year, but at the same time 64% of the students decided not to change their original plans to study abroad, 71% not changing their destination despite difficulties [9]. For the imminent summer camps abroad (when the survey was conducted), 82% agencies predicted they will be affected [9]. This study provides a unique angle of education agencies which play a significant role in Chinese students’ plan (actually most international students) to study abroad. Hence, this survey is crucial in the collected opinions which came more from a family side than individual ones. In general, the agencies offered macroanalyses more professional than other surveys answered by individual students, and their prediction aimed at a longer period than students. The main limitation lies in The time of the survey—March 2020, when the global epidemic just broke out, and most schools had not come out with official policy/ plan for the coming semester. In fact, take the United States for example, its visa policy regarding online learning has changed several times in the past few months [10]. Thus, this BOSSA survey is inadequate in forecasting the coming academic year.

III. METHOD

The survey was carried out from July 30th to August 17th, 2020, receiving 269 responses from Chinese students studying or planning to study abroad, all of whom are familiar with the author who is now completing her graduate study in the United States. This is also why some of the options are closely related to Chinese students studying in the States (for instance, the declining U.S.- China relationship). Of the 269

answers, 261 are complete and effective. There are 14 questions in total, which respectively ask about the country people are currently studying in, the grade they are in, the country they are planning to study abroad in, the major/ program of their planned study, the length of the major/ program, whether they were offered scholarship and its proportion, whether they were offered the option of deferral, whether the program is offered with an online option, their final decision of enrollment plan, the significance level of individual factors—if going abroad and if staying home, and the supplementary comments. The hypothesis is that (contrary to many previous positive surveys) there will be more Chinese students deciding not to go abroad for their study given the complicated situation brought by COVID-19, including the increasing confirmed cases, many schools offering online options, travel restrictions, damaged local economies (bringing more economic burden to international students’ families), tense U.S.-China relationship, and so on.

IV. RESULTS

As shown in Fig.1, more than 67% of the respondents are currently studying in the United States. The respondents cover a wide range of grades, where almost half were in the senior year or have just graduated from undergraduate study, a group affected more than the newly enrolled ones regarding their plans for further study. That is shown in Fig. 2.

As shown in Fig. 3, around 84% of respondents were planning to go to the U.S., showing a 16.5% increase from that of students currently studying there (67.4% from Fig. 1). This acts as a symbol of the popularity of the U.S. as the destination country of Chinese students’ study. For another thing, the percentage of European countries in this question increases 17.6%, which is an over-nine-time increase compared to the number of students currently in Europe. This is consistent with a diversion of Chinese students’ interest for studying abroad country from the U.S [11].

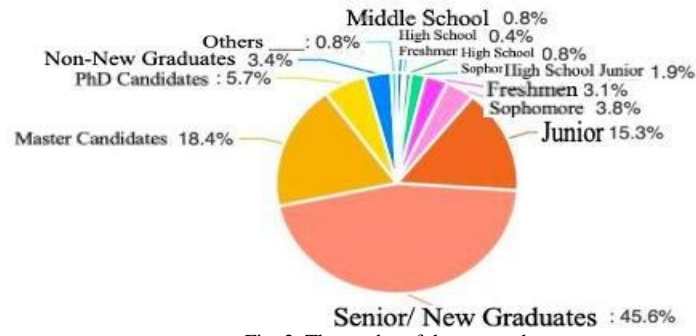


Fig. 2. The grades of the respondents.

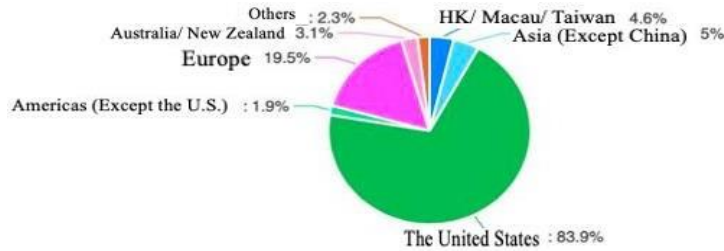


Fig. 3. The destination countries/ regions of the respondents.

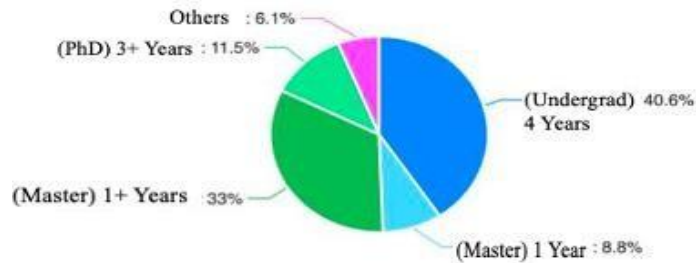


Fig. 4. The program types of study plans of the respondents.

子问题 What is your final decision regarding studying abroad?	What type is your (prospective) program?	(Undergrad) 4 Years (本科) 四年	(Master) 1 Year (研究生) 一年	(Master) 1+ Years (研究生) 一年以上	(Doctor) 3+ Years (博士) 三年以上	Others 其他
前往学校进行线上/线下学习	Attend the Program (Virtual/ In-Person)	33 (31.1%)	11 (47.8%)	31 (36.0%)	12 (40.0%)	7 (3.8%)
待在国内进行线上学习	Virtual in China	37 (34.9%)	4 (17.4%)	23 (26.7%)	7 (23.3%)	6 (37.5%)
推迟入学一学期	Defer for One Semester	5 (4.7%)	2 (8.7%)	12 (14.0%)	5 (16.7%)	1 (6.3%)
推迟入学一年	Defer for One Year	6 (5.7%)	2 (8.7%)	10 (11.6%)	4 (13.3%)	0 (0.0%)
推迟入学一年以上	Defer for More than One Year	0 (0.0%)	1 (4.3%)	1 (1.2%)	0 (0.0%)	0 (0.0%)
(已收到offer) 放弃offer, 转战其他国家 (Received the offer) Give up the Offer, Turn to Other Countries		0 (0.0%)	0 (0.0%)	0 (0.0%)	1 (3.3%)	0 (0.0%)
(未收到offer/没开始申请) 放弃留学/转战其他国家 (Not yet Received the Offer) Give up Studying Abroad/ Turn to Other Countries		8 (7.5%)	1 (4.3%)	3 (3.5%)	0 (0.0%)	0 (0.0%)
就业	Job-Seeking Instead	14 (13.2%)	0 (0.0%)	3 (3.5%)	0 (0.0%)	1 (6.3%)
其他	Others	3 (2.8%)	2 (8.7%)	3 (3.5%)	1 (3.3%)	1 (6.3%)

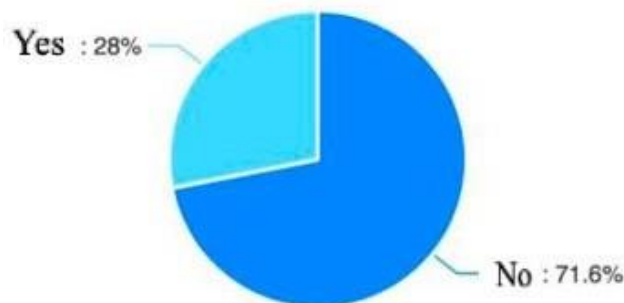


Fig. 5. Whether or not the respondents received scholarship.

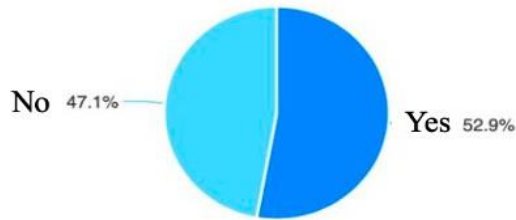


Fig. 6. Whether or not the programs offer the option of deferral.

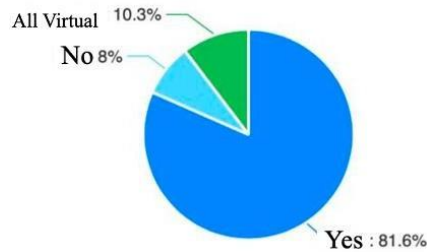


Fig. 7. Whether or not the programs offered the option of virtual study.

TABLE II. CROSS-COMPARISON BETWEEN THE OFFER OF DEFERRAL OPTIONS AND DECISIONS

子问题 What is your final decision regarding studying abroad?	Does your program offer a deferral option?	有 Yes	没有 No
前往学校进行线上/线下学习 Attend the Program (Virtual/ In-person)		34 (24.6%)	60 (48.8%)
待在国内进行线上学习 Virtual In China		44 (31.9%)	33 (26.8%)
推迟入学一学期 Defer for One Semester		22 (15.9%)	3 (2.4%)
推迟入学一年 Defer for One Year		19 (13.8%)	3 (2.4%)
推迟入学一年以上 Defer for More than One Year		2 (1.4%)	0 (0.0%)
(已收到offer) 放弃offer, 转战其他国家 (Received the Offer) Give up the Offer, Turn to Other Countries		1 (0.7%)	0 (0.0%)
(未收到offer/没开始申请) 放弃留学/转战其他国家 (Not Yet Received the offer, Give up Studying Abroad/ Turn to Other Countries		6 (4.3%)	6 (4.9%)
就业 Job-Seeking Instead		6 (4.3%)	12 (9.8%)
其他 Others		4 (2.9%)	6 (4.9%)

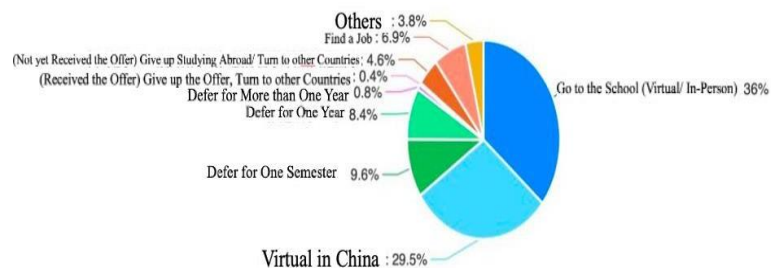
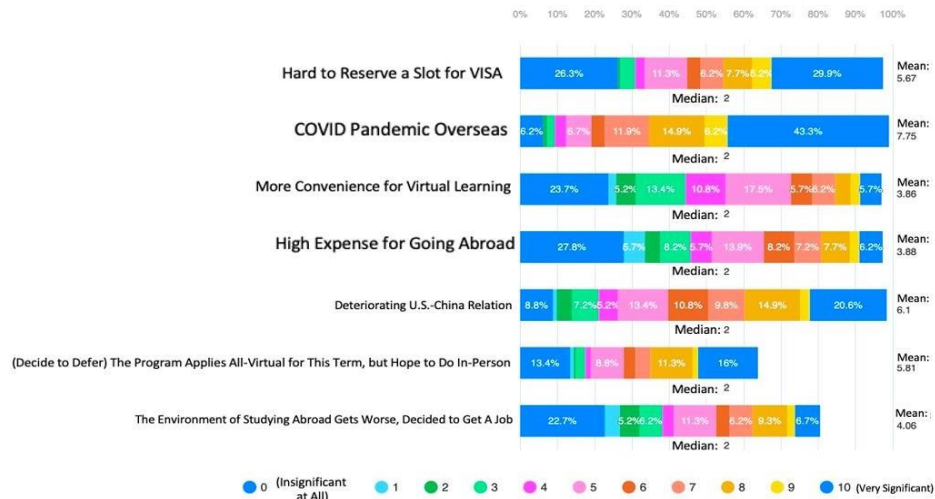


Fig. 8. The final decisions of the respondents.

TABLE III: THE REASONS FOR THE DECISION TO GO ABROAD FOR STUDY VIRTUALLY IN CHINA



TABLE IV: THE REASONS FOR THE DECISION TO STUDY VIRTUALLY



In Question 5, as shown in Fig. 4, around 41% of the respondents are pursuing an undergraduate study, while 42% are pursuing graduate study. The difference becomes clear in the cross-comparison of decisions of the two groups. While the percentage of going abroad and staying home are roughly the same for undergraduate students (33.1% and 37.9%), the gap is much larger for graduate students—around 42% chose to go to the country and 27% chose to stay home, as shown in table 1. It coincides with the realistic concern that graduate students tend to need closer interaction with their faculty and peers, both because their programs are shorter than undergrads, and that professional/ academic development are more impending for them.

In Fig. 5, 6, and 7, the survey asks about the scholarship, deferral and online study options of respondents' programs, which are likely to affect their final decisions. In this cross-comparison of deferral option and enrollment decision shown in table 2, in our common sense, students offered with deferral option will tend to defer since in-person should always be the best choice for study—in comparison with the programs not allowing students to defer, this is consistent with our guess (34% to 60%), which can be seen from Table II.

However, more respondents actually choose to study at home (online/virtual) than to defer and learn in-person (78% and 53%, respectively). This also partly explains the original purpose of conducting this survey, that the epidemic is no longer regarded as a fleeting and temporary disturbance to people's plan, or at least students' plan. It is recognized as a lasting effect, making students even willing to compromise of the most efficient learning in order to get rid of bigger trouble.

As shown in fig. 8, only 36% of the respondents decide to go abroad for their study, while 48.3% chose either to study online or to defer their program, not to mention the 5% giving up their offer or diverting to other countries, and 6.9% to work instead. This result is against most other relevant surveys claiming that Chinese students tend to stick to their original study plans in spite of the difficult situations. The main reasons could include the deteriorating epidemic in the United States, uncertain visa policy, improved online course quality, as shown in Table IV, while the reasons for those who choose to go are shown in Table III. Detailed weighted

significance is as followed.

Both diagrams of weighted significance are choices from all the respondents who filled out the options, which means that there are students choosing to go abroad but also filling out the "why do you decide not to go abroad" question, vice versa. They responded based on their own understanding of how the factors influence the decisions. Therefore, this section can be viewed as unbiased weights of each influence factor. According to the mean value, "hope to finish the study soon" gets the highest mean of 7.83, slightly higher than "prefer in-person learning" (7.74). This is slightly different from the hypothesis where the in-person learning effect should be the highest. Possible explanation is that the wish of completing the study is more complicated than the simple need of better learning effect, the former can be led by the rapidly changing visa policy, travel restrictions and fluctuating job market.

There are more options in the "studying at home/ not going abroad" section, since the options are more diverse— both studying online and deferring, and even working can be categorized as not going abroad for study. According to table 4, the highest mean is attributed to the epidemic situation, which is consistent with the hypothesis. The second highest went to the worsening U.S.-China relationship, which is a heated topic and echoes with the large portion of Chinese students in/ planning to go to U.S. in the respondent pool. It is worth noticing that there is still a large portion of respondents hoping to wait further to get the chance of in-person study, given their program is fully conducted online by now. This shows the sophisticated decision students are trying to make. Surprisingly, the difficulty of applying for a visa is not among the top three priorities of influence factor, which is inconsistent with the hypothesis. In this sense, the macro picture does not always overlap with people's micro experiences.

Among the supplementary comments, there are several realistic reasons, such as the signed expensive housing lease, the cancelled standardized tests, and the need for paper publishing. Although the general categories cannot perfectly fit each specific reason, they mostly fall into epidemic/ uncertain international relationship.

V. CONCLUSION

Taking all the answers into account, the results are consistent with the major hypothesis, which is that students choosing not to go abroad at this point exceed those who still decide to study abroad. However, the most important factors are not quite the same as the hypothesized ones. Although the epidemic does have a leading influence in

detering students from going abroad, other effects are playing important roles as well. In the “why going abroad” section, the gap of the weight in all the factors didn’t turn out to be quite large, which means they are similarly influential in the respondents’ plan. In the “why not going abroad” section, on the contrary, the gap is much larger. The option of choosing to work in advance is relatively insignificant, while the deteriorating U.S.-China relationship weighs a lot. Both options are somehow related to the fact that the environment for Chinese students studying in America is turning less ideal, but the reactions are quite different. Hidden in the data is the fact that Chinese students are still attaching great importance on education, and in this case especially education abroad. Therefore, if the U.S.-China relationship keeps going down, it is quite reasonable that more and more Chinese students will turn to other developed countries for further study, which has already been an obvious trend.

On the other hand, as called upon in the United States, a liable reform as “side effect” of this global epidemic might take place as a new form of education—virtual learning [12]. Although this might cause undeniable loss to the destination foreign countries, this will mark a progress in the education methodology, which is beyond the limited space of this paper.

The survey does have its limits in a lot of ways. The most significant one lies in the small pool of respondents due to its limited reachability. Also the respondents are highly concentrated in the United States (both those already there and those planning to get there).

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

First and foremost, I appreciate all the advice and recommendations my professors and instructors at the university have offered me. I would also like to thank all my friends and classmates who offered to fill out the survey, and who gave me a lot of revising suggestions. Without their generous help, I could not have completed this study.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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