

# **Changes and Challenges Amid a Global Crisis: A Case Study of Chinese International Students in the United States During the COVID-19 Pandemic**

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*Although numerous textbooks and scholarly articles illustrate the racial discrimination against black Americans, few research studies examine other minority groups who also experience injustice during significant crises. Major global crises like a war or a pandemic put certain minority groups in jeopardy, such as Japanese Americans during World War II, Muslim groups during the 9/11 crisis, and Chinese and other Asian groups during the COVID-19 crisis. Using the ongoing Coronavirus crisis (COVID-19) as a case study, this paper illustrates Chinese international experiences' of racial discrimination. Drawing on a qualitative study among ten Chinese international students in X University, this study shows: 1) Chinese students became a stigmatized group and suffered physical and mental assaults; 2) US mass media reacted to negative images of Chinese people following the COVID-19 outbreak; 3) numerous Chinese international students changed their job orientation due to the economic setbacks and COVID-19 trauma.*

*Keywords: national crises, COVID-19 pandemic, racial discrimination, Chinese international students*

## **INTRODUCTION**

Amid global and national disasters, marginalized communities are often treated as scapegoats and targets for blame. During World War II, Japanese Americans suffered from physical and mental harassment and discrimination because other Americans considered them to be disloyal towards the United States (Ito, 2000; Serrano & Minami, 2003). In the 9/11 attacks against the United States, Al Qaeda sought to avenge Western military and cultural incursions into Muslim countries. International students in the United States whose appearance matched that of terrorists from Middle Eastern countries became targets, no matter their ethnic origin, nationality, or religion (Muedini, 2009; Peek, 2003). Currently, COVID-19 is a more recent disaster, affecting the livelihood of people all over the world. East Asians in America became scapegoats due to their association with the presumed Chinese origin of the virus and racial stereotypes about their appearance (Li & Nicholson, 2021).

In December of 2019, COVID-19 broke out in Wuhan, China. COVID-19 (SARS-Cov-2) is a contagious virus causing severe acute respiratory syndrome. Due to the fast spread of the infection, COVID-19 became a global pandemic. During this COVID-19 crisis, US President Donald Trump used the term "Chinese Virus" in social media and in public speeches, increasing public hostility towards China. Chinese people became a targeted group during this pandemic because the US mass media began to portray them as the root cause and carriers of the "Chinese virus," and they experienced increased feelings of marginalization and isolation (Budhwani & Sun, 2020). Many Chinese and other East Asian ethnic minorities have suffered various forms of discrimination, from verbal harassment to physical attacks and

vandalism, due to their association in the public mind with this COVID-19 pandemic (Li & Nicholson, 2021).

My work offers unique insight into the experiences of Chinese international students during the COVID-19 crisis in the United States. The qualitative data was collected from 10 Chinese international students in a public university in a northeastern state. Using this data, I investigate how these students narrate and reflect on their cultural, social, emotional, and academic experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic at a large research university and how the outbreak contributed to immigration policy changes affecting Chinese students' future career decisions. First, this paper reviews critical race theory (CRT), a framework for understanding how and why Chinese groups were treated as "others," "viruses," and "stigmatized people." I explore Sino-US relationships and diplomacy to provide a political and historical context for Chinese students' marginalization. Third, this paper investigates how economic recession, mass media reports, and pervasive mainstream stereotypes and biases further marginalized Chinese international students in the United States. Chinese Americans had been previously viewed as a "model minority" group, due to a perception of their economic and educational success. However, because of COVID-19 trauma, numerous Chinese international students changed their job orientations and decided to go back to their home country after graduation.

**Research Question 1:** *How do Chinese students narrate and reflect on their cultural, social, emotional, and academic experiences before they were locked down and during the COVID-19 pandemic when they worked remotely in a large research university?*

**Research Question 2:** *In light of COVID-19-related changes and challenges, to what extent do Chinese students see themselves altering previously expected personal and professionally related decisions after obtaining higher education degrees in the United States? In other words, what were their career plans pre-pandemic, and to what extent have their career plans changed?*

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### Critical Race Theory (CRT) and Asian Critical Theory (AsianCrit)

#### *CRT Evolution*

Racism has continuously emerged as one of the United States' key social issues for centuries (DuBois, 1903; 1989). During the era of the post-war civil rights movements, critical race theory was started by scholars of color (Bell, 1980; Crenshaw, 1988; Delgado, 1990) in legal studies to change and challenge unequal racial relations in the United States. As Mills and Unsworth (2018) state, "CRT provides a critique of racial colorblindness, assimilation, and multiculturalism, revitalizing race-consciousness and critiquing White racial privilege" (p. 314).

At first, CRT aimed to eliminate racial discrimination of White people against Black groups by shedding light on unintentional, unconscious, as well as systematic and institutional racism. In the 1960s, a prominent black leader, Martin Luther King, delivered his speech "I have a dream" on the steps of the Lincoln Memorial. He aroused people to participate in the Civil Rights movement, advocated for the right to vote, and endorsed desegregation and labor rights. While Dr. King spoke and wrote much about racial justice and equality, he faced great adversity in advancing the cause. In *A Testament of Hope*, which was published after his death, Dr. King wrote about his difficulties, the time he spent in jails, his frustration and sorrows, and the dangerous character of his adversaries (Bell, 2018). Several scholars were encouraged by Dr. King (e.g. Crenshaw, Delgado & Dubois), and they contributed to racial justice for Black people. Although it was difficult fighting against entrenched racism, critical scholars still challenged unequal power relations by the White majority against other minority groups as they developed critical race theory.

Critical scholars have used Critical Race Theory to formulate robust analyses of the pernicious harm of race and racism on marginalized groups as well as how racial hierarchies and white supremacy are perpetuated through both historical patterns of racial oppression and contemporary educational policies and

practices. CRT additionally provides an intersectional framework to examine the links between race and other identity markers, such as gender, class, language, and disability.

### *The AsianCrit and Interest Convergence*

As the field grew, CRT scholars expanded the scope of this theory to address different groups of people in the US: BlackCrit, LatCrit, AsianCrit, and feminist studies. Scholars did not rely on CRT to challenge unequal power relations of the dichotomy of White and non-White solely, as CRT was further applied to different minority groups such as Black, Latino/a, Asian and women. Museus and Iftikar (2018) developed an Asian Critical Theory (AsianCrit) framework to analyze “a range of Asian American experiences and issues in education” (p. 935). Hau Lam, Le & Parker (2022) write:

AsianCrit focused on the issues that centralize race as the primary focus of the problems that are experienced by Asian Americans daily such as experiencing the stereotype of being the “Model Minority,” which led to the image that Asians have not been oppressed, or being seen as “foreign,” and anti-Asian discrimination. (pp. 45)

But in reality, Asian groups were discriminated against for a long time, from the period of the yellow peril<sup>1</sup> to the myth of the model minority, and experiences of stigmatized groups during the COVID-19 pandemic. Although CRT is grounded in US-based legal studies, recently scholars (Yao, Mwangi & Brown, 2018) have argued that CRT should be moved beyond the rigid confines of US borders; it could be applied instead to the context of transnationalism and globalization. US universities and institutions recruit international students largely due to interest convergence. Bell (1980) posited that (cited in Yao et al., 2018) a majority group accepts a minority group’s cultural values and advances equality and justice only when it suits their own benefits. US higher education recruits talented international students, especially students within STEM fields, who can fill in the gap of US talent pools (Yao & Viggiano, 2019). Altbach (2016) states that the flow of international students and scholars brings benefits to the US, including profit, international reputation and global competitiveness. Much of the literature focuses on how international students can assimilate into White culture and overcome their difficulties. At the same time, few studies discuss international students’ experiences of racial discrimination, structural oppression and other negative experiences in the US. Thus, in my paper, utilizing an AsianCrit lens, I unpack how racist ideologies surrounding biases and prejudices shaped the discriminatory experiences of Chinese international students during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Critical scholars (Lee, 2009; Li & Nicholson, 2021) normally utilized AsianCrit for Asian immigrants; however, Asian international students experience significantly different situations than Asian immigrants. No matter the first or second generation of Asian immigrants, they have stayed with their parents and families in the US for a long time. It is much easier for Asian immigrants to obtain decent jobs with American citizenship or a green card. Additionally, immigrants are much more closely assimilated into the dominant White culture. International students are less familiar with American culture and experience some language barriers (Galloway & Jenkins, 2009). Amid the anti-Asian hate, Asian international students became a “doubly disadvantaged group” (Jack, 2020, p. 21), which means international students have fewer resources and know less about dominant White culture. Far from their parents, friends, and relatives, international students shoulder their burden alone. While few scholars use AsianCrit to understand the experiences of international students, I attempt to apply this critical approach to fill in the research gap of international students’ unique social status in the power dynamic of globalization.

## **Historical Background About Racial Discrimination of Minority Groups**

### *World War II: Japanese-Americans Became Victims*

Racial conflicts and discrimination amid a huge disaster could be retrospectively observed from World War II. After the United States entered World War II, President Franklin D. Roosevelt signed Executive Order 9066 on February 19, 1942, which stated that “The order authorized the Secretary of War and the armed forces to remove people of Japanese ancestry from what they designated as military areas and

surrounding communities in the US” (“Annual Observances”, 2021). More than 120,000 innocent Japanese-Americans were sent to detention camps where they were stripped of their civil liberties (Ito, 2000). Those Japanese-Americans reminded in concentration camps for about fourteen weeks. When Japanese American students returned to campuses from concentration camps, they struggled to be included in the United States, even though they were legal American citizens.

#### *Muslim Groups Experienced Discrimination Following September Eleventh*

September 11 impacted and continues to impact all Muslim immigrants in the United States. The events, as well as the subsequent war in Afghanistan, have contributed to a significant number of deaths and controversies, as well as a collision of ideas between the United States and Middle Eastern countries (Nafi, 2004). Following the September 11 attacks, Muslim people were the targeted group who faced racial discrimination during the 9/11 crisis. “In the days, weeks, and months after September 11, members of various ethnic and religious groups were targeted for blame” (Peek, 2002, p. 336).

#### **Chinese and Other Asian Groups Became Scapegoats During the COVID-19 Pandemic**

The COVID-19 virus was first discovered in Wuhan, China, and it spread rapidly throughout Asia, America and globally (Schumaker, 2020). The pandemic made Chinese international students and other Asian groups as scapegoats. Asian people have experienced racism and xenophobia from the time they arrived in the United States in the late 1700s until the present day (Gover et al., 2020). The COVID-19 crisis exacerbated racial inequality and general xenophobia, which increased anti-Asian hate crimes. The US media and politicians portray Chinese people as vectors. President Donald Trump has repeatedly utilized “Chinese virus” and “Kung flu” in public speeches (Scott, 2020). Similarly, US Senator John Cornyn claimed that Chinese people should be blamed because of “the culture where people eat bats and snakes and dogs and things like that” (Shepherd, 2020).

#### **Sino-US Relationship: The Collision Occurred During the COVID-19 Pandemic**

The United States has been leading the world (politics, economy, education and military) for several decades, while China’s economic growth had been extremely slow prior to 1977. However, in the years following 1978, Chinese president, Deng Xiaoping led with the slogan: “economic development is the first priority,” bringing China into the mainstream of modern life as the economy developed exponentially (Zhang, 1996). For example, the real gross domestic product (GDP) in 2010 was 69,037 (100 million, 1978 yuan), displaying an exponential rate of 0.0836 or an average annual growth rate of 8.72% from 1988 onwards (Chow & Li, 2002). Along with rapid growth in economic and military power, China’s influence in Asia and other western countries has increased remarkably over the past decade.

In the 21<sup>st</sup> Century, China and the United States are the two most powerful countries leading the world. The Sino-US relationship is considered the most important bilateral relationship in the world in terms of economy and production, particularly in fields such as artificial intelligence (AI), automation and manufacturing. When two powerful countries compete for influence around the world, nationalism in both countries emerges as a strong sentiment. During the COVID-19 pandemic, US president Donald Trump used the term “Chinese Virus” in social media and in public speeches, increasing public hostility towards China. President Trump and other prominent Republicans added fuel to the fire, which was a political strategy: demonizing foreigners as threatening and dangerous (Reny & Barreto, 2022). China and the US are two powerful nations and attract considerable attention in international relations (IR), but the COVID-19 crisis resulted in the collision between these two forces (Jaworsky & Qiaoan, 2020).

#### **RESEARCH METHODS**

To address the above research questions, a qualitative research method was utilized in my study. A qualitative approach was appropriate for my research questions because, as stated by Bogdan and Biklen (2007), it is “rich in description of people, places, and conversations” (p.2). Unlike quantitative studies, qualitative researchers do not approach their research with hypotheses to test. Rather, qualitative researchers

collect data “through sustained contact with people in settings where subjects normally spend their time—classrooms, cafeterias, teachers’ lounges, dormitories, street corners” (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007, p.2). In my study, I conducted in-depth interviews with ten Chinese international students. Due to the COVID-19 regulations, I collected my data through Zoom meetings with my participants.

Additionally, I adopted Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) as my second methodological approach. CDA is an approach of textual analysis, which “tries to acknowledge the fact that authentic texts are produced and read not in isolation but in some real-world context with all of its complexity” (Miller, 1997, p. 87). Different from Discourse Analysis (DA), CDA is highly concerned with important social issues and it aims to show how those cultural, political, economic and social dimensions are interrelated. CDA also assists in identifying “the way social power abuse, dominance, and inequality are enacted, reproduced, and resisted by text and talk in the social and political context” (Van Dijk, 2001, p. 352). The term “critical” is used because CDA practitioners or researchers describe unfair social/political issues and explicitly criticize them (Miller, 1997). On the whole, CDA takes an ethical stance on social issues in order to improve society. In my research, I use CDA to analyze the covert racism of *The Washington Post* after the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, during the Donald Trump’s presidency. Widely respected because of its authoritative and trusted, award-winning (including 65 Pulitzer Prizes) editing and news-gathering around the world, *The Washington Post* is regarded as a newspaper of record. *The Washington Post* is a major daily newspaper in the US Capital area. Several researchers examined news articles of *The Washington Post* from 1991 to 2004 and concluded that “*The Washington Post* is neither conservative nor liberal locally” (A1Afnan, 2020, p. 57). However, when it reported external news or accusations (the first outbreak of COVID-19 in Wuhan, China), this stance might change and exhibit stereotypes, prejudices and biases (A1Afnan, 2020). In the following paper, I use *The Washington Post* to exemplify and illustrate the US media context and their relationship to rising anti-Asian hate during the pandemic.

## RESEARCH DESIGN AND POPULATION

In this study, I interviewed 10 Chinese students at a large research university. I selected Chinese students because they were a target group and were insulted and referred to as carriers of the “Chinese virus” during the COVID-19 pandemic.

At first, I sent an e-mail to one of our graduate schools at X university and recruited five Chinese international students. As a graduate student, other students in my particular graduate school are the most accessible to me and those students were sources of referral to additional graduate students. Secondly, they recommended me other potential participants from different departments. The snowball strategy was utilized in my research, a common sampling method in qualitative research. Researchers do not directly recruit all participants, but contact others who can recommend potential participants for their project (Marcus et al., 2017; Parker, Scott & Geddes, 2019). Third, fifteen graduate students agreed and were interested in serving as interviewees. All interviewees had to fit the following criteria: (1) They were Chinese international students and were enrolled in graduate programs of the large research university; (2) During the COVID-19 pandemic, they had remained in this university and obtained their primary cultural, social, emotional and academic experiences from it. For example, if a student was located outside of the United States during the whole COVID-19 crisis, he/she did not fit the criteria. After carefully evaluation, only ten people were found to fit my criteria. The following table briefly describes the participants’ information: nationality, gender, fields of study and education level. To protect participants’ privacy, all interviewees’ names in this paper are pseudonyms.

**TABLE 1**  
**BACKGROUND INFORMATION OF PARTICIPANTS**

Name	Gender	Nationality	Fields of Study	Year of Graduate	Education Level
Shuo	Male	China	Medical Instrument	2023	PhD
Yang	Male	China	Urban Planning	2021	Master
Shaowei	Male	China	English Literature	2021	PhD
Dongyang	Male	China	Education	2022	PhD
Jackie	Male	China	Learning and Instruction	2024	PhD
Meng	Female	China	Learning and Instruction	2020	Master
Ma	Female	China	Learning and Instruction	2022	PhD
Yun	Female	China	Education	2022	PhD
Chenxi	Female	China	Education	2023	PhD
Qian	Female	China	Computer Science	2024	PhD

### DATA COLLECTION AND ANALYSIS

Due to the COVID-19 crisis, data were collected remotely, using Zoom, a video conference software, throughout the month of January, 2021. I conducted interviews for these 10 students, which lasted 30 to 45 minutes. Students discussed racial discrimination, US mass media, internship and job-hunting experiences following the outbreak of the COVID-19. I met with my participants one by one through Zoom meetings and recorded our discussions through my mobile phone recording application.

Interview data were transcribed and entered into ATLAS.ti, which is a qualitative data analysis program. The first coding stage is referred to as open coding. Saldana (2021) writes that “a code in qualitative analysis is most often a word or short phrase that symbolically assigns a summative, salient, essence-capturing, and/or evocative attribute for a portion of language-based or visual data” (p.5). I will use words and phrases to label all transcriptions, such as “students’ origins,” “Americans react to Asians,” “mental health issues,” “future decisions.” Secondly, focused coding will be conducted. In this stage, I can add codes or drop codes. Third, all interview data were initially inductively coded and I established a list of codes in ATLAS.ti, which we refer to as a “code book.” To answer my research questions, those lists will be divided into themes and categories. Lastly, I will use analytical memos to describe the data. Analytical memos help researchers move on to themes and connect insightful ideas for the research paper (Saldana, 2021).

## FINDINGS

Through preliminary analysis, several findings emerge, the three most compelling of which are presented in this paper.

### **From a “Model Minority” to a “Stigmatized” Group: Chinese Students’ Experiences of Racial Discrimination During the COVID-19 Pandemic**

William Peterson (1966) spoke highly of Chinese-Americans as the “model minority,” praising the good citizenship of Chinese-Americans and the safety of China-towns (“Success Story”, 1966). From the perspective of this positive stereotype, the “model minority” philosophy suggests that Chinese Americans are hard-working, nice citizens who obtain great academic achievements and are successful in American society (Lee, 2009; McGowan & Lindgren, 2006). Chinese Americans not only work hard in the labor market, but also “value education and would insist that their children do well in school. They work together as a community to keep order and keep crime low” (McGowan & Lindgren, 2006, p.333-334). However, when White Americans feel that their social status is threatened, they begin to view Asian Americans’ success and achievements as negative (Fong, 1994; Newman, 1993; Takagi, 1992). In other words, those historically embraced as a “model minority” became potential threats to White dominance. The positive discourses associated with Asian Americans were considered as hegemonic devices to support notions of meritocracy (Lee, 2009). The model minority stereotype effectively diverted attention away from White hegemony, and this hegemonic power protects the interests of the dominant group (Wu, 2002).

Meanwhile, lauding Asian Americans as shining examples of hard work and nice citizens marginalizes other minority groups. For example, African Americans were positioned as academically inferior, loud, complaining and lazy (Lee, 2009). Thus, stereotypes towards Asian Americans are unfair for both Asian Americans and other minority groups.

Stereotypes potentially pit minoritized groups against each other and raise the possibility of conflicts between them. However, African Americans and Asian Americans instead sought solidarity with each other, resisting colonization, capitalism and imperialism (Chang, 2020). For example, during the 19<sup>th</sup> Century, Chinese Americans fought every piece of discriminatory legislation and worked with African Americans towards abolishing segregation faced by minority groups (Kim, 1998). In 2020, George Floyd, a 46-year-old African American man, died in Minneapolis when a white police officer used his knee to pin Mr. Floyd by his neck. Thousands of Asian-Americans participated in the protests and utilized their blogs and social media accounts to support the movement for Black Lives Matter (Chang, 2020). These variants of activism demonstrate Black-Asian solidarity, labeled as ‘Afro-Asian solidarity’ (Hope, 2019), which can help provide more equitable paths in our society.

However, Chinese students suffered much more discrimination and became a “stigma” group due to this pandemic. Stigma refers to an attribute that is deeply discrediting, and structural forces devalue those with undesirable characteristics (Goffman, 1963). COVID-19 stigmatized Asian-Americans, including Chinese international students, because the pandemic originally found in Wuhan, China in early 2020. “Since the outbreak of the novel coronavirus, anti-Chinese sentiment has been spreading around the world” (Gao & Sai, 2020, p.184). Chinese are the marginalized group, suffering both physically and mentally as a result. Meng, a female student in her mid twenties studying Education, commented in an interview:

Oh my god. I remembered that time I asked a person to help me obtain my Social Security Number (SSN). She told me that “you can call the hotline.” In the hotline, the person asked me: “where do you come from?” I told her that I came from China. Suddenly, I could feel that she changed her attitude. Another example was in March, I went to New Jersey for Lush Shampoo Bar. There was a waitress who treated other guests very well. But, when my boyfriend and I went in, she gave us an unfriendly looked and asked impatiently: “what do you want?” I told her we were just looking around for a shampoo. She never helped us and just looked at me with hostility. She was looking at me as if I were a thief. But, when I paid my stuff at the gates, another young white woman came in and they welcomed her

with smile and introductions. I felt disappointed and I never experienced this before. It was my first time of experiencing racism.

Chinese students struggled to be included in American society after the outbreak of the COVID-19. Meng thought that she experienced unequal treatment from a white woman in that Lush Shampoo Bar. That waitress hosted totally different attitudes towards Meng (a Chinese girl) and a white young woman, which suggested that the COVID-19 crisis exacerbated racial hierarchy. Before the outbreak of the COVID-19, compared with other minority groups (African-American), Asian groups experienced less discrimination (Iftikar & Museus, 2018). However, during the COVID-19 crisis, “the stigma was created and perpetuated by society through social interaction and public commentary (use the term “Chinese virus” instead of scientific terms on social media)” (Budhwani & Sun, 2020, p.2). Without compassion and understanding, Chinese international students felt extremely helpless, upset and isolated due to incidents of xenophobia and racist harassment against them.

Chenxi is a Chinese international student who describes her marginalization experiences as follows:

Chenxi: Oh my gosh. I was scared! That day, my friend and I went to a park. When we sat on a garden chair, a man came to us. The man asked: ‘are you Chinese?’ We felt very scared and didn’t say anything. He continued saying: ‘I will start a war.’ I said, ‘what?’ He said, ‘can you understand English? I will start a war. W -a -r, a war!’ I felt horrible and shook my voice, ‘I cannot understand English.’ He seemed very angry and said, ‘next time, when I see you, I will cut your head.’

Interviewer: I am so sorry. Do you feel better now?

Chenxi: I feel better... But, when I recall this memory, I am still so scared and horrible. He said next time when he meets me, he will cut my head.

Interviewer: Have you called the police?

Chenxi: No, he ran.

Threat of disease often contributes to discrimination and scapegoating “others,” for example, foreigners, immigrants, international students and marginalized groups (Li & Nicholson, 2021). In this interview, the racist individual asked Chenxi: “Are you a Chinese? Can you understand English?” and threatened her: “When I see you next time, I will cut your head.” He considered Chenxi as an enemy foreigner in the United States. Dating back to the other public health crisis, the outbreak of Ebola in 2013 resulted in many blaming West African immigrants. During the Ebola pandemic, Black Americans were not folded into the targeted group. They were accepted and identified as Black Americans, differentiated from West African groups. However, due to this COVID-19-related discrimination, both Chinese international students and Asian-Americans more broadly suffered physical and mental abuse due to the racist attitude that all Asians “look-like” each other (Tessler, Choi & Kao, 2020). According to critical race theory, White Supremacy lumps all of Asian people into one category and “characterizes them as a monolithic racial group with inferior traits of characteristics that justify their victimization” (Iftikar & Museus, 2018, p. 936). Due to this stereotype, no matter what Asian Americans’ actual ethnic origins are, they are considered to hold stronger ties with other countries in competition with the United States (e.g. China) (Shimpi & Zirkel, 2012). Indeed, people of Asian descent have experienced both verbal and physical violence by racists from the time they arrived in the United States in the late 1700s up until the present day (Gover et al. 2020). During this pandemic, “we see not only a rise in anti-Asian sentiment, but also a recapitulation of history” (Chen et al., 2020, p. 556).



## **Bias and Prejudice: US Mass Media Produced Negative Images of Chinese People After the COVID-19 Outbreak**

In early 2020, especially during the COVID-19 lockdown period (from the early March to the end of July), people increasingly relied on social media sites such as Facebook, Twitter or Instagram to facilitate human interaction and stay up to date with information. Meanwhile, authorities use social media to engage people and provide vital information about COVID-19 (Croucher et al., 2020). Thus, social media played a crucial role in the public's perceptions of the COVID-19 crisis.

On March 20, 2020, *The Washington Post* reported:

“[Trump is] essentially throwing his American citizens or residents of Chinese and Asian descent ‘under the bus’ by ignoring the consequences of the language he uses,” said Cheah, a psychology professor at the University of Maryland Baltimore County. “He’s fueling these anti-Chinese sentiments among Americans... not caring that the people who will truly suffer the most are Chinese Americans and other Asian Americans, his citizens whom he’s suppose to protect.” (“Coronavirus,” 2020).

A president should have taken actions to combat this global pandemic, however, President Donald Trump’s usage of these derogatory terms was contagious. Chinese Americans and other Asian people are his citizens, but he didn’t protect them, treating them as foreigners or others. From March 1, 2020 to February 21, 2021, the number of tweets exclusively mentioning “Chinese virus or China virus rather than COVID-19 or coronavirus” (Budhwani and Sun, 2020, p.2) increased dramatically throughout the United States. For this biased information on US social media, Chinese and other Asian students became victims. Wei, a Chinese student, comments in this interview:

Oh, I feel sad about that report. Mainstream mass media in the United States wrote “Chinese viruses.” I feel discriminated against and very frustrated. It is a lack of top-down strategy, you know, the leader shouldn’t have done that. The government didn’t do the really good job in terms of fighting for coronavirus. What’s worse, the government leaders make Chinese as targeted groups. Lots of people believe the media report and are angry with Chinese.

The other Chinese student, Yun, comments in the interview:

I read some pieces of news from a U.S. newspaper that the U.S. media portray Chinese as “Chinese virus.” I felt very angry. In the U.S., there are a lot of Chinese immigrants. The United States is their home. The government portray[s] Chinese as “virus,” which made those Chinese feel marginalized and isolated. Although I am not an immigrant, I can [empathize with] those immigrants’ feelings.

Wei and Yun’s comments suggest that bias, prejudice and ethnocentrism against Chinese people are promoted by US mainstream media, which deliberately dehumanize Chinese international students and other Asian groups. Chinese immigrants study, work and even establish their families in the United States; however, those malicious words in US mass media make them feel as though they do not belong there.

There are three types of media biases: gatekeeping bias, coverage bias and the statement bias (AlAfnan, 2020). Gatekeeping bias, which refers to reporting on a certain topic from several available topics. For example, on the 19<sup>th</sup> of March, 2020, the Washington Post stated: “Don’t blame China for the coronavirus- blame the Chinese Communist Party (CCP)” (“The Washington Post,” 2020). This case was evidence of gatekeeping bias, because mass media moved the topic of the COVID-19 virus from the medical arena to the political arena (AlAfnan, 2020). Additionally, coverage bias refers to the unbalanced reporting of a topic or event. Newspaper writers repeatedly using “Chinese virus”, “Wuhan virus” and “Kung Flu” exemplify coverage biases. Finally, the statement bias refers to a bias rooted in the perspective from which

the author comments. On the 27<sup>th</sup> of December 2021, a writer of *The Washington Post* stated: “Americans must rally against the real threat to our democracy: China” (“Opinions,” 2021). The writer used “we” to imply a unified national stance against China, exemplifying statement bias by assuming a “we” which necessarily excludes certain individuals. Due to these types of biases, Chinese international students and Asian-Americans obtained a negative reputation and became a “stigmatized” group in the US.

### **Chinese International Students Changed Their Job Orientations After the Outbreak of COVID-19 Crisis**

Prior to the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, many international students were willing to remain in the United States to pursue their dreams in Silicon Valley or other cosmopolitan cities in the US. Some international students intended to accumulate some teaching or industrial experience, and then return to their original countries (Wang, 2021). However, during the pandemic situation in 2020, the educational landscape for millions of students has changed dramatically. International students in the United States felt extremely worried about things like visa status, such as if it would be difficult for them to obtain Optional Practical Training (OPT) opportunities. Meng is a Chinese student who finished her Master’s degree on February 2020. She intended to find an internship in the United States, accumulating some work experience. But, during the lockdown period, she experienced numerous difficulties obtaining her social security number (SSN). Meng [pseudonym] comments in the interview:

I was looking for a job. Before I graduate from my master school in January 2020, I have got a job offer. However, after I have got my Employment Authorization Document (EAD) card, I didn’t have a social security number. In April 2020, I obtained my social security number but that company told me that they didn’t want me anymore! They hired others. I felt so sad and [looked for] jobs everywhere. I sent thousands of emails everyday, but nobody gave me answers.

The US economy hit a setback that had a great influence on many industries after the outbreak of COVID-19. Particularly during the lockdown period (from the early March to the end of July 2020), numerous US companies, businesses, job securities and essential services were negatively influenced, contributing to supply and demand (S&D) imbalances in the labor market (Sharif et al., 2020). Economists estimated that approximately 20 million people lost jobs by April 6th, which were far more than jobs lost over the Great Recession following the 2008 stock market crash (Coibion et al., 2020). Under such circumstances, it is extremely difficult for international students to find jobs in the United States. Confronting changes and challenges, many students must reconsider their future job decisions. Yun (pseudonym) is a Chinese student at a large research institute, pursuing her PhD degree. She will graduate in the February of 2022. Yun comments in the interview:

Hopefully, I will graduate in 2022. I hope I can participate in the graduation ceremony in 2022. Before the COVID-19 happens, I wish I could find a post-doctoral position in the U.S. After I finish my post-doctor, I will go back to China and find a faculty job. But now, after the COVID-19 outbreak, the economy [has] shrunk and there are less and less positions in the US. I feel that I don’t have an opportunity to have a job here. I just go back directly after I graduate.

Qian is a Chinese international student and he comments on the interview:

I hope I can graduate in 2024. Before the COVID-19, I hope I can find a job or a conduct my post-doctor in the United States. My major is Cancer Sciences. I want to make money or conduct more advanced research. The U.S. has very great research resources. Biological research of the United States is the number one ranking throughout the world. But now,

because of the COVID-19, I realize that there are lots of disadvantages of the U.S., such as the structure of the whole country. I want to go back to my home country.

International students' job orientations were not only affected by the US economy, but also, Donald Trump's policy left students feeling extremely dehumanized. On July 6<sup>th</sup> 2020, the Student and Exchange Visitor Program (SEVP) released policies about modifying non-immigrant students' requirements of taking on-line classes during the COVID-19 pandemic (Castiello-Gutiérrez & Li, 2020). The Department of Homeland Security (2020) states:

“the US Department of State will not issue visas to students enrolled in schools and/or programs that are fully online for the fall semester nor will US Customs and Border Protection permit these students to enter the United States.”

International students needed to select at least one unit of an in-person class, otherwise, they would be driven outside of the United States. At that time, international students questioned whether the country where they had spent many years of studying, growing, working hard and making friends actually valued their safety and saw them as human beings and US citizens (Castiello-Gutiérrez & Li, 2020).

## **DISCUSSION**

In the past, Chinese people have been portrayed as intelligent, diligent and compliant as part of a diaspora (Archer, Francis & Mau, 2010; Costigan, Hua, & Su, 2010). Chinese international students are willing to pursue their higher education dreams in the United States. They view the pursuit of higher education in the US as an opportunity to broaden their horizons, obtain global cultural capital, receive a well-rounded education, and understand Western culture and society (Liu, 2020; Wang, 2021). However, during the current pandemic, US mass media portrayed Chinese people as the source of “Chinese viruses” at the early outbreaks of COVID-19. Chinese students and Asian people in the United States were dehumanized and they felt extremely isolated in the US due to prejudices and biases that caused a rise in hate crimes. This occurred during a time when people should have been more united. However, following these catastrophes, minority groups (Japanese-Americans, Muslim groups, Chinese and Asian groups) became targeted groups, suffering blame, racial slurs and insults.

International students have the right to choose their future careers. Due to immigrant policy restrictions, racial discrimination experiences, long-time isolation and some COVID-19 trauma, numerous Chinese international students changed their original job orientation in order to return to their home countries once they graduated.

## **CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH**

Although disasters often motivate individuals and groups to behave in altruistic ways, during the COVID-19 pandemic, Chinese students became scapegoats and were blamed for being the root causes and carriers of the coronavirus. In my perspective, biased information ought to be removed. Education leaders, along with other public officials, should conduct public speeches or social media campaigns to clarify the origins of COVID-19, so as to: (1) limit and/or prevent blame from being placed on people of Asian descent, and (2) promote unity among all American citizens in the wake of the pandemic. *Chinese/China virus; Kung flu, “Go eat a bat, Chang!”* US media outlets strongly discourage the use of such biased terms as part of journalistic integrity. The US mainstream mass media ought to provide unbiased information to US citizens.

In terms of racial inequality amid the COVID-19 pandemic, from laws and regulations perspectives, further researchers should consider whether the Immigration Law and the Criminal Law should be revised. Hate crimes must be categorized as felonies. On a university level, there should be additional consideration of how school leaders can provide minority groups with more resources, such as psychological counseling

services. Many international students might have some trauma after a long period of isolation and being discriminated against in the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic. Universities' caring and compassion will provide them with a sense of belonging.

## ENDNOTE

- <sup>1</sup>. Yellow peril was a stereotype towards Chinese Americans. It considered Chinese people as an immoral, inferior, and uncivilized group.

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