

“I don’t belong to either side. I lost my identity”: A Thematic Analysis Study on Chinese International Students’ Interpersonal Experiences During the COVID-19 Pandemic

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Per aspera ad astra

Abstract

Background and Purpose:

The COVID-19 pandemic has had tremendous impacts on everyone's life globally. However, Chinese international students (CIS) are not only susceptible to challenges brought about by COVID-19 but also endure stigma and discrimination for being "virus carriers" due to their Chinese nationality. As international students, they face additional challenges because of travel restrictions and visa issues, which exacerbate their social isolation and precipitate psychological distress. This study aims to inform practice to promote anti-discriminatory and culturally competent interventions that support this population's mental health.

Research Questions:

What are CIS's interpersonal experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic? Does CIS face stigma and discrimination related to COVID-19 in their interpersonal encounters with the non-Chinese population? How do they cope with mental health challenges during the pandemic? In what ways do family and ethnic/national identity shape CIS's experiences?

Methods:

Ten in-depth, semi-structured interviews were conducted with CIS (aged 20 to 28) who resided in the United States for at least 10 months during the COVID-19 pandemic (March 2020 to May 2022). Purposive sampling was employed, recruiting participants through social media advertisements, including a Chinese students' association WeChat group in a university and Facebook. Interviews were conducted in Mandarin Chinese via Zoom. Reflective thematic analysis, following Braun and Clarke's (2012, 2013, 2014, 2020) framework, was employed using NVivo for coding and analysis.

Findings:

The findings suggest that CIS employed mostly active coping strategies to address the challenges they faced during the pandemic. They struggled to deal with discrimination because of their ethnic and national identity, with some participants coping with direct confronting and providing information to counter stereotypes, whereas others resorting to secrecy and withdrawal. The findings also shed light on the emergence of Chinese nationalism among some participants, spurred by perceived discrimination by the non-Chinese population in the host country and satisfaction with their home country's government's handling of the pandemic. Conversely, others expressed a loss of national identity, stemming from marginalization experienced both in their home country (othered Chinese-ness) and the host country.

Conclusions and Implications:

This study highlights the complex challenges faced by CIS during the pandemic, including the experiences of stigma, discrimination, mental health struggles, and issues related to national and ethnic identity. Most participants employed active coping strategies, such as self-care and seeking support from others. Among different types of support, peer support emerged as particularly crucial, while family support was more nuanced—sometimes highly beneficial but at other times counterproductive due to high expectations and cultural values that discourage giving up. Despite their active coping efforts, the combination of social isolation, experiences of

discrimination and stigma, and confusion surrounding their identity significantly impacted their overall well-being and triggered mental health crises. These findings underscore the importance of creating inclusive, anti-racist campus environments to address discrimination and racism within academic settings. The findings also suggest that the Yin and Yang philosophy, with its emphasis on dialectical thinking and a process-oriented worldview, can serve as an effective coping mechanism for managing crisis and pandemic-related stress.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

“Stigma, to be honest, is more dangerous than the [corona] virus itself.”

–Dr. Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus, WHO Director-General (Twitter Post, World Health Organization [WHO], 2020).

COVID-19 was first identified in Wuhan, Hubei province, China in December 2019, and was then named Coronavirus Disease 2019 by the World Health Organization (WHO). Later, the WHO declared the novel coronavirus outbreak a pandemic in March 2020 (Cucinotta & Vanelli, 2020).

There is no doubt that this severe pandemic has had tremendous impacts on everyone’s life globally. However, people of Chinese descent in the United States have not only experienced the pandemic as everyone due to COVID-19 but also have been suffering from the “double threat” or “double pandemic” of racial discrimination (Tavernise & Oppel, 2020; Gao & Liu, 2021). Discrimination against Chinese people and anti-Asian hate crimes increased (Devakumar et al., 2020; Gover et al., 2020) since the WHO declared the novel coronavirus outbreak as a pandemic in March 2020, because China was the believed origin of the infectious disease (Xu et al., 2021).

The media coverage and the use of stigmatizing terms such as “Chinese Virus” further fueled the rapid spread of anti-Chinese discrimination (Gao & Liu, 2021). According to data from the Understanding Coronavirus in America Survey, Asians and Asian Americans were approximately twice as likely as white people to report incidents of COVID-19-related discrimination between March and September of 2020 (Wu et al., 2020). Among Asian subgroups, Chinese Americans reported the largest surge of discrimination incidents from 2019 to 2020 (Ha et al., 2021).

Not only in the United States, but people of Chinese descent and even the whole Asian community have experienced discrimination globally. In the United Kingdom, it was reported that anti-Asian hate crimes had risen by 21% from the beginning of the pandemic until May 2020 (Grierson, 2020). In Italy, as reported by Human Rights Watch, the civil society group Lunaria collected over 50 cases of assaults, bullying, and discrimination against Asians from February to early May 2020 (“Covid-19” fueling anti-Asian racism, 2020). In Africa, there have also been reports of discrimination against Asians for carrying coronavirus (“Covid-19” fueling anti-Asian racism, 2020).

The year 2021 marked the introduction of COVID-19 vaccinations, leading to a decline in COVID-19-related deaths (Gao et al., 2023). This positive trend continued throughout 2022 and persisted until May 2023, when COVID-19 was officially declared no longer a public health emergency (Sarker et al., 2023). Despite the pandemic's decline, Asian Americans continued to face racial discrimination. According to FBI data, anti-Asian hate crimes increased by 167%, rising from 279 incidents in 2020 to 746 in 2021, before decreasing by 33% to 499 incidents in 2022 (Federal Bureau of Investigation, 2023). Additionally, the STOP AAPI HATE national reporting center, which was established on March 19, 2020, documented 11,467 reports of bias or hate incidents over its first two years (Yellow Horse, 2022).

The Unique Challenges of Chinese International Students

In addition to racial discrimination, Chinese international students faced unique challenges during the pandemic including isolation due to travel restrictions (Trump administration’s travel ban and China’s “five-one” policy), lack of social support, Visa issues, and struggle in the crossfire of the bilateral tension between their home and host countries (Ma & Zhan, 2022). For U.S. domestic students, they were able to quarantine with their families

at home; however, international students were either evacuated from campus and lived in temporary off-campus housing or took risks by flying back to their home countries. Furthermore, for Chinese international students who hold international student visa (F-1) status, their status can change drastically based on policy changes and political whim. “Their rights are dictated by policy and political whim, and it is risky to raise a critical voice regarding social justice concerns” (Nam et al, 2021, p.10).

Ma and Zhan (2022) captured the unique conflicted status of Chinese international students as they pointed out that this population “are often caught in the middle of the confusing and contradictory signals sent by their home and host country”, including masking policies and staying in the host country or returning home. Additionally, the migrants’ transient status of Chinese international students might presumably limit Chinese students’ willingness to publicly engage or challenge structural discrimination in America (Ma & Zhan, 2022). What’s more, not only being unwelcomed by the host country, but Chinese international students also may not have felt welcomed by their home country either. For example, the “Five-one” policy instituted by the Civil Aviation Administration of China website specifies that one airline can only operate one flight to/from a given country per week during the pandemic (Notice on further reducing international passengers, 2020). In addition to the shortage of flights, pricey tickets presented barriers to preventing Chinese international students from returning to their home country. When some international students returned to China, they faced the stigmatization of being “virus carriers” from their own home country (Wang, 2020).

Role of Researcher

The reason I am interested in studying this problem is that I have experienced microaggression as an international student and I was afraid to go outside after a xenophobia

incident that happened two miles away from my home during the pandemic. I have also observed my relatives and friends who have been enrolled in American higher education institutions struggle during the pandemic. I understand that there are some advantages of being an insider in this situation as a researcher such as accessibility to the target population, language use, being familiar with the culture, etc. At the same time, being an insider might make it harder to get the full story because I may carry some assumptions based on my own experiences (Berger, 2015). For example, I assumed Chinese international students would be struggling in the context of anti-Asian discrimination. However, when I conducted the literature review for this proposal, I found that some international students described positive experiences with support from professors and their academic institutions (Xu et al., 2021). As Moustakas (1994) suggested, I need to acknowledge my prior knowledge of related experiences and bracket beliefs, values, and assumptions when constructing the study and prior to interviews to focus on the participants' experiences.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

With the rapid pace of globalization, an increasing number of international students choose to study in the United States, and China is the leading place of origin for international students, accounting for 35% of the total international student population (Open Doors Report, 2021). There were roughly 31,7000 Chinese international students studying in the United States in 2021, which declined by 14.8% compared with 2020 (37, 2532 Chinese international students) (Open Doors Report, 2021). Many Western countries have recognized the enormous economic benefits being generated by the international education industry. According to the U.S. Department of Commerce, international students contributed \$39 billion to the U.S. economy in 2020 (Open Doors Report, 2021).

Despite the large number of international students and their contributions to the educational systems and the society they study in, there have been a limited number of studies investigating international students and their mental health in the literature (Zhang & Goodson, 2011). Furthermore, during the COVID-19 pandemic, global attention has been mainly focused on infected patients and frontline health workers. The experiences of Chinese international students and the mental health impacts of COVID-19 on this population have been largely overlooked (Lai et al., 2020).

Stigma, Discrimination, and COVID-19

Pandemics have always been an essential part of human history. In the past century, the Spanish flu (1918-1920), the Asiatic flu (1956-1957), the severe acute respiratory syndrome (SARS, 2002-2003), the Ebola (2013-2014), and other pandemics affected people's well-being worldwide (Talevi et al., 2020). History also demonstrated that disease-related groups and communities might be stigmatized, because of believed origins of the infectious diseases (Xu et

al., 2021). For example, the group of Russian Jewish immigrants from Eastern Europe was blamed for the outbreaks of 1892 typhus and cholera in New York City in the United States; the community of Native Americans was stigmatized for the outbreak of 1993 Hantavirus in the United States, and Asian communities were discriminated for the outbreak of the 2003 SARS epidemic in some Western countries (Person et al., 2004; Bruns et al., 2020; Xu et al., 2021). Similarly, during this COVID-19 pandemic, the group of the overseas Chinese population was stigmatized for this COVID-19 pandemic due to China being the believed origin of the infectious disease.

Stigma research is grounded in the works of the sociologist Goffman (1963). Goffman defines stigma as “an attribute that links a person to an undesirable stereotype, leading other people to reduce the bearer from a whole and usual person to a tainted, discounted one (1963, p. 11)”. Stigma and discrimination are two concepts which interrelated with each other. In this article, stigma is defined as the occurrence of labeling, stereotyping, separation, status loss, and discrimination in a context that exercises power (Link & Phelan, 2001, Hatzenbuehler et al., 2013). In this sense, discrimination is considered a feature of stigma, however, because the stigma process incorporates several other elements (e.g., labeling, and stereotyping), the concept of stigma is broader than discrimination (Richman & Hatzenbuehler, 2014).

Research on stigma and discrimination is commonly discussed on two levels: interpersonal and societal levels. According to Richman and Hatzenbuehler (2014), “research on interpersonal discrimination primarily concerns discrimination that is perceived and directly experienced, whereas research on societal discrimination focuses on societal factors (e.g., policies, social attitudes), with less focus on personal mechanisms” (p.214). For instance, interpersonal discrimination refers to directly perceived discriminatory interactions between

individuals while societal discrimination means societal conditions, cultural norms, and institutional policies and practices that constrain the opportunities, resources, and well-being of the stigmatized (Hatzenbuehler & Link, 2014).

Stigma, Discrimination, and Psychological Well-being

Compelling evidence showed that stigma and discrimination, no matter on societal or interpersonal levels, can have a negative impact on psychological well-being (e.g., Paradies, 2006; Pascoe & Richman, 2009; Williams et al., 2003). For instance, Pascoe and Richman's analysis (2009) of 110 studies examined the relationship between discrimination and psychological well-being and found, that discrimination was negatively related to psychological well-being. Recent studies related to COVID-19 (Yang et al., 2024; Huynh et al., 2022) have also shown that stigma and discrimination negatively impact the mental health of individuals of Chinese descent.

Identity

Stigma and discrimination that Chinese students have experienced might have profound impacts on their attitudes towards American society (Ma and Zhan, 2022) and their own identity (Long, 2022; Wu et al., 2023). A study aimed at exploring the changes in national identity among Chinese international students in the social context of the global pandemic. The study provided evidence of the rise of Chinese nationalism: the alleged discrimination crippled Chinese international students' connection with the local community and pushed them to identify more with their home country (Long, 2022).

In fact, research showed that ethnic identity functions as an important psychological resource that enables ethnic and racial minorities to be resilient against racial discrimination (Phinney, 2003). Ethnic identity is defined as an individual's acquisition and

retention of cultural characteristics that are incorporated into one's self-concept, and it develops in the context of the individual belonging to a minority ethnic group within the larger society (Phinney, 1990). Ethnic identification involves a sense of ethnic pride, involvement in ethnic practices, and cultural commitment to one's racial/ethnic group (Phinney, 1991).

Research has demonstrated that ethnic and racial minorities with a strong ethnic identity are more inclined to maintain a positive sense of well-being and high self-esteem and be resilient to life changes and stressors (Crocker et al., 1994; Lee & Davis, 2000; Phinney & Alipuria, 1996; Ying et al., 2000; Yip & Fuligni, 2002). Ethnic identity also is a significant predictor of high self-esteem, social connectedness, and a sense of community in samples of Asian American college students (Lee, 2003; Lee & Yoo, 2004; Tsai et al., 2001).

The Role of Family

Chinese people value familial collectivism highly (Wah, 2001). In addition, given China's incomplete welfare legislation, Chinese families are often held responsible for the well-being of their members (Hu & Scott, 2016). For Chinese international students, their families play a pivotal role in shaping their education and migration experiences (Fong, 2011). Ma (2020) provided an example of the role of family's impact on Chinese students' college major choices in both explicit and implicit ways. Explicitly, Chinese parents put pressure on their children regarding what major they should study. Implicitly, some parents tell their children how they have invested and how they made sacrifices for their children's education, which suggests that their children should follow their parents' advice on college major choices (Ma, 2020). In crisis situations, families are considered a safety net for individuals to access essential support and resource (Hu et al., 2022). The existing research has provided some insights into how family shapes Chinese international students' experiences (Fong, 2011; Ma, 2020; Tu, 2018), but the

literature regarding how the family responds to this pandemic crisis is sparse. Shah et al. (2021)'s study found that increased family presence was associated with decreased levels of stress, anxiety, and depression during COVID-19. Hu et al. (2022)'s study revealed a distinctive emotional double-bind in the context of COVID-19, which requires members of Chinese international students' families to "strategically perform emotional engagement and detachment in complex ways (p.62)". The family members' roles also constantly shift among multiple roles as collaborators, parents, children, and liability guarantors during the pandemic (Hu et al., 2022).

Yin and Yang Model

Yin and Yang philosophy serves as an important conceptual model in this study. Yin and Yang philosophy has been utilized as conceptual models in management, knowledge creation, and traditional Chinese medicine (Zhang & Hudtohan, 2021; Liu & An, 2021; Zhao et al., 2021; Chin et al., 2022.). A recurring theme across these fields is Yin and Yang's capacity to address complex, dynamic, and evolving issues.

Chin et al. (2022) reinterpreted knowledge creation (KC) as a Yin-Yang dialectical system, wherein tacit knowledge (Yin) and explicit knowledge (Yang) coexist in a complementary relationship. Utilizing the Yijing's Later Heaven Sequence (LHS), they proposed a model of knowledge management as a dynamic capability within the context of international business. Similarly, Zhang and Hudtohan (2021) examined the integration of Yin-Yang philosophy into modern management practices. Their work highlights the importance of balancing traditional Chinese thought (Yang) with management principles (Yin) to harmonize mainstream (Yin) and multistream (Yang) approaches, ultimately fostering organizational success.

Research Gap

Several studies have explored the impact of this outbreak on college students' mental health worldwide (Cao et al., 2020; Firang, 2020; Husky et al., 2020; Kecojevic et al., 2020; Rajkumar, 2020). The overall findings revealed that the impact of COVID-19 on students' mental health included an increased level of anxiety (Cao et al., 2020; Firang, 2020; Husky et al., 2020; Kecojevic et al., 2020; Son et al., 2020; Wang et al., 2020), high level of perceived stress (Firang, 2020; Kecojevic et al., 2020; Son et al., 2020) and an increased level of depressive thoughts (Kecojevic et al., 2020; Wang et al., 2020). A recently published study (Lin et al., 2022) investigating the prevalence and correlates of depression and anxiety among Chinese international students in U.S. colleges during the pandemic found the prevalence of depression at 24.5% and that of anxiety at 20.7% among 1881 participants.

After reviewing the emerging literature related to Chinese international students' mental health and well-being during the pandemic, I found that most of the studies were quantitative studies examining the relevant factors contributing to mental health problems for this population. For example, a study (Haft & Zhou, 2021) investigated the relation between perceived discrimination and anxiety, and whether the COVID-19 context moderated the relationship. According to the results from this study, "the During-COVID group reported higher perceived discrimination and anxiety than the Pre-COVID group. The link between perceived discrimination and anxiety was stronger for the During-COVID group" (p. 522).

Other quantitative studies have examined factors such as gender (Li et al., 2021), marital status (Yu et al., 2020), and media exposure (Gao et al., 2020) and their impact on students' mental health and well-being during the pandemic. Li et al (2021) pointed out that female college students were facing more severe mental health issues and that they were at increased risk of

loneliness, depression, and anxiety during the COVID-19 pandemic. Yu et al. (2020)'s study revealed unmarried respondents were two times more likely to have increased psychological distress compared with married respondents. Gao et al. (2020) recruited 4872 participants to investigate links between media exposure and mental health problems. The study showed there was a high prevalence of mental health problems, which were positively associated with frequent media exposure during the COVID-19 outbreak. Apparently, one of the limitations of those factors (gender, marital status, and media exposure) contributing to mental health problems focused on the general student population and did not specifically apply to the population of Chinese international students.

There are a few in-depth studies examining Chinese international students' experiences in facing this pandemic. Xu et al. (2021) used a descriptive phenomenological method and gathered data from 14 international students and visiting scholars from China. Four transformed meaning units that formed the structural base of the phenomenal experience were identified as 1) safety concerns, including concerns about families in China and their own well-being in the United States; 2) participants' desire to learn the English language and the disappointment of not being able to improve their spoken English language skills due to COVID-19; 3) complexity of decision making such as wearing masks or not and staying in the U.S. or returning to China; 4) unexpected support from university professors and classmates. However, this study was conducted using individual and focus group interviews, and one of the limitations of the study was the authors' concern that not all participants were comfortable expressing their responses or concerns in front of other participants during the focus group discussions. Therefore, some in-depth perceptions on sensitive topics such as race, religion, or political orientation may not have been generated.

Wu et al. (2023) conducted a study examining the discrimination perceived by Chinese international students studying abroad during the COVID-19 pandemic. Using grounded theoretical analysis of interview data, they developed a theoretical conceptual model of perceived discrimination among this group. The findings revealed that Chinese international students often faced discrimination in off-campus settings such as supermarkets, streets, and workplaces. While instances of extreme, explicit discrimination were relatively uncommon, discrimination generally manifested in milder, more implicit forms. The study also found that students frequently chose to endure these discriminatory experiences in silence. Additionally, participants often linked their encounters with discrimination to employment-related challenges. Another key finding was that experiencing discrimination during the COVID-19 pandemic led many participants to develop a stronger sense of identification with China and a heightened sense of pride in their Chinese heritage.

This study will focus on Chinese international students' stigmatized experiences from an interpersonal level. The importance of exploring the interpersonal experience of Chinese international students in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic is critical for personnel in higher education institutions to understand the unique challenges faced by this population. It might also inform social work practice to provide culturally competent interventions that support this population during COVID-19.

Research Questions

As discussed above, it is imperative to understand Chinese international students' interpersonal experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic, yet very few in-depth studies have focused on this population and so little is known about the short and long-term impact of the pandemic on this population. To better understand the experiences of Chinese international

students during the pandemic, the following main research question and sub-questions are proposed:

Main Question: What have been Chinese international students' interpersonal experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic?

Sub-questions: Especially as a result of the pandemic, does this population face stigma and discrimination in the context of interpersonal encounters with the non-Chinese population? Do they have mental health challenges? How do they cope? In what ways does the family shape Chinese international students' experiences? Are there any ethnic and national identity changes in the context of the pandemic?

Chapter 3: Methodology

To answer my research question “What are Chinese international students’ interpersonal experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic”, I used a qualitative approach and conducted semi-structured virtual interviews with 10 participants.

Rationale for qualitative method

Qualitative methods are most appropriate for answering my research question for the following reasons. First, I am interested in understanding the lived experiences of Chinese international students during the pandemic and seek to “give voice” to this vulnerable population, who face racial discrimination and other challenges due to COVID-19. This aligns with the objectives of qualitative research (Braun & Clarke, 2013). Second, I am interested in exploring the meaning of this pandemic generated by the experience of Chinese international students and attempting to “capture some aspects of their social and psychological world” (Braun & Clarke, 2013, p. 20). In this sense, qualitative methods are better suited than quantitative methods since I am interested in meaning, rather than the prevalence or measurement of specific contributing factors of Chinese international students’ mental health issues during the pandemic. Furthermore, personally speaking, as a clinician who is passionate about providing culturally competent and trauma-informed therapy, qualitative methods can provide rich and in-depth data which might be helpful to inform practice and policymaking. Last but not least, my study is interested in the Chinese international students’ experience in the context of the pandemic. Therefore, qualitative methods are best suited because “qualitative research treats context as important” (Braun & Clarke, 2013, p.20).

Ethics and Human Subjects

This study was approved by the Institutional Review Board (IRB) at the University of Pennsylvania on November 22, 2022. The proposal meets eligibility criteria for IRB review exemption authorized by 45 CFR 46.104, category 2. Information about the rationale around confidentiality was included in participants' informed consent forms. Participants chose their own pseudonyms to protect their confidentiality during the interview. Participants were made aware of their rights to withdraw from interviews at any time (Braun & Clarke, 2013). Any information that might reveal participants' identities was de-identified. I followed ethical principles including respect of persons, beneficence, and justice to protect human subjects.

Sampling

A purposive sampling method was employed to generate “insight and in-depth understanding” (Patton, 2002, p.230) of their interpersonal experiences during the pandemic. The inclusion criteria, based on my research interests, were developed as follows:

Inclusion Criteria: (a) Age 18 or older

(b) Enrolled in a U.S. university for at least one semester between March 2020 and May 2022

(c) Place of origin reported as Mainland China

(d) Holding a student visa during their study enrollment

(e) Resided in the United States for at least 10 months between March 2020 and December 2022

Initially, criterion (e) required participants to have resided continuously in the U.S. from March 2020 to May 2022. However, several potential participants reached out to express that, due to the pandemic, many CIS had returned to their home countries, making it challenging to fulfill the nearly two-year residency requirement. After consulting with the IRB and my dissertation chair, this criterion was adjusted to a minimum of 10 months of U.S. residency to increase participant eligibility.

My aim was to recruit a sample size of 10-15 participants. Braun and Clarke (2013) suggest that “a sample size of between 15 and 30 individual interviews tends to be common in research which aims to identify patterns across data” (p. 55). Additionally, my literature review showed that sample sizes between 10 and 16 participants are common in similar studies. After the recruitment process—including screening out ineligible participants and two potential participants dropping out—the final sample size was 10.

Recruitment procedure

I recruited participants through social media platforms, including the University of Pennsylvania’s Chinese Students’ Association WeChat group and Facebook. Initially, I posted my recruitment advertisement on Facebook and the Penn 2022 New Students WeChat group on January 5, 2023. However, I received numerous bot responses from Facebook. Therefore, I shifted my focus to recruiting through the WeChat groups, posting updated advertisements on January 20, 2023, and February 23, 2023. In total, I received responses from 13 participants interested in participating in the interviews. One participant did not meet the criteria, and two dropped out when I reached out to schedule the interview.

Data Collection and Storage

Ten semi-structured interviews (see the interview guide in Appendix A) were conducted with CIS who resided in the United States for at least 10 months during the COVID-19 pandemic (March 2020 to December 2022). Before the interviews, participants received invitation links and consent forms via email. They signed informed consent forms approved by the University of Pennsylvania’s IRB. The interviews were conducted between January and March 2023.

Each interview began with an introduction and explanation of the study's purpose. Given the sensitive nature of the topics, such as experiences of discrimination and changes in ethnic

identity, the interviews started with general, less sensitive questions (see the interview guide in Appendix A). The interviews explored participants' experiences of COVID-19, the pandemic's impact, challenges faced, coping strategies, emotional responses, experiences of discrimination and stigma, ethnic/national identity changes, and the role of family in their experiences. The interviews ranged in length from 52 minutes to 1 hour and 45 minutes, with an average duration of 71 minutes. Each participant received a \$25 Amazon gift card as compensation. After each interview, I wrote memos detailing key facts about each participant, their social history, and my reflections and summaries of the main points discussed.

The interviews were conducted in Mandarin Chinese, the native language of most Chinese international students, to ensure participants had the opportunity to express themselves fully. As Resch and Enzenhofer (2018) noted, “people who are not in command of the respective country’s majority language are given the chance to express themselves” (p. 4). Furthermore, they highlighted that “speaking and being heard, as well as dominance of languages, are part of power relations” (p. 4). With the participants' consent, all interviews were audio-recorded and securely stored on my computer.

Demographic data

Demographic data were collected verbally at the end of each interview. Participants were asked about their age, major, marital status, ethnicity in China, total duration of stay in the U.S., and the length of time they were in the U.S. during the pandemic (between March 2020 and December 2022). Participants' ages ranged from 20 to 28, with an average age of 23.7 years. All participants identified as Han ethnicity in China, and the average length of their stay in the U.S. during the COVID-19 pandemic was 20 months. Only one participant was an undergraduate and

all other participants were graduate students. Detailed demographic information is provided in Table 1.

Table 1: Demographic information of the participants									
Pseudonym	Age	Gender	Educational level	Major	Marital status	Ethnic group in China	the total length of stay in the US up to the interview	Length of stay in the US at the time of COVID	Length of stay in China at the time of COVID
Fu	24	male	graduate	education	single but in relationship	Han	6 years and 2 months	34 months	0
Sherry	21	female	graduate	social work	single but in relationship	Han	2 years and 6 months	20 months	14 months
Julie	24	female	graduate	social policy	single	Han	1 year and 5 months	11 months	23 months
Elva	24	female	graduate	data analytics for social policy	single but in relationship	Han	1 year and 7 months	17 months	17 months
JD	28	male	graduate	engineer	single	Han	almost 10 years	17 months	17 months
Rain	23	female	graduate	social work	single	Han	5 years	22 months	12 months
Molly	26	female	graduate	biotechnology	single but in relationship	Han	3 years and 6 months	34 months	0
Rebecca	23	female	graduate	data analytics for social policy	single but in relationship	Han	8 years	14 months	20 months
Chestnut	20	female	undergraduate	neuroscience	single but in relationship	Han	3 years	17 months	17 months
Emma	24	female	graduate	social work	single	Han	1 year and 8 months	17 months	17 months

Note: the time of COVID is defined as between March 2020 and December 2022

Data analysis

I used reflective thematic analysis following Braun and Clarke's (2012, 2013, 2014, 2020) framework, utilizing NVivo for coding and analysis.

Phase 1: Familiarization

I listened to all the interviews and manually transcribed them using an audio transcription software called Xunfei. I printed out all the transcripts and engaged in reading and re-reading, making notes of interesting observations and documenting my thoughts and feelings regarding the data.

Phase 2: Coding

I coded the data recursively with the guidance from my dissertation chair. I started by coding the first four transcripts and developed my codebook based on these initial codes. I then continued to code the remaining six transcripts using the codebook. I revised my codebook throughout the coding process.

Phase 3: Generating Themes

In this phase, as described by Byrne (2021), the focus shifts from interpreting individual data items within the dataset to interpreting the collective meaning across the dataset. I combined the codes into candidate themes based on their shared meanings.

Phase 4: Reviewing Potential Themes and the Rationale of Using Yin and Yang

According to Braun and Clarke (2012, 2020), researchers should engage in a recursive review of candidate themes, examining them in relation to the coded data items as well as the entire dataset. Under the guidance of my dissertation chair, I reviewed the potential themes and focused on identifying major themes that aligned with my research questions.

I constructed two overarching themes based on the Yin and Yang model (see Appendix B for data display). The rationale for utilizing this model lies in its cultural significance and explanatory power—this dialectical thinking style has profoundly shaped Chinese cosmology, ontology, and worldview (Jiang, 2013). As Jiang (2013) emphasized, "One cannot understand Chinese people and Chinese philosophy without understanding the yin-yang model of thinking" (p. 438).

The experiences of CIS during the COVID-19 pandemic are aptly reflected through this Yin and Yang model. This model encapsulates the coexistence of opposites, suggesting that every situation encompasses both Yin and Yang. For example, the COVID-19 pandemic is

universally regarded as a crisis. In Chinese, the word for "crisis" (危机 wei-ji) embodies this duality: 危 (wei) represents danger, while 机 (ji) signifies opportunity. This dialectical perspective underscores that danger, change, or negativity can simultaneously bring opportunities, growth, and positivity.

The overarching themes were categorized within the Yin and Yang framework. Themes such as changes in role functioning, personal development, experiences of discrimination and stigmatization, and changes in national/ethnic identity were categorized under the Yin theme, which emphasizes challenges and adversity. Conversely, themes reflecting active coping strategies, exploration of national/ethnic identity, and positive gains achieved during the pandemic were categorized under the Yang theme, highlighting resilience and growth.

Phase 5: Defining and Naming Themes

Two overarching themes—Yin and Yang—were identified. The Yin theme encompassed changes and challenges, including sub-themes such as changes in role functioning, changes in personal development, discrimination and stigmatization, and changes in national/ethnic identity. The Yang theme represented opportunities and positive gains, with sub-themes like active coping, identity exploration, and positive outcomes. (refer to Appendix B for the Data Display).

Phase 6: Producing the Report

To minimize the loss of meaning during translation, Nes et al. (2020) recommended “staying in the original language as long and as much as possible” because “there is some influence when analyzing in another language than your own” (p.315). Following this advice, I performed the translation in phase 6, after completing the data analysis. A social work undergraduate student from the National University of Singapore assisted me in translating excerpts.

Reflexivity statement

My epistemological orientation toward the research process is that of social constructivism (also called interpretivism) as described by Creswell and Poth (2018). The goal of the research is to rely on the participants' views of the situation. These subjective meanings are "formed through interaction with others (hence social construction) and through historical and cultural norms that operate in individuals' lives" (Creswell & Poth, 2018, P.25). My study is interested in Chinese international students' experiences during the pandemic and my intent is to understand how Chinese international students form subjective meanings through their interaction with their educational institute, the society, western culture, and this historical event—the pandemic.

Creswell and Poth (2018) also emphasize the orientation of social constructivism, focusing on the processes and specific contexts of participants' experiences and understanding that the researcher's own backgrounds and experiences shape their interpretations. As a previous Chinese international student, I had my own anxiety, fear, worries, and other internal struggles during the pandemic. In addition, I was born and raised in China, and I have always been curious about how Chinese culture and values shape my identity and coping mechanisms in a Western context like the U.S. This curiosity extends to wondering how current CIS have experienced the pandemic and how they interpret the meaning of this global crisis through their own cultural lens.

I consider myself a constructivist due to my previous training in Communication (I have a master's degree in communication) and I have functioned as a journalist for several years. From my previous experience, the audience might think that the news is a fact, but the news is socially constructed (such as what to report, how much information to report, and who will be

benefited from the news being published) by journalists and editors who reflect the biases of those who are involved in this process. Therefore, I am not a believer in objective reality. What I believe is that knowledge is constructed through interaction with others and thus the nature of knowledge is subjective.

One incident that might have impacted my positionality occurred on May 29, 2023. While I was out walking with my toddler near our home, we were enjoying a peaceful moment when a calm voice from a passing golden Toyota said, "Go back to China." I was disoriented and confused, unsure if the comment was directed at me. The only other person nearby was a white woman walking her dog. I kept questioning myself: Was he talking to me? Did I do something wrong? We were not blocking the road or causing any inconvenience.

The mixed emotions I felt after the incident were overwhelming. On one hand, I was relieved that the driver didn't shout, sparing my daughter from being frightened. On the other hand, I was deeply angry about the racism that occurred so close to home, and I still don't belong to this country even after staying here for a decade. I also regretted not responding. What troubled me most was the lingering anxiety—I became uneasy when walking in my neighborhood and panicked each time I saw a similar car. This experience also gave me the courage and motivation to pursue my research, driving me to explore how individuals cope with stigma and discrimination. I felt related when participants shared that they were unable to respond to the discrimination at that moment and understand more deeply how the discrimination impacts people's mental health. This experience also assisted me in looking into more of the stigmatization process and focusing on the coping method.

Chapter 4: Analysis and Findings—Yin

I constructed the two overarching themes using the Yin and Yang model. Yin and Yang is a Chinese philosophical concept that “was originated by the Yellow Emperor, embodied by Laozi as a legend, and finalized by Zou Yan historically” (Ming, 2018, p.11). In Yin and Yang, “everything is composed of two distinct but interdependent/peacefully co-existing counterparts” (Ming, 2018, p. 11).

Etymologically, "Yang" (阳) originally refers to sunshine or what pertains to sunshine and light, while "Yin" (阴) refers to the absence of sunshine. Over time, Yang and Yin evolved to represent two cosmic principles or forces: Yang represents masculinity, activity, heat, brightness, dryness, and hardness, while Yin symbolizes femininity, passivity, cold, darkness, wetness, and softness (Fung, 1948, as cited in Jiang, 2013).

Regarding the Yin, participants in this study discussed the impact of COVID-19, including changes in role functioning and personal development. Additionally, they spoke about their experiences with discrimination and stigmatization and the change in their national/ethnic identity. Change and challenges were considered Yin in this study.

Study participants were not merely passive experiencers; they actively coped, sought support from others, and took this opportunity to explore their identities, find their career paths, increase their mental health awareness, and focus on self-growth. The CIS’s experience of active coping, exploration of national/ethnic identity, and positive gains from the pandemic were considered Yang. In this chapter, I will discuss Yin including the changes in role functioning and the change in the development of a person brought about by the COVID-19 pandemic.

1. The changes in role functioning brought About by the COVID-19 pandemic

The COVID-19 pandemic disrupted students' daily routines, shifted learning methods from in-person to virtual, created tension within some families, and challenged the building of connections with instructors and peers. Consequently, the pandemic inevitably altered participants' roles as students, family members, and friends.

1) Student

All participants discussed the challenges encountered as international students, particularly during the transition from in-person to virtual learning, and subsequently returning to in-person instruction. The unforeseen pandemic disrupted their initial academic plans and daily routines, introducing challenges such as the urgent need to vacate dormitories, student visa issues, and limited resources when ill and seeking research opportunities. Some participants had trouble establishing connections with instructors and peers through virtual learning. In the paragraphs below I discuss challenges that impacted the student role.

The change of academic plan

Participant Julie had an academic plan to study abroad and was accepted by a prestigious institution in the UK. However, she graduated from her undergraduate in 2020, the year coinciding with the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. Julie declined the offer due to the uncertainties and risks associated with the pandemic. Julie exemplifies the cohort of 2020 international students whose academic trajectories were significantly disrupted by COVID-19. This disruption also had profound implications for their mental health.

Julie: "All students who graduated and applied to universities abroad in 2020 were severely impacted. I applied to universities in both the U.S. and the U.K.; unfortunately, I was rejected by all the U.S. universities but was accepted by those in the U.K. While U.S. universities

allowed students to defer their admission for one year, U.K. universities did not offer this option. Some students chose to pursue virtual learning or attended U.K. universities, while a few, like myself, decided to decline the offers from U.K. schools.

As a result, students like us experienced emotional challenges, often sharing feelings of depression and a sense of ‘misery loves company’. We frequently found ourselves questioning and complaining, wondering why we had to face such circumstances.”

Finding new housing

The COVID-19 pandemic significantly disrupted the daily routines of CIS, leaving some without stable housing. When the shelter-in-place orders were lifted, many participants had to quickly find new accommodations as their dormitories were closed. While local students were able to move back home, CIS faced the additional challenges of either securing immediate housing or arranging flights back to China. In the following extract, participant Rain had to vacate her dormitory immediately. Fortunately, her friends offered her a place to stay, though she had to live in their living room for two months, which was not very comfortable.

Rain: “I was living in a dormitory at that time, but when it closed, I couldn’t book a flight back to China. A friend of mine had rented a house off-campus, so I planned to stay there for a week or two before returning home. However, every time I tried to buy a ticket, it got canceled. I ended up staying at my friend’s place for nearly two months, from late April until almost July. I was extremely anxious during that period, constantly checking my ticket status and feeling uncertain about when I could finally leave.”

Participant Chestnut actively advocated for CIS regarding the dormitory shutdown. “Where were all international students supposed to go when schools closed suddenly due to the pandemic? I believe schools should have helped us find a place to stay or at least informed us

well in advance—not just abruptly asked us to leave. Although I didn’t personally experience it, many students were only given one week to move out of their dormitories at that time. But what were international students supposed to do in that situation? How were they expected to pack all their belongings in such a short time? It was really difficult.”

Student Visa issue

International students require an F-1 student visa to maintain their legal status in the U.S. If they return home and their visa has expired, they must reapply for an F-1 visa for reentry. However, if they remain in the U.S., their status remains legal even if their F-1 visa has expired, as long as they comply with F-1 visa regulations and their I-20 form is valid. Due to COVID-19, the U.S. consulate in China was shut down for a period of time. Participant Elva identified the student visa issue as her primary challenge during the pandemic.

Elva: “The biggest challenge for me was dealing with the student visa issue. I really, really disliked navigating the visa process, especially during the pandemic. You never knew when the embassy might close again. There was so much uncertainty between U.S. and China policies during that time, making the whole situation even more stressful.”

Elva encountered dermatological issues and exhibited symptoms of depression. She struggled to decide whether to continue her studies in the U.S. or to return home. Ultimately, due to her fear that her student visa might undergo administrative processing again (her visa was administratively processed when she initially applied, typically taking 4 to 6 weeks but potentially lasting over a year) and due to family pressure, Elva decided to continue her studies in the U.S.

Lack of resources

Two participants spoke about their challenge in the lack of resources. The lack of local medical resources heightened Elva's sense of hopelessness, exacerbated her mental health issues, and affected her functioning as a student.

Elva: "I was not familiar with medical resources, and healthcare here in the U.S. is very expensive. Other than going to the university hospital, I didn't know where else to turn. I felt helpless. In my home country, if one hospital wasn't good, you could just go to another one, and healthcare was much cheaper. Here, you have to make an appointment two or three months in advance, and by then, you might not even need it anymore. I was in bad shape at that time. I felt like I couldn't continue my studies. I was panicked every day, unable to focus on anything. I didn't want to do anything, and I had no interest or motivation. I could hardly get out of bed and I couldn't sleep. I was depressed."

Chestnut also spoke about the challenge of limited resources when seeking research opportunities. "I felt like I didn't have access to many academic resources. For instance, I wanted to find research opportunities, but it was difficult because many labs were closed. The virtual learning didn't offer many options either. It often felt like I had no resources available to me."

Challenges of virtual learning

In addition to these challenges, the primary task for students was to study. The change in learning mode from in-person to virtual brought extra challenges for CIS. A few participants were able to return to their home countries and continue their education virtually. Some participants discussed the technical issues of connecting to the school's internet from China and dealing with time differences. Several participants spoke about the challenge of building

connections with their instructors and peers, while a few participants had difficulty performing lab work and projects.

Chestnut: “Virtual learning was particularly challenging while in China, especially when trying to connect to my university's network through a VPN (as many academic resources and websites are blocked by the Chinese government due to internet censorship). The time difference further added to the difficulty, making it hard to keep track of class schedules.”

Fu spoke about the technical issue related to virtual learning, “I've noticed that many older professors struggle with technology. For example, they might have trouble selecting a document, and there have been times when a professor talked for ten minutes before realizing they were on mute.”

Again, when virtual learning switched back to in-person learning, students faced yet another adjustment. For example, Chestnut mentioned the increased commute time and lack of motivation when transitioning back to in-person learning.

Chestnut: “The biggest adjustment for me came around Spring 2022 or Fall 2021 when classes were held only in person, with no online options available. It was challenging to adapt, especially with just fifteen minutes between classes, making it difficult to commute from one to another. I also felt less motivated to study, particularly after returning to the United States. I had gotten used to staying at home, sometimes even lying on my bed during online classes. Adapting to strict deadlines and the increased intensity of classes, including core courses, was difficult, and I often struggled to keep up with the course pace.”

Challenges in connecting with instructors and peers

Several participants mentioned the challenge of building connections with their instructors and peers during virtual learning, especially while studying in their home countries.

Consider this extract from Rain:

“Due to the nature of our virtual learning, which primarily involved watching video modules, I wasn’t familiar with my professors, nor were they familiar with me. As a result, when I needed someone to write a recommendation letter for graduate school, it was more challenging. I hadn't had many opportunities for in-depth communication with my professors for over a year, which impacted me on application at that time.”

Emma spoke about her challenge in fitting in with her peers and the program, which negatively impacted her engagement in group discussions. “I need to fit in with both the program and my peers, but I’ve found it challenging to integrate into the program and the university as a whole. Consequently, I felt less motivated to engage in discussions with my classmates.”

Unable to do lab work and projects

Molly, a graduate student majoring in Biology, faced significant challenges during her lab work, similar to her peers in the same field.. Molly: “Typically, our bio lab has a bench that accommodates 12-15 people, but during the pandemic, only two people were allowed per bench. This restriction significantly impacted our research. Additionally, we needed to maintain cell cultures for our biological experiments, and if the media wasn’t changed every 3-4 days, the cells could die. We were concerned that a sudden lab shutdown due to COVID-19 might ruin all our samples. As a result, we decided to not run experiments with living cells and focus on others. We did a lot of unrelated and unnecessary experiments.”

A few participants also highlighted the downsides of virtual learning, including increased cheating on tests, difficulties in maintaining focus, and the lack of an educational environment.

2) Family

Several participants reported that their families experienced significant stress and concern about their health and well-being while studying abroad during the COVID-19 pandemic. The participants shared the same worries towards their families and the mutual worry prompted a few participants to move back to China to work or study after their parents contracted COVID-19. With regards to parental support, a few participants noted that their parents' support was primarily financial, covering daily needs and COVID-19 prevention, but lacked emotional understanding and support. It was also observed that high family expectations, coupled with the cultural value against giving up, could create tension between parents and children, as these expectations did not always take into account the limitations imposed by the pandemic.

Family worrying

Julie was raised in a traditional Chinese family that upholds collectivist values, where the opinions of elders in the extended family are highly respected. Her extended family opposed her decision to study in the U.S. during the pandemic, primarily due to concerns about her health. Although her parents supported her decision, they were under significant pressure. "My parents were also very stressed, which led to conflicts between us. Although they were supportive, they were anxious too, and their emotional sensitivity made it easy to get into arguments."

JD experienced pressure from his parents concerning his health. JD: "First and foremost, the pandemic brought a lot of worry; my parents were worried, and we constantly discussed it. It also put pressure on me, as I needed to take good care of myself to avoid worrying my parents."

Emma also sensed the worry from her family related to her health. “My family and friends were worried about my health. They kept advising me on things like how to protect myself during the flight from China to the United States. Throughout the whole process, it felt like they were more worried than I was.”

When Sherry thought she had contracted COVID-19, she shared her worry with her father, and he was so distressed that his hair seemed to turn gray rapidly. “I told my dad that I felt like I had COVID, and later my mom mentioned that my dad's hair had turned gray from worrying so much about me. That was probably the most anxious time for all of us.”

Mutually, CIS students are concerned about their parents' health, which might influence their future plans. For example, Julie’s parents contracted COVID-19 a few months before our interview, causing her deep worry about their well-being.

“My dad has been coughing for a month and a half, and my mom is still coughing too. Just yesterday, I urged my mom to get a CT scan. I’m really worried because some of my parents’ colleagues have experienced severe symptoms, like high fevers and barely being able to walk—things we had never encountered before. When deciding where to pursue my doctorate after I graduate from my master’s program, I worried that if I stayed in the United States and the pandemic returned, I might be okay (because I’m young), but I am worried about my family. This fear affected my emotions and influenced some major decisions, making me feel that perhaps I shouldn’t be far from my parents while they are still alive.”

Ruptures in family relationships during the shelter-in-place period

Some participants returned to live with their parents during the COVID-19 pandemic. The shelter-in-place orders created stress and tension, which impacted family functioning for some participants.

Sherry has always had a close relationship with her parents, but she became aware of her negative feelings towards them, even though they were simply engaging in their daily routines. “I have a very close relationship with my parents, but during the second half of my year in China, I somehow started feeling irritated with them, even though they hadn't done anything wrong. They were just around the house, and I felt annoyed. I think it was probably due to the environment and the feeling of being trapped.”

High familial expectations and don't give up culture

JD experienced pressure from his mother related to job seeking: “My parents never pressured me about my studies, but they did when it came to work. I once broke down in tears to my mom because I wasn't getting any interview opportunities with companies in the United States. I told her I was overwhelmed and wanted to return to China, where I already had an offer. My mom said that I could come back if things didn't work out in the end, but she encouraged me to keep trying.”

Elva faced a difficult decision between staying in the U.S. to continue her studies or returning home when she encountered dermatological issues and mental health challenges. Although her parents initially agreed with her decision to return home after she expressed her desire to do so several times, they later encouraged her to visit her uncle's family, who live in the U.S., to see if it would help with her depressive symptoms.

Elva: “Then he (Elva's uncle) said you just hold on, and then he asked me to go and visit his family, maybe for a weekend with them, to see if I could feel better.”

JD and Elva's account highlights that giving up or dropping out is not culturally accepted in Chinese society. Ma (2022) touches on an important aspect of Chinese cultural values related to perseverance and familial expectations. The emphasis on persistence, even in challenging

times like a pandemic, reflects cultural belief in resilience and success through endurance.

However, this can sometimes lead to increased stress for children, as the pressure to meet these expectations can contribute to family tension.

Lack of emotional support

Elva commented on her parents' support, acknowledging it as “parents have always been very supportive of me, in a kind of unconditional, unquestioning way.” She further elaborated that her parents' support was more financial, addressing her daily needs, but lacked emotional understanding. “It's because we're from different generations, and the things that happen to my generation are not things they can empathize with. Especially since they've never been abroad, they don't know what it's like, and neither of them has studied beyond a bachelor's degree. They both started working right after graduating from college. So, when it comes to the things happening to me, they can't give me much advice. Asking them doesn't help much.”

Julie also spoke about the generational gap, noting that her parents had a hard time understanding her. Consider the following extract from Julie: “I sometimes feel that my family is unable to empathize with me due to generational differences and our different life experiences. Just yesterday, my mom and I were discussing this. There are times when I just want to express my feelings, hoping they would simply say, “I understand you.” or just be silent, or even just acknowledge my emotions without fully understanding them. That kind of support would mean a lot to me in those moments. But I realize that parents may not always express themselves that way—they might see it as being overly emotional or sensitive, which can hurt me deeply.”

3) Friends

Social distancing initiatives have restricted social interactions to reduce disease transmission, which may further isolate people. All participants mentioned that these measures

hindered their opportunities to maintain existing friendships and make new ones. As Emma pointed out: “Connections with friends, whether back home or here, often feel more fragile and harder to establish.”

No closure with the old friends/classmates

Julie, Molly, and Emma shared that they did not have an in-person graduation and missed the opportunity to have closure with their undergraduate peers.

Molly: “During the pandemic, even our graduation ceremony was online. It felt so perfunctory. Everyone gathered on Zoom, gave a 20-second speech, and then our department head said a few words before abruptly ending the call. We didn't have the chance to say goodbye, and the department head closed the Zoom so quickly, which left me feeling really sad.”

Julie: “I never had closure at the end of my undergraduate studies. There was no graduation trip, and no opportunity to say goodbye, which might have left a psychological impact on me.”

Difficulty in maintaining friendship

Fu spoke about the loss of a friend during the pandemic. “Some friends returned to their home countries and may never come back. You just don't expect to see them again.” Fu explained that the reason this friend did not return was because her family was concerned about her safety due to the rise in anti-Asian racism sentiment, “(My friend) is a petite Asian girl, the kind of person who, unfortunately, is a typical target for anti-Asian hate. Because of this, her family is very worried and won't let her return to the U.S.”

Rain: “The year of virtual learning in China made me feel isolated. Some of my former undergraduate peers had returned to normal life and gone back to school, while my new friends

in the U.S. were scattered across different cities. I didn't have friends to hang out with on weekends, and we could only chat online.”

The challenge in making new friends

Elva spoke about her difficulties in making new friends virtually. “I have only five or six friends because you can't make new friends online easily.”

Emma specifically pointed out that wearing masks and not seeing the whole face of her peers has hindered her social interaction with peers. She emphasized that "eye contact" alone was insufficient and believed that "the entirety of facial expressions" was crucial. “There was only eye contact, without any other expressions. As an observant person, I felt like I was missing out on a lot of information.”

To adhere to social distancing guidelines and avoid disease transmission, most participants reduced their social interactions and activities, leading to increased isolation. Chestnut stated, “After I arrived in the U.S., I was afraid to go out because many people on the street didn't wear masks. Additionally, I had to get tested for COVID-19 every month or two, as required by the school. That's why I didn't hang out with my friends.”

Elva, who experienced symptoms of depression, expressed a desire for peer support during those difficult times. “What I learned from the pandemic is that support is incredibly important, especially understanding from others, because I was in a bad place at that time. I felt like I was losing my mind. I needed friends who would reassure me every day, saying, 'You're doing great,' and spending time with me. I needed to feel accompanied to get through it. Being alone was really hard.”

The boundary issue and role-changing among roommates

Another phenomenon worth noting is the challenge people face when living with others 24/7 during shelter-in-place orders. Some CIS temporarily lived with friends or partners, while others found themselves sharing space with less familiar peers. Molly observed that the boundaries between personal space and shared living areas became increasingly blurred under these circumstances.

Molly: “Before the pandemic, I kept a certain distance from my roommates and friends because I value personal space. I don't like everyone being too close; I believe everyone should have their own space. However, during the pandemic, this sense of personal space was disrupted. We were forced to live together, and we had to stock up on food together. On one hand, it brought us closer, but on the other hand, I had to learn to live a life without boundaries. A life without boundaries meant constantly sharing, with people always around. Before the pandemic, I preferred staying home only to sleep and being out at other times. But when it turned into 24 hours at home, I had to learn how to cope with it.”

Molly also discussed how the role of roommates changed as they incorporated COVID-19 prevention into their daily routines. Molly: “My roommates' behavior changed from initially staying in their own rooms and doing their own thing, to later regularly gathering in the common area we shared. We would meet regularly to discuss strategies for dealing with COVID-19 and offer suggestions to each other. For example, someone might say, "I think you shouldn't go out too often; it's better to stay home a bit more for everyone's sake.”

2. The change in the development of a person brought about by COVID-19

In addition to the changes in role functioning brought about by COVID-19, participants also discussed changes in their personal development, including shifts in life direction and an increased prevalence of mental health and health issues.

1) Study/Career Plan Changed

Participant Rebecca majored in Business during her undergraduate studies, initially planning to secure a finance internship for one semester and pursue a career in finance after graduation. However, her internship plans were disrupted due to the pandemic. Additionally, aiming to graduate within three years, she encountered challenges stemming from the pandemic-induced lack of campus experiences. As a result, she decided to pursue a different concentration within social science after completing her undergraduate degree. Rather than immediately seeking a finance job, she chose to continue her studies in social science. Rebecca: “I just think it's quite interesting, many people's plans and their fates may have been changed by this pandemic.”

Julie shared a similar experience with Rebecca regarding how her graduation plan changed due to the pandemic. Julie was in her senior year when the pandemic began, and she had originally planned to pursue further studies in graduate school. Despite receiving an offer from a prestigious university in the U.K., she ultimately declined the opportunity because of her parents' concerns about the COVID-19 pandemic. Consequently, Julie was compelled to seek employment immediately after graduating from her undergraduate program.

Julie: “I never thought I would start working right after graduating with my bachelor's degree. I always planned to complete at least my master's degree first. But I had to find a job immediately in March 2020, during a time when many companies were struggling. It was really tough, and I started questioning my life choices.”

2) Mental health issues

Most participants shared that they experienced mental health issues during the pandemic. Feelings of loneliness and isolation, anxiety, and depression were widespread among them.

Loneliness/isolated feeling

Elva spoke about experiencing feelings of loneliness after she developed a skin issue, expressing a desire for companionship from a peer to keep her company daily. Elva, “At that time, I felt incredibly lonely, like a stray dog. Every day, there was no one to speak with, and when I was feeling down, there was no one to listen because everyone was busy with their own lives.”

Emma had initially ignored or attempted to normalize the feeling of isolation since starting her graduate program. However, she eventually recognized the impact of this isolation, which triggered a panic attack (to be described in the next section).

Emma: “Since the start of my graduate program, I’ve felt a sense of isolation from local students, and this feeling has persisted even in the post-pandemic period. I realize now that I’ve had these feelings for a long time, but I’ve been trying to suppress them. I thought it was normal for an international student, but I didn’t realize how much these negative emotions would amplify and affect me in the long run.”

Anxiety/Worries/Fear

Emma continues to express that this sense of isolation has exacerbated her anxiety, resulting in the onset of panic attacks. “I realized that my anxiety at that time was likely due to my negative emotions reaching a boiling point. A significant part of these negative emotions stemmed from feeling like I couldn’t fit in the community.”

Emma was unable to continue functioning in class and she went to the school’s counseling center when she experienced a panic attack. “The worst episode was one morning when I woke up feeling rigid and unable to focus on anything. I felt irritable and panicked. I couldn’t figure out why.”

Some participants expressed feelings of anxiety and worry arising from the disease itself, as well as from the rapid changes and unpredictability brought on by the pandemic. For Sherry, “When it came to decisions like when to return to China, I felt a lack of control over the policies between China and the U.S. One day, they might suddenly cancel your flight, or the next day, you might be denied entry. The rapid and unpredictable changes in policy made me feel very anxious and powerless. The constant and often unreasonable changes left me with no way to cope. If a new policy came out, I just had to comply because I had no control over the situation.”

Rebecca disclosed that after being isolated for a long time, she experienced shortness of breath upon resuming activities, requiring immediate hospital treatment. Rebecca, “When I went out and interacted with people again after sheltering at home, I began to feel fearful and found it hard to breathe. When I returned to China, I could not breathe properly. I already had an irregular heartbeat, and it worsened to the point where I had to go to the hospital because I couldn't breathe properly.”

JD also pointed out that COVID-19 has restricted his usual methods of stress relief, potentially limiting resources for coping with anxiety. “For me, the challenge was in finding ways to release stress, and I felt limited in that regard. Since you couldn't fully be in an outdoor environment, I had to adjust and change how I managed and released my personal stress.”

Depression

Due to Elva's skin issue and loneliness, she developed symptoms of depression, experiencing insomnia and loss of appetite for three days. “I was really sad at that time. Every day, I felt like that emoji of a depressed cat, just sitting by the window, not eating, sleeping, or drinking—just staring out and thinking about life. I started feeling like I had messed everything up.”

JD's depressed feelings were triggered by social isolation. "I felt like I had a dark cloud hanging over my head, with a low-pressure atmosphere weighing me down. There weren't many opportunities to spend time with friends—maybe just the occasional meal with one or two people, but rarely any group gatherings. It was December, and I remember it was during the peak of the pandemic in the U.S., so interactions with others were even more limited."

Julie's feelings of depression stemmed from the changes in her life direction brought about by the pandemic, leading her to repeatedly ask, 'Why me? Why did this have to happen to us? Why did our cohort have to graduate and face this situation? 'It wasn't just me—my mood was also affected by the emotions of my peers around me.'

3) Physical health issues

Additionally, some participants reported physical health issues related to the pandemic. Julie's shift in graduation plan from planning to study in the UK to searching for a job, which she perceives as a result of unfair fate, negatively impacted her physical health.

Julie: "I just felt like, "How could fate treat me like this?" As my parents would say, sometimes I was too hard on myself, which isn't good for my health. During my previous check-ups, all my indicators were normal because I was still young and had a happy time in college. But the year I started working, I kept wondering why I couldn't go back to school, and my check-ups revealed issues like thyroid nodules and breast nodules. My family told me, 'You're so young, and you already have nodules. You need to take better care of your health and manage your stress.'"

3. Discrimination, Stigma, Coping, and Barriers

COVID-19 not only exacerbates feelings of loneliness, depression, and anxiety but also heightens the risk of stigma and discrimination. Most participants experienced discrimination

and stigma during the COVID-19 pandemic. They reported encountering interpersonal discrimination, societal-level stigma, increased vigilance related to racism, and heightened discrimination among minority groups.

1) Interpersonal stigma/discrimination (Enacted stigma)

Every participant personally experienced or heard of their peers experiencing enacted stigma toward their racial/national identity. Some faced verbal assaults and insulting gestures, while others suffered physical violence. The stigma originated from brief interactions with strangers, but some also endured stigma and microaggressions from familiar individuals.

Enacted stigma from strangers

Some participants experienced stigmatization as fleeting, occurring during brief interactions with strangers. Molly shared two interpersonal experiences with strangers on the street. “I remember during the pandemic, someone on the street yelled 'fuck' at me and glared viciously. I believe it was related to the pandemic and anti-Asian hate. Another time, I was walking on campus, and a white man flipped me off with his middle finger. At first, I thought he was joking with someone behind me, but when I turned around, no one was there.”

Elva shared her discriminatory experience with a stranger on the street. “There was another time when I was walking quickly back to my dorm. The road to my dorm was the one I feared the most. In fact, anytime I had to walk there alone at night, I was extremely scared because I never knew who might suddenly appear. As I was approaching my dorm, there was a stretch of road, and a person, probably a white man, came up to me and directly yelled 'Chinese.' I was shocked and thought, 'How could you just point at me and shout 'Chinese' like that in the middle of the street, where everyone could hear?’”

Enacted stigma experienced by other Chinese international students

Besides experiencing discrimination directly, many participants shared about discriminatory incidents from their friends and peers. Consider the following examples:

Emma: “The Chinese international students living in the dormitory at the time had a WeChat group, and someone shared in the group that a classmate got beaten while walking on the road.”

Sherry shared, “I heard from many people that they got spit on, and I believe this was definitely fueled by the pandemic.”

Molly: “It seems that there are some homeless people who have also discriminated against international students in the past and will throw stones at international students.”

Rain: “I have friends who, while wearing masks on the street, were harassed by passersby accusing them of bringing the virus.”

JD shared his friend’s experience, “A friend of mine was pushed to the ground on 38th Street, the one where Paris Baguette is located.”

Enacted stigma with familiar people

Previous research indicated that stigma and discrimination often occur between strangers (Ji & Chen, 2023). However, some participants reported experiencing stigma, discrimination, and microaggressions from familiar individuals, with some instances being repetitive over time and occurring within academic settings.

Emma shared an experience occurring during her field placement: “During our first year of internship, my supervisor once said, 'Oh, I didn't expect this to be written so well—did you write this?' The audience at the time was me and two other interns, both of whom were American.”

Emma took some time to reflect on her supervisor's comment and eventually felt that it was inappropriate. She felt that she was treated as a foreigner and that her writing abilities were underestimated.

Julie shared an experience with an instructor where, despite participating in three-quarters of the class discussions, the instructor could not remember her name, while recalling the names of all the American students. What was worse, the instructor forgot to assign participation scores for her. Julie spoke: "The professor had a rule at the time that there was a participation grade worth 5 points, and she said, "You'll get these points as long as you come to my office hours." So, we all went to her office hours, but in the end, only two people—me and another Chinese male student—didn't receive those points. We quickly emailed her, asking if she might have missed us, and it turned out she had. But then I started thinking, 'How come you didn't miss anyone else? Why did you only miss the two Chinese students? Was it because of our names, or was it some sort of neglect or something else?'"

Molly also experienced different treatment from her lab administrator. Molly disclosed: "I felt there was a double standard. On one hand, I acknowledge that maybe I didn't do everything perfectly in the lab since I was new, but it seemed like she selectively overlooked issues with some white students while pointing them out to people like us (Asian). Okay, if you point it out, I'll correct my mistakes. Nowadays she hasn't pointed out any issues with my work because I've been doing a good job. Instead, she has shifted her focus to pointing out problems with other Asian students. I feel like this is an ongoing pattern, and it's tricky to address it or call her out on it."

The explanation of enacted stigma

When asked about Molly's thoughts on the causes of discrimination, she cited the political environment and social media as significant factors. Molly: "When Donald Trump was in office, the political climate and public opinion leaned toward conservatism, maintaining hostility toward immigrants like us. Under these combined effects, I felt that being a Chinese student during that period was particularly difficult. People here get their information mostly from the media, and they don't really care to learn about China. The media and political figures needed a target, and China conveniently became that target."

Julie believes that discrimination is deeply ingrained within family values. "Especially with white classmates, their values are influenced by their families. They might be outwardly friendly, but deep down, they feel they are different from us. You don't feel any overt discrimination at all, but there's a subtle sense of 'those who are not like us must think differently'. This is something you pick up on through very subtle cues. I don't blame them for microaggressions because it's how they've been brought up. For example, they might ask you questions like, 'Has any significant (negative event) happened in your country?' or 'Is it true that in your country, people are allowed to get married or have children at 16?'"

Julie also attributes the worsening discrimination to COVID-19 and China's rapid development in recent years. Julie: "I think the worsening discrimination is related to the pandemic and China's development in recent years. This situation has made people more sensitive, as the pandemic has intensified racial tensions and conflicts. Many of the topics people bring up are based on impressions they formed during the pandemic. For example, if you ask an American, they might not have known much about China before, but they still associate COVID-19 with China, believing it originated there."

Rebecca believes that during a crisis like the pandemic, people tend to be more conservative and protect their own interests, which leads to unfair treatment and discrimination against CIS. “I feel that when the overall situation in society—whether it's the economy, public health, or other factors—worsens, people of color, minority groups, and international students like us are affected much more than the local population. But it makes sense because every country prioritizes using its resources to protect its majority group and economy. For example, if something happened in China, the government would prioritize protecting Chinese citizens first. It's unlikely that their first option would be to protect international students. However, if you plan to live here (United States) long-term, you have to accept that discrimination will persist.”

Molly used the metaphor of riding a scooter to explain this phenomenon, suggesting that once people become sensitive to discrimination, they are more likely to notice and perceive additional discriminatory incidents. “During the epidemic, I became more aware of discrimination and sensitivity around me. It became more noticeable, like when I recently bought a scooter and suddenly started seeing many people riding them. Before I owned one, I didn't pay attention, even though they were always there.”

2) Societal-level discrimination

Participants also discussed societal-level discrimination in both their home and host countries. For example, Rebecca noticed that she experienced discrimination in a local hospital when she underwent a COVID-19 test before returning to her home country.

Rebecca: “I feel like there might have been some discrimination in certain places. When I needed to find a clinic or lab to do tests before returning to China, there were very few approved labs or hospitals at that time. I went to a hospital for the test, and I felt there was discrimination because, as a Chinese person, especially someone returning to China, we had to wait much

longer and pay higher fees. For example, while others might pay \$150 for the same test if they were going to other countries, I remember we had to pay \$240.”

It is noted that, for some participants, discrimination originated from their governments' policies and local individuals in their home country.

Rain evoked her feelings: “Regarding race, what affected me more were actually some of the comments from within China. At the time, the mainstream opinion in China was that they hoped international students would stay abroad and not come back to cause trouble.’ Seeing those comments was really upsetting for us.”

JD’s hometown is close to Hong Kong, but he was not allowed to enter Hong Kong as a Chinese citizen during the pandemic, while foreigners holding other countries’ passports were permitted entry. JD shared his experience, “One of the most striking experiences when returning to China was the issue of whether we could enter Hong Kong. Foreigners were allowed to enter—anyone with a passport other than a Chinese one could land in Hong Kong. The only ones who couldn’t enter were those holding a Chinese passport.”

Sherry seconded that, “At the very least, you should let me go home. It's unacceptable to deny me the right to return home. I'm a citizen of this country, and I'm holding my passport—why can't I go back? It just felt absurd.”

3) Racism-related vigilance and the feeling of exclusiveness

A few participants have not encountered discrimination or stigmatization themselves, but they all have heard about discriminatory experiences from their peers. JD is one of these participants. When asked about the impact of these indirect discriminatory experiences, JD stated that they made him more vigilant and increased his stress levels. “I'm worried. I've been constantly concerned about discrimination”.

Regardless of whether they experienced enacted stigma directly or not, most participants discussed their heightened vigilance related to racism. For instance, one participant mentioned her hypervigilance whenever she takes public transportation, feeling as though she risks her life each time. Julie: “I have to be extra cautious. I actually feel alright when I’m out walking because I’m careful to observe and assess the safety risks around me. However, when it comes to public transportation, every time I take it, it feels like I’m gambling with my life. Later on, if I really wanted to save money, I’d walk whenever possible. I’d rather be a bit more diligent and walk than take the subway or bus.”

Rain's example illustrates the perceived stigma related to wearing a mask and her desire to go unnoticed, attempting to become “invisible”. “At the beginning of the pandemic, when Americans weren't paying much attention yet, I felt very self-conscious every time I wore a mask outside. I was worried about how others would perceive me, afraid that they might have negative thoughts or say something about me. So, every time I went out with a mask on, I was unnecessarily cautious, hoping no one would notice me.”

Emma and Fu discussed how stigma and discrimination intensified their feelings of exclusion and influenced their decisions regarding where to pursue further education and job opportunities. Emma: “These cultural differences in the U.S., along with factors like discrimination, always make me feel like I won’t be able to truly fit in here.”

Fu: “Discrimination definitely had an impact on me, especially when it came to choosing where to pursue my graduate studies. Another factor was safety. It felt like I was being pulled in two directions—on one hand, I was homesick and felt drawn back to my home country, while on the other, the environment here made me feel pushed out. This dual effect is why I’ve always felt like the U.S. isn’t my place. At least, that’s my personal view—I don’t feel a sense of belonging

here. The pandemic probably intensified the discrimination and heightened that feeling of not belonging.”

4) Discrimination and stigma among minorities

In Link and Phelan's (2013) conceptualization of stigma, labeling differences is the first component. Even within minority groups, it is not uncommon to identify distinctions and subsequently separate "us" from "them."

Julie shared her experience of stigmatization from other minority groups: “Another incident occurred in one of my classes. The professor, who was African American, understandably focused on the needs of his community, which I can appreciate. However, I felt that the way he supported his people shouldn’t involve speaking negatively about another group. His approach was to make the point that African Americans' rights are often overlooked by the government, but he did it by saying things like, ‘You Asian Americans have anti-Asian hate, we have nothing.’ That was hard for me to accept. And it wasn’t just a one-time comment. If it had been, I could have seen it as a comparison. But he said it every single class. In that course, there were not only Chinese students but also other Asian classmates. We made a bet to see how many times he would bring up this issue during the semester. By the end, we counted that he mentioned it 11 times. In a semester of only about 15 or 16 weeks, he brought it up almost every class.”

5) Coping with discrimination

Participants have struggled with coping with discrimination due to their ethnic and national identity and other barriers. Some coped by directly confronting and providing information to counter stereotypes, while others resorted to secrecy and avoidance. A few

participants explored barriers to coping with discrimination and racism, such as language barriers, safety concerns, lack of support, and inability to respond in real-time.

Coping stigma-passing/secretcy

In the context of health, “passing” is a strategy used by stigmatized individuals to cope with stigma, as Goffman (1963) described it. However, in the case of racial stigmatization, some participants were unable to conceal their racial attributes but still expressed a desire to “pass” as a means of protecting themselves.

Molly shared her wish to “pass” in order to protect her safety, “I actually don’t like wearing a mask and glasses when I’m out on the street because it makes me feel like I look like a typical Asian person. It’s just a feeling of discomfort. At the same time, I also worry that it might make me more vulnerable to unexpected incidents or threats.”

As for Fu, he followed his relative’s advice and pretended his household was a typical local American student’s household to avoid racial-based warning letters. “That year during Chinese New Year, I wanted to put up Chinese New Year couplets. However, I heard that some Americans who probably were racists had sent warning greeting cards—essentially threatening messages—to every house they believed belonged to Chinese people. Since I followed my relative's advice and didn’t put up the couplets outside my door, they didn’t know I was Chinese. Or perhaps it was because I lived in a neighborhood mostly made up of Americans, and my house didn’t resemble a typical Chinese household. Sometimes, I even decorate my front door like Americans, hanging signs or other decorations, so they probably assumed I was just an American student. As a result, I wasn’t affected, but I had close friends who did receive one of those cards.”

Coping stigma-avoidance

Julie encountered a random person who was cursing at her and her friend on the street. Her response to the situation was avoidant, as shown here: “I tend to act tough only around people I’m close to. For example, when discussing a situation where I was discriminated against with my friends later, I’d get really angry and say things like, 'I just wanted to slap them,' or something harsh like that. But in reality, at the time, I definitely wouldn’t have dared to confront the racist. I would just avoid the situation, pretending I didn’t understand what they are saying when they curse...”.

Coping stigma-education

Rebecca was working at the Chinese Student Association (CSA) during her undergraduate studies. They heard some students using the term "Chinese virus" and reported this to her university.

Rebecca, “Then we said that using the term 'Chinese virus' is incorrect and unacceptable. It’s not like you can just use that name because it started in China. We were really upset when we heard people saying it. Actually, the Chinese Student Association (CSA) reported it to the school, and the school sent out some emails, explaining that this term shouldn’t be used and what the proper terminology is. They also talked about the origins of the virus and similar information.”

Coping stigma-confrontation

Julie was taking an international relations class, and the class often discussed some sensitive topics such as organ trade, and human trafficking. She felt that China was stigmatized as a country. Julie responded with confrontation: “I said that from an academic perspective, you need data to support your argument. You can’t make statements without evidence to back them

up. For example, when a UN report claims that the Chinese government isn't cooperating because China hasn't provided relevant human rights reports. The conclusion about Chinese human rights issues remains unidentified. You can't simply conclude that the lack of cooperation means the government is colluding with private entities in trafficking. I pointed out that this is a logical fallacy and a serious mistake in reasoning."

Coping stigma-talking with people

When the instructor did not assign the participation score, Julie spoke with another student from an ethnic minority who had shared a similar experience. when Rain experienced stigmatization from local Chinese groups, she found it helpful to discuss her feelings with people from other ethnic groups.

Rain: "I have a good friend who is American and white. I told him about some of my friends who had experienced racial discrimination and were verbally abused by Americans. At that time, I received emotional support from this friend."

Barriers to counteracting discrimination

A few participants explored barriers to coping with discrimination and racism, such as language barriers, safety concerns, lack of support, and inability to respond in real-time.

Elva was waiting for her flight at the airport when a white man approached her, starting a conversation about his interest in China. He asked Elva which country was better, the U.S. or China. Elva responded that each country is different and has its own pros and cons. The man then inquired about her plans after graduation, to which Elva mentioned she would like to return to China. The man repeated "Really?" three times. Elva felt that the stranger had preconceived assumptions and prejudices about China. However, she struggled to challenge his biases due to a language barrier.

“He asked very sensitive questions, and I felt really uncomfortable at the time. Many things are easy to explain in Chinese, but I didn’t know how to express them in English. Then he asked, 'Does this question make you feel like it’s hard to answer?' and I said, 'Yes, it’s a bit difficult to answer.’”

Molly spoke about safety concerns as a barrier when she encountered someone who cursed at her. “He was a tall Black man, around 6 feet. I was very upset and would have wanted to curse back if someone insulted me, but because he was so tall, I didn’t dare to. So, I just walked past quickly.”

Both Molly and Julie discussed how being perceived as a model minority in the U.S. and the lack of support from their own ethnic community acted as barriers to coping with discrimination.

Julie: “I think when it comes to speaking out, Asians tend to do so far less compared to other racial groups. This is partly because we often prefer not to cause trouble or draw attention to ourselves.”

Molly: “I understand that as a minority group, Asians won’t have the same visibility as, for example, Black people with initiatives like Black History Month. I hope that Asians don’t position themselves as the 'model minority,' where it’s assumed we can handle everything on our own and are doing just fine. I also hope that after the pandemic, Asians can shift their mindset a bit, perhaps becoming more proactive, because if we don’t speak up, no one will pay attention to us.”

Julie also spoke about the lack of support from her ethnic group: “I didn’t have much support around me, which left me feeling disappointed. People around me were outraged by the

situation, but they seemed to just let it go. When I tried to take action, no one even said, ‘Let’s do this together’.”

In addition to the aforementioned barriers, the fleeting and often hidden nature of discrimination and stigma made it difficult for some participants to respond. When Emma heard her supervisor's underestimation of her writing, she was unable to respond to the comment in real-time. “I didn’t react immediately at the time. When I thought, 'Wait a minute, something about this doesn’t sound right, but I didn’t respond to him on the spot.”

Molly spoke about the hidden feature of discrimination from her lab administrator, “You could tell she preferred talking to white people and was more nitpicky with Asians. You could sense it, but she hid it well. Even though you noticed, you couldn’t report her because there wasn’t any solid evidence. She would just say, ‘Oh, I’m just being fair and following the rules’.”

4. Changes in National Identity and Ethnic Identity

Another change participants experienced was related to their national and ethnic identities. Several participants felt a rise in Chinese nationalism, while a few reported a sense of losing their identities.

1) The Rise of Chinese Nationalism

Diseases, like other natural disasters, can either trigger greater cooperation or exacerbate tension and conflicts (Bieber, 2020). The findings highlight the emergence of Chinese nationalism among some participants, spurred by perceived discrimination from the non-Chinese population in the host country and satisfaction with their home country’s handling of the pandemic.

Participant Chestnut expressed satisfaction with how China “overcame” the pandemic and spoke about her pride in her national identity. “I am proud of being Chinese, especially when

that hospital was built in a matter of days. The video of the fast-built hospital went viral internationally, and it filled me with a great sense of pride. I also posted an edited video on Bilibili, where I compiled clips showing how China overcame the pandemic. At the time, I felt really proud.”

Fu expressed his feeling of patriotism: “I’ve always been proud of being Chinese and strongly identify with my culture. The pandemic only deepened my connection to both my culture and my government. I suppose I’ve become more patriotic. There are so many ordinary people I truly admire, (he previously talked about: like the delivery workers who kept working through the holidays, no matter how extreme the weather was). I know I couldn’t do it; if you asked me, I’d just stay at home. But they stepped up—that’s what makes them different. That’s the charm of China, in my opinion.”

Julie pointed out Chinese people’s protectiveness towards their own attributes. “People are still very protective of their own. I believe Chinese people are like that—we protect our own. I can criticize China a hundred times, saying this or that isn’t good, but outsiders can’t say a word about it.”

Julie explained further on the relationship between the rise of Chinese nationalism and COVID-19: “The pandemic made racial tensions and conflicts more pronounced, and many of the discussions that emerged were shaped by impressions people formed during the pandemic. Before, they might have been indifferent or neutral about China, just seeing it as another country. But after COVID, they began to stigmatize China with the virus. This made it even more important for us to clarify and address these misconceptions.”

Julie also shared that she sometimes feels like she plays the role of a police officer, becoming more reflective and sensitive about what her ethnic group has done wrong and how it

might leave a bad impression on other ethnic groups. Julie: “It's like playing the role of a police officer, where if an outsider says something negative about us, we feel the need to prove them wrong. Of course, if someone from our own group does something dishonorable, we also feel a sense of shame because they are part of our community. This makes us more conscious of our own behavior and words.”

Julie is not the only one who feels responsible for her country's image. Molly shared a similar sentiment in her account. “At the same time, I felt that during the pandemic, there was some stigmatization of China in the U.S. or a lack of understanding about China. This made me feel even more motivated to speak up for my country.”

2) The loss of national identity

Conversely, some participants expressed a sense of loss in their national identity due to marginalization experienced in both their home country, where they were "Othered" for their Chinese-ness (as they were seen as different from local Chinese for having studied abroad), and in the host country, where they also faced exclusion.

Sherry, for instance, is dissatisfied with the Chinese government's management of COVID-19, and she stated: “I feel like my sense of national identity has decreased because many of China's prevention measures and actions during the pandemic made me feel ashamed. The most important issue for me was, if they detected the first COVID-19 case, why did they cover it up instead of reporting it? Looking back over the past three years, it feels like a complete disaster, with so many man-made tragedies. I don't think I've identified with my country over the past three years.”

As recalled, JD spoke about his hometown being close to Hong Kong, but he was not allowed to enter Hong Kong with a Chinese passport. He expressed his feelings of exclusion and

how his national identity changed during the pandemic: “If it weren’t for the pandemic, I would have maintained a relatively neutral stance. However, the pandemic and the prevention measures have shaped my perspective. I no longer feel as strongly connected to my Chinese identity, as there’s a sense of being excluded—almost as if I’m not seen as truly Chinese.”

CIS was labeled as distinct from local Chinese groups and faced stigmatization during the pandemic. Rain’s account clearly expressed her feelings of not belonging to either side and the resulting loss of her identity. “I feel like I no longer belong to either side. In the U.S., many people still believe that the virus was brought by Chinese people, and coupled with existing racial discrimination, it makes me feel like I’ll always be seen as a foreigner. Even if I stay here for a long time, they may never see me as part of their community, and I’ll always be viewed as an outsider. On the other hand, I’ve realized that, to people back home in China, international students are seen as different. It feels like, in their eyes, we no longer fully belong to the Chinese identity because we’ve chosen to live in another country. We are no longer the same as them. At that time, I felt stuck in the middle, not being accepted by either side. It made me question what I should do in the future. If I’m not accepted in the U.S. and can’t fully relate to people in China anymore since we have different perspectives. It feels absurd like I’ve lost any sense of belonging or identity.”

A notable phenomenon was that participants sometimes confused national identity with ethnic identity. When discussing ethnic identity, some participants would shift to talking about national identity instead. This confusion may be another indication of heightened nationalism, as strong nationalistic sentiments can blur the distinctions between national and ethnic identities.

3) The change of ethnic identity

Most participants indicated that they felt a stronger connection to their Asian identity during the pandemic, especially after the interviewer clarified the concept of ethnic identity, such as identifying as Asian. They expressed pride in how Asians managed and addressed the pandemic and felt a greater identification with their Asian heritage. This heightened sense of Asian identity was also influenced by the marginalization they experienced from local communities.

JD spoke about his pride in being Asian because of the crisis awareness of Asian people: “During the pandemic, I felt that being Asian had some advantages. The sense of crisis that many Asians tend to have given me a sense of security. When the pandemic hit, things like the use of medications such as Tylenol and disposable testing kits were adopted relatively quickly by Asians. People responded very fast.”

The stigmatization from the U.S. increased Molly’s ethnic identity, “I feel like the pandemic deepened my identification with being Asian, especially due to the issues of discrimination that arose during that time. It felt really unfair. Many of us were just here to study and had no intention of immigrating to the U.S. or taking anyone’s job, yet we were collectively labeled that way. It left me feeling frustrated.”

Chapter 5: Analysis and Findings—Yang

Participants not only spoke about the challenges, losses, changes, and negative emotions they experienced during the COVID-19 pandemic but also shared the positives: their resilience, the support they received, and the growth they experienced as a result.

1. Active Coping

Despite the tremendous challenges faced by CIS, most participants were able to actively cope through self-care and by receiving support from others.

1) Self-care

Several participants emphasized the importance of self-protection, including wearing masks, sanitizing, and washing hands.

Fu shared his approach to self-protection, including how he managed and stocked up on supplies. During Winter break, he returned to his hometown when the pandemic started. His initial response was, " My first reaction was: what should I buy and stock up on this time? ".

Fu's first experience with a pandemic was during the SARS outbreak when he was in kindergarten. When asked what motivated him to stock up on supplies, he attributed it to Chinese culture "I feel like Chinese culture, especially when it comes to food and other aspects of life, always involves planning ahead. As long as the situation and conditions allow, there will always be a plan B or some form of stockpiling."

A few participants mentioned that their hobbies and entertainment helped them cope. Some found comfort in watching TV shows, writing, reading, and listening to music. For example, Molly talked about playing on her Nintendo Switch and browsing a popular online platform among the younger generation.

Molly: “The pandemic brought a big change for me—I started watching Bilibili. I didn't really watch it before, but after the pandemic, I found myself spending a lot of time watching videos on Bilibili every day. It felt more relatable to young people and had a more fun and lively vibe compared to the serious mainstream media. Since then, I've developed the habit of watching Bilibili for 1-2 hours a day, and I still do that now.”

Exercise was another coping strategy frequently mentioned by participants. Emma, for instance, benefited from team sports. Through these activities, she also made friends and built up her community. Emma: “I made friends through team sports. We played volleyball outdoors and took off our masks. Because of the group nature of the activity, I quickly formed connections and made friends.”

A few participants utilized mindfulness and positive self-talk. The example below from Molly illustrates how she incorporates positive self-talk into her daily life. “I give myself positive affirmations every day and choose to reject negative thoughts. For example, watching Bilibili is a great way for me to stay away from negative energy. Whether it's watching dance videos or food vloggers exploring restaurants, it reminds me that life is still quite interesting. I also reflect on how far I've come along the way, like how I made it to the U.S., and remind myself that since I've already overcome so many challenges in the past, there's no need to dwell in self-pity now. I make sure to focus on positive energy every day.”

2) Support from Others

All participants reported receiving support from various sources during the pandemic, including partners, peers, family members, and institutions. They emphasized the crucial role this support played in helping them cope.

Partner support

Many participants spoke about the importance of their partners in helping them maintain their emotional stability.

Fu shared that his partner supported him by engaging in activities together and chatting to help regulate his emotions. Fu “I’ve been pretty lucky during the pandemic because I have my girlfriend, and we live together, which has really helped me manage my emotions. We chat, play games like Go-Moku, and watch movies together, finding ways to regulate our emotions and keep each other company.”

Chestnut mentioned that her boyfriend helped her adjust to college life. Chestnut: “Because my boyfriend is American, he has been helping me adjust to life here. He’s American-born Chinese and spent some time living in China, so he shared a lot with me about campus life. Being a few years ahead of me, he gave me plenty of advice about school. When I finally arrived, for example, if my dorm was locked down due to COVID, I could stay at his place. During the more severe periods of the pandemic, dorms were frequently locked down.”

Peer support

When facing challenges in purchasing flight tickets, Rain found it very helpful to receive informational/cognitive support from her peers.

Rain: “At that time, we formed many online groups to share information about buying flight tickets, like which flights had tickets available. Since everyone knew how difficult it was to get a ticket, we shared as much information as possible. We also exchanged details about the equipment needed for returning to China, such as the specific requirements for COVID-19 tests. The online exchange of information and mutual support was incredibly helpful for me.”

Elva received some instrumental support/material support from her peers. “I did have friends who helped me a lot during that time. Some of my friends had their own houses, so I would send my stuff to their place, and they would drive over to pick things up for me. At that time, it was really hard to get things like protective suits and masks, which were in short supply. One of my friends, whose boyfriend was in the logistics business on the West Coast, managed to bring in a lot of protective suits and masks to the U.S. Knowing we were flying soon, he generously gave each of us several sets of these supplies.”

Molly not only benefited from COVID-related information shared by her roommates but also received emotional support from her peers. Molly: “People communicated more closely and shared their feelings of anxiety with each other, which helped ease the panic and give mutual support. But overall, it wasn't too bad. As adults, everyone was quite rational, and we supported one another to get through that period.”

Julie encountered some difficulty when she communicated with her parents, but she found the importance of being understood by her peers to support her. In her account, she received emotional support from her peers. Being far away in a foreign country, I realized how important friends are. What mattered most was that we could truly understand each other. People at the same stage of life, going through the same experiences, understood where our struggles and fixations were. They might not say much, but even a few simple words made us feel connected. When they shared their own experiences, we realized how similar our journeys were. It's like misery loves company—though it might seem a bit unhealthy, it provided a strange kind of comfort. Even in moments of feeling utterly defeated and joking about how everything seemed to be going wrong, there was still a sense of relief in knowing we weren't alone. It felt

like finding comedy within the tragedy—everyone was going through tough times, but somehow, that made things feel a little more bearable”.

Family support

COVID-19 did create tension for some families, but for others, it brought them closer together as they provided strategies and affirmation to help each other cope.

Sherry suspected that she had contracted COVID-19 and became extremely concerned about her health, especially given her history of childhood asthma. Although she could sense the anxiety from her parents, they provided her with support that helped her cope during this difficult time. “My mom told me, 'If you can walk up three flights of stairs without being short of breath, you don't have COVID.' So, I walked up, didn't feel short of breath, and my mom said, 'You're fine, you don't have it.' That really eased my worries.”

Elva's aunt was a key person in her recovery from the depressive episode. She went to her uncle and aunt's place for a weekend and her aunt's affirmation (esteem support) has been helpful for her.

Elva: “My aunt and uncle, especially my aunt, would tell me every day how great I was. She kept saying that my main issue was a lack of confidence in myself. Every day, she would keep encouraging me, and whenever I asked her if I looked bad, she'd always say, 'No, you look great.' After spending time with them, I did feel a bit better.”

Institutional support

It was noted that several participants utilized their institution's counseling center during the pandemic. JD mentioned that he was too busy to address his negative emotions, but fortunately, he was referred to counseling services during a regular check-up.

JD: “One time, I went to the campus health center for a small issue, either to get something checked or because I hadn’t gotten a vaccine yet—something minor like that. But when I checked in, the computer asked some questions about my mental health. I might have been stressed at the time, and my answers must have raised some flags for the doctors or nurses. As a result, they recommended that I seek therapy through the counseling center.”

Emma attended both individual therapy and group therapy to treat her panic attack. “I’m not sure if I can attribute it to just this, or if it’s the combination of everything, but I do feel that my anxiety has been improving recently. It’s probably the result of multiple factors coming together.”

JD had an instructor who enjoyed playing mahjong with students. JD found that playing mahjong with his instructor in the cafeteria not only helped him relax but also provided an opportunity to reconnect with them. JD: “I actually think playing mahjong helps bridge the gap with teachers, making up for the connections that were disrupted by the pandemic. It also helps strengthen relationships with classmates.”

2. An opportunity to explore national/ethnic Identity

The pandemic triggered an identity crisis for some participants but also offered an opportunity for CIS to explore their ethnic identity. Emma described that the pandemic helped her realize the differences in her ethnic identity compared to other ethnic groups. She stressed that “this pandemic helped me to recognize (认识), not necessarily identify (认可) my own identity. It’s not about identifying with it, but realizing that this label makes our group different from others.”

Fu and Molly shared examples of their journey of identity search, becoming more affirming in their identities.

Fu previously shared that he “passed” his identity (not putting up Chinese New Year couplets) to avoid receiving harassing cards. During the pandemic, he began rethinking his ethnic identity and decided to stop using his English name, choosing instead to use his Chinese name, which is a symbiotic way to achieve his identity. He feels confident about his identity and this self-concept is positive (Oyserman, 2001).

Fu: “I stopped using my English name after reading an article during the pandemic. The article discussed how a Chinese name represents Chinese culture and how our generation should encourage Western people to adapt to us. It pointed out that if Japanese ramen can be called 'ramen,' then why should Chinese 'Lamian' be called 'hand-pulled noodles'? We should stand by our own culture and make others accept it, just like we accept names like Dr. Bush or Christine without them needing to change. It’s about equality, and that’s why I decided to stick with my own name and stop using an English one. For convenience, I might say, 'You can call me X' (since my first name has two characters and I use the first for simplicity), but I no longer use my English nickname.”

Molly: “I think the pandemic strengthened my ethnic identity as an Asian. Before that, I completed my bachelor’s degree in China and then came to the U.S. for graduate studies. Before coming to the U.S., I was determined to adapt to American culture. For example, six months prior to leaving, I started eating Subway regularly, even though I didn’t particularly like it. I thought that since rice wouldn’t be readily available in the U.S., I’d have to eat Subway every day. I made a significant effort to immerse myself in the local culture. I really wanted to fit in when I first arrived and also tried my best to make friends with classmates from different countries.

After the pandemic and living with my roommates for a while, I realized that going back to a Chinese cultural environment is actually quite comfortable. Now, I've become more laid-back and don't put in much effort to make American friends anymore—I just do whatever feels comfortable. I feel like the pandemic deepened my ethnic identity with being Asian, especially with the issues of discrimination that arose during that time. It felt really unfair because we were all just here to study, not to immigrate or take anyone's job. But we were collectively labeled in that way, which made me feel a bit frustrated.”

Molly's ethnic identity achievement also guided her actions of wearing Hanfu (Han-style clothes) in public. “During the pandemic, I spent more time online and noticed things like Koreans allegedly 'stealing' our Hanfu (traditional Chinese clothing). Seeing things like that made me really angry, and I started thinking that I should wear Hanfu more often in public. I never had those kinds of thoughts before, but over time, I found myself reconnecting more with Chinese culture.”

3. Positive Gains - A Blessing in Disguise

All participants identified positive outcomes from the pandemic, including discovering their career paths, cherishing human connections, appreciating life, increasing awareness of mental health, and realizing the importance of self-reliance and preparation.

Finding One's Career Path

Julie has been upset about having to look for a job after graduating from her undergraduate after she declined her graduate school offer due to COVID-19. Luckily, she found her career aspiration when she was working, and she called this process “a blessing in disguise”.

Julie: “When I started working, I began thinking more about my career path, and that job actually helped me decide on my master's degree later. I was working in HR, specifically dealing

with the Social Security Trust Fund, which influenced my decision to pursue a master's in social policy. So, in a way, it felt like a blessing in disguise.”

Julie also spoke about how this pandemic helped her be more persistent about her aspiration. “It has made me more determined to pursue the things I truly want. Before, without the pandemic as a turning point, I think everyone lived more comfortably. It was like the "boiling frog" situation—slowly adapting without realizing the need for change. But with the pandemic, it became clear that what I was doing wasn't my ultimate goal.

The external pressures and hardships intensified and amplified the internal struggles. In this kind of environment, being stuck in a job that isn't fulfilling or in a situation that isn't ideal feels even more painful and motivates you to make a change. While pursuing what I truly want also comes with its own challenges and pain, I feel more determined to do what I want because everything else would be even more painful. That's how I see it.”

Cherishing Human Connection

Most participants spoke about how they realized the importance of human connection and how they value their relationships more deeply through the pandemic. In Emma's account, “In times like the pandemic, the value of material things changes rapidly. However, the value of support between people remains the most solid and enduring.”

Molly shared that she learned to communicate with people through online methods during the pandemic, and this experience made her value in-person communication more deeply. “Now, I cherish face-to-face interactions with people even more. I've always preferred in-person communication, as that suits my personality, and I really don't like typing on WeChat. But because of the pandemic, I've become more skilled at using WeChat emojis to express my emotions. I truly value the emotional connection that comes with face-to-face conversations, but

since that wasn't possible during the pandemic, I had to adapt and learn how to socialize online. This experience has also made me appreciate even more the things I now experience in real life."

Appreciating Life and Self-reflection

The pandemic prompted a greater appreciation for life for a few participants. Rebecca: "I also feel that this pandemic has made me cherish my life more, along with my health. I've become more concerned about these things. It made me realize how fragile people can be."

Several participants spoke about the challenges that led to significant personal growth and self-reflection.

Fu expressed that the pandemic paused his life and provided him with an opportunity to reflect and simplify things. Fu: "The pandemic eliminated many distractions for me, like going out to have fun, eating out, or hanging out with friends. It gave me the chance to slow down and reflect, to think back and look back on everything that happened before."

Mental Health Awareness

Several participants realized the importance of mental health and the universality of emotions. Elva experienced depression and she shared her lesson learned from the pandemic. "I believe emotional stability is really important. When it comes to facing uncertainty and things beyond my control, I think it's best to maintain a calm mindset. I tend to be someone who gets anxious easily and worries about the future."

Emma pointed out the universality of emotions and suggested that this shared understanding might help bridge connections between people from different backgrounds. Emma: "One thing the pandemic made me realize is that (sigh) people may never fully understand each other in different contexts. However, certain emotions are universal. Context shapes how we perceive the little things in our daily lives, as well as how we view the world,

patterns, and changes. These perspectives can vary greatly depending on the context. But when it comes to emotions like anger, we can all recognize that, at the very least, a common desire is being suppressed, even if the reasons behind it are different.”

Self-Reliance and Preparedness

Some participants developed a greater sense of self-reliance and the importance of being prepared. Rain spoke: “You have to rely on yourself most of the time and can’t expect external circumstances to work in your favor. For example, when buying flight tickets, you have to secure them on your own. Even with classes, you can’t expect the schedule to be adjusted just because you’ve returned to your home country in a different time zone—you have to adapt to their schedule. You can’t expect the outside world to cater to your needs; instead, it’s about adapting to the pace of change yourself.”

Chestnut learned about the importance of being prepared: “One of the things I learned during the pandemic is that you need to be well-prepared, especially when you're alone in the U.S. You have to make sure you have everything stocked at home, like water, paper, and other essential supplies. I typically stocked up enough to last for three months, which was really important. Additionally, it's crucial to keep contact information organized. For example, phone numbers for the student health center, medical services, International Student and Scholar Services (ISSS), visa-related offices, and other important resources should all be saved and easily accessible.”

4. The Benefits of Virtual Learning

In the Yin chapter, while we addressed the challenges of virtual learning, several participants also highlighted its benefits, particularly in terms of flexibility, convenience, and more lenient grading. Chestnut, for instance, appreciated the flexibility, noting, “I think the

curriculum was very flexible because the teachers understood that many students might contract COVID-19. So, instead of having strict weekly deadlines, there was a lot of homework that was due by the end of the semester.”

Fu emphasized the convenience aspect: “One advantage of online classes was that I didn’t have to find or pay for parking. For an 8:30 am class, I only needed to get up at 8:25 am.”

Rebecca remarked on the more lenient grading options: “The school offered more flexible grading options that year. For example, for certain courses, you could choose to receive credit without the grades appearing on your transcript if you didn’t perform well.”

Chapter 6: Discussion and Implications

The aim of this study was to understand the interpersonal experiences of Chinese international students (CIS) during the COVID-19 pandemic, with a focus on the following sub-questions:

1. Especially as a result of the pandemic, does this population face stigma and discrimination in the context of interpersonal encounters with the non-Chinese population?
2. Do they have mental health challenges?
3. How do they cope?
4. In what ways does the family shape Chinese international students' experiences?
5. Are there any ethnic and national identity changes in the context of the pandemic?

This study highlights the complex challenges faced by CIS during the pandemic, including the experiences of stigma, discrimination, mental health struggles, and issues related to national and ethnic identity. Most participants employed active coping strategies, such as self-care and seeking support from others. Among different types of support, peer support emerged as particularly crucial, while family support was more nuanced—sometimes highly beneficial but at other times counterproductive due to high expectations and cultural values that discourage giving up. Despite participants' active coping efforts, the combination of social isolation, experiences of discrimination and stigma, and confusion surrounding their identity significantly impacted their overall well-being and triggered mental health crises. I will discuss the findings by addressing each sub-question individually.

1. Stigma, Perceived Discrimination

The stigmatization process

As Sastry and Ban (2020) noted, “Epidemics have always been racialized.” Historically, people have coped with the fear of contagious diseases by blaming and ostracizing the “other” (Joffe, 1999). Our data revealed that all our participants experienced race-based stigma during the pandemic, with the Chinese or Asian population being targeted due to the virus being discovered in China. The data also highlighted how stigmatized CIS perceived, experienced, and coped with discrimination and stigma. The majority of participants reported experiencing or hearing from their peers about various forms of discrimination and stigmatization, ranging from microaggressions to overt verbal or even physical attacks. An increased level of racism-related vigilance was also observed.

According to Ji & Chen (2023), the stigmatization process experienced by CIS during the COVID-19 pandemic is often characterized as “fleeting (mostly short interactions with strangers), ambiguous yet hostile (non-verbal), and situational (hard to define)” (p. 1967). However, our research revealed that stigmatization also occurs repeatedly in academic and professional settings, sometimes originating from familiar people or even other minority groups. This difference in findings may be attributed to the timing of the interviews and the small sample size. Ji and Chen’s (2023) participants were interviewed in the early stages of the pandemic, between March and May 2020 (p. 1966). At that time, due to the shelter-in-place orders, participants had paused in-person learning in academic and professional settings, which likely explains the absence of reports regarding repeated stigmatization in those environments. In contrast, our research, conducted between January and March 2023, found that participants had been back to in-person learning for some time, allowing them to experience stigma from familiar individuals in these settings. My study further emphasizes the often-hidden nature of discrimination and stigmatization, echoing Lashley’s (2022) assertion that, although legislation

has banned racial discrimination in most developed market economies, prejudice and discrimination persist, often in more covert and subtle forms.

Our research uncovered not only interpersonal-level stigmatization but also societal-level discrimination. Some forms of societal discrimination like high expectations of “model minority” and Visa issues existed before the pandemic, while others emerged during it, such as disparities in the cost of COVID-19 PR testing for those returning to China compared to other countries.

CIS who reported being stigmatized vividly described their feelings of exclusion and difficulty fitting in, aligning with Phelan et al. (2008), who argued that stigma may serve to “keep people away” to avoid disease. There is compelling evidence demonstrating that stigma and discrimination negatively impact psychological well-being (e.g., Paradies, 2006; Pascoe & Richman, 2009; Williams et al., 2003). Our data revealed that most of the participants experienced racism-related vigilance, the feeling of exclusiveness, and increased anxiety.

The cause, the barriers, and coping with discrimination and stigmatization

Participants identified several causes of discrimination and stigmatization, including white superiority, national protectionism during the crisis, the perceived threat posed by China's rapid development to Western countries, and the influence of social media. While CIS employ various active coping strategies, they often struggle to manage discrimination. Some resort to passing/secretcy, and avoidance, while others cope through educating others to counter stereotypes, challenging stigmatizing behaviors, and talking with people. These coping strategies are consistent with those identified in response to region-based stigma (stigma rooted in geographical regional differences) and discrimination (Fan et al., 2021). A few participants also identified barriers to coping with discrimination and racism, such as language barriers, safety concerns, lack of support, and the inability to respond in real-time.

2. Mental Health Challenges

The study revealed that participants faced significant mental health challenges during the pandemic, including widespread feelings of loneliness, anxiety, and depression. This finding is consistent with existing studies on the prevalence of mental health issues (Haft & Zhou, 2021; Ke et al., 2023; Lin et al., 2022; Zhang et al., 2024) among CIS during the pandemic. In addition to the stressor of stigma and discrimination, many participants experienced social isolation, which contributed to feelings of loneliness and symptoms of anxiety and depression.

While social isolation has been a common challenge for international students (Sherry et al., 2010), the state-wide shelter-in-place orders and social distancing measures to prevent infection may have further intensified the isolation experienced by CIS (Dong et al., 2024). Participants expressed that social isolation heightened their sense of loneliness, restricted their typical methods of stress relief, and heightened anxiety when they re-engaged with others after long periods of sheltering at home. This supports existing literature that highlights how the feeling of loneliness resulting from social isolation during the pandemic is strongly linked with psychosocial risk factors, such as depressive and anxiety symptoms (Dong et al., 2024).

Some participants expressed anxiety and worry related to the disease itself, as well as a sense of lacking control due to the rapid and unpredictable changes brought on by the pandemic, which aligns with Zhang et al.'s (2024) findings that uncertainty and anxiety induced by decisions and policies in response to COVID-19 was a significant stressor. Depression also surfaced among participants, often triggered by disrupted life plans and medical conditions resulting from the pandemic.

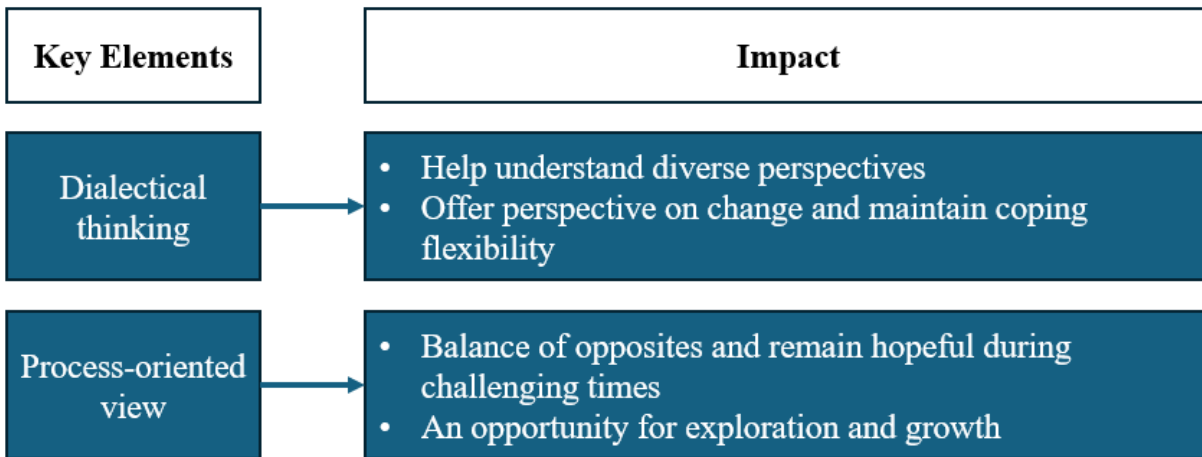
3. Coping

Despite the significant challenges faced by CIS, most participants actively coped through self-care and by seeking support from others. Participants identified various self-care strategies, including self-protection measures against illness including wearing masks, sanitizing, and washing hands, maintaining hobbies, engaging in exercise, and practicing mindfulness.

Although social isolation was a major challenge to participants' mental health, all reported receiving support from various sources during the pandemic, such as partners, peers, counseling services, family members, and institutions. They emphasized the crucial role this support played in helping them cope. These findings align with Ke et al. (2023), which suggests that social support is a protective factor for international students, with those receiving higher levels of support during the pandemic being less likely to report major depression.

I found Yin and Yang's philosophy (see chart 1 below for details) to be a key model representing how CIS coped, manifesting through dialectical thinking and a process-oriented worldview. In a world marked by deglobalization, increasing political divides, and heightened uncertainty, the ability to understand diverse perspectives and maintain coping flexibility is essential. Participants' dialectical thinking helped them navigate these differences and cope with discrimination. While acknowledging the other minority group's experiences with discrimination, participants also recognized the discrimination faced by the Asian community. This aligns with a common Chinese dialectical belief: "A is correct, and B is not wrong either" (Lin, 2009, p. 113). Some participants noted that understanding the roots of stigma and discrimination helped them put their experiences into perspective, while simultaneously acknowledging that their suffering from discrimination is valid as well.

Chart 1: Yin and Yang Philosophy as Coping



Dialectical thinking offers a unique perspective on change, contradictions, and the meanings of events (Hou & Zhu, 2002; Peng & Nisbett, 1999). For example, dialectical thinkers tend to accept that seemingly opposing propositions can coexist in a balanced and harmonious way. This thinking style can be an effective coping mechanism. Basseches (1984) suggested dialectical thinking is linked to coping flexibility, and Cheng (2009) found that a higher capacity for dialectical thinking is associated with greater coping flexibility, which, in turn, leads to lower levels of anxiety and depression, fewer psychosomatic symptoms, and reduced stress-related symptoms (Cheng et al., 1999; Fresco et al., 2006; Katz et al., 2005; Mino & Kanemitsu, 2005).

Jiang (2013) highlighted that in Yin-Yang philosophy, the Chinese believe in the balance of opposites. This belief allows them to remain hopeful during challenging times, recognizing that hardships are temporary, much like how darkness is inevitably followed by dawn. This dialectical thinking leads them to believe that nothing is entirely good or bad, and even in the most challenging situations, one can focus on the positive and create something good.

Some participants viewed the pandemic as an opportunity for exploration and growth, acknowledging the dynamic nature of the world. Despite facing numerous challenges, all

participants maintained an optimistic outlook, reflecting on positive outcomes such as valuing human connections, appreciating life more deeply, and increasing awareness of mental health. This perspective aligns with the concept of posttraumatic growth, which Tedeschi and Calhoun (2004) describe as “the experience of positive change that occurs as a result of the struggle with highly challenging life crises” (p. 1).

4. The role of family

Families played a complex role in shaping participants' experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic. A few participants described feeling supported by their families through their presence, problem-solving amid constant changes, and encouraging words. This aligns with findings from Gayatri and Irawaty (2022) on family resilience, which highlight the importance of adaptability and effective communication in contributing to family resilience. However, for most participants, family worry was a significant theme, with many reporting that their families experienced considerable stress and concern about their health and well-being while studying abroad. This reflects the work of Barzilay et al. (2020), who found that people often worry more about family members contracting COVID-19 than about themselves. Hu et al. (2022) further emphasized the complexity of family members' roles during the COVID-19 pandemic, as they shifted between multiple responsibilities, exposing them to heightened emotional vulnerability and stress.

Several participants noted that their parents' support was primarily financial, covering daily needs and COVID-19 prevention. This practical support was often accompanied by a lack of emotional understanding, leading to a disconnect in the parent-child relationship. This aligns with research highlighting the importance of emotional attunement in effective family support. Families often navigate a delicate balance between emotional engagement—stemming from

heightened worries about their children—and emotional disengagement, as they try to appear calm and composed during times of crisis (Hu et al., 2022). Participants also noted the tension arising from high parental expectations, compounded by cultural values that discourage giving up. These expectations often failed to consider the unprecedented challenges posed by the pandemic, such as disruptions to academic plans and restricted mobility, placing additional pressure on the participants. This dynamic highlights the need for greater emotional support and adaptability within families to foster family resilience, particularly during the COVID-19 crisis.

5. Ethnic/national identity change

Bieber (2022) suggested that COVID-19 has triggered psychological effects, including collective anxiety, and has acted as a catalyst for intensifying existing nationalist sentiments (Zhang and Jamali, 2022). The findings highlight the rise of Chinese nationalism among some participants, which is evident in their patriotism, a sense of responsibility for preserving their country's image, and a reluctance to allow others to criticize their nation.

Previous literature suggests that the rise of nationalism can be attributed to discrimination in the host country, referred to as the push effect (Long, 2022), and that ethnic identity has served as a protective factor against internalized stigma (Phinney, 2003; Mossakowski, 2003). Our research indicates that, in addition to these factors, Chinese nationalism also emerged from participants' satisfaction with how the Chinese government managed the pandemic, as well as cultural traits such as a preparedness mindset, and collective consciousness, especially during times of crisis.

Additionally, some existing research (Yu, 2021; Jin & Wang, 2022) has highlighted the "caught in-the-middle" situation for CIS, who experience stigmatization from both their host and

home countries, leading to a loss of identity and a sense of not belonging to either side. Our research also confirmed this experience for some participants.

The pandemic prompted participants to engage in a process of identity exploration. All the participants are Han ethnic in China. As members of the Han ethnic group, the majority in China, coming to the U.S. might have marked their first significant encounter with racial identity exploration, which was further accelerated by the pandemic and experiences of discrimination.

Participants experienced changes and confusion regarding their national identity but also embarked on a journey of identity search, such as Fu, who transitioned from "passing" to embracing his identity by using his Chinese name. The challenges of COVID-19, along with associated discrimination and stigma, provided an opportunity for CIS to delve deeper into their national and ethnic identities.

As Erikson (1958, 1963) proposed, identity formation involves achieving a sense of wholeness, often through a period of identity crisis during adolescence. Several models of ethnic identity development similarly suggest that an achieved identity results from a crisis or awakening that prompts exploration or experimentation, ultimately leading to a commitment to or incorporation of one's ethnicity (Cross, 1978; Helms, 1990; Kim, 1981; Atkinson et al., 1983, as cited in Phinney, 1993). In the context of this study, the pandemic crisis acted as a pivotal turning point for some participants, propelling them from Phinney's (1993) first stage, "Unexamined Ethnic Identity," through the second stage, "Ethnic Identity Search," and toward the final stage of "Achieved Ethnic Identity".

Implication for Social Work Education

This study highlights the complex challenges faced by CIS during the pandemic, including the experience of discrimination and identity issues. Despite employing active coping

strategies, discrimination and stigma is one factor to significantly impact their well-being. These findings underscore the importance of creating inclusive, anti-racist campus environments to address discrimination and racism within academic settings.

This study suggests that the social work curriculum could benefit from greater diversity by incorporating a broader range of perspectives, particularly those related to immigrants and international populations. This inclusion would help future social workers better understand the unique challenges faced by these communities and support CIS in adapting and integrating more effectively. Additionally, the curriculum should integrate discussions of social welfare policies, laws, ethics, and practices from various regions of the world, allowing students to gain a more comprehensive understanding of global social work. By doing so, social work education could better equip students to address the needs of an increasingly diverse and interconnected world, ensuring they are prepared to support clients from various cultural and national backgrounds with sensitivity and competence.

The study also emphasized the need for academic institutions to establish systems to address racism effectively. These systems should protect students' privacy, hold individuals accountable for discriminatory comments or behaviors, and ensure that students feel safe from retaliation when reporting racism. Institutions should also create open spaces and share resources to address racially discriminatory incidents and news.

In addition to other forms of support provided in the academic setting, hiring school personnel, such as advisors with diverse backgrounds, including immigrants, may help CIS feel more understood and supported. Simplifying the referral process for resources like writing centers or career services and making them more accessible could further enhance support for these students.

Implication for Social Work Practice

Clinicians working with CIS must be culturally sensitive and recognize the diverse experiences and needs of this population. It is essential to remain open-minded and embrace a process-oriented perspective, acknowledging that individuals within the same population may be at different stages of their ethnic or national identity development. When working on family issues with the CIS population, it is crucial to explore the complexity of family dynamics, including generational gaps and cultural differences between parents and children. These students often experience internal conflicts, as they were raised in a traditional, collectivist Chinese culture while receiving higher education in a Western, individualistic environment. Understanding this duality is essential for addressing the emotional strain and challenges that arise from balancing cultural expectations with personal needs and growth.

Our findings suggest that the Yin and Yang philosophy, with its emphasis on dialectical thinking and a process-oriented worldview, can serve as an effective coping mechanism for managing crisis and pandemic-related stress. By recognizing and balancing opposing forces, this approach allows individuals to navigate uncertainty and change, promoting coping flexibility and maintaining an optimistic outlook during challenging times. Future research should explore how this philosophy can be applied as a treatment modality or tool for managing crises, such as global pandemics or other stress-inducing events. Empirical studies could further validate its effectiveness in coping and promoting well-being.

The limitations of this study

This study has several limitations. First, the sample size is small and may not represent the experiences of CIS across the U.S. All participants were recruited from an institution in an urban setting, which means CIS from rural campuses may have had different experiences during

the COVID-19 pandemic. Additionally, all participants identified as heterosexual, so future research could benefit from including LGBTQ populations to capture a broader spectrum of experiences. Moreover, the majority of participants in this study were graduate students and they were able to cope and find positives during the pandemic, which may be due to a selection bias—those who struggled significantly might have opted out of the study, influencing the overall findings.

Secondly, the timing of the interviews likely influenced participants' responses. Conducted between January and April 2023, toward the end of the COVID-19 pandemic, the interviews may have captured more optimistic reflections. The World Health Organization declared the end of the pandemic phase in May 2023. While this allowed participants to reflect on a longer time span, interviews conducted earlier in the pandemic or during its peak may have elicited different, perhaps more negative, experiences.

Thirdly, there were challenges in clearly distinguishing certain themes. For example, changes in ethnic identity were initially categorized under the "Yin" theme due to their perceived negative aspects. However, when reframed as opportunities to explore national or ethnic identity, these changes were reclassified under the "Yang" theme. Additionally, CIS shared experiences that paralleled those of many in the U.S., such as challenges with virtual learning, while also encountering experiences uniquely tied to their racial and ethnic identities. This overlap underscores the complexity and fluidity of participants' experiences, reflecting the dynamic and multifaceted nature of these themes.

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Appendix A: Interview Guide

Introduction: I appreciate that you are taking time to share your thoughts with me today. The information you share will be used to help us learn more about the interpersonal experiences of Chinese international students during the pandemic. You are the expert on this process, and I am interested in whatever you want to tell me.

Were you able to review the consent forms I sent to you before this interview? Do you have any questions? Please remember that if any of the questions asked make you feel uncomfortable, you don't have to answer them. You are free to give as much or as little information as you are comfortable with. You have the right to end the interview at any time. You can choose your own pseudonyms to protect your confidentiality after our interview.

1. Can you tell me your initial reaction when you first heard about COVID-19?

Probe: When was the first time you heard about COVID-19?

Where were you at that time?

What were your initial thoughts about COVID-19?

How did you feel about COVID-19 initially?

2. How did COVID-19 shape your life?

Probe: Tell me about how your academic life changed over the course of the pandemic (in the beginning phase of COVID-19, in the middle phase, and post-COVID-19).

Has your social life changed over the course of the pandemic? In what ways?

3. What are the challenges for you during the pandemic?

Probe: What has been the most challenging in your academic life?

What has been the most challenging in your social life?

4. How have you been dealing with those challenges?

Probe: Are there any internal coping mechanisms or/and people/resources/support being helpful/supportive to you? (If they talked about challenges)

5. How have your emotions evolved over the course of the pandemic?

Probe: Have you experienced any difficult feelings (like sadness, loneliness, panic, etc)?

Have you had any somatic symptoms (like headache, heart palpitation, etc.)?

Have you had any poor appetite or trouble sleeping?

Do you feel in control of your own situation?

6. How do you cope with difficult feelings?

Probe: What do you do when you feel down?

7. Have you experienced any racial discrimination like being treated unfairly because of your race during the pandemic? Have you experienced any physical or verbal assault?

Can you please share your experience if so?

8. How does the pandemic affect your ethnic identity?

Probe: do you identify strongly with your ethnic group (Asian) more or less?

9. How does the pandemic affect your national identity?

Probe: do you identify strongly with your nationality (Mainland China) more or less?

10. In what ways does your family shape your experiences during COVID-19?

11. Imagine a miracle happened and all your wishes come true, what can you imagine governments/your community/universities could do differently to support you in the pandemic?

12. What have you learned from this pandemic?

13. Is there anything else you want to tell me about this experience

Appendix B: Data Display



Yin

- Changes in role functioning (student, family, friends)
- Changes in personal development (career plan changes & mental health issues)
- Discrimination & stigmatization
- Changes in National/Ethnic identity

Yang

- Active Coping
- Identity Exploration
- Positive gains
 - Find career paths
 - Cherishing human connections
 - Increase mental health
 - Appreciating life awareness

Appendix C: IRB Approval



DATE: 23-Nov-2022
TO: Yin Ling Irene Wong
CC:

Institutional Review Board
3600 Civic Center Blvd., 9th Floor
Philadelphia, PA 19104
Phone: 215-573-2540 (Federalwide
Assurance # 00004028)

RE:
IRB PROTOCOL#: 852516
PROTOCOL TITLE: A Thematic Analysis Study on Chinese International Students'
Interpersonal Experiences in the Context of the Triple Pandemic

SPONSOR: NO SPONSOR NUMBER
REVIEW BOARD: IRB #8

IRB SUBMISSION: NOTICE OF EXEMPTION

Dear Dr. Wong,

The above referenced protocol was reviewed by the Institutional Review Board on 22-Nov-2022. It has been determined that the proposal meets eligibility criteria for IRB review exemption authorized by 45 CFR 46.104, category 2.

ONGOING REVIEW:

- The IRB must be kept apprised of any and all changes in the research that may have an impact on the IRB review mechanism needed for a specific proposal. You are required to submit modifications to the IRB if any changes are proposed in the study that might alter the exemption determination, or any applicable HIPAA waiver determination. New procedures that may have an impact on the exemption determination, or HIPAA waiver determination cannot be initiated until Committee approval has been given.
- Consistent with the federal regulations, IRB approval of this protocol will not expire and no continuing reviews will be required for this protocol. The IRB may occasionally contact you to confirm that the trial is still ongoing and that you are adhering the previously stated requirement to submit modifications.

COMMITTEE APPROVALS: You are responsible for assuring and maintaining other relevant committee approvals. This human subjects research protocol should not commence until all relevant committee approvals have been obtained.

If your study is funded by an external agency, please retain this letter as documentation of the IRB's determination regarding your proposal.

If you have any questions about the information in this letter, please contact the IRB administrative staff. A full listing of staff members and contact information can be found on our website: <http://www.irb.upenn.edu>

***This letter constitutes official University of Pennsylvania IRB correspondence. ***

Appendix D: Informed Consent

RESEARCH SUBJECT INFORMED CONSENT FORM

UNIVERSITY OF PENNSYLVANIA

RESEARCH SUBJECT

INFORMED CONSENT FORM

Protocol Title: A Qualitative Study On Chinese International Students’
Interpersonal Experiences During the Pandemic

Principal Linlin Fan

Investigator: linlinf@upenn.edu

Emergency Contact: Doctorate of Social Work Program at the School of Social
Practice and Policy, University of Pennsylvania

Research Study Summary for Potential Subjects

You are invited to participate in a research study. Your participation is voluntary, and you should only participate if you completely understand what the study requires and what the risks of participation are. You should ask the study team any questions you have related to participating before agreeing to join the study. If you have any questions about your rights as a human research participant at any time before, during, or after participation, please contact the Institutional Review Board (IRB) at (215) 898-2614 for assistance.

The research study is being conducted to understand Chinese international students’ (whose place of origin is Mainland China) experiences in the context of COVID-19.

Your participation will take approximately 1 to 1.5 hours to participate in a virtual interview. Your opinions are important for this study. The responses collected in the interview will help us understand the interpersonal experiences of Chinese international students during COVID-19.

The study poses no more than minimal risk. The interview is not intended to result in cognitive, emotional, or psychological distress. Participation is voluntary and confidential. You are free to decline or stop participation at any time during or after the initial consenting process. The information will be destroyed if you decide to leave the study. Please note that there are other factors to consider before agreeing to participate such as other possible risks not discussed here.

Why am I being asked to volunteer?

You are being asked to take part in a research study. Your participation is voluntary which means you can choose whether or not to participate. If you decide to participate or not to participate there will be no loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled. Before you make a decision, you will need to know the purpose of the study, the possible risks and benefits of being in the study, and what you will have to do if you decide to participate.

If you do not understand what you are reading, do not sign it. Please ask the researcher to explain anything you do not understand, including any language contained in this form. If you decide to participate, you will be asked to sign this form and a copy will be given to you. Keep this form, in it, you will find contact information and answers to questions about the study. You may ask to have this form read to you.

What is the purpose of the study?

This study is being conducted for a dissertation. The purpose of the study is to understand the interpersonal experiences of Chinese international students and their needs in the course of COVID-19 and the relevant factors contributing to psychological distress.

How long will I be in the study?

The study will take approximately 1 to 1.5 hours.

Where will the study take place?

You will be asked to participate virtually via Zoom.

What will I be asked to do?

You will be asked a series of questions related to your experience as an international student during the pandemic.

What are the risks?

The completion of the interview is not intended to result in cognitive, emotional, or psychological distress. Participation is voluntary and confidential. There are no adverse consequences in withdrawing from the study.

The study poses no more than minimal risk. An advantage of Zoom is its ability to securely record and store sessions without recourse to third-party software. This feature is important to protect sensitive data. Other possible risks include data breaches from social media platforms and/or email servers. See below for more information on privacy and security risks associated with the use of social media.

Privacy/Security Risks Associated with Use of Social Media

Please do not send any private or confidential information to us via social media. We strongly urge you not to use social media for private/confidential messages, because social media is not a secure means of communication.

How will I benefit from the study?

There may be no benefit to the individual participant. However, your participation will help us gain knowledge about Chinese international students' experiences during the pandemic, which can benefit you directly or indirectly.

What happens if I do not choose to join the research study?

You may choose to join the study, or you may choose not to join the study. You can withdraw from the study at any time. Your participation is voluntary. There are no negative consequences should you choose not to participate in the study or withdraw from the study.

When is the study over?

The PI may send you a short questionnaire for member checking via email after data analysis. Member checking is defined as the practice of checking the analysis with participants. The study may be stopped without your consent for the following reasons:

The PI, the sponsor, or the Institutional Review Board (IRB) at the University of Pennsylvania can stop the study anytime.

You have the right to drop out of the research study at any time during your participation. There is no penalty or loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled if you decide to do so.

How will my personal information be protected during the study?

Participants will be allowed to choose their own pseudonyms to protect their confidentiality. Any information that might reveal participants' identities will be de-identified.

We will do our best to make sure that the personal information obtained during the course of this research study will be kept private. However, we cannot guarantee total privacy. Your personal information may be given out if required by law. If any participants disclose that they are harming others, or feeling suicidal during the interview, the PI has an obligation to report this to the relevant authorities.

If information from this study is published or presented at scientific meetings, your name and other personal information will not be used. The Institutional Review Board (IRB) at the University of Pennsylvania will have access to your records.

Future Use of Data

Your information from the interview may be stored and used for future research purposes for an indefinite amount of time. Your information will be de-identified. De-identified means that all identifiers have been removed. The information could be stored and shared for future research in this de-identified fashion. It would not be possible for future researchers to identify you as we would not share any identifiable information about you with future researchers. This can be done without again seeking your consent in the future, as permitted by law. The future use of your information only applies to the information collected in this study.

We will not follow up with you to tell you about the specific research that will be done. We will send a brief online questionnaire to participants for member checking to see if the researcher's analysis represents your experience during the pandemic.

Will I have to pay for anything?

There is no cost to participate in the study.

Will I be paid for being in this study?

After the interview, you will receive a \$25 Amazon gift card.

Who can I call with questions, complaints or if I'm concerned about my rights as a research subject?

If you have questions, concerns or complaints regarding your participation in this research study or if you have any questions about your rights as a research subject, you should speak with Linlin Fan at linlinf@upenn.edu. If a member of the research team cannot be reached or you want to talk to someone other than those working on the study, you may contact the IRB at (215) -898-2614.

When you click Agree, you are agreeing to take part in this research study. If you have any questions or there is something you do not understand, please ask. You will receive a copy of this consent document.

Appendix E: Recruitment Flyer



IRB Protocol # 852516

PARTICIPANTS NEEDED



I am a Doctor of Clinical Social Work Student at the University of Pennsylvania, School of Social Policy and Practice. I am conducting a qualitative study to **understand Chinese international students' experiences during the pandemic.**

Your participation will take approximately 1 to 1.5 hours to participate in a virtual interview through Zoom. Your opinions are important for this study. This study is being conducted for a dissertation. The responses collected in the interview will help us understand the interpersonal experiences of Chinese international students and their needs during COVID-19. Participants will be allowed to choose their own pseudonyms to protect their confidentiality.

You may qualify if:

- (a) age 18 or older
- (b) enrolled in a university in the U.S.A for at least one semester between March 2020 and May 2022
- (c) place of origin reported as Mainland China
- (d) holding a student visa when enrolled
- (e) resides in the United States for at least 10 months during COVID-19 between March 2020 and December 2022

You will receive \$25 gift card after completing the virtual interview.

Thank you in advance for your time and consideration. If you are interested, please send an email to linlinf@upenn.edu.

Principal Investigator: Linlin Fan