

# Filial Nationalism: How the Trump Administration Impacted Chinese International Students

Fiona Lin<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Greenhills School, Ann Arbor, Michigan, USA

Correspondence: Fiona Lin, Greenhills School, Ann Arbor, Michigan, USA. E-mail: fionaccse@gmail.com

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## Abstract

Historically, Chinese international students have chosen the United States as their top destination to study abroad. Many of those ultimately return to their mother country, despite years of Western education, hoping to integrate China into the developed world. In 2011, Vanessa Fong depicted this strong moral attachment as “filial nationalism”. However, this idea took on a different form under the Trump administration – the desire to study in the United States diminished. During the pandemic era, Chinese descendants retain a strong sense of belonging to their mother country, but their interest in the United States has significantly declined. By examining the stringent visa restrictions, increased anti-Asian sentiments, and the United State’s immediate response to COVID-19 – factors that contribute to Chinese international students’ growing reluctance to study in the United States – this essay draws on Fong’s previous longitudinal study and analyzes filial nationalism in recent contexts.

**Keywords:** Filial nationalism, Trump administration, Chinese international students, COVID-19, Visa Restrictions, Anti-Asian hate

## 1. Introduction

When Macau, after more than four hundred years as a Portuguese colony, returned to Chinese rule in December 1999, a billboard captioned “Mama, I’m returning” was put up in Dalian, China. It depicted a girl running into the arms of her mother. In 2011, Professor Vanessa Fong published *Paradise Redefined*, in which she coins the term “filial nationalism” to illustrate how Chinese descendants feel a type of maternal connection towards China (Fong, 2011). The Chinese public views this strong moral attachment as “a tenet of basic human decency” (Fong, 2011). At the same time, Chinese people in the early 2000s perceived the United States as the most educationally, economically, and geopolitically powerful country in the world. Fong thus observed that many Chinese international students drew parallels between filial duty and a supposed duty to study abroad; in order to aggrandize their mother country’s global influence, they desired to return home with strong credentials from the Western world (Fong, 2011).

Young people, especially those born after the 1970s, gained vast access “to a global neoliberal system that inundated them with discourses” and acquired a desire to study in the developed world with the goal to transform China into part of the developed world (Fong, 2011). It was a sense of shared responsibility that motivated Chinese students to seek Western education. In the present day, filial nationalism remains a powerful force, albeit in a different form. For Chinese students, their desire to study in the United States has transformed under the Trump administration because of stringent visa restrictions, racist attitudes towards Asians, and the controversial procedures America has taken to combat the pandemic. Chinese filial nationalism under the Trump administration was still about returning home with skills and connections, but the United States no longer serves as students’ first-choice destination; it was marked by a diminishing desire to study in the United States, whether due to choice or imposed restrictions because of the pandemic.

## 2. Visa Restrictions

The presidency of Donald Trump caused many Chinese students who once longed to study in the United States to rethink their plans. In May 2020, he signed a proclamation that barred entry to the United States for enrolled and prospective Chinese graduate and post-graduate students with either direct or indirect affiliation with The People’s Liberation Army under the Chinese Communist Party (Wong & Barnes, 2020). Although officials later stated: “we continue to welcome legitimate students and scholars from China who do not further the Chinese

Communist Party's goals of military dominance," the United States did not hesitate to enact the proclamation (British Broadcasting Corporation [BBC], 2020). China subsequently accused the United States of violating students' human rights. However, this accusation did not deter President Trump and around the same time, he worked to smear the public view of Chinese immigrants, denouncing them in a news conference at the White House: "China's pattern of misconduct is well known for decades. They've ripped off the United States like no one has ever done" (The American Presidency Project, 2020). He continued with several examples: "China raided our factories, off-shored our jobs, cut out our industries, stole our intellectual property, and violated the commitment under the World Trade Organization." By September 2020, the Trump administration had revoked more than a thousand Chinese student visas, which Trump claimed to have been a security risk (Davidson, 2020). Many—for instance, Republican Florida Senator Marco Rubio—supported this policy. When asked by the *New York Times*, Rubio condemned China and its apparent motives to "exploit the openness of American schools to advance their own military and intelligence abilities" (Wong & Barnes, 2020).

Many Chinese international students whose visas had been declined shared the names of their Chinese mother schools, the United States institutions that accepted them, the visas they had acquired, and other personal information in a Tencent Spreadsheet, in order to prove that they had been wrongly accused. The Foreign Policy editor of *Forbes*, James Palmer, believed that some of the Chinese schools listed possessed only nominal ties to China's People's Liberation Army. He claimed that politicians in the United States might have "blundered in targeting any Chinese institution with a military-sounding name" (Togoh, 2020). In one of his tweets, he suggests, "it's possible that this is a deliberate move as part of an attempt to seriously reduce Chinese student numbers. But it's also quite likely sheer incompetence from officials just told to look for X set of names who don't recognize the difference" (Togoh, 2020).

Many of these affected Chinese students were understandably frustrated with this situation. Dennis Hu, a Chinese international student at Northeastern University, claimed in a CNN interview, "The ban is based on a simple presumption: If you have been to a certain school, you will be targeted and labeled as a spy, it just hurt me" (Hollingsworth, 2021). Matthew Jagielski, a Ph.D. graduate from the same university, as well as a labmate of Hu, found the idea of Hu being a spy ridiculous: "I definitely don't get the impression that his research is a military sensitive thing. I also don't get the impression that he is a person trying to sneak in or anything. He was very much a staple of the lab..." (Hollingsworth, 2021).

Not only has the policy prevented many prospective Chinese students from entering the United States, but it also made current Chinese students feel uneasy about living here. Eric Hyer, a foreign relations professor at Brigham Young University, claims that "[the policy] will enhance the concern or the suspicion that people have of all Chinese students – and that's not fair because the vast majority of the Chinese people here are simply trying to get a better education" (Gonzalez, 2020). In the same article, Helena He from Guangzhou, China, who studies genetics and biotech at Brigham Young University, feared that "Trump's moves to limit a small number of graduate-level visas may only be the first step" (Gonzalez, 2020). She stated that several friends had debated whether to study in other countries instead of the United States: "The distrust has already been building" (Gonzalez, 2020). The independent school newspaper of Princeton University, the *Daily Princetonian*, highlighted in an article that a nationwide petition against Trump's legislation, "Reject Xenophobia in Higher Education," was drafted to combat racism and xenophobia, especially in light of growing anti-Asian sentiment since the beginning of the pandemic. The petition received much attention from individuals affiliated with Princeton University and beyond. By June of 2020, there were 2,964 signatures (Tam & Silberman, 2020). The petition testifies to the growing sense of anxiety that international students are unwelcome in the country.

As Chinese students' sense of security and support in the United States decreases, simultaneously, their sense of Chinese filial nationalism grows. Contrary to Fong's study in which students dreamed of coming to the United States and "studying hard to repay the motherland" (Fong, 2011), nationalism, in this case, serves as a self-defense mechanism. It dispels Chinese students' desire to come to the United States where they are misunderstood, hurt, and discriminated against. In reaction to the same visa policy, the Chinese Ph.D. student Jeff Ren spoke about his experience in a *Washington Post* article: "Since [the United States] doesn't welcome us to study there, we don't need to be thick-skinned and still go. For me, it doesn't matter now" (Tan, 2021). Ren had spent three years and approximately \$10,000 to prepare and apply to schools in the United States, yet recently gave up his spot at New York University for an offer from the Vrije University in Amsterdam: "America may be good, but it's not too friendly to us nowadays" (Tan, 2021).

### 3. The "Chinese Virus"

Another factor driving Chinese international students away from the United States was the anti-Asian, especially

anti-Chinese, sentiments exacerbated by the Trump administration. In March of 2020, former President Donald Trump referred to the COVID-19 virus as the “Chinese virus” on Twitter. This simple tweet has since altered both Chinese people’s view of the United States and Americans’ view of Chinese people living in the country. A recent study conducted at the University of California in San Francisco proposes that Trump’s rhetoric regarding the pandemic has sparked an increase in anti-Asian hate (Reja, 2021). Trump had repeatedly described the virus as the “Chinese Virus”, both online and in public appearances, and Dr. Yulin Hawen, the study’s lead author, claimed that “the term likely perpetuated racist attitudes and parallels the anti-Asian hate crimes that have occurred since” (Reja, 2021). The statistics gathered by researchers suggest that the expression has motivated many other Twitter users to make inflammatory, racist comments on the media platform. According to another study from the same university, based on nearly 1.3 million hashtags examined around the time of the tweet, the researchers observed that people “who adopted the hashtag #chinesevirus were far more likely to pair it with overtly racist hashtags. By contrast, those who adopted #covid19, the WHO’s official name for the disease, were far less likely to include racist hashtags in their tweets” (Kurtzman, 2021). In fact, half of the people who used #chinesevirus explicitly expressed hate towards Asians, in contrast to only twenty percent of those who used #covid19. Trump’s rhetoric has harmed many Chinese people, exacerbating negative attitudes towards Asian nations and their people, not solely through biased comments on social media but also through ongoing hate crimes. Dr. Hawen has further articulated that the expression “Chinese virus” may be “a proxy of growth in anti-Asian sentiment that was not as prevalent as before” and could encourage more stigmatization of racial groups (Kurtzman, 2021). The surge of anti-Asian crimes in the United States conforms to Hawen’s prediction. An article published by NPR reports, “The frequency of anti-Asian incidents – from taunts to outright assaults – reported in the United States so far this year seems poised to surpass last year despite months of political and social activism” (Tang, 2021). The article’s title, “More than 9,000 Anti-Asian Incidents Have Been Reported Since The Pandemic Began,” also indicates that along with the Atlanta Spa Shootings, a racially motivated shooting spree that killed eight people, six of whom were Asian women, Asian-based hate crimes became increasingly common.

As the pandemic worsens, Chinese people in the United States, including international students, face a double threat. While the virus disrupts their daily lives, they also need to deal with growing discrimination. The *New York Times* article published in March of 2020, “Spit On, Yelled At, Attacked: Chinese-Americans Fear For Their Safety,” shows that approximately two dozen Chinese people have revealed in interviews that they are scared “to go grocery shopping, to travel alone on subways or buses, [and] to let their children go outside” (Tavernise & Oppel, 2020). In the same article, a Chinese epidemiologist from Maryland, Tony Du, worried, “If they keep using these terms, the kids are going to pick it up. They are going to call my eight-year-old son a Chinese virus. It’s serious” (Tavernise & Oppel, 2020). Mr. Du later wrote on his Facebook account, “this is the darkest day in my 20-plus years of life in the United States,” alluding to Trump’s introduction of the phrases “Chinese Virus” and “Kung Flu” on Twitter. Yuanyuan Zhu, a twenty-six-year-old Chinese woman who moved to San Francisco five years ago, was on her way to the gym when a man allegedly yelled an expletive about China and screamed death threats at her. She was later stared at and spat on by the same person (Tavernise & Oppel, 2020). A writer for the *New Yorker*, Jaiyang Fan, was cursed at for being Chinese while she was taking out the trash: “I’ve never felt like this in my twenty-seven years in this country. I’ve never felt afraid to leave my home to take out the trash because of my face” (Tavernise & Oppel, 2020). Edward from Syracuse, New York, who refused to disclose his last name as he feared attracting more attention, recalled that a man ahead of him in line at the grocery store yelled, “It’s you people who brought the disease.” He was also verbally abused by two couples on the same day at Costco (Tavernise & Oppel, 2020). Cases like these have been happening all over the country to different groups of Chinese people and in different types of situations: adults and children have been spat on, sworn at, kicked, and punched in public for allegedly carrying COVID-19.

#### **4. The False Reality**

America under Trump was not what Chinese people expected nor wanted to see. Students and immigrants often come to the United States to pursue better education, work opportunities, living conditions, and the supposed democracy it offers. Freedom and equality have never been guaranteed for anyone in the United States who is not white, thin, financially secure, heterosexual, and non-disabled, but access to these rights further deteriorates as anti-Asian sentiments worsen (Lorde, 1991). Trump’s language conflicts with the ideals and spirit of American democracy. Thus, many Chinese people’s desire to come to the United States has been curtailed under the realization that the country is not truly free and democratic. “This was not the U.S. I imagined,” says Hongyan Chen, who told a *Washington Post* reporter that she urged her son to apply to Canadian and British universities despite his offer from Brown University (Tan, 2021). This Chinese parent later claimed that the

chaos created by the Trump administration, “from the frantic grocery hoarding at the start of the pandemic to the insurrection at the nation’s capital,” has also prompted her peers to send their children to other nations (Tan, 2021). In *Paradise Redefined*, Chinese students yearned to be a part of the wealthy and powerful developed world, yet, under the Trump administration, many were disillusioned by the realities of the “American Dream”. In 2020, Peter Chan, a professor who has an extensive background working with Chinese students from Brigham Young University, predicted that there will be a decrease in Chinese students applying to universities in the United States for the first time in ten years: “I have heard over and over again from Chinese academics and parents saying that they’re not so sure about whether they should really send their kids over to the U.S. now. They are afraid that their students will not be as welcome in the U.S.” (Gonzalez, 2020). The United States Department of Homeland Security revealed that the total number of international applications plummeted between the 2019 and 2020 academic years. However, they rebounded this year — with the exception of China: only 19,000 Chinese international students completed the required undergraduate application, the Common App, which marks a 16 percent decrease (Gonzalez, 2020).

### 5. Trump’s Response to COVID-19

Aside from visa restrictions and anti-Asian sentiments, the pandemic itself also fuels filial nationalism. Under the Communist Party of China, the Chinese nation handled COVID-19 efficiently. The Director-General of the World Health Organization stated, “The speed with which China detected the outbreak, isolated the virus, sequenced the genome and shared it with WHO and the world are very impressive, and beyond words. So is China’s commitment to transparency and to supporting other countries” (World Health Organization [WHO], 2020). Through quarantining citizens and mandating masks, the Chinese government quickly eradicated the virus and opened up the country. Though there have been sporadic outbreaks within several provinces recently, the virus has been contained through neighborhood lockdowns and contact tracing (Wee and Chen). On the other hand, the United States has accumulated more than thirty-seven million cases since 2020. Wang Xiangsui, a retired colonel and professor at the University of Beijing, declares, “In this fight against the pandemic, there will be victorious powers and defeated ones. We’re a victor power, while the United States is still mired and, I think, may well become a defeated power” (Buckley, 2020). In contrast to America, China’s response to the pandemic galvanized filial nationalism as many students’ admiration for China strengthened. This nationalistic belonging will further diminish Chinese international students’ desire to come to the United States, as opposed to the increased desire in the early 2000s, as cited in Fong’s study. Moreover, COVID-19 has also introduced a number of practical and material difficulties for students. Considering the distance between the United States and China, frequent flight cancellations, and ongoing health risks, the pandemic complicates the process of visiting schools, families, and friends. In the midst of a trade war, the relationship between the United States and China was unstable even before the Trump administration. With the pandemic, it became volatile.

### 6. Conclusion

Under the Trump administration, Chinese international students experienced fear, anger, and disappointment. From visa hindrances, anti-Chinese hate, to growing health risks, many Chinese people now perceive the United States differently. Fong argued in her study that filial nationalism was defined by the loyalty of young Chinese people to their country despite admiration for the Western world. Today, this theory has altered slightly: Chinese students retain a strong sense of belonging, but their admiration and interest in the United States have significantly diminished. Though the United States is historically among the most popular destinations for Chinese students, the Trump administration drove away many of its principal consumers.

There are three main limitations of this paper. First, there is no empirical data to support the idea that *all* Chinese students’ desire to study in the United States decreased due to the Trump administration. Other reactions, though not presented in this paper, could be akin to those in Fong’s study: in lieu of refusing to come to the country, many Chinese students could also be more determined to return to “motherland” China after they have completed their studies. Or, despite these obstacles presented under Trump, some Chinese internationals could still choose to study in the United States; for them, the pros may outweigh the cons. The second limitation is that filial nationalism is difficult to separate from nationalistic pride. According to Fong, the word “filial” describes the parental connection between Chinese citizens and their home country. However, filial piety is already implied by the term “nationalism”. The difference between filial nationalism and nationalism, in general, is a question in itself. Lastly, there were certain limitations in acquiring sources. Since the majority of the collected quotes and studies are from different newspaper outlets, not all Chinese students’ voices are heard — the American mainstream media holds certain biases.

The future of Chinese students in the United States is yet to be determined. With the presidency of Joe Biden, the

state of these affairs could change quickly. In April of 2021, the Biden administration lifted travel bans for many countries. In addition, Chinese international students affected by the Presidential Proclamation 9984 were validated to apply for National Interest Exceptions. In addition, though the Chinese government has been developing its own mRNA COVID-19 vaccine, the FDA-approved Pfizer's COVID-19 vaccine may change many Chinese students' minds about studying in the United States.

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