

“14 hours” – The Chinese Student Experience During the COVID-19 Pandemic

Overview

Out of approximately 150 international students currently attending Whitman about 40 are citizens of the People's Republic of China.

I wish to raise awareness of the extraordinary challenges the pandemic has put on the Chinese student population at Whitman. As I gathered information for this report by interviewing dozens of Whitman students in and outside of the US, I started recognizing various additional patterns that I feel are worth including.

Greg Lecki, Associate Director of the Intercultural Center for International Student Support Services

Current Visa and Travel Restrictions

Both Trump and Biden administrations introduced and extended numerous proclamations with the aim of reducing the spread of the virus. Currently, international students attempting to come to the US from any country on an F-1 student visa face two challenges: visa processing availability and international travel restrictions. The general situation is as follows:

- First year students are allowed to enter the US only if at least part of their academic experience is “in-person.”
- US Consulate offices, responsible for visa interviews and visa issuance are at least partially open in most countries, although the situation changes daily. Most consulates allow for emergency visa processing for people with documented immediate need to travel to the US.
- There are travel restrictions/bans in place applicable to China, Iran, the Schengen Area, the UK, Ireland, Brazil and South Africa.
 - o China was the first country under the travel ban (Jan 31, 2020) following the discovery of the virus in the Hubei Province.
 - o Other countries, such as Brazil and South Africa are more recent additions to this list due to the failure of their governments to control Covid-19 (Brazil) and new strains of the virus (Africa).

- On June 22, 2020 President Trump signed Proclamation 10052 allowing some citizens (including F-1 students) of the Schengen Area, UK and Ireland to enter the US by establishing the National Interest Exception program (NIE).

Due to the Emergency Visa Interview system and NIE waivers, all F-1 first year international students at Whitman who wished to come for in-person classes this spring did so, *except those from China*. US consulates in China allow for very limited emergency visa interviews and specifically exclude F-1 students from the eligibility list, in stark contrast to other countries. F-1 students from China determined to travel to the US must first interview for an F-1 US visa abroad (Singapore is a popular choice) and later spend 14 days in a third country due to China not being included in the NIE program. Ironically, such "third countries" are usually under much higher pandemic pressure than China itself, thus putting the student at much higher risk of transmission.

As this situation continues unresolved, there is a growing uncertainty among Chinese students on whether travel between the US and China will resume in 2021.

All Whitman's first year students from China and Chinese sophomores who left the US during early COVID-19 pandemic remain in China, studying online with a time difference of 14 hrs.

Sophomore Chinese Student Experience

In late February and early March I connected individually with nearly all first and second year Chinese remote students and with some Chinese students on campus. All student names have been changed. What follows are some of the most unique stories and observations they generously shared.

Mike returned to China following the end of the Spring semester. He quickly learned he had decided too late – at that time the Chinese government introduced numerous restrictions making it very difficult to return to China. Each airline was allowed only one flight per week. Coach class tickets became nearly impossible to purchase. Business class tickets would reach \$10,000 for a one-way flight. Last-minute flight cancellations became frequent. Refunds were processed slowly with some students with tens of thousands of dollars on hold with numerous airlines.

To be eligible for a flight to China, a student would need to download an app run by the Chinese government. Daily, for a period of two weeks students would need to certify in the app that they had no interactions with other people to be eligible to board the flight. Miss one day and your countdown restarts.

Mike waited two months for his flight.

Mike's transition to zoom classes was relatively smooth as he "knows Whitman, knows faculty, knows the system". He did not try to force himself to be present in all synchronous classes. He gets enough sleep and generally adjusted well. However, as an artist with no

access to art classes his experience as a remote student is very limited. Additionally, his internet connection is very slow and he is unable to change his internet provider as he lives in a company-supplied housing. He prefers to keep his camera off during zoom classes to preserve the limited bandwidth for better sound quality. He constantly worries that some faculty or classmates may think that he does not participate in classes.

Mike is rather shy and Zoom classes make this worse. Once he gathers his thoughts and courage to respond to a query it is usually too late as domestic students will unmute first. It takes him much time to form a response as he analyzes each word for correctness and (his greatest fear!) to make sure the statement is not unintentionally offensive to others.

He is experiencing constant anxiety on deadlines. Watching class recordings with a substantial lag of 10 hours or more reduces the available time to complete assignments. Lack of interaction with peers makes it worse. Professors are very responsive and helpful but email is no substitute for in-person meetings.

Mike cannot wait to return to campus but is growing increasingly concerned whether this is going to be possible.

Hannah decided to return to China as soon as the switch to online classes had been announced. Following about two months of struggle she managed to purchase by far the most expensive ticket in her life and returned in late May. She remembers the chaos of the Spring semester in 2020 and how much better the situation is now. Canvas discussions and homework assignments work well, all her classes are recorded and the sound quality is generally good. She is very grateful some faculty are able to run classes in late afternoons making them more accessible to students in China.

Hannah thinks about the new students from China often. She is trying to engage them on the China@Whitman WeChat group. This is not easy due to traditional divisions between student grades in China. It is uncommon for Chinese freshmen to reach out to a more senior student and ask for help. It is not acceptable for a younger student to refer to an older one by name, except between very close friends.

These barriers are only more pronounced in relations between students and professors. She loves the faculty at Whitman, how approachable and supportive they are. Such informal interactions are uncommon in her homeland. She finds her classes, even in the online format, more stimulating and thought provoking than everything she experienced in China.

Hannah does not regret her trip back home. Her parents have less to worry. However, she tried to return in August and again in January with no success. She hopes people will learn to respect nature and each other more from the lesson Covid has given to us all.

Piper recognized the seriousness of the situation immediately and was one of the first to depart, even before the spring break ended. She faced no delays, no obligatory quarantine and her ticket was inexpensive. She was lucky – all that changed the very next day. She is grateful Whitman made the difficult yet firm decision to switch to online education early.

Many of her friends hesitated, faced multiple flight cancellations and months of agonizing attempts to depart.

She did, however, pay a different price for leaving early. The sudden switch to online classes caught all of us unprepared. Some of her tests and quizzes had their start time strictly defined. 4:00 am exams were very difficult. Like many others she ended up withdrawing from some of her classes. She remembers waking up to review a class recording from the previous day only to realize that an assignment is due in less than an hour. Now the system is much better as it allows for more flexibility.

She got used to the new reality quickly. She is now very well organized and schedules her days carefully. Not all students are.

Access to Google services in China is not as difficult as some people in the US believe, Piper shares. Nearly all households with college age kids use VPN.

Piper (among other students) shared that people in China rarely use email. WeChat dominates all communication including official channels, commerce and utility payments. WeChat is used at schools, too. The health monitoring app mentioned earlier is also a part of the WeChat ecosystem. All of that may explain the difficult start many Chinese freshmen experienced last semester.

Reliance on WeChat makes friendships with domestic students difficult, even when in-person on campus. Most relationships these days start with a virtual handshake on Facebook or Instagram. These apps do not cross-communicate with WeChat.

Piper fondly remembers Whitman campus and her friends. Also, lasagna from Safeway. Together with the amazing peach pie her professor shared with her once, these are her two most favorite food items. She would not stop talking about how much she appreciates and loves the faculty at Whitman.

Mark did not want to go back to China, but his parents insisted. He left late summer and paid dearly for his flight. Fortunately, his obligatory quarantine in China ended just the day before the start of fall semester.

He is now well organized and does not find this new life very difficult. As many sophomores he focuses on watching recorded classes and does not stay up at night. He wishes that subtitles were used more often as the sound is not always very clear. However, he can always rewind a few seconds – something that does not work when classes are in person.

Mark speaks fondly about Whitman campus, loves Cleveland, loves his residence hall. As other Chinese students he mentions his biggest regret of studying in the US: the nearly complete lack of interaction with American students. Any relations with domestic students are formal and academic only. He believes both sides are afraid to offend each other. "Where does this come from?" he wonders. "We are very young, we should be more open. It is almost like we are invisible," he says, "You don't even hear 'hello' outside of the classroom."

Amelia returned to China in June. She is very ambitious and determined to keep her good grades. Classes that require teamwork or labs keep her up until 4am.

Her stress level is very high. Much of this relates to communication problems. "Will my team members understand my accent?" VPN induced lag makes it all more difficult. "I don't feel like a student anymore", she repeats. "It is so easy to lose the motivation. We receive so many emails, we keep missing the important ones. Normally, your classmates would remind you about things, but we are so separated now." Still, she does not regret going back, otherwise her family would worry too much.

Angela is a good student but found online education too stressful and very difficult. It all started with her very late return to China. Due to a health emergency she missed one day of her pre-travel quarantine app check-in. This resulted in additional flight cancellations. Elsie started her semester from a quarantine hotel in China with nearly no internet access. Many of such hotels are very basic, supplying residents with very basic food and almost no services.

It was very difficult to catch up once the quarantine was over. She found strict academic deadlines very difficult to follow with the 14 hrs. time difference and missed many.

Now, taking a leave for this semester, her health is recovering very quickly. She has found an interesting internship locally. She misses her music classes and instruments left behind. She is very determined to return, even if 3rd country travel is the only option.

Invisible

In China, the US is still considered the best place to study with a reputation above Australia and the UK – other popular destinations for Asians.

Most Chinese families determine very early whether their children will study abroad. Such children usually attend private International High Schools to prepare. They get their English names as early as in kindergarten. Sometimes these names change as they change schools. The naming process is quite fluid but some use their English names outside of the school as well.

International schools prep students for western style education: more independent thinking, open minded approach, asking questions and asking for help. They teach about lifestyle and college culture abroad and they offer much practice of English language. Mandarin is ranked as one of the hardest languages to learn for native English speakers. The flip side is no different: it takes much effort and time for a Chinese student to learn English.

Students that come to the US without the benefit of an international high school face additional challenges. The traditional way of studies in China is different, and it takes such students 1-2 years to adjust. They miss out on the formative first and second year of their college experience and find it difficult to make friends.

Even the best prepared, or as some would say most "westernized", find making domestic friends difficult. Constant fear of offending others makes conversations difficult. Some

students blame cultural sensitivity training. "I'd rather be offended than be invisible like this", Jessica (a Junior) says. "It is normal for young people to say something stupid, regretful. Offending each other and apologizing for it, learning a lesson and moving on is a part of growing up. Yes, our politicians are at odds but as 'college kids' we should not have to worry constantly to say something culturally insensitive."

Jessica remembers her first Whitman experience – 10 day long camping trip as Scrambles participant. She came unprepared, not really knowing what camping was. She signed up for Scrambles with a mission of getting to know the Americans. Although the trip was very memorable other students nearly completely ignored her. She believes this was the case because she was slow, weak and made many mistakes.

She went to a traditional high school in China and, as she remembers, her Whitman classmates found her uninteresting and strange. This contributed to an onset of depression that still continues.

Recent studies report markedly higher rates of depressive symptoms among Chinese students, ranging from 32.2% to 45.4% (published by Wei et al. 2008, Cheung 2010; Han et al. 2013). These findings compare with 17.8% prevalence of such symptoms among the general student population in the US.

First-Year Chinese Student Experience

The pandemic experience has been much more significant for first year students. Lacking the college savviness of sophomores, many started Fall 2020 semester convinced that attending every class synchronously was necessary. Even if advised otherwise, they continued late night and early morning sessions. This was very difficult, for some to the point of breaking. In some schools as many as 50% of new Chinese students deferred their admission or stopped responding and attending.

First year students that overcome these difficulties developed effective strategies allowing them to be more successful this spring.

Emma's solution to the time difference was to turn her life around. She is persistent: goes to bed at 7am, gets up at 3 or 4 pm, every day – including weekends. "The consistency is critically important", she said. Her family understands this but they worry nonetheless. She jokes that in 20 years time people will want to hear her stories of starting her college in the US remotely.

Her overall experience is positive. "Our teachers are amazing. They are so interactive, so friendly and constantly encourage us to think independently. They give interesting, thought provoking assignments."

Lucy says she is doing well. She was able to overcome all difficulties and her grades are very good. Her pragmatic attitude helps – "No point wasting mental energy on things we cannot change". She compares her situation to many of her high school friends in China – for

example those studying in Australia lost the previous semester altogether as schools did nothing to provide online classes. She is grateful Whitman College did. Some of her synchronous classes are in late afternoons - early morning in China. This helps a great deal.

She stresses about poor US-China relations but is determined to arrive in August even if 3rd country travel and quarantine is needed – it is so difficult to stay motivated with no classmates exchanging information and competing for grades.

Lucas has strong academic ambitions. He plans to get a PhD and focuses on grades, so far successfully. It has been hard, but he is very resilient. Although his grades are very good, he does not believe he is actually learning as much as he normally would. "We are in damage control mode", he says.

He appreciates what Whitman College has done and how new problems are resolved quickly and decisively. "It is great to learn that students returned on campus, I just wish I could be there with them!"

There is much talk in China on how Americans did not take the pandemic seriously. People joke about how mask-wearing has become a political statement in the US.

He is somewhat worried about health insurance access for international students. He hears how different and confusing the health care system in the US can be.

He is very tired. Partially, he blames himself as he is busy with night classes and internships during the day. "When you are very tired, sometimes sleep actually becomes more difficult." He remembers getting only 2 hours of sleep for a few consecutive days.

Lucas graduated from an international high school. He currently works and lives at this school. His role is similar to that of Resident Director. It is a fun job and living at the school allows him to feel more like a student, to stay organized with access to printers, gym etc.

Lucas talks about the different styles of teaching and learning in the US. He enjoys it very much but appreciates how such a change is difficult to some of his friends. Even in normal times the first semester at US schools is very difficult for Chinese students. They have to "re-learn how to learn". Western style education is more about creativity, critical thinking, writing essays independently.

"There is this constant additional stress due to thinking about visas, travel bans and our media keeps reminding us how unsafe life in the US has become". People know some of this is just political propaganda, but it wears you down anyway.

When Will This End?

For years now, China has remained by far [the most important source](#) of foreign students in the US. Arguably, with State support diminishing over the years, some US schools continue to exist only thanks to the income Chinese students bring.

Many in the US and in China had hoped that the new administration would immediately improve the strained relationship. So far, it seems this is not the case. The recent US-China summit in Anchorage (March 18-19th) [was very confrontational](#).

There is very little political will to support students from China, for example, allowing them emergency visa interviews and to benefit from the NIE program. A large number of higher education associations in the US recently [submitted a letter](#) to the Secretary Anthony Blinken (US State Department) urging for support of international students. The letter does not mention China at all, nor does it bring up the unique situation Chinese students face. Invisible.

Note from Greg Lecki:

I wish to thank Whitman's faculty and staff for the support they continue to provide to our international students, especially those who are still abroad. Your tireless help and night classes are very much appreciated.