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LEIGH LAWRENCE

## What Does 2020 Suggest for the Future of Sino-US Educational Exchange?

### A Cautionary Perspective

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#### ABSTRACT

This article discusses the recent deterioration of Sino-US relations through the lens of international education. Although the pandemic was a pressure point of declining relations, actions taken by both governments suggest that educational exchange, a key tool of soft power initiatives, has been weaponized and 'hardened' to achieve discursive narratives or favourable power dynamics.

From the vantage point of the year 2020, the author cautiously looks towards the future of Sino-US relations with the understanding that positive diplomacy begins and ends with education. As such, it should be a main policy priority for both nations.

#### AUTHOR

Leigh Lawrence is a doctoral student at the Faculty of Education at St John's College, University of Cambridge (UK). Her research focuses on moral education reform in China's 21st century 'New Era' under Xi Jinping. Leigh received her MA from Yale University (USA) in East Asian Studies and BA from Arizona State University (USA) with special affiliation with Nanjing University (PRC). Leigh was a 2019 US Fulbright Scholar and Visiting Scholar at Nanjing Normal University (PRC) and 2014 Boren Scholar to China (PRC). Outside of academic work, her passion is culinary diplomacy, which she encourages through her baking blog 'Ping-Pong Pastries: Cultural Diplomacy through Culinary Arts.'





Leigh Lawrence

## What Does 2020 Suggest for the Future of Sino-US Educational Exchange? A Cautionary Perspective

By

Leigh Lawrence

The year 2020 has brought unprecedented circumstances that challenged our existing social and political systems. The globalized world, once rife with international travel and exchange, quickly shuttered its doors in a haphazard attempt to stem the flow of the novel coronavirus, COVID-19. However, the insidious nature of the virus not only infected people, but also quickly spread to alter our established norms and societies. While it is expected that our medical and biological knowledge will outmatch this virus one day, the long-term consequences for our social and international institutions are less clear. The pandemic, although merely a blip in the centuries-long Sino-US diplomatic relations history, may be the straw that broke the camel's back, expediting an existing trend of worsening relations between the two nations. The pandemic has also highlighted areas of weakness, and priorities, of both nations. As such, this year can be viewed as a bellwether for the future of Sino-US relations, not only representative of a short interim period but indicative of how both nations view, manage, and prioritize their relationship during a crisis.

学如逆水行舟，不进则退

*[Study is like rowing upstream: no advancement is regression]*

Education, particularly international education, has suffered as a result of ongoing stringent virus contagion measures. International education is a broad concept, including study abroad, academic exchange, language or cultural immersion, and more. International education has no requirements or parameters, making each student's personal experiences unique and meaningful. The act of stepping off a plane in a novel destination, soaking up first glances of the people, language, weather, food, and clothes is international education, as is embracing the awkwardness and uncertainty of navigating new cultural norms and the warmth and generosity of host colleagues, friends, or quick acquaintances across the world.

The People's Republic of China [(PRC) hereinafter 'China'] and the United States (US) have a tenuous yet interconnected international education relationship. Both nations have long since realized the importance and benefit of educational exchange – even before the PRC was established. For example, the first established Sino-US education exchange, the Chinese Educational Mission, took place in the 19<sup>th</sup> century (Xi 2015).

In the following century, opportunities for the exchange of ideas and philosophies grew, such as through American scholar John Dewey's famous tours in China. Dewey's tours later became an inspiration for many Chinese educational philosophers such as Chen Duxiu and Hu Shi, among others (Sun 1999). Dewey's tours also influenced his understanding of China, providing first-hand knowledge outside of established Eurocentric narratives (Wang 2007). These initial forays into Sino-US international education highlighted its mutual benefit for both researchers and those who are researched to facilitate domestic advancement while expanding international understanding.

Unfortunately, the turbulent 20<sup>th</sup> century strained Sino-US relationships, with education bearing the brunt of icy relations. While Nixon-era Sino-US rapprochement re-established formal relations, it was the slow but steady investment in international education that opened doors. As Chinese and US students pursued educational exchange, their person-to-person diplomacy and cross-cultural understanding became a foundation of our current globalized world.

前人栽树后人乘凉

*[The ancestor plants the tree so sons can enjoy the shade]*

The education system is a main propeller of prosperity for states (Amirbek & Ydyrys 2014). The US and China both engage in numerous forms of educational exchange, from private study abroad to publicly funded academic and cultural programs. On an individual level, study abroad is a widely sought-after experience for employers in the US and China, valued not just for the academic knowledge gained abroad but also for the inherent people skills, such as open-mindedness, curiosity, and perseverance, that can be fostered from such experiences.

On a national level, international education is a crucial tool in Sino-US soft power initiatives. Termed by political scientist Joseph Nye, soft power relates to the concept of encouraging others to change, persuade, or influence their interests (Nye 2004; Yang 2010). International education has become an adept tool for curating and expanding domestic goals under mutual values of encouraging education. For example, educational initiatives such as China's Confucius Institutes allow China to portray a more palatable, less 'foreign' version of Chinese language and culture to wary Western countries. The Confucius Institutes' direct ties to China's central government underline their importance in international and domestic economic, political, and social interests (Huang & Xiang 2019).

Nye's initial definition of soft power has grown with the globalized world, expanding to encompass cultural diplomacy, fiscal initiatives, person-to-person diplomacy and international exchange. Soft power and cultural diplomacy are key tools aiming to achieve goals through attraction and influence, rather than coercion. A unique characteristic of soft power is that its results are difficult to quantify, as its benefits extend beyond economic and political incentives. While evidence-based policy is a useful measurement tool, gauging the actual impact of soft power initiatives, as well its impact on future policies, remains an insurmountable task (Seymour 2020).

Soft power has developed from an ideology to a tangible goal for many governments. The US and China are both invested in soft power initiatives, many of which are enabled through international education. China's focus on soft power initiatives, particularly through education, is a strategic act of globalization and internationalization (Yang 2010). The Chinese state relies upon the benefits of international influence to buttress its 'hard power' initiatives through continued development and engagement with the West. Unfortunately, education is often at the whim of mercurial diplomatic shifts, either wielded as a punishing tool for declining relations or a positive reward for joint cooperation. This tit-for-tat policymaking has inhibited both nations from establishing a long-term collaborative rationale. Reactive policies, much like what we have seen during the pandemic, should be replaced with proactive ideas that focus on mutual benefits now and for years to come.

患难见真情

*[In adversity, true feelings are shown]*

The global pandemic impacted education in more ways than merely closing physical schools. International students were quickly recalled (myself included), exchange programs shuttered their doors, and the future of international education hung in the balance. Some may argue the pandemic constituted only a short pause in international education's infallible presence within our globalized world. While exceptional circumstances beget exceptional actions, actions taken by both the United States and China indicate the pandemic was not the culprit, but an excuse to permanently alter the Sino-US international education landscape.

Both nations implemented rapid-response policies as the extent of the pandemic grew. Yet many policies were not simply pandemic-conditional, but the culmination of years of growing resentment and antagonism. The pandemic provided a scapegoat for both states to deliver "low blows" under the guise of exceptional and unprecedented circumstances of the global health crisis.

Despite the virus being first identified in Wuhan, China quickly adopted effective contagion methods; the result was a swift return to normalcy. An unfortunate side-effect of these methods was that they effectively stymied Sino-US education exchange, for example limiting travel, blocking visas, and suspending exchange programs.

Although not explicitly a direct result of the pandemic, one example is China's National Security Law (NSL), implemented June 1<sup>st</sup>, 2020, which placed stringent consequences on speech, protest, and movement in Hong Kong (China Daily 2020). Since then, many international universities have sounded alarms regarding the far-reaching extents of the NSL, including its potential to harm students at Western universities. The NSL's vague yet threatening stipulations, such as "criminalizing regular teaching," are tantamount to direct Chinese interference in British domestic affairs (Tsang 2020). The same outcry has occurred at US universities, where professors worry about the safety of students and ability to teach freely while remaining acutely aware of the limitations on free speech (Craymer 2020).

The NSL illustrates an unprecedented development blurring the lines between education, governance, and international relations. While red-lines in Chinese academia have always been vague, the NSL marks a watershed change in the scope of the Chinese government's jurisdiction and severity of punishment. Combined, these factors make independent research on China a potentially dangerous act which may encourage self-censorship while inhibiting opportunities for Sino-international collaboration and partnerships based on fear and uncertainty. China's domestic policy changes during the pandemic have fundamentally altered China as an educational destination. The safety of students and opportunities for uncensored academic engagement both in and about China are now directly at the whim of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), illustrating just how important positive diplomatic relations are for future educational exchange.

In addition, China has recently cracked down on both foreign and domestic investigative journalists and academics, revoking visas and threatening their safety (Hernandez 2019; Wibawa 2020). The pandemic will almost certainly continue to influence this trend, as China grapples with balancing strong societal cohesion amid crisis and social reform; therefore, negative or unflattering press is a danger to the State's legitimacy. For students or educators, China exists in a climate of uncertainty, fraught with the potential to be inimical to freedom of speech and research. The grey lines surrounding what is permitted and what is not encourage self-censorship among students and

teachers. This climate of uncertainty and fear for personal safety is crippling to academic research *on* and *in* the PRC.

While many in the US decry China for its overarching and draconian measures, structural changes to US international education were occurring in parallel across the Pacific, raising concerns and hesitations from Chinese students, parents, and education administrators. First, the United States quickly soared to the unenviable position of the nation with the highest number of deaths related to COVID; by 15 December, over 300,000 Americans had died.<sup>1</sup> This number, paired with the vacillating government response indicates the infection and death rate will continue to rise, making it a potentially unsafe educational destination while the pandemic remains virulent.

Domestic culture has also changed during the pandemic. Numerous instances of anti-Chinese rhetoric, racism, and violence have occurred against the Chinese American and Asian community in the US (Human Rights Watch 2020). In an effort to shift blame and villainize China, President Trump has repeated phrases such as the ‘Chinese plague’ and ‘Wuhan virus,’ empowering racist dialogue and discrimination (Aratani 2020). These actions fostered a climate of fear for Chinese students, wary of not only the virus itself but also the rhetoric it promoted. A recent survey indicated fewer than one in five Chinese higher education students are interested in studying abroad after the pandemic, citing reasons such as safety concerns, travel bans, and funding (Xiong et al. 2020).

In addition to racist and violent attacks, the US arbitrarily revoked thousands of Chinese student visas (BBC 2020) and has targeted and interrogated students based on their nationality (Feng 2020). In retaliation against the NSL, President Trump indefinitely suspended the US Fulbright Program in Mainland China, a serious blow to educators, students, and Sino-US soft power diplomacy (Zheng 2020). During the pandemic, Chinese students in the US were forced to deal with maintaining their health and safety whilst being subject to socially constructed stigma created by diplomatic power struggles (Ma & Zhan 2020).

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<sup>1</sup> Data retrieved from Johns Hopkins University & Medicine Coronavirus Resource Centre  
<https://coronavirus.jhu.edu/us-map>

幸灾乐祸

*[Schadenfreude]*

Actions taken by the US and China during the pandemic suggest both sides may be seizing the ‘crisis of opportunity’ (Kingdon 1984) to advance their interests. China continues to increase Sino-foreign education exchange and programs (CGTN 2020) and encourage international education within its own borders. This may allow China its long-sought opportunity to establish itself as a top education destination as well as closely monitor educational research, students, and educators. Yet in that same vein, China has slowly been increasing its ‘censorship borders’ within its domestic territory and abroad (Mozur 2018). These borders are not only spatial, but also apply to ideological and temporal limitations placed on Chinese and foreign students, educators, and researchers. In the West, the United States has both railed against China’s actions while withdrawing education opportunities in an attempt to exude power and international strength and shift the blame of pandemic disaster onto a foreign enemy.

The prognosis of post-pandemic Sino-US educational exchange is not promising. While the future is undetermined, examining ongoing contexts suggests the pandemic has been a crisis of opportunity for both nations to expedite changes that have been in the making for years. Had the pandemic not happened, the US and China would likely still be on a similar trajectory, as pre-pandemic Sino-US relations were increasingly hostile (Pei 2020). The unpredictable and unprecedented start of 2020 provided an outlet for both nations to manipulate public unrest and instability to reassert power at the expense of educational exchange. These actions have created a climate of competitive self-harm, both punishing present-day scholars and jeopardizing long-term diplomatic progress.

吃一堑，长一智

*[One only learns from one’s mistakes]*

In recent years, the American and Chinese administrations, led by President Trump and General Secretary Xi, were like oil and water: they simply did not mix. While both administrations touted similar values and expound on the virtues of cross-cultural education, their actions indicated their true interests lie in establishing dominance, and international education was manipulated as a hard power means of achieving, or suppressing, ruling-party discursive narratives and power. Both nations have weaponized soft power initiatives and compelled them to become tactics of hard power ideology by restricting access and intellectual freedoms.



While the pandemic has further strained the tenuous Sino-US relationship, there is still potential for reconciliation. This would require a significant change from today's circumstances, and not just in the form of a vaccine. A change in national leadership or societal values, from the US or China, is needed to realign positive relations and bolster confidence in educational exchange programs. Educational exchange is the canary in the coalmine of positive diplomacy, and the events of the past year have endangered international education and the benefits it has provided since 1970s Sino-US rapprochement.

Although the Biden administration is the ideological antithesis of the outgoing Trump administration, the new ideas and change in political priorities is not a panacea and will not immediately resolve existing Sino-US tensions. China has argued that the key to ameliorating the strained relationship is to 'accurately assess the other's intentions' (Fu 2020). To assess, one must learn; improved Sino-US diplomacy begins and ends with education. Both nations can pursue competitive cooperation through the guise of soft power initiatives, but that can only happen with an investment in honest and sincere bilateral exchange and education. At the moment, few signs suggest that will happen without sincere and concerted efforts from both administrations. Strong relations are an investment, not a cure, and the education governments provide, or allow today secures positive relations for tomorrow.

Education is in itself a political act, but it should not be co-opted by governments in a way that limits intellectual freedom or exploration. Based on this past year's events, how can one envision a positive future for Sino-US educational exchange? How can students, teachers, or scholars prepare or plan for study abroad? Confidence, both individual and national, is instilled through education, experiences, and mutual respect. Both nations must quickly recognize that educational exchange is not a problem; it is a solution.

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