

# The COVID-19 Crisis and Cross-Cultural Experience of China's International Students: A Possible Generation of Glocalized Citizens?

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During the COVID-19 crisis, the global pandemic brings extensive discussions on globalization and deglobalization. Within the hyper-connected world, the virus knows no lines and boundaries and spreads across the population with different nationalities, races/ethnicities, genders, social classes, ages, and religions. The world population is connected and faces the same problem. The virus requires social distancing, and nations take future precautions to close borders and focus on national security. National interest comes as the priority, countries like the U.S. are hyping moving manufactures back, and protectionism and xenophobia are around the corner. With this mixture of globalization and nationalism, it is unclear how globalization will look after the pandemic. This commentary intends to discuss how education and students should prepare for the evolving globalization and challenges of deglobalization. Specifically, this commentary seeks to examine the cross-cultural experience of a highly mobile group within the trend of Chinese student population studying in foreign countries and deliberate how global competence should be constructed within this group to prepare for the changing world after COVID-19.

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## Chinese international students: Double stigmatization and histories

International students from China have been encountering contentious and stressful situation since the outbreak of COVID-19 and its spread worldwide. In the early stage when the virus started in China, students worried about their family back home and searched and bought stocks of face masks and medical equipment, and shipped them back to China to their family or for donation. They often were given a strange look for stocking up masks. In the later stage of the outbreak in their hosting countries like the U.S., U.K., and Australia, students suffered the stigmatization of the “Chinese Virus”<sup>1</sup> and even hostage and discrimination. When in-person classes were canceled, and campuses were closed, the pandemic left these students scrambling. They had to deliberate whether they should go home or stay for self-quarantine. As some international students returned to China for sheltering, they further faced double stigmatization of “virus carrier” from their home country. A provincial news anchor falsely criticized the behaviors of returning Chinese international students that “*Zuguo jianshe ni buzai, wanli toudu ni zuikuai*” (You are not here for homeland construction yet the fastest in spreading the contagion) and further discussion of international students from abroad became contentious in the media. This group of international students is the beneficiary of globalization and international education exchange yet witnessing the trend of anti-globalization and nationalism.

If we take a quick review of history and facts of Chinese students seeking international education, there were about 0.66 million international students who went oversea in 2018 and made the total population of current Chinese international students as 1.53 million. The international education has been considered an enriching experience and had histories in both contemporary and modern China. Since the opening-up policy in 1978, about 5.85 million international students went abroad (Ministry of Education of the People’s Republic of China, 2019).<sup>2</sup> Between the late Imperial Qing and 1949, there was a sum of 50,000 international students (Yuan & Li, 2010). The majority of them returned to China (about 85%) and has made enormous contribution to the home country, including establishing modern educational systems and modern disciplines, educational and cultural exchanges, opening up and industrialization (Zhu & Chen, 2019).

As we deliberate the cross-national study and life of these students after the pandemic, we need to consider both challenges and possibilities in prospect. The next two sections intend to further elaborate the existing challenges and discuss what kind of competences<sup>3</sup> are needed in dealing with cross-cultural complexes.

## Challenges of nationalism in civic education and deficits of neoliberal globalization

In the era of neoliberalism, assimilationism, and xenophobia, the government in different countries demonstrates ambition and efforts in ascertaining unity and national belonging. In the U.S., there

are the slogans of “American First” and “Make America Great Again.” In the U.K., there is a requirement from the Ministry for Education that all maintained schools must promote the fundamental British Values (the spiritual, moral, social, and cultural development of their pupils). In China, the current administration aims at achieving “Rejuvenation for the Chinese People” and uses socialist core values to fortify people’s confidence in the socialist path, theories, system, and culture with Chinese characteristics.

Ideological control in citizenship education within these countries comply with the efforts in nationalism. Although discourse in curriculum might be different among countries, comparative studies (Wang & Longoria, 2016) found that citizenship education asserts the key values including solidarity and national allegiance and perpetuate these values in curriculum standards, textbooks, and implementation. Citizenship education in China, with its collectivistic context and authoritative structure, enforces socialist core values through the K-12 curriculum. As Chinese international students receiving their K-12 education in China goes abroad for higher education, they might meet a mismatch between the national values in home and hosting countries. Students defending Chinese systems and policies are named as “*xiao fenhong*” (junior pink) who believe in state propaganda and develop cyber-nationalism (Fang & Repnikova, 2018). The nationalism among younger generations, even those who study abroad, brought challenges to cultivating cosmopolitanism.

The nationalism is further aided by the deficits of neoliberal and superficial globalization. While globalization aims to advance economic, political, and cultural interactions in the global spheres, there has been critics and skepticism on the benefits of globalization. Scholars (Stiglitz, 2019) challenged that capital and transnational corporation takes the lead and exacerbates the problems of economic and social inequities. Sharing in technologies and culture rarely happen yet still are dominated by few countries and companies. Francis Fukuyama, supporter of liberal democracies and free-market capitalism, reflected in a recent interview (Lorrain, 2020) that neoliberal globalization, even before the pandemic, might meet its peak and future globalization might envision more state control on social and economic equities. As we saw the deficits of globalization and stronger state control, the navigation of national and cosmopolitan identity becomes ambiguous. The ambiguity further leads to dilemmas and controversies in citizenship education on what kind of global citizen we really need.

### **Evolving globalization and the need for glocalized citizens**

As some scholars predict a declined globalization, others hold that the globalization is not dying yet still on the making. While globalization has some impacts on the spreading of the virus from a regional contagion to a global pandemic, hyper-connectedness also creates technologies, tools, and mechanisms for innovative and cross-national cooperation to defeat the virus (U.S. Forum on

Microbial Threats, 2006). More importantly, the recent failings in national measures need countries to cooperate to stop and defeat COVID-19 and possible future diseases. As the virus spreads nationwide and globally, Chinese international students staying in their hosting countries witnessed the joint response of international organizations and governments, the controversies about the origins of Coronavirus, each country's different responses to the epidemic, and policy differences in traveling ban on foreign citizens. For students who are internationally mobile, they would need to develop different cosmopolitan citizenship to help them understand, analyze, and respond.

The dilemma of cosmopolitan and national citizenship has been not only discussed among scholars of citizenship education (Banks, 2017; Osler, 2011) but also exemplified in the policies and practices among nation-states. In the age of globalization, the younger generation is expected to acquire global competence to construct a more inclusive and equal world (OECD, 2016). International organizations and nation-states have been promoting cosmopolitanism and global education since the 1970s, such as Asia Society (Mansilla & Jackson, 2011), Oxfam, UNESCO, and the U.S., Germany, and Japan. PISA 2018 test added the section of "Global Competence" as a signal of accrediting cosmopolitan. There are also studies in the concept and connotation of global understanding and educational practices of international understanding in China. Nevertheless, the knowledge gap needs to be filled on how to integrate the national context and nuances with cosmopolitan citizenship, particularly in the light of the evolving globalization.

Advocating the tradition of cosmopolitanism, this commentary proposes an evolved definition of glocalized citizens. The competences of glocalized citizens involve four aspects of local identification, global perspectives, intercultural communication, and action for the well-being of human. This definition is developed from a comparative analysis of the new curriculum standards for high schools in China, "the Core Competencies Framework of Chinese Students," core competence framework from the OECD, and the definition of UNESCO (Wang et al., 2019). To further interpret this definition, glocalized citizens, such as international students from China, (1) develop local and national identities and are aware of their culture; (2) have a global perspective, and are able to understand and analyze the processes of human civilization, world development, and global challenges; (3) seek common ground while reserving differences, respect the diversity and differences within the multicultural world, and actively participate in cross-cultural communication; and (4) establish a sense of community of shared future for mankind and act for collective well-being and sustainable development.

## Conclusion

To look at the prospects of international education in the long run, Chinese students studying abroad might not be as proliferating as it was in the last decade for fear of pandemic and deglobalization coming. Considerable Chinese students will still continue to be mobile as globalization

is evolving and nationalism is rising. They might join prior groups of international students in contributing to the mutual understanding and exchange of knowledge, technologies, and culture. However, being a cosmopolitan will be different and challenging in the dilemma of globalization and nationalism. As we examine how Chinese international students react to and navigate the dilemmas in the pandemic from news, it is notable that international students struggle in the cultural ambivalences of nationalism and globalization. To prepare students for future cross-national and cross-cultural challenges, we would need a glocalized education and rethink and revise the goals and content. When international students can take both local and global perspectives, we might envision a generation of cosmopolitan for both China and the world. At this moment, the coronavirus has brought influences to nations and the world. The mixture of neo-globalization and nationalism had made the picture even more complicated. To further defeat this virus and future viruses, the world would need generations of glocalized citizens to work together.

### **Author's note**

This forum deals with the coronavirus crisis, cross-border student mobility, and choices for Chinese students.

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### **Notes**

1. As groups of scientists suggested, it is stigmatization and racism associating COVID-19 with any people or places in particular.
2. The population of Chinese international students was relatively small between 1949 and 1978 because of the policy of foreign exchange.
3. This study adapts the definitions of core competence from the OECD (2016) and China (Cui & Shao, 2017) and defines core competence as the key skills, necessary characters, and values that students demonstrate when they apply their knowledge, ideas, and methods to solve a real problem in an authentic context.

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