“OPPORTUNITY OR ADVERSITY?”: CHINESE INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS AND ACTIVISM IN CHINA

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Chandler Rosenberger, Advisor

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Pengfei Liu

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Pengfei Liu

Committee members:
Chandler Rosenberger
Gordon Fellman
Gowri Vijayakuma
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Liu Pengfei
Brandeis University

Abstract

In this study, I explore different factors that influence Chinese international students’ decision to participate or not participate in activism in China. Through twelve interviews with Chinese international students of diverse backgrounds, I find that there are three aspects to explore in order to understand why this group of students does not participate in activism in China.

First of all, they are intimidated by the Chinese Communist Party. They are fully aware of the party’s attitude towards activism in China and the dire consequences of being regarded as a dissident. They also have conflicting feelings towards the party because their parents benefited from the party’s economy policy. They believe that without the Chinese Communist Party’s Reform and Opening-Up policy, their families would not be able to pay for them to study abroad and to avoid the competitive state-sponsored education exams.

Also, their experience with activism in America is not thought-provoking after all. Because they consider Chinese society and American society as completely different, activism in America does not necessarily inspire them to reflect upon their own society. They thus do not appreciate the social movements in America and are not inspired to imitate them in China.

Finally, their unique characteristics as Chinese international students also hinder them from participating in activism in China. They can no longer look forward to a golden age of economic growth back in China, and they are fighting to maintain their diminishing social status. As only children, they are also expected to take care of their parents and children, which will be a huge burden considering the constantly increasing cost of living in China.
INTRODUCTION

For many years, I have heard about how Chinese international students will bring advanced knowledge back to China in aid of development in many ways, including reforming the general society. Indeed, in China, studying abroad manifests a certain degree of social mobility. There are many phenomenal Chinese international students in the history who shaped the fate of China, such as Sun Yat-Sun and Liang Qichao, among many others.

The parents of the current generation of Chinese students benefitted directly from the state’s Reform and Opening-Up policy, allowing them to start business as well as work at foreign companies in China. Over more than thirty years of accumulating assets in a rapidly growing economy, these Chinese families are able to afford to send their children to study abroad rather than force them to participate in the cruel competition of state-sponsored education exam. The “overseas returnees” are also more welcome in the job market. As a result, 35% of international students in America are Chinese students. Understanding this emerging and significantly large yet diverse student group is important to both China and American campuses. To American campuses, this group of students requires extensive care and instruction in order to adapt to a completely different environment with a different language, culture, and set of values. How can these schools deliver the core values of their liberal arts education to the Chinese international students? To China, these students are both resourceful and threatening. They have learnt the most advanced theories and are trained in the most prestigious institutions; a developing country like China desperately needs them. At the same time, they have had a taste of civil society as well as other characteristics that a totalitarian society does not have. They have also experienced uncensored media and Internet, which provides them with different
perspectives of historical issues such as Cultural Revolution, the Great Famine, Tiananmen Protest, and so on.

Should Chinese Communist Party worry about these students? I would like to argue that they do not need to worry about the general population of Chinese international students. After carefully studying Chinese international students in interviews, I realized that obstacles and disjunctures discourage students from developing an interest in activism, nor do they allow students who are interested in activism to participate in it.

As someone who is deeply interested in improving Chinese society, I have rarely encountered Chinese international students who share the same interest. On the other hand, China itself has had many activisms in recent years. For example, in 2014, the people of Maoming, a city of China, flooded the streets to protest the municipal’s new program of introducing PX plant near the city. In the same year, Hong Kong had its nationalist student movement. The next year, Chinese feminist initiated their anti-sexual harassment campaign by carrying signs that said, “My wearing isn’t your excuse to harass me (我可以騷你不能擾)” and “Stop that Hand（住手）.” While the first two activisms may not be appealing to Chinese international students because they were focused on local issues, the feminist movement in China also did not attract much attention of Chinese international students. In fact, until March 19, 2018, there were only about two hundred Chinese in America actively engaging in communicating and organizing feminist-related events back in China, and some of them are feminist activists who involuntarily left their home country to seek political asylum. Compared to over three hundred thousand Chinese international students in America, less than 0.0006% of
them are participating in the Chinese feminist movement. How can there be only a significantly small fraction of students participating in activism when they have spent time living in the United States, where they have witnessed several influential social movements such as the #BlackLivesMatter and Occupy movements? I would like to explain it in three aspects.

First of all, I argue that Chinese international students are not really as free as people believe. Although many of them cannot name any activists persecuted except Nobel Peace Prize laureate Liu Xiaobo, they are all very familiar of Chinese Communist Party’s attitude towards activists. They are afraid that if they participate in any activism in America, either their family members or they themselves will suffer dire consequences such as interrogations and a ban on returning China. Some of them also firmly believe that “Chinese Student and Scholar Association” is a tool for Chinese Communist Party to monitor their behaviors. In fact, one of my interviewees reported that she found out someone had anonymously reported students who went to a documentary screening about the Dalai Lama to CSSA at her university. Meanwhile, Chinese Communist Party’s repression of activist groups interferes their ability to recruit members publicly, resulting in significant difficulty for Chinese international students to join activist groups. Secondly, I would like to argue that Chinese international students do not necessarily reflect upon their society when seeing or reading news about activism in America. Instead, they believe that their society is different from American society and what is problematic with American society does not necessarily apply to Chinese society. For example, when asked about their opinions on #BlackLivesMatter, some of my interviewees reported that they do not think Chinese society has racism. Finally, I would like to argue that this generation of Chinese international students has some characteristics that do not encourage them to
participate in activism in China, such as their definitions of equality based on their social status and being the only child of the family.
LITERATURE REVIEW

There is a great deal of research that examines how Chinese international students adapt to the new social environment and cope with challenges of language, culture, and ideology. There is also research focusing on Chinese democracy movement overseas. However, studies that relate Chinese international students to activism in China are very limited.

In Vanessa Fong’s book *Paradise Redefined* (2012), Chinese international students are described as pursuers of the ultimate elite status. Most of the transnational students in her study considered applying for citizenship in the developed world. And they believe studying abroad is the bridge to prestigious, high-paying careers in China. However, during the time I conducted my research, the relationship between China and the U.S. was deteriorating and only two of my twelve interviewees reported that they considered staying in America. Both of them are Computer Science major students. Besides, Vanessa Fong did not devote much space to identify the benefits of studying abroad, such as freer Internet, which was mentioned multiple times by my interviewees, and a more liberal environment to study Social Science and Humanities subjects.

In “China: Regime Shakers and Regime Supporters”, Teresa Wright (2012) summarizes different characteristics of Chinese students as a social group of different time period. She indicates that Chinese students after 1980 were inclined to cultivate positive ties to the ruling regime due to intensified competition for jobs as well as the great opportunities for social mobility produced by CCP’s economy policy. In addition, she suggests that the emergence of student protest was facilitated by the divisions among ruling elites, especially during the Repbulican period, which “featured a weak state and many contending political powers”.
In contrast to Teresa Wright’s findings, my interviewees are not facing great opportunities for social mobility. Their parents may have benefited greatly from the Reform and Opening-Up policy by CCP, but the once rapidly developing economy is slowing down. Students no longer expect to achieve great social mobility, but hope instead to maintain their social status. These Chinese international students are also financially supported by their parents instead of the state, which allows them a certain degree of immunity to totalitarian regime’s control as well as access to freer Internet and database.

Meanwhile, in “Transnational Activism Online” (2009), Guobin Yang describes Chinese international students as “Chinese Diaspora” who were deeply involved in mobilizing support for their domestic counterpart during the 1989 Tiananmen Protest. One of the four diasporic activist networks named by Guobin Yang is the “Chinese Students and Scholars Association.” It is interesting to see how this organization has changed from actively using newsgroups and email groups to mobilize support for protesters at home in 1989 to today, when it strengthens the CCP’s control of students abroad. Besides, Guobin Yang’s research was conducted at a time when censorship on both Internet and media was not as severe as it is today. It also does not talk about Chinese international students’ experiences abroad. My research, on the other hand, includes interviews with Chinese international students and allows readers to have a grasp of what these students have learnt from studying abroad, as well as what are some of the common characteristics that influence their decisions about participating in activism.

In Inventing the World Grand University (2017), Fraiberg, Wang, and You studied Chinese international students at Michigan State University extensively and indicated the importance of studying Chinese international students, as one out of six international students is now from the People’s Republic of China. Fraiberg et al. has produced many interesting
findings, such as the “rich underground economy that was widespread on the MSU campus and difficult to access or document” (Fraiberg 2017), the disjuncture between Chinese international students and American campuses, and the difficulty of fitting study of Chinese international students into well-worn tropes. They concluded that without a deep understanding of social and historical contexts of both home and host cultures there would be a danger of reproducing social and class inequalities. However, the case studies by Fraiberg et al., as admitted by them, do not reconstruct the full landscape of Chinese international students in the United States. Drawing samples from more prestigious institutions, my research explores the struggles of Chinese international students who are not motivated to stay in the U.S., but rather are utilizing the education resources these institutions can provide to achieve a better understanding of the subjects they are studying. While some of them fit into the stereotypes of money-driven entrepreneurs, others are reconciling a dissonance between their previous image of China and the reality showed to them through multiple agents, such as uncensored Internet, professors who specialized in East Asia Studies, and so on. My study unveils these students’ struggles of how to improve their society, and at what price.

In “The Overseas Chinese Democracy Movement after Thirty Years,” Jie Chen (2014) indicates the current trends in the Overseas Chinese Democracy Movement, such as cooperation with the exiled Falun Gong movement and solidarity with exile ethnic minority campaigns. In my study, only two of my interviewees read Liu Xiaobo’s writings, and only three of them do not regard the exiled Tibetan cause as separatist. All of them also addressed the specific concern that they may be banned from entering their home country if the government regards them as dissidents. The disjuncture between democracy movement led by Tiananmen exiles and current generation of Chinese international students needs to be addressed so that people who want to
build a democracy China can unite together.

Overall, the potential of this new generation of Chinese international students is not fully examined in previous studies. They fail to address the diversity within this large group of students, or to try to understand how a liberal arts education and freer environment empower them. Most importantly, they do not recognize that some Chinese international students are acquiring a taste of democracy and civil society and want to bring them home. My research, on the other hand, will try to address the motivations and challenges faced by these Chinese international students. I will be talking about the state repression, the exposure to activism, and the different needs Chinese international students want to address in their home society.
METHODOLOGY

My research aims to understand different factors that influence Chinese international students’ interests in participate in activism. My research draws on transcription of audiotape and notes collected during in-depth interviews with 12 Chinese international students who have been selected based on snowball sampling, including both undergraduate and graduate students. I believe only interviews allow me to understand what factors influence my interviewees’ decisions to participate in activism in China because they allow further exploration of my interviewees’ subjective experiences. The reason to use snowball sampling is that I have been rejected numerous times by students who believed this topic is too sensitive to talk about or not their priority of studying abroad. As a result, I have had to ask interviewees to refer to me others who might be interested in this topic. People who accepted my invitation were genuinely interested in this topic and wanted to have a conversation with me. In fact, some interviewees even asked me to share my opinions on issues brought up during the interview as well as to explain to them how to have access to this level of knowledge about activism in China. I believe my interviewees have gained a more refined knowledge of activism and themselves through our dialogues.

My interview consists of a list of questions about several aspects, namely students’ experience in America and in China, students’ definition of equality, and students’ attitude and knowledge of activism in China. In order to protect my interviewees’ privacy, especially for some of them who did not realize the potential risks of being heard by irrelevant people, I always chose a classroom with no one in it to conduct my interviews. My interviews were all conducted in Chinese. I believe it is the only way my interviewees were able to express their opinions at full capacity. In the beginning, they were asked to read and sign my consent form.
My interviewees were also informed that they could choose not to participate or avoid any question, as they desired. None of them declined to answer any questions, including questions about Tibetan, Tiananmen Protest, and other sensitive matters, although one interviewee asked me to stop audiotaping when describing their experience with a participant of Tiananmen Protest.

The whole process began with my acceptance of IRB approval. I posted recruitment letter on social media platform and I asked my friends to refer people they believe would be interested in this topic to me. I was able to find three interviewees without much trouble. Then, after finishing interviews, they also referred some of their friends to me. Many people have turned me down for reasons such as “not interested” or “I am afraid I cannot talk about activism”. But, in the end I successfully conducted twelve interviews.

I had my interviewees’ consent and recorded our conversations during the interviews. Then, I translated and transcribed our conversations in Chinese to English. I did not have a clear theme of what I was looking for until I started coding my transcriptions together. I was able to locate similar patterns in my interviewees’ answers, and later developed into my three chapters.

For protection of privacy, I used randomly assigned TV show names to refer to my interviewees. After transcribing, I have deleted all the audio files.

Because I had to translate interviews from Chinese to English, I might have simplified my interviewee’s answers. To ensure the accuracy, I double-checked my translations with my interviewees.

Although I have tried my best to avoid limitations of my study, I believe the image I constructed is missing pieces from students who rejected my invitation to participate in my
study. Also, I have done my best to diversify my study, but I cannot reach students in the most prestigious institutions as well as students in less prestigious institutions. These limitations may affect my study’s outcome.
Chapter I: REPRESSION OF CHINESE COMMUNIST PARTY

A common theme about activism in China from these interviews is that everyone is afraid of government persecution. As expected, my interviewees have different levels of knowledge of activism in China. Some of them participated in classes that discuss activism in China and in general, some of them follow friends, independent news, or social media accounts, and some of them do not have access to this information and do not intend to do so. However, they all expressed their concerns of Chinese Communist Party’s action if they participate in activism. Also, it appears that some of my interviewees are intimidated by Chinese Communist Party’s reputation as a legitimate government. They attribute Chinese society’s recent 30 years of rapid economic development to CCP’s Reform and Opening-Up policy. As children of the direct beneficiaries of this policy, they reported that they do not want to bite the hand that feeds them.

Generally speaking, my interviewees show more resentment toward the government and society in general the more they know about activism and class, ethnic, and labor conflicts in China. However, their motivations to act upon this resentment do not necessarily follow up because they also learn about the crackdown on activism by the Chinese Communist Party. Nine of my interviewees could not even name a single activist that was persecuted in the recent years, and yet they know the attitude of CCP towards activists through state media, censorship, and rumors. Hence, they are even more reluctant to participate in activism due to the dire consequences.

There are multiple ways Chinese government authoritarianism reaches America, according to reports made by the Congressional-Executive Commission on China. The first one is the establishment of Confucius Institutes across the United States. In 2017 there were 110
Confucius Institutes, and 501 Confucius Classrooms in the United States. The education expenses are shared by Hanban, which is the Office of Chinese Language Council International in China, and its American partners, while instructors and teaching materials are selected by Hanban. Some Confucius Institutes have been proven to commit academic censorship and problematic employment practices. Other than the Confucius Institutes, Chinese government also relies on the collaboration with the Chinese Students and Scholars Association to reinforce its control over its population abroad. In 2017, the CSSA at UC San Diego, in collaboration with the local consulate of China, demanded that the university not to invite the Dalai Lama as a commencement speaker. In fact, my interviewee Soso’s experience shows the role played by the CSSA in American universities. Chinese international students are also aware of the grave consequences if they express opinions against CCP. The state media in China has vilified several Chinese international students who expressed heterodox views on American campuses. In 2008, a Chinese student at Duke University was portrayed in China as a traitor because of her independent stance on Tibetan rights. In 2017, a graduating Chinese senior student at the University of Maryland was also vilified after her Commencement address described free speech in the United States as a breath of fresh air. Hence, Chinese international students cannot really appreciate free speech in the United States without worrying about the consequences shown in those instances.

As one of the more knowledgeable interviewees, Soso offered some insights of CCP’s attitude towards activism. When asked if she follows reports of activism in China, Soso answered,

Yes, like the #MeToo movement, which caused FeministVoices’ social media accounts to be deleted. I also know other LGTBQ movements in China, but they are relatively small and not
influential. It is just difficult to do activism in China. I think advocating for these movements would be more viable. I learned about these events when I read news in America because when in China the government deleted those news immediately. I know these American media are biased, but it is a viable way to obtain information. I read about most of these activism in America. I think it is hard to keep devoting to activism in China. Also, the implication of our political system make people think the state will solve problems, not the people. I think only people that have experienced a lot, like Ai Weiwei, will be committed to activism.

FeministVoices, the group mentioned in Soso’s answer, is the largest Chinese feminist social media account with hundreds of thousands of followers based in Beijing China. In previous years, FeministVoices’ account was always blocked right after Woman’s Day. But in 2018, FeministVoices’ account was deleted right after Woman’s Day. It drew a lot of attention across the globe and put massive pressure on the social media company to restore FeministVoices’ account. Even the CEO of the social media platform came out and apologized for the “unknown” reason they cannot restore FeministVoices account. However, at the same time there were many accusations online stating that FeministVoices was banned because it was promoting Western ideology and challenging the authority of CCP. In an authoritarian environment like this, it is hard to imagine how Chinese international students can overcome the pressure and participate in activism in China.

Soso also recalled a recent case of fellow Chinese students being anonymously reported to the Chinese Student Scholar Association at her university for going to a screening event about the Dalai Lama. She said,

I am really afraid of going to events like this. I am really interested in this event, but last time someone wrote an anonymous letter to CSSA to report Chinese students who went to that
screening. Also, in Australia some Chinese students would report other students for political reasons, and the police would visit their parents in China.

Soso was referring to Tony Chang’s experience in 2015. Tony Chang was an undergraduate student at the Queensland University of Technology when he decided to participate in the Chinese democracy movement in Australia. Soon, three state security agents in China visited his parents in northeastern China and warned them to tell their son to stop participating in that movement and to keep a low profile. Tony Chang’s experience shows that my interviewees’ concerns are grounded in empirical evidence rather than hearsay.

Soso’s account allows us to understand that even though Chinese international students are far away from China, the CCP’s influence still reaches them through multiple agents like peers who are loyal to the party. My other interviewees do not have a direct experience of CCP’s long-distant oppression of its citizens’ freedom of speech. However, they could still give accounts of how CCP treat activists and activism in China.

Veronica is my only interviewee who worked with a domestic NGO in China. Her answer addresses the precarity of NGOs in China. She said:

When I was working in this NGO, I tried to raise urban population’s awareness of others in poverty. This NGO needs resources from both government and people to operate, which makes me think it is hopeless. In my short period of working in this NGO, nothing changed. People lack of faith in organizations because of those governmental organizations’ inadequacy poses a big threat to us. Besides, government’s censorship also obstructs our work. I still remember the arrest of five feminists in Guangzhou last year. It was then that I realized how hopeless our society is.
Unlike other interviewees, Veronica has actual experience with how CCP obstructs others who want to help oppressed populations. Her answer shows the predicament of NGOs in China even though most of them are essential to oppressed population’s survival. For example, the five feminists mentioned in Veronica’s answer were distributing anti-sexual harassment pamphlets when they got arrested. They were all members of FeministVoices, which I mentioned above. Their routine work consisted of using their connections with women’s rights lawyers to help victims of bride trafficking, domestic violence, and so on. With nothing against the Chinese government, NGO like FeministVoices are still under constant harassment by it.

Hehe’s description of his attitude towards activism in China also relates to the government’s brutal history of oppression,

I respect these Chinese dissidents a lot. This is a really dark road in my opinion. The scariest part is that they are not that influential, especially if you are a human rights lawyer for villagers, like Tan Zuo’ren. A lot of them were persecuted and nothing has changed. I really respect them, and I believe their works are pushing Chinese society to a rule of law society. However, I don’t think it is enough. At least they let these liberal ideas out. In terms of politics they may have not accomplished much, but in terms of the public they let people know that liberal fighters exist. I think activists in China also face more resistance. Our government does not listen to its people, like Tiananmen Protest. They know if they do not contain activists, their governance will be destroyed.

Tan Zuo’ren, as mentioned by Hehe, is an activist who proposed the “5.12 Student Archive” asking people who lost their children due to the 2008 Sichuan Earthquake to build a victim database. He was trying to reveal the subpar construction quality of school buildings in
Sichuan and got arrested and later convicted for “inciting subversion of state power”. Hehe’s account shows the importance of knowledge of Chinese activists for Chinese international students to understand the importance of activism as well as lack of supervision of power in China. Otherwise, it is difficult to imagine the consequence of letting an authority using vague laws to punish dissidents.

Jane, a sophomore college student with Economics and IGS double major, also highlights the oppression of activism by Chinese government as the reason she could not devote to activism in China,

The first time I experienced activism was when women are on the street marching and chanting “Not my president.” To be honest, I envy them. In China, only in private space do we talk about these things. I do not have ways to learn about activism in China. I know there are some underground activities but I am not involved. I really hope my country becomes better, and I want to contribute something. But the environment is just too hostile to anyone who has his or her own voice. I do not want to end up being exiled.

*Can you imagine circumstances when you would participate in activism?*

I need to have hope. I won’t participate in something that will end in few days. I do not have the ability to know about these movements, and I am not smart enough to organize a movement of enough scale. However, if I find it hopeful, I will join in. I do not want anyone to sacrifice his or her lives for this.

Jane’s answer also indicates the lack of visibility of Chinese activists to the general population in China as well as people’s fear to the CCP. Jane does not have any knowledge of activists in China, and yet she believes it is hopeless to participate in activism in China. According to Jane, her fear of CCP is based on the Tiananmen Square Protest. She said,
Recently I have read an article, my roommate also had an class about social movements, about the Tiananmen Square Protest. My roommate was really sad that while American students can work on social movements, we cannot act upon it. I used to watch videos of “CP’s secrets” but I never really believe in it. I just absorb different perspectives. I have also had a conversation with my mom and she warned me not to think about it, “Being alive is most important”.

Jane’s mother’s response also reveals the significance of my interviewees’ generation to their families. Due to the One Child Policy introduced in 1979 in China, most of the Han families were only allowed to have one child per household. Breaking this law would result in fine as well as forced abortion, which Qiang would talk about in his answers. Hence, it is hard for Chinese international students who are single children to risk their personal freedom and future to engage in activism that are not promising under an authoritarian government.

As mentioned above, Qiang is from Guangzhou, China. His father is a lawyer and has many human rights lawyer colleagues who were imprisoned by CCP. He described his parents’ concerns as he told them he wants to improve the society,

My parents are afraid of me participating in any social movement here. They think there might be consequences back in China. They do not want me to go to pro-democracy in China rally in America. They think CCP has eyes and ears everywhere. They even think organizations like CSSA are ears of CCP.

Can you imagine circumstances when you would participate in activism in China?

First of all, my immigration status cannot be threatened because I plan to stay here. I also do not want to be banned from entering my home country.
Even Qiang’s parents in China believe the CCP monitors China's international student population to reduce threats to their authority. It is obvious that the fear of CCP’s ears permeates the Chinese society.

When asked about why she knew fewer Chinese activists than American activists, Fiona said,

I have some northern friends who really love to talk about politics. However, they also say their parents let them watch state news media. They often side with CCP on social issues. I also have friends from Communist Party families, and they are really supportive of it. I think the CCP really did contributed to China, and if you ask me to fight against it, I probably won’t. I think international students like us hardly experience any oppression from the CCP. In fact, we benefit from the CCP’s policies. I think this is why we may not be against it. I also think some friends’ opinions against the CCP are really naïve. Maybe I did not have a whole picture of the issue, but I think these people are less welcome.

Fiona’s answer reveals the complicated relationship with the CCP. Indeed, without the CCP’s economic reform and opening policy, their families could not possibly afford them to study abroad. As the direct beneficiaries of the CCP’s policies, it is hard to imagine what can motivate Chinese international students to overcome the feeling that they owe the CCP and participate in activism.

Also, it appears that Chinese international students do not have a clear path to participate in activism. Due to the nature of heavy surveillance and dire consequences of being regarded as an activist by the government, Chinese activists do not publicly recruit members. Instead, they often require a prospective member to be vouched by other activists in order to join their group.
It is also related to the fact that Chinese government recruits informants among activists. My interviewee Artemis’ recount shows that it is even unlikely for Chinese international students who are passionate about activism to find their groups.

Artemis, a sociology PhD student who spent eight years in America, also found it difficult to find guidance to participate in activism. When asked about if she had joined any activism, Artemis was very sad and said,

Honestly I haven’t. I was really excited about activism in my undergraduate years. However, when I was very excited and motivated about activism, there wasn’t any activism I could join because I was in Ohio, America. I think if I have friends who are activists, I might become an activist as well. Still, there is no one asking me to join his or her activist group. Also, since most of us are single child, it may hinder us to be free to do something.

Artemis’s answer also suggests that being a single child hinders Chinese international students from participating in activism in China.

Although there are many Chinese activist groups and exiles in America, they don’t seem to be able to outreach to the majority of Chinese international students. Consequently, there are only a small fraction of Chinese international students who are in activist groups, and none of my interviewees are in them.

Based on my interviewees’ accounts of government interference, it appears that Chinese government has successfully reduced the possibilities for Chinese international students to devote their knowledge to activism in China by

1. Blocking their access to absorb and circulate information relate to social issues
2. Using activists like Liu Xiaobo to implicate the dire consequence of participating in activism in China

3. Isolating you from your family, friends, and society by state media censorship and forced conviction

4. Cultivating informants among Chinese international students to intimidate students from speaking against Chinese government abroad

All in all, although none of my interviewees answered that they were participating in activism, they still know the measures tha the CCP took to repress activists. Studying abroad also put them in a precarious position. One of my interviewee, Qiang, specifically said that he believes his immigration status would be threatened if he participates in activism in America. As a result, being an international student abroad may be discouraging to people who want to participate in activism. Also, my interviewees have given various accounts of how the CCP contributed to the Chinese society, especially when Fiona recognizes Chinese international students as direct beneficiaries of the CCP’s economic reform policy. With the dire consequences and complicated relationship with the CCP, it is even harder for Chinese international students who haven’t experienced any social injustice in China to stand up against the CCP. I also argue that the strict activist recruitment procedure due to the severe repression against activism by the CCP also hinders Chinese international students’ chances to join activist groups and have people with similar interests to talk about social injustice.
CHAPTER II AMERICAN ACTIVISM IN CHINESE STUDENTS

In this chapter, I would like to use my interviewees’ experiences with activism in America to argue that they do not necessarily prompt reflection on their own society but rather on the differences between American society and Chinese society. Without direct participation, all but one of my interviewees did not show an interest in the inspirations for the activism they witnessed in America, such as #BlackLivesMatter.

When in America, Chinese international students are exposed to an unprecedented amount of discussion of activism in America. As a result, I would like to discuss what my interviewees might have learnt from activism in America and what they regard as unsuitable in Chinese soil from activism in America.

Unlike in America, Chinese government and state-run media rarely report incidents of activism due to the “stability maintenance” policy. The most common answers from my interviewees are that they never heard of activism in China when in college, not to mention when they were back in China. This distorted and blocked access of information shows how important the uncensored Internet and media they get to access in America are to their knowledge of activism.

At the same time, the concepts of social justice that Chinese international students encounter in America are largely related to race, gender, and sexuality. Not many of these students are motivated to study these concepts or try to understand social injustice issues in China using these concepts. Hence, studying in America can be an opportunity for some Chinese students like my interviewee Artemis and Soso, who want to eliminate social injustice.
But it can also be an obstacle for others, like Hehe and Fiona, who are overwhelmed by the cruel and chaotic reality these concepts show them.

Soso is an undergraduate with Anthropology and WMGS double major. She is very knowledgeable about social movements in America compared to other interviewees. Soso described her knowledge of social movement as:

I have been to our school’s #Fordhall2015 for one day. About #Metoo movement, I have not posted anything online but I have seen people making this post. There were a lot of discussions in my class about #Metoo as well.

#Fordhall2015 was an organized protest by concerned students of color. The participation was relatively high, with many students occupying an administrative building. Many of my interviewees mentioned #Fordhall2015, and yet only Soso participated in it. It is important to notice that Chinese international students rarely see themselves as students of color. As Cena said in his interview, many of them believe racism does not exist in Chinese society. Meanwhile, none of my interviewees are from designated ethnic minority groups in China. Hence, it appears that it is difficult for most Chinese international students to feel related to racial issues in America.

Some were sympathetic. Soso is from a Buddhist family with knowledge of oppression of Tibetan in China. As a result, she has a better knowledge of whether racism exists in China than other interviewees. Soso said that she experienced social injustice in both America and China. She described her experience of social injustice in China as:
At my home, Tibet issue was brought up the most, especially Tibetan Buddhism. My father is very familiar with this. He is very concerned about the oppression of Tibetan Buddhism. My family is very Buddhism religious.

Although Tibet is one of the many provinces in China, none of my interviewees addressed issues relate to Tibet except Soso. Because of her father, Soso was aware of the oppression of Tibetan Buddhism, which is never portrayed in state media of China.

As a bisexual woman, Soso is also well aware of sexism and homophobia in China. As she noted:

In 2015 the Chinese media censorship committee stigmatized homosexuality. It is a systemic discrimination. Even before that, LGBTQ group were discriminated against at individual level as well. Also, as a woman in China, I have also experienced individual discrimination. My family members would say things like “Why do girls go to college abroad? Why do they need to study in the first place?”

Besides, Soso experienced social injustice in America in many ways. She experienced verbal sexual harassment from white men. As a result, she learned about how Asian women are fetishized in America. She is also concerned about white students’ shallow supports of activism. According to Soso,

Deis’ Impact is a social justice festival at our university. It is sponsored by the Ethics Center. We invited famous activists such as Rebecca Walker to this event. I am quitting this year because many members of Deis’ Impact are very superficial about these events. They do not think about why these activists are doing these activism and what will be the consequences. All of them are female American students beside myself. Only this
year we have two male students, and they are international students from India and Korea.

Soso’s observation also shows the different determination required to participate in activism between Chinese students and American students. For American students, participation in activism can simply be a personal hobby while for Chinese students, participation in activism means they are risking their personal freedom as well as relationship with their parents back in China.

Soso is determined to become an anthropology professor in the future and address these personal experiences in her academic career. However, she also appears to hesitate after systemically studying these social movements. She repeated her concerns many times during the interview:

I don’t think activism is universal. In China, I think most people are not activists but advocates. I think social justice is also interlinked with culture context… A lot of them (activists) tried to voice demands of LGBTQ people, but they are often using western LGBTQ strategy, such as demanding legalizing homosexual marriage and using their terminology. Although they give us identity, it is often not useful in Chinese society context. It often ends like Japan, where the LGBTQ movement has stalled because of lack of viable strategy. The access of resource is also problematic, which is why I want to be anthropology professor in China.

Soso’s skepticism towards strategies of western LGBTQ activism unveils the mismatch of western activism and Chinese society. Even for passionate students like Soso, learning from activism in America does not mean a clear path to activism in China. Their realization of the different political and social context troubles people like Soso.
On the other hand, interviewees like Cena and Qiang were much less concerned about social injustice, as they claimed they never experienced such things.

Cena is from an upperclass family in Beijing, China. He is an entrepreneur with a tech start up in Boston that his parents invested in. Cena’s narrative of his experience with racism is very interesting as he claimed those racism were very mild. According to Cena,

To be honest, this is not my major interest. Unless it is something very close to my personal life, like #Fordhall2015 at Brandeis, I would not notice it. I probably spent 2% of my time searching for this kind of information. I haven’t experienced any social injustice in America, except some racial slurs when we are playing basketball in America. To me, it seems quite mild. I am not going to be triggered because I lived in a society without racism. I am very insensitive about it.

It was astonishing and revealing to hear from Cena that he believes Chinese society does not have racism. International students like Cena perceive activism in America as irrelevant to their lives in China or their social locations in America. It is true that Chinese government has created fifty-five designated ethnic minorities and a mirage of harmonious ethnic relationships. But to find out that someone like Cena who spent six years in America with uncensored media and internet still has no knowledge of what Chinese society really looks like is too shocking for me. However, I believe it is necessary to understand what does equality mean to Chinese students like Cena in order to comprehend their lack of interest in activism in China.

Jane’s experience also shows how Chinese international students’ first contacts with activism in America can be overwhelming rather than thought provoking. Jane is a junior student in college studying Economics and IGS, and her family is into medicine industry in China. When asked about if she know about activism in America, she responded,
I heard it from an exiled Chinese LGBTQ documentary director. He explained to me how gay marriage was legalized because of influential gay billionaires in the dark pushing this agenda. I went to a WMGS class once and I dropped it after the first class. I think these people are too radical. For example, when professor asked us who defined gender, most students answered it is a social construct. The professor also agreed that your experience defines your gender. There was a very annoying student who insisted that their genders are defined by themselves. I felt very uncomfortable, I felt it is very easy to offend these people.

Jane was referring to Cui Zi’en in her answer. Cui Zi’en produced many films about marginalized population in China. He is an outspoken LGBT activist based in Beijing and recently moved to the United State. Jane’s answer suggests the conflict between Chinese international students and identity politics in western society. Due to the hegemonic status of Han population in China, my interviewees, except Soso and Artemis, do not have direct experience with ethnic minority groups. Also, they are newcomers to the identity politics in America. As a result, the identity politics of American activism alienates Chinese international students on its own.

Linda, a junior student with Art History major, also shows the problem with identity politics in America hinders Chinese international students. When asked about her experience with activism in America, she said,

I have a lot. However, in the beginning I was only learning about activism in America in class. I had a lot of things I wanted to say, but I did not have the language to express my opinions. Of course, I later conquered my fear and I proved to others that I also have good ideas to share with them. But it was not a good experience. I had a lot to share but I couldn’t. I was afraid of people looking down on me.
Linda’s mother’s experience as the head of a high school in Suzhou also reveals a unique kind of social injustice in China. She said,

You know, my mother is the head of the school. It is very rare to see a female head of school. So, my mother actually received some complaint letters about her ability to manage a school. Those letters usually say, “Are you sure you can do this, woman? Why someone allows a woman to be in charge? Get out of Suzhou, you outsider.” Yes, regional discrimination in Suzhou is really bad, and people often attack my mother as an outsider.

Cena’s account also proves the severity of regional discrimination in China. He said,

When I was in Beijing, I think some Beijing citizens really discriminate against outsiders. Although I registered as Beijing, I came to Beijing at age 8 from Qinhuangdao, Hebei. I do not personally define myself as 100% Beijinger. Although many Beijingers think I am one of them. I don’t experience this discrimination, but I have seen children and adults being discriminated against. For example, when in Lunar New Year, Beijingers will celebrate when outsiders went back to their home town. In fact, even my parents would express their happiness when outsiders were gone.

The “outsiders” in Cena’s answer refer to the “float” population of China that exists due to the Hukou system, which is a household registration system that regulates flow of population. If you are not registered in the city, you cannot benefit from its welfare system, and your children cannot go to the local public schools without paying significantly higher tuition. This system imposes significant advantage on urban population over others and creates numerous kinds of oppression on village population. However, Cena and Linda are the only two interviewees who addressed this unique social injustice in China in their reports.
On the other hand, coming from a different and more repressive society, it is reasonable for Chinese international students to feel overwhelmed. Many of my interviewees expressed their interests in hidden history of China. In fact, they reported that the first thing they did with free Internet was to find materials related to Tiananmen Square Protest. This freer environment of media allows Chinese international students to have more information about China than their peers in China. However, without proper guidance, it is difficult for them to construct their own critical thinking of Chinese society.

Also, although many of my interviewees answered that they have read about activism in America on social media, none of them reported to have a group of interested Chinese international students to discuss this matter. Fiona and Artemis specifically reported that they couldn’t find anybody to talk to about activism.

Fiona is a senior student studying IGS and LGLS, and her parents are real estate investors. When asked about her engagement with activism in America, she said,

Sometimes. When I am dissatisfied or resented about some topics on Chinese media, I will talk to my boyfriend. However, he does not engage in a discussion in depth. I did not directly engage in these events. I mostly learned from friends’ social media accounts. I did not have any discussion with my friends about these events. I do not have anyone inviting me to join any organizations to fight against discriminations, so I haven’t done anything.

It is important to notice that Chinese international students like Fiona do not actively engage in conversations about social issues with their friends, unlike their American counterparts.
Meanwhile, some of my interviewees also mentioned they struggles with connection to their homeland. Artemis describes it as,

I remember when I was in the class of urban sociology. We talked about homeless people in San Francisco. During the class, I remembered seeing homeless people in Lanzhou. I felt more empathetic to them than I feel now. After coming to America, most of the people I talk to are social elites. The exposure to oppressed population is significantly reduced. Also, the theories I learnt in class are based on western society. It is very hard to apply these languages to Chinese society. I think this is also an injustice. I hope the knowledge I learned from college is more applicable to Chinese society. I want to vernacularize these theories in my future study.

Lanzhou is the capital city of Gansu province of China. According to 2010 census, there are 3.4 million Han and around 160 hundred ethnic minority population. Artemis’ observation of her reduced exposure to oppressed population reveals the dilemma for many Chinese students who want to make social changes. She mentioned that she became more and more indifferent to social injustice because she lost connection with oppressed population in China.

Cena also expressed his weakened bond to Chinese society and how social media helped restoring this bond when asked about his experience with social injustice in China,

A lot of things I think are very strange. First of all, I haven’t been to China for a long time. A lot of things are very complicated, and I do not have many personal experiences. Maybe when I was in high school. I have never been in society before, I was just a student. I may have heard of things such as some online comments being deleted. My friends on social media were all outraged about this censorship. I do not have direct personal experience. I do not actively monitor social justice matter.
However, I also feel bad about government after seeing many people criticizing government’s censorship.

While other interviewees like Hehe and Artemis have reported that they have learned to bypass the Internet censorship and access sites like Youtube to learn about history censored by the CCP, Cena’s answer shows his indifference to society has been there since his high school. Cena’s experience likely shows us the education received by some Chinese international students back in China may not include education of empathy.

All in all, I argue that some social movements in America do not inspire Chinese students to participate in activism in China, such as #BlackLivesMatter, due to different characteristics and perceptions between Chinese society and American society. They appear to be confusing to Chinese international students and do not prompt them to reflect upon their own society.
CHAPTER III CHINESE STUDENTS AND CHINA

In this chapter, I would like to take a holistic approach to understand the relationship between Chinese international students and activism in China. What does equality mean to Chinese international students? What do they care about at home? How does the economics in China influence their personal goals? My interviewees’ answers provide some significant insights.

Ten out of twelve interviewees said that they never experienced social injustice in America and in China personally. The only two interviewees who reported they experienced social injustice are Soso and Artemis. I would argue that it is not because my interviewees are all privileged. Unlike the unrealistic assumption that Chinese international students are all princelings, my interviewees, in fact, are from a variety of family backgrounds, social locations, and geographical locations. Some of them are from ultra-wealthy family in mega cities of China, like Shanghai and Guangzhou, and some of them are from less developed area, like Gansu, and have less financial support from their families. However, their concepts of equality resemble with each other. This similarity shows what my interviewees all perceive as lacking in Chinese society and what are being ignored by my interviewees. It is also important to notice that the difference between my interviewees’ concept of equality and the concept of equality in social movements in America.

My interviewee Veronica is a senior undergraduate student with Computational Social Science major. Her parents and grandparents are all teachers and professors in China. She described her experience and understanding of social justice and injustice as,
I think a society with justice should have everyone as equal. For example, everyone should have equal opportunity to make a better life for himself or herself. A rational person who makes the right choices should be able to maximize his or her happiness. For example, people won’t be discriminated against because of their gender, sexuality, ethnicity, and etc. These won’t be someone’s obstacles to make a better living. I think social injustice is the reverse. I am not sure if I have experienced any of these. For example, I didn’t experience any racism in America. I was in an inclusive environment. I remember this sociology professor Feng Gang, who said something like “Women should not be PhD.” It was very surprising to me. As a result, I do believe social injustice exists, just I never experienced them personally.

It is important to notice that Veronica is one of four interviewees who showed inclusiveness in their answers. My other interviewees did not include the multiple identities one might be discriminated against. In fact, few of my interviewees voiced their concerns of sexism in China.

When talking about equality, both Cena and Hehe said that it means social mobility for everyone. Cena said,

My first impression is that this society is not fair because our resources are scarce. The human society’s history has always been a hierarchal one. Although industrialization created a enormous size of middle class, I don’t think it will solve the extreme rich and poor situation. We all live on earth, and it won’t be possible to solve this dilemma on earth with limited resources. However, I do believe that when our technology has advanced to a degree that creates singularity, all the social problems would be solved. I think everyone’s fate shouldn’t be decided by their statuses born with. I think everyone should have upward mobility. However, I think it is very difficult to achieve. Even in
America with meritocracy, if you are born poor you will likely stay poor. For example, if Mark Zuckerberg was born in a poor family in which they cannot afford to buy him computer at young age, he won’t be able to learn computer science. So this is an unsolvable dilemma. But it is also critical to social stability. A lot of attempt to challenge the status quo didn't end up well, like our communism.

Cena believes that everyone is entitled to social mobility. However, he also suggests that it is impossible to achieve mobility through meritocracy or communism. Meanwhile, Cena’s concern with social mobility also reveals the burden imposed on this generation of Chinese international students. All of my interviewees’ parents are direct beneficiaries of the Reform and Opening-Up policy in 1980s China. There were two stages of this economic reform. The first stage involved the decollectivization of agriculture, opening-up to foreign investment, and allowing entrepreneur to start up business. The second stage involved outsourcing state-owned industry and lifting of price control, protectionist policy, and regulations. The private sector of China grew significantly with economy increasing by 9.5% a year. As a result, the generation of the parents of my interviewees had unprecedented amount of opportunity to move upward in the social hierarchy. However, for this generation of Chinese international students, everything has changed. They are facing universal higher education in China, booming real estate markets, and an unprecedented number of Chinese international students. All this, combined with their single child status, imposes significant economic burden on them. In an ideal situation, two partners will be raising two children and taking care of four elders. It is becoming more and more costly to do so. Hence, students like Cena are overwhelmed by the scarce social resources and increasing cost of living in China. It is nearly impossible for them to achieve social upward mobility like their parents. Like Cena said, “I probably spent 2% of my time searching for this
kind of information.” Their main concern is not the suffering of marginalized group but their endangered social status.

Hehe is from Wuhan, China, and his family is not as wealthy as my other interviewees due to having three brothers and three sisters. He, on the other hand, responded,

Most importantly, I think everyone should be treated equally. This should be the foundation of social justice, and I know there are other definitions of social justice. But to me, all people should be equal. Equality. There are many ways to ensure equality, like equal access to resources and developments, not necessarily affirmative act. Yes it may sound a lot like communism. Social injustice is like where we are now. We are 草民 (worthless people), we don’t have any freedom, we are just tools for government development. Class is fixated, limited social upward mobility. 70% of wealth is in top 1% of population. Education resources are distributed unequally. Healthcare is also garbage. I think social justice is what I am pursuing. I hope not only myself but also everyone else can have it. I believe achieving social justice will benefit not only myself but everyone else. I am not in a very privileged position, so selfishly speaking that will benefit me and I have motivation to do it. Or eventually I somehow become oppressor, because I am a selfish human. I am not ultra-altruism but I am willing to achieve social justice.

Hehe, unlike Cena, believes that achieving social justice for everyone is possible. Judging from his response, Hehe is very motivated to do so due to his less privileged social location. Hehe’s response provides a possibility that less privileged Chinese international students have the reason to pursue social justice because they are direct beneficiaries of it.
Also, Hehe and Soso were the only interviewees who addressed systemic discrimination against ethnic minority in China. When asked about an example of discrimination in China, Hehe said,

I remember a student in my elementary school was bullied so badly. Maybe because he has a dark skin tone and looks like Uyghur people. In Wuhan, people often associate Uyghur with thieves. Our parents would also tell us to stay away from Uyghurs. Tragically, he became a target of our resentment against Uyghur. I wasn’t perpetrator of bullying him but I was also an inactive bystander. Also, on the internet a lot of most liked news articles in China are either sexist opinions, xenophobe, or anti-Muslim. They call Muslim 绿绿 (green green), like green terror. I think these are systemic discrimination.

In my other interviewees’ answers, it is hard to see that China has fifty-five designated ethnic minority groups. It is important to notice how Chinese international students’ perspectives reflect the successful segregation strategy Chinese government uses to divide its population. Only three of my interviewees can address the issues with ethnic minority groups, and only Soso could point out the systemic oppression faced by Tibetan in China. While social movements in America are striving to be more inclusive, there is still a lack of inclusiveness in my interviewees’ answers about social justice.

My interviewees’ geographical locations also determine their exposure of certain social issues in China. Artemis is the only interviewee that lived in a city with the majority population being ethnic minority. She recalled how ethnic minority’s rights are constantly changing due to the CCP’s different policies and leadership.
Half of my twelve interviewees addressed the rule of law as their ideal social justice. Deng, on one hand, indicated that without the rule of law everyone is thinking about bypassing the law to secure their assets. Deng is a senior undergraduate student majored in Finance, and he is from Shenzhen. His father is a CEO of a large corporation, and his mother is a designer. When asked about what social justice means to him, Deng said,

> It means private property should be secured, and we have a law of justice to make sure nobody is taking legal loopholes to have advantages over others. My father always expresses this concern because everyone is competing illegally. If he does not engage in illegal ways to compete, his company won’t survive in this environment. However, if he does engage in illegal activities, he risks prison time and financial punishments. My father is really in a dilemma, which I prefer to stay away.

Xi provided a similar account when asked about what social justice means to him. Xi is a single child from an upper middleclass family with cousins all working in finance business. He said,

> I think social justice is exactly what is missing in Chinese society. We need to make sure the local government cannot benefit from local businesses. How can the government always get away with illegal things while business owners are the one to suffer? Chinese Custom once interrogated my mother for a night because her company would not carry contraband for the local cadre. They only let her go after her boss paid fifty thousand dollars to that cadre as a sign of apologize. This is why my mother is working in insurance company now. Too many shaddy business the government does not admit, and it’s always ordinary people like us who need to suffer.
Xi and Deng’s concern is very common for business owners in contemporary China. After China’s decentralization reform, local governments in China have possessed absolute powers on many matters, including selling properties and lands to real estate developers. Without supervision, this decentralization fostered corruptions and collusions between local cadres and local business owners. Deng’s answer shows that even for today’s China, corruption and collusion between officials and business owners are still worth concerning. Without financial stability, it is difficult to imagine Chinese international students like Xi and Deng can devote time to subjects that are not promising financial independence.

On the other hand, my other interviewees also pointed out the necessity to incorporate social awareness into the law system. Fiona said,

After studying legal system in college, I started to question what is social justice. In America, the government is pursuing procedural justice. I started to understand that we need to protect defendants’ rights. Also, I think about equity and equality. Everyone is born differently. How can we ensure a fair environment? From non-material perspective? I think social justice is an ideal situation.

My interviewees’ desires of an enforced law system that can protect everyone’s rights and social motilities unveil the anxiety they have toward the law system in China. Indeed, my interviewees’ experiences with their privileges are the best example of how weak the law in China is enforced in some aspects. The persecution of activists also shows the lack of supervision of government departments.

As for knowledge of activism in China, my interviewees have different responses. When asked about knowledge of activism in China, Veronica said,
I really don’t like nationalist activism, like cyber-bullying people who are in favor of foreign culture. I think other activisms like promoting awareness of poverty population are very necessary despite the fact they all are in a very bad shape. I think feminist movement should be appraised because of its valuable pursuit. There is still a lot of progress to be made. However, I really think Chinese society is doomed. I think although activists in China are lack of organization and common agenda, they are still hopeful. A lot of responsibilities used to rely on governmental organizations are shifting to these NGOs and activists. I believe in them.

Veronica pointed out a significant portion of activism in China, which is the nationalist movement. The development of social media and Internet coverage combined with the government’s nationalist propaganda created numerous instances of nationalist movement, such as Diaoyu/Senkaku movements, 2012 China anti-Japanese demonstrations and so on. It is important to know the existence of censorship in media creates a bizarre phenomenon in China’s entertainment industry, which is the outrageous number of anti-Japan WWII drama shows. It fosters radical nationalist sentiments nation-wide. It is also interesting to notice that none of my other interviewees mentioned nationalist movement in their responses. Veronica’s answer also shows the anxiety shared by people who are well aware of Chinese Communist Party’s repression of activists. However, her sentiment is not shared by my other interviewees. It might be because Veronica is more familiar with Chinese society than my other interviewees as she spent her first two years in a Chinese university.

While Chinese students are exposed to information and perspectives about Chinese society that are rarely found outside of few elite institutions in China, such as Tibetan issue, gender study, and so on, their cost of doing so is their bond to their homeland. Chinese society changes rapidly, and for most Chinese international students, they can only spend three months
in China in the summer. Meanwhile, due to time zone changes and priority of studying, they also easily lose track of what has happened in China when they are gone. All of my interviewees addressed the importance of acquiring knowledge of Chinese society from their social media accounts. However, with twelve to thirteen hours’ difference of time, it would be impossible for them to learn about what happened when they were sleeping. Also, when they are outside of China, they do not have means necessary to join activist groups. But when they are back in China, they still do not have means of communication to organize an activist group without risking their personal freedom.

As it is shown in most of my interviewees’ responses, economic equality is their major concern. What Chinese international students like my interviewees value the most is a fair justice system that secures their social status in the age of slowing down economic development and limited social mobility. They do not have the energy nor the means to keep track of what is happening to ethnic minority groups or other marginalized groups. The lack of awareness of these domestic issues is very dangerous and may not allow Chinese international students to have a reciprocal relationship with other social groups in activism in China.
CONCLUSION

While people still believe that Chinese international students will bring changes to Chinese society, I argue that it is difficult to imagine they will steer Chinese society in a democratic and civic direction in the near future. We may have thought that Chinese international students are natural candidates for activism in China, but my study shows that there are multiple levels of control that discourage them to do so.

First of all, I argued that my interviewees’ answers show the outreaching pressure of the CCP hinders Chinese international students to participate in activism in China. There are multiple accounts of dissident students’ family members being harassed by the state security agents as well as students themselves vilified by the state media. Students also believe, with some good evidence, that the CCP has informants among Chinese international students to monitor any dissident behaviors. Meanwhile, some of my interviewees’ answers indicate their unwillingness to criticize the Party that has helped their families prosper. The CCP’s Reform and Opening-Up policy allowed their families to accumulate enough wealth to afford them to study abroad.

Besides, the mismatch of activism in the U.S. and Chinese society prompts not reflection on Chinese international students’ home country but their alienation from American society. The current expectations of Chinese international students and curriculum designs by American campuses also do not encourage them to reflect upon their society. Many of them came to America in hope of maintaining their social status in an intensely competing job markets. Hence, they are not willing to take courses that are not career-oriented. Their misconceptions of their home country also misguided their opinions on activism in the U.S.
Finally, we must understand how Chinese international students define equality if we hope to understand their approach to activism in China. These students believe that their social status is being threatened by scarce of resource and regressing economic opportunities. Their single child status also imposes significant economic burden on them in the future. It is challenging for them to fulfill their traditional filial piety while studying social science and humanity subjects. Meanwhile, Chinese activist groups are very careful about recruiting members in fear of the CCP’s infiltration. Chinese international students rarely have the chance to know activists who would vouch for them to join an activist group. When coming to China, Chinese international students also lose their uncensored Internet and means of communication. They cannot organize an activist group on their own. This dilemma hinders many Chinese international students who are interested in activism to organize effectively.

Although my study’s outcome shows a gloomy reality, there is still a silver lining. As I am writing my senior thesis, the #Metoo movement has begun in China, with both victims sharing their stories and perpetuators and government trying to silence these voices. Some involved prestigious academic institution, like Peking University, has initiated a proposal to build anti-sexual harassment system on campus due to the #Metoo movement in China. A feminist Chinese international student in Canada started the movement when she was moved by the #Metoo movement in America and Canada. She spent a couple months building momentum on the Internet by engaging in discussion with people who are interested in this topic on Chinese social media. Then, several Chinese professors in American universities stood up against their fellow Chinese professors who they knew for a long time as perpetuators. Many students responded to their rally at these Chinese universities and provided even more accounts of sexual assault. However, the state security agents interfered and treated this event as a
collusion to incite “subversion of state power” and interrogated some students who were actively demanding the school to release relevant documents during this event.

This ongoing event shows that there are still common causes that allow Chinese international students to mobilize other social groups in China to participate in activism. Although their participation is limited, it is very important to have them in order to document activism as well as mobilize supports from international society.

Overall, I hope my findings allow people to have a glimpse of the unique characteristics of Chinese international students as an emerging social group with immense potential to provide for both American campuses and Chinese society. As a fellow Chinese international student, I truly hope my peers can value the opportunity of living in a civil society and utilize it to become a socially responsible citizen.


APPENDIX A: INTERVIEW GUIDE IN ENGLISH

1. Please introduce yourself to me. (your gender, sexuality, education, romantic relationship, personal goals and etc.)

2. What is your family’s background (Communist party member, social status, geographic location)?

3. Do you follow stories about activisms in America, such as Black Lives Matter, the condition of Native American, and the poor of America?

4. How do you define social justice and social injustice? What do they mean to you?

5. What are your experiences with social justice and injustice in America?

6. What are your experiences with social justice and injustice in China? What were your reactions?

7. How do you define discrimination? (Individual or systemic)

8. Give me an example of discrimination in China? It can be you or people around you. How did you react to that instance?

9. What do you think would help improve these situations? What will you do? Why or why not?

10. Do you follow stories about activisms in China? How are you informed about activisms in China?

11. What are some instances of activism you are familiar with in China in the past?

12. Can you give me some instances of activism in China nowadays?

13. What are your reactions to activisms in China nowadays? What do you think of current conditions of Chinese activists? What roles do you think are activists playing in Chinese society?

14. What are some of the differences you see in America and China that leads to disproportionate
amount of social movements?

15. Has it occurred to you to take part in any social movements? Why or why not? If you have taken part in any, what are the movements?

16. Can you imagine circumstances when you would participate in activism?

17. Does China censor media? If yes, what’s your reaction to government censorship? Why do they do that?

18. What do you think about the fact that China uses the Great Firewall?

19. What do you know about Hong Kong? Hong Kong movement? Do you think state-media cover stories objectively? Why or why not?

20. Are you familiar with activists in jail, exiled, or those who left China involuntarily? Why do you think that government would do that? How many activists do you think the Chinese government has persecuted in recent several years? Do you know any of them?

21. What do you know about Liu Xiaobo and what do you think of him?


23. What do you think of the Chinese government’s repression of minorities, such as ethnics other than Han? How many minorities do you think the government oppressed?

24. What do you think of Chinese society becoming super capitalistic?

25. Where is China now and where is it going? How do you imagine it will change? When do you think it will happen? If so, why? If not, what will happen instead?
APPENDIX B: INTERVIEW GUIDE IN CHINESE

1. 请自我介绍一下（性别，性向，教育经历，亲密关系，个人目标等）

2. 请你介绍一下你的家庭背景（党员身份，社会地位，地理位置）

3. 你关注在美国的社会运动吗？例如黑人的命也是名，本土人民的诉求，美国穷人的运动

4. 你如何定义社会正义与社会不正义？这对你意味着什么？

5. 你能分享一下你在美国的关于社会正义与社会不正义的经历吗？

6. 你能分享一下你在中国的关于社会正义与社会不正义的经历吗？你当时的反应呢？

7. 你如何定义歧视？可以是个人层面也可以是系统层面的

8. 你能举一个在中国的歧视的例子吗？可以是你也可以是你身边的人，你当时如何反应的呢？

9. 你觉得怎样能够改善上述情况呢？你会怎么做？为什么？

10. 你关注在中国的社会运动吗？你是如何了解到的？

11. 你了解哪些历史上的中国社会运动？

12. 你能够告诉我一些现在的中国社会运动吗？

13. 你的反应是什么呢？你觉得当今的中国社会运动人士的情况如何？你觉得它们扮演了怎样的角色？

14. 你觉得是什么导致了中国与美国的社会运动人士数量的不成比例？

15. 你有参加过任何社会运动吗？为什么？能说一下你参加的是什么社会运动吗？

16. 你能想象在哪种情形下你会参加社会运动？

17. 中国审查媒体吗？如果是的话，你对这种审查制度的看法呢？为什么他们这么做？
18. 你觉得中国使用防火墙来屏蔽网站吗？你的看法呢？

19. 你对于香港了解吗？香港的独立运动呢？你觉得中国媒体有客观的报道吗？为什么呢？

20. 你了解任何被监禁、驱逐、被迫离开中国的社会运动人士吗？你觉得政府为什么这么做？你觉得中国政府近几年迫害了多少运动人士？你知道其中的任何人吗？

21. 你了解刘晓波吗？你对他有什么看法？

22. 你了解西藏历史吗？达赖喇嘛？你了解中国和西藏的关系吗？藏传佛教？你对于中国政府解放西藏的说法有什么看法？

23. 你了解中国政府对于少数民族的压迫吗？你觉得中国政府压迫了多少少数民族？

24. 你对于中国社会变得越来越倾向于资本主义的看法呢？

25. 你觉得中国走向如何？你觉得未来会发生什么改变？你觉得什么时候会发生改变？

   如果不会发生改变，为什么呢？-