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REVIEW BY PRISCILLA ROBERTS, CITY UNIVERSITY OF MACAU

It is something of a truism that U.S. presidential elections command at least as much attention beyond as within the borders of the United States. With the increasingly fraught relationship between China and the United States, the world's two largest economic powers which are widely viewed as the most significant globally, one would expect Chinese to have followed intently the recent fiercely contested battle for the presidency between Donald W. Trump and Joseph R. Biden. As no other president before him had done, Trump and his administration highlighted China as a dangerous opponent of the United States, posing challenges at economic, strategic, and ideological levels alike. While—at least until the Covid-19 pandemic began—Trump himself tended to focus largely on the massive U.S. trade deficit with China and what he considered unfair Chinese commercial practices, including forced technology transfers, intellectual property theft, and unduly low pricing of Chinese goods, key members of his national security bureaucracy concurrently demonstrated great alarm over Chinese military assertiveness in the South China Sea and beyond and China's policies toward Hong Kong and Taiwan. China therefore featured prominently in the campaign preceding the November 2020 elections. Multifaceted shared distrust and condemnation of numerous aspects of the People's Republic of China (PRC) was, indeed, one of the few issues on which the otherwise deeply polarized Republicans and Democrats were in agreement.

For decades, Chinese university students have followed in minute detail every nuance of U.S. presidential pronouncements related to China, parsing each word for every discernible possible implication. By comparison with their counterparts in American universities, who generally demonstrate far lower levels of interest in China, many Chinese students seem to come close to being almost fixated upon the United States. This situation is mirrored by the great and still widening disparity in the numbers of Chinese and U.S. students pursuing education in the other country. In 2009-2010, 127,628 college and university students from China were enrolled in tertiary institutions in the United States, a figure that—the impact of the pandemic and political difficulties notwithstanding—had risen to 372,532 ten years later, in 2019-2020.¹ Although total Chinese numbers fell to 317,000 in 2020-2021, with admissions of all foreign students to the United States affected by Covid-19 restrictions, the Institute of International Education anticipated a rebound in the near future.² In terms of sheer numbers of overseas tertiary students in the United States, China currently ranks first, surpassing India, the second largest

¹ C. Textor, "Number of College and University Students from China in the United States from Academic Year 2009/10 to 2019/20," 12 April 2021, Statista.Com, <https://www.statista.com/statistics/372900/number-of-chinese-students-that-study-in-the-us/>, accessed 20 November 2021.

² Owen Churchill, "New International Student Enrolments at US Universities Dive, but China Still Keeps its No 1 Ranking," *South China Morning Post*, 15 November 2021, <https://www.scmp.com/news/china/article/3155938/new-international-student-enrolments-us-universities-dive-china-keeps>, accessed 20 November 2021; "Survey Explores Perspective of Foreign-Enrolled Students in China," 21 July 2021, ICEF Monitor, <https://monitor.icef.com/2021/07/survey-explores-perspective-of-foreign-enrolled-students-in-china/>, accessed 20 November 2021.

source, by over 100,000. Traffic in the opposite direction told a very different story: from 2011-2012 to 2018-2019, even before the impact of Covid-19 was felt, the already relatively small number of Americans studying in China had fallen by more than 20 percent, from 14,877 to 11,639.³ Given that in 2017-2018 over 330,000 Americans were studying in overseas universities and colleges, 55 percent of them in Europe and a further 15 percent in Latin America, this meant that perhaps 3.5 percent went to China, a discrepancy some observers found understandable given the cultural differences, while others thought it undesirable in terms of the consequences in limiting informed American familiarity with and knowledge of China to a select few.⁴

The voracious appetite within China for North American- or Western-style tertiary education was not to be slaked solely by sending young Chinese overseas. Foreign universities also went global and came to China. The three authors of this research note all teach in Henan province in Central China, in the Robbins College of Business and Entrepreneurship of Fort Hays State University, a public university in Kansas that has established a Chinese campus in collaboration with Zhengzhou SIAS College and offers a dual degree program, in which students earn both Chinese and U.S. bachelor's degrees (72-88). From the late 1990s until very recently, numerous foreign tertiary institutions partnered with Chinese counterpart universities to establish hundreds of joint programs based in China and catering for PRC students. In some cases, these involved joint programs, with students spending one to two years outside China; in others, students remained on campus in China, but benefited from international-style education provided by a combination of Chinese and foreign teachers. Among the most prominent such joint ventures are the Hopkins-Nanjing Center for Chinese and American Studies, the Nottingham Ningbo University China, Duke Kunshan University, New York University Shanghai, Xi'an Jiaotong-Liverpool University, and Bryant Zhuhai, all of which have established campuses in China, as has Fort Hays State University with Zhengzhou SIAS College.⁵ How many of these partnerships will successfully navigate and survive the current hazards in China's relations with the West remains an open question; in summer 2021, the Chinese Ministry of Education terminated a significant number of joint programs.⁶

Whatever the long-term prospects of these undertakings, they provide opportunities for gaining insight into the outlook of youthful students from China's 'Generation Z,' a cohort who have come of age in what—at least until very recently—seemed a golden era of rapid and steady increases in prosperity, with living standards rising and the rest of the world courting Chinese consumers. Growing up during China's years of economic reform and modernization, they have also been fortunate enough to have no personal memories of either the hardships of the pre-1978 years, or the upheavals of 1989. As one who has for several years taught mainland students enrolled in an elite programme in Macau, I can attest to their vitality, determination, stamina, ambition, originality, and independence of mind. They also show an impressive familiarity with current Western popular culture, with Harry Potter and such television series as *Sherlock* and *Peaky Blinders* all highly regarded. During his presidency, most were well aware of the existence of Donald Trump and—not least because they were

³ C. Textor, "Number of Students from the United States Studying in China 2008/09-2018/19," 5 March 2021, Statista.Com, <https://www.statista.com/statistics/374169/china-number-of-students-from-the-us/>, accessed 20 November 2021; "Chinese Students in U.S. Colleges," 3 June 2021, University of Southern California US-China Institute, <https://china.usc.edu/chinese-students-us-colleges>, accessed 20 November 2021.

⁴ "Trends in U.S. Study Abroad," n.d. [2021], NAFSA.org, <https://www.nafsa.org/policy-and-advocacy/policy-resources/trends-us-study-abroad>, accessed 20 November 2021; Peter Vanham, "US Students Should be Encouraged to Study in China," *Financial Times*, 22 November 2018, <https://www.ft.com/content/6665e98c-ecc6-11e8-8180-9cf212677a57>, accessed 20 November 2021; Alexandra Harney, "U.S. Students Losing Interest in China as Dream Jobs Prove Elusive," Reuters, 13 March 2015, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-china-usa-students-idUSKBN0M82MU20150312>, accessed 20 November 2021.

⁵ Cong Cao, "Chinese Joint Venture Universities Try for the Best of all Worlds," *Nature*, 26 May 2021, <https://www.nature.com/articles/d41586-021-01406-z>, accessed 20 November 2021.

⁶ Phoebe Zhang, "China Kills almost 300 Partnerships with Elite Foreign Universities in Places like New York, London and Hong Kong, after Private Tutoring Ban," *South China Morning Post*, 16 August 2021, <https://www.scmp.com/news/people-culture/trending-china/article/3145208/china-kills-almost-300-partnerships-elite>, accessed 20 November 2021.

studying business—of the assorted problems that relations between China and the United States encountered while his administration was in power. To the best of my recollection, however, during the presidential elections, none expressed strong preferences for either Biden or Trump. If anything, they were somewhat bemused by the situation in the United States.

Unlike my own anecdotal and sketchy insights, the results reported here are based on a systematic and well-designed questionnaire voluntarily completed by 506 students aged 17 to 22, enrolled in the bachelor's degree program in the Fort Hays State University-Zhengzhou SIAS campus in Henan. Interestingly, although China's heightened prominence in U.S. policy during the Trump administration has further intensified the attention both the Chinese media and public devoted to relations between the two countries, just over a quarter of students replied that they were unaware of the U.S. presidential election.

On a scale of one ("not at all") to five ("very much"), 47 percent chose the safe middle option of three when asked to say how much they cared about the impending election. Overall, the majority, perhaps not surprisingly, knew far more about the high-profile Trump than they did about Biden. While there was no consensus as to precisely which qualities should rank foremost when choosing a president, a candidate's words, policies, and attitude toward other countries were all considered significant factors by respondents. Interestingly, however, while more than half (54.73 percent) thought a candidate's appearance the least important factor, just over one-third (34.68 percent) believed how the candidate looked to be the most important.

While respondents were more knowledgeable about Trump than about Biden, overall, they tended to reject the devil they knew. Cutting to the chase, when asked for whom they would vote, were they U.S. citizens, 41 percent of respondents stated that they would "definitely not" vote for Trump, with a further 27 percent unlikely to vote for him, whereas only 10.6 percent were "definitely" against Biden and a further 24.8 percent unlikely to support him. 8.6 percent were "very likely" to choose Trump, with a mere 5.6 percent "very likely" to select Biden. In terms of leaning toward Biden, however, the Democrat came out well ahead of Trump in the intermediate third (neutral) and fourth (quite likely) categories, doing three times better than his rival in each (43.4-16.8 percent and 15.6-6.6 percent respectively).

Considerable diversity existed as to where student respondents went to find out about the U.S. election. Three-fifths relied extensively on state news media, considering this their first or second most important source of information, but one-third preferred to turn to international news media. Some considered Chinese state media trustworthy and accurate, while others expressed doubts as to its reliability and placed more faith in international reports. Students were deeply divided as to whether or not information on social media was dependable, tending to cluster at one of two extremes, either according social media sources high credibility or else viewing them as purveyors of fake news.

Interestingly, no one set pattern existed as to whether or not students discussed domestic and international politics in depth with their families or friends: instead, there were great variations, with some coming from homes or belonging to circles that followed the news closely, where intense political debate was a way of life, while the families and friends of others displayed little interest in current domestic and international affairs.

In many questionnaires, given a choice, respondents tend to opt for somewhere safely in the middle, as opposed to extremes at either end. Perhaps not surprisingly, it seems that students of Fort Hays State University's Chinese campus quite often did so. The open questions, by contrast, offered opportunities to express their own views and perspectives. These comments made it clear that among the students overall, no single monolithic view of Trump, Biden, or the future of Sino-U.S. relations was in the ascendant.

Of those who chose to comment specifically on Trump or Biden, 90 percent addressed themselves to the incumbent. Thirty-eight students stated their resentment of how Trump had treated China, albeit in a few cases with a rider that ultimately, his actions would strengthen China by making it more self-reliant. Issues on which respondents expressed distaste for the then president included his unfriendly attitude towards other countries, his buffoonery and anti-social conduct, the negative

effects his policies had on China's position in the existing world order, and his handling of the Covid-19 pandemic. Seventeen of these 38 students pressed for 'win-win cooperation,' a top trademark theme pushed by the Chinese government. Seven, by contrast, took a positive view of Trump, arguing that his administration had done well in alleviating the impact of Covid-19 on low-income Americans; praising his 'farsighted' international policies and domestic measures as advantageous to the future development of the United States; and admiring his public persona.

Understandably, views of Biden were far more cautious, with only a few respondents expressing any opinions. Sensibly, "Six remarked that they wanted to know how Biden would treat China first before having a confident opinion" (80). A few were aware of his positions on various domestic U.S. issues or even joked about his health. Some noted that Trump and Biden had both made forceful attacks on China, with eleven believing the two men's positions were in essence similar.

Asked to predict the likely consequences of either a Trump or Biden victory, students reached equally little consensus. A substantial number believed that should Trump win re-election, relations between China and the United States would continue to deteriorate. Others, though, argued that it would be advantageous for China for Trump to remain in office, since he "is not very good at politics. He just focuses on interests and will not make a big change in politics." From this perspective, Biden and his advisers considered Trump too 'soft' on China and a Biden win would therefore represent "a greater threat to China" because the new president would impose "even stronger" measures against China than Trump had. Yet this was not the only perspective. Some students, by contrast, expected a Biden presidency to bring a "return to friendship" (81).

Nineteen respondents, however, saw little cause for optimism in either case, anticipating that it would make little difference whichever man won, because the policies of both would be equally hostile to China and the downward trajectory of relations would continue. Echoing themes strongly propounded by state media, many respondents proclaimed that their "powerful country" was "not afraid" and would be able to withstand any pressures from the United States, since "China is the future" (82).

The authors conclude by noting the wide range of opinions expressed by the sample of students surveyed, as "a considerable portion of participants articulated unique and diverse viewpoints" (82). This lack of uniformity characterized not just their views, but also their preferred sources of information and whether or not they and their friends and families habitually discussed domestic and international political issues. There is no one-size-fits-all template for Chinese college students. From my own experiences of dealing with students from China's 'Generation Z,' I too have discovered that its members are individualistic, original, talented, and more than capable of thinking for themselves. Some feel highly politically engaged, to the point where a few might even be termed political junkies, while others are more focused on other issues, be it their own studies and careers or broader interests or causes.

The authors end by suggesting that once Biden had taken office and it was clearer just what his China policy might be, it would be useful to conduct a follow-up survey of Chinese students' perceptions of the election's outcome and the new administration. A year has now gone by since Biden won the election. In the ten months since he was sworn in, his administration has made fairly clear the basic principles of its stance toward China. One hopes that the authors of this enlightening analysis will be able to provide a second in what might well become established as a regular and valuable series of surveys.

Priscilla Roberts is an associate professor of business and co-director of the Asia-Pacific Business Research Centre at City University of Macau. She specializes in twentieth-century international history, focusing particularly upon transitions of power. Her recent publications include the edited collections, *Hong Kong in the Cold War* (University of Hong Kong Press, 2016); (with Odd Arne Westad), *China, Hong Kong, and the Long 1970s: Global Perspectives* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2017); and *Chinese Economic Statecraft from 1978 to 1989: The First Decade of Deng Xiaoping's Reforms* (Palgrave Macmillan, forthcoming). She is working on a study of Anglo-American think tanks and China policy from the 1940s to the 1990s.