Pandemic, Phenomenology, and Power: Chinese Graduate Students' Lived Experiences of the COVID-19 Pandemic in China

Brian Bantugan, PhD[1], Xiaomeng Chen[2], Susha Huang[3], Ke Li[4], Chengdong Luo[5], Yuanyuan Sun[6], Gensheng Wu[7], Guizheng Yang[8], Gang Yuan[9], Wang Zhiyu[10]

[1](Faculty, St. Paul University Manila)
[2](Graduate Student, St. Paul University Manila; Director, China Internet Information Center)
[3](Graduate Student, St. Paul University Manila; National Center for Schooling Development Programme, China)
[4](Graduate Student, St. Paul University Manila; Faculty, Hechi University, China)
[5](Graduate Student, St. Paul University Manila; Faculty, Hechi University, China)
[6](Graduate Student, St. Paul University Manila; Faculty, Sichuan University of Science and Engineering)
[7](Graduate Student, St. Paul University Manila; Faculty, Hechi University, China)
[8](Graduate Student, St. Paul University Manila; Faculty,Hechi University, China)
[9](Graduate Student, St. Paul University Manila; President, New Writing Institute, China)
[10](Graduate Student, St. Paul University Manila)

Abstract: *This research addresses the stigmatization and xenophobia faced by the Chinese population during the COVID-19 pandemic, particularly focusing on Chinese graduate students unable to pursue international studies at St. Paul University Manila College of Education due to travel restrictions. It investigates their experiences to foster human connections and combat racism, discrimination, and hate. A phenomenological study was conducted, exploring the mental frameworks that shaped Chinese graduate students' perceptions of the COVID-19 pandemic. Nine participants from various regions of China engaged in online reflection activities. Data from their responses to the question, "What have been your personal encounters with the COVID-19 pandemic in China?" were subjected to phenomenological thematic analysis, unveiling the subtleties and facets of their experiences. Three major themes emerged from the analysis: (1) Experiencing what can and could not be done, encompassing health-related empowerment, general agency, and institutional interventions; (2) Disturbing changes at micro, meso, and macro levels, affecting personal lives, community dynamics, and policies; (3) Emotional shifts, including discomfort, relief, and physical struggles. The overarching finding was that powerlessness overshadowed physical pain, indicating that the pandemic posed an existential challenge rather than just a health crisis for participants. Their experiences were multi-layered and multi-dimensional, reflecting the complexity of human experiences during the pandemic. The research highlights the significance of power and powerlessness in the participants' narratives, demonstrating that their experiences were more about struggling with a loss of agency than dealing with physical pain. It underscores the existential nature of the pandemic for them, emphasizing the importance of being able to make a positive impact despite the threat of COVID-19. The study offers a model illustrating the multi-layered and multi-dimensional aspects of the participants' pandemic experiences, shedding light on the complexity of human responses to such crises.*

Keywords*: Lived experiences, COVID-19 pandemic, phenomenology, mental constructions, Chinese graduate students*

I.   Introduction

Wuhan, China served as the epicenter of the COVID-19 pandemic, as documented by Hassler (2020). Consequently, various detractors of China referred to the coronavirus responsible for COVID-19 as the "Wuhan virus" or "China virus," as discussed by Vazquez (2020). Vazquez contended that such designations carried undertones of xenophobia and contributed to the stigmatization of the Chinese population, a viewpoint echoed by Di et al. (2021). These labels, coupled with misconceptions and stereotypes, led to incidents of racism and violence against Asian Americans, as noted by Findling, Blendon, Benson, and Koh (2022). In response to the rise in anti-Asian racism stemming from the pandemic, NYC Human Rights (2023) developed a toolkit for addressing anti-Asian bias, discrimination, and hate, which aligns with the historical observation that pandemics often trigger hate, as pointed out by Lu (2021). The antidote to combatting hate, as emphasized by Rajghatta (2009), is the promotion of compassion.

This paper aims to contribute to the cultivation of a culture of compassion by delving into the firsthand experiences of Chinese graduate students at St. Paul University Manila who were unable to pursue their international studies on-site due to pandemic-induced travel restrictions. By unveiling the Chinese experience, which has been unfairly demonized, we can foster genuine human connections that counteract racism, discrimination, and hate. Conducting a phenomenological study focused on the Chinese experience of the COVID-19 pandemic allows for the exploration of the mental frameworks that helped individuals make sense of their pandemic experience. Consequently, this research has the potential to guide the world beyond xenophobia.

Overall, the philosophical underpinning of phenomenology revolves around the study of consciousness, perception, and human experience from a subjective, first-person perspective (Smith, 2013). It encourages a deep exploration of the richness and complexity of lived experiences, with an emphasis on understanding the phenomena themselves rather than reducing them to external explanations. Phenomenology, a philosophical approach, is founded on several core principles. These principles include the practice of "phenomenological reduction" or "epoché," where preconceived assumptions are set aside to approach phenomena with fresh perception. It emphasizes "intentionality," highlighting that conscious experiences are inherently directed toward objects or thoughts. Phenomenology prioritizes the detailed "description" of lived experiences over a causal "explanation," distinguishing it from scientific methods. It often intertwines with existentialism, examining themes like freedom and authenticity. Existential phenomenology underscores that human existence precedes any fixed essence.

II.   Methodology

Nine graduate students, ranging in age from their 30s to 50s and hailing from various regions of China, were invited to partake in an online activity focused on composing reflection papers. In July 2023, during the fourth week, these students—comprising three females and six males—convened in a classroom at St. Paul University Manila. Their objective was to contemplate and document their individual experiences throughout the COVID-19 pandemic in China, using a Google Form to respond to the guiding question: "What have been your personal experiences with the COVID-19 pandemic in China?" Subsequently, their responses underwent a rigorous thematic analysis process, encompassing stages such as data immersion, coding, theme identification, thorough review and refinement, as well as the subsequent interpretation, description, and creation of a phenomenological narrative. This methodology, known as phenomenological thematic analysis, empowers researchers to delve into the distinctive facets and subtleties inherent in these experiences, ultimately yielding profound insights that enhance our comprehension of the phenomenon under scrutiny.

III.   Results

Three key themes surfaced from the analysis of the written answers of the participants. They are: (1) Experiencing what can and cannot be done; (2) Experiencing disturbing changes; and (3) Experiencing emotional shifts. The first theme was found to have three major categories

Experiencing what can and cannot be done

The large volume of the responses participants expressed that during the pandemic they realized they can and cannot do things (health-related sense of power and powerlessness, a general sense of ability and disability, and institutional interventions.

Health-related sense of power and powerlessness. More specifically, they experienced a sense of power and powerlessness with their health. They shared that they were knowledgeable about the hygiene and health protocols designed to prevent infection. One of the students said, "1. Get the COVID-19 vaccine 2. Get regular nucleic acid tests 3. Scientific and precise prevention and control work.". They reiterated public health advisories or "obey(ing) the advice of professionals" like not going to public places or isolating themselves, "wearing the mask". and regularly checking their body temperature. "Paying more attention to the news" allowed them to monitor "official" infection and death cases daily. Striking a balance between being able to do something and not doing what one used to do because of "distancing" mandates by the Chinese government all pointed to their sense of power and powerlessness.

General sense of ability and disability. Their agency (sense of power) or lack thereof was not only in the aspect of physical health but also in larger areas of their lives. One noted that society had generalized "panic" or "too much panic" in that they "did not know what to do" beyond the health protocols. One said, that despite not knowing what to do, they felt they had to "get ready for anything". One student tried to be productive despite the limitations saying "I studied hard, published books, published articles, got a master's degree, and then began to apply for the St. Paul University Manila, in the Philippines." Knowing that they had no control over the pandemic ("life has been controlled by the outbreak"), there was an attempt to take control where it could be done to the greatest extent possible. These opposing senses of ability and disability relaxed as they perceived that "the pandemic was gradually being brought under control" and that "work was stable as a whole" (given most of them worked in schools and not in other workplaces most disrupted by the pandemic).

Institutional interventions. Along with their efforts, they expressed their agency as taking place alongside the efforts of institutions, specifically the government and schools where they work. Directives of schools that "all staff must wear masks" and, later, to close showed that schools were, at least, doing something to protect employees. About the Chinese government, one student said, "China's epidemic prevention is very strict, and we have received good protection". Another student wrote, "With the regulation of the national government, the epidemic was brought under control and normal life resumed". Government restrictions were appreciated in so far as they were perceived as efforts to "control the (pan)demic". Further, one student shared that he appreciated being part of such efforts, and was delighted to be invited to "do relevant work in (COVID-19) prevention and control… as the school "set up a quarantine zone".

IV.   Disturbing changes

The sense of power or powerlessness, ability or disability, could be understood in the context of disturbing changes, particularly at the micro, meso, and macro levels.

Personal disturbances. The changes were immediately felt at the micro or personal level. Personal disturbances and concerns were linked to "Three years of… life completely disrupted (or) changed", "One's desire to live freely being (negatively) affected", "wedding postponement and reschedul(ing) twice", and a "father's sudden illness at home". In short, individual lives, ideals, plans, and well-being were derailed by the pandemic.

Public health disturbances. They also experienced disturbances at the meso or community level, particularly "sporadic outbreaks in individual cities" and the pandemic becoming "more and more severe". By its sheer magnitude, one student said that it was clearly "not an ordinary epidemic". This category referred mainly to the surprising spread and extent of its severity taking place beyond what the students could ever imagine.

Policy-related disturbances. They attributed the personal and public health disturbances as a result or influenced by policy-related disturbances. School policies that "cannot be carried out normally" or shifted delivery from "online" to "offline" and vice versa. "Control policy (that) seriously affected personal travel and other related plans" and restricted mobility "from capitals to small villages" also appeared significantly memorable at the macro level.

V. Emotional Shifts

The sense of power and powerlessness arising from the disturbing changes at different levels came together with the participants' experience of emotional shifts.

General discomfort. Immediately felt were discomforts that affected many areas of their lives, including their livelihood. The students were emotionally distraught and they expressed it in the following ways: "It was so terrible"; "I felt very afraid"; "I felt very scared"; and "(I was in a) state of anxiety". One student associated this discomfort with "not finding a job" or not being able to "earn money", especially for college graduates.

General relief. Emphasized by their responses was the opposite experience of relief following discomforts. One student confided noticing emotional states that showed a shift "from panic to calm, from repression to release, from rejection to acceptance of control". As the discomforts seemingly sent shockwaves to the economic system, the experiences of relief became similarly impactful.

Physical struggles. Pain was identified as a physical experience that intensified the discomforts that came with the emotional shifts. One became infected and experienced the pain that came with the virus. The pain, still memorable to this day, comes close to being traumatic.

Discussion

Powerlessness Overshadowing Pain. The volume of the lived experiences shared by the graduate students gravitated more towards their experiences of power and/or powerlessness during the pandemic than the more immediate life disruptions and emotional rollercoaster. Contrary to what one might expect, that is, fear of being sick or infected would be the most talked about since the pandemic is a health issue, the informants revealed it not to be the case. Although many shared about observing health protocols, it was told within the context of having or lacking agency.

Only one revealed having been sick with COVID-19 but was not able to share much about the experience of being ill. Being physically sick was associated with the experience of pain, above other forms of suffering associated with COVID-19. The experience of powerlessness overshadowed the experience of pain, and, consequently, heightened one's experience of relief from paralysis or not being able to do anything to make one's situation better and appreciation for the efforts of institutions like the government and schools to help.

Struggling with Opposing Experiences. As previously mentioned, discomforts and disruptions were highlighted as much as the experience of relief. What comes to mind as a metaphor for this is the application and release of extreme pressure, both causing extreme responses. Power and powerlessness, panicking and taking control, and personal helplessness and institutional helpfulness were evident across the three themes.

Multi-layered and Multi-dimensional Experiences. One's senses of power and powerlessness were specific (physical health-focused) and general (other aspects beyond physical health), and found in the personal and institutional domains, as was shown in the first theme. Disruptions (featured in the second theme) were experienced and noted at the micro (related to personal life), meso (related to community concerns), and macro (related to policy interventions) levels. Emotional shifts arose from physical (pain), economic (lack or loss of livelihood), and adaptive (responses to disruptions) dimensions of one's life during the pandemic. These point to the different areas contributing to the complexity of human experiences arising from the pandemic.

Model of Chinese Graduate Experience of the COVID-19 Pandemic. Given the above, the researchers were able to configure the complexity that constructed the consciousness of the Chinese graduate students who lived to tell their personal experiences of the COVID-19 pandemic. Figure 1 below shows that given the multi-layeredness and multi-dimensionality of their COVID-19 pandemic lived experiences, and their consequent struggles with opposing experiences (base positions), their COVID-19 lived experiences were "ultimately" (top position) about struggling with powerlessness that was more difficult to deal with than physical pain.
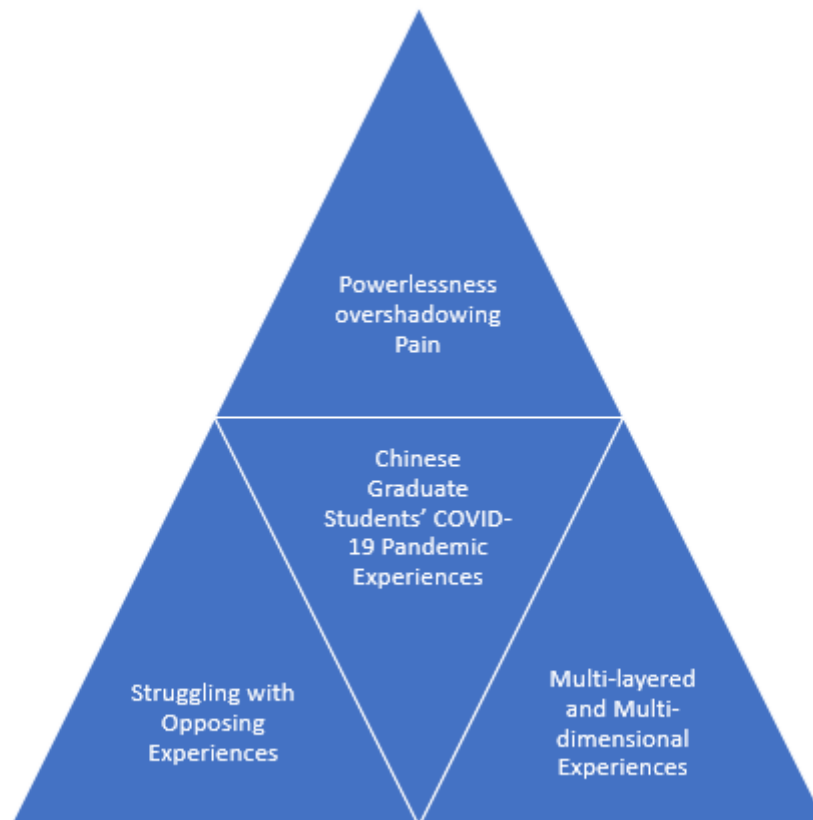

Figure 1. The Complexity of the Mental Constructions of Chinese Graduate Students' Lived Experiences during the COVID-19 Pandemic

The COVID-19 pandemic was more of a challenge to living a full life than merely a diseaseless one. This reveals that for the participants the COVID-19 pandemic was more an existential problem than one of survival. "Existential" here means the sense of being able to do and accomplish something despite the threat of COVID-19. One participant captured this eloquently by saying, "to try to help others and do what we can under the premise of protecting ourselves" through "isolating" was more difficult to bear than physical pain.

A quantitative study by Wang, Liang, Zhang, Kang, and Zeng (2022) involving a series of questionnaires, latent class analysis, and multinomial logistic regression to determine the impact of the pandemic on Chinese graduate students' learning activities in China found that "the learning activities of graduate students in all grades were affected to varying degrees, and the impacts on second-year and third-year graduate students were greater than those of first-year graduate students" (para. 1). While this study did not delve into the learning experiences of graduate students, it resonated with the findings of Wang and associates that some students suffered enough during the pandemic to experience mental health issues such as anxiety and

depression. Surprisingly, mental health issues were not highlighted by the informants of this study but it would not be off-tangent to point out that the complexity of the lived experiences on the pandemic surfaced here would potentially contribute to the development of mental health issues if not addressed properly.

Using a descriptive phenomenological psychological method, Xu and partners (2021) looked into the lived experiences of Chinese international college students in the United States and found that they expressed safety concerns, anxiety about not being able to use the language more fluently, and difficulty living in two worlds. The second concern on the use of the English language aligned with a previous study by Bantugan (2022) which looked into the learning needs of Chinese graduate students in the College of Music and the Performing Arts at St. Paul University Manila before the pandemic, implying that their struggle with English is more pertinent to their being in foreign country than experiencing a pandemic. The third concern, resonates strongly with the findings of this research, particularly in the theme "struggling with opposing experiences". However, the college students in that study were drawing their sentiments more from their being in the US which does not reflect the experiences of the Chinese graduate students in this study.

It must be pointed out, nevertheless, that this struggle with opposition seemed to have been highlighted by the pandemic in more ways than one, where possible, and highly educated people are not spared. These experiences of opposing realities may be responsible for the international college students' worries about post-pandemic realities, potentially as it relates to Asian discrimination in the US (Findling, Blendon, Benson, & Koh, 2022). Shen (2021), investigating the same group of students, resulted in findings aligned with the results of the study of Wang and associates (2022), particularly mental health issues, and this paper as it raised concerns about closures and disruptions.

In another study covering a larger locale, including America and Australia, international graduate students from Africa and Asia were studied to determine the impact of the pandemic on their learning and wellbeing. Ackah-Jnr and company (2022) revealed that the pandemic affected the academic and social lives of said students due to "stress and hardship, isolation, fear and insecurity, frustration and helplessness" (p. 98). Helplessness strikes a chord with this study and implies that one's sense of powerlessness during the pandemic is a common experience not only among the Chinese, in particular, but also among Asians and Africans, in general, regardless of where the student resided during the pandemic. It would be good to reflect on whether this sense of helplessness is something characteristic of non-White international students.

Masud, Suborna, Hosan, and Hassan (2021), observing the experiences and challenges of international students living at Huzhou University during the pandemic, revealed that they were able to adjust to psychological, academic, and social challenges despite being paralyzed for some time. This paralysis was similarly highlighted here under the theme "Experiencing what can and could not be done", indicating that the Chinese graduate students' experience of powerlessness is shared with international students from other countries who were in China during the pandemic. Thus, paralysis, powerlessness, or helplessness is not specific to non-White international students. Perhaps, one's educational status underscores the experience of agency, or lack thereof, especially since this struggle surfaced more among international graduate students inside or outside of China. When one's knowledge was considered power before the pandemic, the latter proved that it was not always the case.

References

[1.] Ackah-Jnr, F. R., Appiah, J., Udah, H., Abedi, E., Yaro, K., Addo-Kissiedu, K., Agyei, I. K., & Opoku-Nkoom, I. (2022). COVID-19 Pandemic Experiences: Cross-Border Voices of International Graduate Students in Australia and America. International Journal of Learning, Teaching and Educational Research, 21(4), 97-113. DOI: https://doi.org/10.26803/ijlter.21.4.6

[2.] Bantugan, B. (2022). Responding to the Learning Needs of the Chinese Students Enrolled In the College of Music and the Performing Arts of St. Paul University Manila. *International Journal of Arts and Social Science, 5*(1), 166-181.

[3.] Di, Y., Li, A., Li, H. *et al.* (2021). Stigma toward Wuhan people during the COVID-19 epidemic: an exploratory study based on social media. *BMC Public Health* 21, 1958. DOI: https://doi.org/10.1186/s12889-021-12001-2

[4.] Findling, M. G., Blendon, R. J., Benson, J., & Koh, H. (2022, April 12). COVID-19 Has Driven Racism And Violence Against Asian Americans: Perspectives From 12 National Polls. Retrieved from https://www.healthaffairs.org/content/forefront/covid-19-has-driven-racism-and-violence-against-asian-americans-perspectives-12

[5.] Hassler, P. (2020, October 5). Nine days in Wuhan, the ground zero of the coronavirus pandemic. Retrieved from https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2020/10/12/nine-days-in-wuhan-the-ground-zero-of-the-coronavirus-pandemic

[6.] Lu, J. (2021, March 26). Why Pandemics Give Birth To Hate: From Bubonic Plague To COVID-19. Retrieved from https://www.npr.org/sections/goatsandsoda/2021/03/26/980480882/why-pandemics-give-birth-to-hate-from-black-death-to-covid-19

[7.] Masud, N. A., Suborna, T. N., Hosan, S., & Hassan, M. J. (2021). Living Experience of International Students during COVID-19: A Study at Huzhou University, China. *European Journal of Social Science Studies, 6*(3), 85-97.

[8.] NYC Human Rights. (2023). Stop Asian Hate. Retrieved from https://www.nyc.gov/site/cchr/community/stop-asian-hate.page

[9.] Rajghatta, C. (2009, November 12). To counter hate, a more compassionate world. Retrieved from http://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/articleshow/5221191.cms?utm_source=contentofinterest&utm_medium=text&utm_campaign=cppst

[10.] Shen, C. (2021). Experiences of Chinese International Students During COVID-19. Retrieved from https://scholarworks.calstate.edu/downloads/kh04dw182

[11.] Smith, D. W. (2013, December 16). Phenomenology. Retrieved from https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/phenomenology/

[12.] Vazquez, M. (2020, March 12). Calling COVID-19 the "Wuhan Virus" or "China Virus" is inaccurate and xenophobic. Retrieved from https://medicine.yale.edu/news-article/calling-covid-19-the-wuhan-virus-or-china-virus-is-inaccurate-and-xenophobic/

[13.] Wang, J., Liang, Z., Zhang, M., Kang, D., Zeng, Q. (2022). Effects of the COVID-19 Pandemic on Chinese Graduate Students' Learning Activities: A Latent Class Analysis. *Frontiers in Psychology, 26*(13), 877106. DOI: 10.3389/fpsyg.2022.877106

[14.] Xu, Y., Gibson D., Pandey, T., Jiang, Y., &Olsoe, B. (2021). The Lived Experiences of Chinese International College Students and Scholars during the Initial COVID-19 Quarantine Period in the United States. *Int J Adv Couns*., 43(4), 534-552. DOI: 10.1007/s10447-021-09446-w.