

How International College Students Have Been Affected by COVID-19
By Katherine Swartz

When colleges began announcing in late March that campuses would be closed down and instruction moved online for the rest of the year, students across the country grappled with whether to stay in their college towns or move back home.

But for Tom Huang, that decision meant deciding whether to go an ocean away from UCSB.

A 1st year electrical engineering international student from China, Huang had to choose whether to stay in California for the remainder of the quarter — forced to move out of his dorm and be away from family during a pandemic — or to go back home, where he would face two weeks of mandatory isolation and a 15 hour time difference for lectures.

At the end of winter quarter, Huang flew back to China, mainly because of safety concerns in the U.S.

"I think the situation in China is recovering, especially because I'm not from Wuhan. I'm from Shanghai and all the city is actually dealing with it pretty well. My dad resumed working in mid-February and we know that the peak is already passed," he said.

"I do believe it is safer in China than the U.S. It's not even a government problem. People in the U.S. don't even have the awareness to wear a mask or anything like that. So I felt a bit concerned [staying in the U.S]."

International students at UCSB — both those who decided to stay in Isla Vista and those who decided to travel to home countries — have faced a unique set of difficulties in keeping up with coursework during the coronavirus pandemic. Students were forced to quickly make a decision about whether to stay or go, and during the quarter have faced hardships that domestic students don't have to navigate.

That uncertainty continues on, as the UC grapples with what level of in-person instruction is safe for the coming fall quarter. In an email outlining fall quarter protocols, Chancellor Yang announced that all first-year international students will have the option to continue with remote curriculum "sufficient for full-time status," and that "any student who wishes to continue with a full remote offering may do so without being present on or near campus."

Many international students are unsure whether they can get visas renewed to re-enter the U.S., or even if coming to the U.S. is the safest option.

"I bought a one way ticket because I'm so uncertain about when I can come back," said Hak Zheng, a second-year Physics CCS major currently back home in Japan.

"I'm actually not sure if I wanted to come back right now if I'm able to. They might not be allowing any non-citizen people to come in."

Zheng said it was "kind of obvious" for him to go back to Japan instead of "being by myself in I.V." He tentatively plans to come back to the U.S. for fall quarter, even if his classes are all held online.

"If Fall Quarter is still online but the U.S. lets me come back inside, I might consider coming back, just because I do feel like my productivity is low here, so I might decide that I've had enough time with my family, now I'm gonna go back to my school," he said.

College students across the country have shifted to a "new normal" over the past few months, while being disconnected from campus and attending lectures over Zoom. But this adjustment is only exacerbated for international students trying to keep up with classes in a different time zone.

Some international students attend lectures and take exams in the middle of the night. While some classes were held asynchronous this past quarter — where international students could make up the lectures on their own time — there was limited flexibility when it came to exams.

Zheng said he had Zoom lectures at 5 a.m. twice a week for one class, and that for another class he had to take the midterm and final at 3 a.m.

"Students who stayed in the U S have their normal time and normal schedule, but we have to do this weird scheduling thing. So the score is not a good reflection of where we are. I don't know if any professors are going to take that into consideration at all, but that's just something I'm a little concerned about," he said.

"I think we as human beings need to need that strict sleep schedule to operate well. I feel like I'm less energetic than usual. But I'm seeing it as something that I just have to deal with for this quarter, hopefully only this quarter, but who knows."

The time zone change was a major factor in international students' decision to remain in the U.S. Aimee Wang, a 3rd year sociology major from China, stayed at a friend's house in Rancho Cucamonga, California after moving out of her sorority house.

Wang ran a successful Senate campaign, becoming the first international student elected. She said the demanding schedule of running for Senate and beginning her duties at the end of the quarter meant moving back to China would be a "huge hassle."

"My friends that I've spoken with said they're not going back to China over the summer because right now when we go back we have to quarantine ourselves. How they designate the place depends on each district, I think it's a hotel or a resort or someplace like that for two weeks, then after that two weeks you have to stay at home and quarantine by yourself for two more weeks," she said.

"So it's kind of a very long process to go back, then spend almost a month to quarantine by yourself. That may be half of a normal summer break, just to come back to the U.S. and you'd probably have to quarantine yourself again."

An added difficulty in moving back to China in particular is that students have to use a virtual private network (VPN) for internet access, which Wang said can be very slow.

Zheng hasn't had any accessibility troubles in Japan, but said that in China students cannot access Google or any affiliated websites like Google Docs.

"I have two other CCS physics students who I'm pretty close with, they're both from China and they did both decided to stay, and the main reason for them was that they had to deal with the firewall and probably more like restrictions in China," he said, assessing that it was a "50-50" split between friends of his who decided to stay in California and who decided to leave.

But he also said there's been an added isolation that comes with living over 5,000 miles away from your school.

"I do feel disconnected from my friends, Most of my friends are in the United States, so I mean, they call and they would do homework together. So sometimes they'll be calling while I'm sleeping, so I do notice that I connect with them a lot less than when I'm back in school," he said.

"There's a huge difference between trying to connect with a person through a video call than hanging out in person."

The main uncertainty that lies ahead is what a fall quarter hybrid scenario will look like. Wang said she'll be staying in I.V. regardless of if school is online or not because she wants to experience her senior year there. But she added that a concern for many international students is cost of tuition while missing out on the benefits of in-person education.

"For out of state and international students, we pay a lot more for tuition. With the whole online situation, all these changes are already unfair for all the students, but I think it's even more unfair for international students and out-of-states."

Huang said he doesn't know exactly when he'll be back in the U.S. But of the challenges he's faced this quarter, he said the most difficult — and ongoing — challenge is the uncertainty that lies ahead.

"I'm not saying I'm worried about living or anything like that, but mostly learning. Really what most of us are worried about is being able to come back to the U.S. in the fall."