

Journal of International Students
Volume 13, Issue 2 (2023), pp. 189-205
ISSN: 2162-3104 (Print), 2166-3750 (Online)
ojed.org/jis

Chinese Students' Resilience in Making Post-Graduation Plans Under the US-China Geopolitical Tensions

Xiaojie Li
University of Arizona, USA

ABSTRACT

As the US-China geopolitical tensions escalated, this study sought to investigate how Chinese students respond to the political circumstances when making their post-graduation plans. Drawing from interviews among 15 Chinese international students who graduated from a US university, this study found that most Chinese students did not change their post-graduation plans due to the heightened tensions between the US and China; however, they enacted agency to overcome the difficulties imposed by the geopolitical context. This study challenged the deficit view of international student research by indicating that Chinese students could adapt to a set of perspectives, transform these perspectives into actions, and leverage useful resources to protect their career and life aspirations. The study also warned the danger of the continuity of the anti-China political rhetoric and emphasized the role of higher education institutions in buffering the negative political impact and supporting Chinese and all international students.

Keywords: Chinese international students, post-graduation plans, geopolitics, agency, United States

China has been portrayed as the US's biggest competitor and threat. While most Americans welcome international students, they also support limits on Chinese students in the US higher education (Pew Research Center, 2021). The Trump Administration implemented immigration regulations targeting Chinese students and scholars, such as shortened visa stays for certain high-tech majors, and an entry ban of Chinese students and scholars with military ties (i.e., Proclamation 10043). Furthermore, the scientists of Chinese descent were disproportionately and wrongfully charged for engaging academic espionage activities under the China

Initiative. All these policies contribute to the rise of the anti-China rhetoric in the US.

Despite the tensions between the US and China, the impact of such political context on Chinese student mobility remains understudied. Two known exceptions have suggested some negative consequences. A College Board internal survey indicated that the US-China political tensions became one of the concerns shared by Chinese students and their parents in choosing the US universities (Institute of International Education, 2021). In the other case, a national study among scientists in higher education found that Chinese graduate students considered returning to China or relocating elsewhere to pursue their careers due to the China Initiative and/or FBI investigations (J. J. Lee & Li, 2021). However, more needs to be explored beyond these two studies, especially the nuanced processes students undertake when making their mobility decisions.

While the existing literature has extensively documented international students' mobility for pursuing education (Gümüş et al., 2020), it relatively overlooked their mobility after graduation. Nevertheless, employability in the host country is an important factor that international students consider when choosing a study abroad destination (Nilsson & Ripmeester, 2016; Tran et al., 2020). In addition, international students' contribution to the US workforce after graduation cannot be emphasized enough; foreign-born workers made up for 30% of the total scientists and engineers in the US (National Science Board, 2020). It is critical for the US to not only attract international students to study, but also retain them upon their graduation.

Given the little knowledge of how the US-China tensions influence student mobility and the importance of international students' post-graduation mobility, this study sought to investigate how Chinese students made post-graduation plans responding to the US-China geopolitical tensions. I collected data through interviews among 15 Chinese international undergraduate and master's graduates. The findings showed that Chinese students who were determined to find employment in the US were able to push through the difficulties imposed by the political circumstances. Subsequently, this study challenged the deficit view of international student research by indicating that Chinese students enacted a set of agentic perspectives and actions to protect their career and life aspirations. The study also warned the danger of the continuity of the anti-China political rhetoric and emphasized the role of higher education institutions in buffering the negative political impact and supporting Chinese and all international students.

FACTORS SHAPING INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS' POST-GRADUATION MOBILITY

Non-Political Factors

International students' post-graduation mobility choices often depend on their perceptions of career prospects in both home and host countries. A survey among nearly 1,000 international students in the US and UK found that students' perceptions of their job prospects in the host country were positively associated

with their intentions to stay (Baruch et al., 2007). Similarly, Chinese students who personally believed in better career prospects in China than in the US were more likely to plan for return (Kellogg, 2012). Students' perceptions of future job prospects are shaped by structural factors. For example, comparative economic conditions between the home and host countries drive mobility. International students who were from low-wage countries were motivated to stay in the US for higher income (Alberts & Hazen, 2005). After the Asian financial crisis in 1997/98, the stay rate for doctoral students from South Korea increased in the US (Kim et al., 2011). Chinese students were inclined to return as the job opportunities grew rapidly in China prior to the recent economic slowdown (Szelényi, 2006). At the same time, some Chinese students also anticipated the Chinese labor market to become increasingly competitive, so that they strategically planned to obtain some professional experiences abroad before returning to leverage their position in the Chinese labor market (Geddie, 2010).

Beyond career considerations, international students' familial and social relations also influence their mobility decision making. Some studies indicated that family ties in their home countries generally pulled students to return (Alberts & Hazen, 2005; Baruch et al., 2007; Bozionelos et al., 2015; Hazen & Alberts, 2006). However, the impact of familial relations could be more complex. Based on interviews with international graduate students in Canada and UK, (Geddie, 2013) found that students had a sense of responsibility of caring for elderly parents, but this consideration could pull students to opposite directions. While some planned to live close to their parents by moving back to their home country, others wanted to stay in the host country to support their parents better financially. Sometimes, parents tended to impose what they perceived as the best plan on their children (Findlay et al., 2017). For example, families from less developed countries expected their children to pursue a money-making international career. The students who preferred to return had to negotiate between their own and parents' aspirations.

In addition to fulfilling the duties for parents and sometimes extended family, romantic relationships also play an important role in shaping students' mobility plans. International students who were married to US citizens or had children in the US tended to stay, because it would be challenging for their partners or children to move (Alberts & Hazen, 2005). Students who were in a relationship reported the challenge of balancing their own and partner's career (Geddie, 2013). They had limited options of location to satisfy both careers, and female students were more willing to prioritize their partner's career. Additionally, students also considered the arrangement for future child-raising when deciding on location.

Social networks built in the host country could facilitate students to stay in the host country. International students gained a sense of home and felt settled in the host country by making friends locally, even though they did not plan to stay originally (Findlay et al., 2017). In addition to friendships, professional ties also matter. Connections with faculty members in the US opened more opportunities for international students to stay (Szelényi, 2006). Another study confirmed this finding; it indicated that international students who were better supported by their

professors and fellow students had higher intention to stay in the host country (Baruch et al., 2007).

Political Factors

International student post-graduation mobility is associated with both actual and perceived changes of immigration policy. After the Canadian government extended the Post-Graduation Work Permit program to three years and allowed students to apply without a formal job offer, international students were more interested in staying for work even if they did not plan to do so (Geddie, 2010). Trump administration's policy attempts to increase H-1B wage levels resulted in a chilling effect that discouraged international students to stay in the US (Ma, 2020). In other cases, political changes may lead to an increasing sense of uncertainty regarding future immigration regulations. For example, the US travel ban in 2017 that prevented nationals from six Muslim-majority countries to enter the US resulted in concerns among all international students regarding their future job prospects in the US due to the overall hostile climate against immigrants, even though the employment visa (H-1B) regulations remained unchanged around that time (Todoran & Peterson, 2019). Similarly, EU students reported to be much more likely to leave the UK after completion of their studies as they anticipated that the cost, living standards and employability would be affected in the longer term after Brexit, even though no actual changes of their rights took place (Falkingham et al., 2019). Following this line of literature, this study focused on the impact of heightened political tensions between the US and China on Chinese international students' post-graduation mobility. More importantly, this study not only examined whether students changed their mobility plans due to some shifting political circumstances, but also how they responded to those changes.

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

This study draws the notion of human agency. The definition of agency is adopted from O'Meara et al. (2014)'s work on graduate student agency in career advancement, which indicated that agency is "assuming strategic perspectives, and/or taking strategic actions toward goals that matter to him/her" (p. 157). Agency incorporates two components, agentic perspectives, and agentic actions. Agentic perspectives are "a form of self-talk, a set of perspectives or views taken when experiencing opportunities and constraints in pursuit of a goal" (p. 157), while agentic actions are what one does to achieve the goal. O'Meara et al. emphasize that agency should be viewed for a specific project. In this study, the "project" is achieving career and life aspirations, which are intertwined with their mobility plans.

While international student agency remains understudied, Tran & Vu (2018) conceptualized international student agency in mobility, which further provides the theoretical grounding for this study. Among the four forms of agency concluded by the authors (i.e., agency for becoming, needs-response agency, agency as struggle and resistance, and collective agency for contestation), agency

for becoming and agency as struggle and resistance are particularly relevant to this study. Agency for becoming refers to students' active engagement in their life-course construction and their mobility decisions are tied to such self-forming process. Based on this concept, students' agency for becoming in making their post-graduation plans is a process of imagining and realizing one's future self through career, life, and mobility arrangements. Agency as struggle and resistance depicts the agency exerted to counter unfavorable situations. It serves as a lens to understand students' active responses to the changing political context.

Both O'Meara et al. (2014) and Tran & Vu (2018) indicated that agency is shaped by the social and institutional contexts that one is situated in. In O'Meara et al. (2014)'s study, departments played an essential role in enhancing graduate student agency in career advancement. Tran & Vu (2018) indicated that how successful international students enact their agency depended on institutional resources. Building on those arguments, this study also examined how the social and institutional contexts influence students' agency.

Overall, the concept of agency challenges the deficit view of international students. Based on the expectations originated from Anglo-Western perspective, international students are viewed as lacking critical thinking and proficiency in English, failing to integrate, and tending to plagiarize (Jones, 2017). They are also the victims of the discrimination based on their race and ethnicity (J. J. Lee & Rice, 2007; Yao, 2018), and vulnerable under immigration policy changes (Castiello-Gutiérrez & Li, 2020). While all these factors hinder international students' career prospects in the host country, they also exercise their agency when making mobility decisions, and this study focused on the latter.

METHOD

Research Design

This qualitative study took a phenomenological approach. A phenomenological study "describes the common meaning for several individuals of their lived experiences of a concept or a phenomenon" (Creswell, 2013, p.76). This approach allowed this study to examine what Chinese students experienced under a certain political context and the process of how they experienced it. Specifically, the study was guided by the following research questions: How do Chinese students perceive the US-China geopolitical tensions? How are their post-graduation plans influenced by such geopolitical context? How do Chinese students enact agentic perspectives and actions when making their post-graduation mobility plans under such political environment? How is Chinese students' agency influenced by their social and institutional environment?

To answer these questions, I conducted 15 semi-structured interviews among Chinese international graduates in 2019. The participants shared their career and mobility experiences after graduation, as well as next step plans and rationales behind those plans. In addition, I asked students about their perceptions about the US-China geopolitical tensions between 2017 and 2019, and whether and how they adjusted their plans based on those changing political conditions in the US.

Research Site and Participants

The site of the study was a four-year public research university in the Southwestern US. This institution hosted over 10,000 international students in 2019, among which around one third were Chinese students. Each of these students originally participated in one of ten focus groups to discuss their post-graduation mobility plans in 2017. As the anti-immigrant rhetoric rose and US-China geopolitical tensions escalated, I interviewed some focus group participants who had graduated by the time of the interview in 2019. Although only the follow-up interviews in 2019 were used for the purpose of this study, the 2017 focus groups provided the essential context for the interviews in 2019. Specifically, each interview in 2019 started with reviewing the student's post-graduation plans discussed in 2017. This helped students to reflect on whether they had changed their plans over the past two years.

Table 1 shows the demographic information of the fifteen participants. seven were female and eight were male students. In 2017, nine were undergraduate students and six were pursuing a master's degree. At the time of the 2019 interviews, four out of the fifteen students had returned to China, while the other eleven students remained in the US working or studying in a different degree program.

Table 1: Participants

Pseudonym	Gender	Level of study in 2017	Pursuing a high-level degree in 2019	Location of residence in 2019
Hua	Female	Bachelor	No	US
Da	Female	Bachelor	No	US
Jeremy	Male	Bachelor	No	US
Salem	Male	Bachelor	No	US
Shen	Female	Master	No	US
Kevin	Male	Master	No	US
Venti	Male	Master	No	China
Zack	Male	Bachelor	Yes	US
Sky	Male	Bachelor	No	China
Elizabeth	Female	Master	No	China
Daniel	Female	Master	No	US
Lucia	Female	Master	No	US
Mary	Female	Bachelor	Yes	US
Danny	Male	Bachelor	Yes	US
Ganson	Male	Bachelor	No	China

Data Collection

The focus groups that the students originally participated in were an assessment project initiated by the Career and Professional Services Center (CPSC) and the International Students and Scholars Center (ISSC) and approved by at the university. Approved by the Institutional Review Board, this project intended to understand Chinese international students' post-graduation mobility plans and career needs. I was a staff member at ISSC and recruited participants through ISSC newsletters and WeChat account (a popular Chinese social media platform). Then I assigned the participants into ten focus groups based on their academic level and the post-graduation plan that they initially indicated when signing up for the study.

In 2019, I purposefully invited that the students who had graduated by the time of the interview so that they were able to speak about their post-graduation experiences. I conducted some interviews over the phone or WeChat because those participants had moved to other states or returned to China. Each interview lasted one hour on average. I used Mandarin Chinese and audio recorded all interviews.

Data Analysis

I transcribed and then translated the interviews from Chinese to English. In the first round of coding, I coded data into four parts to address four research questions respectively: perceptions, political impact, student agency and factors that influence student agency. In the second round, I developed codes for each of the four parts respectively. For example, I adopted descriptive and in vivo coding strategies to generate codes for student agentic perspectives and actions (Saldana, 2016). I conducted member checking with participants by sharing the draft findings and seeking their feedback on my translations and interpretations.

FINDINGS

Perceptions of the US-China Tensions

All participants were aware of the tensions between the US and China and indicated that the political environment in the US was unfriendly for Chinese international students. They believed that Chinese people were particularly targeted and often mentioned the cases in which Chinese people were unfairly accused of engaging in espionage activities in higher education and high-tech industries. For example, Kevin expressed his disappointment with the discriminatory treatment: “They are not spies, but they are monitored, and not allowed to study or work in the US. This conflicts with the some of the core values of this country, such as democracy and freedom.” While being aware of discrimination against Chinese people, one third of the students shared a relatively optimistic view about the future. These students believed that the geopolitical situations were constantly changing, and the current tensions might be temporary:

I have been in the US for years and have seen many ups and downs. Every now and then, there are some political tensions... [The US-China relations] can't go so bad. At worst, the US has an election every four year. Every new administration has different policies, and policies may even change within a certain administration. (Mary)

Impact on Students' Post-Graduation Mobility

The main impact of the geopolitical tensions between the US and China on students' post-graduation plans was the increasing challenges in finding a job and obtaining the H-1B visa sponsorship. Several participants who graduated in 2019 experienced delayed Optional Practical Training (OPT) process. Although they felt lucky that their employers kindly postponed their starting day, they pointed out that this could make some students to lose their job. More broadly, participants indicated that employers in the US were less willing to take the risk to hire temporary visa holders due to Trump's "American First" policy and the anti-China rhetoric. Among the students who were affected, Da had the most disruptive experience of seeking sponsorship:

Many positions that provide sponsorship in 2017 suddenly stopped sponsoring in 2018. I applied for a position during the summer of 2018. I was told they could sponsor me when they invited me to the interview. The night before the scheduled interview, they told me that they decided to no longer sponsor this position and cancelled my interview. (Da)

Despite the difficulties, all students who originally intended to stay in the US, at least temporarily, had not changed their plan. One of the reasons was that they still saw opportunities to find employment in the US. As bachelor's or master's graduates, the participants in this study believed that they were less affected by the political conditions than those who engage in cutting-edge technology or scientific research. The latter group was especially targeted by the US government and companies. In addition, students argued that the US economy had recovered from the 2008 recession and the job market was good. This echoed previous research that international student mobility tendency is associated with a country's economic conditions (Geddie, 2010; Kim et al., 2011; Szelényi, 2006). Furthermore, participants believed that American companies rely on foreign talent, which is determined by the market. For example, Jeremy said, "They can't expel everyone. They need us. How can the American high-tech fields function without internationals? It is not going to work."

Meanwhile, many students felt that they needed to stick to their plan given the financial resources, time, and efforts that they had invested in studying abroad:

My family has spent a lot in my studies in the US. It is not a small number. Regardless of what happens, I will try to seek career opportunities here. I don't necessary want to immigrate, but my goal is to find a job [in the US]. (Zack)

While several participants indicated that future Chinese students might give a second thought about their studying abroad decision due to the political circumstances, students' post-graduation plans were less affected:

For those who have not studied abroad, they probably want to stay away from the US. They may be hesitant because of the potential negative impact on their studies and work. For those who are already in the US and looking for a job, the political situation is just a barrier that we must overcome. (Shen)

Another student, Hua, described such situation as riding a boat that she had bought ticket for, and she just had to "keep going".

Agentic Perspectives

To further understand the Chinese students' resilience in making their post-graduation decisions amid the US-China tensions, I unpacked the specific agentic perspectives and actions that they enacted to resist the negative impact of the political environment.

"Do What I Can."

Unlike the agency as struggle and resistance demonstrated in Tran & Vu (2018)'s study, where students directly fought against unjust institutional practices, no one in this study attempted to change the unfavorable political circumstances. All participants demonstrated a similar strategy; they recognized that the political circumstances were out of their control in the first place, and intentionally shifted their focus to what they could manage:

Many people complain, and I do too. But you need to be clear that this [political environment] is not something anyone can fix. It is what it is. If I can't change it, just do what I can...This is how I adjusted my mindset when I was looking for a job. Plan for the worst but don't give up. (Jeremy)

Jeremy and other students who stayed in the US demonstrated a soft form of agency as struggle and resistance. Geopolitical tensions between two countries were more difficult to be challenged than institutional practices, and students felt impossible to change those conditions. When facing such a powerful structure beyond individuals' reach, students passively accepted the difficulties, and at the same time, actively looked towards their own aspirations and choices.

"You Will Stay If You Are Determined to."

All participants agreed that students' own motivation of staying in the US was a more impactful factor than the political context to determine their post-graduation mobility. Daniel argued:

You will stay if you are determined to. Policies including the H-1B lottery can't stop you from staying. You can always create opportunities for yourself to achieve your goal even when you didn't seem to have one. (Daniel)

Daniel and many other participants also shared their plans to “create opportunities”. For example, one could pursue a higher-level degree, or transfer to a different country within one's company and return to the US on an L-1 visa.

Moreover, a few students indicated that some students might also use politics as an excuse for their failure in finding employment in the US:

They [students who decide to leave the US] may say I didn't want to stay here because I couldn't find a job. Companies didn't hire me because the political environment was not friendly. But is it really the case? ... Companies would hire you if you could bring values to them. I know many people who found a job in the US, and all of them were motivated. (Salem)

Students' determination in staying in the US was fundamentally associated with their pursuit of economic and human capital, as well as social status. For almost all the participants, staying in the US was not the goal but a steppingstone toward upward social mobility. Work experience in the US will facilitate them to transfer to a high-status job position if they return to China or relocate elsewhere. For example, a student who was employed by a multi-national company, indicated:

From what I know within our company, a senior manager in Mexico was demoted to a manager when transferring to the US. From a different perspective, you might be promoted as a manager if you were only an associate here... [Staying in the US] is a great steppingstone for me. If I transfer to China after 5 years, I will probably maintain my salary level while the living cost is lower over there. (Salem)

“It is Bad but also Good.”

Students' pursuit of economic and human capital not only empowered students to stay determined, but also facilitated them to adopt a positive perspective in perceiving the political related challenges. One of the students explained:

Finding a job becomes more and more difficult, especially the relationship between China and the US gets more intense. Perhaps it took 3 months to find a job before, and now it takes 4 to 5 months. The bar is rising for international students, which requires us to be more competitive. It's bad but also good. The good side is that it forces us to be better and improve our skills. The skills I gain are mine. Even if I returned to China one day, these skills would still be useful. (Daniel)

Like Daniel, Jeremy and Kevin also framed the unfavorable political environment as a competition. Jeremy said he was willing to “accept the challenge”. Kevin indicated that he gained a strong sense of achievement by finding a job in the US during a challenging time. Instead of feeling frustrated by the increasing difficulties, students were motivated by their potential self-growth and professional success.

Students’ agentic perspectives “you will stay if you are determined to” and “it is bad but also good” demonstrated their agency for becoming. Under increasing career challenges, they chose to focus on achieving a better self who is equipped with more knowledge and skills. Such agency for becoming enabled students to reframe the political impact as a condition that forced their self-growth. For this reason, the agency for becoming could also be seen as agency as struggle and resistance.

Agentic Actions

Students had transformed some of the agentic perspectives into actual actions. Once students were determined to stay in the US, they made substantial efforts to enhance their career competitiveness. For example, Salem sought advice from career services when he was a first-year student. Danny decided to pursue a master’s degree. Daniel made a good use of the Curriculum Practical Training (CPT) program to obtain internship experiences before graduation. Jeremy intentionally developed his professional networks, through which he obtained his first full-time job.

In addition to developing their skills and accumulating career experiences during their studies, Jeremy made an unusual decision to cope with the political changes. He added a STEM major in his third year of college to enhance his employability in the US. He shared what this decision meant to him:

I had a sense of crisis especially after Trump took the office. I realized that I needed to do something to protect myself. It has been extremely helpful to add the STEM major, otherwise I would probably be still unemployed now. With a STEM major, you can do more, and you have a potential two-year OPT extension. Companies wouldn’t be willing to spend money on hiring someone who could only work for less than a year. (Jeremy)

Although adding a STEM major required many additional efforts, it was something that within Jeremy’s control compared to the changing political circumstances. He showed an example of leveraging existing immigration policies to serve his goal of finding employment in the US.

Factors Shaping Students’ Agency

Consistent with J. Lee (2021)’s study, which indicated that institutional contexts and practices substantially shaped international students’ post-graduation aspirations, this study found that students’ perceptions about the US and their

possibility of staying in the US were influenced by their social networks and the university. Even though many students were aware of the discriminatory incidents against the Asian community and Chinese people, they reported that they were surrounded by supportive professors, classmates, colleagues, and friends. These positive day-to-day social experiences boosted students' agency by buffering the negative impact of the unfriendly political rhetoric. Lucia provided one of the examples:

It depends on your social networks. I don't feel being discriminated. People I socialize with are usually well-educated. They can rationally talk about political incidents. They never treated me differently because of the political environment. My colleagues could openly discuss the trade war and China, but they didn't target me. I really want to say that most people in America treat me as an individual other than Chinese. I read news about people yelling things like "go back to your country" or "you raised our tax and made us poor" to Asian people. But it really depends on your social networks, and I haven't experienced anything like that. (Lucia)

In addition, socializing with their peer Chinese students who had successfully secured employment could also enhance their agency. Students were more likely to have confidence in achieving similar goals after hearing others' success. One student described such effect:

All my friends landed a job [in the US]. I don't know about all majors, but for those in Computer Science, Electrical Engineering, and Statistics, they all found a job eventually. Some got a full-time job, if not, a part-time job is also fine... The job market seems to be good. (Daniel)

While Daniel showed an extreme case that all her friends were employed in the US, many of the interview participants indicated that they were more hopeful and determined through their friends' successful stories. This finding echoed the academic enclave effect which suggests that international students' aspirations to stay in the US are enhanced by a larger community of co-national students (Kaul & Renzulli, 2022).

Beyond one's own social networks, the university also improved students' agency in making post-graduation plans. It provided career and immigration related resources and support. Also, it emphasized their stance in supporting Chinese students in public statements after racial profiling incidents against Chinese students and scholars took place:

Academics are borderless. Many universities are openly supporting Chinese students. I read that [University Name] said they had not seen any cases of visa suspension among Chinese students, and they would always support international students, especially Chinese students to study and pursue a career here. (Kevin)

While interview participants did not mention any specific actions that universities had taken to ensure a less disruptive experience for Chinese students, they felt

being welcome by learning that universities were their allies to fight against the anti-China policies and attempts at the federal level.

DISCUSSION

Following Rose-Redwood & Rose-Redwood (2017)'s call for research on political dimensions of international student experience, this study unpacked the political impact on international student post-graduation mobility through students' lived experiences. This study did not indicate a direct impact of political changes on international students' future plans as previous studies found (Falkingham et al., 2019). Such result, however, should not be taken lightly. In fact, this study revealed the complexities under the unchanged post-graduation plans. Through the lens of agentic perspectives and actions O'Meara et al. (2014), this study highlighted that students' resilience was mostly manifested through their internal dialogues. Internal dialogues were less visible than external actions. Future research should particularly attend international students' internal sophisticated processes of battling the negative political impact.

One of the most important contributions of this study is that it joined Tran & Vu (2018)'s research to emphasize international student agency and challenge the deficit view of international student research. With career and life aspirations being restrained by the political circumstances in the US, Chinese students exercised agency for becoming and agency as struggle and resistance to counter the actual and potential negative influence. Incorporating international students' own voices with a focus on their agency helped to shape an alternative narrative. While international students were powerless under immigration policies and international relations, they could also develop coping strategies to protect their own career and life aspirations.

Agency for becoming demonstrated in this study should be viewed with caution. The future self that students were constructing was mostly related to the positional outcome (Robertson et al., 2011), which manifested the influence of neoliberal competition. A major theme of Chinese students' post-graduation planning was pursuing competitiveness in the global job market. This was consistent with Fong (2011)'s research, which argued that Chinese students' mobility decisions were tied to their pursuit of legal, social, and cultural citizenships in the developed world. The developed world does not refer to certain countries, but "an imagined global community of affluent, powerful, and prestigious people" (p. 16). In contrast to the concept of agency for becoming defined as self-transformation based on one's past and present experiences (Tran & Vu, 2018), I argue that such agency may also incorporate the positional outcome.

A limitation of this study is that it did not address how political factors interact with non-political factors to jointly shape international students' post-graduation mobility. Being interviewed prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, some of the participants mentioned that US economy had recovered from the 2008 recession. Consequently, they were more willing to stay in the US. This might

have compensated the negative political impact on their career prospects in the US. Future research should examine such interactions among different factors.

In addition to scholarly contributions, this study also had some policy implications. The US-China geopolitical tensions had not alleviated since the time that the interviews of this study were conducted. Even though the China Initiative was ended in early 2022, the Proclamation 10043 was still in place. As the Biden Administration continued to portray China as a major competitor, it seems to be unlikely that the political climate for Chinese students in the US can be improved in the near term. This study argues that federal policy makers should be fully aware of the long-term consequences of current political conditions on international education. Although the unwarranted suspicion of Chinese people affects the elite scientists and professionals more than bachelor's and master's graduates, such discriminatory narrative has resulted in a broad unwelcoming environment for Chinese students to seek employment in the US. While they mostly remained their original mobility plans, they had to make many additional efforts to resist the political challenges and uncertainties. The study showed the signs of the chilling effect as some participants indicated that future Chinese students were likely to choose elsewhere to study instead of the US. Whether the US can remain to be an attractive destination for Chinese students becomes concerning. In addition, it is unclear to what extent students' resilience demonstrated in this study will continue to work if the political climate does not improve as some of the interview participants anticipated. If Chinese students largely planned to return after graduation, the US would face a severe problem of talent loss.

Under such political circumstances, this study emphasized that higher education institutions play a critical role in resisting the negative political impact and supporting Chinese international students. Despite the anti-China rhetoric at the macro level, universities could still effectively exert their own power to foster a welcoming and supportive social and institutional environment that allows international students to thrive in their career and life aspirations after graduation. Students' perceptions about the US highly depend on their immediate social contacts. Interacting with supportive faculty, staff and domestic students at a daily basis powerfully shapes a positive view about the US, thus leads to a strong willingness to stay.

Acknowledgement

In loving memory of Janell Leach

REFERENCES

- Alberts, H. C., & Hazen, H. D. (2005). There are always two voices: International students' intentions to stay in the United States or return to their home countries. *International Migration*, 43(3), 131–154. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-2435.2005.00328.x>

- Baruch, Y., Budhwar, P. S., & Khatri, N. (2007). Brain drain: Inclination to stay abroad after studies. *Journal of World Business*, 42(1), 99–112. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jwb.2006.11.004>
- Bozionelos, N., Bozionelos, G., Kostopoulos, K., Shyong, C. H., Baruch, Y., & Zhou, W. (2015). International graduate students' perceptions and interest in international careers. *International Journal of Human Resource Management*, 26(11), 1428–1451. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09585192.2014.935457>
- Castiello-Gutiérrez, S., & Li, X. (2020). We are more than your paycheck: The dehumanization of international students in the United States. *Journal of International Students*, 10(3). <https://doi.org/10.32674/jis.v10i3.2676>
- Creswell, J. W. (2013). *Qualitative inquiry and research design: Choosing among five approaches* (3rd ed.). SAGE Publication.
- Falkingham, J., Giulietti, C., Wahba, J., & Wang, C. (2019). The impact of Brexit on international students' return intentions. In *Global Labor Organization Discussion Paper* (Vol. 342).
- Findlay, A., Prazeres, L., McCollum, D., & Packwood, H. (2017). “It was always the plan”: International study as “learning to migrate.” *Area*, 49(2), 192–199. <https://doi.org/10.1111/area.12315>
- Fong, V. L. (2011). *Paradise redefined: Transnational Chinese students and the quest for flexible citizenship in the developed world*. Stanford University Press.
- Geddie, K. (2010). *Transnational landscapes of opportunity? Postgraduation settlement and career strategies of international students in Toronto, Canada and London, UK* [University of Toronto]. https://tspace.library.utoronto.ca/bitstream/1807/26526/3/Geddie_Katherine_P_201011_PhD_thesis.pdf
- Geddie, K. (2013). The transnational ties that bind: Relationship considerations for graduating international science and engineering research students. *Population, Space and Place*, 19(2), 196–208. <https://doi.org/10.1002/psp.1751>
- Gümüş, S., Gök, E., & Esen, M. (2020). A review of research on international student mobility: Science mapping the existing knowledge base. *Journal of Studies in International Education*, 24(5), 495–517. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1028315319893651>
- Hazen, H. D., & Alberts, H. C. (2006). Visitors or immigrants? International students in the United States. *Population, Space and Place*, 12(3), 201–216. <https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.1002/psp.409>
- Heng, T. T. (2018). Different is not deficient: Contradicting stereotypes of Chinese international students in US higher education. *Studies in Higher Education*, 43(1), 22–36. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03075079.2016.1152466>
- Institute of International Education. (2021). *A rising for ebbing tide: Do Chinese students still want to study in the U.S.?* https://iie.widen.net/s/hqpxjsppzh/rising-or-ebbing-tide_final

- Jones, E. (2017). Problematising and reimagining the notion of ‘international student experience.’ *Studies in Higher Education*, 42(5), 933–943. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03075079.2017.1293880>
- Kaul, V., & Renzulli, L. (2022). Duality of persistence: Academic enclaves and international students’ aspirations to stay in the United States. *Journal of International Students*, 12(2), 467–488. <https://doi.org/10.32674/jis.v12i2.3198>
- Kellogg, R. P. (2012). China’s brain gain?: Attitudes and future plans of overseas Chinese students in the US. *Journal of Chinese Overseas*, 8(1), 83–104. <https://doi.org/10.1163/179325412X634319>
- Kim, D., Bankart, C. A. S., & Isdell, L. (2011). International doctorates: Trends analysis on their decision to stay in US. *Higher Education*, 62(2), 141–161. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10734-010-9371-1>
- Lee, J. (2021). A future of endless possibilities? Institutional habitus and international students’ post-study aspirations and transitions transitions. *British Journal of Sociology of Education*. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01425692.2021.1886907>
- Lee, J. J., & Li, X. (2021). *Racial profiling among scientists of Chinese descent and consequences for the U.S. scientific community*. <https://www.committee100.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/10/C100-Lee-Li-White-Paper-FINAL-FINAL-10.28.pdf>
- Lee, J. J., & Rice, C. (2007). Welcome to America? International student perceptions of discrimination. *Higher Education*, 53(3), 381–409. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10734-005-4508-3>
- Ma, Y. (2020). *Ambitious and anxious: How Chinese college students succeed and struggle in American higher education*. Columbia University Press.
- National Science Board. (2020). *The state of U.S. science and engineering*. <https://nces.nsf.gov/pubs/nsb20201/assets/nsb20201.pdf>
- Nilsson, P. A., & Ripmeester, N. (2016). International student expectations: Career opportunities and employability. *Journal of International Students*, 6(2), 614–631. <https://doi.org/10.32674/jis.v6i2.373>
- O’Meara, K., Eliason, J., Cowdery, K., Jaeger, A., Grantham, A., Mitchall, A., & Zhang, K. (2014). By design: How departments influence graduate student agency in career advancement. *International Journal of Doctoral Studies*, 9, 155–179. <https://doi.org/10.28945/2048>
- Pew Research Center. (2021). *Most Americans support tough stance toward China on human rights, economic issues*. <https://www.pewresearch.org/global/2021/03/04/most-americans-support-tough-stance-toward-china-on-human-rights-economic-issues/>
- Robertson, S., Hoare, L., & Harwood, A. (2011). Returnees, student-migrants and second chance learners: Case studies of positional and transformative outcomes of Australian international education. *Compare*, 41(5), 685–698. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03057925.2011.562369>
- Rose-Redwood, C., & Rose-Redwood, R. (2017). Rethinking the politics of the international student experience in the age of Trump. *Journal of International Students*, 7(3), I–IX. <https://doi.org/10.32674/jis.v7i3.201>

- Saldana, J. (2016). *The coding manual for qualitative researchers* (3rd ed.). SAGE Publications Inc.
- Szelényi, K. (2006). Migratory decision-making among international graduate students in the U.S. *Knowledge, Technology, & Policy*, 19(3), 64–86. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s12130-006-1030-6>
- Todoran, C., & Peterson, C. (2019). Should they stay or should they go? How the 2017 U.S. travel ban affects international doctoral students. *Journal of Studies in International Education*, 24(4), 440–455. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1028315319861344>
- Tran, L. T., Rahimi, M., Tan, G., Dang, X. T., & Le, N. (2020). Post-study work for international graduates in Australia: Opportunity to enhance employability, get a return on investment or secure migration? *Globalisation, Societies and Education*, 18(5), 495–510. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14767724.2020.1789449>
- Tran, L. T., & Vu, T. T. P. (2018). ‘Agency in mobility’: Towards a conceptualisation of international student agency in transnational mobility. *Educational Review*, 70(2), 167–187. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00131911.2017.1293615>
- Yao, C. W. (2018). “They don’t care about you”: First-year Chinese international students’ experiences with neo-racism and othering on a U.S. Campus. *Journal of The First-Year Experience & Students in Transition*, 30(1), 87–101.

Author bios

XIAOJIE LI is a PhD student in the Center for the Study of Higher Education, University of Arizona. Her major research interests lie in international student mobility and experiences, transnational education, and intellectual migration. Email: xiaojieli@arizona.edu
