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Mobility Repertoires: How Chinese Overseas Students Overcame Pandemic-Induced Immobility

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Abstract

The burgeoning field of immobility studies focuses on how migratory aspirations and capabilities shape a given (im)mobility status but devotes scant attention to how people traverse different (im)mobility categories. Through a case study of Chinese students in the United States during the COVID-19 pandemic, this article develops two arguments to shed light on migrants' experiences and strategies in mobility transitions. First, during the pandemic, while China's restrictive travel policies and unfavorable public discourses made return migration extremely difficult, Chinese overseas students also felt unwelcome in the United States, due to visa restrictions and Sinophobic violence. This dilemma of being unable to return to the homeland and being simultaneously stranded in a hostile host society pushed Chinese student migrants, a previously highly mobile population, into immobility. Second, drawing on in-depth interviews, we discover that Chinese overseas students deployed four sets of tools—online crowdsourcing, virtual intermediary, temporal adaptation, and institutional cushioning—to reclaim mobility. We propose the concept of "mobility repertoires" to capture social actors' active retooling and

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deliberate restrategizing of digital, cognitive, and institutional resources to navigate unsettling (im)mobility predicaments and construct new mobility tactics. By cross-fertilizing studies of immobility and migration infrastructure, we provide an action-centered, processual account of (im)mobilities as agential practices and robust courses of action, rather than static statuses or categories. This article also transcends the mobility bias in the literature on international student mobility (ISM) by unraveling the co-production of international student *im*mobility by migration policies and discursive constraints in host and home countries.

Keywords
COVID-19 pandemic, Chinese overseas students, student immobility

Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic brought the world to a near standstill. By February 2022, 208 countries or territories had issued as many as 122,823 travel restrictions (International Organization for Migration 2022). Domestic lockdowns also confined citizens in close quarters and crippled their movements (Martin and Bergmann 2021). The burgeoning field of immobility studies provides a timely and fitting framework to account for this mode of involuntary immobility caused by diminished migration capabilities (Carling 2002; de Haas 2021; Lubkemann 2008). This scholarship transcends the "mobility bias" in migration studies (Schewel 2020) by separating aspirations (i.e., people's desires to migrate) from capabilities (i.e., their actual abilities to realize migratory goals), opening new space for a refocus on immobility that persists even in the much-celebrated "age of migration" (Castles et al. 2014).

Although innovative, immobility studies concentrate on how specific combinations of migratory aspirations and capabilities shape a given (im)mobility status (Carling and Schewel 2018; Mata-Codesal 2015). Such works devote scant attention to how people *traverse* different (im)mobility categories (Rodriguez-Pena 2022). Without a dynamic account of (im)mobility *shifts*, we know little about mobilization strategies for transforming mobility. Furthermore, the empirical scope of immobility studies is often confined within sending societies, such as Cape Verde (Carling 2002), Morocco (de Haas 2021), the Philippines (Ortiga and Macabasag 2021), and Ethiopia (Schewel 2020). This promising line of research overlooks migrants who have finished initial emigration but face dwindling capabilities of *staying* in host countries or *returning* to their home countries (Haugen 2012; Mata-Codesal 2015, 2281). For example, as a growing stream of global migration, international students have been celebrated as the quintessential embodiments of globalization with "unlimited transnational mobility" (Gomes 2015, 46). However, despite preliminary insights into student migrants who were stranded during the pandemic (Martin and Bergmann 2021; Wang 2022), scholars have not yet adopted the immobility lens to systematically analyze how international student mobility (ISM) may be compromised or restored.

To fill the void of how migrants overcome post-emigration immobilities and achieve mobility transitions, we conducted a case study of Chinese students[1] in the United States during the COVID-19 pandemic. First, we examine migration policies and public discourses in China and the United States to highlight how they shaped student migrants' perceptions of diminished mobility. We discover that while China's restrictive travel policies and pandemic control measures imposed financial and logistical barriers for the return migration of Chinese overseas students, these students also felt compelled to stay in the increasingly hostile US society. Due to worsening visa restrictions and Sinophobic violence in the United States, these student immigrants feared the decreasing chance of reentering the host country should they risk returning to China. These factors pushed them into immobility. Far from being private matters or discrete events, overseas students' immobility shifts were enmeshed in broader geopolitics (i.e., China–US tensions) and long-standing societal sentiments (i.e., anti-Asian racism).

Second, we find that Chinese students in the United States overcame immobility and retrieved mobility by utilizing four sets of tools—online crowdsourcing, virtual intermediary, temporal adaptation, and institutional cushioning. Following cultural sociological theory (Swidler 1986) and studies of migration infrastructure (Wang 2022; Xiang and Lindquist 2014), we propose the concept of "mobility repertoires" to capture social actors' active retooling and deliberate restrategizing of digital, cognitive, and institutional resources to navigate unsettling immobility predicaments and construct new mobility tactics. By focusing on mobility as agential practices and robust courses of action, rather than static statuses or categories, we push immobility literature toward a more dynamic, action-centered perspective on how migrants wrestle with mobility transitions.

Mobility Repertoires

As Schewel's (2020) seminal review points out, migration studies have long been beleaguered by a "mobility bias" in which sedentary life is naturalized as a by-default phenomenon that needs little explanation, in marked contrast to the extensive scholarly scrutiny into migration or mobility (Mata-Codesal 2015). Departing from this oversight, the emerging immobility literature follows a two-step approach to examining the differentiated *aspirations* and *capabilities* for migration (de Haas 2021). By enriching this model with more empirical nuances, researchers have developed an increasingly sophisticated typology to shed light on involuntary immobility (Carling 2002; Lubkemann 2008), desired immobility (Mata-Codesal 2015), and acquiescent immobility (Carling and Schewel 2018; Schewel 2020).

Despite making critical inroads into unpacking the diverse categories of (im) mobility, immobility studies fail to explicitly explain social actors' dynamic

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[1]We define Chinese overseas students as those holding passports of the People's Republic of China and pursuing education abroad.

movements *across* (im)mobility types (Rodriguez-Pena 2022). Although Carling and Schewel (2018, 958) touch upon what they call "adaptive preferences," this concept only considers individuals' unidirectional adaptation to reduced mobility possibilities, that is, subduing migration aspirations to adapt to limited capabilities. Yet, people can adopt various coping strategies to confront mobility shifts in various directions along the immobility–mobility spectrum (Paul 2011). For instance, Rodriguez-Pena (2022) documents two distinct (im)mobility transitions in a single case: first, heteronormative family values plunged gay youths in Latin America into involuntary immobility; second, these aspiring individuals regained migratory capabilities through waiting and renegotiating with families and eventually managed to migrate. For another example, Ortiga and Macabasag (2021) recount how Filipino nurses actively dealt with the deflated prospects of cross-border emigration by migrating within the country while readjusting aspirations and accumulating new capabilities. These recent findings bespeak the need to move beyond the parsimonious, yet incomplete, model of "adaptive preferences" (Carling and Schewel 2018, 958) and accomplish a more dynamic theorization of mobility shifts.

The budding research on migration infrastructure offers perceptive insights into "the systematically interlinked technologies, institutions, and actors that facilitate and condition mobility" (Xiang and Lindquist 2014, 124). Inspired by immobility studies, Wang (2022) adds another level of complexity by exploring "*im*mobility infrastructures" that allow people to stay put. Wang (2022) finds that during the COVID-19 pandemic, online platforms enabled Chinese international students to attend courses virtually and avoid cross-border travel. This body of work yields a fruitful understanding of (im)mobility as interlocked with and made possible by a more comprehensive array of resources and practices (Hernández-León 2012).

Building on these empirical and theoretical advances, we develop the concept of "mobility repertoires" to delineate an action-centered perspective on how people mobilize otherwise mundane resources for mobility transitions. Drawing on the well-established concept of "cultural repertoires" (Swidler 1986), we envision "mobility repertoires" as a toolkit of know-how, techniques, and infrastructures that people tactfully deploy to their advantage when their aspirations for and capabilities of migrating or staying fluctuate. While the concept of "migration infrastructure" underscores the role of *intermediary resources* in enabling or stifling mobility (Wang 2022; Xiang and Lindquist 2014), our notion of "mobility repertoires" places *migrants* at the center of analysis. Our concept brings to the fore social actors' agency in proactively repurposing and transforming their digital, cognitive, and institutional resources into mobility repertoires to adapt to the changing mobility landscape and renegotiate (im)mobility strategies. Mobility shifts do not depend on intermediary resources in and of themselves (c.f., Wang 2022; Xiang and Lindquist 2014); instead, it is the migrants' agency that activates and reshapes mobility repertoires. We apply this concept to analyze the mobility transitions of international students, an important subgroup of global migrants that remains underresearched in migration scholarship (Liu 2022a).

International Student Immobility

With over six million migrants pursuing tertiary education outside their home countries in 2017, student migration has grown into a sizable stream of transborder movements with profound implications for the cross-border accumulation and transfer of human, cultural, and symbolic capital (Robertson 2021). Under the influence of the "mobilities paradigm" (Urry 2000), ISM studies tend to highlight elements of flux and fluidity that stimulate mobility in global education, including the commercialization of Western universities, the diffusion of neoliberal labor policies, and the brokerage by commercial intermediaries (Brooks and Waters 2011; Robertson 2021). Yet this mobility-focused ISM literature risks losing sight of international students' recurrent conditions of *im*mobility, whether desired or involuntary (Martin and Bergmann 2021; Wang 2022).

Furthermore, when considering national policies on international students, ISM studies' emphasis often lies in Western states' neoliberal education and employment policies, especially in the United States, Britain, and Australia, that promote de-regulation and post-graduation transition into local labor markets (Brooks and Waters 2011). Little has been written about how *sending countries* regulate their students abroad (Liu 2022a) or unfavorable ISM policies, such as restrictive student visa policies, that may *hinder* transborder mobility.

In this article, we address this deep-seated "mobility bias" (Schewel 2020) in the ISM literature by examining how Chinese students in the United States became immobile during the COVID-19 pandemic and how they utilized varied repertoires to retrieve mobility. Chinese students in the United States constitute the world's largest group of overseas students in a single destination country (Ma 2020). In 2019, the number of Chinese students across US universities peaked at 370,000, accounting for 31% of the international student body in the United States and contributing an estimated 15 billion dollars to the American economy (Open Doors 2022). During the COVID-19 pandemic, however, due to a series of disadvantageous policies and discourses (later discussed in this article), the number of Chinese students in the United States shrank by nearly 15% in the 2020–21 academic year and by another 8.6% in 2022 (Open Doors 2022).

Sino-US student migration dates to the late 19th century and mushroomed after China sanctioned overseas studies as a legitimate purpose of exit in the mid-1980s (Liu 2021). In 2007, a combination of factors, including the streamlined US student visa process and financial pressures imposed by the economic recession, led to US universities' increasing admission of self-funded and scholarship-funded Chinese students (Ma 2020). This increased admission resulted in more diverse student profiles, especially a growing portion of Chinese students from non-elite socioeconomic backgrounds (Ma 2020). While earlier waves of Chinese student migrants tended to stay and gain long-term legal status such as immigrant visas, permanent residency, or eventually, naturalized citizenship in the United States, more students now plan to return to China after graduation (Liu 2022a).

Before the COVID-19 pandemic, most Chinese international students enjoyed an overall favorable social status and privileged mobility in both sending and receiving countries (Brooks and Waters 2011; Robertson 2021). As part of the broader "brain circulation" project since the 1980s, China has rolled out preferential policies to encourage overseas students' post-graduation return aimed at boosting the Chinese economy with imported knowledge and capital (Saxenian 2005). With soaring geopolitical ambitions under President Xi Jinping, China gave overseas students the new "grassroots ambassadors" role to promote Chinese soft power abroad (Liu 2022a). China's politicization of overseas students, however, clashed with Western states' suspicions of Chinese students as potential "foreign spies," pushing student migrants to the forefront of Sino-Western geopolitical conflicts (Liu 2022b). Consequently, since 2018, many Chinese students, especially doctoral students in science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) majors, have experienced difficulties obtaining or renewing US visas (Burke 2021). Chinese students already in the United States were forced to remain in the country for long periods for fear of their potential inability to return to the United States should they leave (Burke 2021).

The COVID-19 pandemic intensified these structural strains on Chinese student migrants amid a global mobility crisis (Martin and Bergmann 2021). In this article, we move beyond the individualistic tendency in immobility studies (Rodriguez-Pena 2022; Schewel 2020, 337) by attributing international student (im)mobility to long-term sociopolitical constraints in the host and home countries. We pay special attention to how shifting policies and discourses at both ends of the ISM trajectory gave rise to student migrants' mobility transitions and, more critically, how overseas students availed themselves of a diverse set of repertoires to carve out new mobilities.

Methods

To analyze Chinese overseas students' immobility and coping strategies during the pandemic, this article draws on two bodies of evidence: policy documents and interviews with Chinese students. First, we extracted and examined over thirty pandemic-related policies and public statements made between January 2020 and May 2022 from eight Chinese and US government agencies, including the Civil Aviation Administration of China, the Chinese Embassy in the United States, the US State Department, and the White House. We used these documents to excavate the immobilizing mechanisms that shaped Chinese overseas students' immobility and to construct a timeline of shifting policies in both countries (see Table 1).

Based on this policy analysis, we conducted semi-structured interviews between January and February 2022 to further analyze how Chinese students abroad made sense of and responded to mobility transitions. Interviewees were Chinese overseas students who pursued bachelor's, master's, or Ph.D. degrees during 2020–2021 in seven public and private universities across the United States. We adopted purposive sampling to recruit initial interviewees from our social networks and used snowball

Table 1. Key Policies in China and the United States That Shaped Student Immobility.

Time	Travel Policies		Visa & Passport Policies	
	China	US	China	US
6/2018				Limited one-year visas to Chinese students in STEM fields.
1/2020		1/31 Travel restriction on aliens present in China within the past 14 days.		
2/2020				2/10 Suspension of visa issuance in China.
3/2020	3/29 "Five-One Policy" for international passenger flights.			
4/2020	4/7 Mandatory health codes of 14 days before boarding.	4/22 Suspended entry for immigrants who might compete with natives in the US labor market.	4/3 Chinese embassy suspended consular and passport services. 4/7 Launched government-organized charter flights for underage students.	
5/2020		5/29 Suspended entry of Chinese students in graduate programs with ties to the Chinese military.		5/29 Visa revocation for Chinese students in the US with ties to the Chinese military.

Table 1. (continued)

Time	Travel Policies		Visa & Passport Policies	
	China	US	China	US
6/2020	6/4 Intensified suspension of international flights with positive Covid cases. 6/15 Approved four flights per week from the US	6/3 Suspended passenger flights to China. 6/15 Approved four flights per week between US and China.		
7/2020			Organized charter flights to evacuate underage students and students whose legal documents were expiring/expired.	7/4 Announced visa revocation for international students taking entirely online courses.
9/2020				Revoked visas of more than 1000 Chinese students deemed as high security risks.
10/2020	10/30 Requirement on double negative tests for nucleic acid and serum antibody serum 48 hours before boarding.			
04/2021	4/28	4/26	4/20	4/26 Exempted international students

Table 1. (continued)

Time	Travel Policies		Visa & Passport Policies	
	China	US	China	US
08/2022	Moderately loosened flight restrictions into China.	Lifted 14-day travel restrictions on Chinese students.	Chinese consulates moderately resumed passport services.	from travel restrictions and resumed issuing student visas in China.
			8/4 Suspended issuing/renewing passports to non-essential travelers in China.	
11/2022	11/11 Loosened requirements on pre-departure tests and shortened post-arrival quarantine.			
12/2022	12/28 Announced plans to cancel "Five-One Policy," post-departure quarantine, and health code.	12/28 Required travelers from China to present negative Covid tests within 48 hours of departure.		
01/2023	01/8 Canceled "Five-One Policy" and post-departure quarantine. Still required negative Covid tests within 48 hours before departure.		01/08 Resumed issuing/renewing passports to Chinese citizens for traveling abroad.	

Table 2. Descriptive Characteristics of Interviewees.

	N
Gender	
Women	10
Men	10
Degree[a]	
Bachelor's	7
Master's	6
Ph.D.	11
Field of study	
STEM	11
Non-STEM	9
Location at the time of interview	
China	6
US	13
Other	1
Return trip to China	
Yes	10
No	10
Reentering the US (of the returnees to China)	
Yes	5
No	5
Intention for permanent residence in the US	
Yes	11
No	9

[a]Five interviewees transitioned from bachelor's to master's degrees or from master's to Ph.D. degrees and were counted for both degrees.

sampling to recruit 20 interviewees distributed relatively evenly across gender, degree levels, and fields of study (see Table 2). Among the ten interviewees who successfully returned to China during the pandemic, five reentered the United States, and five stayed in China. The other ten interviewees remained in the United States.

To represent diverse experiences across socioeconomic backgrounds, we recruited self-funded Chinese students (primarily undergraduate and master's students) and students sponsored by scholarships and academic employment (mostly Ph.D. students). As our data show, while more resourced interviewees, especially self-funded students, were more likely to retrieve short-term mobility by returning to China and reentering the United States, others from less privileged backgrounds often chose to stay there. Nevertheless, we recognize that our sample cannot capture the heterogenous experiences of all Chinese overseas students. For example, we could not find interviewees facing the most extreme immobilizing circumstances, such as visa revocation, deportation, or near-complete depletion of financial means. Despite this limitation, our sample vividly describes how various student migrants turned available resources into mobility repertoires to achieve different mobilities.

We designed interview questions to invite participants to share their perceptions of and strategies for navigating changes in migration policies and public discourses. Both authors were Chinese overseas students registered at US universities at the time of interviews. With one co-author living in China and the other "stuck" in the United States during this research, we could empathize with both groups of Chinese overseas students, those who returned to China and those who stayed in the United States. Many interviewees expressed that sharing with us was cathartic and helped them reflect on the hardships they had undergone and the mobility for which they fought. With the interviewees' consent, we recorded and transcribed interviews in Mandarin Chinese via Tencent Meeting, a Chinese telecommunication platform equivalent to Zoom. After each interview, we wrote detailed memos to record emerging themes, the tenor of interviews, and our preliminary analyses.

In data analysis, we developed three levels of codes, including sources of immobility (policies or discourses from the United States and China), students' experiences (constraints and responses), and their specific feelings and actions. We first independently coded interview transcripts using inductive coding methods and then compared and discussed our coding. We found that interviewees tried to overcome immobility by returning to China or staying put in the United States. We recognized these two (im)mobility strategies as ways to flexibly achieve short- or long-term mobility and identified four mobility repertoires students mobilized to transcend immobility.

Unfavorable Migration Policies

Often hailed as a "success story" of globalization, international students, particularly Chinese overseas students, enjoyed high cross-border mobility before the COVID-19 pandemic (Gomes 2015). Following the pandemic's outbreak in early 2020, however, restrictive migration policies significantly curtailed Chinese students' transborder mobility. While facing difficulties returning to China, they also confronted the challenges of staying in the United States, due to rising xenophobic and racist undercurrents. In this section, we investigate how Chinese overseas students perceived and experienced this policy-induced dilemma as immobility.

Five-One Policy

The COVID-19 epidemic first broke out in China in late December 2019, but after the coronavirus cases began to spread on a global scale, the Chinese government took aggressive measures to restrict international travel in and out of China. From March 26, 2020, to January 8, 2023, the Civil Aviation Administration of China (CAAC) restricted each domestic airline to only one weekly outbound flight to any given country and each international airline to one weekly inbound flight (see Table 1). Known as the "Five-One Policy," China's flight restrictions cut international flights into China in 2021 to merely 2.2% of the pre-pandemic level (Reuters 2021).

The "Five-One Policy" also led to frequent flight cancellations and shifting entry requirements, seriously impeding Chinese overseas students' return mobility. Most interviewees who managed to return to China in 2020 and 2021 paid two to five times the regular price and took multiple connecting flights while constantly worrying about the risks of exposure to COVID-19 during the long journey. Unable to afford the high return costs, other interviewees never attempted to travel back to China. China's drastic flight restrictions also forced some Chinese students to remain in the United States after their student visas expired.

Beyond the financial and logistical hurdles to returning, what profoundly frustrated Chinese overseas students was their sense of being deprived of the fundamental right to return to their home country. Reflecting on the extreme uncertainties, stress, and hefty costs associated with returning, Zihuan, a doctoral student, remarked: "These policies effectively revoked and undermined my right and freedom to return home." Another doctoral student, Shirley, could not return to China while feeling anxious about the rising anti-Asian violence in the United States. She shared, "overseas students face very difficult situations abroad, and I feel abandoned [by China]."

Although the Chinese government tried to ease these difficulties by organizing charter flights in 2020 (Chinese Embassy in the US 2020*a*), most Chinese overseas students did not qualify for a ticket. According to reports, these chartered flights were only available for 7,000 underage students and those with expiring or expired immigration status (Chinese Embassy in the US 2020*a*). Only one student among our interviewees boarded a charter flight and described the arbitrary and half-baked repatriation arrangements. Chad, who was graduating in June 2020, received the Chinese embassy's short notice of a chartered flight only two days before the planned departure. He recalled, "it was the busiest week for my thesis defense. At first, I declined the ticket because it was just too hectic. But on second thought, I feared I'd never be able to return, so I called back and bought the expensive return ticket at $5000."

Furthermore, between October 2020 and November 2022, the Chinese government mandated that returnees self-quarantine in the port of departure seven days before their China-bound flight (see Table 1). Before boarding the plane, they also needed to provide valid negative results for COVID nucleic acid and serum antibody tests which were taken within 48 hours. Sandra, a doctoral student in San Diego, had to self-quarantine in a San Francisco hotel and obtain two COVID tests from different testing centers. Facing the complicated logistical arrangements, she changed her hotels and flights multiple times and suffered from insomnia and anxiety. These mandatory pre-departure requirements exacerbated returning students' financial and health risks and deterred many students from attempting to return.

US Visa Restrictions

In addition to barriers to returning to China, US travel and visa policies also elevated uncertainties regarding reentering and staying in the United States and heightened

Chinese overseas students' immobility. In February 2020, the United States limited the entry of foreign nationals physically present in China within the previous 14 days and suspended visa issuance in China (see Table 1). As a result, some Chinese students had to take sinuous and costly journeys to reenter the United States after a temporary return to China. For example, after finishing an internship in China, Patricia had to first go to Singapore and stay there for two weeks before reentering the United States. But facing the financial and logistical pressure of securing a 14-day stay in a transit country, interviewees like Jack and Christy remained in China and took online courses until degree completion. Other interviewees like Shiwei chose to stay put in the United States for fear that they would be unable to reenter and finish their studies.

Chinese overseas students' immobility further worsened in the political crossfire amid Sino-US tensions. In 2018, the Trump administration began limiting visas for Chinese students in STEM disciplines while investigating their so-called "espionage activities" (Burke 2021). Such measures escalated during the pandemic. In May 2020, the Trump administration issued an executive order (#10043) to deny and cancel student visas for anyone with alleged ties to China's military (White House 2020). The US State Department later implemented this executive order by suddenly revoking the visas of more than 1,000 Chinese students categorized as "high risk." This large-scale visa revocation signaled to Chinese overseas students both the US government's discriminatory attitudes and their precarious legal status.

After witnessing a Chinese friend be denied a US visa following their temporary return to China, Junyi, a doctoral student in computer science, feared that he might also fall victim to this policy. Thus, he made the difficult decision not to visit China until graduation. He commented, "Flight tickets and quarantine are extremely expensive, but more than anything else, the 10043 [order] made it hard to return. Such US policies imposed the biggest barrier to Chinese students." The increasingly antagonistic visa policy, plus the dire prospect of getting another visa, sent shock waves to those not yet impacted by the visa revocation. For example, interviewees in non-STEM fields also feared being uprooted in the United States. Ivy, a doctoral student in Asian Studies, remarked, "I used to believe I could pursue opportunities anywhere without limitations. But after witnessing these unfathomable visa policy changes and worsening US–China relations, I'm very worried about the social environment [in the United States]."

Although the Biden administration relaxed visa policies toward Chinese students in May 2021 (see Table 1), interviewees expected many restrictions to remain in place, due to the continuous geopolitical rupture between the world's two biggest economies. As Qiaoyu, a doctoral student in pharmaceutical engineering, put it, "regardless of the pandemic, diplomatic conflicts and visa restrictions will continue, and so will our insecurity." While the high return costs prohibited many Chinese students from returning to China, lingering visa uncertainties and deteriorating US–China relations also made them fear that they might be unable to reenter the United States to finish their studies if they returned.

In addition, several interviewees shared that the two governments' antagonism "worsened the hostility toward Chinese students." Qiaoyu worried such policies would make the American public more biased against Chinese migrants. He added, "Together with the news coverage [of anti-Asian hatred], I feel unwelcome and unsafe." Similar concerns from other interviewees reveal that unwelcoming discursive environments intensified Chinese students' vulnerability and immobility, which we discuss below.

Unwelcoming Public Discourses

Due to their transnational credentials and potential to catalyze China's economic boom, Chinese overseas students have long enjoyed the high status of "educated returnees" (*haigui*, or colloquially "sea turtles") in Chinese discourses (Liu 2022a). Similarly, in the United States, Chinese students had served as a conceptual hinge for the celebratory, albeit discriminatory, imaginary of the Asian "model minority" (Hsu 2009). These relatively positive public narratives, however, were overturned during the pandemic. This section delves into how hostile discourses in China and the United States pushed student migrants further into immobility.

"Virus-Spreaders From Abroad"

In the pandemic's early stage, Chinese public discourses initially portrayed overseas students as responsible, enthusiastic patriots who donated masks and medical equipment to their homeland (Jiang et al. 2020). Along with the "Five-One Policy," however, Chinese public discourses took a U-turn. They became increasingly concerned with a potential new wave of infections brought in by returned migrants. Public hostilities against a handful of student returnees who failed to comply with quarantine requirements sowed the seeds for the generalized stigmatization of all returned students as ungrateful, spoiled, and even contaminated (Jiang et al. 2020). Returned students were vilified in popular sayings, such as "you are absent from developing the homeland; yet, you are best at spreading the virus from thousands of miles away" (People's Daily 2020). The stereotyping of overseas students as wealthy and selfish intensified these negative discourses, irrespective of student migrants' diverse socioeconomic backgrounds (Ma 2020). Shirley expressed disappointment with the negative portrayals of overseas students on Chinese social media: "I feel sad because we are already rootless overseas, and now we are rejected by our own people."

The Chinese state's calculated use of nationalist narratives also contributed to student migrants' discursive predicaments. The government characterized Chinese people's collective suffering and endurance under strict lockdowns as necessary compromises for national victory in times of great disaster (Jiang et al. 2020). This heavy emphasis on the shared feelings of perseverance inadvertently depicted overseas students as absent opportunists who would only return to reap benefits from

other citizens' sacrifices. For instance, Ivy and other Chinese students coordinated mask donations from the United States to China in January 2020 but were later disparaged as "virus-spreaders from afar" on social media. She recalled, "I felt hurt and frustrated. I joked with my parents that in order not to let the Chinese people down, I'd never return."

Chinese official rhetoric further raised discursive barriers to Chinese students' return by portraying staying abroad as a patriotic act (Chinese Embassy in the US 2020*b*). China allegedly gave out 500,000 health kits to overseas students across the globe and characterized the move as "the mother's care and concern for traveling children thousands of miles away" (Chinese Embassy in the US 2020*b*). Such rhetoric depicted overseas students as vulnerable subjects needily nourished by a generous, loving motherland. However, each health kit also contained a letter recommending that students "consider cautiously" their return plans to avoid infection during long-haul travel. Reflecting on the Chinese state's implicit discouragement of students' return, Jack, a master's student, commented, "we all get the message: when we are in danger abroad, we are not welcomed to return." Yet, negative Chinese rhetoric was not the only discursive hurdle confronting Chinese students. Studying in the United States, they struggled simultaneously with hostile nativist discourses that threatened their stay.

"China Virus"

As the COVID-19 pandemic accentuated a sense of insecurity among the American public, tensing US–China relations catalyzed social hostilities toward the Chinese and Asians in general. Since the pandemic's beginning, former President Trump repeatedly called COVID-19 the "Chinese virus" and "Kung Flu" and adamantly stated that "it [coronavirus] came from China" (Rogers, Jakes, and Swanson 2020). In this hateful atmosphere, the centuries-old anti-Asian hatred in the United States, exemplified by Sinophobic narratives of Yellow Peril and the Chinese Exclusion Act (Hsu 2009), escalated into a series of verbal and physical assaults against the Chinese and Asian Americans (Ruiz, Edwards, and Lopez 2021).

In March 2021, a shooting spree in Atlanta, Georgia, killed eight people, six of whom were Asian women (Cheng 2021). In November 2021, a Chinese master's student was gunned down in Chicago, Illinois (Struett and Kenney 2021). After learning that the victim was her friend's friend, Shiwei shared, "I was heartbroken and felt an alter-ego died." The process of othering during the pandemic also deepened Chinese students' sense of vulnerability. Ted, an undergraduate student, shared a lesson he had learned during the pandemic: "An ethnic Chinese person [in the United States] can never raise their head in my lifetime, and we're always marginalized."

Meanwhile, since March 2020, Asian minority groups have also organized such public campaigns as "Stop AAPI Hate" and "#IAMNOTAVIRUS" to combat

anti-Asian racism (Stop AAPI Hate Coalition 2020). Feeling unsafe amid the rampant and targeted violence, many Chinese students joined anti-racism activism online and offline. For example, Anthony, an undergraduate student in economics, joined a protest for the first time in his life and rallied against anti-Asian hate. "While some people drove by and honked to show support, others gave me the finger," he shared. "Despite the mixed responses, I felt I was contributing a tiny bit to augment the campaign's influence."

From Chinese students' everyday concerns and activism against racist hatred and violence, we can glimpse the hostile terrain they and other Asian people had to navigate in the United States. While the home country's nationalist narratives sparked unfavorable public discourses that discouraged students' return, deeply rooted anti-Asian racism and rising hostilities in the host country exacerbated their immobility. Dehumanized as the contagious virus in China and the United States, Chinese students felt immobile on both ends of their migratory trajectory.

Repertoires for Short-Term Mobility

Despite the pandemic-induced immobility, Chinese overseas students were not powerless actors who quietly endured the policy restrictions and unfavorable discourses. Quite the contrary, they repurposed a variety of resources, expertise, technologies, and infrastructures to retrieve short- and long-term mobilities by returning to China or staying put in the United States. This section illustrates how Chinese student migrants deployed online crowdsourcing tools and virtual intermediaries as mobility repertoires to navigate China's travel restrictions and carve out return mobility.

Online Crowdsourcing

Under the "Five-One" Policy, China imposed rigid return restrictions: flight reductions, pre-departure COVID tests and self-quarantine, and post-arrival quarantine. Yet, it was not the prohibitive return policies per se but rather their hasty and ambiguous nature that caused confusion and a deep sense of helplessness among overseas students seeking to return home. As Sandra described, "We had no idea whether we could get viable tickets, where and how to complete two [pre-departure COVID] tests, or if the tests would pass [the Chinese embassy's screening] before boarding —all the details were vague and based on half-baked policies."

To navigate the opaque, burdensome return procedures, Chinese student migrants leveraged online social media as critical mobility repertoires to crowdsource knowledge and accomplish short-term mobility. While previous research focuses on how digital media mediate transnational connections *within* migrants' social networks, such as families and friends (Sun and Yu 2022), this article expands the empirical horizon of digital migration studies by examining social media-enabled information sharing *beyond* migrants' circles of acquaintances. In particular, two social media—

Beimei Piaodi ("North American Ticket Tips," or BP hereafter) and *Xiaohongshu* ("Little Red Book," or LRB hereafter)—played pivotal roles in gathering grassroots data and disseminating expert advice tailored to Chinese migrants abroad who struggled to return.

Originally created on Weibo, the Chinese social media equivalent of Twitter, BP specialized in posting and synthesizing China's latest travel policies and providing in-house analysis of possible return solutions. More importantly, BP encouraged its followers to share their recent return experiences and relied on the prodigious amount of user-generated information to add up-to-the-minute, real-world perspectives to its professional tips on returning. Aspiring returnees also turned BP's comment board into a communal space for meeting fellow travelers and forming various chat groups on WeChat, a Chinese social media and messaging application, to learn and share return strategies in a bottom-up manner. Christy, a master's student who joined a chat group of return passengers, commented, "The group became my major source of information. In comparison, the consulate's official announcements were only auxiliary!"

A more revealing example of BP as a crucial mobility repertoire was the grassroots "discovery" of a hidden pattern that since July 2020, Chinese airlines had taken turns arbitrarily calling off return flights from North America beyond the publicly circulated "Five-One" policy and only informed passengers about these sudden cancellations a day in advance. BP followers called these mysterious flight cancellations the "periodic cancellation" (*guilüxing quxiao*). Based on collective observation and analyses, BP followers designed and circulated a cancellation prediction tool for public use. Relying on this tool, Patricia, a master's student, managed to avoid flights forecast to be "periodically canceled" and eventually boarded a homebound flight. As Chinese overseas students collaborated in online information research and sharing, they strengthened their mental and logistical preparedness to strenuously counter immobility through return migration.

Chinese overseas students also generated and exchanged information regarding return strategies on the algorithm-based V-log application LRB. Unlike BP, which specializes in disseminating return information, LRB primarily hosts people who create content to share lifestyle trends. However, once grassroots actors started to post, view, and share tips and experiences of returning to China, this shared knowledge became the data source for training the LRB algorithms to recommend relevant information to overseas students proactively. For example, in accordance with China's return requirements, Patricia picked a COVID testing clinic in Los Angeles recommended by LRB. But the day before her flight departure, the test results still had not come through. As she was anxiously investigating the issue, LRB accurately recommended the contact information of a Chinese worker at the clinic, who then instructed her to seek help from customer service. This critical information sent by LRB effectively helped her get in time the Chinese consulate's final approval of her return to China.

Using LRB as a mobility repertoire, successful and aspiring returnees quickly established a knowledge community around the common goal of making return

possible, despite China's convoluted and capricious policies. Many interviewees described information-sharing on LRB as especially helpful for revealing unwritten yet crucial return conditions. For instance, Christy told us that to meet the requirements of pre-departure COVID testing, it was not enough just to follow official instructions. Instead, based on detailed guidance posted on LRB, she learned to photograph herself displaying the biographical page of her passport while having blood drawn for the test. According to other returnees' posts on LRB, such visual evidence would facilitate the Chinese consulate's verification of test results and eventually lead to a smoother return. Christy said, "Only by building onto the shared wisdom and detailed guidance [from LRB] could I successfully complete the super-complicated [return] requirements."

Social media are not mobility repertoires per se. Yet, by actively crowdsourcing online knowledge, aspiring returnees, including overseas students, generated a wealth of data for complementing BP's professional return advice and for training LRB's algorithms, which repurposed these platforms to meet their information needs and achieve their mobility goals. In other words, because users like overseas students had created conditions for developing informational and algorithmic mobility repertoires, they effectively transformed BP and LRB into vital tools to build an epistemic community beyond their immediate social circles and solve their immobility conundrum.

Virtual Intermediary

To achieve return mobility, Chinese overseas students also utilized WeChat to establish virtual mutual aid groups and build solidarity among aspiring returnees. Known as "China's super-app," WeChat's myriad social media functions and near-universal usership among Chinese citizens and diasporas made it an irreplaceable node for overseas students to promptly share useful information and provide much-needed emotional support in their arduous journey back home (Sun and Yu 2022).

Chinese overseas students frequently shared China's return policies on WeChat. They posted pictures and videos throughout their return trips on WeChat Moments (*pengyouquan*, or "Friends' Circle"), a social-networking function akin to Facebook. Contents on WeChat Moments are only viewable to the user's choice of friends and may be "liked" by others, creating strong senses of intimacy and bonding. Through this close-knit, everyday information-sharing, even student migrants who decided to temporarily stay in place kept abreast of the latest return policies and first-hand travel experiences.

Shiwei was among several interviewees who had not conducted prior research and decided to return to China only after the United States lifted the 14-day travel ban in April 2021 (see Table 1). She contacted her friends on WeChat, gathered information on flight routes and testing requirements, and secured tickets in just two days. Shiwei's case shows that overseas students' collective struggles and experiences

culminated in a mobility repertoire that their fellow student migrants could easily tap into without reinventing the wheel each time.

Chinese overseas students with more financial resources also used WeChat to seek professional brokerage to purchase flight tickets and arrange travel details. Whereas the existing literature on migration infrastructure and the migration industry focuses on how these intermediary brokers get migrants *out of* sending countries (Hernández-Léon 2012; Wang 2022; Xiang and Lindquist 2014), few studies have paid attention to their role in facilitating migrants' *return to* home countries. Our empirical data show that China's stringent travel policies and volatile return flights bred an enormous for-profit industry ("*piaodai*," or ticket agents) to mediate the return migration of Chinese overseas. Due to lockdown measures, this return industry operated entirely online via WeChat. Interviewees indicated that most ticket agents were based in China and unregistered with any government. Operating in a legal grey zone, this ad hoc return industry often secured and hoarded scant return flight tickets through semi-legal means and charged exorbitant fees to desperate returnees. These clandestine activities resembled the irregular operations adopted by the traditional migration industry (Hernández-Léon 2012).

For example, Minqi, an undergraduate student, initially tried to buy return tickets from the official airline websites four times, but all the bookings got canceled. Frustrated with established travel agencies, Minqi obtained the WeChat contact information of a ticket agent. She felt she had no choice but to turn to these unregulated businesses as the only source of "stable but more expensive flight tickets." Overseas students like Minqi used WeChat Pay, a mobile payment service, to complete online transactions and directly transfer money to ticket agents. With ticket agents' help, Minqi bought flight tickets for 50,000 yuan (approximately 7,752 USD) and arrived in China after two connecting flights. In this case, WeChat constituted a significant mobility repertoire to connect overseas students with the return industry and generated a transborder virtual space to mediate return mobility.

Yet this WeChat-based return industry was highly opportunistic and infamous for scam operations. Jack, a master's student, carefully selected a ticket agent who had helped several friends. After transferring 5,000 yuan (approximately 775 USD) as a retainer via WeChat Pay, he never heard back. He remarked, "I realized later that [this ticket agent] scammed other students for even more money… The fees were outrageous, but it was the only viable way to get a ticket." Despite this loss, Jack had no alternative but to continue the risky path to work with other agents and finally bought a flight ticket at more than 30,000 yuan (approximately 4,651 USD), or five times the pre-pandemic price. Hence, when deploying a virtual intermediary as an indispensable mobility repertoire, student returnees also became vulnerable to fraud and opportunistic actors who caused financial losses and emotional strain. Still, they cautiously weighed mobility opportunities against the high risks and costs of the return industry.

In short, this section illuminates that overseas Chinese students used social media to disseminate knowledge about return strategies, build virtual communities,

leverage collective wisdom, and connect with virtual intermediaries. In this sense, students retooled digital media into dynamic repertoires to achieve short-term mobility. Returning to China, however, was not accessible to all students hoping to break away from immobility. Economic resources and career plans conditioned many students' ability to risk exhausting money, time, and emotions to return home. In the following section, we closely examine how other students negotiated their continuous stay in the United States in pursuit of long-term mobility.

Repertoires for Long-Term Mobility

Although return migration to China revitalized mobility in the short run, these trips were expensive. Returnees could face more difficulty reentering the United States in the future, due to their missed opportunities for post-study employment in the host society. Hence, many Chinese students chose to remain in the United States to avoid the extremely high return costs while working toward a future transition into the US labor market. Although these stayers might seem "displaced in place" (Lubkemann 2008), their temporary immobility was intended to pave the way for greater long-term mobility. This section highlights two mobility repertoires that student stayers deployed to translate their temporary immobility into mobility in the long run: first, making temporal adaptations in their professional plans and everyday life and, second, using universities as an institutional cushion. Following Mata-Codesal (2015), we contend that staying put is not static or passive, but rather a calculated process involving complex, forward-looking life strategies and careful management of various modes of (im)mobility.

Temporal Adaptation

In our sample of 20 interviewees, 11 were pursuing degrees in STEM fields, seven of whom chose to stay in the United States. For these stayers, immobility was less of an emergency than a long-standing lived experience. In particular, interviewees who were Ph.D. students in STEM disciplines, in their own words, had long been "trapped in the United States" and endured immobility. Unlike non-STEM-majored international students who usually obtain F-1 student visas valid for the entire duration of their academic programs, STEM doctoral students have since 2018 only received one-year US visas, irrespective of the five or six years required for their training (Burke 2021). Although they could still legally study in the United States with expired visas, the limited visa validity and the heightened difficulties and costs of visa renewal had restricted STEM doctoral students from traveling outside the country and shaped their immobility well before the COVID-19 pandemic.

After years of immobile experience, many interviewees had developed the cognitive and practical skills to perceive their immobility as a temporary disruption in their broader scheme of pursuing upward social mobility and employment in the United States. This temporal adaptation can take both directions: adapting to a longer

time frame to achieve mobility or accelerating the immigration process by flexibly adjusting their plans.

Many STEM-majored doctoral students adopted a prolonged period of 6–10 years to slowly, albeit laboriously, progress toward the projected mobility. Like Yasmine, many students originally planned return trips to China after three or four consecutive years of working in labs. After the pandemic hit, however, unfavorable Chinese and US policies and discourses forced Yasmine to give up her meager hope for return mobility altogether. She had to stay in the United States for the full six years of doctoral training. However, she perceived this lengthy immobility as a necessary step toward her future integration into US society. At the time of her interview, Yasmine was about to graduate and embark on a new chapter as a postdoctoral researcher in the United States. Reflecting on her immobility and anticipated mobility, she said, "Trump made it more difficult for Chinese scientists [to stay and immigrate], but I was mentally prepared for this immobility. I just have to wait a few more years to visit China again." In other words, Chinese student migrants' pre-pandemic immobile experiences honed their temporal adaptation, as they made mental preparations to reimagine immobility as an interim, transitional phase that would eventually lead to long-term legal status in the United States.

Such temporal rescaling of mobility gave hope to student stayers and motivated them to endure the present immobility as the necessary sacrifice for long-term mobility. Like Filipino domestic workers who adopted "stepwise" migration plans (Paul 2011), interviewees, especially those lacking the financial resources to embark on short-term return journeys, envisaged an indirect path toward mobility and incorporated their immobility as part of the multistage process of immigration. By rethinking mobility through a temporal lens (Robertson 2021), we find that rather than an acquiescent or pessimistic reaction, waiting in immobility could also be student migrants' calculated strategy oriented toward a mobile future (Ortiga and Macabasag 2021; Rodriguez-Pena 2022).

Second, other interviewees accelerated their temporal scheme for mobility by adjusting their professional goals. For example, concerned about Chinese scientists' prospects in the United States following a series of espionage allegations (Burke 2021), doctoral student Zihuan changed his original plans of working as an academic scientist with an immigrant O-1A visa. Instead, he took advantage of the Optional Practical Training (OPT) program to take "a more robust path." He applied for industry jobs that would sponsor an H-1B visa and eventually permanent residency. Compared to the academic path, the OPT and H-1B route could expedite his immigration trajectory and shorten his immobility. Although students like Zihuan had to stay in the United States and remained temporarily immobile, their proactive adaptation of career plans opened new mobility opportunities within a shorter time frame. For interviewees, staying was not a default, passive continuation of previous life and study (Mata-Codesal 2015). Instead, it was a deliberate strategy of working through the provisionary immobility to set the stage for future mobility, essentially blurring the line between mobility and immobility (Paul 2011).

In short, Chinese overseas students adroitly deployed temporal adaptation as a repertoire to mitigate immobility and readjusted the time frame of mobility transitions. Despite overseas students' perseverance, temporal adaptation alone was not sufficient to get them through the difficulties of staying in the United States. In addition, interviewees capitalized on universities for institutional cushioning against immobilizing quandaries, to which we now turn.

Institutional Cushioning

Since the commercialization of Western universities in the second half of the 20th century, international students have become crucial "customers" for which these educational institutions eagerly compete in an increasingly crowded global market (Robertson 2021). Due to their vested interest, universities tend to protect international students from hostile national policies (Brooks and Waters 2011). During the COVID-19 pandemic, this peculiar interdependence between universities and international students provided a vital cushion for Chinese students to shield themselves from immobility. Interviewees who stayed in the United States during the pandemic utilized two sets of university resources—administrative support and university facilities—to cope with the otherwise-precarious stay and, ultimately, to shift toward increased mobility through future integration in the United States or safe return to China.

First, many interviewees reconceived university administration and faculty members as a source of institutional and emotional support. For instance, in July 2020, the US government announced that it would revoke student visas and initiate removal procedures if international students took a full online course load in the Fall 2020 semester (Jordan, Kanno-Youngs, and Levin 2020). Facing the potential deprivation of legal status and even deportation, many Chinese students like Yasmine proactively contacted the university administration and faculty supervisors for their continual support. In response, Yasmine's advisor committed to her that they would open an in-person class to meet the policy requirement and protect international students from this exclusionary policy.

In another instance, after the tragic shooting of Asian women in Atlanta in 2021 (Cheng 2021), Chinese overseas students like Ivy and her friends rallied for university resources to condemn the violence and support Asian students. Ivy said, "As doctoral students in Asian Studies, we felt we must take action. We wrote and circulated a petition letter and got signatures. We demanded the university to expand activities and courses to raise awareness of Asian cultures, rights, and power." Their actions drew more faculty and staff support from the university. Ivy shared that one senior professor caringly responded to their letter by organizing a town hall meeting for Chinese and other Asian students and offering emotional support to process the ongoing societal turbulence. Although universities were first and foremost educational institutions, Chinese student migrants utilized administrative and faculty support as a buffer to lessen the impacts of immobilizing US policies and discourses. These strategies transformed their stay into an active process of planning for and

negotiating with the host society's sociopolitical conditions and widened their access to institutional assistance.

Second, Chinese student migrants utilized university facilities for physical security. For example, in reaction to the surging anti-Asian violence during the pandemic, Junyi took advantage of "safe ride," an after-hour university transportation service, to protect his safety when working in the lab until late at night. Junyi said, "Before the pandemic, I used to walk home alone after work. But during the pandemic, I'd always call the university's public safety office to arrange a pickup to get home." To create safer living conditions against Sinophobic hostilities in the United States, student stayers also actively tapped into university housing for greater safety and petitioned for exceptional arrangements tailored to their needs. According to Ivy, several Chinese students who were going to graduate in June 2020 could not afford or secure return tickets to China but were asked to vacate their university-owned apartments immediately. Facing logistical and financial difficulties in finding alternative, safe housing, these students bargained with university officials and managed to extend their housing contracts for another year. By effectively drawing on university resources, student migrants negotiated a more secure environment to surpass immobility.

To summarize, although some Chinese students stayed in the United States, they did not passively succumb to immobility. Instead, they deployed mobility repertoires by adapting their temporal scale for future integration and seeking institutional cushioning from universities. By rearranging plans of an immobile present for a mobile future, these students tactfully retooled a constellation of digital, cognitive, and institutional resources for mobility. They restrategized and transformed immobility into active staying that laid the foundation for their mobility in the long term.

Conclusion

This article yields two findings based on a case study of Chinese students in the United States during the COVID-19 pandemic. First, we argue that hostile state policies and public discourses in both China and the United States rendered student migrants immobile: they had difficulties returning to their home country and staying in the host country. This examination dispels the myth of international students as always hypermobile (c.f., Gomes 2015) and unravels their marginality and vulnerability configured by long-standing sociopolitical forces, such as racism, xenophobia, and geopolitical conflicts (Hsu 2009; Ma 2020).

This finding pushes ISM studies beyond the prevailing "mobilities paradigm" (Urry 2000) and refocuses on structural constraints that shape student *im*mobility (Wang 2022), especially the oft-neglected role of homeland state policies (Liu 2022a). ISM policies, as we show, are not only characterized by neoliberalism and de-regulation (Brooks and Waters 2011; Robertson 2021) but can also exert far-reaching immobilizing impacts on international students and guard nation-states' membership and sovereignty boundaries. These repercussions might extend well beyond the COVID-19 pandemic and profoundly reshape the ISM landscape. To

highlight ISM in migration studies, this article invites further insights into the imbrication of international students in broader political changes and migration patterns in the *longue durée* (Castles et al. 2014).

Second, we develop the concept of "mobility repertoires" to account for student migrants' agential power in navigating unfavorable (im)mobility shifts and carving out new mobility tactics by mobilizing a plethora of resources, techniques, instruments, and infrastructures. Chinese students in the United States dealt with pandemic-induced immobility through four sets of mobility repertoires: online crowdsourcing, virtual intermediary, temporal adaptation, and institutional cushioning. While overseas students deployed the first two mobility repertoires to retrieve short-term mobility by returning to China, the latter two mobility repertoires served to transform immobility into active staying aimed at long-term mobility and integration in the United States. Engaging with a temporal retheorization of international migration (Robertson 2021), we elucidate how student migrants' adept deployment of mobility repertoires contributes to their elastic temporal schemes of mobilities.

This concept of "mobility repertoires" adds an action-centered perspective to the "aspiration-capability" framework in immobility studies (Carling 2002; Carling and Schewel 2018; de Haas 2021; Schewel 2020). Building on the burgeoning scholarship on migration infrastructure (Wang 2022; Xiang and Lindquist 2014), we show that suppressing migratory aspirations was but one of many coping strategies for mobility shifts (c.f., Carling and Schewel 2018, 958). As agential actors, people can mobilize resources at their disposal and take advantage of diverse repertoires in multiple directions along the mobility–immobility continuum. For instance, Chinese overseas students, especially those with more economic resources, cultivated stronger aspirations for short-term return migration and reinforced their return capabilities via the creative use of technologies such as social media and virtual intermediaries. Other students with more limited financial capacities or fearing adverse policies on legal status were more likely to resort to cognitive adjustment. They transformed temporary immobility into the preparation for longer-term mobility and drew on institutional resources to secure their stay. To shift attention away from mobility *categories* and toward mobility *transitions* (Rodriguez-Pena 2022), this article provides a dynamic perspective on how migrants' diverse backgrounds and social ties prepared them to differently activate mobility repertoires.

For Chinese students struck by immobility in the United States, neither returning to their home country nor staying in the host society was a natural, unquestionable process. Rather, their efforts to reclaim mobility hinged upon the agential deployment of mobility repertoires. Chinese overseas students, however, were not an exclusive case where people deliberately repurposed otherwise-quotidian resources into repertoires to transcend structural (im)mobility conditions. Given the lasting effects of social media, virtual platforms, and educational institutions in modern society (Sun and Yu 2022), these mobility repertoires are likely to continue shaping migrants' post-pandemic mobilities. This article joins and amplifies prior scholarship on how migrants capitalize on acquaintance networks (Paul 2011) and

broker agencies (Hernández-Léon 2012; Ortiga and Macabasag 2021) to counter curtailed migration capabilities. We also expand the theoretical scope of existing research on the roles of digital media (Sun and Yu 2022; Wang 2022), temporal rescaling (Robertson 2021), and collective values (Rodriguez-Pena 2022) in enabling or impeding mobility shifts. With the notion of "mobility repertoires" as a point of departure, this article encourages more grounded research into how structural conditions bring about (im)mobility transformations and, more importantly, social actors' repertoires and strategies for achieving new mobility solutions.

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