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Jiaqi M. LIU

Singapore Management University, jiaqiliu@smu.edu.sg

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From “Sea Turtles” to “Grassroots Ambassadors”: The Chinese Politics of Outbound Student Migration

Jiaqi M. Liu 

University of California San Diego

Abstract

International student migration/mobility (ISM) has long come under the spotlight in migration and education studies. Previous research has focused primarily on inbound students in Western host countries, with much less attention on sending countries' policies. Based on evidence from interviews, ethnography, and policy analysis in China, the world's largest source country of student migrants, I argue that outbound student migration can be integrated into the home country's broader diaspora politics to serve *economic*, *governmental*, and *geopolitical* policy objectives. These diverse, sometimes-clashing, interests are predicated upon China's domestic politics and global positioning. To establish a conceptual bridge between ISM and diaspora studies, I depart from the mobility paradigm's emphases on neoliberalism and de-regulation and, instead, foreground nation-states' changing, yet-unabating, interests in regulating and strategizing about overseas students. I find that following decades of prioritizing the *economic* and *governmental* impacts of student returnees (*haigui*, or colloquially “sea turtles”) in boosting the domestic economy and maintaining political stability, China now attaches growing importance to student migrants' *geopolitical* value as “grassroots ambassadors” (*minjian dashi*) in expanding China's global influence and enhancing its national image abroad. This geopolitics-

Corresponding Author:

Jiaqi M. Liu, Department of Sociology, University of California San Diego, 9500 Gilman Dr. MC#0533, La Jolla, CA 92093, USA.

Email: jil1202@ucsd.edu

focused national reorientation, however, may not be well received by student migrants themselves or fully implemented by street-level migration bureaucrats. By examining tensions between the central Chinese state, student migrants, and frontline local officials, this article sheds new light on ISM as a dynamic policy arena where state ambitions crosscut individual desires and national grand plans are confronted with flexible local improvisation.

Keywords

student migration, China, diaspora politics

Introduction

Global student migration is on the rise (Brooks and Waters 2011; Kell and Vogl 2012; King and Raghuram 2013). As of 2017, over 6 million tertiary students were studying outside their origin countries (UNESCO n.d.). International students exert enormous economic impacts, contributing \$45 billion to the US economy alone in 2018 (Institute of International Education n.d.). On the other side of the migratory channel, China has steadily established itself as the world's largest source country of student migrants¹ since 1998, when the earliest UNESCO data are available, with the global percentage of Chinese student migrants more than doubling from 7 percent in 1998 to 17 percent in 2017 (see Figure 1).

Given that China is the world's most populous country, it may not be surprising that China also has the largest number of overseas students. However, the mammoth size of the Chinese student population abroad is not a historical constant (Ma 2020). In 1978, when China began promoting large-scale outbound student migration (OSM), it had only 860 overseas students (see Figure 2). In less than four decades, this number ballooned by 535 times to 460,000 in 2014. Scholars attribute this dramatic growth to a constellation of domestic factors, including the rising Chinese middle class and their conversion of economic capital into cultural capital (Xiang and Shen 2009), China's competitive domestic education system (Fong 2011), the Confucian pursuit of better education (Kell and Vogl 2012), the brokerage of commercial education agents (Lan 2019), and pull factors in destination countries (Brooks and Waters 2011; Robertson 2013).

Nonetheless, the existing literature on international student migration/mobility (ISM) pays scant attention to China's changing OSM policies.² Constrained by the

¹I use the terms "overseas students" and "student migrants" interchangeably. The Chinese official phraseology, however, only uses "overseas students" (*liuxuesheng*).

²There is a growing literature on China's increasingly welcoming policies toward *inbound* student migrants, especially those from countries along the so-called "Belt and Road" (Wen and Hu 2019). To clarify, this article's focus lies in state policies toward Chinese students who study abroad.

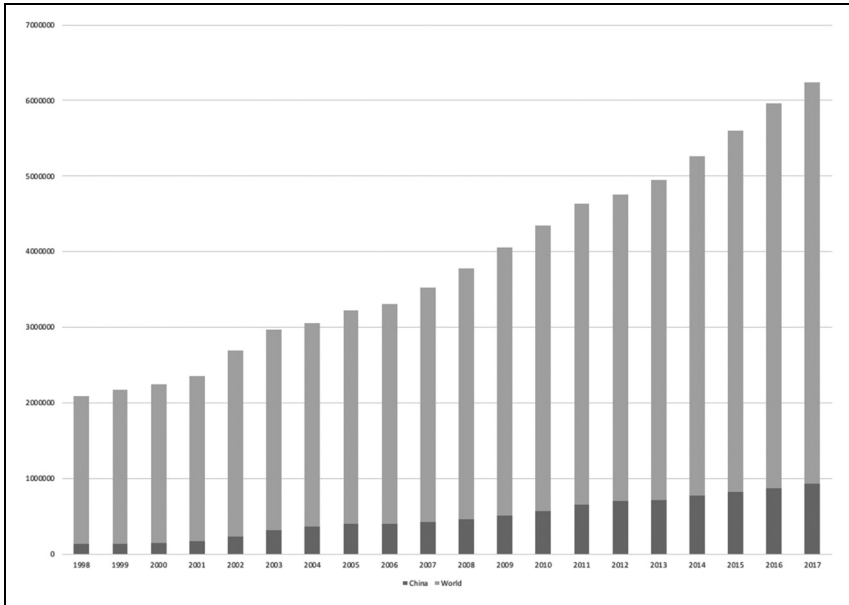


Figure 1. Chinese and world student migrant populations from 1998 to 2017. Source: UNESCO Institute for Statistics.

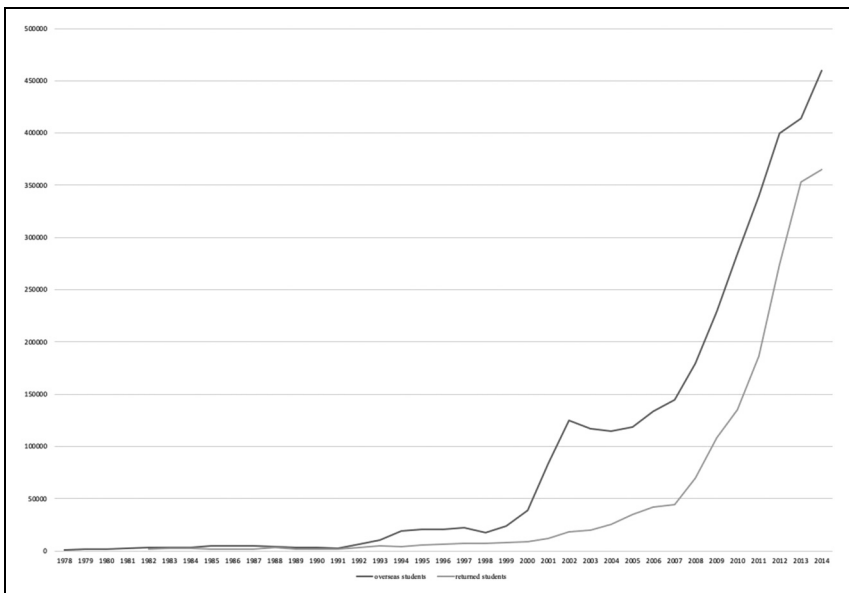


Figure 2. Number of Chinese student migrants and returnees from 1978 to 2014. Source: China Education Yearbook.

prevalent immigration bias in migration studies (Adamson and Tsourapas 2020), scholars tend to focus on *host* countries' international education and post-graduation employment policies regarding *inbound* student migrants, while casting less attention on *sending* countries (Gribble 2008). This article, by examining China, the world's largest origin country of student migrants, illuminates how home countries regulate and strategize about overseas students.

Utilizing three qualitative methods, including a historical policy review, an ethnography in state-organized summer camps for overseas students, and interviews with migration officials and student migrants, I propose two main arguments. First, I argue that the politics of Chinese OSM — which I define as the collectivity of the homeland state's policies, practices, and rhetorics toward overseas students — serves three policy objectives: economic, governmental, and geopolitical. These objectives, however, are not set in stone. Rather, their relative significance ebbs and flows, depending on the sending country's specific socioeconomic and political conditions. As I show, following decades of prioritizing the economic and governmental impacts of student returnees (*haigui*, or colloquially “sea turtles”) in boosting the domestic economy and maintaining political stability, the Chinese state now gives growing weight to student migrants' geopolitical value as “grassroots ambassadors” (*minjian dashi*) in expanding China's global influence and enhancing national image abroad. This geopolitical reorientation has become particularly salient under the Xi Jinping leadership, as China adopts more assertive soft power strategies in pursuit of global supremacy.

Drawing on ethnographic and interview data, my second argument suggests that the geopolitics-focused reorientation of China's OSM policy may not be fully implemented by migration officials at the local level or well received among student migrants. Whereas Chinese students faced surging espionage accusations across the world in recent years (Reuters 2017; Quan 2019; Fish 2020; Osaki 2020), I refrain from taking for granted the close political ties between the Chinese state and overseas students, as depicted in rhetorical flourish by the Western media and Chinese national strategies (France-Pressé 2005). Instead, I examine the on-the-ground disjuncture between the central Chinese state, frontline bureaucrats, and student migrants. Based on grounded empirical research, I shed new light on the OSM politics as a contentious field where state ambitions crosscut individual desires and where national grand plans are confronted with flexible local improvisation.

My tripartite model of OSM politics — economic, governmental, and geopolitical — strives to facilitate scholarly dialogue between ISM and diaspora studies. While the burgeoning mobility paradigm (King and Raghuram 2013; Findlay 2011) emphasizes neoliberalism's crucial role in promoting the transition from international education to labor immigration in destination countries (Riaño, Mol, and Raghuram 2018), this article pushes China to center stage and examines the homeland state's changing, yet-unabating, interests in regulating and positioning overseas students in both national policies and local implementation.

In the following sections, I map the ISM literature to identify a knowledge gap on sending countries' policies toward overseas students. To address this lacuna, I spell out my tripartite model of OSM through the lens of diaspora politics. After introducing my methodologies, I dive into a policy review and empirical analysis. I, first, probe China's changing interests in the national OSM policies and, then, examine the variegated responses and interests of local bureaucrats and student migrants. I conclude this article by calling for more research on ISM from sending countries' perspectives and for centering international students in studies of diaspora politics.

Mapping Student Migration

International student migration has long come under the spotlight in both education and migration studies (King and Raghuram 2013). Focusing on the increasingly neoliberal nature of international student mobilities (Findlay 2011; Riaño, Mol, and Raghuram 2018), the existing literature has identified four main actors driving the rise of ISM since the mid-twentieth century: students and their families (Waters 2005; Xiang and Shen 2009; Robertson 2013), Western universities (Brooks and Waters 2011; Kell and Vogl 2012; Riaño, Mol, and Raghuram 2018), receiving countries (Hawthorne 2010; Brooks and Waters 2011; Lan and Wu 2016), and the education-migration industry (Findlay 2011; Beech 2018; Baas 2019; Lan 2019; Tuxen and Robertson 2019).

The first factor that propels ISM is student migrants and their families. Across the developing world, ISM has become a child-centered strategy for aspiring middle- and upper-class families to accumulate and reproduce cultural and human capital through foreign educational credentials (Waters 2005). In globalized professional contexts, the prestige attached to Anglo-American and European universities makes Western education a distinctive class marker and an ideal means for student migrants to achieve elevated social capital (Xiang and Shen 2009; Robertson 2013, 18).

Second, the proliferation of ISM also results from the corporatization and commodification of Western universities (Kell and Vogl 2012, 7). Confronted with sharply diminishing state funding in neoliberal states, especially the United States and Britain, financially challenged "entrepreneurial universities" must attract fee-paying foreign students to gain an indispensable source of revenue, reduce reliance on the public purse, and remain financially solvent (Robertson 2013). The presence of large number of international students also boosts universities' images as multicultural and cosmopolitan, helping them stay competitive in a crowded educational market (Brooks and Waters 2011, 67). Nevertheless, despite its insightfulness in pointing out the neoliberalization of higher education (Riaño, Mol, and Raghuram 2018), this emphasis on neoliberalism may run the risk of overestimating the level of de-regulation worldwide and ignoring state strategies, particularly those of sending countries, in managing ISM.

Third, and partly due to a deeply entrenched immigration bias and Western-centrism in migration literatures (Adamson and Tsourapas 2020), most attention in ISM studies has focused on host countries in the developed world (King and Raghuram 2013; Riaño, Mol, and Raghuram 2018). Western states have been eager to facilitate student migrants' transition from education to labor migration, or what Robertson (2013) calls the "education-migration nexus." For instance, Liu-Farrer (2009) offers critical scrutiny of Japan's import of student "trainees" to fulfill domestic labor shortage, enabling its anti-immigration regime to avoid openly embracing foreign labor. Following a "two-step" approach (Hawthorne 2010), the emerging mobility paradigm perceives ISM as a *de facto* channel in neoliberal global labor flows, producing economic agents who can more easily integrate into destination societies (Riaño, Mol, and Raghuram 2018). In addition, receiving countries may also turn ISM into a political tool. For example, China grants Taiwanese students exceptional scholarships and privileged access to college admission to cultivate a pro-China attitude and promote Mainland China's unification with Taiwan (Lan and Wu 2016). By the same token, the European Union's (EU) Erasmus program plays a key political role in instilling a European identity and bolstering EU integration (King and Raghuram 2013).

Fourth, the diverse interests of student migrants and families, receiving countries, and Western universities must be brokered, creating the conditions for an education-migration industry (Baas 2019). Based on a classic "supply-demand" model, Findlay (2011) stresses the role of intermediaries, including education agents, recruiters, money lenders, and standardized test institutions, in mediating the flows of information, capital, and students *qua* consumers (Beech 2018). These seemingly facilitative brokers often perpetuate social inequalities by either endorsing neoliberal ethics such as self-responsibility and self-improvement (Lan 2019) or advising based on assumptions about their clients' class status (Tuxen and Robertson 2019).

These four actors jointly shape ISM as a simultaneously desirable, profitable, and exploitable migration flow. What is missing in the burgeoning ISM scholarship, however, are systematic accounts of sending states and their OSM policies (Gribble 2008). Except for studies of how home countries address "brain drain" by promoting overseas students' return migration (Xiang 2011; Zweig and Wang 2013), there is insufficient insight into student migrants' positioning in sending countries' overall diaspora politics (Del Sordi 2018). Although Robertson (2013) breaks ground by taking a holistic view of the "education-migration nexus," what she really means by "migration" is "immigration," as evidenced by her focus on post-graduation labor policies in *receiving* countries. Without sending countries' perspectives, we have only a partial picture of international students' in- and out-migration as a continuous transborder process. To transcend this limit, this article foregrounds the significant, yet underresearched, role of *sending* states and places OSM policies in the broader framework of diaspora politics.

Student Migration and Diaspora Politics

It may seem unlikely, at first glance, that OSM can be incorporated into diaspora politics. After all, there is a temporal difference between student migrants and diasporas. While the former entails a relatively temporary migratory status oriented toward a specific educational purpose, the latter denotes longer-term emigrants who maintain close socio-cultural and political bonds with the homeland (Gamlen 2019). However, student migrants are versatile figures who not only build ties with the broader destination society beyond the school context but also retain transborder connections with home communities (Xiang 2011; Zweig and Wang 2013).

Furthermore, following a constructivist turn in diaspora studies (Liu 2020), scholars have largely abandoned an essentialist depiction of diasporas as “bona fide actual entities” (Sheffer 2003, 245) and shifted the analytical focus toward the sociopolitical construction of diasporas for strategic goals (Liu 2020). Home countries may deliberately mold student migrants into the diaspora to tap into their economic, governmental, and geopolitical resources (Gamlen 2019). The social construction of diasporas, coupled with overseas students’ transborder ties with the homeland, establishes a conceptual bridge between ISM and diaspora studies, allowing for critical rethinking of ISM through the prism of diaspora politics in sending countries.

The literature on diaspora politics documents home countries’ growing engagement with emigrants and their descendants for a constellation of ethno-national, cultural, economic, and geopolitical objectives (FitzGerald 2008; Ho 2018; Gamlen 2019). In a perceptive overview, Adamson and Tsourapas (2020) establish a three-fold typology of nationalizing, developmental, and neoliberal sending states in the Global South. By adapting this framework to better account for the specificities of student migrants, I argue that from sending countries’ viewpoints, OSM policies can be integrated into the broader diaspora politics to serve three vital domestic and international aims — namely, economic, governmental, and geopolitical.

First, OSM can yield bountiful *economic* benefits for sending countries (Gribble 2008). Student migrants, most of whom are high skilled and resourceful, can make direct economic contributions through financial remittances from their post-graduation employment. More importantly, sending countries across the Global South, especially China and India, are keen to reverse the “brain drain” caused by the loss of tertiary talents (Xiang 2011; Zweig and Wang 2013) and actively promote “brain circulation” (Saxenian 2005) in the forms of technology transfer, entrepreneurial partnering, and return migration. For instance, Chinese and Indian entrepreneurs in Silicon Valley accelerated the development of IT industries in Beijing, Bangalore, and Hyderabad through close alliances with growth-driven local policymakers (Saxenian 2005).

Second, when home countries perceive overseas students as potential security threats, student migration policies may seek to produce *governmental* effects in maintaining domestic stability and regime hegemony. For centuries, China has periodically regarded outgoing migrants as foreign spies and challenges to the prevailing official

ideology (Ho 2018, 5). Similarly, Kazakhstan established the Bolashak program to sponsor overseas studies for the dual purposes of developing the economy and bolstering authoritarian stability (Del Sordi 2018). In these cases, non-democratic home countries are concerned about overseas students' foreign exposure and strive to repress students' potential anti-regime activities. Meanwhile, home states roll out favorable student return privileges to co-opt foreign-educated elites back into the bureaucracy and reproduce the political rule (Ding and Koslowski 2017).

Third, in contrast to the *economic* and *governmental* models' domestic focus, sending countries may also seek to strengthen *geopolitical* influence in destination countries through overseas students. In fact, prior to the neoliberal marketization of Western tertiary education, ISM was primarily a foreign policy tool and played geopolitical roles in the Cold War (Brooks and Waters 2011). The US and Australian governments, for example, launched the Fulbright Program and Colombo Plan, respectively, first to counter the Axis propaganda threat and then to extend their geopolitical influence through "educational aids" as "soft diplomacy" (Kell and Vogl 2012; Robertson 2013). Fast forward to the present day, East Asian, Central Asian, and Middle Eastern states incorporate overseas students into national strategies of "public diplomacy" (Ho 2018) to enhance home countries' national image abroad and conduct external propaganda campaigns at the grassroots level (Kell and Vogl 2012; Ding and Koslowski 2017; Del Sordi 2018).

These economic, governmental, and geopolitical models of OSM politics are not exhaustive or mutually exclusive, nor are they given equal weight in different sociopolitical contexts or across administrative levels. Instead, these diverse, sometimes-clashing, interests are predicated upon the homeland state's specific conditions of domestic politics and global positioning, resulting in their fluctuating importance within broader diaspora politics. By tracing OSM policies in the larger historical framework, we can unpack the changing, rather than dwindling (King and Raghuram 2013; Riaño, Mol, and Raghuram 2018), role of nation-states in reshaping ISM (Gamlen 2019; Adamson and Tsourapas 2020).

Moreover, building on FitzGerald's (2008) pluralist approach to diaspora politics, I delve into the interplay of various actors in the field of OSM politics, including the central state, street-level bureaucrats, and student migrants themselves. The central-local variation is embedded in any polity's administrative fragmentation, including that of China (Lieberthal 1992), where the policy objectives pursued by national grand plans may not resonate with street-level bureaucrats. As grassroots or local officials take charge of enforcing state policies on the ground, they may deviate from national strategies to improvise based on specific local conditions and interests.

I also attach great importance to overseas students' own perceptions and narratives through grounded empirical research. Following King and Raghuram (2013, 134), I perceive student migrants as "complex subjects who are much more than just students whose only function is life in higher education" and foreground the migration aspect of the Janus-faced figure of "student-migrants." As I demonstrate, like other migrants, student migrants carry with them an assemblage of social relations

across national borders. They have their own ideas, voices, and agendas and not only are subject to but may also challenge their home country's narratives (Ma 2020). By paying close attention to how the distinct goals of student migrants and the multi-level state converge and collide in their real-world encounters, I conceptualize OSM as a dynamic political arena where both macrohistorical changes and interactional conflicts abound.

Methods

This article draws from a case study of China, conducted in Wuse County³ in Summer 2019, as part of a broader project to investigate Chinese diaspora politics (Liu 2020, 2021). I selected Wuse County as my field site, due to its status as a prominent hometown of overseas Chinese (*qiaoxiang*) and a community of origin for a growing number of overseas students (Liu 2020). Wuse County is an administrative subdivision of Fengsheng Prefecture. Following interviews with the organizers of state-run, voluntary retreats for overseas students, I was invited by these migration officials to participate in three such events. These retreats included a trip to Fuzhou, organized by the Federation of Returned Overseas Chinese (FROC) of Fengsheng Prefecture, a trip to Nanchang and Mount Lu, organized by the Overseas Students and Families Association (OSFA) of Wuse County, and a trip within Fengsheng Prefecture, organized by the United Front Work Department (UFD) of Fengsheng Prefecture. In the end, I carried out over 100 hours of participant observation in these trips over July and August 2019. The summer trips provided an ideal lens to closely examine the quotidian operation of OSM policies, as well as the deep-running tensions between national grand plans, local bureaucratic improvisation, and student migrants' own desires.

Each trip lasted approximately 5 days and included 10 to 20 overseas student participants and one or two bureaucrat guides. Student participants were registered undergraduate or graduate students at European and North American universities. Most were spending the summer break in their natal or ancestral hometown and ranged in age from 19 to 31 years old. This age group is representative of the vast majority of student migrants from China (Ma 2020). All costs associated with the trips, including meals, entrance fees, transportation, and accommodations, were fully covered by organizing entities. Because my participant observation data are solely based on what I observed in public places and no minors were involved, I was not required by the agreement with my university's Institutional Review Board to obtain consent for this part of ethnographic data. In the presentation of data, I redacted any potentially identifying information of student participants and bureaucrat interviewees.

³To protect the confidentiality of bureaucrat interviewees and student respondents, Wuse County and Fengsheng Prefecture are pseudonyms.

Within a month after the trips, I conducted 15 in-person interviews with student participants in Wuse County. Some participants proactively approached me after learning about my research interest in international migration during our informal conversations throughout the trips. I recruited other student interviewees to diversify my sample in terms of gender, age, destination countries, and years of living abroad. I am of similar age as student participants and have a Western educational background, which helped me build rapport with student interviewees. All student participants that I approached gave consent for interviews. I also interviewed 12 bureaucrats who worked in Wuse County and Fengsheng Prefecture's diaspora apparatuses. Semi-structured interviews with both student participants and migration officials were held in Mandarin Chinese and lasted on average 30 minutes. In them, I probed how student participants and frontline bureaucrats made sense of the trips and, more broadly, China's OSM policies.

To situate this research in a longer arc of history, I also searched for and examined over 300 pages of China's published official materials on overseas students from the 1990s to the present, including laws and regulations, policy documents, and political speeches. Most materials were found online, while some statistics were retrieved from the library archive of University of California, San Diego.

Data analysis began in NVivo software with open coding by reading all textual materials, field notes, and transcripts. Following the abductive approach (Tavory and Timmermans 2014), I, then, conducted numerous rounds of thematical coding to engage iteratively between collected data and theoretical repertoires. Eventually, I identified three underlying logics behind China's shifting student migration policies — economic, governmental, and geopolitical — and traced their fluctuations in relative significance in different historical and ethnographic contexts.

Contextualizing Student Migration in Twentieth-Century China

Before diving into the contemporary Chinese politics of OSM, a brief historical overview will help contextualize the ups and downs of economic, governmental, and geopolitical interests in state strategies in the *longue durée*. In fact, prior to the twentieth century, China mostly received, rather than sent, large number of student migrants, due to its cultural hegemony in Confucianism and economic prowess in global trade (Cheng and Miao 2010). It was not until the late-nineteenth century, when China's imperial order was on the verge of collapse, that the wobbly Qing court sent students to Japan, Europe, and the United States (Zhang and Liu 2019). Many key revolutionary figures in the twentieth century, including Sun Yat-sen, Zhou Enlai, and Deng Xiaoping, were educated abroad (Miao 2010).

After the founding of the People's Republic of China (PRC) in 1949, China sent students to the Soviet Union and other communist allies (Li 2016). At the heart of the Maoist student migration policy was the developmentalist state thinking that overseas

students would bring back advanced technological and ideological know-how to revitalize the Chinese economy (Li 2016). Nonetheless, this *economy-oriented* policy was checked by the nascent socialist regime's deep *governmental* concerns. Fearing that overseas students might be brainwashed abroad by rival forces to work against their home country, China strictly controlled the ideology and overall number of student migrants (Miao 2010). After the Cultural Revolution broke out in 1966, OSM ceased altogether, and overseas students were ordered to return for ideological struggles (Li 2016). Only in 1972 was student migration reinitiated on a much smaller scale (Cheng and Miao 2010).

A seismic shift came in 1978, when Deng Xiaoping prioritized education reforms as the harbinger of his all-out modernization project (Kell and Vogl 2012). Under Deng's *developmentalism*, student migration was seen as a crucial catalyst for China's economic take-off (Miao 2010). In 1984, for the first time in PRC history, the Chinese state allowed self-sponsored (*zifei*) overseas studies as a legitimate means of exit (Liu 2021). Self-funded students quickly outnumbered state-sponsored ones, propelling China's meteoric growth into the world's largest source country of student migrants (Cheng and Miao 2010).

Deng's open-door policy also reduced student migrants' reliance on the state's financial and logistical support (Zhang and Liu 2019). Without ideological constraints, student migrants were able to more freely develop their own political opinions, some of which inevitably ran counter to the rule of the Communist Party of China (CPC) (Zweig and Wang 2013). During China's student movements for democracy in 1989, for example, many overseas students protested across the West against the party-state and helped domestic student movement leaders escape and seek asylum abroad (Xiang 2011). Moreover, the 1992 Chinese Student Protection Act in the United States and similar legislation in other destination countries granted permanent residency to Chinese students and protected them from potential persecution by the Chinese state in the aftermath of the 1989 democracy movements (Kell and Vogl 2012). These factors led to the resurgence of *governmental* objectives behind China's more restrictive policies toward overseas students from 1989 to 1992 and a sharp decline of student out-migration and return (Zweig and Wang 2013).

To mitigate economic difficulties caused by post-Tiananmen international sanctions, China re-promoted student migration by reinstating the open-door policy in 1992, regardless of overseas students' previous political opinions (State Council 1992). In 1993, the CPC established a far-reaching 12-word principle for student migration that included "supporting studying abroad, encouraging return, and guaranteeing freedom of movement" (*zhichi liuxue, guli huiguo, lai qu ziyou*) (Xiang 2011). Following this liberalized principle, the Chinese state focused on attracting student returnees (or "sea turtles") for *economic* modernization over the past three decades (Zweig and Wang 2013). Meanwhile, it also learned lessons from the 1989 incident and gradually reestablished political control over student migrants to achieve the *governmental* goal of maintaining domestic security (Ding and Koslowski 2017). Most notably, against the backdrop of a rising China, student

migrants are increasingly given the mandate to play a *geopolitical* role in elevating China's global stature.

Student Migrants as Grassroots Ambassadors

Lying at the heart of OSM's emerging political agenda is a semi-official organization called the Western Returned Scholars Association (WRSA, or "*Oumei tongxuehui*"). Founded in 1913, the WRSA remained rather dormant until 1995, when it became a subordinate organization under the UFWD's direct supervision (Central United Front Work Department 2018). The UFWD is a key CPC institution tasked with managing the united front (*tongyi zhanxian*), that is, forging alliances with the CPC's potentially oppositional forces and uniting them to promote the Party's interests (Groot 2004). In 2000, the UFWD's purview was expanded to cover, for the first time, "persons who study abroad or have returned" (Central Committee of the Communist Party of China 2000). In 2004, the CPC promulgated its first specific policy on conducting united front work with overseas students:

Conduct ideological and political work with overseas students. Be concerned about their ideological status, guide them to adhere to the correct political direction, to carry forward the patriotic spirit. (Central United Front Work Department 2004)

In the early 2010s, after Xi Jinping rose to power as China's supreme leader, the geopolitical reorientation of OSM policies was markedly accelerated. In a 2013 conference to celebrate the WRSA's centennial, for example, Xi expressed his "hopes" for overseas students to help China wield stronger *geopolitical* influence abroad,

It is hoped that a large number of overseas students will give full play to their advantages, strengthen their connections with both China and foreign countries, become *grassroots ambassadors* to promote friendly exchanges between China and foreign countries, tell good stories about China using the channels and methods that ordinary people in foreign countries would hear, understand, and listen to, and let the world support China even more. (Xi [2012] 2015, emphasis added)

This speech marked a watershed moment in China's student migration policies. Guided by Deng's developmentalism, the previous policy emphasis had focused on promoting the return of overseas students for *economic* growth through projects such as the Thousand Talents Plan and Cheung Kong Scholar awards (Xiang 2011; Zweig and Wang 2013). Under Xi's leadership, by contrast, student migration policies have been increasingly realigned with the UFWD, making overseas students a critical link in China's *geopolitical* grand plans or, in Xi's stylized vocabulary, "grassroots ambassadors." Transcending the innocent figure of "students," this labeling delegates student migrants more responsibility in China's soft power network and assertive pursuit of global ascendancy.

Overseas students' importance further rose in the 2015 Central United Front Work Conference, where Xi named them as the new "center of gravity" (*zhuolidian*) for the UFDW (Xinhua 2015). More fundamentally, Xi extended the long-established 12-word principle by adding the requirement of "playing a role" (*fahui zuoyong*) and encouraged overseas students to serve the motherland by *either* returning to China *or* "utilizing multiple means" (*yi duozhong fangshi*). These new policies implied that return migration is no longer a precondition and that overseas students can also serve state interests in destination countries. The remolded state-student relations *during* students' studies abroad, rather than *following* their post-study return, established closer linkage between OSM politics and China's diaspora policies.

In 2016, to reinforce the WRSA's institutional strength, a key Party document formalized Xi's instructions by designating overseas students as "new forces of grassroots diplomacy" (*minjian waijiao shenglijun*):

Encourage and guide overseas students to tell good stories of China and act as ambassadors for friendly exchanges between China and foreign countries. Following the Party and the State's diplomatic plans, [overseas students should] strengthen contacts with Chinese embassies and consulates, and actively carry out grassroots diplomacy, serve national strategies such as the "Belt and Road" project. (Central Committee of the Communist Party of China 2016)

This stronger association between OSM and public diplomacy (Ho 2018) coincided with the geopolitics-focused restructuring of China's diaspora politics. In tandem with the incorporation of student migration policies into the UFDW, diaspora politics as a whole was also brought into the UFDW's orbit. In 2018, the Overseas Chinese Affairs Office, which had been China's paramount diaspora policymaking institution since the PRC's founding, was absorbed into the UFDW (Xinhua 2018). As a result, overseas students and diasporas fell into the purview of the same apparatus and constituted the core of the CPC's "overseas united front" (*haiwai tongyi zhanxian*). This organizational reshuffling allowed for the more coordinated execution of student migration policies by the centralized diaspora bureaucracy. A bureaucrat interviewee in Fengsheng Prefecture commented,

Theoretically, overseas students haven't even become diasporans. However, overseas students and overseas Chinese have many characteristics in common. If our government seeks to liaise with overseas students, it's best for diaspora institutions to do this job. However, we should keep a low profile (*buhao dazhangqigu*). After all, it's very sensitive.

The 2015 Central United Front Work Conference also called for establishing WRSA branches at local levels (Xinhua 2015). Consequently, as of 2018, over 42 WRSA branches had sprouted in provincial capitals and universities, boasting 220,000 individual members (WRSA 2018). At further lower administrative levels of prefectures and counties, local FROC branches establish various versions of the Overseas Students and Families Association (OSFA, or "*Liuxue renyuan ji jia shu*

lianyihui”) to play essentially the same role as the WRSA. Like the WRSA, the FROC also has close ties with the UFWD and takes charge of China’s external liaison with the Chinese diaspora. These institutions have collectively formed an expansive network of official and quasi-official entities across the administrative hierarchy that enables China to reach out to overseas students for *geopolitical* ambitions.

By analyzing historical policy documents, I have demonstrated that since the PRC’s founding in 1949, the economic, governmental, and geopolitical objectives behind the Chinese politics of OSM have fluctuated in their relative significance, depending on China’s contingent socioeconomic and political conditions. Before the 2010s, *economic* and *governmental* interests dominated state policies, and overseas students were seen as either catalysts for the country’s economic boom or potential threats to regime stability that needed close surveillance. Since the 2010s, however, *geopolitical* ambitions have gradually taken precedence in China’s policies toward overseas students. As China more assertively pursues global leadership, student migrants are envisioned as public diplomats to strengthen Chinese influence abroad. Given the Chinese central and local governments’ inconsistent administrative interests (Lieberthal 1992), however, this fundamental realignment in national grand plans may not be fully enforced by frontline migration officials, who have their own bureaucratic priorities and political agendas (FitzGerald 2008), as the next section will discuss.

Deviations in Local Implementation

Concomitant with China’s repositioning of student migrants from “sea turtles” to “grassroots ambassadors,” Chinese students increasingly faced espionage allegations and strict political scrutiny around the world, including Europe (France-Pressé 2005), the United States (Fish 2020), Canada (Quan 2019), Japan (Osaki 2020), and Taiwan (Reuters 2017). Chinese students were accused of stealing technological innovations and acting as the long arm of China’s intelligence machine into foreign campuses (France-Pressé 2005). Despite largely speculative allegations (Fish 2020), these widespread suspicions thrust the supposedly close political ties between Chinese overseas students and the Chinese state into the international limelight.

My grounded empirical research reveals, however, that the reality of state-student relations may be more complicated than the rhetorical flourish in the West suggests. China’s geopolitics-oriented, top-level strategies have not been fully translated into grassroots migration officials’ implementation on the ground. In interviews, bureaucrats in Wuse County, for example, still attached most importance to overseas students’ *economic* and *governmental* benefits in boosting the local economy and maintaining political stability, while downplaying the national grand plan’s *geopolitical* reorientation. For instance, a senior OSFA member in Fengsheng Prefecture told me about its three institutional goals:

First, to serve overseas students. We are part of the united front. In the eyes of the UFWD, overseas students are a group of potential threats that need to be reined in

(*guanshu*). Therefore, the OSFA gathers overseas students to let them feel the care and love from the government. Second, we create a platform where we can meet more friends with similar backgrounds and experiences of studying abroad. We also serve as a launching pad where we can share information about business and entrepreneurial opportunities. Third, the government needs to hear the voice of overseas students and better understand their ideological status quo.

Thus, while the first and third goals of the OSFA in Fengsheng point to the *governmental* dimension of student migration politics, the second goal is *economic* in nature. To illustrate the *economic* yields from student returnees, both actual and desired, bureaucrat interviewees analogized their work as “brokering the coupling between ‘brains’ (*naodai*) and ‘deep pockets’ (*qiandai*).” To stay economically competitive, Wuse County and Fengsheng Prefecture joined other Chinese cities in a fierce “scramble for talent” (*qiangren dazhan*) by trying to entice student returnees with privileges in social welfare and citizenship benefits (Liu 2021).

What was more concerning for migration officials at the time of my fieldwork was overseas students’ potential *security* threats. In Summer 2019, university students led Hong Kong citizens to protest against the introduction of a controversial extradition bill that would allegedly jeopardize the territory’s judicial independence from Mainland China (Lee 2020). A bureaucrat interviewee told me that young students’ active participation in pro-democracy campaigns in Hong Kong had sparked state concerns over these youth movements’ potential spill-over effects onto the mainland,

History tells us that young students are passionate, hot-blooded, and agitative. If they fight against us, they could become very destructive. We should learn lessons from what’s happening in Hong Kong. We need to influence their minds. Let them see the real China that is different from how it is presented in the West.

Seeing overseas students as a possible threat to local political stability, the diaspora apparatus spared no effort to prioritize the *governmental* objectives in the implementation of overseas student policy. As a member of Wuse County’s OFSA shared,

We all know why the UFWD needs an organization like the OSFA — to keep overseas students under control. When we plan activities, we are told to gauge the appropriateness of the events from the perspective of the Party. We had to consider the CPC’s taste.

Another OSFA member complained to me that some officers from the Bureau of State Security, which is China’s intelligence and secret police agency, were secretly monitoring their events: “It’s only a casual gathering of overseas students. Why did they send spies to watch us? Are we going to topple the government, or what?”

Compared to these *economic* and *governmental* interests, the rising *geopolitical* goal in national policies was rather poorly received among street-level officials in Wuse County. When asked if they also perceived overseas students as “grassroots

ambassadors,” a bureaucrat interviewee pointed out the local state’s lack of interest in broader geopolitical issues: “People who make national policies are big-picture thinkers (*da geju*). In this small county, we are more concerned about matters that have direct local impacts.” Other bureaucrat interviewees also expressed their stronger enthusiasm for OSM policies’ *economic* and *governmental* effects, while showing little motivation in pursuing such policies’ *geopolitical* goals. In comparison to economic prosperity and political stability that topped the local political agenda, the geopolitical leverage of the Chinese nation as a whole seemed tangential to grassroots bureaucratic interests.

In China’s fragmented administrative structure, despite the national government’s enormous power in policy design and coordination, national policies rely on the implementation by local governments (Lieberthal 1992). While adhering to the top-down policymaking in principle, grassroots bureaucrats enjoyed a high degree of autonomy in adjusting national policies based on specific conditions and local interests on the ground. This decentralized bureaucratic setup leads to what FitzGerald (2008) calls the “pluralist” diaspora politics featured by street-level migration officials’ flexible improvisation in their day-to-day operation. In Wuse County, local bureaucrats kept prioritizing OSM policies’ *economic* and *governmental* impacts, regardless of the growing emphasis on *geopolitics* in national strategies. In addition, student migrants’ own responses to this geopolitical orientation varied significantly, as evidenced by my ethnography in three state-organized summer retreats for overseas students.

Encounters and Collisions in Summer Trips

A trademark activity of China’s expanding diaspora affairs apparatus is summer trips for overseas youths of all age groups. In 2019 alone, over 23,000 overseas teenagers of Chinese descent from 75 countries took part in the so-called “root-seeking tours” (*xungen zhili*) (FROC 2019). These trips bear a striking resemblance to the diaspora tourism organized in Israel (Kelner 2012), Morocco (Mahieu 2019), and Scotland (Basu 2007). As Louie (2004) points out in an ethnography of Chinese diasporic youth festivals, these political rituals aim to inculcate ethnonational and cultural bonds between diasporic descendants and home states.

Lesser known in the diaspora tourism literature are summer trips for the more mature population of tertiary students abroad. Compared to diasporic teenagers, tertiary students’ upbringing in China and education in Western liberal democracies later in life mean that they tend to be more concerned and even critical about Chinese politics (Ma 2020). In contrast to the ethno-cultural orientation of youth festivals examined by Louie (2004), the summer trips I observed were more political and ideological in nature, aimed at forging student migrants’ political attitudes along the Party line. These retreats provided mundane encounters in which migration bureaucrats tried to build political rapport with student migrants and achieve the multiple goals behind OSM policies.

On the summer trips I observed, each day, the guides whisked participants off to a whirlwind of activities and banquets. The paramount theme of all three summer trips, however, was red tourism (*hongse lüyou*), that is, state-promoted tours to revolutionary sites commemorating the CPC's heroic figures and victorious events. During these trips, we visited eight red destination sites. To set the tone, each trip began with a visit to a red museum. On one trip, for example, we visited August 1, Nanchang Uprising Memorial on the exact date of August 1, 2019, to commemorate the 92nd anniversary of the birth of the CPC armed force. All participants were required to wear red T-shirts with the CPC's hammer-and-sickle emblem and the English caption of "stay calm and believe in communism." In other museums, we were asked to perform a myriad of patriotic rituals, such as giving full 90-degree bows to a tomb where a famous CPC general was buried, singing red songs, and sending flowers to a monument of martyred CPC soldiers in the Anti-Japanese War.

Some participants, however, clad in T-shirts of luxurious foreign brands and coated with thick layers of sunscreen, seemed out of place in these sites designated to memorialize the hardship and endurance of CPC war heroes. When discussing the purpose of conducting red tourism in what they originally thought to be more relaxing summer trips, participant interviewees were fully aware that they were perhaps seen as *security* threats. A student interviewee said resignedly,

In their eyes, we are Western educated (*he yangmoshui*, or literally "drink foreign ink"). We have been influenced by the West, so we are "dangerous" and become the target for the united front.

Participant interviewees were also cognizant of their value in public diplomacy, as one said, "They see us as not only economic resources but also a business card [through which China can be introduced to the West]." In addition to party ideologies, summer trips sought to present a positive image of China vis-à-vis its allegedly negative media representation in the West. We, for instance, visited numerous pristine mountains and heritage villages, learned the traditional seven-string musical instrument of *guqin*, practiced the ancient physical exercise of Five-Animal Play (*wuqin xi*), and ate fresh, local cuisines in fine restaurants. A student interviewee astutely pointed out the rationale behind these arrangements:

In Western media, China has all kinds of problems: economic slowdown, environmental degradation, food insecurity, lost traditions, money worship, you name it. But here, they show us how awesome the environment is. There's not so much pollution. All we see are beautiful rivers, green mountains, and well-organized villages. They also present historical heroes to show the greatness of the Chinese people. They teach us traditional musical instruments and physical exercises to show that traditions are well protected. We also eat clean, organic food. They guided us to factories and companies where business is booming. All in all, the past, the present, and the future of China, everything is great. This is also the narrative they want us to use when describing China to our friends abroad.

In fact, many student participants signed up for these trips because everything was free and because they could meet new friends during the summer break. Beneath the benevolent appearance of “free tours,” however, was the political agenda of implanting favorable perceptions about China. A further *geopolitical* goal was to feed student migrants with publicity materials and to motivate them to “tell good stories of China” (*jianghao zhongguo gushi*) abroad.

This *geopolitical* vision seemed to be better received among student participants who intended to return to China after graduation, especially those who aspired to join the state bureaucracy. When asked whether they resonated with trip activities, some student interviewees told me that they were quite familiar with this style of political indoctrination throughout their upbringing, when they were members of the Young Pioneers of China and the Communist Youth League of China, two youth organizations affiliated with the CPC. “It’s just how things work in China,” an interviewee said indifferently.

In comparison, the freedom of information abroad had shaped other participants’ more independent understanding of China, which, in their own words, could hardly be affected by “a five-day propaganda trip.” They performed political rituals during the trips only to “get over it” (*yingfu*). As one participant commented,

I went studying abroad since high school and read George Orwell’s novels *1984* and *Animal Farm*. I sometimes intentionally fight back against the history that the Party had taught me. So it’s meaningless that they try again to instill this version of history during the trip. But everything’s free. What else can I complain about?

Some student participants developed a deeper aversion to the trips’ embedded political agenda because they now had insider knowledge of the CPC’s “inner workings.” In particular, the formalistic (*xingshi zhuyi*) nature of these trips annoyed many participants. After visiting each site, participants were asked to take group pictures holding red banners with the titles of each trip or patriotic slogans. Many group photos were taken outdoors in the scorching summer heat. Trip organizers repeatedly apologized by saying, “Hold on for a bit longer! This is the last photo today.” To give the false impression that we visited more sites of red tourism than we actually did, organizers shrewdly took several group photos at the same location by changing the banners, reorganizing participants’ standing positions, and using different shooting angles. “Just like we submit assignments to teachers, they also have to report to their bosses,” participant interviewees explained to me.

Occasionally, student participants openly expressed their disaffection. For instance, we visited a museum in Fengsheng Prefecture that celebrated the “international friendship” showcased by local villagers who saved the life of a Japan-bound American pilot near the end of WWII. When we were walking uphill to the museum, the guide mentioned that there would be air conditioning. Exhausted in the sweltering heat, participants yelled with great excitement. The guide asked disappointedly, “Is

A/C really the most important thing about the museum?” Participants laughed loudly without saying aloud that they were rather unconcerned with the museum’s content.

When we arrived at the museum, few were interested in the exhibition, and most participants lined up to play an entertainment flight simulator. Preoccupied with maneuvering a crash landing in WWII, they appeared aloof to the villagers’ proclaimed courage and international solidarity on display, not to mention their desired *geopolitical* role as “grassroots ambassadors.” Personal leisure and entertaining desires outweighed the political agenda throughout these mundane encounters between student migrants and state projects.

Conclusion

Following the rise of global student migration, studies on international student migration/mobility have grown substantially across the education and migration literatures (King and Raghuram 2013; Riaño, Mol, and Raghuram 2018). Existing scholarship mostly focuses on four actors involved in ISM: students and their families, Western universities, receiving countries, and the education-migration industry. In contrast, sending countries and how their policies shape, regulate, and strategize about overseas students have been relatively overlooked (Gribble 2008).

This article foregrounds sending countries’ perspectives by examining China’s OSM policy through the conceptual framework of diaspora politics. Drawing on Adamson and Tsourapas (2020), I propose a typology to account for three policy objectives in student migration politics: economic, governmental, and geopolitical. The *economic* model emphasizes student migration’s developmental effects in boosting the home economy through financial remittances, knowledge transfer, and return migration. The *governmental* model highlights the security concerns of sending states, many of which are ruled by non-democratic regimes, aimed at co-opting overseas students into political compliance. The *geopolitical* model treats overseas students as para-diplomats in expanding home countries’ global clout and soft power in host countries.

Based on a comparative analysis of policy and ethnographic evidence, I further argue that the relative significance of these interests tends to both change over time and differ across administrative levels. As I show, since the PRC’s founding, *economic* and *governmental* interests alternated to dominate in China’s OSM policies, depending on the country’s specific socioeconomic and political contexts. The past decade, however, has witnessed the steady rise of *geopolitical* considerations under the incumbent leadership of Xi Jinping, as OSM policies have been incorporated into China’s broader diaspora politics and global soft power strategies.

Nevertheless, the changing national policy interest may not resonate with all local migration bureaucrats or student migrants. Drawing on evidence from interviews and ethnography, I present the complex politics of OSM as a dynamic field where local improvisation adapted national grand plans for grassroots interests and individual desires took advantage of state projects. I find that while the national emphasis has

increasingly moved toward the *geopolitical* objective, street-level bureaucrats still pay more attention to OSM's *economic* and *governmental* impacts, due to the latter's closer connections to local issues. Furthermore, student interviewees diverged in terms of their attitudes toward their designated role as "grassroots ambassadors" for China's growing soft power project in host countries. Among student participants in the three state-organized summer retreats that I observed, while those who intended to return to China after graduation and join the state government were more receptive to their delegated political roles, most student interviewees were rather indifferent or even averse to the ritualistic inculcation of their alleged responsibility of conducting public diplomacy for a rising China.

Through a close examination of the real-world encounters between migration officials and student migrants, this article advances the burgeoning scholarship on diaspora institutions (Gamlen 2019) in the localized contexts of China. At the confluence of FitzGerald's (2008) theorization of "pluralist" diaspora politics and Lieberthal's (1992) classic thesis on China's fragmented political structure, I provide first-hand evidence on the decentralization of Chinese OSM politics. The multilevel governance of OSM brings about the dynamic interplay and negotiation between the central state and street-level officials in defining their variegated bureaucratic interests. As China's diaspora affairs apparatus has undergone considerable transformations in recent years (Xinhua 2018), this article serves as a point of departure for finer-grained insights into the complex operation of diaspora governance on the ground.

Following Adamson and Tsourapas's (2020) footsteps to break away from the immigration bias and Western-centrism in migration studies, this article also advances the theorization of ISM, with China, the world's largest sending country of student migrants, as the primary frame of reference. Although the central state policy on OSM may not accomplish as much as it has hoped, the robust evolution of economic, governmental, and geopolitical goals in different macrohistorical environments testifies to OSM's significant role as an integral part of China's broader socioeconomic and geopolitical strategies.

Additionally, this article enriches our knowledge of diaspora tourism and birth-right trips (Louie 2004; Basu 2007; Kelner 2012; Mahieu 2019) by investigating how China adopts a similar approach to a migrant population who has not yet become "diasporic" per se. To establish a conceptual bridge between diaspora and ISM studies, I push forward the constructivist turn in diaspora studies (Liu 2020) and give more weight to the dynamic processes whereby overseas students are imagined and positioned in changing diaspora politics. In doing so, and steering away from the prevailing focus on neoliberalism in ISM studies (Findlay 2011; Riaño, Mol, and Raghuram 2018), I redirect scholarly attention to the role of nation-states, especially sending countries, in repositioning and re-strategizing about international students. While neoliberal education and labor immigration policies in destination countries constitute the necessary pull factors for ISM's continuous rise (King and Raghuram 2013), sending states may also seize the opportunity to tap into overseas

students' economic, governmental, and geopolitical effects both within and beyond state boundaries. This article, thus, recenters sending countries in ISM literature and highlights the “migrant” dimension in the hyphenated figure of “student-migrants” (Robertson 2013).

More broadly, these findings deepen understandings of state-student relations at a time when Chinese overseas students have been accused of espionage activities by destination countries (France-Presse 2005; Reuters 2017; Quan 2019; Fish 2020; Osaki 2020). Admittedly, the ongoing geopolitical reorientation in China's OSM policies at the national level signals the central state's desire for closer political ties with student migrants. However, my grounded empirical research indicates that this geopolitics-oriented policy realignment received divergent recognitions among local bureaucrats tasked with enforcing national policies on a day-to-day basis and student participants in state-organized trips.

A more nuanced picture of the relationship between the Chinese state and overseas students requires moving beyond both prevalent sinophobic sentiments among Western politicians and rhetorical flourish in political grand plans. Migration scholars should take overseas students as the central frame to uncover their own agency and voices vis-à-vis the homeland state's top-down designation (Ma 2020). This article also calls for more ethnographic insights into the actual processes through which diaspora policies are carried out in their quotidian operation. While home countries have increasingly reached out to emigrants and pursued more assertive “diaspora governance” (Ho 2018; Gamlen 2019), we need more grounded research to examine migrants' agential responses and street-level migration bureaucrats' local improvisation.

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ORCID iD

Jiaqi M. Liu  <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-6875-2485>

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