Chinese Youth on the Move:
from 'fantasy' to 'reality' through overseas study in the United States

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Abstract

The flow of Chinese international students to the US is a long-standing phenomenon that has lasted for more than a century. Such popularity has been growing on a larger scale in the last two decade until the Covid-19 pandemic. Wondering on such sustained and augmenting heat of migration and mobility to the US, this study takes a biographical approach to explore the lives and experiences of today's Chinese international students in the US by examining their mobility motives, lived experiences, reflections and reflexivities on their international mobility, and their future imagining and projecting.

Among the extant studies, very few takes a holistic approach to investigate the whole international mobility experiences of Chinese international students. Most of them only focus on their horizontal relocation but overlook their vertical temporalities. This study introduces two backbone theoretical frameworks of youth transition to adulthood and migration/mobility to construe the biographical experiences of today's Chinese international students in the US with a central aim of inquiring into what role international mobility plays in their transitions to adulthood and how they wield agency to navigate their mobility trajectories against contextual and structural constraints. Through international mobility, Chinese international students experience 'double' social changes from the rapidly-changing China to the ever-changing America and from the past to the future. Therefore, by examining how Chinese international students make transitions to adulthood, this study can also reflect the changes to social conditions in both China and the US and even to the extent of the whole world.

Assuming that today's Chinese international students growing up in a fast-changing society could be vastly different from their predecessors not long ago, this research adopts a qualitative research paradigm using in-depth interviews to collect empirical

data in order to provide a rich understanding of the multiplicity and breadth of participants' individual experiences, with various reflexive representations of the individuals' narratives at the core of the study. Following an interpretivist-constructivist approach to analyze empirical data, this study finds out that today's young Chinese international students practice international mobility to the US mainly for escaping social control in China and for an alternative transition process in a different social condition in which they believe they will be able to enjoy the course of studying, living and exploring, and after years of mobile lives in the US they incorporate spatial mobility into their imagining and projecting for future transition outcomes-making. And the analysis reveals that they value mobility highly and display an acute awareness of both the advantages and challenges of their mobile lives and refer to their lived experiences in both China and the US for their decision-making process concerning their future mobility trajectories in the hopes of securing both 'good' transition processes and 'good' transition outcomes. The significance of this study reaches beyond offering a landscape of today's Chinese international students in the US to the extent that valuable theoretical implications can be contributed to the currently vigorous debate on youth transitions to adulthood while being on the move.

Keywords: Chinese international students, youth transition to adulthood, migration, mobility, transition processes, transition outcomes.

Chapter 1 Introduction

In 2013, Grace, at the age of 14, moved to the US alone for high school study. Before her international mobility, Grace was studying in an 'experimental class' of a key primary school in a major capital city in Northern China. When she was graduating from kindergarten, she passed several rounds of competitive examinations to have finally obtained a place in this class full of highly-selected clever kids. Following a non-traditional curriculum, Grace had enjoyed a relaxed style of education throughout her primary school where she and her classmates were offered all kinds of opportunities for extracurricular activities, such as visiting museums, joining sports, volunteering in nursing home etc. At the very beginning, this institutional experiment made a promise to ensure these clever kids to advance to middle school and then to high school without taking any entrance examination, however, not long after they entered middle school, they were notified that such promise could not be lived up to due to a purportedly disapproval by the local education bureau, which meant they would have to take the high school entrance examinations. Facing such unexpected institutional change, Grace's parents thought it would be a waste of time for her to spend a whole semester to prepare for such entrance examinations and it would be more suitable for their daughter to follow the foreign education system. Plus they had already thought about sending Grace abroad for university study before this incident happened. In the end, they decided to send her abroad earlier. Seven years later, in December 2020 at the time of interview when Grace was recalling the reasons why she chose the US, she said:

> 'I think everyone had a same reason, I have found that many [Chinese international] students around me who had come to the US at a very young age used to watch a lot of American TV programs and cartoons during primary and middle school time, then we had developed a kind of unrealistic...well...I could not say it's fantasy, but we had idealized the US to be too good, and only to have found out it was not like what we had imagined as soon as we arrived here'.

When looking forward to a future, Grace first complained about how the US had failed to satisfy her spiritual well-being for its poor cultural deposits and then expressed her aspiration to go back to China for a career in sports industry or alternatively to go to a third country like the UK or Spain for the same professional goal.

Jacky is also a top student who had studied through a local key middle school and a local key high school in a capital city in Central China before he came to the US in 2018 for undergraduate study. If he had stayed in China, he could be admitted to a top Chinese university like Tsinghua University or Beijing University, but at the suggestion of his father who firmly believed overseas study was a better choice, he naturally accepted this 'path'. He said:

> 'At that time, I had a very liberal mind. I did not have a particular preference for staying [in China] or going abroad... How should I put it, I am a very Buddha-like laid-back person. On one hand, either path did not matter to me, on the other hand, I thought overseas study was less depressing than in China, it would be more free there, or to say, it would give me a bigger pool of options.'

At the thought of his future, Jacky held an open attitude towards where he would like to work after the conclusion of his study, saying that 'a career back in China would be not bad, and a career in the US would be also OK'.

Grace and Jacky are two of the 40 Chinese international students whom I had interviewed for this study. Speaking from the perspectives of their incipient mobility intentions, mobility paths, current social status and their attitude towards future mobility, obviously they are not migrants in the classical sense of seeking economic opportunities, or escaping domestic deprived conditions or political instabilities, nor can they be counted as elite migrants who are high-skilled careerists circulating in an intensely fluid world of inter-and intra-firm transfers. So are they middling-migrants as in Robertson's (2021) middling student-turned-migrants whose migration

trajectories involve complex social and economic locations and relocations as they combine skilled and unskilled work, periods of precarity as well as potential upward social mobility, and short-term sacrifices of middle-class lifestyles and incomes to achieve longer-term goals?

A majority of my participants moved to the US for K-12 education as 'parachute kids' like Grace. 'Parachute kids' is a term coined to describe 'unaccompanied minors' (Popadiuk, 2009: 230), 'unaccompanied sojourners' (Kuo & Roysircar, 2006: 161), or 'little overseas students' (Tsong & Liu, 2009: 366), who come from Asian regions such as Taiwan, Hong Kong, South Korea, Malaysia, Indonesia, and mainland China (Cheng et al., 2020: 5) to the US for secondary K-12 or even primary K-12 education. These students are often dropped off in the US schools while their parents stay in their country of origin (Fu, 1994). The rest of my participants like Jacky moved to the US to attend university after they finished high school in China and are termed 'degree-seekers' in my study. At the time of interview, they were still students who were wholly financially dependent on their parents and hadn't even entered labor market yet, not to mention experiencing the 'middling lives' oscillated 'between precarity and fluidity, autonomy and heteronomy, desire and anxiety, linearity and fragmentation' (Robertson, 2021: 10), therefore apparently they were not middling student-turned-migrants, either, at least not yet. Since we have failed to identify their migrant category, how about we let these young Chinese stay with the label 'international students' at the moment?

As the largest sending country of international students in the world, China sent 662,100 students abroad in 2018 alone, which was an increase of 8.83% over the previous year (Ministry of Education, 2019). From the late 1970s when China sent out the first dispatch of students overseas after decades of national isolation till the end of 2015, the total number of Chinese students studying overseas had reached 4.04 million with an average yearly growth rate of 19.06% for nearly four decades (Ministry of Education, 2016). China was already the top sending country of

international students to the United States in the 1990s and had surpassed India to become the top sending country once again in 2009 (Cheng et al., 2020: 3). In 2017, close to 1.1 million international students enrolled in American colleges and universities, and 363,341 (about 33%) of them were Chinese (IIE, 2018). In the academic year 2019/2020, there were 372,532 Chinese students enrolled at US universities, accounting for 35% of the total number of international students in the US (IIE, 2020). As the data shows, the US has always been the most popular destination for Chinese students in recent decades. And such heat of overseas study in the US interacts with the rapidly changing social structure in China and is fueled by the expanding Chinese middle- and upper-middle class stratums.

The changing social structure of the expanding middle- and upper-middle class families is certainly an important factor stimulating the growing popularity of overseas education in China, but there must be many other reasons behind today's larger outflow of Chinese students, especially to the US. Very few extant literature take a holistic perspective to study Chinese international students' whole experiences of their international mobility from pre-arrival till future prospect. Hence this research aims to investigate through a biographical lens the mobility motives, lived experiences, reflections and reflexivities (Ma, 2020: 25), and future projecting of today's young Chinese international students in the US. In doing so, I also intend to shed light on youth condition and youth transition to adulthood in contemporary social changes through which today's young people's youth transitions trajetories have been fragmentized, non-linearized and contingencized. Chinese international students crosscutting two different cultures from China to the US experience both a horizontal social change from home to the destination and a vertical social change from the past to the future in both societies. Their international mobility is contextualized in such 'double' social changes. And the heat of international mobility for education in China can not be fully understood without making sense of such changes of contextual conditions.

To gain a better understanding of the heat of overseas study in Chinese society, it is necessary to first take a look at China's social and educational context where Chinese students make educational transitions. Advancement from high school to university in China has always been the most important event to all Chinese students. After the third year of high school, equivalent to after the 12th grade in the United States, there is a large nationwide examination, namely, the National College Entrance Examination, which is abbreviated as *Gaokao* in China. It is an examination used for the selection of qualified high school graduates and equivalent candidates. Because of the stratification of Chinese universities and to ensure a fair enrollment procedure, most universities rely solely on the scores of Gaokao to screen candidates for admission. In 2019, with a gross enrollment rate of 51.6%, 40.02 million Chinese students were studying in domestic higher education institutions (Ministry of Education, 2020a), 21.6% higher than that of 30% in 2012 (Ministry of Education, 2013), but much lower than the 87.9% gross enrollment rate of their American counterparts in the US in 2019 (The World Bank, 2021). In the same year, 0.70 million Chinese students including postgraduate study seekers went abroad for university study (Ministry of Education, 2020b), of which more than half chose the US as their destination (IIE, 2020). The low gross enrollment rate in China does not only mean that a large amount of high school graduates are excluded from higher education, but also curtails the number of students who can be admitted to the limited key universities. The symbolic capital of a credential from a key university alone usually brings considerable advantages in labor market, let alone the human capital and social resources that students graduated from these key universities had gathered. Despite a slight drop in the number of candidates who sit Gaokao in 2010, the number of Gaokao-takers has been steadily growing (Ministry of Education, 2020c) excluding those who skipped Gaokao for overseas education. Although the scale of China's higher education continues to grow in terms of the number of institutions and number of enrollments, such supply still falls short of the demand by the constantly growing number of Chinese high school graduates and a constantly expanding middle-class families.

Prior to Gaokao, the fierce competition for the limited high-quality education resources have already begun early on. In order for families to give their children access to quality education resources, competition among different social levels runs throughout the education process: starting from the fight for admission opportunities into key primary schools, key middle schools, key high schools, all the way to key universities (Cheng et al., 2020: 44). In 2019, the gross enrollment rates of middle school and high school were 102.6% and 89.5% respectively (Ministry of Education, 2020). Most of the key universities' students graduate from key high schools, therefore students in the first nine years of compulsory education stage are required to focus on competing for admissions into key high schools first, in order to obtain a higher chance of entrance into key universities (Cheng et al., 2020: 45). And in the same manner in order to enter a key high school, students have to pass a series of academic tests and intelligence tests, sometimes with the help of their parents' resources, to earn a place in a key primary school then in a key middle school and then in a key high school. Grace and Jacky, as interviewees in my study, were two of these clever kids who passed these tests to enter key schools and happened to be of upper-middle class background.

Apart from the dominant number of Chinese public K-12 schools, among which some key high schools set an international class with foreign curricula for those students who will go abroad for higher education, other private bilingual schools which usually charge high fees provide Chinese students with similar curricula of the secondary education of Anglophone countries such as the US, Britain, Canada, and Australia, for them to gain academic preparation for admission into colleges of these countries (Cheng et al., 2020: 47). Students studying in these private international schools are all from middle- and upper-middle-class families. These private boarding international schools are often perceived by the Chinese public as 'aristocratic schools' and work as important institutional tools for social stratification and segregation.

As introduced above, it is in such complex social and structural context that the market of overseas study in China has been boosted in the 21ˢᵗ century. Most extant studies are apt to scrutinize Chinese international students from the theoretical perspectives of migration, adaptation, acculturation and integration, which risk undervaluing the contextual and structural conditions that these young people are situated in. But it is the 'double' social changes from home to a new culture and from the past to the present and onward to the future in both societies that make Chinese international students' experiences distinct from their sedentary counterparts. To also reflect the youth condition of Chinese international students, this study thus introduces the theoretical perspective of youth transitions and intersects it with mobility/migration theories to not only delve into Chinese international students' youth transition to adulthood through their international mobility experiences but also discuss the relations between their agency and contextual and structural constraints through the 'double' social changes. Bearing in mind that Chinese international students in the US are situated in such 'double' social changes, this study proposes research questions to address the relations between their agency and social conditions in which they make youth transitions. In their pre-arrival phase, what I am interested in are the social factors that influence their decision-making for overseas study in the US and their expectations of such international mobility experiences. After their arrival, it is natural to wonder how their social life is in the US and what are their reflections and reflexivities on their mobility experiences and personal changes after years of study and life in the US. On an outlook to their future, their future mobility directions and their social and professional aspirations are to be probed into.

Although this study focuses on today's Chinese students' outflow abroad, it is also necessary to observe this phenomenon from a global perspective and to acknowledge the fact that an increasing number of Chinese international students return to China after graduation. Two decades ago, China suffered serious brain drain, however with the fast economic development and various incentive government policies, more and more Chinese international students return to China. In 2019, while 703.5 thousand

Chinese students went abroad, 580.3 thousand returned in the same year, which was a 11.73% increase over the year of 2018 (Ministry of Education, 2019). Beyond the return flow of Chinese international students, it should also be noted that more and more international students flow to China for study. China has been the third largest recipient of international higher education students since 2011 (IIE, 2012). In 2018, a total of 492,185 international students from 196 countries/regions were pursuing their studies in China, with 50,600 international students from South Korean as the largest source country, and with 20,996 from the US as the fifth largest source country (Ministry of Education, 2019). Therefore, we should see the outflow of Chinese international students as only a part of the whole world's circulation of international students.

Research approach

Although I will justify in detail my theoretical approaches and methodological choices in Chapters Two, Three, and Five, here I give a brief introduction of the research approach to this study. A theoretical framework of youth transition to adulthood crisscrossed by international mobility/migration is believed to be highly relevant to the study of today's Chinese international undergraduate students, who are more often studied from the perspectives of migration, acculturation and integration than from a more comprehensive perspective of youth transitions intersected with mobility/migration. As from a fast-changing society and entering another ever-changing society, the characteristics of today's young Chinese international students could be remarkably different from their predecessors one decade or even just half a decade ago due to the fast-changing social and societal conditions in both home and destination countries. Thus through the prism of youth transitions to investigate Chinese international students is a timely endeavor to make sense of their lived mobile experiences. Since a biographical approach is determined to holistically investigate these students, I use qualitative interview as the research method to collect

data and to capture a detailed landscape of their experiences and perspectives.

The sample selection is designed to focus on Chinese undergraduate students in the US considering the largest proportion of this group among all Chinese international students by academic level as shown in the statistical data. Students' fields of study is not concerned since they are irrelevant to my research questions. Specific age range is not predetermined, either, since most undergraduate students are around 20. Due to the travel restriction caused by pandemic, previously planned face-to-face interviews were replaced by online interviews. Through various means, 40 Chinese international students were recruited. And the final selected sample includes a roughly even division in terms of gender.

Structure of the thesis

This thesis is divided into ten chapters. The following two chapters, Chapters Two, and Three, constitute the theoretical framework. Chapter Two first reviews migration theories and mobility theories, then discusses the antithesis and relevance of the two. Through literature review, this chapter shows that most extant migration theories are developed from empirical studies of the deprived, disfranchised, poor, unskilled subjects who flee economic and social hardships with a strong implication of 'one time' migration and permanent settlement, while mobility theories render a much larger sense of spatial and virtual movement, not only interlocking various movements of people with other tangible and intangible objects in social worlds, but also assuming different modes of migration including the short-term, temporary, non-linear, interrupted, circular, and those without an end to the mobile status. In another word, migration is simply a form of mobility. However, in many studies, 'migration' and 'mobility' are either used interchangeably or framed as two antithetical genres of spatial practices. Such confusion is also discussed before I introduce Cairns and Clemente's (2021) theoretical proposal arguing that youth

mobility is nested within youth migration and young people are already practicing migration while being mobile, which can help researchers to go beyond the dichotomy between 'mobility' and 'migration' in studying the spatial movement of youth. Then I incorporate push-pull model into King and Sondhi's (2018) four theoretical domains to tease out the theories on explaining international students before I discuss theories of 'middling' international students lastly.

Chapter Three focuses on youth studies theories which are believed to be highly appropriate to analyze the biographical mobility experiences of my research subjects. This chapter first reviews the development of the 'twin tracks' of youth studies theories: youth culture and youth transition to adulthood, then discusses the efforts made so far to dissolve these two binaries, followed by a critique of youth studies theories on their bias towards Western youth in two dimensions: the scant body of youth studies on Southern youth; and the forceful adaptation of Northern youth studies theories to Southern youth without fully observing the different economic, cultural and social conditions in which Southern youth grow up. This chapter argues that Northern youth studies theories developed in the Western context were grounded in the dramatic social changes in the West due to capitalism, deindustrialization and globalization, which was vastly different from the social changes in the South during the same ages, and they were developed to reflect on the social changes in Western societies. However, the explanatory power of youth transitions theories in investigating (Southern) young people's agency against contextual and structural constraints is still recognized in this chapter. In the following section of this chapter, the attention is given to the extant theoretical devotion to the enrichment of youth transitions studies by introducing a mobility perspective followed by my proposal of a new theoretical model of 'youth transition process' as a complementary conceptual framework to 'spatial reflexivity' (Cairns et al., 2012) which fixates on 'youth transition outcome'. Lastly, this chapter stresses the 'youth transition processes' that have been under-researched by youth transitions studies and explicates its importance in influencing young people's well-being and transition outcomes-making.

Chapter Four reviews the latest empirical literature addressing Chinese international students. This chapter shows there is a great deal of research that explores Chinese international students in terms of motivations, adaptation, integration and acculturation, but there is a paucity of qualitative examination from the perspective of youth studies. And especially there is a huge lack of empirical investigation of Chinese international students' reflections and reflexivities on their personal changes attributed to international mobility and their future mobility intentions while they are still in their undergraduate study phase abroad. Many studies that happen to deal with these issues focus on Chinese returnees. While the research subjects of my study are still in their educational transition stage. Young people at this stage of their life could be very different from those who have already graduated and entered labor market in terms of their reflections and reflexivities on their past and their outlook to their future. After a review of their mobility motives, experiences, reflections and reflexivities, and future mobility intentions, this chapter gives an independent section to review extant empirical works on Chinese parachute kids, since the majority of my participants are former parachute kids. This group of participants had already lived in the US for at least 4-5 years, some even had 8 years of life experiences there at the time of interview. There is a scant of empirical works that investigate Chinese international students who are former parachute kids. Therefore, my research work can make a contribution to filling this gap. At last, I integrate an up-to-date monograph on Chinese international students in the US from a holistic perspective to the summary section.

Chapter Five is the methodology chapter introducing the methods employed to conduct this research, including an outline of the research sample. After an introduction of my research questions, I justify the theoretical choices by the paucity of literature that address Chinese international students holistically from the perspective of youth transitions studies traversed by mobility/migration studies, then I justify the interchangeable use of 'migration' and 'mobility' and the terminology of

'mobile students' in my thesis by extant literature and the characteristics of my research participants before I justify a qualitative research method to this study by my research questions and an interpretivist-constructivist approach to analyze my data by the qualitative nature of the study and the position of me as a cultural insider. The use of in-depth semi-structured interviews as methods to collect empirical data is also justified by my research questions. Then I introduce the criteria of participant selection that is set based on the statistical data of Chinese international students in the US by study level and gender ratio. The data of Chinese international students' places of study in the US and cities of origin in China is also introduced although the sample selection is not subject to these two data. Then some unexpected situations during the data collection process is explained and the changes to the data collections methods are justified by the pandemic, followed by a detailed description of data processing and analyzing with related software and specific analysis techniques under the interpretivist-constructivist approach. The final part of this chapter addresses the role of the researcher－myself as a cultural insider－in the whole research process.

Chapters Six to Nine are the ones focusing on the analysis of empirical data. Chapter Six deals with the Chinese international students' motivations for going abroad and to the US. Although push-pull model has its limitation in explaining international migrations, it is still functional in identifying specific factors that influence migrants' decision-making process. In my study, push-pull model is used to discern my participants' reasons of leaving, reasons of choosing the US and their expectations of such international mobility, which are important individual decisions that form a part of biographical transitions. Chapter Seven unfolds my participants' lived experiences in the US. By comparing with previous studies and drawing on related theories, I analyze my participants' adaptation, unpleasant experiences, pleasant memories, unsatisfied social integration, voluntary segregation and romantic relationship, and discuss the relationship between their agency and contextual and institutional constraints, mediated by private transition support received from social relationships. Chapter Eight scrutinizes my participants' reflections and reflexivities on their

rewards, personal changes, deeper understanding of the US and China, sense of belonging and identity, and their perceptions of adulthood after they had experienced international mobility, and stresses how transition processes of mobile lives contribute to young people's personal development and psychological growth, which are often overlooked by youth transitions studies. Chapter Nine interprets my participants' plans and imaginations of their future mobility with the help of Cuzzocrea and Mandich's (2016) theoretical model of 'imaging mobility' and Cairns' (2014) conceptual tool of 'spatial reflexivity'. In this chapter, my participants are categorized into three groups by the directions of their mobility intentions. Their individualized reasons of choosing or imagining a next destination are analyzed by their considerations of the macro social structures and conditions of each possible places, their social and professional desires, and the resources to which they have access.

Chapter Ten is the conclusion chapter. This chapter first epitomizes the empirical findings across the previous four chapters then provides theoretical implications by framing a typology. In terms of motivations for international mobility to the US, both old and new motives have been detected from the narratives of my participants. Their motives of escaping social control and desire for exploration and personal development are the major empirical data to support my argument that today's young Chinese international students go to the US to seek a better social condition in which they would like to study and live through their transition processes and ultimately towards 'good' transition outcomes, which is different from many of their predecessors who moved abroad only to pursue transition outcomes, such as symbolic credentials and economic opportunities. In a summary of their lived experiences in the US, I use the theory of self-socialization to explain their social choices and their reactions to their social confrontations, and highlight the importance of their agency in dealing with contextual and structural constraints. Regarding their reflections and reflexivities on their international mobility experiences, their personal development and accrued social resources as well as their deeper understanding of themselves and social contexts are found to be considered more valuable than their academic progress,

based on which I thus emphasize again young people highly value their own personal development in their transitions to adulthood. In analyzing my participants' future mobility intentions, it has been elucidated that, unlike their last time of decision-making process for their mobility to the US, this time they are sophisticated enough to 'naturally' incorporate spatial mobility in their imagining and projecting of their future transition outcomes-making, which I argue is a capacity cultivated through their international mobility experiences. To synthesize the empirical findings of my participants' international mobility for theoretical implications, I frame a typology by relating their incipient mobility motives to their future mobility projecting. According to the four identified ideal types, I have found two dominant international mobility trajectories, namely those who moved to the US with non-instrumental purposes gave priority to either social environment or career opportunities, or both in their consideration of future mobility plans. In the final part of this chapter, the metaphors of 'fantasy' and 'reality' of the thesis title are illustrated. Such metaphorical implications not only refer to their attitudes toward the US changed from an idealized perception to a realistic and critical one, but also is a symbolic epitomization of their youth transition processes towards adulthood.

This study takes a biographical approach to provide a qualitative exploration of today's young Chinese international students in the US who are still in a mobile state from the perspectives of youth transitions and youth mobility/migration. With a focus on their agency against contextual and structural constraints, this study argues for a turn for 'transition process' approach in youth transitions studies and valuing the private transition supports received from and obstacles inflicted upon social relationships in shaping young people's transition processes and their followed transition outcomes. This research also aims to make a contribution to the currently popular scholarship of youth transitions studies intersected with a mobility dimension by probing into how horizontal social changes from home society to host society and vertical social changes from the past to the future influence young people's transition processes and transition outcomes, and at the same time examining how much room

young people have to exercise their agency against contextual and structural constrains in their transitions-making.

Chapter 2 Youth Migration and Youth Mobility

Introduction

The cross-border movement of international students is deemed as mobility in some literature but migration in some others. Some literature even directly term it as international student migration/mobility to avoid partiality. In order to study my research subjects from a more inclusive theoretical perspective, this study recognize international students' spatial practices as both migration and mobility.

Chinese international students in the US are usually perceived as migrants by the West both in media and in academic scholarship. Indeed they were migrants in the 1980s when most of them did not return to China (Orleans, 1988). They chose to stay abroad for a higher living standard, better career, better opportunities, and more social and political freedom (Liu, 2015: 19). And even in the 1990s and the early 21st century, many Chinese international students did not return, either, although the return rate has been rising due to China's economic growth in the 2010s. So it is possible that among today's Chinese international students in the US some are also motivated to settle down there. However, it has also been noticed that in the new century an increasing number of literature mostly by Chinese or Chinese American scholars define the cross-boundary relocations of Chinese international students to be mobility instead of migration (e.g., Guo, 2010; Liu, 2016; Martin, 2017; Mankowska, 2018; Lan, 2020). Therefore mobility theories are also believed to be vital for an account of my research subjects.

This chapter thus reviews both strands of literature that are considered relevant to explicating international students. First, I review concisely but comprehensively the

classic migration theories. Then I introduce the 'new mobilities' paradigm and discuss the intrinsic connection between 'mobility' and 'migration' before I point out the confusion between them in many literature which either use them interchangeably or oppositely. Then I present a latest theoretical proposal which argues that youth mobility is nested within youth migration (Cairns & Clemente, 2021), calling for a dissolution of the binary. And the last two sections are devoted to theories on international students: the four theoretical frameworks, push-pull model and the 'middling' international students.

Migration theories

Since the late 19th century, a variety of social science disciplines have been developing theories on what drive migration. In general, motivations of migration are often multi-faceted. Although conventional belief in causes of migration is geographical disparity in income, living standard, rights and other opportunities, those who migrate for economic reasons may also flee other difficulties and hardships in home regions. When studying migration process, it is encouraged to see migration as an intrinsic part of broader social processes rather than from a deficient perspective of seeing it as a problem (Castles et al., 2014: 26). The concept of the migratory process thus comprises the complex sets of factors and interactions that engender migration and affect its course.

There are two main paradigms of migration theories: functionalist theories and historical-structural theories. Functionalist social theories see society as a system of interdependent actors, which tends to reach and maintain equilibrium, and perceive migration as benefiting most people and maintaining equality within and between societies. Push-pull models, neoclassical theory and human capital theory fall under the functionalist school. Push-pull model (Lee, 1966) analyzes factors that push people out of places of origin and pull them into destination places, such factors

usually refer to economy, environment and demographic changes. Neoclassical migration theory sees migration as a destined consequence of the whole development process through which workers move from low wage, labor-surplus regions to high-wage, labor-scarce regions (Castles et al., 2014: 29). At the macro-level, neoclassical theory views migration as a process which optimizes the allocation of production elements (Castles et al., 2014: 30). At the micro-level, Sjaastad (1962) consider migration as an investment that increases the productivity of 'human capital', which helps to explain the 'selectivity' of migration (Castles et al., 2014: 30) and why the young and the higher skilled are more likely to migrate (Bauer & Zimmermann, 1998: 99). Because of unrealistic assumptions of migrants being rational and having prefect knowledge of the destinations, neoclassical theories often fail to explain real-life migration patterns. Furthermore, neither push-pull models nor neoclassical theories have given weight to human agency and its relations to structural conditions.

Contrary to functionalist theories, historical-structural theories pessimistically underline the ways how social, economic, cultural and political structures constrain and direct the behavior of individuals and reinforce disequilibria. They criticize that the unequal economic and political power across the world tend to reproduce such structural inequalities by exploiting cheap labor force from sending countries to serve the interests of the wealthy receiving countries, causing a 'brain drain' in the former and a 'brain gain' in the latter. Dependency theory accuses the powerful 'First World' of exploiting the resources of the 'Third world', making the latter dependent on the former and perpetuating such unequal relation by unfair terms of trade (Baeck, 1993; Frank, 1969). Later world systems theory (Amin, 1974; Wallerstein, 1974; 1980; 1984) was developed to suggest there is a world economic system in which 'core' capitalist nations benefit while less developed 'peripheral' regions are exploited. In the 1990s, globalization theory emerged and was often portrayed primarily as a global economic process characterized by liberalization and deregulation in cross-border flows of capital, technology and services, as well as the emergence of a new international division of labor (Petras & Veltmeyer, 2000). However, globalization is criticized for

being a new form of imperialism and reinforcing the power of core 'Northern' states (Hardt & Negri, 2000; Petras & Veltmeyer, 2000; Weiss, 1997). It is believed that migration has been boosted by globalization as a result of technological advancement in transport and communication, and consequently some traditional forms of migration are potentially to be replaced (de Haas, 2009; Skeldon, 2012; Zelinsky, 1971). As another historical-structural theory concerning labor market, Piore's (1979) dual (or segmented) labor market theory argues the demand for high- and low-skilled immigrant labor is structurally embedded in modem capitalist economies mediated by institutional factors as well as race and gender, dividing the labor market into primary and secondary sectors.

Both functionalist and historical-structural perspectives are too one-sided to understand adequately the complexity of migration, with the former neglecting historical causes and structural conditions and the latter overly emphasizing on political and economic structures. And both approaches portray human beings as rather passive. Since the l980s, a growing body of studies has stressed the role of migrants' agency in actively and creatively overcoming structural constraints such as immigration restrictions, social exclusion, racism and social insecurity. The new economics of labor migration (NELM) (Massey et al., 1993) sees migration as families or households' risk-sharing strategy to accumulate resources for investment in economic activities in home region. Household models have been criticized for overlooking intra-household inequalities and conflicts of interest across gender, generation, and age (de Haas & Fokkema, 2015), since migration can also be an individual strategy to escape from social control, abuse and oppression within families (Castles et al., 2014: 39).

Acknowledging social capital as an important resource for migration, migration network theory makes accounts of how social networks are formed when migrants create and maintain social ties with other migrants and with family and friends back home (Castles et al., 2014: 39). The initiation of social networks formation is usually

dependent on factors such as warfare, colonialism, conquest, occupation, military service and labor recruitment, as well as shared culture, language and geographical proximity (Massey et al., 1998; Skeldon, 1997).

Against the background of increasingly salient globalization, transnationalism theory argues that globalization has increased the ability of migrants to maintain transnational network ties across borders through modern technologies. Diaspora is an old term for transnational communities, and is now used to denote almost any migrant community, but Cohen (1997) acknowledges diaspora's particular feature of dispersal from an original homeland, often traumatically, to two or more foreign regions. Glick Schiller (1999: 203) suggests the term 'transmigrant' to identify people who participate in transnational communities based on migration. Different from migration network theories which focus on the role of social capital, transnational and diaspora theory shed lights on identity formation.

Migration systems theory taps the intrinsic relations between migration and other tangible and intangible forms of exchange, such as flows of goods, ideas, and money; and how these relations change the initial conditions both in origin and destination societies (Castles et al., 2014: 43). Mabogunje (1970) pioneered migration system theory and focused on how flows of information and new ideas back to places of origin shape migration systems. Favourable information would encourage further migration and lead to situations of 'almost organized migratory flows from particular villages to particular cities' (Mabogunje, 1970: 13). Levitt (1998) coined the term 'social remittances', as analogous to economic remittances, to refer to the return flow of ideas, behavioral repertoires, identities and social capital to sending communities. If migration happens to accompany more stories of success, a 'culture of migration' would arise seeing migration as the norm and staying home as associated with failure (Massey et al., 1993). Such migration-affected cultural change can further strengthen migration aspirations (de Haas, 2010a). The migration systems approach examines both ends of migration flows and studies all linkages between the sending and

receiving place, not just the process of migration (Castles et al., 2014: 43).

Theories on migrant networks, transnationalism, diasporas and migration systems help understand migrants' agency in creating meso-level social, cultural and economic structures which tend to make migration processes self-sustaining (Castles et al., 2014: 45). However, macro-level political and economic factors are also believed to affect migration processes (Castles et al., 2014: 46). Both functionalist and historical-structural theories assume that migration is primarily an outgrowth of geographical inequalities, and reduced inequality and stimulated development in origin societies can lower migration. However, empirical observations have shown that development often increases emigration (cf. de Haas, 2010b; Skeldon, 1997; Tapinos, 1990). One reason is that people need resources to migrate, another explanation is provided by mobility transition theory proposed by Zelinsky (1971) who argues that all forms of internal and international mobility increase in early transitional societies due to population growth, a decline in rural employment and rapid economic and technological development, and as societies develops with further industrialization, emigration falls and immigration increases.

Sen's capabilities framework (Sen, 2014; 1999) can help migration scholars have a richer understanding of human mobility (de Haas, 2009).People's capabilities and aspirations to migrate are enhanced with increased income, improved education and access to information as well as improved communication and transportation, especially when local opportunities no longer satisfy rising expectations (Castles et al., 2014: 50). Migration to seek particular jobs commensurate to skills is also a structural reason to explain high rate of migration in developed societies (Castles et al., 2014: 50). The functional perspective of capabilities and aspirations help to conceive migrants as having agency to deal with structural constraints, beyond the dichotomy between 'forced' and 'voluntary' migration. From a capabilities perspective, 'forced migration' can be self-contradictory in terms, because people need to have a certain level of agency in order to move at all (Castles et al., 2014: 51). And structural

constraints usually 'force' the most deprived ones to stay.

In a summary of the most important migration theories, one central argument is that migration should be understood as an intrinsic part of broader processes of development, social transformation and globalization, which drive migration by increasing capabilities and aspirations to move (Castles et al., 2014: 51). Thus insights from both functional theories and historical-structural theories can be helpful in making sense of particular migration typologies in particular contexts and at different levels of analysis. Despite the contribution of these earlier migration theories to global migration phenomenon, they often assume migration processes are linear and are mainly involved with labor flows and they often see internal migration and international migration separately. More recently, scholars are developing new concepts and frameworks with which to understand non-linear, circular and temporary migrations across diverse types of migrants such as affluent migrants and asylum seekers (O'reilly, 2015: 29) and are conceiving connections between internal migration and international migration as mutually facilitating (Skeldon, 2006). At the turn of new century, with the emergence of 'mobility turn' (Urry, 2000), a more inclusive concept of flows and on-going internal and international movement has been introduced to migration studies.

The 'mobility turn'

Human beings are mobile beings. We need to move for planting food, building shelters, and for studying, working, shopping, networking, travelling etc. Mobility is our nature, our basic human need and basic human right. We simply survive and thrive on mobility. However, social science in the 20th century had largely ignored or trivialised the importance of the systematic movements of people for study, work, life and leisure (Sheller & Urry, 2006: 208).

To counter sedentary perspectives in social sciences and to challenge the position of nation state as sociology's analytical unit, Urry (2000) presents the 'mobility turn' as a way of seeing the world with mobility and flow transcending national borders, which explores how different forms of mobilities－of not only people, but also tangible and intangible objects, like emotions, information, technologies, risks, etc.－produce and reproduce social relations on local, regional, and global scales (Urry, 2007). The 'new mobilities' paradigm (Sheller & Urry, 2006) challenges both research subjects and research methodologies of social science.

Thanks to the non-stop advancement of modern technologies, the lives of all walks of people including tourists, workers, students, migrants, asylum-seekers, businessmen, soldiers and so on have become increasingly mobile, producing a more dynamic and more networked social pattern for both the mobile actors and the sedentary. Materials like glasses and laptops as mobile people's belongings are also on the move. Mobilities transform the social life of people into a more interdependent, more flexible and more intricate networked system regardless of the distance from each other. The new forms of connectivity between human bodies spurred by communication devices generate new forms of belongings.

The image of political-economic space as a complex, tangled mosaic of superimposed and interpenetrating nodes, levels, scales, and morphologies has become more appropriate to describe the modern interstate system compared to the traditional Cartesian model of homogenous, self-enclosed and contiguous blocks of territory (Brenner, 2004: 66), and the transformation from national-territorial sense of statehood to more 'complex, polymorphic, and multiscalar regulatory geographies' (Brenner, 2004: 67) is believed to be 'fundamentally related to the emergence of complex mobility systems and their restructuring of both space and time' (Hanam et al., 2006: 3)

Mobilities cannot happen without the support of infrastructural and institutional

moorings, which form 'interdependent systems of immobile platforms (transmitters, roads, garages, stations, aerials, airports, docks) structure mobility experiences' (Elliott & Urry, 2010: 20). Systems of immobility enable mobility, yet mobility is regulated by various regimes and is accessed by different degrees of 'motility' which refers to capacity or potential for mobility (Kaufmann, 2002). Motility is mediated by structures and hierarchies of power and position across race, gender, age and class, ranging from the local to the global (Tesfahuney, 1998: 501, as cited in Hanam et al., 2006: 3).

In addition to physical mobility, new forms of 'virtual' and 'imaginative' mobility are becoming increasingly common owing to the advanced information technology and in many cases can substitute physical mobility efficiently when the latter is restricted. And the continuous advancement and proliferation of internet and mobile technologies redefine the social interactions between people, objects and events, as well as the relations between private and public space (Morley, 2002), which are changing the nature of travel and of communications conducted at-a-distance (Hanam et al., 2006: 4). As there is increasing inter-dependencies and convergence between physical transport and virtual communication, it is encouraged to look beyond physical travel and pay attention to how such convergence formulates a new kind of nexus embracing various arts of co-presence (Hanam et al., 2006: 4). And human mobility at the global level is inseparable from local concerns about daily social practices involving a variety of mobility and immobility of both human and information, forming complex interconnectivities in an obligatory way.

The new mobilities paradigm reckons that being on the move can involve sets of 'occasioned' activities (Lyons & Urry, 2005), some of which might be considered as important episodes affecting one's process of life. This perspective posits that the time spent on mobility is not a waste, but a resource for social activities on the move towards the destination, adding another value to the function of mobility. Furthermore, 'places' (destinations) and 'people' (visitors) are not clearly distinct from each other

in the new mobilities paradigm, rather, there is a complex relationality of places and persons connected through performances that are intermittently mobile 'within' the destination place itself (Sheller & Urry, 2004). Thus there are hybrid systems of 'materialities and mobilities' that combine objects, technologies, and socialities, and they are produced and reproduced out of those distinct places (Sheller & Urry, 2006: 214). In the new mobilities paradigm, places themselves are seen to be about relationships, about the placing of peoples, materials, images, and the systems of difference that they perform (Sheller & Urry, 2006: 214), since we know our own places and positions through spatial references to other people and objects around us.

In the 21st century, people are increasingly reliant on new machines to move through space and to establish social connections. These machines are portable and closely attached to the moving bodies. Such reliance facilitates the emergence of complex mobility systems that are simply becoming more and more complex 'based upon specialized and arcane forms of expertise' (Hanam et al., 2006: 5). Moreover, such systems are much more interdependent so that individual journeys or pieces of communication depend upon multiple systems that need to function and interface successfully with each other (Hanam et al., 2006: 5).

In sum, the mobilities paradigm challenges the ways how social science research has been studied from a relatively 'a-mobile' perspective until the turn of the 21st century. It offers perspectives that look beyond both territorial fixity and disciplinary boundaries. And mobilities in this paradigm is used in a broad and inclusive sense referring to movement of not only the corporeal but also other tangible and intangible beings. Migration studies deserve to be one of the first to be examined from mobility perspective, since migration has been continually referred to as one of the most prominent forms of mobility (e.g., Glick Schiller & Salazar, 2013). Migration studies are crucial to the field of mobilities research (Hanam et al., 2006: 10). Studies of migration, diasporas and transnational citizenship already criticized the bounded and static categories of nation, ethnicity, community, place and state within much social

science (Hanam et al., 2006: 10). Thus the relation between migration, return migration, tourism, transnationalism and diaspora is critical to mobilities research, which implies that research focuses should be devoted to both obligatory and voluntary forms of travel.

Migration studies explore the movement of people and indicate a one-time horizontal social change from place of origin to destination, while mobility studies interlock the movement of people more systematically with the flows of information, ideas and objects supported by the immobile moorings across the global community and imply constant social changes from the past to future. In Urry's (2000) elucidation of 'Sociology beyond Societies', the existing sociology of migration is incidentally far too limited in its concerns to be very useful for reconstructing the 'social as society' into the 'social as mobility' (Urry, 2000: 3). To him, migration or other kinds of semi-permanent geographical movement is just one form of mobility (Urry, 2009: 480). Mobility includes all types of territorial movements (Hyndman, 2012: 248). However, it is unknown since when there have been two clusters of literature that address the relations between 'migration' and 'mobility' differently: one uses the two terms interchangeably, the other perceives them as having disparate connotations from each other or even as opposite to each other.

Confusion between 'migration' and 'mobility'

There are too many literature, which use 'migration' and 'mobility' interchangeably or redundantly put them in one sentence denoting the same meaning, to be reviewed here, so I only address those which distinguish the nuances between these two intrinsically related concepts.

Two decades ago around the same time when Urry was proposing a 'mobility turn' (2000), Bell and Ward (2000) made an endeavor to explore the conceptual links and

substantive differences between temporary and permanent mobility. They argue that temporary mobility is distinctive from permanent migration in dimensions of duration, frequency and seasonality, since temporary moves are repetitive events of variable duration involving seasonal peaks, while migration is in general a single and lasting relocation to a new residence which occurs more or less evenly throughout the year (Smith, 1989, 1994). However, when they contend that temporary mobility implies a return 'home', they find the concept of 'usual residence' complicating, since an increasing proportion of the population have no single residence (Behr & Gober, 1982). In terms of the common features shared by temporary mobility and permanent migration, they contend that both forms of movement can be interpreted within a production-consumption framework, for example, business trip versus labor migration, and tourism versus amenity-led migration. In the end, they conclude that in some cases temporary and permanent mobility act in a complementary, symbiotic relationship while in others the former may substitute for or act as a precursor to the latter. Despite the effort of trying to elaborate temporary and permanent movements, Bell and Ward (2000) directly use the terms 'temporary mobility', 'circular mobility', 'permanent migration' and even 'temporary migration' without any justification, causing confusions, and meanwhile, they somehow have accidentally made 'mobility' and 'migration' interchangeable.

Classification of actors who conduct migration or mobility is another perspective to detect the different usages of the two terms. Based on literature review, Al Ariss (2010: 340) compares the terms 'migrant' and 'self-initiated expatriate (SIE)' in four dimensions: first, migrants are presented as moving from developing countries to developed countries (Baruch et al., 2007: 99), while SIEs relocate from developed countries (Doherty & Dickmann, 2008) and engage in an exploration 'across international boundaries' (Richardson & Zikic, 2007: 179); second, the term 'migrant' implies a necessity to move across boundaries (Baruch et al., 2007; Al Ariss, 2010) whereas SIEs decide to 'relocate to a country of their choice' (Tharenou, 2010); third, while migrants are supposed to 'find permanent jobs overseas, and would decide to

stay in the more developed economies' (Carr et al., 2005: 387), SIEs are seen to have more 'temporariness' in their choice of country of residence (Agullo & Egawa, 2009); fifth, the term 'migrant' implies negative connotations like 'unwelcomed social product' (Sayad, 2004: 291) and 'inferiorized other' (Berry, 2009), in contrast, SIEs are 'accustomed to interacting and motivated to interact with host country nationals' (Peltokorpi & Froese, 2009: 1106), and research subjects in (mainly Western) literature on SIEs usually do not include 'non-white' who undertake an international career experience in the West (Zikic et al., 2008).

In the European context, King and Lulle (2016: 30-31) note a discursive shift from 'migration' to the more neutral term 'mobility' in the terminology used by the European Commission, probably because migration is being seen as a 'threat' in many European countries (King et al., 2016: 8). 'Migration' implies that migrants will stay and become a burden on the welfare state, whereas 'mobility' signals that people will not stay but move on, either back to their home country or onwards to another one (King et al., 2016: 8). There has been a trend to describe intra-European migration as 'mobility', but those from outside the EU of 'third-country nationals' as 'migration' (Boswell & Geddes, 2011: 3). This trend objectively tends to Europeanize and monopolize 'mobility' and institutionalize a de facto discrimination against non-EU citizens.

As discussed above, in many literature migration is considered as related to negative connotations, whereas mobility implies a certain hint of capacity, power and freedom. But most such differences are man-made, among which many are against the spirit of Urry's 'mobility turn' (2000) which presumes migration, as one aspect of social life being contingent or predictable, linear or non-linear, one-time permanent or temporary, to be just a form of mobility. The old dichotomies of forced versus voluntary, temporary versus permanent, legal versus illegal blur as both the motivations and modalities of migration become much more diverse (King, 2002: 89). The artificial bifurcation between migration and mobility not only hinders our understanding of the

global patterns of migration, but also betrays blatant or internalized racism or regionalism produced by and reproducing social inequality across the globe.

Youth mobility nested within youth migration

Migration perspective has been increasingly contested in making sense of young people who around the whole world today are much more mobile than their predecessors in the past than their older counterparts of today. As opposed to many literature which use 'migration' and 'mobility' either interchangeably or as oppositely, Cairns and Clemente (2021) sees them as in a nested relationship rather than distinct in young peoples' spatial practices.

Migration practiced by young people has fragmented into disparate episodes (Cairns & Clemente, 2021: 1). Rather than becoming migrants in the classical sense of moving across borders with a clear and pre-planned trajectory, today's young people tend to practice migration intermittently, in an often circular manner and for reasons such as education, work and training (Cairns & Clemente, 2021: 1). Young people's migration decisions are actually mobility decisions at the outset (Cairns, 2021b: 26) for their assumed transient journeys, but they can become migrants later at some point in a relatively tacit and unconscious way (Cairns, 2021b: 25). Such argument is justified by two temporal perspectives. Mobile young people, especially those who haven't set one-time settlement in their agenda at the beginning, may not even identify themselves as migrants, especially in the very early stages of their migration routes (Cairns & Clemente, 2021: 1). But if we take into account their previous mobility experiences or current mobile state, either short or long duration of stays abroad, we come to realize that they are already practicing migration (Cairns & Clemente, 2021: 1). From the second temporal perspective, mobility abroad during the youth phase can be seen as preludes to a longer duration of stay abroad later in life (Cairns & Clemente, 2021: 1). These two temporal perspectives can serve as heuristic

tools to dissolve the dichotomy of youth migration and youth mobility, but they should be always used as a combined approach to offer a developmental perspective to understand today's mobile young people, otherwise neither single one of them, especially not the former one alone, can sufficiently uphold the reasoning of the already-being-practiced migration by mobile youth.

The logic behind youth migration being constituted of episodic and sporadic youth mobility is that what happens at a young age matters a great deal to future professional development, as this can be the time of life when the knowledge and skills required to become a migrant are generated, along with an awareness of how to make effective decisions about where and when to go (Cairns & Clemente, 2021: 1). Previous mobility experiences and current mobile state contribute to the possible formation of future migration. This idea also views a migration trajectory as fluid, flexible and fragmented. Instead of conducting a one-time permanent migration from one place to another, many mobile young people move on, return, lay over and circulate (Cairns et al., 2021: 13). This means youth migration is seen from a dynamic perspective acknowledging the incremental process interpolated with mobility and immobility. And such episodic mobility and immobility can be either voluntary or a response to contextual constraints. Voluntary mobility and immobility in episodic manners can be organic parts of a migration project, while involuntary ones due to structural constraints are usually fragmented 'hard-to-connect phases' of a migration trajectory and are 'at a high economic and emotional cost, imbued with risk, precarity and unpredictable outcomes' (Cairns et al., 2021: 14). As a result of this fragmentation, young people need to make effort and invest resources in a reflexive way to become and remain mobile. Thus spatial choices are premediated by young people with monetary and emotional cost rather than being random or unintended.

Constructing migration out of mobility requires mobile young people to think reflexively and to inherit, accumulate and invest mobility capital (Cairns et al., 2021: 14). Young people's agency in making mobility choices is mediated by the resources

they have allied to the knowledge and information available to them. Their choices of mobility can be motivated by desires beyond immediate economic opportunities for the recognition of becoming part of a globalized mobility culture or for the pursuit of mobile lifestyles that offer adventures and excitement. The aspiration to make a better life for oneself via mobility is shared by both the privileged and disadvantaged youth, with the former wishing to 'consolidate or multiply their wealth' and the latter 'without resources or support in an attempt to escape hardship' (Cairns & Clemente, 2021: 2). Although the former are usually seen as good consumers and net contributors to the host society, while the latter may be marked as vulnerable and a social problem due to their dependence on public largess (Cairns & Clemente, 2021: 2), both may encounter similar challenges, especially those youth who are privileged at home but are excluded cultural others in another society.

Young people's episodic mobility at the time of undertaking are usually justified by the goal of acquiring new skills or credentials, or finding a job commensurate to their qualities, or just sight-seeing or having fun, but 'it is only when this formative mobility is conjoined with later in life mobility episodes' that the significance of what has happened before begins to surface, and in such condition 'the antecedents enable the subsequent sojourns to happen, thus establishing a spatial continuum' (Cairns, 2021a: 17). The preceding mobility moments of young people are also a process of socialization through which knowledge, information, values and dispositions collected and cultivated while on the move are internalized into the young bodies. These internalized knowledge, skills, information, values and dispositions may therefore have an influence on one's future decision-making on a longer term of migration trajectory which is created 'out of what may have appeared to be unrelated, even ephemeral experiences' (Cairns, 2021a: 18). Then the collection of short-term or circulatory mobility episodes combined now becomes migration and 'young people learn how to be migrants through being mobile' (Cairns, 2021a: 18). Social structures can to some extent shape or curtail young people's mobility practices, but it doesn't mean that young people are passive in this mobility process. On the contrary, it is

'generally up to individual young people to put together' real or seemingly discrete, disparate and disconnected mobility pieces into a holistic migration project. Young people develop new competences and skills through overcoming unexpected difficulties and restrictions while being on the move and gain confidence in dealing with future uncertainties, which in turn facilitate their motility and encourage their further mobility. The basic idea then is that 'mobility produces mobility' (Samuk et al., 2021), and participating in one program can lead to joining another (Cairns, 2021a: 18), and mobility fractions can finally form a large migration project.

In order to theorize a fuller range of spatial practices among youth rejecting the dichotomy of 'mobility' and 'migration' and emphasizing the connections and fluidity of youth spatiality, the new youth migration paradigm 'the spatial consumer' is introduced (Cairns, 2021a: 19). Despite the economic implication of its term, this paradigm aims to integrate not only problematized migration involved with economic and political motives, but also neutral mobility such as student mobility, training programs and the imperative mobility to seek employment opportunities, and also privileged mobility for becoming part of the global cosmopolitan culture (Cairns, 2021a: 19). In this paradigm, mobility is seen as both a means of seeking economic gains and an opportunity for personal growth and many other intangible rewards. Therefore a spatial consumer is an idealized neoliberal subject, the spatial self-entrepreneur (Cairns, 2021a: 20) who makes reflexive choices based on what fits his/her personality and professional needs and desires, and values self-discipline or reflexive entrepreneurialism as an important means to deal with a mobility imperative required by the neoliberal governance of education, training systems and labor markets (Cairns, 2021a: 19-20).

Although the new paradigm 'the spatial consumer' simultaneously integrates mobility and migration, seeing these two modalities as intrinsically linked and nested, with the former being constructed out of fragments of the latter (Cairns, 2021a: 21), such paradigm still betrays a bias towards youth of the higher class, the North and the West,

since the most young bodies of the South subject to varied contextual constraints do not have enough resources or means to 'consume' and maintain mobility, especially the episodic ones that can be constructed into migration. Hence it still hasn't solved the fundamental issue of the dichotomy between the privileged mobility/migration of the North and the problematized migration of the South yet. Second, the theoretical idea of migration being constructed out of mobility does not assume young people to be migrants by default, rather it sees young people as potential migrants. In reviewing França and Padilla's (2021) work which studies the experiences of students travelling from Portuguese-speaking African countries to Brazil, Cairns (Cairns, 2021a: 18-19) concludes that due to a lack of social integration probably caused by contextual and structural constraints, young people may remain mobile students rather than become future migrants, making the exchange mobility experience a one-off adventure rather than a preliminary stage in a future migration process, therefore not everyone can learn how to be a migrant through being mobile at the same pace or in the same manner. It means that in his theoretical argument mobile young people are potential migrants instead of already-migrants, although they are recognized as already being practicing migration. Third, this theory of mobility nested within migration can not explain those international students who instrumentally use their sojourn abroad to gather credentials and specialized knowledge for their future career at home country and do not find social integration in the host country necessary.

Four theoretical frameworks of international student migration

International student are perhaps the most typical mobile youth among all. Following the above discussed theory of 'youth mobility nested in youth migration', student mobility, whether for a semester exchange or a degree study, is considered a form of migration in itself and is interpreted as a preliminary step in a larger migration project. In looking at educational free movers, we can learn more about where migration starts, and sometimes where it stops, taking into additional consideration the roles played by

public and policy discourses that define 'migration' (Cairns & Clemente, 2021: 7). This section mainly draws upon the four theoretical frameworks of international student migration developed by King and Sondhi (2018) based on earlier studies to present the latest relevant theories for studying international students.

The first theoretical frame considers international student migration as a subset of highly skilled migration (King & Sondhi, 2018: 178). From a macro-economic perspective, the host-country attracts foreign students for improving the supply of highly qualified human capital into their domestic labor markets, causing brain drain from the source countries while countered by a discursive shift to 'brain circulation', including 'brain return' to the origin country (King & Sondhi, 2018: 178). The directionality of this movement is often seen to be South to North or North to North, though this situation is changing as there are research that examine other mobilities of highly skilled labor (Ortiga et al., 2017). From the human-capital perspective, international student migration can be seen as an investment to obtain foreign knowledge and credentials in order to gain an edge in the domestic labor market of the origin country after graduation and returning home., Or it can be seen as the first step towards a high-income international career as part of a migration project or international mobility (Findlay et al., 2017). Therefore, international student migration is believed to be conducive to the creation of an elite international labor market, although it is contestable whether students, especially undergraduates and younger ones, can be regarded as highly skilled professionals since they have not officially entered the labor market yet.

Secondly, international student migration is seen as both a product and an underlying mechanism of the globalization of higher education (King & Sondhi, 2018: 178). This functional perspective sees higher education as commodities in the global education market being sold to international students whose educational desire can not be met in home country due to fierce competition for limited places, or relatively lower quality of education, or lower value of degree credentials, or simply just insufficient supply

of education opportunities (Yang, 2003). Indeed higher education has been commodified, especially in Anglophone countries. Relying on their English language as the lingua franca and their world-recognized higher education quality and credentials, the US, the UK, Canada and Australia have been the dominant providers for international higher education. It can be said that it is a win-win for both higher education institutions in these developed countries and for international students since the former profit from selling quality education 'products' and the latter have their education aspirations fulfilled.

The third conceptual framework is inspired by Urry's 'mobility turn' (2000) and considers international student migration as part of global youth mobility cultures, which privilege mobilities practiced by young people, especially the ones with sufficient resources for travelling freely and exploring different places and cultures with an adventurous spirit, signaling a desirable youth lifestyle. However, the main protagonists of the 'mobility turn' (principally Cresswell, 2006; Urry, 2007) barely observe international students as their main study objects for their discussions of the mobilities paradigm (King & Sondhi, 2018: 178). In the youth mobility framework, international student migration itself is a motivation for experiencing the process of mobility. Thus the overseas study is consumed as a 'product' in the global market celebrating a 'rite of passage'. To achieve academic progress and absorbing knowledge remains important during study abroad, but the more priority goal is to be immersed in another culture enjoying the process of learning the different ways of beings, establishing and maintaining new social contacts, and satisfying all kinds of sensory expectations. Nevertheless, such youth mobility is costly and are often considered as 'luxuries' afforded by Northern youth, especially the white Western ones. When Southern youth migration shows some signs of youth mobility, it is often perceived as an abnormal exception made by the nouveau riche (e.g., Waters, 2006). When Southern young bodies are on the move for the process of mobility itself, their mobility practices are usually interpreted as trying to follow the activities of 'white privilege' in order to show off their privileged class identity, as if only the white

young people have the right and resources to consume mobility (Roos, 2017) while the Southern ones are not supposed to do the same. Echoing the above reviewed 'migrant' versus 'self-initiated expatriate (SIE)' (Al Ariss, 2010: 340), this youth mobility framework also tends to produce social inequality in a discursive way. As Beck and Beck-Gernsheim (2002) argue, the more diverse places that students have visited, the greater agency they will have in terms of creative and individualized self-identification. Mobile students often unwittingly or deliberately distinguish themselves from their sedentary counterparts for their spectacular mobile biography. In the language of Bourdieu's (1986) 'forms of capital', the mobile students are in possession of not only international cultural capital and international social capital, but also 'mobility capital' (Murphy-Lejeune, 2002) that advantages them in intercultural encounters and better prepares their further mobility.

The fourth theoretical framework follows the conceptualization of the privileged youth mobility and introduces the class analysis to distinguish international students from the static ones despite the proclaimed outdatedness of 'class' as a crucial category in contemporary fluid and mobile societies (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 2002; Urry, 2000). Social class is still valid in analyzing contemporary social phenomena including international student migration. In most societies, access to higher education, especially to the key universities, are already mediated by students' social-economic backgrounds. Comparably, the more expensive foreign higher education would even require a much higher affordance. However, class boundaries are not fixed but mobile and permeable with some climbing up and some slipping down. In studying Hong Kong Chinese students' migration to Canada, Waters (2006) finds that overseas study at prestigious Western universities is a way that the elite and upper-middle classes can maintain their distinction from the rising and expanding middle class. Thus international student migration can be deemed as a manifestation of social stratification in the sending country.

All the factors that generate and stimulate international student migration/mobility

mentioned across these four theoretical frames can be encapsulated by the push-pull model which has been one of the most widely used theories for migration studies for many years (Ravenstein, 1885; Stouffer, 1940). Both home and host countries have push (minus) and pull (plus) factors that affect migrants' decision-making (Lee, 1966: 51). Later, many scholars in education started to explain international students' migration with push-and-pull framework (Agarwal & Winkler, 1985; Altbach, 1991; McMahon, 1992; Mazzarol et al., 1997; Mazzarol & Soutar, 2002; Azmat, et al, 2012) Tan (2013) regroups the four factors as the following: (1) domestic push factors, (2) external push factors, (3) domestic pull factors, and (4) external pull factors, and argue that students leave their home countries to pursue study in another country when the pushing force exceeds the pulling force. Push-pull model can help identify specific factors that influence international students' decision-making of moving abroad, but does not inform well how factors combined cause international student migration, moreover, some motivations like 'to expand horizon' are in a strict sense neither pulled or pushed, but a disposition or a preference nursed in specific social contexts.

The 'middling' international students

Both migration and mobility studies like to classify research subjects who move voluntarily across borders into two binary categories of the elites and the unskilled/low-skilled 'immigrants' (Robertson, 2021: 51). The former refers to 'expatriates', 'cosmopolitans' or 'globals' who mobilize their economic and cultural resources to circulate relatively freely around the world (see, e.g., Bauman, 1998; Sklair, 2001; Elliott & Urry, 2010), and the latter 'migrant workers' from the Global South who leave home where there is a deprived condition to seek economic gains and form a migrant underclass in host countries (see, e.g., Constable, 1997 ; Giles et al., 2014; Kathiravelu, 2016).. Such dichotomy glosses over the stratification within and across categories, obscures the hard realities of the many highly skilled, educated

migrants who cross borders as unskilled migrants leaving their unconvertible human capital behind at the border, and especially leave out another key populations — international students who, perhaps more than nearly all other groups, are the quintessential avatars of globalization (Favell et al., 2007: 16).

While international students have traditionally been neglected in migration studies, some researchers tend to see international students as elites. Based on an empirical study of UK students abroad, Waters and Brooks (2011) have detected that many UK students abroad generally confined their socio-cultural interactions to an international student community where experience of cultural diversity is fulfilled to a certain extent, and they reach to a conclusion that the separation and isolation of the international student community do serve a useful function in terms of the wider process of elite class formation and social reproduction. However, such claim of UK international students being elite migrants is not solid. Waters and Brooks (2011) never call these UK international students as 'migrants' in the first place although they draw upon student migration framework, as if they tactically avoid the use of the term 'migrant' in defining them, just like how Cairns (2021a) is reluctant to call mobile youth as migrants but acknowledges their practice of cross-border movements as migration. Secondly, experience of cultural diversity alone does not result in an elite migrant status. In their study, students' socioeconomic resource is not mentioned. And lastly, is it appropriate to classify student consumers as elites at all? Most international students are consumers mainly relying on parents' financial support rather than producers who earn income for their labor contribution. Whereas many highly skilled elite migrants generally have secured an occupation prior to migration, frequently moving within the same company (Beaverstock, 2005).

Contrasting Waters and Brooks' (2011) theoretical expectations of international students to be elites, Luthra and Platt (2016) use the concept of 'middling transnationals' or 'middling migrants' (Conradson & Latham, 2005b) to posit that current student migrants are likely to show greater variation in terms of origins, skills,

social position and settlement aims. They (Luthra & Platt, 2016) believe that the accounts of elite student migrants are likely to be an accurate representation of some international students, but not many others. Due to the expansion of higher education across the globe, students of diverse social backgrounds have also gained access to international education. And the visa policy may have restricted the movement of some non-elite students who aspire to move across borders for education, making student migration look like an elite phenomenon. The perspective of 'middling migrants' argue that technological advancement and increasing globalization have not only made the already-existed international circulation of global elites smoother, but also significantly lowered costs to enable the international mobility of the middle class (Conradson & Latham, 2005a; Scott, 2006). In the literature on the 'middling' transnationals or immigrants, research subjects are found to experience constraints and struggles in the host countries but at the same time stick to their own agendas of various non-pecuniary aims (Luthra & Platt, 2016: 320-321). Compared to elites who can relatively frictionlssly transfer within a multinational firm across borders, middling transnationals are more likely to have to go through the bureaucratic procedures of legal system and the labor market of the hosting country on their own, and to deal with the uncertainties, temporariness and constraints (Mavroudi & Warren, 2013; Robertson & Runganaikaloo, 2014). Upward social mobility or even just maintaining social position through geographical migration is easier said than done, as Rutten and Verstappen (2014) find that Indian middle-class youth's migration to the UK ends up in low-status, semi-skilled jobs, and this uncertainty and downward social mobility leads to dissatisfaction and frustration. However, many middling migrants who include non-economic goals in their migration project at the beginning see these apparently unwanted outcomes in a positive way as they have experienced the process of migration and acquired language proficiency despite their poor economic outcomes (Luthra et al., 2014).

Using the specific case study of Pakistani students migrating to London, Luthra and Platt (2016) have identified among their sample of migrants for education a small elite

group and two middling groups 'networked middling' and 'middle-class middling'. While the elite students group had a higher socioeconomic position and a more cosmopolitan disposition and had better educational and occupational outcomes, the 'networked middling' student groups displayed more traditional characteristics of migration flows (Luthra & Platt, 2016: 338). Drawing on the concept of 'substitution effect' (De Haas, 2011), Luthra and Platt (2016: 338) analyze that 'networked middling' students use their international student identity as an alternative channel for migration circumventing the more restrictive work and family reunification migration policies. In contrast, the 'middle-class middling' group showed both some intermediate features and some characteristics that might be explained by the internationalization of student flows from lower-income countries with an expanding middle class (Luthra & Platt, 2016: 338). Despite the proposition and identification of the 'middling student migrants', Luthra and Platt (2016) consider those minority international students among their samples as elites and other majority ones as middling migrants, ignoring the non-labor nature of international students. Both elite and 'middling' migrants are usually full-time employees, but international students are not, at least not full-time workers.

Summary

Considering Chinese international students as mobility actors, potential migrants and young people, this theoretical chapter has reviewed a string of theories that are assumed to be relevant to making sense of their boundary-crossing movement in the hopes of exploiting all the potential theoretical points that will be valid in expounding my research participants.

Through teasing out these theories, some theoretical nuances have been identified. First, migration is just a form of mobility and mobility implies non-linearity, intermittency and circulation when referring to geographical movement of people.

Second, some literature tend to privilege international students from the Global North and problematize the ones from the Global South. Third, latest literature that are committed to dissolving the dichotomy of migration and mobility for studies of international students acknowledge the cross-border flow of international students as both migration and mobility but still consider them as potential migrants rather than already migrants. These theoretical nuances can serve as justifications for my conceptual framework which views today's Chinese international students as mobility actors and potential migrants and their spatial practices as both migration and mobility.

Chapter 3 Mobile Youth in Transition to Adulthood

Introduction

Young people in their twenties are usually taken for granted as adults having a series of civil right such as voting, being voted, driving, drinking, working etc. since the law in most societies considers them as adults starting from 18. However, whether they have really reached an independent adulthood status is of a concern among social scientists, who have formulated an academic platform on which young people are being elaboratively under research. Such research discipline is outspokenly called youth studies. While having a sociological core, youth studies draw contributions from geography, history, anthropology, education, politics, cultural and media studies (Woodman & Bennett, 2015:1).

Youth studies, that are widely employed in the scholarship, were developed within the 'Western' context with 'Western' young people as research subjects. Whether these youth theories can be adapted to explaining youth in other parts of the world merits further detection, albeit there are already some works applying these theories to make account of young people in the Global South. Chinese international students as Southern youth have barely been studied from the perspective of youth studies. Assuming youth studies theories are at least partly valid in studying Chinese international students, this chapter reviews these theories to lay a foundation for the analysis of empirical data that I have collected for this research project.

Youth studies theories used to assume young people to be sedentary, but an increasing crop of scholarly attention has been focusing on young people who are on the move. Chinese international students are without doubts mobile youth. Thus a discussion of theories on mobile youth is a desirable theoretical building for an empirical study of

these mobile youth from China. While believing youth transitions theories are more relevant to my study, in this chapter I still review both approaches of youth cultures and youth transitions. Then I introduce the extant efforts in dissolving this binary division before looking into youth studies in and of the Global South. Afterwards, I make a discussion on currently popular topic in youth studies — making youth transitions while being on the move — and propose a theoretical model of 'youth transition processes' which many mobile youth of today are pursuing. And the final section of the chapter argues how youth transition processes have been under-researched and calls for a 'process turn' in youth transitions studies.

Youth culture

'Youth culture' emerged as a categorical phenomenon in the 'West' in the 20th century, more precisely in the immediate post-war era (Carosso, 2012: 132; Weinstein, 1995: 62) which witnessed increased standards of living yet with continued poverty, more leisure time, consumption culture and the ongoing larger cultural changes of modernization. It was Talcott Parsons (1942) that first introduced the concept of 'youth culture' referring to the values of irresponsibility, athletics and sexual attractiveness among American young people who desired freedom to develop a certain level of autonomy. During the 1950s and 1960s radical theorists emphasized that youth had the potential ability to initiate and promote social and cultural change (Jones, 2009). Paul Goodman (1956) presupposed that rebelling or initiating fundamental change is a social function and believed that young people who had no opportunity to express their autonomy and creativity were being marginalized by society. With an inspection of the student protests that arose from the early 1950s in the US and in Europe signaling political awakening of young people, Theodore Roszak (1968) pinpointed an emerging 'counterculture' among youth who rejected the 'technocratic society' but promoted an 'alternative society' with new values and sensibilities. In consideration of young people finding themselves largely excluded

from economic opportunity, John Rowntree and Margaret Rowntree (1968) saw in the counterculture the rise of youth as a potentially new revolutionary 'class'.

Collective cultural practices offered young people a 'space' where they could find a sense of belonging in managing the tensions of growing up in a time of profound social change. Common interests in music, clothing, dance and style of expressions as well as similar social background were all resources for young people to utilize to 'survive' through chaotic ages. However, people are born into social classes which were complexly stratified with distinct 'ways of life', modified by region and neighborhood (Brake, 1985: 3). Therefore, from birth, people are inserted into particular configurations of meanings which establish the context, values and ideas by which they understand and negotiate their social worlds and natural environments (Wyn & White, 1997: 72). In British scholarship, a series of studies emerged during the 1950s which argued that subcultural formation by working-class youth revealed their inability to integrate in society. The Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies (CCCS) further developed theory of subculture and suggested that cultural practices were important means for young people to resist dominant ideas (Hall & Jefferson, 1976). The approach used in *Resistance through Rituals* (Hall & Jefferson, 1976) is to assume that youth subcultures belong to the working class deriving from the experience of subordination and subcultural activity is interpreted as a form of symbolic politics to particular class and cultural experiences (Blackman, 2005: 6).

Youth subcultures are faced with many critiques. Paul Willis (1972: xlv-xlvi) states that there has not been a vigorous analysis of the status of the culture that a sub-culture is supposed to be 'sub' to yet and accuses the notion 'subculture' implies a relative positioning which seems to give an altogether misleading sense of absoluteness and dominance of the main culture. Blackman (2005: 7) argues social class is no longer a determinate variable of youth subcultures although it remains a crucial factor among others. Cohen (1987) and Bennett (1999) point out that the CCCS focuses on abstract forms of textual and semiotic analysis and downplay the

messy lived 'reality' of these youth subculturalists whose voices were often ignored. CCCS youth subcultures theory is also routinely dismissed for its neglect of gender (McRobbie, 1991), race (Nayak, 2003; Huq, 2006), and women, ethnic and sexual minorities youth in the Western societies in general are also less visible in the studies of youth culture.

Since the 1980s youth culture studies have been influenced by postmodern theories. Concepts of risk, individualization and globalization started to frequently occur in youth culture researches. Miles (2000) contends that young people are more immersed in personal lifestyle projects. While other studies argue that collective youth subcultures still persists (Hodkinson, 2002). Some other studies also support such opinion that there is the continuing popularity of older forms of subcultural activity appealing to young and not so young adults (Bennett & Hodkinson, 2012). In the early 2000s, 'post-subcultural' theory criticizes subcultural theory for rigidly associating social background to subcultural affiliation and breaks down the idea of youth style as reflecting cultural homogeneity while at the same time allowing for differing degrees of investment and commitment (Bennett, 2015: 46) and has recontextualized youth (sub)cultures as more fluid and characterized by shifting associations (Bennett, 1999). Hence, young people may simultaneously involve several different youth cultural affiliations across, for example, music, sport and digital media. In a nutshell, what post-subcultural theorists are essentially specifying is a need to embrace a more complex and diverse range of youth cultural practices under a broader and more nuanced heading of 'youth culture' (Bennett, 2015: 47).

More recently youth culture, subculture and post-subculture theories all have criticized their traditional bias of 'closing off' any discussion over 'ordinary' youth but 'clustering' around the more spectacular dimension of youth life (Bennet, 2015: 42). As McRobbie observed that 'few writers seemed interested in what happened when a mod went home after a weekend on speed, only what happened out there on the streets mattered' (1989: 113), it appeared as if subculturalists were created by

subculture theory rather than real young human beings. Young people's cultural lives are complex and embrace a broad range of practices ranging from the spectacular to the mundane to varying degrees. Youth cultures researchers who take up a life-course perspective have noted that some people who are in middle ages and even older ages maintain their involvement with and emotional connection to a particular 'youth' culture beyond what is normally considered youth (Bennett & Hodkinson, 2012). From readers' perspective, when reading works that fall into the youth culture tradition, we need to remind ourselves that highly visible changes in expression can occur without any meaningful change in underlying relationships and without understandings of the unjust and exploitative nature of life in advanced capitalist society (Furlong, 2015: 20). For youth culture to continue having critical value as an analytical tool in youth research, its conceptual parameters will need to be broadened (Bennet, 2015: 52).

Studies employing a cultural perspective focus on youth cultural forms mostly seen in music, fashion, art, actual or seemingly deviant activities which have been constantly developing themselves portraying young people's helplessness, disaffection, indignation and rebellion and at the same time displaying their agency. Scholars of youth culture tend to illustrate the meaning of experiences and events to young people from an ethnographic lens prioritizing small-scale qualitative methods, with the aim of featuring young peoples' creativity and resistance to the status quo (Bennett, 2002). Traditional youth cultural analyses center on spectacular working class youth subcultures (Hall & Jefferson, 1976; Hebdige, 1979), later notions of 'club culture' (Redhead, 1990) and 'post' subculture have come to the fore (Muggleton, 1998; Bennett & Kahn-Harris, 2004). One of the latest appeal has been called for broadening its research spotlight onto mundane aspects of young people's cultural engagement. Youth cultures research may have the theoretical and methodological tools to highlight how young people build meaning and creatively shape their lives, but it is limited in its capability to understand the structural limitations faced by young people.

Youth Transitions

Youth transitions approach is widely recognized as youth culture's 'twin' in the discipline of youth studies (Cohen, 2003). These 'twin tracks' are understood as two 'dominant poles' into which diverse youth studies can be categorized. In Western literature, youth transitions are a concept referring to a period for youths of physical and social change that falls between childhood and adulthood in the life course (Cieslik & Simpson, 2013: chapter 2: 2). It focuses on transitions to 'adulthood' statuses, one of the most common markers of which is the completion of study and entry into the full-time labor market. However, there is no consensus on the age at which a youth transition from childhood begins and at which it ends with the conferment of adult status (Cieslik & Simpson, 2013: chapter 2: 2). First of all, the age of reaching adulthood varies from culture to culture. Secondly, today individual biographical timetables do not follow socially expected and culturally transmitted age-norms (Heinz, 2009: 3). The timing and duration of transitions between childhood, adolescence, youth, adulthood and old age are less age-dependent and demand a series of individual decisions (Heinz, 2009: 3).

Youth transitions approach became a prominent concern of youth studies in the late twentieth century. Across Western societies in much of the immediate post-war period, while the transition of young people from school to employment was seen as largely linear, unidirectional and unproblematic for most (Ashton & Field 1976: 115; Cieslik & Simpson, 2013: chapter 2: 2). Structural opportunities and social backgrounds play an important role in young people's school-work transitions, as some went straight into paid employment, some others completed a short period of vocational training/apprenticeship and some others went on to higher education for a number of years before entering the labor market (Roberts, 1968). Since the end of the 1970s, youth unemployment has been an eye-catching problem across many parts of the

Western world, coinciding with the structural shift in the economy toward neoliberalism (Woodman & Bennett, 2015: 3). This made the transition to work a major concern of youth policy makers and youth researchers (Cuervo & Wyn, 2011).

In addition to the school-to-work transition, Coles (1997) argues there are two other dimensions to youth transitions, namely, the domestic transition referring to the transition from family of origin to family of destination and the housing transition meaning the transition from residence with parents to living away from them. For Coles, these three transitions inter-relate with each other, so that status in one aspect may both influence and be influenced by the status of another. For instance, unemployment can lead to a change of housing situation, and vice versa. Such risks shape the non-linear transition trajectories. An emerging critical approach to studying youth transitions demonstrated how these different trajectories was strongly correlated to and influenced by social class background, gender and/or ethnicity (Roberts, 1997), with working young people go straight into relatively low paid employment while middle and higher class ones study longer in higher education until taking a higher paid employment. This 'youth divide' influenced by structural factors has drawn much attention to youth transitions debate (Jones, 2002; Webster et al., 2004).

The context of wider economic and social change since the 1970s have spurred significant rethinking and development around the concept of youth transitions. They were framed within wider theoretical developments in the social sciences, which witnessed the emergence of concepts such as 'risk society' (Beck, 1992) and 'structuration' (Giddens, 1991). 'Risk society' (Beck, 1992) theory believes there has been a breakdown in traditional 'structurally-determined' transitions as they become more fragmented and less certain. To better visualize the consequences of these changes, youth researchers enriched the concept of youth transitions with a variety of adjectives such as 'long', 'broken', 'extended', 'protracted', 'uneasy' and 'fractured' (Shildrick & MacDonald, 2007: 590). As more young people stayed longer in education and delayed the timing of full-time employment, and delayed marriage and

parenthood, youth researchers proposed various new models of transition. Arnett's (2000: 469) 'emerging adulthood' positively believes that social change is providing new opportunities for young people to take their time to experiment with a greater number of career and lifestyle options. Some theorists use the terms 'arrested' and 'delayed' to describe protracted transition transitions to adulthood which is becoming common (Côté, 2000) while others ponder on a 'yo-yo transitions' (du Bois-Reymond & Stauber, 2005; Biggart & Walther, 2006), nonlinear transitions (Te Riele, 2004; Furlong et al., 2006) as well and a 'boomerang' (Wyn & White, 1997: 96) youth who return to parents' home time and time again, reflecting the increasingly messy transition to adulthood. In this new context some youth researchers noted how young people tried to actively 'navigate' and 'negotiate' their transitions to adulthood (Cieslik & Simpson, 2013: chapter 2: 3). Instead of focusing on structural factors such as social class, gender and ethnicity, they underscored a biographical approach that investigated the role of young people themselves in the process of transition to adulthood across time (Henderson et al., 2007), and attempted to holistically and dynamically understand how individuals made sense of their lives within the dynamic processes of transition and change in risk societies (Furlong & Cartmel, 2007) exercising their agency against structure. Henderson et al. (2007), drawing on late modern theory and the idea of a reflexive project of the self, highlight the importance of institutional changes in education, employment, drugs, cultures of violence and well-being in influencing transitions. They also delved into how important the things that these young people cared about influenced their choices, such as their concerns for mobility, home, sense of belonging, intimacy and social life. Biographical approach have also emphasized the importance of 'critical moments' in youth transitions (Thomson et al., 2002). Webster et al. (2004) noted how experiences of bereavement influence 'personal agency' within youth transitions. Thomson et al. (2002) claim responses to critical moments within youth transitions are 'framed' by circumstances but allow youth researchers to make interpretations which 'demonstrate the centrality of identity and subjectivity to an understanding of transitions, without reducing the analysis to individual psychology' (Thomson et al. 2002: 351).

The most common criticism of work on transitions argues that that young people's lives have become so diverse, fragmented, protracted and even 'reversible' that it is meaningless to search for an 'end point' that marks the completion of transition. The boundaries between youth and adulthood become fussy and keep changing, and the social meaning of both phases of the life course is being redefined (Leccardi & Ruspini, 2006). Besides, there is a risk of mistaking evidence of the emergence of new understandings of adulthood for evidence of delayed or nonlinear transition (Cuervo & Wyn, 2011), let alone the meaning of adulthood is already culturally construed and contested over time. It seems that 'stable', 'full-time', 'independent' and 'completed' which are the typical adjectives to identify 'reaching adulthood' may characterize fewer and fewer lives (Woodman & Bennett, 2015: 6). And it appears that developing the resources to cope with change is becoming part of new definitions of adulthood (Dwyer & Wyn, 2001; Blatterer, 2007).

Youth transitions approach has a relatively shorter history than its 'twin' youth culture approach. Proto-transitions research was largely concerned with role socialization and how young workers found their 'niche' (Woodman & Bennett, 2015: 3) in the workforce in the 1960s and then 'pathways' in the 1970s, as 'trajectories' in the 1980s, and the more reflexive and post-structuralist metaphor of 'navigation' in the 1990s (Goodwin & O'Connor, 2005: 202). Methodologically, transitions approach tend to draw on policy-driven, large-scale, quantitative, and longitudinal data collection or existing data sets (Roberts, 1997: 62). This transitions lens has expanded the theoretical horizon of the discipline of youth studies by offering a more structural perspective and implicating both institutional constraints and subjective agency, although it has been considered as 'limited in its understanding of agency' (Woodman & Bennett, 2015: 7). And the appeal of a broad holistic, long view of youth transitions is that it offers a privileged vantage point from which to glimpse processes of social structural formation and transformation (Shildrick & MacDonald, 2007: 601).

Dissolving the binary and transcending the orthodoxies

There has been a widespread concern about the limitations that each of the two youth studies approaches alone can contribute to a holistic understanding of youth in modern societies (Furlong et al., 2011). Culture and transitions are lenses through which youth researchers can better detect youth in a more specifically contextualized setting. Both of them share concerns over social changes and social division. Many scholars thus have called for an effort to investigate the resonances between the two tracks of youth research, and for approaches that can 'bridge the gap' (Coles, 1986; MacDonald et al., 1993 2001; Geldens et al. 2011).

As a response to the urgent appeal for a holistic account of young lives, youth researchers have been trying to find the proper conception to congregate the strengths of transitions and cultures approaches. 'Bounded agency' (Evans, 2007) and 'structured individualization' (Roberts, 2003) are the two influential concepts falling under the banner of conceptual 'middle-ground'. Furlong (2015: 26) calls upon youth researchers to draw on Norbert Elias' (1987) 'social process' theory, and claims that social scientists should learn the lesson from Elias and develop a better understanding of 'long term social processes and associated broader overarching questions about human societies' (Dunning & Hughes 2012: 202), so that our focus moves beyond youth dualistic forms of thinking. Wyn and White (2015: 29) introduce the metaphor 'triple helix' — individual transitions, social transformations and identity — to conceptualize youth, and argue that youth is framed and constrained by institutions (i.e., structure), shaped and acted on by young people (i.e., agency), and experienced in enactments of identity, taking account of different contexts and circumstances (subjectivity) (Wyn & White, 2015: 31).

More recently, a temporal approach to youth studies has come to the fore in an attempt to transcend the traditional transitions-cultures binary. Woodman and Leccardi (2015: 56) argue that youth studies is a field of research that is by definition engaging

temporal questions. Research into transitions traces changes in the timing of one status to another over time and compares the timing across various groups, while cultural practices also 'unfold' over time, and demand the coordination of time between young people (Woodman & Leccardi, 2015: 56). Temporal senses of social changes and continuities in social structure have been debated in both approaches of youth studies. And such social changes (and continuities) are characterized by the process of 'individualization' (Beck & Beck-Gernsheim, 2002; Woodman & Wyn, 2015), which means the changing forms of life can not keep up with the institutional changes in education, workplace and technology due to accelerated social changes (Woodman & Leccardi, 2015: 62). In the end, the present is the only temporal dimension over which a cognitive dominion is possible (Leccardi, 2012a: 64), as it is increasingly difficult for young people to make long-term plans for their future, not because they don't care about the future, but because often only the short-term horizon of action makes sense (Woodman & Leccardi, 2015: 64). Within the changing and complex patterns of labor market and educational temporalities, most young people still appear capable of constructing times-spaces within which to practice forms of social and cultural engagement (Woodman & Leccardi, 2015: 64). They also invent new ways with flexibility and creativity to construct biographies dealing with the high-speed society in which they live (Leccardi, 2012b).

So far many efforts have been exerted to dissolve the binary between and transcend the orthodoxies of youth cultures and transitions approaches. Youth is not a transition nor a culture, but particular assemblages of bodies, ideas, and affects at particular times and places (Woodman & Bennett, 2015: 11). The 'twin approaches' can to some extent be understood as a theoretical strategy that youth researchers adopted to probe into young lives in a more operable way free from 'signal interference' caused by the other approach. However, the current situation of social conditions and research context has required youth researchers to move beyond these orthodoxies and examine youth from a more multi-perspective since social structures and cultural forms do not exist separately from each other but are connected within a continual

process of co-production.

Youth studies to the Global South

Youth of the Global South are less 'visited' by youth researchers probably due to the fact that 'overwhelming majority of research on youth occurs at institutions in the Global North' (Cooper et al., 2019: 30). Youth Studies theories often assume universal generalizability despite rarely making the youthful populations, ontologies, values and politics of Global South the focus of research (Cooper et al., 2019: 29). Given the unbalanced academic conditions in this field between the North and the South, it is reasonable to wonder whether or to what extent the Northern youth theories can be applied to making sense of what it is like to be youth in the Global South. Youth culture, as in Parsons' coinage of 'youth culture', emerged in the context of Western societies in their post-war economic expansion, while youth transitions problems were identified during the process of their deindustrialization. The young counterparts in most Southern countries, especially in the most deprived ones in Africa, Middle East, South America and South Asia, never experienced proper industrialization or deindustrialization at all. Although they must also have their own local youth cultures that differentiate their values, norms and practices from their older generations, unlike those depressed sub-culturalist youths in the UK who at least had enough resources for fashioning new styles, they had not the similar means to invent spectacular youth cultural practices, moreover, youth for them is not necessarily about resistance, rebellion or subversion, but could be a period of relative conformity to their parents, main-stream social values and traditions. And the fragmented, non-linear and protracted transitions to adulthood that Western youth have been suffering would be a 'luxury' for many Southern youth who never had a chance to experience and are still struggling for survival. In this sense, youth studies theories are not only Western-centric but also hypocritical. Many Western countries transferred the highly polluting manufacturing industry to developing countries and have been profiting a

great deal from the cheap labor in the latter while in the meantime they do not have enough white-collar jobs for their own youth. It is such structural change in industry due to capitalism and globalization that had made Western young people's transitions in the late modernity problematic. But the youth studies theories make them look like victims.

Everatt (2015) strongly criticizes Western/developed world for having been dominating approaches to and concepts in youth research, and ignoring the living conditions of the majority of young people in the developing world. He (Everatt, 2015: 64) interrogates how youth from non-Western countries are conceptualized as 'other' as an effect of a function of dominant cultures to assume a normative value and automatically 'other' cultures (Eagleton, 2009: 158). He (Everatt, 2015: 65) contends that among the two approaches which have reigned over youth research in the West for decades, life course has 'tenuous purchase in the developing world', and subculture research into the 'voyeuristic favorites of violence, sex, and death' of Southern youth meet the Western world's expectation of the backward South. Due to the opposite demographic characteristics in the developing world to the ones in the developed world, every policy in the former is a youth policy (Everatt, 2015: 67), and almost every culture there is youth culture. Thus the 'subculture' in Western context is like the 'dominant culture' in the South (Everatt, 2015: 64). And when a majority of Southern youth is unemployed, 'transitions' can not be afforded at all (Everatt, 2015: 71). In a conclusion, Everatt (2015: 77) tries to propose a new and globally inclusive direction for youth studies, which is animated by 'basic tenet of global justice' and argues that youth studies 'must mean something tangible to the teenager in Delhi or Nairobi or Bogota, not just to the academic sitting in London or Melbourne or Manhattan' and should highlight how the global dynamics of exclusion driven by Western power result in the exclusion of young people at the local.

Following Everatt's critiques, Philipps (2018: 2) addresses an institutional cause for

youth studies' predilection for the Global North — the bifurcation of the social sciences. In Philipps' view (2018: 2), sociology and other core disciplines including new fields such as youth studies consciously pick the so-called modern world to be their study object and leave the developing world, the world's 'residual' social realities and 'deviant' cases (Mamdani, 1995: 613) of Africa (Mudimbe, 1988), the Orient (Said, 1978) and Latin America (Mignolo, 2005) to anthropology and area studies. Philipps (2018: 4) points out the defect of Everatt's effort in trying to introduce an inclusive approach, and argues that including Southern youth into youth studies risks making them a kind of 'ethnographic minutiae' that could be exploited by Western youth studies to justify its theoretical universality rather than helping the discipline to realize its Northern biases. He then proposes that Area Studies scholarship aligned with postcolonial theory can serve as a corrective and a source of inspiration for youth studies and as a starting point to develop more inclusive concepts and understandings of youth (Philipps, 2018: 12).

Despite the critiques against Western youth studies theories, there are indeed some studies on Southern youth directly using these theories for empirical analysis. By looking into the relationship between migration and educational aspirations, Crivello (2011) draws on qualitative data to discuss how young Peruvians make use of migration for education as an important means to overcome structural inequalities in their youth transitions to adulthood in home country. Azaola (2012) explores Mexican rural youth's transition to adulthood in relation to their migration aspirations and experiences, and finds out that the lack of opportunities in localities together with the role played by peer groups and youngsters' own desire for financial independence seem to be determinant factors that stimulate youth in transition's decision to migrate. China, no matter how emerging it is, is still a developing country of the Global South. And there is only one empirical study of Chinese youth from the perspective of Western youth transitions theory. In an empirical qualitative study of young Chinese university graduates, Cai (2018) notices that there is a 'yo-yo transition' (du Bois-Reymond and Stauber 2005, Biggart & Walther 2006) among today's young

Chinese. Based on qualitative interviews, Cai (2018) investigates the roles that individual choices (agency) and structural constraints of labor market play in 'yo-yo transition'. She states that on one hand, similar to 'Western' youth, Chinese young people are also experiencing fragmented, reversible and fragile 'yo-yo transitions' of ups and downs, on the other hand, different from 'Western' youth, Chinese familial support plays an important role in supporting young people's employment and pursuit of further education, and such support is highly class-related. Despite their valuable empirical findings, these studies all take Western youth studies theories for granted without being aware of the nature of Western youth studies theories in reflecting the social changes in the West and without noticing the large difference between social conditions in the West and the ones in the Global South. Take China for instance, the social condition in the post-war China were characterized by civil war in the second half of the 1940s, the great leap and the great famine in the 1950s, and the cultural revolution in the 1960s and 1970s. During these ages of turbulences, young Chinese had no appropriate resources and means to invent spectacular cultural practices or make relatively smooth youth transitions. It was only after Deng Xiaoping's 'reform and opening-up' in the end of 1970s that China had started proper industrialization and young Chinese had started to have a 'normal' life. And the deindustrialization of China's economy only began in 2012 (Lovely, 2021) which was around 4 decades later than the West. Therefore the social conditions in China that Chinese youth have been experiencing since the Second World War are fundamentally different from the ones that Western youth have been experiencing in the West.

In a rigid sense, youth studies theories are only valid in analyzing empirical data collected within Western context, because such theories are developed on the basis of the social changes that happened there and are used to trace the changes of social conditions in which Western youth make transitions to adulthood. Such social conditions are vastly different from that in the Global South. Knowledge can be useful regardless of where they originate, but only when they become intentionally entangled in local realities and are adapted accordingly (Cooper et al., 2019: 29). Researchers

should at least mention the limitation of Western youth studies theories when exploiting them for interpreting Southern youth. Youth is a social relationship rather than simply being a universal and essential category (Wyn & White, 2015: 28), so there is a need to contextualize and historicize theoretical debates about precarity, social structure and youth agency (Cuervo & Miranda, 2019: 7).

Despite the limitations of and critiques against youth studies theories in adaptation to studying Southern youth, in this study I still value the explanatory power of youth transitions theories in elucidating young people's agency against contextual and structural constraints in their transitions to adulthood in the late modern conditions of intensive social changes. Therefore I uproot youth transitions theories from Western social conditions and situate them in the wider social context across the East and the West in order to make sense of my participants who experience 'double' social changes from China to the US and from the past to the future encountering double contextual and structural constraints while making transitions to adulthood.

Mobile young lives in transitions to adulthood

Existing paradigms of youth transitions approach tend to assume that young people's transitions-making happens in a fixed geographical context and probably close to home (Cairns, 2014: 5). Coincidentally, youth have traditionally been absent from studies of migration and mobility (Cairns, 2014: 2). The youth transition phase involves a number of important life decisions to make, including choosing an educational path, developing a career aspiration, leaving parents' house, dating, marriage and whether or not to have children, in order to achieve as a smooth and successful transition to adulthood as possible. Contemporary conditions have been characterized by global flows, global networks, and mobilities driven by changing landscapes of opportunity and risk (Ong, 1999; Rizvi, 2012; Bauman, 2008; Helve & Evans, 2013, as cited in Woodman & Leccardi, 2015). All these decisions during

youth transition phase can no longer be presumed to be made in and for a geographically static state. Thus it is time to incorporate the 'mobility turn' (Urry, 2000) and the 'mobility requirement' (Morano-Foadi, 2005: 146) into youth studies.

It is frequently discussed in the existing literature that in the current age of globalization young people are more apt to conduct mobility, especially transnational mobility, as part of their life course (Skrbis et al., 2014: 617). Young people move not simply because they are open to and adventurous with cultural diversity, but also because they are aware of the contribution of mobility to their future prosperity despite the fact that some young people on the move may not have such clear awareness and reflexivity.

Young people's mobility is always accompanied with their course of becoming adults. According to Thomson and Taylor (2005), young people have always been valuing mobility as a substantial resource to facilitate their transitions to adulthood. Many studies interpret young people's increasing desire for global mobility as a strategic response to increasingly flexible and precarious global and local labor markets (Brown et al., 2003; Brown et al., 2011; Heath, 2007; Kawashima 2010; Simpson 2005). This analytical perspective is named by Yoon (2014) as 'socio-economic approach', characterizing social mobility in the labor market as young people's motive of international mobility. Under the socio-economic approach, the global experience gathered through international mobility is recognized as a form of cultural capital (Brown et al., 2003; Heath, 2007; Kawashima, 2010; Simpson, 2005) for enhancing employability, since academic credentials which used to be the major criteria for employers to evaluate young people's employability has been less valued, rather it is various forms of global cultural experience that employers now consider as the most important employment attributes (Brown et al., 2003: 120; Heath, 2007). Thus international mobility has become popular among middle-class youth who acquire soft skills, greater maturity, enhanced self-awareness, increased independence and cosmopolitan competence through the overseas 'gap year' experience (Heath,

2007: 100) and 'working holidays' (Kawashima, 2010), implying young people's concerns over socio-economic outcomes in their transitions to adulthood.

Such concerns over socio-economic outcomes in young people's transitions to adulthood can be explained by Cairns' 'spatial reflexivity' (Cairns et al., 2012), which seems to be able to be identified as a socio-economic approach, describing a physical and mental openness towards the idea of incorporating geographical movement into educational and career plans (Cairns, 2014: 27). Cairns (2014: 28) argues that becoming mobile and being 'reflexive' about mobility is of particular importance to young people who aspire to better themselves through pursuing higher education trajectories and professional career paths, which means that spatial reflexivity is more about choosing a life (livelihood) rather than selecting a lifestyle. 'The idea that being mobile can lead to better, or at least different, transition outcomes' (Cairns, 2014: 28) has become more popular than ever in contemporary societies characterized by uncertainty and instability. Planning the future has almost become an imperative as different choices can make difference outcomes varying from the successful ones to the failures (Leccardi, 2005), and mobility is one of the choices. In order to realize a desirable transition outcome, mobility can be planned for accessing an educational opportunity that can not be offered in local place or for finding a job abroad commensurate to skill and qualification level (Cairns, 2014: 28). In this theoretical model of 'spatial reflexivity', transition outcomes via mobility refer to not only the preparation course of gathering cultural capital for future employment, but also the employment itself, therefore it is slightly different from the above discussed socio-economic approach which sees mobility as a process of collecting capital for future employment outcome.

As opposed to socio-economic approach, 'the ideological approach' (Yoon, 2014) offers insight into the way in which young people's pursuit of global experience is motivated by their aspirations for self-development and freedom rather than being a strategic attempt at career development (Haverig & Roberts, 2011; Haverig, 2011).

Studies based on this approach see the discourse and the practice of global experience as the ethos of neoliberalism (Yoon, 2014: 1015). And young mobile people are seen as neoliberal subjects who freely and individually choose their life courses rather than accumulate professional competencies and skills (Haverig, 2011). Thus it is argued that the aspiration for self-development and self-management is increasingly integrated into young people's transition to adulthood (Abelmann et al., 2009), although the structural issue of social inequality is glossed over by this ideological approach. Acknowledging young mobile people as exercising agency in freely seeking self-development and a life course rather than a future transition outcome in employment is the core perspective of ideological approach, however, it overlaps with socio-economic approach in the matter that both approaches focus on transition processes with the former emphasizing the course itself the later the outcomes as the goal of the preparation process.

Through an empirical study, Yoon (2014) finds two groups of young Koreans in terms of mobility motives. The first group considered global experience of working holidays in Canada as a means to seek 'true self' free from social control and from a standardized life course at home, which seem to be shared mobility motives by many middle-class youth across all East Asian countries characterized by Confucianism including China. And the second group aimed to gather cultural capital to upgrade CV for upward social mobility back in Korea, which is a strategy that many mobile youth around whole the global also practice. The former group were directed at meaningful processes, while the latter's goals were desirable outcomes. However, Yoon (2014: 1023) argues that the two meanings of global experience－the pursuit of the 'true self' and CV enhancement－overlap with each other in the narrative of 'self-development'. Thus the theoretical perspectives of the socio-economic approach and the ideological approach can not exclude each other well, causing confusions and limiting their explanatory power. Inspired by Cairns' 'spatial reflexivity' which believes that it is a different transition outcome that young people conduct mobility for, I propose another model arguing that it is a different transition process that many mobile youth are

longing for in order to enjoy the course of youth transitions during which they can seek 'true selves' and free from uncomfortable social control at home.

The under-researched youth transition processes

Compared to youth cultures studies which present young people's agency of creativity in subcultures and resistance to the status quo, the 'cold-blood' youth transitions perspective mainly concerns how structural and institutional factors hinders or facilitates young people's transitions to adulthood with a focus on how classic markers of school-to-work transition, housing transition and domestic transition are attained. Youth transitions literature has traditionally devoted great attention to identifying and analyzing structural events considered crucial to such role transitions of young people, but overlooks plenty of other aspects that young people themselves consider valuable.

Several decades ago, Hogan and Astone (1986, as cited in Arnett, 1997) reviewed and integrated a myriad of articles on youth transitions to adulthood, and found that many authors acknowledged the importance of biological and psychological aspects of transitions but focused their review on role transitions, namely, finishing education, entering the labor force, marriage, and parenthood. Although the review was comprehensive and insightful, few out of more than 100 cited references addressed young people's own conceptions of the transition to adulthood (Hogan & Astone, 1986, as cited in Arnett, 1997). And in contemporary studies of youth transitions, young people's perceptions of their own youth transitions are also overlooked by youth scholars.

In the belief that research on young people's conceptions of their own transitions to adulthood may provide a useful complement to research that focus on the timing of role transitions, Arnet (1997) conducts an empirical study examining American young

people's perspectives on youth transitions to adulthood and has disclosed very interesting findings. He finds out that from the perspective of many young people themselves, youth transition to adulthood evidently takes place not in the form of discrete transition events but according to the individual's judgement of when various subtle psychological processes have reached fruition (Arnet, 1997). He thus questions rhetorically: when exactly does a young person become capable of accepting responsibility for the consequences of his/her actions? At what point can it be said that one has decided one's own beliefs and values? How does one know when one has become an adult as equal as their parents? And he argues there is no particular day or hour at which these thresholds are crossed; there is not likely to be any anniversary to mark them, rather, they are reached gradually and incrementally, as process that take years to complete.

The contemporary youth transitions studies seem to care more about the changing patterns of social and societal structures rather than young people themselves, as they see youth as a barometer and a 'metaphor' (Leccardi, Cuzzocrea & Bello, 2018) to read the late modern 'risk society' (Beck, 1992) full of uncertainty and precariousness. To justify the scope of youth transitions studies itself, categories such as 'crossroads' (Bagnoli & Ketokivi, 2009), 'turning points' (Abbott, 2001; Crow & Lyon, 2011) and 'critical moments' (Holland & Thomson, 2009; Thomson & Holland, 2015; Thomson et al., 2002, also used by Tomanović, 2012) are introduced to investigate the processes which hinder or facilitate the attainment of adulthood independence (Cuzzocrea, 2018: 672).

'Crossroads' indicate 'concrete social settings and situations in which the different layers of human existence, fate, individual choice and the social, variously confront each other, together contributing to the unfolding of contemporary lives' (Bagnoli & Ketokivi, 2009: 318). The idea of the 'turning point' has been treated as a key concept for analyzing narratives of the self (Cuzzocrea, 2018: 674). As Abbott (2001) notes, turning points suggest the redirection of paths in an unpredictable trajectory. In Crow

and Lyon's (2011: 18) analysis, turning points are interpreted in that they 'revealed a certain hard-headed realism about the prospects for achieving ideal outcomes'. Concepts such as 'transitions' and 'sequences' have also been proposed in order to describe the 'contingent life course' (Heinz, 2003: 199), which imply a meaning of discontinuity.

Drawing on the data collected for a UK-based research project called 'Inventing Adulthoods', Thomson et al. label the 'fateful moments' that characterize Giddens'(1991) notion of the reflexive self as 'critical moments' (Holland & Thomson, 2009; Thomson & Holland, 2015; Thomson et al., 2002). They define a 'critical moment' as 'an event described in an interview that either the researcher or the interviewee sees as having important consequences for their lives and identities' (Cuzzocrea, 2018: 674). So interviews were better designed to allow 'critical moments' to arise in the narrative' ((Thomson et al., 2002: 339, as cited in Cuzzocrea, 2018: 674). Encouraging the narrative of 'critical moments' in interviews are then considered as a research strategy to see 'kind of events that were reported as having particular biographical significance' (Thomson et al., 2002: 1, as cited in Cuzzocrea, 2018) and 'compare narratives over time and across cases' (Thomson & Holland, 2015: 2, as cited in Cuzzocrea, 2018). The more interesting discussions for this article are that moments which emerged as critical were not necessarily always aspects related to the classic thresholds or markers in youth studies research (obtaining a job, concluding education, leaving the parents' house, eventually forming a couple, and becoming parents) but events more related to the private: an episode of disclosing violence, a drug addiction emerging in a particular period of life, and so on (Cuzzocrea, 2018: 674). These findings suggest that we need to rethink the important nodes that have biographical significance through young people's transitions to adulthood, and, it seems that those private moments has been somewhat under-researched (Cuzzocrea, 2018: 674).

'Crossroads', 'turning points' and 'critical moments' usually happen before the

threshold of transitions to adulthood, thus constitute significant biographical episodes of young people's transition processes which may in the long-term have an impact on their transition outcomes. Geographical mobility may be a crossroad (Cuzzocrea & Mandich, 2016), a turning point (Abbott, 2001) or a critical moment (Thomson et al., 2002): it can be imagined as an 'entry ticket' to embark on a better life that seems otherwise to be denied (Cuzzocrea, 2018: 674). Mobility therefore functions to enable 'youth agency', rather than preassume insurmountable difficulties (Cuzzocrea, 2018: 674). However, the wording of 'a better life' pursued by means of mobility can cause ambiguity, as it may signify both a process (a lifestyle) and an outcome (a livelihood). Cairns (2014: 6) explicitly distinguishes the difference between selecting a lifestyle and choosing a life by arguing that the act of being mobile can be understood as using geographical mobility to move towards 'better' transition outcomes, thus linking spatial movement with socioeconomic self-advancement, although young people can also conduct mobility for a different lifestyle.

In the current scholarly debate of youth mobility, mobile youth are portrayed either as privileged or middle-class youth who live a lifestyle of exploring and practice a cosmopolitan youth mobility culture, or as marginalized and peripheral youth who are compelled to move to seek a (better) way out. Choosing a lifestyle is, in a sense, choosing a transition process. However, an alternative transition process is not necessarily equivalent to a different lifestyle, rather it can just mean an alternative social condition in which young people grow up. And seeking an alternative transition process which is believed to be a 'better' transition process does not necessarily contradicts an attempt to achieve a different ('better') transition outcome. On the contrary, a 'better' transition process is highly likely to yield a 'better' transition outcome.

In young people's transition processes, their well-being can to a large extent signify the quality of such transition processes. In youth transitions studies, what is under-researched and less well understood is how the challenges of 'transitioning' into

a conventional and secure adulthood impact on young people's well-being (Wyn et al., 2015: 59). Young people's mental well-being is a reflection of the quality of their social and economic relationships (Wyn et al., 2015: 59). Moreover, health, whether physical or mental, is central to the processes that constitute youth, and being well against a backdrop of complex social and economic circumstances that they have little control over is one of the dimensions of life that young people must navigate (Wyn et al., 2015: 59). Despite the obvious relevance of well-being to young people's navigation of their social contexts, research that takes a transitions approach to understand young people's lives tends to downgrade the importance of their well-being (Wyn et al., 2015: 60; see also Wyn 2008). Given the belief that well-being can be a barometer to measure young people's youth transition processes which have significant influence on their future transition outcomes-making, it is time to strengthen our understanding of young people's well-being as their significant social processes towards adulthood.

Summary

Based on a systemic review of youth studies, namely of youth culture approach and youth transitions approach as well as the more recent theories trying to break the binary division and transcend the theoretical orthodox, I aim to justify the choice of youth transitions approach as my theoretical framework to study my research participants. Then through a discussion of youth studies to the Global South, I present the limitations of Western youth studies theories in explaining Southern youth in order to justify the way how I use youth transitions theories to interpret my research participants, by which I detach youth transitions theories from the Western social conditions in which the social changes were different from the ones in the Global South, and I situate them in a global and more abstract social condition to highlight their explanatory power of making sense of young people's agency against contextual and structural constraints, so that Chinese international students' youth

transitions-making can also be analyzed by these theories.

Then I introduce the framework of youth mobility in transitions to adulthood and elaborate the roles that mobility can play in youth transition to adulthood, which is considered as one of the key theoretical purchases for making account of my research subjects, and propose the theoretical model of 'youth transition processes' as opposed to 'youth transition outcomes' as a new perspective to study youth mobility. Lastly, I discuss the under-researched youth transition processes in youth transitions studies and argue that the private moments in young people's transition to adulthood not only influence their well-being and their youth transition processes but also their future transition outcomes.

Chapter 4 Extant Studies on Chinese International Students

Introduction

China has long been the largest source country of the world's international students, many literature have addressed this constantly growing group of youth. Following the research questions of this study, this chapter reviews the latest empirical research related to Chinese international students' motivations of going abroad, experiences abroad, reflections and reflexivities on international mobility and future mobility intentions. Since there are limited amount of the latest works devoted to Chinese international students in the US, this chapter will include some works which study Chinese international students in other countries.

In the first section, recent qualitative, quantitative and mixed methods studies devoted to Chinese international students' mobility motives are reviewed. A large part of the second section is built on a recent literature review work complemented by a review of several other works of which I believe the research themes related to my participants' experiences. Since very few literature center on Chinese international students' reflections and reflexivities on their international mobility experiences, in the third section, related findings that touch upon this aspect from the works on Chinese returnees are extracted. The fourth section reviews the latest works on Chinese international students' future mobility intentions and highlights three works which address the issue of school-to-work transitions. Considering that a majority of my participants are former parachute kids, an independent fifth section is given to a body of literature review on studies of this teenage group of Chinese international students. Since there is an up-to-date monograph on Chinese international students in

the US from a holistic perspective and its research questions happen to be similar to that of mine, I exploit the space of the summary section to review this monograph work.

Chinese students' motivations for international mobility

Research on international students' motivations of going overseas for study usually fall into sociology of education although in many cases academic achievement is not the only aim of international students. Sociology of migration also studies international students based on the assumption and facts of students-turned-migrants phenomenon. More recently, an increasing number of sociologists scrutinize international students with the theoretical lens of mobility.

Earlier studies like to quantitatively examine Chinese students' motivations of study abroad through the approach of push and pull factors (e.g., Mazzarol et al., 2001; Mazzarol & Soutar, 2002). One recent quantitative study by Cao et al. (2016) also use this model to enquire Chinese university students' perceptions of factors that influence their decisions on international academic mobility, and identifies that 'future career prospects', 'quality of host institutions', 'mobility cost' and 'climate environment in host country' as significant favorable pull factors, while 'impact from parents', 'language and intercultural training of home institutions' and 'economic situation of home country' as push factors. This model places students in a passive position being affected by external factors and overlooks students' subjective agency. With this one-fold measure to investigate Chinese international students' motivations for international mobility, researchers often jump to a conclusion underlining their instrumentalist goals: better economic opportunities, upward social mobility, migration to a wealthier nation (Li, 2010; Yang, 2007; Griner & Sobol, 2014). Although many international students' basic motives of studying abroad are often indeed instrumental, such crude measure does not tell the whole story (Martin, 2017:

707). More recent studies on this topic have looked beyond the 'push-pull' model and try to provide more diverse perspectives.

Mixed methods of drawing on both quantitative and qualitative data seems to be a popular approach in some of the latest literature on Chinese international students' motivation of overseas study. To explore the reasons why an increasing number of Chinese students choose to study abroad and why the US is their preferred destination, Chao et al. (2017) carry out a mixed-methods study based on the data collected from a questionnaire survey with supplemented interviews and find out that cultural exploration, better education system in the US and desires to gain a non-Chinese world perspective emerge as primary motives. In other two previous quantitative works, Chao and colleagues find similar results (Hegarty et al., 2013; Chao & Hegarty, 2014), however in all these three works they do not tell when the empirical data was collected. Given the only indicated information about the ages of most of the respondents who were born after 1978 in these three articles, it is inferred that they might have used the same old database, although they were all published within the last decade. It means that the demographic features of their respondents back then are significantly different from that of today's Chinese international students in the US given the fact that China has changed a lot in the past two decades and is still rapidly changing.

With relatively newer empirical data collected through the academic year 2009/2010, Wu (2014) examines the factors that influence Chinese students to pursue Master's programs in the UK based on quantitative questionnaire survey and qualitative interviews. In this study, three core factors are identified, which are the desire to experience different cultures, the native English environment, and future career aspirations (Wu, 2014: 438). In addition, demographic differences are compared internally to explore the diversity among the cohort of respondents, and the findings show that older students and those in MA programs are more strongly influenced by a need to experience different cultures, while younger students and those in MSc

programs are more strongly driven by academics-related reasons (Wu, 2014: 438: 426).

In a more recent mix-methods study on what stimulate Chinese students to study in the UK, Cebolla-Boado et al. (2018) have found that international education is not only an investment strategy in the form of human capital accumulation in expectation of further return but also to many of them a way of self-realization and a 'lived' cultural experience in itself, in line with the increasingly dominant imaginaries of active and mobile individuals (Cebolla-Boado et al., 2018: 376), therefore they encourage future research to go beyond the conceptualization that Chinese students opt for international education to veer away from the fierce competition in Gaokao or as a compensation strategy when they fail to access prestigious universities in China (Bodycott, 2009; Brooks & Waters, 2009).

Among the latest qualitative studies of Chinese students' motives of education abroad, more nuanced perspectives are dedicated to investigating different groups of these young Chinese people. Different from most studies which perceive Chinese international students as a homogeneous group, Martin (2017) adopts a gender perspective and finds out that many middle-class Chinese women planning to study at universities in Australia see educational mobility as a combined wealth- and risk-management strategy and a means of self-fashioning and identify transforming, being intended to maximize educational and hence economic opportunities, to hedge against a variety of risks that are likely to affect their future lives and to avoid getting 'trapped' into a standard feminine life course in China. By drawing on and complicating risk society theory (Beck, 1992), Martin (2017: 716) has underlined the re-traditionalisation of gender relations in post-socialist China, acknowledged the evident strengthening desire of individualization among middle-class educated young women in urban China, and suggested that the self-individualizing practices these young women engage in may be thoroughly interwoven with family connections and loyalties, making the transition from 'tradition' through 'modernity' toward ultimate

freedom from gendered constraints nonlinear and full of intensifying contradictions, with their international education projects being manifestation of such contradictions. She concludes that these young Chinese women, in order to embody self-entrepreneurial agency, take up the potentials of mobility as an available tool against the imposed limitations of gender and the contradictions inherent in the system in China.

Although being an obviously smaller group, Chinese doctoral students abroad have also caught researchers' attention. Yang et al. (2018) investigates the motivations of Chinese international doctoral students for undertaking a PhD in Australia and the external factors influencing this major life decision. Based on in-depth interviews, the findings show that for the current generation, enriching life experiences and self-cultivation emerge as most prominent personal motivations, and the choice to study abroad, though ultimately a personal decision, was influenced by a range of factors and particularly by long-term cooperation between host and home institutions.

Drawing on the UNESCO and OECD educational reports and Chinese government documents, as well as statements by Chinese students on online forums, Mankowska (2018) qualitatively discusses the topic of educational mobility among students from China and their motives of mobility. Based on her analysis, two main categories of motivations for their study abroad are discerned: the first category is directly linked with the prospect of gaining human capital and foreign credential as a response to the global competition; the second category involves trends in consumerism, as she detects that instead of considering personal benefits like a lucrative career that arise from earning a foreign degree, Chinese students care more about other aspects such as the attractiveness of a country as a travel destination, the most popular destination chosen by their immediate peers, the decisions of friends or the prevailing fashion for study abroad and the desire of experiencing an adventure.

Despite the fact that Italy is a non-traditional destination for Chinese international

students and only a minority of them study there, a recent article by Lan (2020) is worth reviewing for its latest publication date and its theoretical perspective of youth transition to adulthood. In examining Chinese international students' motivations for university study in Italy, Lan (2020) has revealed two themes in their choice-making: one is that with the help of the transnational-institutional projects Marco Polo and Turandot, those who failed to get admitted to elite universities in China can receive quality higher education in Italy; the second is their desire to see the world, to broaden their horizon, and to have new experiences, in a way that study in Italy is romanticized as a means for self-transformation. She finds out that the state-initiated student mobility programs with lenient admission requirements have played a key role in pulling Chinese students to Italy but at the same time left all the future difficulties, such as grasping a new language as soon as possible and finishing study within a legally permitted time frame, to themselves, eventually causing many prolonged educational transitions.

After a review of the most recent literature on Chinese international students' motivations of international mobility, common features of this group of contemporary young Chinese have been recognized. In spite of different samples ranging from undergraduates, postgraduates to doctoral students, and to female students, they all exhibit aspirations for exploration and self-realization through a 'lived' sojourn experience abroad, picturing a stark contrast to their predecessors in the 1990s and the early 2000s whose motivations were found in previous studies to be highly instrumental, for the purpose of escaping poverty (Wang, 1992; Pang, 2001), insufficient opportunities (Pang, 2001; Zhao, 2005), political instability and low incomes (Pang, 2001), and in the hopes of gaining prestige (Brzezinski, 1994) and scholastic capital (Altbach, 1991; Mazzarol, 1998) as well as pursuing 'American Dream' of political freedom and economic and social opportunities (Zweig & Changgui, 1995).

Chinese international students' experiences abroad

At the moment when international students set foot on the land of their overseas destinations, apart from a sense of excitement and novelty, they have also started to face many unexpected encounters and difficulties that many of them were unlikely to have prepared for. Many earlier literature on international student experiences assume that their difficulties of adapting, integrating or stress-coping are their own responsibilities and the host society is inerrable (Hechanova-Alampay et al., 2003; Heggins & Jackson, 2003; Zhao et al., 2005). In a review of 30 studies of undergraduate international students' psychosocial adjustment to the US universities published between 2009 and 2017, Brunsting et al. (2018) have identified that some works started to provide implications not only for international students but also for host institutions. Despite the acknowledgement that host society also bears responsibilities, the underlying assumption of these works is still that international students travel a long way from abroad just to seek to adjust and assimilate to the host society and they are supposed to do so, with the help of the latter. As a critique against this traditional paradigm, Marginson (2014) argues for a shift from the focus on 'adjustment' to 'self-formation' in studying international students emphasizing their agency so as to better understand their experiences and harvests.

Most of the previous studies of Chinese international students' experience abroad also adopt deficient perspectives to interrogate their language barrier, maladjustment, inadaptation, low acculturation etc. In a critical literature review work, Zhang-Wu (2018) synthesizes and analyzes research designs, underlying assumptions and findings of 21 recent scholarly articles on Chinese international students' experiences in the US. The deficient perspectives from which these 21 works study Chinese international students are revealed through Zhang-Wu's (2018) synthesis and analysis. Based on Zhang-Wu's (2018) review work, I make a more condensed critical overview of some articles that she has sorted out.

As detected by Zhang-Wu (2018: 1179), in the group of articles addressing Chinese international students' language barrier, most assume that Chinese international students are linguistically incompetent in the host country largely caused by the different Chinese and American cultures and educational practices (e.g., Cheng & Erben, 2012; Jiang, 2014; Wang, 2016; Wang, 2009; Xue, 2013). She argues that such assumption not only betrays a deficit perspective toward Chinese international students, reinforcing the so-called native-speaker superiority fallacy (Canagarajah, 1999), but also could mask possible successful stories of fluent English-speaking Chinese international students. Self-reported English language proficiency has indeed been found to be related to Chinese international students' communication effectiveness (Jiang, 2014; Wang, 2016; Xue, 2013), academic performance (Xue, 2013), psychological well-being (Yeh & Inose, 2003) and transnational adjustment ability (Cheng & Erben, 2011; Wang, 2009; Yeh & Inose, 2003) in the US. However, a solely deficient perspective would methodologically limit the research on international students.

Zhang-Wu (2018: 1183) critiques many studies on Chinese international students' degrees of acculturation and acculturative stress in the host country (Batterton & Horner, 2016; Wang et al., 2012; Wang, 2009; Yang et al., 2004; Ye, 2006; Yeh & Inose, 2003) for using Berry's (1997) or Phinney's (1996) immigrant-oriented theoretical frameworks. She argues that international students are fundamentally different from immigrants in terms of expected length of stay abroad and socioeconomic status, which make their acculturation and assimilation into the host country less mandatory. Therefore, she contends that it is more appropriate to acknowledge international students' uniqueness, evaluate their acculturative needs, and conduct research based on international student-targeted theoretical frameworks, although she doesn't explicitly indicate which specific student-targeted theories they are.

In the section of discussion and conclusions of the review work, Zhang-Wu (2018:

1190) emphasizes an observed pattern across the studies, which is the ignorance of the issues of race and racism. She notices that cultural differences are blamed for almost all their negative experiences (e.g., Hanassab, 2006; Lee & Rice, 2007; Spencer-Rodgers & McGovern, 2002; Wang et al., 2012; Yeh & Inose, 2003). She spots that researchers have already found international students of non-white tend to have more acculturative stress (Yeh & Inose, 2003) and higher chance of receiving discrimination (Hanassab, 2006; Lee & Rice, 2007; Spencer-Rodgers & McGovern, 2002) than white international students from Europe, however, rather than building on the findings to unpack more complex issues such as White Supremacy and Whiteness as 'property' (Harris, 1993), no discussions about race were conducted in these studies, instead, researchers related such unpleasant experiences to cultural diversity (Hanassab, 2006), intercultural communication barriers (Spencer-Rodgers & McGovern, 2002), cultural differences (Lee & Rice, 2007), and cultural distance (Yeh & Inose, 2003), as Liu (2009) summarized, it is cultural shocks that are responsible for the challenges they encounter in the host country.

Zhang-Wu (2018: 1190) adds that a color-blind strategy, which views people based on their characteristics other than race, has been adopted in these studies, with culture being overly blamed and race becoming a taboo, ignored as if it does not exist in American society. She continues that despite its face value of being beneficial in promoting racial equality by avoiding overt conversations on race and racism, color-blind racism in reality serves as a new racial ideology in hidden mechanisms; avoiding the discussions on race by no means help eradicate racism (Bonilla-Silva, 2002, 2010), instead, it suppresses the narratives of oppression on other races (Bostick, 2016). She further criticizes those studies for interpreting the challenges that Chinese international students are faced with as due to their traditional cultural values, which prompted them to stay with other Chinese international students (Wang, 2016), to remain modest and quiet (Jiang, 2014), and to learn by rote (Cheng & Erben, 2012) rather than interact with native speakers, giving no chance for further investigation and discussions on possible racial segregation between local White college students

and international students of non-white. In the end, Zhang-Wu (2018: 1192) calls on future research to go beyond color-blind racism, and initiate deeper conversations on the role of race and racism in international student experiences in order to address their challenges from the root cause.

Among the studies that Zhang-Wu (2018) hasn't reviewed, it is worth mentioning some other works which share the themes that related to my participants' experiences. Yao (2016; 2018) finds that many Chinese international students desire to room with domestic students to improve English and immerse themselves in American culture, but the uncomfortable and dissatisfied experience of having an American roommate has lowered Chinese international students' sense of belonging to the residence hall and to the larger host society. In Tao's studies (2016; 2018) cultural differences are overly blamed again for impeding friendship formation between the two counterparts, giving no space for the discussion of the possible issues of racism.

The claim of cultural factors being overly blamed does not mean they are unimportant, but it is the deficient perspectives that have concealed the bright sides of research subjects. In a bid to introduce alternative perspectives from which to study Chinese international students, Heng (2018a) suggests a 'hybrid sociocultural framework', which situates Chinese international students within their previous and current contexts, for gaining a holistic understanding of their experiences in the host countries. This framework encourages us to view Chinese international students' experiences as contextualized, dynamic, and complex rather than unitary when they cross cultural borders, and reminds us that Chinese international students are agentic beings who are not passive. Despite the goodwill of socio-culturally viewing Chinese international students as dynamic and active in a cross-cultural context, Heng (2018a) also overlooks racism, exclusion and discrimination that many Chinese international students could be subject to.

In contrast to most previous studies which either solely took deficient perspectives or

overly blamed cultural differences and sidestepped the issues of racism, Xie et al. (2019) draw on the neo-racism conceptual framework and human ecological theory to explore perceived stereotypes of and discrimination against Chinese undergraduate students and how these experiences influence their psychosocial adjustment in the US. The research results reveal that stereotypes may lead to discriminating behaviors against Chinese international students and perceived stereotypes and discrimination negatively affected their psychological well-being. In a most recent empirical study of Chinese international graduate students' experience in the US through a Bourdieusian lens, Wang and Freed (2021) criticize in their theoretical framework section that international students are 'surprisingly overlooked in racial and educational research', but ironically they don't discuss the issue of racism or neo-racism at all in their empirical analysis section, on the contrary, they elaborate how Chinese students struggle in changing their habitus to adapt to the new 'social field' in the US and how they blame themselves for social isolation and for being denied access to sociocultural capital in the host society where there is a lack of institutional support for them.

Since many articles are accused of administering deficient perspectives, applying inappropriate theories and neglecting racism in studying Chinese international students' experiences, more recent works try to provide alternative lens through which to explore or directly focus on their experiences of being stereotyped and discrimination, giving weight to the issue of racism. However, the limitation of these literatures is that they have mostly only scrutinized Chinese international students' past and present temporalities but haven't shed light on how their experiences abroad may also affect their future transition to adulthood. Such inadequacy could be remedied by the essential analytical perspective of youth transitions studies which take a holistic view on the past, present and future. A most recent study of Chinese international students in Italy (Lan, 2020), however as a non-traditional destination for most Chinese families, addresses how emotional stress resulted from the tensions between the study obligation and the consumption conviviality of their experiences in Italy complicates their youth transition to adulthood and argues it is the structural

problems — the transnational Marco Polo and Turandot projects which admit them without demanding a high Italian language proficiency or a high Gaokao score — that play an important role in prolonging their transition period abroad fraught with feelings of vulnerability. This is the only study among the latest literature body that elaborates Chinese international students' youth transition to adulthood.

Chinese international students' reflections and reflexivities on international mobility

Rewards are the most common reflections and reflexivities on one's international mobility experiences. Broadly speaking, many intangible rewards can be yielded from overseas study, including more open and flexible ways of thinking and communicating (Kim, 1988, 1992; Ting-Toomey, 1999); personal growth and transformation (Adler, 1975; Kim, 1988, 1992; Bennett, 1993); intercultural competence and having an integrated and inclusive worldview (Taylor, 1994; Alred et al., 2003); the ability to adopt a 'third space' in which to perceive and understand one's own and other cultures (Gill, 2005, 2007); and becoming autonomous and independent (Murphy-LeJeune, 2003);

Maybe it's because most academic attention has been concentrated on Chinese students' motivations of going abroad, destination choice and experiences abroad, there is a paucity of scholarship caring for what they have benefited from international mobility or how they have changed through such international mobility. However, some benefits or rewards can be identified from their positive experiences of academic achievement, reflexive observation, successful acculturation and challenges overcoming. They felt proud of having gained academic recognition and felt vindicated for overcoming initial academic challenges (Heng, 2018b: 1147). They have observed that there were tangible differences between the way of thinking in Chinese classrooms and in the US classrooms (Heng, 2018a: 28). They talk about

how new experiences in the US have opened their minds to fresh viewpoints, and how they are pleased by their progress in critical thinking and initiative in social interaction (Heng, 2018a: 31). They emphasize their personal growth, an obtained competitive advantage and their broadened global perspectives (Yuan, 2011; Oramas et al., 2018: 34). They gradually mature and become independent and proactive (Li, 2016; Oramas et al., 2018: 34; Heng, 2018b), and successfully adjust and adapt in US universities (Oramas et al., 2018: 32). They acknowledge 'invaluable personal gain and cultural learning experience (with) a strong motivation to adapt and develop not only as students but also as individuals' (Zhang, 2013: 137; Oramas et al., 2018: 34). Moreover, from a gender perspective, urban middle-class young Chinese women who desire to escape from the standard feminine life course can obtain freedom from social pressure at home and meanwhile increase their reflexive understanding of the culture-bound character of gendered conventions through international education projects (Martin, 2017: 715).

It makes sense that benefits, rewards and changes attributed to international mobility can be better investigated after research subjects' return migration to home. In a research on the effect that studying overseas had on Chinese returnees (Gill, 2010: 372), the core learning from study overseas is connected with the qualitative changes in the returnees' sense of self, ways of seeing and perceiving the world, values, and (work-related) ethics. And such intercultural identity, theorized as 'an open-ended, adaptive, and transformative self-other orientation' (Kim, 2008: 364), developed through their international mobility seems to be 'firmly situated in their own cultural roots, but with an increased capacity to internalize and transcend other cultural traditions, conventions and values' (Gill, 2010: 372). Such qualitative changes echo Gu and Schweisfurth's (2015) findings that many returnees have gained a reflexive understanding of themselves in the wider world through exposure to a different way of working and thinking and hence have bred a broadened outlook with international awareness. In terms of more specific rewards in relation to work and life, many returnees expressed increased confidence and leadership, enhanced self-efficacy and

positive attitudes, initiatives and resilience under pressure, better time management and self-planning skills and increased ability to think creatively and critically (Gu & Schweisfurth, 2015). In a more recent empirical study which examines the effects of international higher education on Chinese returnees' job prospects and career development, Mok et al. (2018: 218) uncover that respondents highly appreciated their overseas learning experiences for having acquired hard knowledge, soft skills and cross-cultural understanding, and considered their international learning experiences to have a positive impact on their future upward social mobility.

In a study of Chinese returnees' career success after 2-3 years of Master's program study in Norway, Hu and Cairns (2017) investigate whether foreign study experience as in 'mobility capital' contributes to later success in the labor market at home, which touches right upon the debate of school-to-work transition within youth studies. A number of rewards that Chinese returnees accredit to their international mobility experiences can be recognized in this study: mental and psychological maturity; new perspectives on life outside the workplace; improved academic competence; better interpersonal skills; strengthened consciousness of civil right and responsibility; habitus of time-management and research before decision-making (Hu & Cairns, 2017). As regard to the direct influence on their career, their language proficiency, interpersonal skills and the credential value of an overseas degree helped them land jobs in international organizations and companies and opened-up more career possibilities (Hu & Cairns, 2017: 184). While in other cases when their overseas experience did not directly contribute to their job placement, mobility capital paid off in terms of self-confidence that was put to use in searching for work and in job interviews (Hu & Cairns, 2017: 184). In other words, the obtained mobility capital is expressed in terms of not only academic credential and earning potential, but also a more amorphous range of attributes, including self-awareness, social conscientiousness and the freedom to think positively and constructively about the future. Although this study follows Bourdieu's theoretical precedent in its analysis, it has made a contribution to youth studies by introducing the dimension of youth

mobility in an attempt to delve into how international mobility impact on youth transitions.

There is very little literature body devoted to what rewards the international educational mobility has brought to Chinese international students. However, many positives changes can be identified in the works elaborating Chinese returnees who returned to China after years of sojourn abroad. And the rewards of their international mobility have been found to be cultural capital, social capital and many other immaterial personal growth which are either considered as rewards in themselves or can be converted to material gains.

Chinese international students' post-graduation mobility

Among the works studying Chinese international students' post-graduation mobility intentions, most are devoted to their dilemma between return and stay while very few address the possibility of moving on to a third country or straddling between home and a host country.

There are quite a few review articles of Chinese international students' intentions of return mobility. By reviewing articles of Australia-based Chinese international students' motivations for returning, Zhai et al. (2019) sort out that China's fast development, good career opportunities, family ties and existing social connections in China are pull factors, while difficult integration into local society in Australia, language problem, different cultures and values, and loneliness are push factors. In another systematic review of studies, Hao et al. (2017) classify previous literature into 'multiple factor analysis' and 'single factor analysis'. And in analysis of the multiple-factor articles, they categorize the factors into personal, professional and societal: personal factors including family connections, non-familial social connections, housing, education and welfare are important considerations in their

decision to return to China; as for professional factors, expected higher salaries (Le Bail & Shen, 2008; Zweig et al., 2004), access to various academic or business opportunities are pull factors, while lack of these opportunities (Chen, 2016) and 'guanxi' (social connections) in China after years of overseas experience (Cao, 2008; Chen, 2016), political rituals such as 'official speeches, government banquets, tours of key development sites' which are key to success in China (Xiang & Shen, 2009) but are resented by returnees (Yi, 2011; Cao, 2008), restrictions on research topics in the social sciences (Cao, 2008) and unwelcoming institutional leaders and colleagues (Cao, 2008) are push factors, nonetheless, the fact that China's economy has developed rapidly and has many available job opportunities remains a strong pull factor (Guo et al., 2013; Le Bail & Shen, 2008); societal factors refer to the influence of society, policies, the economy and culture, more specifically, culture shock, alienation and difficulties in acquiring foreign citizenship are push factors in the destination countries (Chen, 2016; Wadhwa, 2009; Zweig, 2006), whereas patriotism is a pull factor that drives students to return (Kellogg, 2012). As for the single-factor articles, many focus on the impact of policy and group influence; returnees' social network (Qin, 2011) and Chinese government incentives are pull factors, while China's prohibition of dual citizenship is a push factor in host country (Harvey, 2014; Guo & De Voretz, 2006).

Some research focus on post-graduation mobility intentions of all international students from multiple countries including China. Findlay et al. (2017: 194) find that students from China, among all UK-enrolled international students from different countries, were the most likely to anticipate their return mobility after they conclude their studies abroad given the brighter future career opportunities in China than other parts of the world, with or without being lured by 'Chinese government incentives' (Alberts & Hazen, 2005), which reverses Lin et al.'s (2016) finding that many professional factors are the primary motivators that drives Chinese international students to stay in the host country, however, Han et al. (2015) find out that personal and social factors are motivators that drive them to return to home countries. While by

examining future mobility intentions of STEM international students from high-, middle- and low-income countries using push-pull model, Gesing and Glass' (2019: 234) shows that the factors that made those Chinese international students intend to stay in the US were better job opportunities, treatment by colleagues/faculty in the US, and treatment by colleagues/faculty at home; while the ones that made others intend to leave were a better professional network at home, family connection, and treatment by colleagues/faculty in the US; as to those who were unsure, it was more likely due to cultural and social challenges, as well as their choice to study in the US due to its higher quality of education.

In a qualitative investigation of the return intentions of Chinese students studying at prestigious universities in the US., Cheung and Xu (2015) have found several aspects relating to elite mainland Chinese students' choice regarding return to China and the factors that influence their choices: first, unlike their counterparts at mid-ranking universities, these top Chinese international students studying at elite universities are more likely to get job offers upon graduation; in addition, the US has a long-standing tendency to absorb foreign-born talent and professionals in the STEM fields due to a severe shortage of candidates (Society for Human Resource Management, 2011). This temporary stay often leads to a longer or even a permanent stay after these students obtain suitable jobs, start their families, and enjoy their careers in the US (Zweig et al., 2008). As these findings suggest, academic and economic factors rather than political and social cultural factors are the major ones that make them stay in the US, as consistent with many other studies (Cao, 2008; Li, 2004).

By empirically examining the return intentions, return plans, and return behaviors of Chinese student migrants at different stages of the transition period starting from being still enrolled in their programs of study, followed by job-searching period, to eventually becoming part of the highly skilled labor force, Yu (2016) concludes a dynamic return migration decision-making process for Chinese student migrants in the US: at the first stage, Chinese student migrants initially hold uncertain return

intentions upon arrival in the US, then as they approach graduation, their return intentions change from overwhelmingly dependent on China's pull factors to being an outcome of both pull factors from China, such as sudden job opportunities and family concerns, and push factors from the US such as their worries of 'fitting in' the US society, moreover, their ambivalent return intentions associated with their concerns about the limited job opportunities for them in the US stimulate their immediate return migration behaviors at this stage; at the second stage, when they transfer to the OPT (Optional Practical Training) program, their transnational activities are limited and they intend to temporarily stay in the US, and their return intentions are greatly shaped by the social and political forces of both China and the US, specifically in the form of pull factors from the US on the OPT program, thus, their return intentions decline and their return plans are postponed until the end of the OPT period; at the third stage when their OPT is close to an end, their losing or fears of losing legal status may lead to their actualized return behavior; at the fourth stage when they successfully transition to the first-term H-1B period, their short-term return intentions are at a low level as a result of their personal career plans, yet they still hold strong return intentions in the long term, which involves their considerations of the social, cultural, and political factors from both the US and China, and actualized return mobility is limited at this stage; at the final stage, the longer they stay in the US, the stronger are the pull factors from US and the push factors from China that affect their return intentions, the lower return intentions they will have, and the more likely they will be to become the ambivalent migrants as Senyurekli and Menjivar (2012) demonstrated. Yu's research design offers a dynamic perspective to explore Chinese international students' return intentions at different stages of their transition period, with each period involving a certain rate of actualized return until the last stage when those who stick to the end become migrants.

Through an account of the complex decision-making processes in study-to-employment transition of a heterogeneous sample of UK-educated Chinese international students and graduates including still-enrolled students, work-visa or

permanent-residency stayers in possession of Bachelor's, Master's or doctorate degree, and returnees who had years of work experiences in the UK, Tu and Nehring (2020) perceive that most of their participants either had intended to return to China after completing a Master's degree or did not indicate a clear post-study plan, and many stayed right after graduation to accumulate more capital and experience which can yield 'cosmopolitan competence' with a view to gain greater mobility in the job market in China (Tu & Nehring, 2020: 49), while among a minority group of participants who re-migrated to the UK either had a Western PhD degree, or a dependent visa through a spouse with British citizenship, or a residence permit (Tu & Nehring, 2020: 51). An important contribution of Tu and Nehring's (2020) study is that it opens a discussion of how imagined transnational mobility and immobility as well as the gap between aspiration and reality due to spatial and temporal factors affect 'the dynamic of young Chinese graduates' transition from students to professionals' (Tu & Nehring, 2020: 54).

As the review shows, most extant literature fall into the binary of return vs. stay when exploring Chinese international students' post-graduation mobility intentions, which gives more attention to return mobility and hence unbalances the significance of all possible destinations, despite the fact that a majority of contemporary Chinese international students do intend to return immediately or after having accumulated more experiences abroad. Additionally, an important trend that should be noted is that recent studies start to take study-to-employment transition into consideration when they explore Chinese international students' post-graduation mobility choices, which happens to be the core scholarly concern of youth transition studies.

Chinese Parachute kids

The international sojourning experiences of those at a younger age may be different from those who are older because they are at a more formative age (Cheng & Yang,

2019: 554), as Lyttle et al. (2011: 688; Dacey & Travers, 2002) state: 'early adolescence (ages 12-18) is a period of meta-development, which includes comprehension of social norms and subgroups as well as increased cognitive complexity'. A review over extant studies of these teenage international students will help us gain an understanding of how their international mobility at younger ages may affect their present and future.

Parachute kids first emerged in the 1980s, and during the 1980s and early 1990s, the parachute kids phenomenon gained increased media attention partly because parachute kids were predominantly from Taiwan (Hamilton, 1993; Zhou, 1998). In 2009, mainland China became the No. 1 sending country of international high school students in the US, surpassing South Korea. During the past decade, the number of parachute kids from mainland China has been rapidly rising. As of 2019, there were 36,842 Chinese K-12 students in the US, accounting for 47% of total international K-12 students (Department of Homeland Security, 2020). Behind the large outflow of Chinese students is the general trend of social stratification in China. Accompanying the rapid economic development and the establishment of the market as the dominating force for allocating resources, China has been undergoing a social transformation characterized by rapid social stratification during the past three decades.

The reasons for parachuting include the opportunities for better education in destination countries and fierce competition for limited educational resources at home (Zhou, 1998; Cheng, 2020: 826). In the earlier times, parachuting was also a practical way of investing in the future, as many families expected their kids to return home after completion of schooling abroad, but if circumstances make return difficult or impossible, settlement in the US would be an acceptable alternative and was an 'insurance policy' for wealthy Chinese entrepreneurs (Zhou, 1998: 689). In a latest study on why a rapidly rising group of urban upper-middle-class Chinese families decide to send their only children to the US on their own for private secondary

education, Tu (2021) situates this phenomenon in the socio-historical transformation of contemporary Chinese society and has revealed that dissatisfaction with the political narrative, resistance against the test-oriented pedagogical practices at school and aspiration of a 'well-rounded' education are the main reason for parachuting. She concludes that the phenomenon of parachute kids in American high schools is relatively new in China and is a class-specific educational consumption in exchange for American experiences, tastes, lifestyles, a 'well-rounded' development, and some uncertainties of the children's life trajectories (Tu, 2021: 13-14). This very up-to-date study, although overlooks essential issues like why these families think China maintains such education system, has provided empirical data in support of my claim that today's parachute kids and their parents value a different and a believed better social condition under which their kid will be able to enjoy the course of study and life as their main motive of parachuting, contrasting that of parachuting in the earlier times when the pursuit of specific better outcomes, such as 'insurance policy', 'better education for upward social mobility', 'to escape fierce competition for limited educational opportunities at home', 'to obtain residence in the US', 'to avoid mandatory military service' (Zhou, 1998) were many families' incentives.

In terms of parachute kids' experiences abroad, many studies like to use acculturation model to investigate these Chinese teenagers' adaptation and integration level. Cheng (2020: 828) argues that 'the interface between cultural adjustments and individual development more than double the difficult task of acculturation for Chinese parachute kids', echoing Tsong and Liu's (2008: 370) statement: 'The changes associated with immigration and separation from one or both parents make the challenges that come with normative developmental tasks in this age group all the more difficult'. Chiang-Hom (2004) uses the term 'uprooting' to describe the sense of disorientation among parachute kids as they moved from a familiar environment to an alien one, and, to assess how well they adapted, he compares the adjustments of unaccompanied Chinese little sojourners with those of foreign-born Chinese youth and US-born Chinese youth and finds unaccompanied sojourners to be doing as well

as the other two groups academically, psychologically and behaviorally. Ying (2001) compares three groups of Chinese, namely, accompanied minors, unaccompanied minors, and unaccompanied adults, and finds that unaccompanied minors had a stronger orientation to their traditional values and home culture which facilitated their process of cross-cultural transition. Kuo and Roysircar (2004) examine three cohorts of Chinese adolescents in Canada, namely, Canadian-born, immigrants, and unaccompanied sojourners, and find that the unaccompanied sojourners experienced the lowest acculturation level and highest acculturative stress levels. They also explore the psychological well-being and adaptation of adolescent Taiwanese unaccompanied sojourners attending secondary schools in Canada (Kuo & Roysircar, 2006), and find out that these students were a potentially vulnerable group who felt ill-prepared for studying in Canada and poorly oriented.

In the literature body of parachute kids in general, many struggling and painful experiences have been reported (Lee & Friedlander, 2014; Mok, 2015). Popadiuk (2009) studies 21 unaccompanied minors from Asia attending three urban secondary schools in Western Canada, and emphasizes that support should be provided for adolescent international students before they arrive and throughout the duration of their sojourn. Cheng (2020: 832) categorizes parachute kids' adjustments into three levels, namely, tangible, structural and mental ones: an example of a tangible adjustment is the need for a sense of home and belonging; structural adjustments include teacher-student relationships and interpersonal relationships; and mental adjustments include the change from being privileged to being disadvantaged, and from being passive to being proactive. Based on an empirical study, Cheng (2020) has identified three types of Chinese parachute kids: those who are integrated appear to be those with an open and curious mind, and proactive in making adjustments by getting to know more about the local people and culture, and use the adjustments as an opportunity for reflection and growth; those who resist making adjustments appear to be the ones with a more passive attitude who thus become separated from the host culture; and the majority rest do not resist the new culture while holding onto their

home culture, but at the same time, they struggle to reconcile the differences, exploring ways to navigate between two cultures.

Extant empirical findings of the rewards that Chinese parachute kids obtain from sojourn abroad can be extracted from Cheng and Yang's (2019) research which examines the experiences of overseas parachute kids in the US and whether sojourn serves as a pathway to global citizenship. According to interview data collected by Cheng and Yang's (2019), overall participants reported experiencing growth in their knowledge and understanding, especially concerning the local people and local culture, which were more accurate than they had previously learnt on media and internet; some recounted that they were able to enrich their values, develop different perspectives and broaden their world outlook; and many prompted to reflect on the differences between China and America by virtue of living in the US. Cheng and Yang (2019: 553) argue that the process of acculturation may help international students develop global competencies (knowledge, understanding and skills), and global consciousness (values and attitudes).

Despite an increasing number of Chinese parachute kids going to North American for secondary education, they are still dwarfed by the mass of tertiary education seekers, therefore there is scant literature on them. In a summary of the above review, we can see that contemporary parachute kids move to the US for a better social condition and study environment rather than instrumental purposes like earlier ones. However, the experiences of these unaccompanied teenagers in the US are always challenging and sometimes even depressing since they are still in their formative years and the task of adapting an alien culture is daunting. Yet they still harvest rewards from their overseas secondary school years.

Summary

I tease out extant literature on Chinese international students by extracting them into four groups, namely, the ones that address their mobility motives before relocation, their experiences abroad, their rewards from their overseas study and life, and their outlook to future mobility, following a biographical sequence in line with how I structure my empirical analysis chapters. I review literature on Chinese parachute kids separately in consideration of their younger ages and unique educational trajectories, and I also follow the same pattern to review the studies on their pre-arrival mobility motives, their experiences and their rewards.

Before I close this chapter, I exploit the space of this summary section to separately review another latest monograph by Ma (2020) titled *Ambitious and Anxious: How Chinese College Students Succeed and Struggle in American Higher Education,* as it is a latest relevant literature that holistically examines Chinese international students' mobility experiences from pre-arrival to post-graduation plans and my research questions happen to largely resemble the ones of this work. Based on empirical data, Ma argues that a culture of studying abroad has emerged in urban China over the past decade (2020: 23) since rational considerations including more educational opportunities, higher quality education in the US and a chance to avoid Gaokao, and the idealistic goal of broadening horizons by acquiring cosmopolitan capital, were the motivations for Chinese international students to study in the US (2020: 50-52); as for the social experiences, the findings show that Chinese international students explicitly expressed their desire to make friends with Americans but were frustrated by the cultural and institutional barriers and by those who hold biased views about China, therefore they seek 'protective segregation' with other Chinese international students (Ma, 2020: 133); regarding personal changes after experiences in the US, they had become 'more active and engaged citizens, reflective and reflexive about the social worlds they live in', which helped them develop a renewed interest in and a strong awareness of being Chinese while being abroad (Ma, 2020: 202-203), meanwhile

their perception of the US had changed from romanticized to critical and realistic (Ma, 2020: 203); concerning post-graduation plans, college major, social integration, English proficiency and the unfriendly visa policy all matter in their decision making-process, but overall, a majority intended to return to China (Ma, 2020: 228). This monograph takes a biographical approach to investigate and offers insights into Chinese international students' experiences, opinions and reflections and reflexivities, however like most other literature, it does not wear a youth transitions lens.

In a sum up, it is evident that most extant literature on Chinese international students study single stages of their lived experiences without holistically looking into the whole course of their youth transitions and how their international mobility plays a role in their transitions to adulthood. Only several recent research like Lan (2020) and Tu and Nehring (2020) address the education-to-work transitions of Chinese international students. Therefore, my research will make a contribution to this scant literature body.

Chapter 5 Methodology

Introduction

This methodology chapter describes and justifies the research methods selected for this study. The first section introduces my research design. In this section, I justify my choice of having both mobility/migration and youth transitions as the backbone theoretical guidance for my study, then I explain the interchangeable usage of mobility and migration in this study and the theoretical adaptability before I justify the choice of qualitative research methods and an interpretivist-constructivist approach for data analysis. In the second section, I justify semi-structured, in-depth interviews as the methods to collect empirical data. In section three, I justify the criteria of sample selection with the characteristics of statistical data, then describe the process of data collection in which I had encountered unexpected situations and unexpected sample characteristics. In the following section, I introduce how I processed the data with the help of MAXQDA software and analyzed the data with proper coding logic. Lastly, I discuss how my positionality of a cultural insider had helped the whole data collection process and at the same time could possibly influence the whole research project due to the potential biases I have in collecting, processing and analyzing empirical data.

In short, this methodology chapter tries to give a detailed introduction of the research design, research approaches and the manners of presenting research results in order to justify my theoretical choices, data collection methods, sampling choices, art of data analysis and interpretation, and my own situatedness.

Research design

Chinese international students' migration and mobility to the US is a long-standing phenomenon that has lasted for more than a century. The 21st century has been witnessing a larger-scaled constant growth of Chinese international students in the US. So why is there a constant increase of Chinese students going to the US? Especially why such trend is still popular in the background of the more intensified political conflicts between the US and China since Trump's presidency? Are they enjoying their life in the US? How do they evaluate their experiences? Will they stay in the US or return to China?

As the research questions entail a chronological sequence and the empirical findings present a biographical narrative, an umbrella research question is outlined: how does international mobility play a role in Chinese international students' transitions to adulthood? The answers to such umbrella research question address issues including their motivations for international mobility, their lived past, reflections and reflexivities on the past, and the future planning and imagining, offering a biographical perspective to provide insight into how today's Chinese international students in the US make transitions to adulthood.

Very few extant studies holistically investigate Chinese international students' international mobility experiences from pre-arrival to future outlooks. And fewer take a youth transitions approach to examine their transitions-making while being mobile across national boundaries in contemporary social conditions that are rapidly changing. This study adopts youth transitions studies and mobility/migration as two backbone theoretical frameworks to inquire into today's Chinese international students' mobility to the US, exposing the contextual and structural constraints that young mobile Chinese are negotiating to make transitions to adulthood. From the perspective of youth transitions studies which concern the relationship between agency and structure in an ever-changing world full of unpredictability and

uncertainties, young people who are on the move and experiencing 'double' social changes are different from their sedentary counterparts. In the case of my study, how international mobility affect youth transitions-making of Chinese international students in the US who experience both horizontal social changes (from home to another culture) and vertical social changes (from the past to the future in both societies) deserves a sociological inquiry. From the perspective of mobility and migration, young people's transitions to adulthood intersected with their mobility trajectories is impregnated with more potential uncertainties and contingencies, and further generates potential ambivalence and fragmentation in their following mobility trajectories. Thus the juxtaposition of youth transitions and mobility/migration theories can provide a more holistic and more reflexive perspective to make sense of today's Chinese international students' mobility experiences.

In the matter of terminological nuances, this study uses 'migration' and 'mobility' interchangeably following Cairns and Clemente's (2021: 1) theoretical proposal of 'youth mobility nested within youth migration' and draws on related literature of both strands to the analysis of my empirical data. However, I still term my participants as mobile students instead of migrant students in this study, only because of their current mobile state and their yet-to-practice future mobility trajectories. In another word, this study considers Chinese international students as potential migrants and acknowledges that their action of moving across national borders is both migration and mobility since migration is just a form of mobility (Urry, 2009: 480). Regarding theoretical adaptability, youth transitions theories in my study allude to general social changes around the whole world and the social change from one culture to another, and is not restricted to social changes within Western societies, so that it can be applied to explain how my participants exercise agency against contextual and structural constraints in their transitions to adulthood in an intercultural and transnational context.

Although Chinese international students' motives of mobility, experiences abroad and

future intentions have already been investigated by many previous studies, I still didn't know whether there were any new findings since the characteristics of today's young Chinese growing up in a fast-changing society and entering into another ever-changing society could be vastly different from the ones not very long ago. Therefore, this study adopts a qualitative research paradigm to explore the mobility experiences of today's Chinese international students in the US and administers in-depth and semi-structural interviews to collect empirical data.

Since this research project studies the experiences, reflections and reflexivities, and future desires of my participants with a qualitative research method, I believe an interpretivist-constructivist approach is an appropriate method to analyze my empirical data. An interpretivist-constructivist approach serves as hermeneutic instrument for understanding 'the world of human experience' (Cohen & Manion, 1994: 36), believing that 'reality is socially constructed' (Berger & Luckmann, 1966). Interpretivism suggests that researchers understands the research data not only through their research participants' perspectives, but also through their own views, backgrounds and experiences. And there is no 'pure fact' since every 'fact' is already the product of a series of interpretations of underlying data and assumptions (Van der Walt, 2020: 61). Instead of finding generalizations of social phenomena, we only find distinctions between and within individuals (Blackburn, 2009: 23). It is always the interpreter who has the ultimate power to decide what counts as facts and data, what to include and how to interpret the data (Barrett, 2009: 208). Unlike positivists, constructivists normally do not hypothesize research findings, rather they 'generate or inductively develop a theory or pattern of meanings' (Creswell, 2003: 9) based on the interpretations that are influenced by the situatedness of both the researcher and research subjects. Therefore interpretivist-constructivist approach is aimed at a 'holistic complementarity' rather than the acquisition of 'proven facts' (Van der Walt, 2020: 65). Thus the goal of this research is not to construct broad generalizations of all Chinese international students' experiences in the US, but rather to create an in-depth understanding of the participants' lives as individual cases within the broader

context of the phenomenon of Chinese international students' mobility to the US. In the process of data analysis, themes and theories emerge from the data itself.

Data collection method

In-depth interview can generate insights into participants' lives which would otherwise remain hidden to the researcher; give access to individuals' understanding of the contexts they are in, to their opinions, aspirations, attitude and feelings; have a complex understanding into others' perceptions of social phenomena and why they make certain choices and act in the ways they do; and promote participants to consider details which would otherwise be inaccessible (Clark et al., 2013: 138). It is generally recognized as a young people-friendly strategy, providing opportunities for young people to talk about their lives on their own terms (Heath et al., 2009: 79). Giving voice to young people's own experiences, opinions and concerns is important in a world where the meanings of young people's attitudes and actions are often either assumed or based on adult interpretations (Heath et al., 2009: 79). When young participants are being interviewed, they are telling stories and selecting details of their experiences from their stream of consciousness (Seidman, 2006: 7), to which research questions are to be answered. Immediate interaction of interview is a good way to investigate individuals' motivations and experiences because it does not give them much time to process and possibly to make up answers. The influence of mobility on one's youth transitions to adulthood are not directly measurable, so they can only be operationalized through other indicators, such as self-reflections on 'rewards from international mobility' which can break down into sub-indicators such as 'being more open to cultural others', 'having obtained credentials', 'having become more self-confident', 'having accumulated more social resources' etc. All these information are better collected through in-depth interviews.

In order to better effectively elicit biographical narratives from my young participants,

I use semi-structured interview method to give them more flexibility and freedom to navigate themselves through their stream of consciousness and to al give myself a chance to dig deeper into their memories especially when an unexpected relevant theme pops out. Semi-structured interviews offer a more flexible approach, where the interviewer starts with a set of questions which provide a 'backbone' for the interview, but may freely come up with spontaneous new questions in reaction to interviewees' answer or narrative (Clark et al., 2013: 140). This interaction resembles 'ebb and flow' of everyday exchanges, thus it can help both interviewee and interviewer relax and help generate more personalized responses, opening up areas of enquiry that emerge from the participants rather than from the researchers preconception (Clark et al., 2013: 140). Following the semi-structured interview pattern, I am allowed to add, delete or adjust some questions depending on the uniqueness of the participants' social background and experiences, meanwhile I am not required to ask questions in a fixed order, and my interviewee is free to jump between different issues which may be all equally relevant to the topic. One of the major strengths of semi-structured interview pattern is to allow research participants to explore themes in their own comfortable ways. Many young people like to make logic leaps when they are recalling their own experiences and retrieving memories, but as long as they invariably introduce related themes, they will not be interrupted. Sometimes such relatively loose and relaxed way of interviewing can yield unanticipated themes and connections in detail which had not occurred to the researcher. Semi-structured and non-directive questioning in the context of youth studies can also help avoid a scenario in which young participants deal with an adult interviewer in authority and feel they are expected to give a 'right' answer, and in doing so they may attempt to second-guess the 'right' answer, or may find it difficult to formulate any answer at all (Heath et al., 2009: 82).

Participant selection

As opposed to random or probability sampling in quantitative research which aim to draw representative sample from the population, so that 'the results of studying the sample can then be generalized back to the population' (Marshall, 1996: 522), purposeful sampling approach is usually used in qualitative research to 'improve understanding of complex human issues' rather than generalizability of results (Marshall, 1996: 524), namely to best possibly answer the research questions and inform important facets and perspectives related to the phenomenon being studied.

Although coming from one country, Chinese international students in the US are of diverse background in terms of age, gender, region of origin and study type and level of attended course. In terms of gender, according to 'Student and Exchange Visitor Program (SEVP) 2019 SEVIS by the Numbers Report' released by U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (2020), 47.8% of Chinese international students were female and 52.1% were male. This data as the only available institutional data I can find indicating gender statistics refers to all Chinese international students of various academic levels including Chinese K12 students who were attending primary and secondary schools in the US. There is no institutional data on Chinese international students' age, but it can be estimated that Chinese international undergraduate students are aged around 18 to 22, K12 students are mostly between 15 to 18, but the ages of Chinese graduate students could be more diverse since it is possible that some had a gap year or several gap years or work years after having finished undergraduate study. Regarding the regions of origin, the only available data based on a statistics on all foreign student visa approvals from 2008 to 2012 shows that Beijing, Shanghai, Nanjing, Guangzhou, Chengdu, Wuhan, Shenzhen were the top seven sending cities of Chinese international students (Ruiz, 2014). These cities are all capital cities and major cities that are more economically developed than other relatively peripheral cities.

Top Source Hometown of F-1 Foreign Students, 2008-2012					
Rank	City	Number of Students	Share	City Size	City Income Type
1	Seoul, South Korea	56,503	4.9%	Large	Upper Middle Income
2	Beijing, China	49,946	4.3%	Megacity	Middle Income
3	Shanghai, China	29,145	2.5%	Megacity	Middle Income
4	Hyderabad, India	26,220	2.3%	Large	Very Low Income
5	Riyadh, Saudi Arabia	17,361	1.5%	Large	Upper Middle Income
6	Mumbai, India	17,294	1.5%	Megacity	Low Income
7	Taipei, Taiwan	15,985	1.4%	Large	High Income
8	Hong Kong, SAR	12,406	1.1%	Large	High Income
9	Kathmandu, Nepal	10,721	0.9%	Small	Very Low Income
10	Jeddah, Saudi Arabia	10,468	0.9%	Middle	Middle Income
11	Nanjing, China	9,316	0.8%	Large	Middle Income
12	Chennai, India	9,141	0.8%	Large	Very Low Income
13	Singapore	8,989	0.8%	Large	Very High Income
14	Bangalore, India	8,835	0.8%	Large	Low Income
15	Delhi, India	8,728	0.8%	Megacity	Low Income
16	Guangzhou, China	8,167	0.7%	Megacity	Middle Income
17	Chengdu, China	8,124	0.7%	Large	Low Income
18	Wuhan, China	8,001	0.7%	Large	Low Income
19	Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam	7,955	0.7%	Large	Low Income
20	Shenzhen, China	7,792	0.7%	Megacity	Middle Income
	World	1,153,459	100.0%		

Source: SEVIS, Immigration and Customs Enforcement and McKinsey Global Cities of the Future. For thresholds for city size and city income type see appendix A.
Includes only foreign students studying for Bachelor's or higher degrees

Table 1 (source: Ruiz, 2014)

Chinese international students in American tertiary schools are categorized by Institute of International Education (IIE) into four groups: undergraduates, graduates, non-degree and OPT (Optional Practical Training). OPT is an internship period offered to international students who just graduate from university. It can be a critical transient path for those who want to stay and work in the US to transfer their visa type from 'student' to 'work' and finally to 'permanent residency' or a precious opportunity to collect work experiences in the US before return to home country. As reported by IIE in its annual Open Doors Reports, Chinese undergraduates in the US have been the largest group by academic level since 2014/2015 when it for the first time ever outnumbered Chinese graduate students (IIE, 2015). In academic year 2019/2020, there were 148,160 Chinese undergraduates accounting for 39.8% of the total Chinese international students of tertiary education in the US (IIE, 2020).
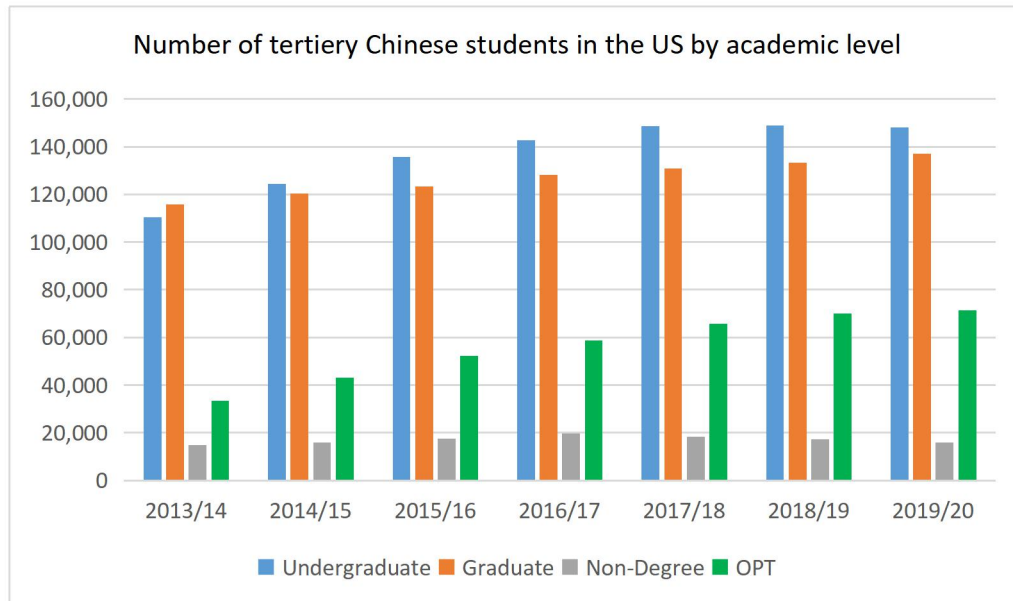
Chart 1 (source: Open Doors Report, IIE, 2014-2020)

Suggested by related data and theoretical perspective, I followed the homogeneous sampling approach and selected Chinese undergraduate international students in the US as my research participants in the hopes of having a more comprehensive and in-depth understanding of this group's experiences and representations. From the perspective of youth transitions studies, undergraduate period is probably the most critical stage for young people in their transitions to adulthood, after which they have the basic credential to enter the knowledge labor market, and are relatively mature enough to be able to get married, and soon may have enough financial capability to afford independent housing. The college experience itself represents an intensive preparatory socialization process, where many stakeholders have related but distinct goals: the business community wants eager employees with human capital skills; civil society needs an informed and committed citizenry; parents hope college will enhance their offsprings' happiness and self-sufficiency; and college students themselves aspire to improve their professional and personal prospects (Montgomery & Côté, 2003: 149). Thus Chinese undergraduates' characteristics of being the largest group and of being in their most critical life stage justify my homogeneous sampling choice.

After locating undergraduates as my target study objects, the next step is to specify a

region of the US where my interviewees will be found. Although New York state, following California, hosted the second largest amount of international students with 40.9% of them were Chinese in 2019 (IIE, 2019), at the beginning I still chose New York as the place where I would find 40 Chinese undergraduates as my participants and conduct interviews because I had found a host professor in Syracuse University who would co-supervise my empirical work in New York.

2019 FACT SHEET: NEW YORK

124,277	2.5	2	$5,311,151,048
Int'l Students in the State	Percent Change from Previous Year	Rank in the U.S.*	Estimated Int'l Student Expenditure in the State**

* Rankings include all 50 U.S. states in addition to Washington, D.C., Puerto Rico, and the U.S. Virgin Islands.
**Source: NAFSA: Association of International Educators. For more information, see www.nafsa.org/economicvalue.

LEADING PLACES OF ORIGIN FOR INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS IN THE STATE

Rank	Place of Origin	% Total
1	China	40.9
2	India	16.9
3	South Korea	5.8

Table 2 (source: Open Doors Report, IIE, 2020)

Data collection process

Being subject to international travel restrictions caused by the pandemic, the original plan of face-to-face interviews in New York had been substituted by online interviews. And the geographical scope of participants selection was extended beyond New York for two reasons. First, it was more difficult to find Chinese international students with online tools than through tangible connections within physical reach. Second, online meetings are unbounded by spatial proximity.

Online interview approach was already quite common in qualitative research before

the pandemic. In fact, it has steadily become increasingly popular among social scientists as it overcomes time and financial constraints, geographical dispersion, and physical mobility boundaries. Although there are some drawbacks, such as loss of subtle visual and non-verbal cues (O'Connor et al., 2008), time difference if the researcher and participants are in different time zones, and possible disconnections caused by bandwidth, there are also many advantages compared to traditional face-to-face interview. First, time and money would have not been spent if the interviewee does not keep an appointment for the interview; second, their anonymity can be easily ensured online as there is no need to obtain phone numbers from participants; third, both the interviewer and the interviewee are able to remain in a 'safe location' without imposing on each other's personal space; fourth, it is suggested that online interviews may allow for more reflective responses and can be a useful forum for asking sensitive or embarrassing questions (Madge & O'Connor, 2004). Reviewing those days when I was collecting data, maybe online interview method is indeed another reason, besides my cultural insider membership, why my participants were comfortable to share their sexual experiences and sensitive political opinions.

Every interview was audio-recorded upon consent by my participants. In fear of occurrence of technical problems, I recorded the audio with both a dictaphone and my mobile phone as a strategy of double insurance. I prepared a digital agreement of confidentiality and sent it to every participant right after the interview. However more than half of them did not bother signing it and sending it back. But it doesn't matter since I have their verbal consent and written consent on social media before I started recording. I used either Skype or Zoom for online interviews depending on participants' preference. Unfortunately, laggy video, voice skipping and even disconnections happened in the middle of many interviews. When these problems occurred, we shut off the video and continued our interviews using only audio communication. Anyhow, I saw every participant's face and had an impression of their looks, so that when I was coding and processing the transcriptions later I could recall the specific student who said what in my head. And I believed such memory of

their faces matched with their words could help me better understand and interpret their narratives.

The in-depth interviews were conducted in Chinese mandarin because I believed that interviewees would be able to better express themselves in their mother tongue especially when they wanted to disclose their deep feelings and it would be also easier for me to understand and follow their storyline, since the use of foreign language in interview somehow 'threatens the accuracy of response' (Welch & Piekkari, 2006: 434). Each interview averagely lasted around 90 minutes with three exceptions which lasted around two hours and one around only one hour. Before the interview questions were asked, there was a short survey list of questions inquiring participants demographic information such as age, singleton or not, city of origin, year of study, field of study, years of stay in the US, parents' educational backgrounds and occupations, etc. Semi-structured interview questions were asked, as guided by research questions, in a chronological structure of inquiry into their biographical experiences. The first set of interview questions asked their pre-arrival decision-making process and expectation of international mobility. The second set of questions examined their life experiences in the US in respects of social interactions at school, in accommodation and in wider local society. The third set of questions inquired how they felt the international mobility experiences had changed them, how they were reflective and reflexive about their cross-cultural experiences, what rewards they felt they had obtained, and how they understood the US and China. The final set of questions investigated their future plans including their future mobility destinations, social expectations and career aspirations.

The process of searching for Chinese international undergraduate students was not as smooth as I expected. Before I started the first 'official' interview, I did two trial interviews in September 2020, one with a student in New York and another with one in Los Angeles. I found the first 'trial' student on a Wechat group account that I spotted on a website where Chinese international students in New York posted their

individual Wechat accounts and group Wechat accounts for establishing social connections. The second 'trial' student was introduced by my cousin who was an undergraduate himself studying at a university in Central-north of the US. Both of these 'trial' students were Master students, so they could not be included in my project in any case. These two trials were conducted only for the purpose of improving my interview outline.

After I improved the interview online through two 'trial' interviews, I tried my luck on Wechat again to look for the first 'official' interviewee, but I found nothing. Then I tried posting advertisements on another social media, but it didn't catch any attention, either. While feeling frustrated, I asked my cousin again to help me find another undergraduate student. He introduced one of his roommates Shawn to me. After my anxiety was relieved a bit with the completion of the first 'official' interview, I pulled myself together and started thinking about other ways of searching for interviewees. At the beginning of December, I casually searched around on a third social media and accidentally came across the official account of a New York-based Chinese students' social club, through which I reached my second 'official' interviewee Grace who was very excited to participate in my project and was even eager to help me find more Chinese international students. At first, I hesitated for a moment about whether to interview her or not when I learnt that she just started her Master's program although she finished her Bachelor's program one year earlier. But she was very enthusiastic to be my participant and emphasized that she just started Master' program around two months ago and her graduation one year ahead made her still a de facto undergraduate student in a temporal sense. Convinced by her enthusiasm and insistence, I made a Skype appointment with her for the next day. As she promised, she introduced a group of students to me. At the same time, she suggested I post an advertisement on the social media account of another New York-based Chinese students' social club, through which I recruited another couple of participants. With these two sources, I found several more students with snowballing strategy. At some point when these two sources seemed to dry out, I asked my cousin again to introduce one more student

who then further introduced several others to me. Meanwhile, through a friend of mine, I reached a student studying at a university in California, who then also introduced one more student to me. In principle, I had recruited 40 interviewees through snowballing strategy on these four sources. A majority of them were students from New York. Then a small group were from universities in the Central North, and several more from the ones in California. The total cycle of conducting 40 online interviews lasted for more than 4 months from November 2020 to March 2021. Later when I was transcribing, I contacted several participants to further clarify some doubts that I had about their answers. Furthermore, it occurred to me that I should ask them some follow-up questions concerning their understandings of youth and adulthood and their opinions on the post-pandemic US and China and how they thought this pandemic had affected their present and would affect their future. In the end, I received answers to these follow-up questions in written texts or voice messages from 30 of them.

When I was looking for students, I totally forgot about balancing my participants by gender because all my attention was on finding interviewees and I was even worried of failing to find enough ones. Fortunately, when the issue of gender balance suddenly occurred to me after I already finished all the 40 interviews, I noticed that 18 were female and 22 were male. Another selection criterion that I did not expect of and I forgot to ask most of the interviewees when I was making appointments with them might have turned out to be unintended positive outcomes. In the first couple of interviews, it was easy to tell these participants were holding a student visa. But in the middle of an interview with the eighth student, I was told that he and his mother obtained a green card through an immigrant investor program right before he moved to the US with his mother for high school study. After I finished that interview, I was thinking whether I should abandon it or not, because unlike my previous interviewees, he would have no pressure of trying to obtain an H-1B visa towards official employment if he wanted to stay and work in the US. After a second thought, I chose to keep it because his biographical story and opinions were very interesting. Without

realizing it, I kept forgetting to ask about the green card when I was making appointments with the following participants, then I came across another five students who were green card holders. Two of them fall into the conventional migration type, because they were brought to the US by their parent(s) who then settled in the US and worked in Chinese communities. Three others, like the first green card holder I interviewed, used their green card of permanent residence solely for the convenience of their education and life in the US. These six green card holder students might to some extent represent the demographic reality of Chinese international undergraduate students in the US.

Apart from the green card issue, one more demographic feature was also beyond my expectation. The two 'trial' interviewees and the first 'official' interviewee all finished their high school study in China before they moved to the US, although they all studied in private international high schools. So I anticipated that all the following 'official' interviewees would be of similar educational trajectory. To my surprise, my second 'official' interviewee Grace is a former parachute kid who moved to the US when she just finished her 2nd year of middle school in China. In the end, a majority of my participants are former parachute kids who moved to the US at their teen ages during their middle school period or after they finished middle school in China. A few former parachute kids in my study obtained the green card through their families' immigrant investor programs before they moved to the US for secondary education. And several of them were living with their parents in their own houses in the US. In a strict sense, they can not be counted as parachute kids who are supposed to be 'dropped' in the US alone, but in this study I still classify them as parachute kids for their early teenage identity at the time of international mobility to the US. According to SEVIS (Student and Exchange Visitor Information System), there were 36,842 Chinese K-12 students in the US in 2019 accounting for 47% of total international K-12 students, and in 2018 the number was 42,122, and five years before that it was less than 10,000. In contrast, as indicated in the *Open Doors Report on International Educational Exchange*, the numbers of Chinese international undergraduates in the

US in 2019 and 2018 were 148,160 and 148,880 respectively, around four times as the number of Chinese K-12 students. It seems that the number of Chinese K-12 students is dwarfed by that of Chinese undergraduate students. But if we make a calculation of composition of the Chinese undergraduate group, it is inferred that among the total number of Chinese undergraduate students of all four grades in 2019, a lot of them used to be K-12 students in 2018, 2017, 2016 and 2015. So the selection of my participants does have a certain degree of representativeness of the overall demographics of the total Chinese undergraduates in the US, although I was not obliged, due to the qualitative nature of my research, to select participants who can best represent the overall population of Chinese international students in the US. From the perspective of the significance of the research itself, maybe it is a surprise to come across these Chinese undergraduates who have secondary education experience in the US, because at a relatively older age their reflections and reflexivities on their previous teenage years in a different culture may generate a different perspective of their present and future from those who had no secondary schooling experiences in the US, and such perspective could be precious data for my research. Moreover, most existent research on Chinese international students strictly divide the high school cohort and college cohort apart and study them separately without investigating the undergraduates' recalling on their past American high school experiences. Therefore this study can fill up this gap to some extent.

The third unexpected situation was that almost half of the participants was back in China at the time of interview. Most of them went back to China around April 2020 after the outbreak of Covid-19 epidemic in the US was confirmed. Some of them went back to China as early as in Christmas time in 2019 for holiday but had been stuck in China after the epidemic happened. Although their location did not affect the implementation of online interviews, but other possible social influences should be taken into consideration. After months of stuck in China having online courses in an upside-down schedule due to time difference between China and the US, these participants could be tired and bored of their confinement and unhealthy timetable of

study and rest. Consequently, these participants could be in a different mood than the others who were in the US for two scenarios. The first scenario is that they could become eager to come back to the US because of confinement at home or of conflicts with parents. In this situation, her future mobility intention could be predisposed toward staying in the US. The second scenario is that they could have regained the inertia to rely on parents on daily rituals, so that they would slightly prefer returning to China when they were asked about their future plans. Thus the various unexpected situations caused by the pandemic had to some extent influenced my whole research process.

Data processing and analyzing

Transcribing 40 audio interviews of each lasting 90 minutes averagely is a massive amount of work for a researcher alone. Thanks to a powerful A.I. transcribing software which helped reduce a considerable load of work burden, I just needed to revise some minor details that the software failed to transcribe correctly and adjust the texts into proper dialogue format. When I spotted the logically unclear or nonsensical words or other obvious mistakes, I had to play the source audio and quickly find the lines which were transcribed wrong, then revised the transcriptions myself. Although revising the transcription mistakes by checking audio records one by one also still cost time, but compared to manually transcribing the whole audios, A.I. transcribing was still much faster and more productive. Thus the transcription work of all the 40 interviews was finished in just around one month. Then I started translating transcriptions into English, but I found it too time-consuming and depressing. After having translated several transcriptions, I had decided to directly code the Chinese interview texts with MAXQDA, and then only translated the excerpts that I chose to use in my thesis. In this way, the workload of translation was scaled down a great deal. Temple and Young (2004) argue that researchers, who can translate data themselves, are the best situated to carry out cross-language research, because they interact with

participants and understand the expressed intentions within a given context. As a cultural insider who is familiar with many Chinese idioms and memes that are very popular among today's young Chinese, I can better understand and translate my participants' narratives.

Categorizing and coding interview texts is the first step to process data in qualitative studies. Categories are used for structuring the content, for generating types, and for the assessment (evaluation) of statements (Kuckartz, 2014). Identifying and naming categories are just the actions of coding. Categories or codes are often named by a simple word or a combination of a few words, and avoid the use of longer word combinations or statements. MAXQDA makes coding fast and simple, hence highly improves work efficiency. Before dropping data segments under the established codes, which can be done within a simple click of mouse with the help of MAXQDA, identifying categories and naming codes are important analytical processes. A useful set of codes has two basic logical characteristics: all-inclusiveness and mutually exclusiveness. To be all-inclusive, the set must include the entire range of relevant response categories in a particular dimension. To be mutually exclusive, each category in the set making up the dimension must be defined clearly enough so that a concrete example can not logically fall into two categories at the same time. Nevertheless, codes of a more abstract definition is better than the ones of a too concrete meaning in order to potentially include all the relevant data segments regardless of their superficial differences rather than missing any of them. To perform the task of summarizing, condensing, and storing a concrete example that falls into a certain code, I assigned a name to the code to represent any case in that category. At first, following a deductive, concept-driven approach, where codes can be developed before viewing the data (Kuckartz & Rädiker, 2019: 67) based on research questions and theoretical framework, I identified three sets of parent-codes: reasons of mobility, during the mobility and future plans. Then I follow an inductive, data-driven approach, where codes can be regarded as condensed descriptions of the phenomena discovered in the data (Kuckartz & Rädiker, 2019: 67), and identified segments that belonged to a

certain category which fell under a parent-code and built a sub-code with a name for them, for instance, I created sub-codes named 'role of parents', 'role of friends', and 'previous mobility' etc., which can explain an influence on the decision of going to the US, under the parent-code of 'reasons of mobility'. Undoubtedly, parents usually play a key role in international students' overseas study projects, not only because they are the source of fund but also because they are one of the first who propose the idea of overseas education to their children. Friends who are going abroad are the non-family social connections that also often help stimulate students' desire for overseas study. While previous short-term trips obviously also help nurse aspiration for a long-term education abroad.

After the coding process is finished, I familiarize myself repeatedly with the excerpts under each sub-code and identify the theme(s) of these excerpts. I copy-paste all the excerpts into a Word file and classify them by themes. After a comparison between these themes and between excerpts under each theme, I select the most impressive ones that are responsive to my research questions as the excerpts for my dissertation writing. For example, a group of students disclosed that their parents proposed to send the abroad because they did not want them to suffer the high pressure of study in China. So I selected and translated two excerpts that best represent such theme of 'parents' role' as parts of the buildup for my first empirical chapter 'Aspirations to Go Abroad and to the United States'.

Following an interpretivist-constructivist approach, I acknowledged that the process of data analysis would inevitably be influenced by my own values, prejudices, assumptions and preconceived ideas. In terms of interpreting and presenting my empirical data, I aimed to provide a detailed scrutiny of the lived experiences, reflections and reflexivities, and future outlook of my participants reflecting as much their own diverse opinions and preferences as possible, although the display of the research findings are the result of the social interactions between my participants and I as the researcher. Respecting the 'the value of plurality, multiplicity, the acceptance

and celebration of difference' (Smith & Deemer 2003: 454) in accordance with Patton's (2002: 268) assertion that uniqueness or particularity is one of the evaluative criteria for constructivist research, I integrated divergent cases and responses into the overall exploration of the themes rather than just casting them aside. In the phase of analysis writing, I followed Richardson's (2003) idea of 'writing as a mode of inquiry' viewing writing process as a research practice itself that involved discovery and analysis, which was particularly helpful in contemplating how my empirical data was related to theoretical concepts of youth transitions studies and youth mobility/migration studies. Considering the cross-language nature of interpretation and presentation, I had to give up the technique of verbatim quotations to ensure the coherence and readability of the excerpts of my participants' narratives. Some repeated Chinese words in my participants' narration due to occasional stammers were deleted. And their narratives were as much literally translated as possible, except for some particular cases when literal translation could not capture the original meaning of the Chinese text, liberal translation technique was used to help deliver the essence of my participants' utterances.

In order to have a better understanding of my participants, their class backgrounds have also been analyzed based on their demographic information and narratives, since one's aspirations, decisions, desires, opinions and experiences are mediated by the economic and social resources one has. But the data of class backgrounds were not directly collected from my participants for two reasons. First, annual household income and the amount of economic and social capital are the very private information that most people do not like to impart, so preying into their privacy could risk making my participants defensive in sharing their life experiences. Second, my participants probably didn't know anything about their parents' income themselves at all. Therefore it was only available for me to estimate their social strata by referring to their parents' educational backgrounds and professions and the cost of study and life in the US. Working class, middle class, upper-middle class, affluent class etc. are common sociological terms to distinguish socioeconomic positions in a class

hierarchy. The standard of these classifications varies from country to country and changes over time. Nevertheless, international students, especially those in the Western context, are usually all considered to be of middle class background. According to The Economist (July 9th, 2016), the size of middle class in China in 2016 was around 225 million Chinese households who made the annual income of $11,500-$43,000. However, the costs of study and life for an undergraduate program in the US for international students ranged from $41,950 to $52,500 in 2018/19 (Bridgestock, 2021). Clearly it is almost impossible for a middle class Chinese family to afford a US Bachelor's degree program. Although it is possible that some middle class Chinese families save money for such expenses for their kids, it would be still quite challenging for them to sustain four years of such high expenditures.
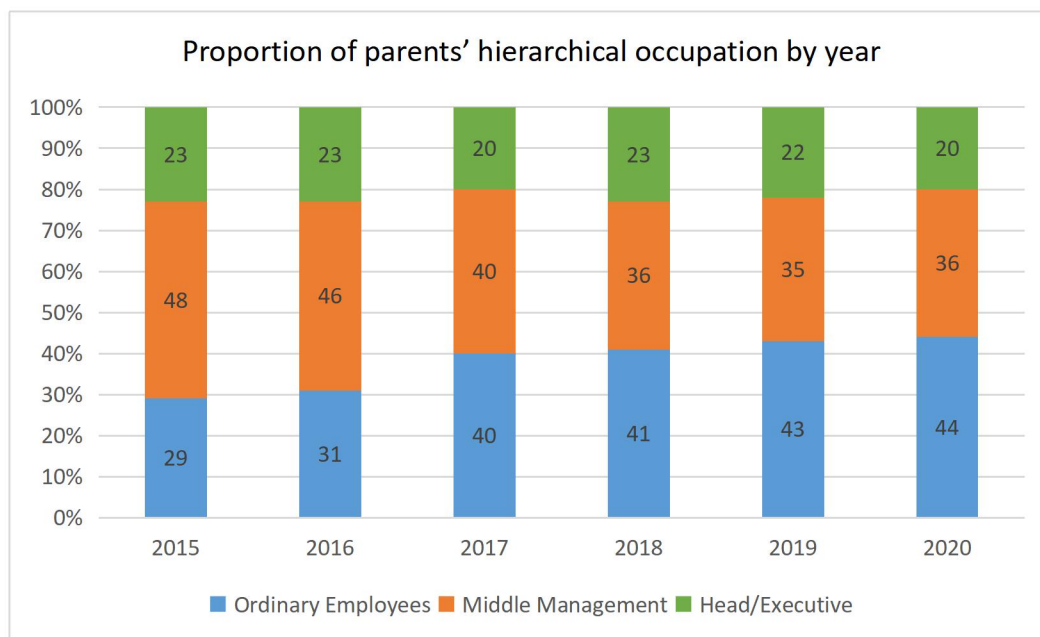
Table 3 (Source: Report on Chinese Students' Overseas Study 2020)

According to *Report on Chinese Students' Overseas Study 2020* released by New Oriental Vision Overseas Consulting Co. Ltd in collaboration with Kantar, an increasing proportion of parents of middle class and working class background sent their children abroad for education over the last 5 years. Although this is the data of overseas Chinese students around the whole world and there is no such data for the ones to the US alone, it is possible that more middle class and working class Chinese

families sent their children abroad to other countries than the US because simply they can hardly afford a US bachelor's degree program. The participants in my study, except two, never mentioned any economic hardship or concerns over their financial situation, and most of their parents have university education background and senior executive professional positions. I thus locate them to the upper-middle-class stratum in China. One of the two exceptions moved to the US through a 2+2 Bachelor's program (first two years of study in a Chinese university plus second two years in the US) and had to do part-time job illegally to make ends meet, and complained about the high consumption prices in the US although she had already received some financial support from her parents, while the other participant also complained about the high price in the US and shared his experiences about how he had suffered a lot of economic pressures that his parents gave him.

Lastly, to protect my participants' privacy, I give each of them an English pseudonym in my thesis writing. In addition, I obfuscated some of their demographic information that bears the risk of divulging their identity, like their places of origin and the universities they were attending, by replacing them with the names of larger jurisdiction areas.

The Researcher

Denzin and Lincoln's (1998: 24) claim that, 'the age of value-free inquiry for the human disciplines is over'. Social sciences now believe that knowledge and truth are seen as social constructs by the researcher, the researched and the readers. Human beings are social beings influenced by social contexts. Every researcher as a social being has his/her own internalized values, dispositions and perspectives. Bearing this in mind, I make a self-reflection on my own personal background and experiences and understand how my position would affect the interpretation of my research data.

As a Chinese international student myself, it is hard for me not to relate my own experiences to my participants' although I am vastly different from them in many other aspects, such as age, study level, country of study, class backgrounds, social encounters etc. Like my participants, I have also experienced the challenges and excitement of studying in another culture. I felt these experiences had in some ways made me more confident in better connecting to my participants, and the common label of 'Chinese international students' had helped establish rapport and mutual understandings. In terms of the bias, I have tended to assume some of my participants' experiences are similar to mine and to that of the people I personally know, or are what I assumed to be based on my knowledge; and I have tended to be more empathetic with them and seen them as the marginalized youth in the US. For instance, regarding motivations of going abroad, I assume that most of my participants, who are from much higher social class stratum than me, are not seeking immigration in the US (although they are still considered as potential immigrants) because my own mobility motives were to expand my knowledge academically and socially and see more of the wider world. Furthermore, I personally know some people in China who are returnees from the US, the UK, Canada, Australia, Japan, France etc. While as for my participants' lived experiences in the US, I already anticipated that they would share many unpleasant social hardships because I have heard and read a lot about Chinese international students' harsh encounters in the US on media.

Obviously, being both a native Chinese speaker and an international student myself makes me an insider researcher to my participants in a cultural and lingual sense. However, as a PhD student who has never set foot in the US territory and as an older counterpart who has never studied abroad for the education before PhD level and as being from a family slightly below middle class that I self-identify, I am also an outsider in spatial, temporal and social terms. However, given the fact that my participants only know me as a 'Chinese international PhD student in Italy', so I am more of an insider than an outsider to them. Positionality has long been considered by

social scientists as an important component in the course of qualitative data collection. There has been an extensive discussion over the impact of researcher-participant relationships on the research process and its outcomes (Al-Makhamreh & Lewando-Hundt, 2008; Berger, 2015; Blythe, Wikles, Jackson & Halcomb, 2013). In qualitative research, there are as many insider researchers as outsider ones. Insider researcher refers to someone who shares a particular characteristic such as gender, ethnicity or culture with the participants, whereas outsider researcher does not (Mercer, 2007). Merton (1972) stresses that both insider and outsider researchers have their own advantages and disadvantages. Compared to the relationship between outsider researcher and participant, a membership gives an insider researcher a natural advantage in approaching participants and gaining trust from them. Participants might be more willing to share their experiences because they are less defensive and assume the insider researcher can understand them better due to shared commonalities and distinctiveness. Indeed if I were not a Chinese international student myself, it would be unimaginably difficult for me to recruit Chinese international student participants on social media without any intermediary aid. In addition to easier entry, an insider will be able to better understand an issue or a narrative which could be confusing to an outsider researcher and will be able to extract true data from the participants as he can relate well to them (Bonner & Tolhurst, 2002). Although shared status can be very beneficial as it affords access, entry, and a common ground from which to begin the research and reach a greater depth to the data, it has a potential to impede the research process as it progresses (Dwyer & Buckle, 2009: 58). It is possible that the participants will make assumptions of similarity and therefore fail to explain their individual experience fully (Dwyer & Buckle, 2009: 58). It is also possible that the researcher's perceptions might be clouded by his or her own personal experience and he or she will have difficulty separating it from that of the participants (Dwyer & Buckle, 2009: 58). Furthermore, its undue influence might affect the analysis, leading to an emphasis on shared factors between the researcher and the participants and a de-emphasis on factors that are discrepant, or vice versa (Dwyer & Buckle, 2009: 58). Research conducted by an outsider was once considered to be the only form of

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'objective' research (Chavez, 2008; Hellawell, 2006), because 'distance' was believed to be necessary for valid research. Insiders may be blindsided by some issues in their research as they do not consider certain issues as important as how outsiders would see them, and they might not be as alert and as sensitive to the information or issue compared to outsiders (Saidin, 2016: 850). However, the outsider has neither been socialized in the group nor has engaged in the run of experiences that makes up his/her life, therefore cannot have the direct and intuitive sensitivity that alone makes empathetic understanding possible (Merton, 1972: 15). And being an outsider does not guarantee being immune from the influence of his or her own personal value and perspective. It is possible that an outsider researcher holds a biased understanding of and even prejudice against the participants based on limited or false knowledge he/she has learnt about the latter, and such bias and prejudice will influence the whole research process. As it is argued 'the insider-outsider distinction is a false dichotomy' (Chavez, 2008: 474), both outsiders and insiders have to deal with their identities and their situated knowledge as the result of their position. Perhaps, as researchers we can only ever occupy the space in between, as we cannot fully occupy one or the other of the two positions since our perspective is shaped by our position as a researcher who has read much literature on the research topic (Dwyer & Buckle, 2009: 61) and has experienced related social processes. Therefore the core issue is not insider or outsider position but an open, authentic and honest attitude, deeply interested in the experience of one's research participants, and committed to accurately and adequately representing their experience (Dwyer & Buckle, 2009: 61).

Being aware of my insider's perspective, I tried to maximize the advantages of such positionality during the process of empirical data collection. And I did benefited a lot from my insider position in collecting data relating to some very private topics and sensitive opinions. Sexuality is a very private issue to many people who are very unlikely to share with someone they meet for the first time. Maybe it is my insider membership who has similar international and transnational experience and has a relatively small age gap with my participants or maybe it is just that most of my

participants are very open or maybe both, the ones who had sexual experiences all disclosed their intimate moments to me except two who hesitated a bit at the beginning. In many cases, some political opinions are considered to be so sensitive that people may not want to express to outsiders. Among my participants, those who held a political stance or have their own viewpoints launched into a tirade of analysis on and critiques against politicians, governments and societies.

A smooth flow of interviewing with as less interruptions as possible helps participants uncover their true reflections on their experiences and opinions, being able to better understand the underlying logic of their narratives from a shared cultural perspective supports such smoothness. For instance, when one of my participants was recalling that he adapted to the new environment very naturally upon arrival in the US at the age of 15 for high school education, I did not feel there was a need to ask him what he meant by 'adapted naturally' because I knew he meant banal things like eating, doing groceries, sleeping etc., but not in social terms. Later in a follow up contact on social media to ask him for clarification, his reply confirmed my correct understanding, whereas a cultural outsider may find this 'natural adaptation' confusing. In a similar case, when another participant was criticizing the philosophy classes in China's secondary education, he said, 'I disliked the politics classes in China very much!'. It would sound very confusing to an outsider but very natural to me as an insider who had experienced the middle and high school education in China where philosophy courses were incorporated into politics ones. Despite all the advantages of being an insider researcher, I should also be cautious about the possibilities of revealing too much sensitive information (Smyth & Holian, 2008) which I may take for granted just because I have easy access to it and then may overlook the confidentiality and ethic issues.

Summary

Following the research questions of this study, I introduce my theoretical choice of youth transitions and mobility/migration justified by the inadequacy of extant literature in addressing Chinese international mobility experiences simultaneously from both theoretical perspectives. Then I justify the qualitative nature of this study by research questions and by the characteristics of the data that I collect through in-depth, semi-structured interview method. By listing all the unexpected situations I had encountered in the process of data collection, I have assumed all the possible deviations and biases that could affect my interpretations and all the unintended positive effects on my data collection process. In general, the validity of the research methods is justified. The analysis is aided by qualitative coding software MAXQDA, and the interpretation is presented following the interpretivist-constructivist paradigm which acknowledges the impact of the researcher's bias and prejudice on the research process and values the social construction of meanings as an effect of the interactions between the researcher and the research subjects.

As a whole, the philosophy of these methodological choices was an attempt to appropriately and sufficiently exhibit the lived experiences of my research participants, and thus to enhance sociological understanding of today's Chinese international students in the US, and in a more theoretical level today's mobile young people's transitions to adulthood.

Chapter 6 Aspirations to Go Abroad and to the United States

Introduction

Chinese international students' motivations for overseas study are constantly changing, although some of them have persisted as major ones. As an intrinsic goal of study itself, academic success is certainly one of students' all-time ambitions. In the late Qing Dynasty of 19th century, Chinese government sent students including teenage boys to the US for acquiring technical knowledge of the West in order to defend the country from more Western invasions (Cheng et al., 2020). To those overseas Chinese students in the early 20th century, obtaining the US diploma had become a symbol of prestige and a guarantee of ascent in the social and political structure of China (Bourne, 1975: 269). In the latest decades prior to the 1990s, Chinese students were still mainly funded by the government, and their motivations were primarily or even solely academically oriented and were directly linked to political, geostrategic, and cultural considerations, and their destinations were concentrated within the former Soviet Russia and the Eastern Bloc countries (Wu, 2014: 427). Since the late 1990s, as China was deepening its reform from a planned economy to a market system, the patterns of overseas study had become more complex with an ever-growing proportion of self-funded students going abroad. In 2007, self-funded students accounted for around 90% of all Chinese international student (Ministry of Education, 2008). In 2018, 467,600 self-funded students out of 519,400 in total left China for international education (Ministry of Education, 2019). Among them, a growing number of teenage parachute kids for K-12 education are being sent aboard. One assumption of the reason behind this 'parachuting' phenomenon is a pragmatic strategy seeing the US secondary education as a way of smoothing the path to a place

at a US college, since it is believed to be able to help improve English before entering the US higher education, and ease the transition, in both the cultural and educational spheres. However, the decision-making processes for both to-be-parachute kids and university education seekers are far more complex. The continued and changed motivations for overseas study among Chinese international students across various age cohorts over the previous decades suggest that social and historical forces affect these choices and decision-making processes.

This chapter investigates Chinese international students' motives of going to the US for study with push-pull model, the explanatory power of which has posited itself as a major theory to make sense of international students' mobility motives until today. In order to have a delicate interpretation, this chapter breaks Chinese international students' motivations into three inter-penetrative sections: reasons of leaving, choosing the US and expectations of international mobility. Apparently, reasons of leaving are push factors, and reasons of choosing the US are pull factors. Expectations of international mobility usually implicate positive anticipations and can be either push factors or pull factors, but in some cases motives like 'seeking adventures' in a rigid sense are neither pushed by the home country nor pulled by the destination.

Reasons of leaving

In the decision-making process of transnational mobility for study, Chinese students' parents play a key role not only in the sense of being the sole patronage to afford such mobility, but also they are usually the ones who have their children exposed to such idea and option. As already mentioned in my methodology chapter, a majority of my participants moved to the US either after or even before they finished middle school in China. These students were sent to the US at a teen age for the US K-12 education with, of course, a long-term aim of advancement to an American university. As for the reasons why parents were willing to send their under-age children (the only child to

most parents) to as far as the other side of Pacific Ocean alone, the theme of 'to reduce study pressure' emerged.

> [When I was attending primary school,] I felt the study atmosphere at school was too depressing, and it made me very stressed. Because of the unpleasant study experiences at primary school in my city, we moved to another city where [primary school] study was relatively more relaxed... But then due to the Hukou restriction, we said, 'let's just go abroad'... My parents were planning to send me abroad for high school, but after I started my 1st year of middle school, I found the study pressure was too heavy, and the study style there was not suitable for me at all, I was so depressed every day... It was my parents who proposed it. They thought going abroad was a better option for me, although I did not really want to go abroad at that time. (Angela, female, 21 years old, upper-middle-class background, from a capital city of Northern China)

Angela already experienced an internal migration during her primary school time precisely because the primary school study in her home city was too depressing and that in the other city where they moved to was relatively more relaxed until she entered middle school when the study pressure surfaced again, consequently her parents had to advance their plan of sending her abroad ahead of originally planned schedule. Sarcastically, the Hukou restriction she mentioned is usually an institutional obstacle preventing children of domestic migrant workers from taking Gaokao in the places where they live with their migrant parents. The Hukou (household registration) system in China institutionally constrains internal mobility, not only between but also within rural and urban areas. Migration from one city to another without changing Hukou registration means that Angela would have to return to her city of origin to take Gaokao if she chose to stay in China for higher education, which was a trouble to her and her family. However, for an upper-middle-class family who had sufficient resources to pick the best educational path for Angela, the mention of Hukou restriction was more like an inessential excuse rather than a serious consideration for choosing overseas study. The interlinks between internal and international migration addressed by migration scholarship focus on economic migration where 'there were cases of internal migration leading to international migration' (Skeldon, 2006: 27).

But to Angela and her parents, it was securing well-being rather than seeking economic gain that had motivated their internal migration from one of the most advanced cities to another equally advanced city in China followed by international migration to the US. In a similar case, it is not uncommon for some middle- and upper-middle-class Chinese students to migrate internally from relatively periphery cities where there are fewer, poorer or no international education resources to larger major cities for better quality education before they move abroad for higher education. Cathy is one of them, who disliked the busy, highly-disciplined and stressful study in a public high school in her hometown then was sent by her parents to a larger city alone to attend an international boarding high school before she moved to the US for university study.

There is an impressive group among my participants who complained about the study pressure during their K-12 education in China. When Jenny, being a clever pupil in a key class full of clever kids, had already sensed the pressure of preparation for advancement from primary school to middle school, her parents came to her rescue.

> I was in a 'contest class' at primary school. There was a lot of pressure, and at that time the advancement from primary school to middle school was already a 'big thing' to us. At the thought of high school entrance examination and Gaokao in the future, my parents were reluctant to let me continue such exam-oriented education, so they proposed the idea of sending me abroad for study. (Jenny, female, 21 years old, upper-middle-class background, from a capital city of Northern China)

In China's public K-12 education system, there are key classes and key schools across the whole country, which concentrate and cultivate the most clever students from the local region and are equipped with the best educational resources including the best teachers. A 'contest class' that Jenny was studying in, which was filled with clever kids selected to participate various academic and intelligent contests like Mathematical Olympiad, was one of them, along with 'experimental classes' and 'prodigies classes', 'experimental schools' and 'foreign language schools'. The pride

that these clever kids bring to their families for their 'intellectual capital' is usually at the expense of suffering harsher competition and higher study pressure in these special study environments. Quite a few of my participants happen to be former clever students who had studied in those key classes and key schools in China. Scot had been studying in a 'prodigies class' since primary school in which outstandingly clever students were congregated and trained for the goal of gaining admission into universities around the age of 14. He totally 'collapsed' after years of intensive study. Finally his parents sent him abroad as a tactic to escape the study pressure in the 'prodigies class' and to circumvent Gaokao.

> I totally collapsed for some time before I ran to here (the US)... I skipped 5th and 6th grades and I finished middle school within one and a half years, then I studied in high school for half a year before I could no longer stand it... I was dead inside, because we had to finish the amount of courses, which ordinary students need 2-3 years to finish, within a very short time, so we barely had any rest from Monday to Sunday, and we had to study until 22:00 at night... It was my parents' idea [to send me abroad]... If it were not for their suggestions [of sending me abroad], I wouldn't know what I had become now. (Scot, male, 19 years old, upper-class background, from a metropolitan city in Southern China)

Compared to Scot who was overwhelmed by the study pressure in the 'prodigies class' and felt 'dead inside', Jenny and Hanker were luckier for having at least found a hobby to be passionate for although they also suffered study pressure in China. Jenny had been fond of little animals since she was very little and had devoted herself to some volunteer work for animal protection in China. But she still complained about China's public K-12 education system for failing to provide enough opportunities and platforms for her to do more such volunteer work. A lack of extra-curricular activities seems to be a growing concern among many of today's young Chinese students, especially the privileged ones who may consider it one of the primary reasons for going abroad. Hanker had a passion for skiing. He complained there was hardly any chance of skiing activities in Chinese high schools, in addition to the study pressure that his parents did not want him to suffer.

I had always liked skiing... My parents got to know this 'pathway' [of going abroad for study], so they started to think about reducing my future study pressure... The schools I attended in China were quite good, so there was already a certain amount of study pressure since primary school through middle school... I accepted this 'pathway' because after comparing the coming high school entrance examination [in China] with the stress-free environment in the US high schools, I naturally preferred the latter, and the second point was that I learnt there were a skiing team and many other clubs in that US high school, while in schools in China, I could not say there was none, but there must be very very few. (Hanker, male, 19 years old, upper-middle-class background, from a capital city in Eastern China)

Different from Angela, Jenny, Scot and Hanker's parents who had acutely sensed the study pressure their children were suffering, Celia's father presented to her the idea of overseas study because he personally preferred the US education without realizing that his daughter was already hoping to escape China's stressful education. In recalling the days before moving to the US, Celia, who was one of the top students in a key middle school in China and had already secured admission into the high school department of the same key school[1] through the school's 'recommendation system' exempt from the entrance examination, confessed in a very helpless tone, 'I was too tired in the final year of middle school. I didn't want to do this anymore. It was only my selfish motive [to leave]...'. For a top-scorer student like Celia, being exempt from high school entrance examination and assured of admission into a key high school were still not enough to bring her inner peace. '[The study of] that year pushed me too hard, and it made me numb. I just realized that I didn't want to keep studying like that anymore. I felt like hiding away from it.' When asked why she still wanted to 'hide away' since she was already a winner in the competitive 'race', she asked back rhetorically in an arguing tone:

Yes, I didn't need to take the entrance examination, but I would still have to keep studying like that in the high school, wouldn't I?... I would keep having that kind of education in that school. Our school had very strict rules... I didn't want to continue to get so tired... and I would have to study hard for Gaokao... Maybe I would be exempt from Gaokao again, but it would be still very grueling for me if

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[1] Some Chinese secondary schools include both a middle school and a high school within the same campus.

I kept going through that educational institution. (Celia, female, 23 years old, upper-middle-class background, from a capital city of Northern China)

At the time of interview, Celia just finished a bachelor's program in Human Biology one year ahead of schedule and was applying for a PhD program. As already a top student in China, Celia was aware that she might be exempt from Gaokao again in the future, but besides those examinations, it was the whole China's stressful education system that made her want to 'hide away'. Celia's story firmly breaks one of the stereotypes assuming Chinese international students as being low at academic performance who were sent abroad by their rich parents to dodge Gaokao otherwise they would not be able to enter a good university in China and would lose their family's face.

Similar to the findings of Zhao et al. (2008), who investigate Chinese high school students in China of their knowledge and opinions on the US and China, many of my participants also seemed to be interested in the US education system not because of education quality, but more because of resenting China's education system for the pressure caused by long-hour and exam-oriented study for entrance examinations as well as lacking opportunities of individualized cultivation. Chinese students compete against one another from the time they start primary school until they graduate from college. For many middle- and upper-middle-class Chinese parents, sending children abroad to escape the study pressure 'has become part of cultural logic in their parenting practice' (Tong et al., 2020: 6). Slightly different from Benson and O'reilly (2009)'s concept of 'lifestyle migration', these Chinese students and their parents are more in a mood for fleeing the stressful education system rather than purely pursuing and consuming a different lifestyle, although it is still a type of 'lifestyle consumption' (Liu-Farrer, 2016), however, it is a forced 'lifestyle consumption', to put it in a more nuanced way. Only several of my participants' parents had overseas study or research experiences themselves although most of them had visited outside China as tourists, but they had enough resources and channels to come to know the relatively stress-free

study environment in secondary schools in the US. The increasingly fossilized class stratification in post-reform China has led to a class consciousness among more affluent families, who are keen on ensuring their children's quality of life and protecting their children's well-being from the study pressure in China.

Geographical mobility is usually considered as a means to secure better, or at least, different transition outcomes in the forms of, for instance, entering a foreign labor market at a level commensurate to skills and qualifications or finding other less tangible forms of personal fulfillment via foreign dislocations (Cairns, 2014: 3). From the human-capital perspective of the individual, international student mobility can be seen as a rational career-enhancing investment to gain an edge in the domestic labor market of the origin country following retour (King & Sondhi, 2018: 178). It could equally be seen as the first step towards a high-income international career or as part of a life-plan project of emigration and international mobility (Findlay et al., 2017). But my participants' narratives reveal that the motives of both international and internal migration are not necessarily for the purpose of securing a different transition outcome, but an alternative transition process in a believed more well-being-friendly educational setting.

In contrast to those who were offered by parents the suggestion of going abroad for study as an option, some students proactively asked their parents for support of their wish for study abroad. Clark's parents were not in favor of his idea of overseas study at an early age but suggested he could go abroad at a later stage for a master's program, although in the end they still let him leave for overseas undergraduate study.

> Growing up, I had never seriously considered overseas study, neither had my parents... I was in an experimental class in my high school, all my classmates were putting a lot of effort into the preparation for Gaokao, but I felt I was not very suited to such environment. I did not like the process of spending three years to prepare for an exam... At that time my girlfriend decided to go abroad for university study, that's how I got exposed to this 'thing'... At first my parents were very against my request, they believed that I should not go abroad until after

On the part of students themselves, due to their middle- or upper-middle-class background, they possess higher economic, social and cultural capital which lead to a higher chance of being exposed to the idea and influence of overseas study. At the moment when these students happen to realize they resent China's education system, they can naturally develop an awareness of having an alternative educational path to 'walk'. People of the same class stratum tend to flock together. It was Clark's girlfriend of a similar class background that had exposed to him the 'thing' of going abroad for study, which he was aware that his family could also afford. His mobility capacity thus was converted from his economic, social and cultural capital. And such mobility capacity was mobilized to seek an alternative transition process as he resented the 'process of spending three years to prepare for an exam'.

Sometimes parents' initiatives happen to free their children from an environment of which students think they are out of league. Although they might not have realized it is social stratum that differentiates themselves from their peers of lower-class background in the school, it is their 'habitus' and their 'class instinct' that ignite their dispositions towards peers of the similar class background. Expectations of education quality and peer group environment in home country not being met was a reason for Carter to consider the choice of going abroad. A class (sub)consciousness is detected from his complaints.

I bombed the high school entrance examinations and failed to get admission into the high school that I wanted to study in... After having studied at another senior high school for the first half semester, it gave me an impression that my classmates' academic level was not as good as the ones in my middle school, so I thought if I kept studying in that school I would not be able to learn much... It was not only their academic performance, but also their manners and thoughts that were way below my middle school classmates'... It was during that time that more and more of my middle school classmates were going abroad... My parents

first proposed the idea of overseas study, then I thought it was nice to have a try...
At first I did not want to go abroad... because I was afraid... I just felt like staying
in a familiar place. (Carter, male, 22 years old, upper-middle-class background,
from a capital city in Southern China)

Having got used to an ecology in which there are comparable peers with 'good'
manners and 'high' thoughts, a decline to a 'vulgar' environment is unacceptable or at
least difficult to adapt to, at the moment of which another option offered by parents
could be a chance to return to the class stratum where they can find privileged peers
and feel belonging to. As Carter complained about his peers in the high school in
which he was reluctant to continue studying, it was his class consciousness that was
awaking. Such classism awareness in Chinese society is verified by Jenny's memory,
'my father indeed had a talk with the principal of my middle school... The principal
did say that the reason why he needed to interview parents was because he had two
rules: first, he didn't enroll students from nouveau riche families; and the second rule
was... it may not sound good... he was prejudiced against single-parent families, he
wanted to create a friendly environment for his students free from the bad influence of
single-parent families... I personally don't agree with him, but he did say that.'
Previous studies have already identified that the advantaged social class in China
regard overseas study for pursuing high-quality educational resources as a means to
maintain their advantaged social status (Xiang & Shen, 2009; Fan & Cheng, 2018).
However, this study has identified a new nuance that class segregation process in
China has already begun even before these privileged young Chinese conduct
international mobility for overseas study. And such process has been underpinned by
various social mechanisms like this 'aristocratic' middle school of which the principal
'helped' segregate the so-called old 'aristocratic' and elite families from the
new-money rich ones and from stigmatized minorities, let alone the lower-class
population.

Except those former parachute kids who attended secondary schools in the US, almost
all the rest of my participants who are seekers of the US university education studied

in private international schools, foreign language schools or local key public schools in China where most or all of their peers were preparing for overseas study. Especially for those families who chose private international schools or the 'international class' of the public schools where there are only foreign curricula offered, overseas study had already been set within their schedule early on. These students and their parents had already been surrounded by the atmosphere and idea of international mobility and they were already in a preparation mood for overseas study, hence for them it was a 'natural' pathway or even the only pathway to go abroad. Florian was studying in the international class of a public high school where he followed British A-Level curriculum. Different from those who attended private international schools, Florian could directly see the 'hard life' of his peers who were studying toward Gaokao, which reassured his decision of going abroad.

> In the final year of my middle school... it was my father that convinced me... After I entered the 'international class' of the public high school, there was no turning back, yes, I would not take Gaokao, instead we were studying British A-level courses... It meant that I would have no chance to get admission into a Chinese university... For a moment, I was once thinking which track would give me more certainty... After all it was a public high school, I had many friends who were preparing for Gaokao, I could often see their life which was really toilsome. (Florian, male, 19 years old, upper-middle-class background, from a capital city in Northeastern China)

Although many of my participants were offered the option of overseas study by their parents, but they did not receive the idea passively. They actively developed their own understanding of and attitude towards overseas study and gradually build up their mood for and aspiration to overseas education. When being offered options, Tony was very thrilled,

> I grew up with a heart of exploration. I'd always loved exploring and adventuring...I was very open to new things. I was very curious about new things. That's why I was so excited when I was told this option. (Tony, male, 21 years old, upper-middle-class background, from a capital city in Eastern China)

Congruent with Wu's (2014: 431) findings, exploration and adventures are also a driver for many of my participants to go abroad. Recently aspiration and freedom to travel and to 'explore' different places and cultures is seen as a desirable lifestyle attribute for middle-class youth, and is considered as a part of global youth mobility cultures (King & Sondhi, 2018: 178). Under the youth mobility framework, international students' experiences and adventures themselves are seen as the primary motivation for international mobility. The sojourn abroad thus becomes a life-stage 'good' to be consumed, while the academic study retains equally important. The central aim is to get exposed to cultural differences and new social environments ranging from tasting local food, appreciating histories to establishing cross-cultural friendship. For the most part this construction of youth mobility has been limited to the movement of 'white bodies' as if the sense of adventure is not seen as a 'natural' activity of the non-white body (King & Sondhi, 2018: 179) and leisure mobility is only the remit of the Western traveler (Roos, 2017). Such Western-centric and racist discourse in a conscious and subconscious attempt to discursively produce and reproduce social inequality between the West and the non-West can be readily refuted by the story of the Southern youth like Tony.

Choosing the US

In the matter of choosing the US as their preferred destination, there were well-calculated plans, judgements based on previous mobility experiences, influence of stereotypes, family links and other personal reasons, or more than two of these factors combined. Among them, some families chose the US simply because 'The US is the No. 1!'.

> We didn't make a choice, there was no other choices, we never considered other countries... At that time it seemed to us that the US education was way ahead of any other country. As far as overseas study was concerned, we had only discussed about the US. We just had a feeling that it seemed to us an obvious decision that if I went abroad for study I should go to the US. (Jenny, female, 21 years old,

upper-middle-class background, from a capital city of Northern China)

From Jenny's narrative has been detected a subconscious but strong contempt upon other countries which were totally negligible. And such contempt is a reflection of the US global influence on these privileged Chinese youth in recognizing the unequal world structure where the US has been sitting the dominant No. 1 position.

Almost all of my participants had visited abroad, either with their family, or with classmates and friends or alone, on short trips to see the wider world when they were younger. In 2019, a total of 169.21 million outbound international trips abroad were made by Chinese tourists (National Bureau of Statistics, 2020), many of whom were children accompanied by their families. Most of my participants had already visited at least one foreign country for holiday, summer camp or summer school. So it makes sense that their previous mobility experiences served as a reference for them to make choices.

> After entering middle school, I participated in various international summer camps... In my 6th grade, I went to the UK for a summer camp then to Australia for a summer vacation... and then to the US... and I also participated exchange activities in their local middle schools for about two weeks, and I finally chose to come to the US because I thought the environment in the US was more free than in the UK, and the US culture was more diversified. The reason why I didn't choose to go to Australia is because... I can not say it was boring, but I felt the pace of life there was a lot slower compared to that in China. So I chose the US. (Ria, female, 22 years old, upper-middle-class background, from a capital city of Eastern China)

When Ria was visiting the UK, Australia and the US, she was only around 12 years old. Three years later, in her decision-making process of choosing a study abroad destination, she was rationally comparing the three Anglophone countries based on her traveling experiences and finally chose the US for its free atmosphere, diversified culture and pace of life, none of which was related to education quality, rather, what she cared more about was the living environment. Ria did not explicitly complain

about the study pressure as much as Angela, Jenny and Scot did, but she did complain that China's K-12 education system forced everyone to study mathematics, physics and chemistry which she did not like, and she said it was her parents who wanted to protect her from the study pressure that insisted on sending her abroad. According to her reasons of choosing the US, it is obvious that it was a better social and structural environment where she would spend her precious years on study and life that she was longing for.

Unlike Ria who chose the US after a rational comparison, Dina's previous mobility experience to the UK served as a stark contrast to her positive impression of the US, which only helped reassure her already shaped dislike of the UK and preference for the US although she had never visited the latter before.

> When I was in middle school, I visited the UK for a study tour. I didn't really like the environment there. First of all... it kept raining and it was very humid. Secondly the way how the teachers there taught was very stagnant, so it was not very suitable for me. And there was one more point, I didn't like British accent at all... I just didn't know why I was so resistant against British accent... What I was studying in high school was also British courses, they were very stagnant and rigid... at that time, I already learnt about the US through my cousin who was already studying there back then... The UK just gave me a lot of stereotypical impressions... While there was more freedom in the US universities, and they were more flexible... I never visited any European universities, so I had no idea of what they looked like, but based on my knowledge I felt that I was more suited for the US. (Dina, 22 years old, from a capital city of Eastern China)

Interestingly, quite a handful of my participants literally expressed their dislike of British accent without giving any reason or without being able to explain how they had formed such prejudice, but such prejudice was exactly one of the justifications for their predisposition towards the US. More interestingly, two of my participants mistook British literature for American when they were children, and had nursed an aspiration to going to the US by reading British literature.

> When I was in primary school, someone sent me a set of Harry Potter books...

then in middle school I bough an English version of Harry Potter myself... you know everyone liked to show off something, and I always liked to put that English version of Harry Potter on my desk in the classroom, and it made me feel that I was awesome... Maybe at that time I was not very cognitive of the differences [between the UK and the US]... To me it was a foreign country, it was a Western country, and the US was the representative of the West. (Cara, female, 21 years old, middle-class background, from a capital city of Northern China)

It makes sense that some students chose the US because of its 'No. 1' position and their personal previous mobility experiences, but how can we understand their predilection for American accent that they could not even explain themselves? We may need to borrow the knowledge of psychology here. Social psychologist Robert Zajonc (1968) put forward the theory of mere-exposure effect referring to a psychological phenomenon by which people tend to develop a preference for things merely because they are familiar with them through repeated exposure. The mass media of the 'No. 1' power has a global influence, under which young people around the world are constantly exposed to the US movies, TV series and music more than the ones of other foreign countries. Therefore it is not a surprise that many of them like Dina have developed an inclination towards American accent due to mere-exposure effect.

In addition to previous mobilities and personal preferences, family link or social link with the US also rationalizes my participants' choice of the US. Although being interest in both the US and Japan, a romantic relationship helped Cathy break the tie.

'It was a very personal reason. I was thinking about going to Japan or the US because I liked the cultures of both. But at that time, my ex-boyfriend was in the US, so I chose the US. There was no other particular reason.' (Cathy, female, 23 years old, upper-middle-class background, from a capital city of South-western China)

In contrast with the above-mentioned reasons which are not instrumentalist, a comparison between the US and other countries in terms of resources and opportunities is an important reason for Carlen to make an informed-decision of

preferring the US as the destination.

> When I was in the second year of my middle school, I was planning to go to Canada, I didn't know the difference [between Canada and the US] anyway. One day a friend of my mom was having dinner with us. He asked me about my preparation for overseas study. I answered that I could go to Canada or the US, but I was not sure yet. Then he told me directly that in terms of gaining future opportunities, there was a huge difference between studying at a Canadian university and at an American university, Canada lagged way behind the US in offering opportunities. Just this one word of his made me decide to go to the US. (Carlen, male, 22 years old, upper-middle-class background, from a capital city of Central China).

Instrumental goals like seeking symbolic credentials, career and economic opportunities used to be the mainstream motivation for migration to the US among Chinese international students in the past. However, there is only a small number of my participants emphasizing this aim, and among whom most considered it as just one of the motives of their mobility to the US.

It is almost taken for granted that many Chinese international students take more than one factors into consideration in their decision-making process. The factors of influence of parents, previous mobility, parents' social connections with the US and a strong belief in the US education combined surely helped Haily land an easy decision.

> My father was a visiting scholar in the US for 2-3 years, so when I was in my primary school and middle school time, I was already kind of back and forth between China and the US... When I was travelling around Europe in my 5th grade, I didn't find any country that stood out and impressed me... Another reason was that my father had many friends there [in the US]... with the help of these local connections, it would be easier for me to adapt and take root... Furthermore, they believed the US education was very outstanding. (Haily, female, 22 years old, upper-middle-class background, from a capital city of Eastern China)

Around 90% of my participants' parents have tertiary education experiences, many of them hold a master's degree, and even a few are in possession of a PhD. Haily's father is one of the few among these parents who had overseas study or research experiences

themselves. From a structural perspective, we can see that most of my participants are second-generation college students. On an account of the economic, cultural and social capital of their first-generation college parents, their international education trajectories seem to be a 'natural path'.

Expectations of international mobility

As argued above, some expectations of international mobility could be either pushed or pulled, but some others can not be fit into either, which confirms the limitation of push-pull model. Thus an independent subsection is reserved to address this aspect.

A very interesting new finding is that some of my participants didn't have any expectation of their international mobility at all. They cared more about leaving than arriving at the time of preparation for displacement. At a very early teen age, some of them were not sophisticated enough to expect anything particular. Even though acquisition of English proficiency was mentioned by several participants, to them, being able to speak fluent English after several years of study and life in the US is rather a forecast than an expectation.

> Going abroad at that age, I did not think about what I wanted to get... I really didn't expect anything else, I just naively thought that when I came back to China I would be able to speak very good English. I didn't think about improving my capabilities in other aspects. (Adam, male, 19 years old, upper-middle-class background, from a capital city of Northern China)

Sometimes friends can play a very important role in influencing one in making a decision, which does not necessarily come with any specific goals. Feeling betrayed and left behind by two best friends who went to the UK without telling her, Yuri made an abrupt decision of going to the US when she was in her 2nd year of middle school. And when the decision of going to the US was an affective action of a teenage

girl, it is not a surprise that she did not expect anything particular of the international mobility.

> I made that decision more out of spite, because my two best friends did not tell me they were going abroad... They just left like that... so I was more in a spite mood, and I was thinking, 'since you all went abroad, I will, too!'... But at that time I was only around 12 or 13 years old, I was still a little kid, I didn't particularly think about what I would become, what I would get or if I would stay [in the US] or not, I didn't think about that far ahead. (Yuri, female, 21 years old, upper-middle-class background, from a coastal city of Northeastern China)

Across many interview narratives, 'to have fun' is a recurrent theme in the expectations of mobility to the US. Angela and Brie even confided that 'to have fun' was the only thing they were expecting, although some other students believed that having better and more individualized education was as equally important as having fun.

> I didn't expect to get anything particular, I was coming in a mood of 'having fun'... That aunt told me that all the experiences that I would have in the US were not accessible in China at that time, you know, they had easy school work, they went to school at around 8 or 9 in the morning and finished at as early as around 2 or 3 in the afternoon! It sounded so new and so relaxing to me, I was so looking forward to it. (Brie, female, 20 years old, middle-class background, from a coastal city of Eastern China)

The impression of the relaxed-style education and easy schoolwork in the US high schools seems to be very pervasive among some Chinese students' knowledge of their destination when they were still in China. Based on an informed comparison between the US high schools and China's high schools, it makes sense why they had an image of a stress-free high school life in the US. In this sense, it was also a different transition process or a new study and living environment that they were longing for.

Among other themes of expectations of mobility, 'critical thinking' and 'international horizon' are identified in consistence with Ma's (2020) findings. As mentioned above,

to explore and adventure was already a reason for Tony to leave China and embark on an international journey. When asked what he expected to gain in the US, he said,

> Critical thinking. That's the only thing I was thinking about when I still didn't know much about the US. That's what I looked forward to getting... At that time, I did not know this term 'critical thinking', but I knew America was characterized by 'creativity'. It was very different from China. In the US, they teach you a kind of divergent thinking ability. Well China is also very successful, but the US is vastly different methodically.... Even my English was terrible back then, I had no plan at all. I really couldn't make much of a plan. There was absolutely no clear plan. I just wanted to go. That's it. I just wanted to see some new things. (Tony, male, 21 years old, upper-middle-class background, from a capital city in Eastern China)

When Tony was only 15 years old before relocation, he only realized it was the American 'creativity' that he was expecting to gain, so 'critical thinking' was just a hinder-sight in his retrospect since he did not know this term back then. The Chinese international students in Ma's (2020) study consider American education to be better than Chinese education for cultivating creativity and critical thinking and often refer to these two terms interchangeably (2020: 108). Ma takes a closer examination on the relationship between the two and believes that critical thinking is the means to achieve creativity (2020: 108).

'International horizon' or 'expanded horizons' are highly related to 'critical thinking', as the former and the latter mutually strengthen each other. Most of my participants considered 'broadened horizon' and 'different perspectives' to be meaningful in themselves. A few mentioned the pragmatic value that 'international horizon' might convert to. Jacky cited his father's pragmatic opinion on 'broadened horizon',

> In my father's view, it is always good to see more, 'you stayed in China then in the US, two languages and two environments, especially the US has a very open and very big platform, then you would have a more broaden horizon, the more you see the better your life would become'. I agreed with his opinion. (Jacky, male, 21 years old, upper-middle-class background, from a capital city of Central China)

Ma draws on the concept of 'cosmopolitan capital' to make sense of her participants' yearning for broadened horizon and summarizes that the more abstract or idealistic goal of Chinese international students is to broaden horizon by acquiring cosmopolitan capital in order to display confidence and comfort in this era of globalization (Ma, 2020: 52). Whereas I argue that horizon expansion is the means to acquire cosmopolitan capital which then helps to further broaden horizon.

Less fortunate than those seekers of exploration and international horizon who did not suffer or at least did not share in the interviews their experiences of suffering social control, another group of participants lamented about how their daily life was interfered and restricted in China and anchored their hope of overseas study as a means to obtain more freedom. Oliver had already studied in the US for half a year during his middle school period when his father was doing a postdoc research project there with his mother also staying there with them. After he came back to China with his parents, he voluntarily asked them to send him to the US for high school study. His parents were not happy about his request and were worried about his life alone in the US, but he was rebellious and insisted going. When asked what he expected to obtain in the US that he would not be able to obtain in China, he said,

> At that time, I was thinking more about drifting out of my parents' grasp. I wanted more freedom, so that when I was making friends I would not need to consider about their family backgrounds... so that I would be able to make friends purely for the sake of making friends, because my parents were very strict with me in making friends... They liked to ask me, 'which friends did you hang out today? What did you do? What kinds of jobs do their parents do?' (Oliver, male, 22 years old, middle-class background, from a capital city of Northern China)

China, and also the other two East Asian countries Japan and South Korea, are deeply influenced by Confucianism which emphasizes social harmony and envisions a society based on a hierarchical system in which each individual's role is determined by his or her position in society. Thus respect to authority and elderly is a powerful

tradition in a Confucian society, which many Chinese parents take for granted for 'disciplining' their children. Oliver's rebellion against his parents' interference in his social life is an epitome of today's inter-generational conflict in China. In addition to the theme of 'obtaining freedom from parents' identified from Oliver's narrative, the theme of 'class segregation' emerged again. Oliver was clever enough to sense his parents' intention behind their interrogations of whom he was being friends with. In contrast to Carter's preference for hanging out with peers of similar class background, Oliver refused to confine himself in a class stratum and seek freedom from his parents in making friends without following any classism rules.

Celia, as a top student, used to be occupied by the long-hour study in China and was mostly confined within two sites: school and home. Almost as the same as her reason of leaving, her only expectation was freedom and liberation.

> When you grew up in an environment, you would always pay more attention to those aspects in which you were disciplined, for example, my middle school was very strict with our dressing and hairstyle, at the time I just had a very simple wish, I wished some day there would be no one who could control me anymore, and I could bring my cellphone to school whenever I wanted, just that simple... I mean what I say, at that time I was just looking forward to freedom, so that I would not need to be disciplined by my parents everyday... Our school also disciplined us... I think that's what I desired the most back then. Was I very shallow? (Celia, female, 23 years old, upper-middle-class background, from a capital city of Northern China)

Gaining freedom from study pressure, school rules and parents' control is one of the most impressive findings of this study. And it reconfirms that many Chinese students' motives of mobility to the US was more pushed than pulled.

The term 'overseas study' already intrinsically manifests that academic achievement is supposed to be international students' primary goal. But perhaps for some participants, study was a taken-for-granted obligation, therefore when they were asked of what they expected to gain from overseas education, they spontaneously

(over)emphasized other aspects that they looked forward to but did not mention study itself, or perhaps they truly favored non-academic goals over academic ones. Apart from the above reported non-academic expectations of international mobility, acquiring particular knowledge is also highlighted by some students. Clark underlined that he had been interested in philosophy since his 1st year of high school in China,

> I realized that Chinese education system did not attach importance to humanities disciplines, especially philosophy, and I wanted to study Western philosophy more... and I disliked the politics classes in China very much!' (Clark, male, 22 years old, upper-middle-class background, from a capital city in Northern China)

In China's high school education, philosophy courses are integrated into politics courses. It is not uncommon that many Chinese secondary school students find politics courses boring. Clark was one of them who found no meaning in studying those courses. And his desire for learning Western philosophy was not for instrumental purposes but for exploration valuing study as an end in itself. However to Matt, study is not merely for the sake of accumulating knowledge but also an instrumental means to seek a desired career in China.

> I think financial industry still pays the highest salary. Then I was thinking if I wanted to enter the financial industry in the future, I must graduate from a very prestigious university... if I sit Gaokao, I would definitely not be able to get a high score that could grant me admission into a first-class finance university in China, then I decided to go abroad... New York University should be the best choice for me based on my GPA... In China, only the business schools of the top 5 Chinese universities are more prestigious than NYU Stern School of Business, but if I stayed in China, I would never be able to get admitted into one of the top 5 universities, so applying for NYU was a good deal, a good arbitrage, but of course I would have to pay a lot more tuition to NYU. (Matt, male, 21 years old, middle-class background, from a capital city of Southwestern China)

Matt's parents work in financial industry in China. Obviously his rational calculation of obtaining a symbolic credential was influenced by their jobs. The dramatic expansion of China's higher education enrollment in the last four decades leads to the devaluation of university degree (Bai, 2006), as a consequence the competition of

admission into top universities is increasingly fierce. Since elite jobs require elite university degrees, at the time of decision-making, some Chinese students are calculative in choosing a host institution, as competitive entry into a top university can be regarded as symbolic capital attainments (Ma & Cartier, 2003). A degree from a good university implicates symbolic capital (Rivera, 2011) which refers to the form that the various species of capital assume when they are accepted as legitimate (Bourdieu, 1989). Graduates can obtain the symbolic capital through institutional affiliation (Gerhards, Hans, & Drewski, 2018). Motivated by the symbolic capital, many Chinese students apply for overseas universities with good ranking (Ma & Cartier, 2003), which would confer a competitive credential upon graduation, in the hopes of having a higher chance of securing a favorable career with higher salary and higher social status.

Some students juxtaposed academic achievement with other non-academic goals as their expectations, while some others view the latter as even more important than the former. One of my participants happens to be gay, and his expectation of mobility to the US was highly related to his homosexual identity.

> Back then I particularly wanted to seek some support for my identity recognition, which I thought was even more important to me than scoring high at a subject, because I was in a state of confusion. I had a feeling that there was something in the US that would accept me, something that I could not find in China. (Frey, male, 20 years old, upper-middle-class background, from a capital city of Eastern China)

In the case of Frey, sexuality plays a vital role in his international mobility although he hasn't got 'out of the closet' to his parents yet. Transnational movements enable homosexual individuals to facilitate queer practices and harness queer identities or subjectivities (Ramirez, 2005, 164). It is not appropriate to classify Frey's international mobility as 'sexual migration' (Carrillo, 2004), but seeking identity recognition and self-actualization in the US where he can make a queer lifestyle is indeed of more importance to his overseas study journey.

Summary

The push and pull factors that drove and attracted my participants to the US are variegated, including long-standing clichés and new elements. Reasons of their leaving range from escaping study pressure and social control, dissatisfaction with China's education system and atmosphere, to exploration and adventure. While reasons of choosing the US include the its center position on world stage, rational comparisons based on previous mobilities, preference for American English accent and American social environment, social links with the US, more resources and opportunities in the US, and symbolic credential and education quality of American universities. Among the relatively new findings, resentment of social control by parents and schools and dissatisfaction with study environment fraught with peers of lower class background are impressive push factors. Most of my participants all perceived the US as the best destination after comparing or even without comparing it with other countries while making choices. And preference for American accent is a very interesting justification for predisposition to the US, so is developing an aspiration to the US by mistakenly reading British literature. As for expectations of mobility, no expectations, to have fun, and to obtain social freedom are new findings. And there are only several who aimed at instrumental goals.

In the 1980s, with increasing complaints about conditions at home and highly idealized descriptions of the outside world, a fever of going abroad emerged in China (Chen, 1988). And such fad has lasted until the turn of the century. As the middle class has been expanding and the number of Chinese international students has been rocketing since the 21st century, the fad has been transformed into a culture of international mobility. In recent years, a culture of studying abroad has emerged in urban China (Ma, 2020: 27), as a constantly growing number of students and parents of middle- and upper-middle-class background are being exposed to the atmosphere

of international education. While some traditional motivations still remain as important push and pull factors, a youth mobility culture are concurrently growing and spreading, and becoming an increasingly normative part of the imaginary of middle-class life trajectories globally (Robertson et al., 2018), although such youth mobility culture is still mainly limited to the population of the privileged ones.

Many of the former parachute kids in my study moved to the US at a very young teen age for a believed better social environment where their well-being and personal development would be better secured. Some others wanted to explore and adventure. Thus seeking an alternative transition process, in my terminology, was their motives of going to the US. Although a 'better' transition outcome in the long-term future could be also anticipated, such transition to university and later to work or postgraduate study which would happen in 4 and 8 years were at least less urgent than their time-being needs of an alternative transition process. Among the degree-seekers in my study, despite several wanted to attain credentials and symbolic capital which would advantage them in their future school-to-work transition, the majority rest were also desiring an alternative transition process through which they would be able to explore new things, learn different cultures, gain international horizon, enjoy study and develop hobbies and talents. Hence, the majority of my participants prioritized their short-term future (a 'better' transition process) over their long-term future (a 'better' transition outcome) when they were making decisions of going to the US.

Chapter 7 The Lived Experiences through International Mobility

Introduction

To have a better understanding of how Chinese international students have been influenced and changed by their experiences of overseas study and life in the US, it is necessary to first take a look at their mobile life through which these young Chinese spent their most precious adolescent temporalities abroad. Lived experiences are an indispensable part of one's biography and have significant value in molding one's present and future. The impact of international mobility on Chinese international students does not take shape in one day, the lived experiences through their teenage and early-20s years in a different culture far away from home make who they are of today.

Youth researchers need to investigate everything, especially social temporalities that happen during transition processes, not just those obviously and closely related to the final threshold that marks accomplished transition to adulthood, like entry into labor market, independent housing, marriage and parenthood. The events and experiences that have long-term implications for transition outcomes need to be distinguished from those that are relatively inconsequential (Roberts, 2009: 20). Investigating young people's social past can help diagnose their predispositions, aspirations, desires, values and beliefs, which are of great worth in explaining their present choices and future plans. The seemingly random episodes selected from their memory storage betrays the events and incidents that matter to them. And the way how they give meanings to those events and incidents through which they develop, negotiate and change their identities unfold with the story-telling of their biographical past.

This chapter starts with a look into my participants' adaptation period upon arrival in the US, then focuses on their unpleasant experiences, racist encounters and pleasant moments before a discussion of their social choice-making and their romantic relationships.

Adaptation upon arrival in the US

Adaptation is usually referred to as 'changes that take place in individuals or groups in response to environmental demands' (Chataway & Berry, 1989). A sudden social change due to separation from close family and friends, lack of comfort and familiarity with different cultural practices (e.g., foods and social customs), social isolation, and inadequate language proficiency contribute to adaptation challenges that international students have to confront in the new culture (Khawaja & Stallman, 2011).

My participants' adaptation experiences after arrival in the US vary from individual to individual. But in general, there are three types of experiences: one group of students said they adapted quite well and quite soon; the second group shared their somewhat difficult adaptation; the third group includes those who just recounted their life and observation of the new environment in the initial phase of their stay without reflexively making any comment on their adaptation and those who unconsciously skipped narrating their adaptation. Many of them, especially those former parachute kids who studied in secondary schools located in villages or small towns, recalled in a judgmental tone that they were so shocked to see such remote places in the middle of nowhere which was extremely opposite to their pre-established impression of the modern and highly advanced 'No. 1' country.

Some of my participants adapted well and fast right after arrival in the US. In the case

of Rick, by 'adapted fast and naturally' to the high school life in the US, he meant daily life, eating, going out for grocery and having a walk around. Angela, who desperately wanted to secure well-being from the study pressure in China as cited in the previous chapter, had finally arrived in the US at the age of as early as 13 for middle school. Her adaptation was also quite smooth.

> All of a sudden, I lost contact with my friends in China and had to establish a new circle of friends in the US. In the beginning, it was quite difficult in terms of language, actually it was not that difficult, I felt I was adapting quite well, and I could communicate [in English]. When I was in that middle school, I was the only Chinese in my class, but they were all very nice to me, and it was easy to integrate into their group, and I went to their houses for party, making sweet cakes... (Angela, female, 21 years old, upper-middle-class background, from a capital city of Northern China)

While some other students experienced a difficult time at the beginning. Ria moved to the US for high school accompanied by her mother after they obtained their green cards through an immigrant investor program. Unlike most other parachute kids who had to start dealing with a new milieu all alone far away from both parents, she lived with her mother at their own home throughout her four years of high school. However, she still went through a challenging adaptation period at school.

> Our high school didn't have a cafeteria, we had to find seats by ourselves for lunch. So everyone either drove out and ate together, or found an table outside. Because I didn't know other classmates in the first one or two months, during that time, I usually just ate by myself, or a very nice teacher took me to a classroom and we ate together there. At that time, I had a feeling of loneliness asking myself why I didn't have friends. But in fact, I didn't reach out to make friends myself. After I had friends, I got better. (Ria, female, 22 years old, upper-middle-class background, from a capital city of Eastern China)

Mobility to a destination for a relatively long-term of stay inevitably involves an adaptation process regardless of the age of the mobile bodies. The degree-seekers, among my participants, who moved to the US for college study after having finished high school in China were at a relatively older age than those former parachute kids at

the time of moving. But some of them still had a tough time in the first couple of months. Eddy was the one who had experienced the hardest adaptation process, probably because he was also suffering some financial pressure that his parents had 'transferred' to him.

> New York is a very diverse city... but I felt that you were just a nobody in it, no one would care about you, you had to take care of yourself, then there was a lot of life pressure, it was very different from what I had imagined... I had no [Chinese] friends and it was also difficult to integrate into the circle of American students, so I was quite depressed at that time, my life was so tired... in that first semester after my arrival in the US, going back to China was my only hope. (Eddy, male, 20 years old, slightly below upper-middle-class background, from a capital city of Eastern China)

Eddy was one of the two participants who seriously complained about the high consuming prices in New York. Based on his narration of how his mother complained about his 'over-expenditure' in his first semester and how he was trying to make ends meet by saving money, I classify his socioeconomic stratum into slightly below upper-middle-class. In addition to his financial pressure, his accommodation situation was another factor that had made his adaptation process challenging. He happened to share a dormitory room with a white American student who almost had no communication with him. It was multiple reasons combined that had made his adaptation a torture.

In migration scholarship, psychological adaptation and sociocultural adaptation are distinguished to measure the process of acculturation of those who are placed in a new culture (Searle & Ward, 1990). The former indicates feelings of well-being and satisfaction, whereas the latter refers to the ability to 'fit in' or negotiate interactive aspects of the host culture (Ward & Kennedy, 1993: 131). Rick's sense of 'natural adaptation' did not include sociocultural adaptation, rather, it was the daily chores that he had felt psychologically adapted to. Conversely, Ria expected to socially 'fit in' or at least felt a need to be socially integrated at lunchtime, so her sociocultural

in-adaptation resulted in her psychological loneliness. Whereas Eddy's insufficient sociocultural adaptation due to multiple reasons directly led to his poor psychological well-being and homesickness.

Generally speaking, international students are more likely to experience anxiety, homesickness, and stress in adaptation (Fritz et al., 2008). And those who fail to adapt well are more likely to become homesick (Thomas, 2020). Studies (De Araujo, 2011; Ward et al., 2008) confirm that social support derived from family, friends, and faculty are a critical resource to coping stress and conducive to mental health. Although Rick said he adapted fast and naturally in banal terms, he took for granted the private support he received in his social environment where there were many other Chinese international students in his dormitory. While reflexively comparing his life between in his high school years and in his college years, Rick reported the issue of 'homesickness'.

> When I just arrived in the US for high school, I was not homesick at all. But strangely, I was very homesick in my first college year here. Many other Chinese international students who moved here for high school also have the same experience. I communicated with them before, we all shared our feelings saying that we were not homesick in high school here, but in the fist year of college, we were all very homesick. I don't know why. (Rick, male, 22 years old, upper-middle-class background, from a major city of Northern China)

Rick's incidental finding that many other former parachute kids around him shared the same experience of feeling homesick in college but not in high school was completely beyond my expectation and was not mentioned by other participants of my study, but such interesting report can not be ignored. So how can we understand this phenomenon? Since I don't have relevant data to refer to, I can only propose some hypotheses. It is possibly because that parachute kids are so occupied by their conscious or unconscious adaptation to a new environment that they barely have any time to think or realize if they are homesick or not, or because there are other Chinese international students around them with whom they stay socially engaged, forming a

social network that satisfies their daily life, or both. Anyhow, it is future empirical research that is anticipated to verify these hypotheses.

Unpleasant experiences in the US

In total, my participants talked more of their unpleasant experiences than pleasant ones when they were asked to share some experiences, either good or bad, that impressed them the most. It makes sense that almost all of their unpleasant experiences happened at school, dormitory and homestay families since these places are the only social spheres where they spent most all of their time as international students and have to frequently encounter others in the US. And these unpleasant incidents involved teachers, local American students, other international students and also other fellow Chinese international students.

Celia changed accommodation three times in the four years of her high school. In the first year, she was living in school dormitory. Then she moved to her aunt's house for her second year. In the final two years, she was living in a homestay family. When asked of the most impressive experiences, either good or bad, Celia said she could not remember very well,

> Maybe because I have experienced some bad things that my brain has automatically sealed up those memories... It's not that I don't want to recall them, it's just that they are blurred themselves... it's like a PTSD (Post Traumatic Stress Disorder) that has directly sealed up those terrible things and does not want me to recall... it seems like there are just some lessons left... there were conflicts with classmates, and also in my aunt's house. (Celia, female, 23 years old, upper-middle-class background, from a capital city of Northern China)

I encouraged her to describe a conflict with her classmates, but she chose to share a conflict that happened in her aunt's house.

> my [Asian] uncle-in-law wanted everyone in the house to render

unconditional obedience to him... for example, if I turned on the light at the time when he thought it shouldn't be turned on, he would scold me; and if I didn't hang the towel in the right place, he would smash my door open and lift me up from my bed to the towel and scold me... I was too small, I had no power to fight back... my brain has refused me to recall many details, when I tried to recall, it's more like viewing from a third-person perspective. (Celia, female, 23 years old, upper-middle-class background, from a capital city of Northern China)

Although Celia said it was her 'brain' that had 'sealed up' the memories of unpleasant experiences she had in the US, but facing a question of sharing an impressive event, she was directly reminded of the 'bad' ones and was struggling to pick one out of them. It means that those unpleasant experiences were more impressive to her than the other pleasant ones whether her 'brain' had denied it or not.

Since the US is the global destination for students from all over the world, it is inevitable for Chinese international students' to confront other international students as well as other fellow Chinese students in the US. Josef is one of the few participants who moved to the US in the middle of his middle school period. He lived in school dormitory throughout her five years of secondary education. In his middle school, there were some students from Hongkong and Taiwan. He had some political disputes with one of them. And this randomly selected episode of unpleasant experiences is a manifestation of his internalized patriotism and a strong sense of Chinese identity.

One Hongkong student always denied his Chinese identity, he always claimed he was British, we had many verbal fights with him because of this... It was my [Chinese] friend who first started this verbal fight, then I joined... I considered this kind of person to be very disgusting for trying to split our country. (Josef, male, 21 years old, middle-class background, from a capital city in Eastern China)

Sometimes unpleasant experiences were not anything that directly inflicted on my participants, but were lamentable events that happened around them. Some of my participants spontaneously recalled the misfortune of their peers when they were asked to share their own experiences. Such spontaneousness betrayed their subjective

judgement of the incidents to be important episodes in their life, which cast an influence on their present, and possibly also their future.

> My high school was located in a countryside where it was very peaceful... every year at least one student of our school committed suicide... and I personally knew one of them... one day another student called police while he was waiting in our school's parking lot, he pointed a gun at policemen, then the policemen shot him dead... I thought he was probably a very religious white. He could not go to heaven through suicide, so he sought external help to assist him... most of these students suffered depressive disorder... When I just started the 1st year of my university, another two students committed suicide, they threw themselves under a train, I was very upset. (Scot, male, 19 years old, upper-class background, from a metropolitan city in Southern China)

Scot, as only a 19 year-old boy, seemed to be very sensitive to the incidents of 'life ending' that happened around him. What impressed me more was his unperturbed tone when he was recounting these suicide cases. Quite a few of my participants were also students of the same university who probably had also heard of the same suicide cases, but he was the only one who mentioned these stories. Maybe it is because he did 'die' himself once spiritually when he was back in China suffering the unbearable long-hours of study in a 'prodigies class', since then he had become hyper subconscious of 'death' as he spontaneously paid attention to those suicides committed by his peers around him.

Hearing is one thing, but seeing is another. When Rubina spoke of her Chinese roommate in high school period who was suffering depression and convicted self-harm in her face, she sounded very calm and self-assured because she had learnt how to deal with this kind of situation through that incident.

> She suddenly started to slash her wrists. Before that she had insomnia and she had to take medicines, I heard she had this problem, but I never saw it with my own eyes... at that time, I was still a child myself, I was so scared at the beginning, so I reported it to our RA (Resident Assistant) who then took her to see a doctor, and she got better after taking medicines, but in our 3rd year, it happened again!... she was taken by the police and stayed in sanatorium for two weeks... I have learnt

from this experience how to communicate with people, and how to empathize, and in what situations I can deal with by myself and in what cases I need to ask other people for help, I have been honed a lot through this experience. (Rubina, female, 21 years old, upper-middle-class background, from a capital city of Southern China)

While still in the stage of forming their identities, which is already a difficult task for any teenager, parachute kids have to do it among all the uncertainties brought by the new cultural environment and without the daily support of their family (Cheng, 2020: 828). When looking back at those unexpected scary moments, Rubina was trying to justify her fear by emphasizing that she was 'still a child' back then, and so was Celia who felt powerless and helpless of herself being a minor during high school time when she was suffering unfair treatments in the US.

Racist encounters in the US

As already discussed in my literature review in Chapter 4, previous studies tend to ignore racism or neo-racism when investigating international students' experiences. To fill up this gap, I directly asked my participants whether they had experienced any racial discrimination if such topic did not emerge in their narration. However, many participants shared their experiences of being discriminated directly without being asked of it.

In the first year of my high school, I selected drama class... At first, I was very shy... one day I chose a monologue which was very suitable for me, and the way I acted was very different from the usual me, so everyone was surprised, even the teacher thought I had no potential in acting because I was a typical shy Chinese girl in her eyes.... Since then I had been very close to that drama teacher, she was almost like a mom to me... She always cast me in her drama every year... But one time I overheard my classmates' discussion with her saying that Asians could not fit leading roles... because it did not meet public anticipation. I was very angry to overhear that... Later that teacher came to me and told me that she could not give me the leading role not because I was not a good actress but because from the director's perspective the appearance of an actress... I was very unhappy. (Angela, female, 21 years old, upper-middle-class background, from a capital city of

Northern China)

Racial discrimination seems to be an unpleasant experience that most Chinese students were not be able to dodge in the US. We can imagine how racist exclusions and insults had negatively influenced these young Chinese in their course of growing up especially when such discrimination was from teachers who were supposed to impart knowledge and to be role models to them.

> Most teachers were nice, but I felt some particular teachers discriminated Chinese students a bit... He could raise any tiny issue to the level of a personal attack... Every Chinese student had been scolded by him. The odds were too high, weren't they? ... Our high school did not allow us to speak Chinese in public area, they said it's like we were excluding others... but, for example, if we wanted to have a private conversation, did we have to let all other people hear us? Why did we have to speak English for our private conversation?... we think it is very normal for foreigners to speak English in China, no one in China would ask them to speak Chinese, so I think we [Chinese in China] are quite open. (Celia, female, 23 years old, upper-middle-class background, from a capital city of Northern China)

Celia's encounter can be explained by 'linguistic racism'. The ideologies and practices that are utilized to confirm, normalize and reformulate an unequal and uneven linguistic power between language users can be termed linguistic racism (Dovchin 2019a, 2019b). Findings of Dobinson and Mercieca's (2020) investigation of linguistic racism on an Australian university campus show that Chinese students were invisibilized because a dogmatic English-only rule was enforced on campus, and due to such institutionalized devaluation of Chinese but appreciation of English, domestic Australian students profited from linguistic privilege. And such linguistic racism can result in international students' loss of self-confidence and sense of identity (Dobinson & Mercieca, 2020).

Through previous social confrontations with American peer students, Elena had even developed a skill of telling which kinds of Americans are the ones she should avoid owing to her unpleasant experiences she had suffered when she was a kid attending a

summer camp in the US with many local American peers in her middle school time before her relocation to the US for college study.

> I had a very bad impression of the US after I attended a summer camp in the US... you should know fraternity and sorority... I was with those bunch of kids in that summer camp... they were very unfriendly... even younger American girls tried to bully me... After I entered New York University, my two dormitory flatmates were exactly that kind of annoying sorority girls... One girl in the next room was very mean... we had a floor drain problem clogged by hair [in the shower]... but how could she accuse me and my Asian roommate of our hair for clogging the floor drain just because she could not easily tell her own blonde hair among those hair, what the hell was wrong with her?... I know there are some [American] people that I should avoid, and it is easy to tell. Although they have grown up, their fake smiles and behaviors still can remind me of those kids in that summer camp... If I sense someone who resembles those kids, I would absolutely not talk to him/her. (Elena, female, 20 years old, upper-middle-class background, from a capital city of Eastern China)

In as confined space as a middle school where the students were only aged around 12 to 15, many international students had to flatter to integrate in American students' circle in order not to get bullied. But Jenny was too proud to stoop low.

> Many Chinese and Korean students fawned on American students in order to integrate... There was something wrong with that school... Americans had a mindset of white supremacy, and there were mainly Korean and Chinese among Asian students. Maybe it was because everyone was too young when moving to the US, for example, when I was in my 8th grade, it seemed to me that those younger Chinese students of 6th and 7th grades did not have a strong sense of self-identification as Chinese, so I could not get along well with them, the ones I made friends with including some whom I still have contact with until now were all those marginalized Chinese students... There were a lot of exclusion, marginalization and bully... (Jenny, female, 21 years old, upper-middle-class background, from a capital city of Northern China)

The historically long-standing racism problem in the US socially constructed and being reproduced through media stereotyping, demonizing, uglifying, derogating and stigmatizing, as well as family and school education in either formal or informal ways, have problematized interaction between international students and domestic ones in

the US. Racial ridicules, exclusions, contempt, verbal and physical assaults cause conflicts and undermine the relationship between young peers. Exposure to the stress of racism is a likely contributor to the development of symptoms of depression and other negative mood states (Brondolo et al., 2012: 374), and directly lead to poor physical and mental well-being of the victims (Crocker, 2007: 1).

Previous studies of Chinese parachute kids address many issues of transnational living apart from parents, such as self-discipline, changes in parent-child relationships, acculturation and isolation (Zhou, 1998). And research findings include increased sense of ethnic pride and commitment to Chinese culture due to rejection and discrimination by 'Americans' and close association with other Chinese peers (Chiang-Hom, 2004: 155), stronger orientation to their traditional values and home culture which facilitated their process of cross-cultural adjustment (Ying, 2001), and the lowest acculturation and highest acculturative stress (Kuo & Roysircar, 2004). However, these studies all underplay the social hardships these kids have been subjected to as if all the problems were mainly attributed to their own inadaptation, maladjustment and low acculturation, and as if there was negligible or even no exclusion, discrimination and racism inflicted on them. International students do confront an array of cultural adjustments, but the responsibility is often left to the student to 'adjust' or 'adapt' to the host culture (Bevis, 2002). Many research assume that international students should bear the responsibility to overcome their discomfort and integrate into the host society (Klineberg & Hull, 1979; Bevis, 2002; Pritchard & Skinner, 2002; Hechanova-Alampay et al., 2002; Heggins & Jackson, 2003; Zhao et al., 2005), but fail to consider the inadequacies of the host society in engaging international students (Perrucci & Hu, 1995: 496). Such research perspectives commit a de facto deprivation of international students' voice and can lead to a biased research result. Few studies consider how institutions and individuals may purposefully or inadvertently marginalize international students (Beoku-Betts, 2004; Lee, 2005). Except a group of my participants who complained about a challenging adaptation period upon arrival in the US, the majority rest did not mention or at least

did not highlight any difficulties of adaptation, acculturation or 'culture shock' (Oberg, 1960), but they voluntarily confided their unforgettable unpleasant moments, as exemplified by Angela who adapted quite well in an American middle school but later experienced exclusion by her American classmates and American drama teacher whom she looked up to in an American high school, which means these unpleasant memories of their past are of significant meaning to them, and not only constitute an important part of who they are at present, but may also continue to influence on their future in their transitions to adulthood.

Pleasant memories

Apart from difficulties, displeasure, disappointment and harsh encounters, a smaller group of my participants have good memories to be nostalgic with. Mary felt lucky to have lived with a very nice homestay family in her high school time for the first year in the US.

> When I first arrived in the US for middle school, I was living in a homestay. The host family was so nice... They were a second generation of Italian immigrants... I remember it was before Christmas, they asked me what I wanted [for Christmas]... then in that morning, the Christmas tree was all dripped with gifts, so many gifts, I felt so happy when I was unwrapping them one by one. (Mary, female, 20 years old, upper-middle-class background, from a capital city of Southern China)

Unlike the above-mentioned students who were victims of unfair treatment by their American teachers, some other students were lucky to have very admirable teachers who played a very positive role in their young lives. Frey had a very nice chemistry teacher in his 3rd year of high school who even invited him to be a guest in her house for thanksgiving. But one time he missed a chemistry laboratory class for an extracurricular activity, one week later when he checked his grade, he was surprised to find out he only scored 20. He went to ask that teacher if she could let him make up that laboratory experiment but was turned down.

She said, 'rules are rules... we are very close and I think you are a good student, but I can not change your score, otherwise it would be unfair to other students.' I was very sad. But on the night of that day, I received a very long email from her, she wrote, 'I know you missed the experiment out of negligence, I would not look down upon you just because of this, this experiment only accounts for 20% of the final grade, I believe your grade will rise up again after you finish the following experiments, I will always be cheering for you, I love you.' I was so touched! My parents had always been very busy since I was little, they had never said anything affirmative to me... and since primary school to middle school [in China] I had a knowledge of value that only if you achieve a good grade can you be affirmed by teachers, and only if you do well at everything can you be accepted by the society... It was the first time for me to realize that I could be affirmed as a person regardless of my grades... This experience [with that teacher] has been forever engraved in my mind... (Frey, male, 20 years old, upper-middle-class background, from a capital city of Eastern China)

Having been raised and socialized in a collectivistic society which mostly places collective interests over individual ones, Frey learnt for the first time of his individual value. Compared to the higher frequency of interaction between teachers and students in high school, the opportunities for university students to meet lectures and professors are much less. However, it does not weaken the positive relationship between my degree-seeker participants and their American professors. Clark was impressed by the way how American professors treated students including those from another culture like him.

I feel that American professors, at least all the professors I have contact with in our school, are very nice. I didn't expect that at all. I was shocked. I didn't expect that the relationship between a university professor and students could be like this. They would ask me very sincerely if I had any questions and ask whether I needed help with my homework, and when I was sick and late for [homework] submission, they were be very generous and said I could submit later or even offered me some help. I was deeply touched... Then I feel that it is indeed difficult to imagine that [in China] domestic undergraduate students could have this kind of relationship with professors. I think this is the most valuable thing that has made my coming to the US for study worthwhile, in terms of study and interpersonal relationship [with professors]. (Clark, male, 22 years old, upper-middle-class background, from a capital city in Northern China)

Supportive teacher-student relationships positively affect students behaviorally and emotionally (Baker, 2006; Hughes et al., 2008; Lee, 2012; O'Connor & McCartney, 2007). Clark was surprised by the positive teacher-student relationship in the US probably because he was referring to the teacher-student relationship in Chinese universities. In Ma's (2020: 96) study, one of her participants also found American teachers to be nice and approachable compared to the strict and 'scary' Chinese teachers. In China, the typical teacher-student relationship may be considered authoritarian characterized by a strict Confucian hierarchy with students expected to surrender absolute obedience to teachers. The fear of failing to observe teachers' authoritarian power may lead to a distance between the two parties. In the US, however, the student-teacher relationship is more equal and more professional.

Unsatisfied social interaction with American peers

Friendship with local students has been recognized as a major index to affect sojourner's social adjustment process (Brown, 2009). However, 'a low incidence of bonds between international and local students has been long and widely documented' (Brown, 2009: 185). And it is especially the case for most of Chinese international students who are 'structurally or socially segregated on a voluntary basis' (Yan & Berliner, 2016: 140). They speak Mandarin Chinese and associate primarily with fellow Chinese students, or those of similar socio-economic status in their ethnic community (Tsai, 1986). This study has further confirmed these findings.

When asked of friendship in the US, Adam's first reaction was, 'many of them repeated a 9th grade after arrival in the US, but I did not attend a 9th grade in China, I went to the US for 9th grade right after I finished 8th grade in China, so they were one year older than me'. He started only talking about his compatriots as if the question was to ask of his friendship with other Chinese international students, and he totally ignored American peers and other non-Chinese international students. In a reply to an

added question of why he only mentioned other Chinese students when reviewing his social life, he emphasized the term 'different values'.

> To be honest, compared to other Chinese students, I relatively had more American friends, but I still felt our values were very different, you know, no matter how good my relationships with my American friends were, there was no way we could be as close as opening our hearts to each other, you know what I mean?... That's why when I mentioned 'them', I only referred to those Chinese students in our dormitory, they were like life-time good friends to me. (Adam, male, 19 years old, upper-middle-class background, from a capital city of Northern China)

A common perception among Chinese students was that many American peers are friendly, however, it was difficult to develop a deep relationship or form a real friendship with them. In most Chinese students' understanding of friendship, friends are supposed to be very close and open hearts to each other, have each other's back emotionally and make any jokes of each other, exchange favors and even know each other's 'businesses'. The Chinese concept of 'friendship' is closely related to 'connections' or 'guanxi' (Frank, 2000), which is very much in conformity with collectivism, meaning both parties' resources are expected to be shared with each other when necessary. To Chinese, the 'friend network' is very reliable and effective when help is needed. In contrast to the Chinese concept of friendship, individualistic Americans hold quite different expectations regarding what friends should do to keep a proper distance to protect each other's personal space. Essentially, different values of 'friendship' between Chinese and American students are resulted from cultural difference. In addition, the convenience of reaching other Chinese international students further amplifies such effect of cultural difference.

> I actually wanted to make American friends, but it was hard to find the right opportunities... Maybe it is the language barrier. I think I have no problem speaking English, but if I want to make some really good and close friends [with Americans], if they make meme jokes, I would not know how to respond, it would totally go over my head. So there is still a cultural difference... In addition to this objective limitation, it may also be that it is just much easier to hang out

with Chinese students, because we have more similarities, right? For now, I mainly hang out with Chinese students. (Florian, 19 years old, upper-middle-class background, from a capital city of Northeastern China)

Many of my participants expressed their interests in making friends with American peers, but the cultural difference, for example in the form of not having enough cultural capital to decipher American meme jokes as indicated by Florian, stood in their way of establishing close friendships. Lack of background knowledge impaired the ability of Chinese students to fully understand their American friends' topics of conversation. Other personal reasons like lack of English proficiency and initiative are also the barriers for Clark to engage an effective interaction with American students. Clark identified himself not as a person good at initiating social communications, though he admitted that he longed for social connections and friendship in the US.

I feel that I can not get along very well with most of my classmates. I used to hang out with a bunch of [Chinese] friends, but I just feet that it is very hard to find any friends who were like the ones that I made friends with in my middle and high school [in China], I'm not sure why, maybe it's the things that we are busy with respectively are too different, and our goals and thoughts are too different. My friends are mostly Chinese or Chinese Americans, it's [the problem of] my spoken English, and partly because I am a little autistic and I have a little social phobia. It was nice to talk as friends to some American classmates in class, but we had little communication after class... In the atmosphere of an American university, I find it difficult for two complete strangers to become good friends. And I am not the kind of person who likes to take the initiative to socialize, so we might know very little about each other. (Clark, male, 22 years old, upper-middle-class background, from a capital city in Northern China)

Echoing a recent study's findings (Lertora & Sullivan, 2019), meeting new people in the classroom and through group work assignments did not elicit any lasting friendships between my participants and American students. Clark had a serious self-reflection over why he did not have any American friends and faintly believed that his poor English and his personality were part of the reason that had made him socially isolated. But when he was mentioning his American classmates, he was implying that maybe it's also because his American classmates were not interesting in

making friends with him. Then I asked him if he had a strong willing to make friends with local American students, he gave a negative answer, 'I don't have a strong willing. I am the "go with the flow" type of guy. I would not make any effort if a conversation does not happen'.

The transition from high school to university involved a geographical mobility or an internal migration within the US. And such geographical mobility entails a change of social context, which affected their social life in a profound way.

> We had been very accustomed to an enclosed high school campus accommodating [around] 200 students, where everybody knew everybody. But after entering university, you have to make a lot of effort to make friends, it's not like in high school where you could naturally have friends... it's too big... it's really hard to make friends [in university]. (Yuri, female, 21 years old, upper-middle-class background, from a coastal city of Northeastern China)

A contextual change can serve as a certain degree of institutional function that can have different influence on different individuals. It could be a social emancipation from the past to Celia who had more social choices in college, but a social constraint of the present to Yuri. Institutional support does make a difference, according to Ma's study which finds that institutional opportunities to engage in volunteer work and international student work, activities can help Chinese international students to find close American friends (Ma, 2020: 132).

Multiple reasons could lie behind the unsuccessful establishment of social connections between Chinese international students and American students. Maybe it is both cultural difference, and 'institutional problems' (Yao, 2018; Ma, 2020) that thwart the formation of intercultural friendship.

Voluntary segregation

In contrast to some students like Clark who was at least puzzled for a while over his social isolation, another couple of students directly gave up trying to figure out why and considered hanging out exclusively with other Chinese international students as merely a choice.

> It's like a coin having two sides, the good thing is that we would feel more comfortable... the downside is that we would not be able to integrate into local environment very well... but my choice does not mean that I think integration into American people is a good thing or a bad thing, I mean I just made such choice, and I don't think it is a bad choice... I just choose my way of life, and it's not necessary to force myself to integrate... I just do whatever makes me feel comfortable... It's not like you've come all the way [from China to] here for nothing if you don't integrate. (Dina, 22 years old, from a capital city of Eastern China)

Many previous studies have identified the acculturative stress that Chinese international students suffer (Berry, 1997; Rice, Choi, Zhang, Morero, & Anderson, 2012; Yakunina, Weigold, & Weigold, 2013; Yan & Berliner, 2011) and indicate that lack of acculturation is a problem, because support from co-national students, although helpful early on, hinders social integration and cultural learning (Yan & Berliner, 2011). However, most of my respondents did not express any serious concern or worry over their failure in or voluntary refusal of integration into American society, instead, some of them didn't consider integration as a necessity although most of them held a positive attitude towards the idea of having American friends. They tended to actively choose to have other Chinese international students within their social circle. And such choices range from daily social contact to sharing accommodation. As a former parachute kid, Adam happened to have Chinese roommates for his whole four high school years, during which he had accumulated knowledge about and developed a deeper understanding of American students based on direct and indirect experiences.

I knew it would be a very unpleasant experience if I had an American roommate...I may classify American people into several types. The first type is the normal sensible Americans from our Chinese perspective. For example, they would complain like us Chinese [students] about how difficult the exams are and worry about failing them... This sensible type of Americans accounts for around 35%-40%. Then the second type is the one track-minded including many Christians. For example, if he was punished to run laps by a coach, he would never shirk... This type accounts for around 15%. Then another type is the 'white trash'. They make troubles in class, and challenge eating detergent pods, so ridiculous! Just a few days ago, some crazy Americans challenged coronavirus by licking subway handrails... The rest minority includes American Otakus, skater boys and Rock boys, these three types are also very crazy... So all Americans can be generalized into these types. There would be a high probability to have such kind of roommate if I shared accommodation with an American, in that case, my first university year would be ruined. I knew about this, so I would not [choose to share accommodation with an American]. Maybe some Chinese students who just arrived in the US would say, 'Oh, I want to make American friends, I don't want to restrict myself in the "Chinese circle"', but I did not want to take this risk, despite there are many nice Americans. (Adam, male, 19 years old, upper-middle-class background, from a capital city of Northern China)

Adam strategically chose to share accommodation with fellow Chinese international students, because he did not want to 'risk' having his first university year ruined by having an American roommate. It doesn't matter whether his categorization of American students is reasonable or not, but what matters is his agency that he had been utilizing to navigate his social life in the US.

There are many arguments and findings on Chinese international students' acculturation 'problem': their high admiration of the West is mostly based on an affinity of Western science and humanitarian ideas, not real cultural participation and religious encounters (Wang, 1992); most of them are socially isolated from Americans and immerse themselves in abstract technical learning (Chen, 1979); the strangeness and alienness of American life to most Chinese international students is either due to the short length of their experience in America or due to the enormous difference between the two cultures (Yan & Berliner, 2016: 140); they are strongly attached to China in social, cultural, and patriotic terms and there is no change in identity while in

America; their strong ties to home combined with a lack of knowledge about America lead to the severe social isolation (Xu, 2006); as a result, Chinese students inevitably are caught in a deep spiritual conflict between the professional world which is Western and Americanized and the private world which is related to Oriental and Chinese (Yeh, 2000). All These arguments and findings seem convincing because there are indeed some Chinese international students who choose to be socially segregated from American society in some part of their life, however, they have ignored the institutional, contextual and cultural constraints that impede many other Chinese international students' effort to reach out.

Most of my participants developed an aspiration to study in the US through exposure to American culture and media, and a majority of them spent their most formative years of secondary school in the US, and most of them thought positively of the idea of having friendship with American peers, but in the end most of them ended up confining themselves within Chinese international students community. It is hard to discern whether it is the length of their stay or the insurmountable cultural difference or their incipient lack of interests, or the structural constraints that had impeded their integration into American society. But in any case, one palm can not clap after all.

Romantic relationships

Young people's romantic relationships and sexual experiences during their transitions to adulthood have the potential to signal their future transition outcomes of marriage and parenthood, and may also affect their school-to-work and housing transitions. Mobile young people may face more challenges of seeking and retaining partners than sedentary youth due to their often fragmented transnational life and a smaller available dating market since most migrants choose to date or have no choice but to date their own ethnic members.

As the social networks of migrants shape various life opportunities and the behavioral norms of young migrants (Castles, 2007), partnering opportunities are often assisted by the co-ethnic networks in the host country (Hirsch 2003; Song 2009). Like the preference for whom they establish friendship with, most of my participants inclined towards their in-group members for dating. Although several of my participants were open to dating non-Chinese and had some intimate experiences with Americans, and one girl participant was dating a white American at the time of interview, most of them prefer dating or only date Chinese or in some cases general East Asians. As an evidence confirming Kim's (2020) finding that Chinese students date Korean because of cultural affinity, one of my participants Ria had an ABK (American-born-Korean) boyfriend in high school and then a Chinese boyfriend in university. She dated several non-Chinese guys only because she thought it was impolite to reject dating invitations at the beginning and she was willing to get to know people and give it a try, but due to the cultural difference and her preference for East Asian guys, none of those dates worked out.

> I felt that I might not be able to enter into a serious relationship with any guys other than East Asians, because I thought many of their understandings of romantic relationship are not the same as mine... From aesthetic point of view, foreigners are not my type. I don't think they are as handsome as East Asian guys. I don't think they are very handsome. They may look good but they are not very attractive to me. (Ria, female, 22 years old, upper-middle-class background, from a capital city of Eastern China)

Corresponding to a previous study in which having the same cultural background is found to be the major reason for many Chinese students to prefer seeking partnership with other Chinese (Yan & Berliner, 2013: 69), most of my participants made the same claim. However, an interesting new finding is that some participants, both male and female, when asked of why they had such preference for their own ethnic members, they answered simply because they preferred Chinese look and body. Except for one male student who prefer white girls, all the other boys expressed their preference or slight preference for Chinese girls for their Chinese looks.

I only date Chinese girls... I just said that I like Chinese [girls], but it doesn't mean that I hate foreigners. I just like Chinese [girls]. That's all. I just think that Chinese [girls] are better-looking. (Carlen, male, 22 years old, upper-middle-class background, from a capital city of Central China)

Some studies emphasize the persisting cultural hegemony that frames US whites as desirable partners (Kim, 2006; Pyke, 2010), but my research findings evidence that co-ethnic coupling among migrants is not a result of unmet assimilation (Luibheid, 2013), but an active choice.

Among those who had experiences of intimate relationships, many had partners in another place geographically distant from them. Many of such long-distance relationships ended up broken up.

I had a [Chinese] boyfriend here. He went back to China after the Covid broke out in the US... because of the time difference, I don't know if it was me that slept too much or if it was him that slept too much, we could slept through quite a few days without talking to each other. For example, if I sent him a message, he was still asleep [in China] the next day when I got up... so there was always a time lag. (Myra, female, 21 years old, upper-middle-class background, from a capital city of Southeastern China)

As introduced in the previous chapter, Cathy chose the US over Japan only because her Chinese boyfriend happened to be studying in the US. But she did not apply for the same university in the same city, instead she applied for another one in a nearby city.

I did not apply for the same university simply because I did not want to be his younger schoolmate... I did not come to the US for him, he just happened to be a random influence factor to me... back then I was already thinking about going to the US, so [I came to the US] not completely for him... I just didn't want to be too close to him, I don't know why, I can't explain... It was in my sophomore year, I broke up with him... I just felt that I did not like him anymore. (Cathy, female, 23 years old, upper-middle-class background, from a capital city of South-western China)

Cathy socially and academically immersed herself in the 'American circle'. She occupied herself with a variety of fraternity-related activities for practicing English and accumulating human capital and social capital. The only romantic relationship she had so far seems to be not only a random influence on her choice of the US, but also a brief interlude among her busy life in the US.

Frey is one of the very few students among my participants who were more integrated in local community. His desire for recognition of his homosexual identity in American society that he found difficult to obtain in China had made him more eager to acculturate.

> I had a boyfriend in high school, and we were classmates for four years. I confessed my love to him in Disneyland and then we were together. When I was making my graduation speech, I added an expression of my love to him in the end. We [later] broke up because of long distance, I can not accept long-distance relationship. (Frey, male, 20 years old, upper-middle-class background, from a capital city of Eastern China)

Frey's relatively successful social integration may be more than just a coincidence. A recent research finds out that gay Asian Americans are more likely to be perceived as Americans than their straight counterparts, which means gay Asian males in the US may be less likely to face foreignness-based prejudice compared to straight Asians (Semrow et al., 2020). A scholarly explanation relates this phenomenon to the American value of freedom which generates a more positive attitude toward LGBTQ individuals than many non-Western nations (Adamczyk & Pitt, 2009; Smith, Son, & Kim, 2014). However, it may also has a lot to do with the stereotyped image of Asian men who have been desexualized and feminized in American history and are the 'other' to not pose a sexual threat to white men because they are socially believed to lack sexual power or prowess (Linares, 2018).

Summary

The public in China has always been thinking of study abroad as a privilege exclusive to the rich class families but seldom knows the hardship that these young kids have gone through abroad. This research has revealed that many young Chinese students who used to be the 'winners' among their peers in China are actually disadvantaged victims abroad in many ways. They have suffered cruelty, exclusion, insults, humiliation etc. despite some kindness they received from the host society.

Some participants adapted well enough upon arrival in the new social context, while many others were depressed at the beginning. In general, they shared more unpleasant experiences and racist encounters in detail than pleasant ones. Similar to Ma's (2020) findings, most of my participants were willing to make friends with American students, but due to cultural and institutional barriers, previous racist encounters as well as the convenience of reaching other Chinese international students, they either naturally, and in some cases helplessly, confined themselves within the 'Chinese circle' or actively avoided interacting with non-Chinese. And such social preference is also active in their dating life. An interesting new finding shows that many of my participants preferred dating Chinese or East Asians simply because they preferred the Chinese or Asian exterior appearances.

Despite in many occasions my participants, especially the former parachute kids, were in passive positions subject to social hardships and contextual constraints, they had been actively wielding their agency in the form of making social choices to navigate their life in the US the whole time, sometimes with the private transition support they received from their social relationships. And such social choices would correspond to their reflections and reflexivities on their lived experiences through their mobile life in the US.

Chapter 8 Reflections and Reflexivities on
International Mobility

Introduction

A self-reflexive review serves as a means to examine if incipient expectations of international mobility have been fulfilled or not and if there are other unexpected rewards as well as acquired knowledge and capital. To be reflective and reflexive on the changes that international mobility has contributed to while still being in a mobile state is to make a positive summary of one's past mobile temporalities, which bears a significant implication for the construction of life course continuity to one's living present and aspired future.

My participants were in the middle of their transition processes closely prior to their future transitions outcome-making. They had already been negotiating contextual and structural constraints with specific modes of biographical agency ever since they landed in the US. A reflective and reflexive account of changes, achievements and self-awareness at this stage is like an interim report on personal growth which could be mobilized for the soon coming critical moments of entering to adulthood. The acquired cultural capital and social capital are often addressed as a resource to shape young people's transition outcomes against backdrop of structural factors (e.g., Furlong & Cartmel, 1997). However, young people's spiritual and psychological growth in the transition process has barely been paid attention to, despite its value in reflecting personal agency.

This chapter discusses my participants' reflections and reflexivities on their rewards, personal changes, understanding of the US and home country, sense of belonging and

identity and perception of adulthood attributed to their study and life in the US, ranging from cultural and social capital like expanded and international horizons and collected quality social connections to other personal development like self-awareness, psychological self-assurance and self-perception, and a better understanding of the two countries.

International horizon

Most of my participants who expected particular gains before mobility do have had their wishes met in the US. Jenny had had more opportunities to do volunteer work for animal protection; Josef could study in small-sized classes as he had always wished for; Rick had played football matches in a formal high school football league; Hanker had skied more often through his relaxed high school years; Angela had started to enjoy study instead of being weary of it like how she was in China; Celia had finally been emancipated from parents' control and stressful study at school in China; Levi had developed more interests encouraged by extracurricular activities. Regardless of whether having had or having not had any particular expectations, in consistent with Cheng et al.'s finding (2020: 111), almost all of my participants felt rewarded with 'broadened horizon' which was also what many of them had expected to acquire before departure to the US. Apart from having gained 'critical thinking' as anticipated before, Tony even underscored that exposure to diversity was more precious than the knowledge that he had learnt in the US.

> I have exchanged ideas with so many people of different backgrounds, this is very rewarding, which I could not have had in other places, because New York is an international metropolis full of people from around the whole world. As for the specific knowledge I've learned, they are less valuable compared to international horizon. I can get universal knowledge everywhere, but the experiences of meeting different people and broadening horizon is only accessible through study abroad. (Tony, male, 21 years old, upper-middle-class background, from a capital city in Eastern China)

A broadened international horizon does not only unfurl a wider world with manifold spectra to my participants, but also provide insights into how the world is perceiving China in return. Sam was sensitive enough to capture the latter as one of the perspectives he had learnt.

> My way of thinking is more international [now]. I can think and process from more full-rounded perspectives. I have broadened my horizon. And the US I experienced in person is different from the US that I got to know about in China before I moved there... And I got to know the China that Americans know about is different from the real China, too. They actually know very little about China. (Sam, male, 22 years old, middle-class background, from a capital city in Central-South China)

A quantitative study finds out that to gain a new perspective on home country is a motive that affects Chinese international students in their decision-making for studying abroad (Chao et al., 2017), however to Sam in my study, a new perspective on China is an unexpected reward from his international mobility, and his sensitivity to such reward is an indication of his subconscious and deep-rooted sense of belonging to his home country.

Having been immersed in contacts with different cultures, different values and diverse perspectives, it is almost a corollary for these young Chinese to cultivate a sense of world mindedness and cosmopolitan outlook. Dynamic cultural exchanges are so powerful that under their influence a pre-planned instrumentalist goal can be gradually replaced by a mundane pursuit of learning and accepting new cultures. As one of the very few participants whose motivation of mobility to the US was purely instrumental, Carlen had realized how much he had changed or had been changed after two and a half years of stay in the US.

> The longer I have stayed in the US, the stronger I have realized that getting a university degree is not that important any more. What's important is the process of being in contact with local people and local cultures... I have realized that I want to learn and accept new cultures... I have found it very interesting to

communicate with other people in a different place. So my goal has been gradually changed from getting a degree to learning more about their cultures... I feel my horizon has been expanded... I can see in real life those things which I could only see on TV [back in China], it's like a magic. (Carlen, male, 22 years old, upper-middle-class background, from a capital city of Central China)

Many participants indeed enjoyed the course of international mobility itself for the horizon and diversity that it came with, but several other students still could find its pragmatic value in assisting their future personal and career development.

The greatest benefit of study abroad is my broadened horizon. [with the help of such broadened horizons], I would not choose a wrong path when I have to make some choices in the future, and I would not make a misjudgment just because I haven't seen enough people. (Filip, 26 years old, upper-middle-class background, from a relatively peripheral city of Northeastern China)

Filip is one of the few participants who rationally saw broadened horizon as acquired social and cultural capital and believed that 'seeing enough people', either friends, nodding acquaintances or strangers who happened to show up in his vision, would help him avoid making mistakes in his future encounters, which seems corresponding to one of his major motivations of study abroad—to see if the abroad is really as wonderful, advanced, peaceful and equal as it is narrated by the media.

Social rewards and social resources

Apart from international horizon, accrued social capital is another major reward shared by many of my participants. Adam accentuated how his high school years in the US had influenced him the most in his course of growing up and acknowledged those years as a very significant phase of his life to build up a world view and a sense of value, and reiterated that he had harvested pure and firm friendship with many other Chinese international students. And Dina found the social skills that she had learnt through her stay in the US to be very rewarding.

I consider learning how to manage a romantic relationship as also a personal improvement... And knowing how to interact with different people is also quite important... I would be able to prejudge what kind of person he/she is at work, then I would choose an appropriate way to approach him/her or even make friends with him/her... I think it is quite difficult to communicate with people who have different values from mine... If I prejudge a person is not a potential friend, I would not spend more time on him/her, otherwise I would become very close friends with him/her. (Dina, 22 years old, upper-middle-class background, from a capital city of Eastern China)

While friendship is purely conceived as an end in itself to many of my participants, several others see friendship as an important social resource that might benefit them some day in the future. However, it should be noted that none of them had mentioned that social capital accumulation was a motive of their international mobility. It is very unlikely for most of them to even know the concept of 'social capital' back them. But after years of study and life in the US where they have spent most of their social time with other fellow Chinese international students, they have gradually become aware of the common socioeconomic characteristics between them.

I think after coming to the US, I have come to meet a large group of Chinese international students who are either affluent or aristocratic. This is definitely a resource. If there are something that I feel rewarded with, the first that come across my mind are the social connections I have accumulated, I have some social resources now. (Brie, 20 years old, upper-middle-class background, from a relatively peripheral city of Eastern China)

The theme of 'social stratification' emerges again in Brie's narrative. Although none of my participants expressed any explicit snobbish attitude towards their lower-class Chinese peers, they are fully aware that having a high-quality social network with other Chinese students of upper-middle and affluent class background benefits their present and future.

The path of overseas education to the US is like a 'filter' in between the Pacific Ocean screening out all the working- and lower-class young Chinese and sifting the

privileged ones to the other shore. Waters (2007) draws on Sklair's (2001) concept of 'transnational capitalist class' to describe how international education operates in the creation of an 'exclusive club' of transnational professionals, whose commonalities are formed in and through experiences of international education. And members of this group possess similar lifestyles, patterns of consumption and, importantly, educational histories (see also Butler & Lees, 2006; Carroll, 2004, as cited in Waters, 2007: 479), which form a sense of belonging among them. Many studies find that Chinese international students stick to co-nationals after encounters of indifference, prejudice, exclusion or failed acculturation (e.g., Tian & Lowe, 2009, Yan & Berliner, 2009; Yuan, 2011; Longerbeam et al.,2013; Ma, 2020), and imply it as a problem, but my study finds out that many Chinese international students perceive their friendship with other fellow Chinese international students as a fortune.

Independence and self-awareness

A majority of my participants felt very satisfied of becoming able to take care of themselves, to make independent decisions, to think independently, to be self-disciplined, to develop individual interests and to become cognizant of what they really want for themselves.

It is highly possible that most of my participants, or Chinese international students in general, were taken delicate care of by their families and extended families at home in China, so they probably never had a chance to do any domestic chores. Some of them even boasted as banal trifle as cooking as a new 'survival skill' that they have learnt. Alongside independent living skills, being able to think independently due to exposure to more perspectives is another rewarded skill highlighted by many of them.

> After all these years of life in the US, I think I have become different from those who stayed in China. In China, it is always someone else that tells you what to do, but here you can think independently from various perspectives. This is what I

have felt rewarded the most from the US education experiences. (Angela, female, 21 years old, upper-middle-class background, from a capital city of Northern China)

Independence in the form of survival skills and thinking ability is highly associated with the long distance away from parents. Leaving parental home has long been considered as one of the first critical steps in transition to adulthood. To my participants, leaving home does not only mean a departure from parents' care and support, but also a freedom from their supervision, discipline and control.

I think I have a more independent personality now. My parents liked to control me in almost everything, from what to eat to what to wear... I really hoped they could just let go of me... At the beginning I was more in a pursuit of physical freedom, but now I think it is spiritual independence that I am looking for. I feel more comfortable here [in the US], and I have got my own way of thinking. Compared to before, I definitely know better of what I really want. I have become much more mature than before. (Cara, 21 years old, upper-middle-class background, from a capital city of Eastern China)

In the era of singletons due to the one child policy, Chinese parents invest as much of their resources, emotions and care as possible in their only child, which often results in children's inertia of relying on them in everything and at the same time limits their physical scope of movements as well as their spiritual sphere of self-exploration. Jenny has become aware that being away from parents gave her a chance to explore a state of psychological and emotional independence.

I think what has influenced me the most is the process through which I have become more independent psychologically and emotionally. I am able to deal with a lot of situations all by myself now. If I stayed around my parents in China, I would not be able to make contact with anything new for a very long time. I think the experiences themselves are very rewarding. They have given me more confidence in confronting my future. (Jenny, female, 21 years old, upper-middle-class background, from a capital city of Northern China)

The youth transitions perspective emphasizes the importance of successfully reaching certain structural landmarks before one may reasonably be considered an adult by the

rest of society (Cairns, 2014: 22). These landmarks include finishing full-time education and training, entering the 'adult' labor market, moving out of the parental home and into more or less independent housing, forming stable and lasting relationships and starting a family of one's own (Shanahan, 2000), which means youth transitions framework is more concerned of transition outcomes but often overlooks the process through which young people make psychological, emotional and spiritual growth. To be able to 'decide on personal beliefs and values independently from parents or other influences' is viewed as necessary for adulthood (Arnett, 1997: 11). My participants' voices affirm the significance of psychological, emotional and spiritual growth in guiding them on their road to approaching independence of self-awareness.

Braveness, tolerance, confidence and inner peace

In recalling the past years of study and life in the US, many participants sensed that they have changed a lot. They have become more brave, more confident, more poised, more tolerant, tougher and more at peace with themselves. Ria felt ashamed of her body and appearance when she was in China. But in the US where there are all kinds of people, she was not considered as 'special', and she was not judged by people from different cultural backgrounds.

> When I was in China, I actually didn't touch sports at all... After I arrived abroad, every student was encouraged to participate at least one or two sports... Back in China, everyone thought I was not slim, so I didn't dare to dance, but in high school here in the US, I tried cheer-leading and musicals... When I was in China, I always felt that I didn't fit the model of a good student or a good-looking girl... I would criticize myself more, and then I would deliberately go on a diet and lose weight... after I came to the US, I became more confident in myself, and less concerned about others' opinions, so that I would be more focused on my own personal development and about the things I was interested in. (Ria, female, 22 years old, upper-middle-class background, from a capital city of Eastern China)

When people stay in a homogeneous community for a long time, they are more likely to judge if one member does anything apparently different or does not fit a model that is believed as appropriate. Being in another country and having had exchanges with numerous other cultures, one would not see anything that is different from his/her own culture as strange anymore.

> I have become more objective. I have seen many things, so I would think everything is normal and reasonable, and I would not make a fuss over anything. I am more capable of accepting many bad things... Really, only after you have seen enough can you reach this level, so I think study abroad is very rewarding. (Joe, male, 24 years old, upper-middle-class background, from a capital city of Northern China)

Joe had developed an objective attitude toward and tolerance with everything through his exposure to difference and diversity in the US. Likewise, Cathy who used to resent her parents for preferring sons to daughters had started to reexamine such outdated tradition with a more rational attitude.

> My first personal change is that I would not judge anything anymore... I am from a very traditional family, and my parents had to have a son to pass down the family bloodline. I had always been very upset about it... but now I am not upset anymore. There must be many reasons behind it. It is because of the cultural difference and because they were probably educated like that. Now I am not holding any grudges at all, I would look for the reasons behind it... After three years of stay in the US, now I feel it's good to be anywhere, it seems OK to live anywhere. It's like I would no longer be affected by the environment, instead I would like to change the environment. (Cathy, female, 23 years old, upper-middle-class background, from a capital city of South-western China)

Even in one's own culture, one may find many things that are confusing or unacceptable. In Chinese society, preference for sons over daughters is a culture that has passed down for centuries. Many of today's young Chinese, both girls and boys themselves, find it very backward and disturbing. The experience of study and living abroad has magically helped Cathy find inner peace with herself, with her past and with her family. In contrast with Cathy who used to be a very tough girl back in China

resenting her parents and the society but has become a tolerant person after several years of mobile life in the US, Celia who used to be a mild girl in China has become a spiritual fighter with a strong heart after 8 years of life in the US.

> I have come to understand how uneasy life is, and I have a stronger heart now. When I was in middle school [in China], I was a very mild girl, but now I am not that mild anymore, I have become tough, I'm not that soft anymore. I think it's probably because I have experienced many different cultures, so I am keeping a more open mind... I would judge other people as least as possible. (Celia, female, 23 years old, upper-middle-class background, from a capital city of Northern China)

Back in China, Celia was desperately longing to escape parents' control and study pressure in China. After she moved to the US, she had finally gained freedom, but at the cost of suffering a lot in many other aspects of life. She said she only saw and could only see the negative side of her study and life in China because she had been suffering study pressure and social control in a confined space for a very long time. At that time she could only see the positive side of study and life in the US which she did not know very well. But after her arrival in the US, she had come to encounter social hardships in a new environment in exchange for the freedom obtained.

> In summary, like I said, I was hit quite hard in my high school years, so I had psychologically grown up a bit faster during that time. I had been transformed from a very sensitive and cautious little girl to a person who does not care about others' opinions any more. I am more concerned about my own thoughts now, and I focus more on myself... My high school experiences were really painful to me, but it was just those painful experiences that had made me grown up. (Celia, female, 23 years old, upper-middle-class background, from a capital city of Northern China)

Events that were perceived as insulting and painful at the time they took place may be retrospectively re-evaluated as a 'catalyzer' to self-development in terms of lessons being learnt through hardship. The portfolio self thus involves 'a sequencing of the self' (Robertson, 2021: 95) for which past unpleasant experiences through adolescent add value to the present. After having suffered all those suffocating study pressure and

parents' control in China and then discrimination, exclusion and bully at high school in the US, Celia had grown up, psychologically as she said. She chose to forgive the past and look at them with a positive attitude. Undoubtedly, those difficult episodes were 'critical moments' (Thomson et al., 2002) in Celia's youth transition process. And the choice of how to give meaning to and how to be reflective and reflexive on those 'critical moments' are also crucial 'critical moments' themselves, which can be recognize as a positive transition outcome. Thus being able to forgive and to assign a positive meaning to the past and to see it as a lesson for personal growth is a dazzling sign of approaching adulthood if not having reached it already.

A better understanding of China through understanding the US

People like to take home for granted and are most likely not to see it critically until they see the outside world. Meanwhile people also tend to see the outside world partially either in a positive way or a negative way. As having been living abroad for multiple years in a row, these young Chinese have been consciously or subconsciously comparing and judging the two different contexts.

After years of sojourn in the US, my participants have come to a better understanding of the societal and cultural differences between the US and China. Regarding an insight into why the US education focuses more on personality development while China's education is more of a stressful exam-oriented system and a rote learning style, many of them underlined the different conditions of demographic characteristics. Jenny had already sensed the fierce competition for the very limited educational resources in China since she was a little child in primary school, and she used the Chinese idiom 'more monks with less porridge' to describe the scarce educational resources per capita in China compared to that in the US, whereas Scot pointed out the issue of equity behind the limited educational resources.

As a very poor country back then, to ensure a fair competition, it could only draw such an admission line for students to enter a good university through Gaokao. Here in the US, they could get extra points through various extracurricular activities, which is also unfair to the relatively poor [American] people. I know that many American people would spend a lot of money to do the so-called poverty alleviation activities, and the activities themselves were very costly, but I was wondering why wouldn't they just directly donate those money to some poverty alleviation agencies... because they just wanted to add points in their resumes... In China, there is only one channel, the Gaokao... it ensures more equity, but there is much less pressure here in the US, otherwise I wouldn't come here. (Scot, male, 19 years old, upper-class background, from a metropolitan city in Southern China)

However, interestingly, Celia did not agree that China's education was purely a rote style and American education solely focuses on critical thinking and individualized development, and she even accused my interview question of making biased suggestive hints and criticized such view of being stereotypical. She said, 'every country's education system had its own problems… it was probably the culture that had made China's education so stressful'. American education had taught my participants to think critically from multiple perspectives. Being reflective and reflexive on Chinese education system after they had experienced the both, they had figured out that the societal and cultural condition was the root cause of the different education systems. Many previous studies of Chinese international students' motivations for going abroad touch upon the 'problem' of China's education but superficially revolve around the exam-oriented regime without digging deeper the reasons behind it (e.g., Tu, 2021; Ping et al., 2020; Chao et al., 2017). This study takes a closer examination at such 'problem' and has collected from my participants valuable understandings of the societal and cultural differences between the two countries that make China's education system look more 'problematic'.

Many participants intentionally or unintentionally positioned themselves in the transnational context between the US and China when sharing their understandings of the two countries and tried to figure out how their lives are related to the two contexts. Frey's consciousness of his gay identity had been active throughout the whole

interview. He kept spontaneously relating it to his reflections and reflexivities. And he had realized that the societal and cultural conditions were the reasons why gay life in China was restricted.

> I think [in China] bureaucratism is still a serious problem. Many policies can not be implemented. But we are the ones with vested interests, and most of the government's policies can not affect elite class and very privileged people like us… even if I think the over-all environment is not good, but there are still quite a lot of gay bars [in China] that I can visit, and I can even organize a private gay club myself. But there is no way those in underdeveloped regions, you know, those who have a lower social economic status can do it. They are the ones who are really affected by policies… It is precisely because of my study experience in the US that has made me less cynical... I can see China's development in a more rational, comprehensive and objective way, so as to better understand why [our government] leaders have formulated some policies that seem weird or even exasperating, but when I carefully thought about them again, I have found them understandable. (Frey, male, 20 years old, upper-middle-class background, from a capital city of Eastern China)

Being self-identified as a person who grew up in a traditional family and especially admired authority, Matt had come to a better understanding of China's paternalist system after a comparison with the US system and seen the positive relationship of himself with such system.

> The China's paternalistic governing is right to my taste, this system is more suitable for me, the US is not suitable for me. The US is so free and loose, they didn't lockdown the city during the epidemic outbreak, and the government did not care about anything. This is not good. It's easier for me to understand Chinese way of dealing with people than to understand the US way of dealing with people. For example, from a cultural perspective, I think the opportunities for me in China are definitely better than in the US. (Matt, male, 21 years old, middle-class background, from a capital city of Southwestern China)

Matt's narrative displayed his strong sense of cultural belonging to China and placed himself in the position of a beneficiary comparing the two countries' systems regarding his own interests.

Freedom in China V.S. freedom in the US

The stark difference between the US and China is not restricted at societal and cultural level. Since the two countries can almost represent two extremes in terms of political regime, Chinese international students' understandings of and opinions on the differences between the two countries in terms of freedom and political system are worthy of investigation.

In order to detect whether or not 'political freedom' is an issue that these students had paid attention to in the first place and to avoid making biased suggestive hints, the interview question was designed without mentioning any political term. When asked to compare the freedom they had enjoyed in China and in the US, a group of participants, including both girls and boys, centered around banal freedom in everyday life, such as freedom from parents' control, personal life not being interfered, freedom of dressing style without being judged, freedom to select courses at school, no freedom without a car in the US etc. When comparing the freedom in the two contexts, Levi felt lucky to be far away from his parents and to have come to the US for study and life.

> I didn't have much freedom in China. If I didn't come to the US when I was 14 and if I stayed in that international school [in China], my mother would definitely arrange all kinds of cram schools and extracurricular activities for my whole weekends... I would have to completely focus on study. But in the US, I can play computer games whenever I want, and I can hang out with my friends, and I can play soccer. If stayed in China, my mom would think it was a waste of time to do all these things. (Levi, male, 20 years old, upper-middle-class background, from a relatively peripheral city of Southern China)

In a following question, when these participants were asked about the non-banal freedom that is given by the state and government, most girls in the group either said they did not like to express anything political and extreme or said they were just not very interested in politics. Brie believed that argument on politics was pointless.

I feel quite free in both countries. After all, I didn't get into any trouble, and I wouldn't take part in any parades... I don't really talk gibberish on social media, because I think everyone has different opinions. I vented my opinions, then, apart from getting some people's endorsements, the rest are only disagreements. No matter what I say, there will always be different voices, so I don't care much about my [political] freedom of speech. (Brie, 20 years old, upper-middle-class background, from a relatively peripheral city of Eastern China)

Several others who talked about banal life at first did share some thoughts after being asked about political freedom. Emma's concern over her personal safety was the reason why she was cautious about expressing political opinions in both countries. And she was more cautious in the US because she thought some American students were very radical. Whereas Ria argued that free access to all kinds of information could even lead to more biased thinking.

I think the US is quite free, but when you return to the U.S. from another country, you would still be worried that they would check your phone, or they would not let you enter the border if you say anything wrong. But when you are inside the US, I think you are relatively free, but at the same time when receiving information, being free may get yourself trapped in the content you always want to read. Because it is so free that if you prefer a certain value of speeches, you may keep reading that aspect of the content, and then you would not have a very comprehensive understanding. (Ria, female, 22 years old, upper-middle-class background, from a capital city of Eastern China)

The bias in media consumption in Ria's critical opinion can be explained by the confirmation bias theory of psychology, which refers to a type of cognitive bias that involves favoring information that confirms one's previously existing beliefs or biases (American Psychological Association). Thoughts usually feed on media, in the process of which self-selection bias seems inevitable. The freedom of speech means various voices including the extreme ones are not silenced (despite the fact that many voices are also silenced in the US). Therefore, it is possible that individuals who support one political view would consume more related media that further support his/her biased belief in such political view.

Critical opinions on political freedom

Except the above-mentioned participants who were not very interested in politics, the majority rest directly started opining on political freedom, and in long monologues. Some of them hold critical stances against both countries. But most of them criticized the US more while hold a relatively positive view on China.

> My understanding of freedom is, how can I put it, freedom does not mean that I can do everything, but that there are some things that I cannot do under a framework, and the rest is freedom. For me, there is not much relative freedom in the US. For example, it is freedom for people to carry guns, and it is a happy thing for them. But for someone like me who doesn't have a gun, I would have to be worried about my own personal safety, that is to say, their freedom violates my freedom, but there is nothing I can do unless I join them, but I don't want to buy a gun myself… I will fully support your freedom, but the premise is that you don't affect others. Relatively speaking, I prefer the domestic environment in China. I wouldn't do anything illegal or undisciplined, so I feel equally free everywhere, within the framework of basic rules, whether it is moral or legal. (Filip, 26 years old, upper-middle-class background, from a relatively peripheral city of Northeastern China)

All participants of this group are fully aware that there is less political freedom in China than in the US. But they didn't think the US political system made a country better off. Josef argued that freedom was a very broad concept and different people had different pursuit of freedom.

> Americans and Westerners often like to talk about freedom of speech, freedom of religion and freedom of politics. In this regard, China is good most of the time. Okay, but we don't have the so-called 'right' to vote. We really don't. We only have grassroots election. We definitely can not directly determine who is the top leader of this country. This is undeniable, but if we see other aspects of freedom, then I think the basic freedom we Chinese have [in China] is very insured, and sometimes even better than Americans [in the US]. If I replace this 'freedom' with the term 'human rights', then at least all Chinese people now have basic national health insurance, but it is not the case in the US… take our efforts in fighting the epidemic for instance, we have effectively contained the covid-19,

while in the US, they indeed have the so-called freedom, and they can go out, but they would have to be mentally prepared for the risk of getting infected. If I were in New York now, I would not go out, but now in China my daily life has been restored back to normal… (Josef, male, 21 years old, middle-class background, from a capital city in Eastern China)

Some students simply didn't believe there was a perfect political system in the world. They were very realistic and pragmatic in seeing the two countries. Frey was very critical about both systems.

I think there is only pseudo freedom of speech in both countries. The pseudo freedom of speech in the US is that you can not say anything political incorrect. In China, you can not say anything bad about the government, you can not say any sensitive words, you can not produce gay-themed films. I even think the American dream and the Chinese dream are both fake dreams. American dream is just a trick used to deceive people of the bottom class telling them they will succeed as long as they work hard, but there is no way they can succeed, because many policies prevent them from succeeding... For example, the unequal [access to] educational resources... (Frey, male, 20 years old, upper-middle-class background, from a capital city of Eastern China)

Frey again related his gay identity to his opinions on political freedom. And since he happened to be the only gay participant in my study, a following question was proposed to ask his opinions on China's LGBT policy. And he again rationally started to analyze this issue from the perspective of societal and cultural condition, and thought the LGBT policy in China was 'OK for the current Chinese society because of a very large population base'

...LGBT is a very small group, and what China needs to solve now is to get rid of poverty. We still have to solve the basic problems first, for example, the education resource problem in rural areas of China, and we need to help them have clean water and nutritious food first, only until then can we privileged people enjoy our spiritual life. It would be even more difficult for you to be a gay in a countryside of Guizhou. You wouldn't even have enough nutritious food to eat, how could you think of your spiritual world? So I think China's current development focus should indeed be on infrastructure construction and poverty alleviation. Maybe 20 years later when all of our people are rich and more educated, and everyone is more tolerant of different groups, we can raise this proposal again, and by then

more Chinese people will understand this [homosexual] group, and everyone will be more willing to open up to discuss about it. (Frey, male, 20 years old, upper-middle-class background, from a capital city of Eastern China)

Instead of emotionally resenting the LGBT condition in today's China, Frey held a very critical, rational, pragmatic, empathetic, humanistic and holistic view on this issue, which also signals his personal growth in this transition to adulthood.

To Matt, who only utilized overseas study in the US as an instrumentalist investment for his future career in China, the US political system was a complete failure dwarfed by the Chinese system in terms of epidemic containment.

Freedom in the United States leads to absolute non-freedom. It is their freedom not to wear a mask, it is their freedom to go to the streets, it is their freedom to march. All these lead to absolute non-freedom. It's been a year, right? It's still like this in the US. In the beginning, Chinese government said no one was allowed to go out, and whoever went out would be arrested. After two months of strict lockdown, everything returned to normal. That is to say, absolute freedom will lead to absolute non-freedom, but in some cases absolute non-freedom will bring you greater freedom. China's lockdown was absolutely non-freedom, but its effect ultimately led to a greater freedom... (Matt, male, 21 years old, middle-class background, from a capital city of Southwestern China)

Most of my participants shared a lot and in detail about their thoughts on political freedom based on their personal experiences. Jacky rhetorically questioned the so-called 'freedom' in the US and the so called 'non-freedom' in China and even questioned the definition of freedom itself

I feel that how freedom is defined has not been settled yet. For example, if you go online in China, there is a 'wall', right? ... but you can 'climb the ladder' (using VPN to get access to those banned websites)... And some opinions can not be published on the internet, otherwise they will be deleted... In the US, this situation is better, you can say anything bad about the government, you can complain about the system...but in the US, they have their own sore spots and the so-called sensitive spots which can not be touched. In terms of political freedom in China, I think the difference of freedom under different systems does not give civilians a strong feeling in their daily life experience. I even think it is the social

structure of the entire East Asian cultural circle, which is very paternalistic, that make people habitually obey the system. No one would think, 'I'm not free, so I'm going to break this system'. In terms of feelings, we would not feel whether we are free or not… I haven't sensed the gap between the freedom & democracy in the US and the non-freedom & non-democracy in China. What exactly is the sensorial gap between the two? On the contrary, what has given me a more striking feeling is that under the circumstances of China's capitalist market economy, there are more choices economically. Your life is more enriched economically, and you have more choices in buying products, eating food and doing activities... From an economic point of view, does China have greater freedom? So this question is complicated. (Jacky, male, 21 years old, upper-middle-class background, from a capital city of Central China)

In Western societies, especially in the US, democracy, freedom and human right are frequently raised topics, therefore it is natural for researchers to be curious about opinions of Chinese international students from a so-called 'non-democratic' country on such issues since they have study and life experiences in both countries. Social learning theory posits that overseas experience can potentially change an individual's political attitudes, nevertheless, the effects of overseas experience on attitudes toward democracy require careful examination, since the experience of learning in an overseas country may be either positive or negative, and a negative experience might reduce an individual's support for democracy (Han & Chen, 2016: 750). For example, Chinese in the US may experience the 'dark side' of democracy, such as inequality, low voter turnout, and intensive partisan struggle (Han & Chen, 2016: 750). My participants indeed have been seriously and carefully thinking about these issues, and after constant comparisons between their lived experiences between the two regimes, they have made their own judgements. The monopolized definition of democracy, freedom and human right by the US and the West need to be questioned in the first place, as my participants said, national coverage of health insurance is one of the real human right, and freedom from danger and poverty is the basic and priority human freedom. The assumption of Chinese people, including Chinese youth, being brainwashed by Chinese government is prevailing in many Western narratives. Such narratives do not only betray a subconsciously racist accuse of Chinese people being so intelligently inferior that they are incapable of making their own judgements, but

also can serve as an attempt to stigmatize Chinese people for the purpose of justifying the discrimination against them since anyone who is believed to have no freedom can be considered as an inferior being, and inferior beings are easily subject to discrimination.

Sense of belonging and identity

While belonging and identity can be seen as part of the same 'family' of concepts, belonging enables a greater engagement with place and location and the structural and contextual facets of social life (Anthias, 2018). The concept of belonging has become an increasingly common framework to understand the impact of social change on young people's lives (Cuervo & Wyn, 2012; Tilleczek, 2010, as cited in Cuervo & Wyn, 2014: 903). A metaphor of belonging helps better focus on the nature and quality of social relationships (Cuervo & Wyn, 2014: 903). By visualizing the crucial aspects of social life, the metaphor of belonging contributes to a youth sociology that is able to more adequately 'see' youth as a social process (Wyn & White, 1997, as cited in Cuervo & Wyn, 2014: 903).

Researchers in social science have defined young people's belonging to place as 'place-belongingness', 'a personal, intimate, feeling of being "at home" in a place' (Antonsich, 2010: 645, as cited in Cuervo & Wyn, 2014: 906); where 'home is an on-going project entailing a sense of hope for the future' (Hage, 1997: 103, as cited in Cuervo & Wyn, 2014: 906). And a sense of belonging to a place is of particular explanatory value for making sense of identity formation of mobile youth. After having experienced international relocation and socialization in the host society for multiple years, most of my participants, including green card holders, however were still had a strong sense of Chinese identity.

My mom and I obtained the green card through an immigrant investor program about 7 years ago, and then I should be regarded as the first generation of

immigrants. But when I talked to those friends [of Chinese ethnic background] who were born and raised in the US, we still had some different opinions on and feelings for the US, not to mention the sense of belonging, I still think that China is my own country and the US is a place where I study and work... Because my family is in China, when I went back to China, I felt like I am home. And every time I went back to the United States, I felt that I had to start studying seriously or working again, that is, I feel that the feelings are different when I arrived in the two countries. (Ria, female, 22 years old, upper-middle-class background, from a capital city of Eastern China)

Many of my participants' sense of belonging seemed to be more related to their social relationships rather than to China as a place, as the relationships to people that matter to them is illuminated by the metaphor of belonging (Cuervo & Wyn, 2012). Meaningful, trusted ties and interactions with family, close friends, neighbours and other members of a community have the capacity to generate a sense of belonging for individuals and shape the decisions and choices they make (Cuervo & Wyn, 2014: 907). Thomson (2007) argues that belonging is about commonalities and differences with others, and about the social relationships that provide a life anchor, a sense of personal physical and symbolic location. In youth transition studies, relationship between youth and family has generally focused on transition away from the original family home and simplistic analysis of transmission of financial and cultural capital from one generation to another, but has been overlooked for its affluence on the formation of young people's identity and sense of belonging.

Young people's sense of belonging can be to multiple places (Cuervo & Wyn, 2014: 907). Some of my participants confided that they felt having a sense of belonging to both China and the US. However, Celia said she had no sense of belonging at all.

I didn't have a sense of belonging when I went back to China, nor did I have one when I returned to the US... I usually stayed for a very short time in China every time when I went back. Especially due to the pandemic, I haven't been back for two years, there are newly built metros, my city has been developing quite fast, there are many things that I haven't heard of for these two years, I feel like I am out of date... I feel every place is gloomy to me, I don't have a strong opinion [on anything], especially after I studied philosophy... (Celia, female, 23 years old,

upper-middle-class background, from a capital city of Northern China)

If we refer to the social hardships Celia had experienced in both China and the US and the way she reflected on them, it is not hard to understand why she felt no sense of belonging at all. Some scholars describe a sense of belonging to multiple places as a sense of ease with oneself and the different social contexts and spaces in which they live and interact (see Antonsich, 2010; May, 2013; Miller, 2009). However Celia's story reveals that a sense of belonging to nowhere also seems to be a sense of harmony with different social contexts.

As both an issue regarding identity and as an answer to the question raised in my Introduction Chapter 'are they migrants?', we can give voice to my participants themselves. Except Ria and Jimmy who considered themselves as immigrants for their green card possession, all the rest participants denied such immigrant identity and claimed their international student status.

> I haven't entered the immigration status yet, so I'm still a foreign national, and my future visa would be also working visa, and I would be just a worker, so there is no such saying that I have decided so early that I want to immigrate. Of course, If I want to stay here long-term, I will apply for a green car, by then I would be an immigrant. But at the present stage, I don't define myself as having become American or something like that, so I am still Chinese, and I am studying overseas here. (Dina, 22 years old, upper-middle-class background, from a capital city of Eastern China)

It is argued that today's mobile young people are actually practicing migration if taking into account the accumulation of previous mobility experiences being consumed and considering current phase as precursors to longer duration stays later in life (Cairns & Clemente, 2021: 1), but due to a lack of social integration, international students may remain mobile rather than become future migrants (Cairns, 2021a: 18). It seems convincing that international students may not become future migrants because of failed integration, however such theory can not make sense of all international students. As already cited in the previous chapter, Dina considered

staying in the 'Chinese circle' as merely a 'natural' choice while integration to local American society as unnecessary, so her non-migrant mobile identity is a voluntary choice rather than a response to lack of integration, and also a realistic understanding of her current period of overseas study.

Self-perception of youth transition to adulthood

Youth transition studies have long been neglecting young people's own conceptions of their transitions to adulthood, although Arnett (1997) had already raised such problem and had conducted an empirical study of young American's understanding of their own transitions more than two decades ago finding out that young American of that time conceptualize their transitions to adulthood in intangible, gradual, psychological and individualistic terms. Following Arnett's cause, I asked participants what kinds of young people could be considered as adults and whether they considered themselves as adults already. According to the findings, there are two almost equal groups. The slightly bigger group of participants believed they were adults already regardless of their economic dependence on their parents.

> I think I am an adult now, I think I can make my decision, so I make my decision well, and then I measure the feasibility of my decision...I don't think that economic independence is the standard for becoming adults, because whether a person is economically independent has nothing to do with whether he/she has enough knowledge of the world for making corresponding choices. (Elena, female, 20 years old, upper-middle-class background, from a capital city of Eastern China)

Elena argues that independence of being able to make one's own decision is the major standard to judge if one has become adult or not, and despised the stereotypical perception of economic independence as the criterion for reaching adulthood. In Haily's understanding, adulthood is a concept in opposition to childhood.

> I think I am an adult. I think adulthood is not a single definition of age, nor is it

defined by experience in the traditional sense. I think that as long as a person realizes that his/her childhood has become a past tense, then he/she is an adult, regardless of how young or how old he/she is, as long as he/she has this kind of concept of the past, a concept of separation from the past, I think he/she can be considered an adult. (Haily, female, 22 years old, upper-middle-class background, from a capital city of Eastern China)

Despite this group of participants' claims of their obtained adulthood is contestable from the perspective of youth transitions studies, their self-perception is of great value in analyzing their agency of negotiating the changing social contexts of which the structural constraints tend to fragmentize their transitions to adulthood. And the priority they gave to their personality independence over economic independence implies the important role of their spiritual and psychological growth in their transitions to adulthood.

As for the relatively smaller group of participants who didn't see themselves as adults, some particular aspects, especially in terms of economic dependence, were considered as the evidence of their youth transition phase.

I feel that I am an adult in some ways but not in some other ways. Legally yes, I have to bear legal responsibility as an adult. This is what I must accept as a member of society. Physiologically, I'm also an adult. But psychologically I am not, I don't know enough about many aspects of the society and I'm not psychologically prepared yet. If I started working, had some assets and full access to society, then I would be considered an adult. Economically, I'm not an adult, either. I think financial independence is one of the necessary conditions for becoming an adult. (Tony, male, 21 years old, upper-middle-class background, from a capital city in Eastern China)

Many of my participants like Tony broke the quality of adulthood down into several sub-qualities in legal terms, physiological terms, psychological terms and economic terms, and claimed their partial adulthood and partial youth transitory stage. They believed adulthood could be not fully attained without having obtained all those sub-qualities.

Florian was one of the youngest participants in my study, but he seemed to be more aware of the concept of adulthood and what it means to be an adult.

> Becoming adults should be counted from the beginning of entering society, they need to work to support themselves, or have certain responsibilities to themselves and their families; marriage is also counted as [having become] an adult bearing responsibility to the small family and the other half. University should be regarded as a transitional period between an ivory tower and society. I feel that I have not fully finished my transitions yet, so I still call myself a 'college student' rather than an 'adult'. (Florian, 19 years old, upper-middle-class background, from a capital city of Northeastern China)

Although Florian did not mention economic dependence, he listed a number of qualities like self-sustenance, contribution to society and responsibilities that an adult should shoulder. The participants across the two groups all underscored personality independence, which was usually acquired through spiritual and psychological growth, over other specific transition markers as the most important characteristic to enter adulthood. So it seems there is a decoupling between how youth transitions scholars see young people and how young people see themselves. Although transition landmarks like entry into labor market, housing independence and marriage are still important conceptual tools to investigate the relationships between structural constraints and youth agency, young people's own perception of their transitions matters to the extent that their transition process preceding to their transition outcomes are given equal attentions. Thus youth transitions studies are anticipated to give more voice to young people themselves and give more attention to youth transition processes.

Summary

Being reflective and reflexive on mobile experiences, my participants shared their personal development in terms of expanded horizon and acquired critical thinking ability, emotional, spiritual and psychological growth, self-awareness and

self-perceptions, and social rewards in terms of accumulated social connections with other Chinese international students, but barely talked about their academic achievements. In addition, they had developed a more profound understanding of the US and China and in relation to themselves.

All these reflections and reflexivities unrelated to their study reveals that in their hearts the social experiences of international mobility, especially those impressive 'critical moments' (Thomson et al., 2002), were considered as more valuable than their academic gains. As moments which emerged as critical were not necessarily always aspects related to the classic thresholds or markers in youth transitions studies (obtaining a job, concluding education, leaving the parents' house, eventually forming a couple, and becoming parents) but events more related to the private (Cuzzocrea, 2018: 674), in the case of my participants, the social hardships they had encountered. And it was these 'critical moments' that had made them 'grow up faster'. The double social changes from home culture to the host culture and from the past to the future through international mobility seems like a 'stimulus' and a 'facilitator' that had not only enriched my participants' horizons and understandings of both societies, but also intensified and accelerated in a way their personal growth in various aspects. And all these reflections and reflexivities can serve as precious resources for them to project their future.

Chapter 9 Imagining and Projecting Future Mobility

Introduction

A biographical narrative does not necessarily end until the present, but can extend further to one's future. In response to the question of 'future plans', my participants' first reaction was to make a wish, a prediction, an assumption or an imagination for their orientation to the 'turning points' (Abbott, 2001; Crow & Lyon, 2011) which were the critical transition nodes of events, i.e., transition to a postgraduate study program or to a job position, in a certain place, since 'one cannot imagine the future without place' (Prince, 2014: 700). The essence of what brainpower got us is planning, and planning depends on imagination together with the drive for survival (Reuland, 2010: S99). When my participants were sketching out their future plans, they were planning to actualize an imagined biographical future, that had been estimated to be feasible or at least possible within their capabilities, in a certain place. The idea of 'turning point' has been treated as a key concept for analyzing narratives of the self, revealing 'a certain hard-headed realism about the prospects for achieving ideal outcomes' (Crow & Lyon, 2011: 18). Since my participants, being already mobile, were all approaching their next 'turning points', among whom some senior students were already confronting or were supposed to confront their next transition phase, delving into their plans for their near-future 'turning points' will provide an insight into how their post-diploma imaginations shape their transition processes and transition outcomes in a way they desire.

Except a few of my participants who did not explicitly articulate a place in their imaginations of planning only because they intended to stay in the US and considered staying in the US as a choice by default, all the rest indicated a place or places where they would like to make their transitions to employment. Mobility is imagined in

association with places where, presumably, a plan (however broadly it is defined) is thought to occur, and expressing the intention to move implies first-hand consideration of where the best place to move is to realize one's ambitions and life plans (Cuzzocrea & Mandich, 2016: 557). Imagining mobility enables young people, as it allows them to experiment with possible paths in their transition to adulthood and to explore spaces with different possibilities (Cuzzocrea & Mandich, 2016: 563), and to assume and predict possible hinders and facilitators to reach such possibilities. By imagining a possible future, young people express identity and subjectivity, and this expression helps them to discursively position themselves within society (Cuzzocrea & Mandich, 2016: 563). And by imagining a future mobility in a transition period, young people have a chance to explore their predispositions and understand what they really want to become in life. The transition period of international undergraduate students is a critical and important juncture of their lives, because they not only directly face the decision of whether to return or to stay or to move on within a limited time of legal stay in the host countries, but also constantly negotiate their transition to the next status—an employment or a postgraduate study.

This chapter delineates the narratives of my participants' future plans and mobility intentions. A minority group expressed their wish for staying in the US for a postgraduate study, a long-term career, or a career after they finished postgraduate study, although some of them were open to the possibilities of moving on to a third country or returning to China. A majority group preferred returning to China, either right after obtaining their BA degree or eventually after having finished their further postgraduate studies or after having gathered some work experiences abroad. Among the rest, a majority were undecided, while several others desired to move on and one wanted to straddle transnationally between China and the US or the UK. Due to the incomparable numbers between these groups, I combine the 'stay in the US' group with those who aspired to move on and the one who wanted to maintain transnational into one group of 'maintaining mobile status quo'.

Return mobility to China

China has witnessed a rapid increase in the number of student sojourners returning in recent years (Ministry of Education, 2020b). This return flow is encouraged by the thriving economy, improved employment opportunities, and a more liberalized polity and lifestyle (Tharenou & Seet, 2014; Wen, 2012; Wen et al., 2014; Zweig, 2006). In the years spanning from 2016 to 2019, the total number of Chinese returnees is 2.01 million, 80% of 2.51 million outbound Chinese students (Ministry of Education, 2020b). The growing international economic and political influence of China has contributed to the return mobility of Western-educated Chinese students. It is the first time in recent Chinese migration history that 'home' is no longer a significantly less developed place with fewer career promises (Li et al., 2019).

Identical to Ma's (2020) findings, the majority of my participants also preferred or were already planning on return to China. Apart from career opportunities, intellectual capital transferability, family ties, sense of belonging, contextual and structural constraints in the host country are also factors that motivate Chinese international students to return. Matt once considered accumulating some work experiences in the US after graduation before going back to China.

> At the beginning, I was thinking if I would want to stay in the US to work for a period of time before going back to China or not, but then the US had completely failed in containing the epidemic, so I had decided to go back to China as soon as I graduate, there is no point of staying in the US [to collect work experiences]... (Matt, male, 21 years old, middle-class background, from a capital city of Southwestern China)

Many Chinese international students choose temporary stay in the US upon graduation to take advantage of the available OPT program to collect work experiences with a pragmatic return plan. Matt used to choose this path, too. However, America's failure in containing the Covid-19 epidemic had accelerated his return mobility plan. When asked in a following question of why he wanted to go back to

China eventually, he emphasized his parents' wish, his own filial piety, and the social & economic calculation of his career development in China compared to that of his imagined future in the US.

> My parents also want me to go back... if I stay in the US, and if something happens to them, there would be no way for me to take care of them. I don't want anything to happen to them, so if I stay in China, I would be able to take care of them. And it's better to go back to China. I know the living situation of Asians in the US very well. Asian Americans are not mainstream citizens, even though they are a model minority... but I am among the mainstream after I return to China... My parents' work experience in China will be very useful to me, but if I work in the US, they would not be able to help me. I don't mean their social connections, I am referring to their professional experiences and suggestions. My cultural background is different from the US workplace, the space for my career growth would be limited in the US, I think my career development in China will be better than in the US. And the development of China is good in the long-term, so I definitely want to return to China, and I don't even need to hesitate about it. (Matt, male, 21 years old, middle-class background, from a capital city of Southwestern China)

Besides economic rationality corresponding to his instrumental motivation for overseas study, Matt's well-calculated decision of return mobility also involves multiple delicate considerations over ethics, Confucian morality, and social conditions. Similar to Matt, Josef also had a very clear and even more detailed step-by-step plan for his future back in China. And starting a business of his own is the major reason why he decided to eventually go back to China.

> My current plan is to find a job in the US after graduation and work for two years first, then I will do a master's degree program, I will see if I would like to work for another two years in the US after getting my master's degree...but my final plan is definitely to return to China, my ultimate aim is to develop my career in China... because my goal is to start my own business in the future. I said that I wanted to work for a few years first, that's because I want to learn from the US market. Because the US market is more mature, and I am curious what development trends in the US are worth learning from and what areas the leading Chinese companies have not set foot in yet, and I hope to find out these trends and areas. And when I am working, I could learn about the companies' management models in the US as well, and I will see if these experiences and knowledge could be used to make some improvements and to do something that

is more suitable when I am starting my own business in the future. I think the domestic market development in China is relatively more promising compared with the US. Because our market economy is still not very mature, and many industries are still in a relatively early stage. So I think in the future I will have an advantage to start a business in China than in the US. (Josef, male, 21 years old, middle-class background, from a capital city in Eastern China)

In migration literature, some scholars have observed that enrichment in terms of human capital acquired through informal learning on and off the job abroad can make return migrants innovative pioneers who are able to create entrepreneurial opportunities in niches of the market for self-employment and business formation (Hagan & Wassink 2016, 514). Whereas Josef as an international student had already developed an entrepreneurial spirit while he was still receiving formal higher education abroad, and his return mobility plan was the means to achieve such entrepreneurship. This is another trait of international students that makes them different from migrants. In the case of Josef, moreover, it is difficult to discern whether his entrepreneurial aspiration was the result of the influence of his overseas experiences or of his parents who run a company together. And it is even possible that he had already seeded his entrepreneurial spirit before his relocation to the US at the very beginning, since he had also imagined his ideal family formation in the future, 'if my future wife and I are also entrepreneur partners like my parents, it would be perfect.'

Among Matt and Josef's narratives, the theme 'gather work experiences in the US' was recurrent. They perceived work experiences abroad as important human capital for their future career in China. Educated and upper-middle-class international students 'tend to see their engagements with the labor market as more than "jobs", that is, more than simply economic activity that generates income' (Robertson, 2021: 92). Rather, they expect to enter a 'niche' that fit their skills and interests after finishing formal education and training. The concept of a career as the normative outcome of engagements with the labor market is closely tied to middle-class identities and particularly to transitions to middle-class adulthood (Arnett, 2001;

Valentine, 2003). Many students highly valued the contribution of work experiences in the US or abroad to their future career development back in China. Given the increasing 'credential inflation' in China in recent years (Waters, 2005: 366) and underemployment of returnees and devaluing of Western degrees in the local Chinese job market (Waters, 2006; Hao & Welch, 2012; Yu, 2016a; Tu, 2018), overseas post-study work experiences has been valued as an edge for competition in China's domestic labor market. Meanwhile, accumulating work experiences abroad can also serve as a strategic cushion for those who are not completely settled with the idea of staying for long-term or return before they make a final decision. As pointed out by Haily, 'everyone would consider collecting some work experiences in the US first, then decides whether staying permanently or going back. It's giving yourself more choices. If you go back to China as soon as graduation, you are basically not coming back [to the US], moreover, your resume would not be very convincing if you go back to China without any overseas work experiences.'

Weighing the advantages and disadvantages between staying in the US and going back to China is a very common strategy to try to figure out a decision, especially for those who are student-visa holders. However, as a green card holder, Scott also preferred returning to China.

> I came to the US after we obtained our green cards...but at present we don't have any intention of acquiring American citizenship... My next plan is to find a job and work in the US for several years, then I might go back to China, I should be going back. But I want to work in the US for several years and learn something first, maybe I will study a Master's program, then I will see... I have also considered that there is a glass ceiling for Asians in the US, and it is also because the US as a hegemonic country is declining. And I can also tell that the US society is becoming more and more divided, and people's life are getting worse and worse. I think China will surpass the US economically, and there may be more [job] opportunities, but it is difficult to say for now, I think it will be evaluated after a few years. (Scott, male, 19 years old, upper-class background, from a metropolitan city in Southern China)

The possession of a green card entails absolute advantages in free access to American

social welfare and labor market, compared to student-visa holders of most other Chinese international students and most international students from around the world. However, Scott had formed a preliminary preference for return mobility based on a careful evaluation on the contextual and institutional constraints in the US versus opportunities in China from a developmental perspective. And it is worth noting that Scott is not the only green card holder in my study who preferred ultimately going back to China.

> Actually, I still want to go back to China and develop my career there. I don't really want to stay in the US. I've been living in the US for 7 years, I have stayed here longer than most other Chinese students, and I also have a green card. I used to plan to stay here. Of course, if I can find a job here after graduation, then I would work here for a few years before returning to China, but basically I still plan to return to China... Well, I can't get any support from my parents in all aspects if I stay here. Whereas I can rely on my parents to find a job in China, and I can spend their money, and I don't need to look for a job or rent a house by myself. In China I can live in my parents' house, and my parents will find me a job... I also think as an Asian, it is difficult [in the US]. (Angela, female, 21 years old, upper-middle-class background, from a capital city of Northern China)

Ann straightforwardly confided her thought of relying on her parents for her future transition-making and compared an imagined future of an easy life 'provided' by her parents in China and a foreseen future of a hard life in the US all by herself. A worry of contextual and structural constraint can be detected from her narrative, although she only mentioned lightly her Asian ethnicity background as one of the reasons of her return plan without continuing sharing more of her opinions on racism in the US. It is hard not to relate her unwillingness of staying to her unpleasant experiences of being excluded from the leading role casting in her high school drama performance and possibly many other unhappiness alike. As mentioned in Chapter 6, it is the lived past that has made young people what they are of today, Angela's lived experiences possibly had an enormous impact on her consideration of future mobility. She had a green card that many other international students from all around the world dream of, but it did not make a difference to her imagination of her difficult future in the US nor

affected her inclination towards returning to China. And if we take a more holistic perspective to see her whole international mobility experience starting from the beginning. Her preference for return to China corresponds to her original non-instrumental motivation for mobility to the US, that is for a better social environment rather than a better economic opportunity. If the attainment of a US green card can be considered as immigration status successfully achieved, then to Scott and Angela, immigration to the US was not an end but a means to ensure a believed better social condition in which they can have a 'better' transition process. And from psychological perspective, people tend to be more eager to pursue something they don't have. Scott and Angela did not have the need to acquire American permanent residency like many other international students since they already had it, which made their choice of stay or return free from the influence of psychological desire.

For those who planned to move on to a third country for a postgraduate course before final return to China, reasons range from further accumulation of human capital in an more efficient way (for example, to the UK for a Master's program which costs only one year of time), US' failure of containing epidemic, to unpleasant social life in the US. Clark was in his 4th year of study and had already applied for a Master's program in the UK. His dissatisfaction of his social life in the US was the major drive for him to leave.

> My provisional plan for my future after graduation from the Master's program is to go back to China for work or to do an internship in the UK... I would like to accumulate some work experiences [abroad] first, my long-term goal is to go back to China... During the past 4 years of my stay in the US I didn't feel very pleasant in terms of interpersonal communication with Americans. I just want to change an environment and experience a bit [in the UK]... Changing an environment is the major reason, I don't like American culture and the feelings that American people gave me. (Clark, male, 22 years old, upper-middle-class background, from a capital city in Northern China)

In a contrast to Clark's non-instrumental motive of overseas study in the US for

exploration, this time his motivation for moving on for a postgraduate included both non-instrumental reason and instrumental concern. His emphasis of changing an environment shows that his motive of moving on to the UK was to try a new social environment. However, since future post-graduate study would be closer to education-to-work transition, he was also bearing in mind that accumulating more human capital through this postgraduate study was equally important. Thus his moving on at this phase was for both a 'better' transition process and a 'better' transition outcome.

Mobility action or planning of students like Clark who were graduating in their final year of undergraduate study can be classified into the category of 'post-diploma mobility' (Cairns, 2014: 20). Post-diploma mobility refers to transnational movement made after the completion of an initial undergraduate degree program, typically a course completed in one's country of residence (Cairns, 2014: 20). Mobility at this stage needs to be distinguished from the preceding stage of diploma mobility, because students at this stage have different needs and a different range of possibilities to choose from since there is a pressing need to invest and accumulate upon the academic capital gained from the successful completion of a first-degree program, which means that the choice to be made will be much more specific than was the case for diploma mobility decision-making (Cairns, 2014: 20-21). The possible choices of post-diploma movement involves undertaking a postgraduate study or training course, or entering the labor market via a job corresponding to qualification and skill level (Cairns, 2014: 21). An imminent graduate may have a rude awakening when approaching post-diploma decision-making time (Cairns, 2014: 21). But my participants seem to have developed such idea of moving on at an earlier time and have carefully thought about it. It seems to be a discreet move for those among my participants who had chosen the UK as their next stop considering the English language and easier study program connections between a US and a UK university which best possibly ensured a smooth transition from an undergraduate study to a postgraduate one.

Undecided between staying, returning and moving on

In the context of both micro-level personal life transitions and constant macro-level socio-economic changes in host/home and third countries (e.g., global redistribution of employment opportunities) (Wingens et al., 2011), Chinese international students in the twenty-first century are faced with a more complex process in terms of capital accumulation and conversion at a transnational level, which in turn shape the outcome of their next mobility decisions (Tu & Nehring, 2020: 44).

The post-2008 wave of international students from China face a different local and transnational context to carry out their next mobility strategy after concluding international education (Fong, 2011; Li et al., 2019). International education is no longer a guarantor of success in today's China as a much more complex and highly competitive society (Hao et al., 2016: 35). The reform of Chinese higher education and its internationalization has also increased local graduates' quality, competitiveness and employability (Hao et al., 2016: 35). Re-adaptation to Chinese culture and wisdom, which do not stand still but rather keeps evolving (Hao et al., 2016: 35), is another challenge that needs to be taken into consideration. Bonds to home, a comparison of academic or economic opportunities between all possible choices, lifestyle preference, constraints in host countries, all compete with each other in swaying Chinese international students between potential destinations.

Being undecided does not necessarily mean being unprepared, but rather being pragmatic. Changing and resetting plans and goals in the course of transition to adulthood is a common characteristic among many young people. Goal changes are usually made based on previous experiences, present knowledge and estimation of the future. Haily has enough living experiences in the US, and is still obtaining knowledge of the present US and China and is flexibly responding to the changing

situations when it comes to her future im/mobility.

> I think my goal has been changing all the time. I thought I must stay here before, but later I thought it would be nice to go back to China... now I think both sides are pretty good. To be honest, after staying for a long time...I feel that each country has its own advantages and disadvantages... You have to really get to know it through a period of time, I think when you settled down, [you would realize] life is just like that, it's the media that like to blow things up out of all proportion. Now I think it's not bad to go back to China... I think it largely depends on what you want to do. Many people now think that there are many opportunities in China... if you are in the US, first of all, your visa issue is a potential barrier, and then it is your [Asian] background. In many cases you are less competitive than others, while in China you don't need to endure such pressure in all aspects or to even think about it. You may like it here and you want to stay here, but you may not be able to successfully stay here. There are a lot of opportunities and possibilities in China, so to me both sides are OK. (Haily, 22 years old, upper-middle-class background, from a capital city of Southern China)

Haily is in the final year of her program now, but she was still undecided about her next move. She was so calm with her future by taking into consideration various aspects including contextual and structural constraints in the US and opportunities in China, and kept their options open for both countries. Elena was in her gap year in her third academic year back in China due to the pandemic. She also considered the institutional constraints of visa policy as one of the important factors for her future pragmatic choice, although she was reluctant to predict her decision that she thought should be made several years later.

> I would like to work in the US, but it depends on the visa policy... Currently I don't have any strong preference, now I think both choices are okay. I really think it's a choice that I would make at my age of 25 or 27, not something that I can decide when I am 20. I cannot use my 20-year-old outlook on life to guess what I would think at my age of 25... Cities are very important to me. If I like the atmosphere of a city, I would definitely go to that city, and then it also depends on the cost and concerns. (Elena, female, 20 years old, upper-middle-class background, from a capital city of Eastern China)

Elena was very sensitive to her temporal self and was reluctant to make in advance

any decision that she believed to be made years later since her 25 or 27 years of lived past would give her more and different perspectives than the ones she could have collected from her 20 years of life experiences. Reiter (2003: 273) argues that young people 'are not able to survey past and future in the sense of an assessment of possibilities, chances and consequences of actions. They act and react in a limited sphere of pragmatic relevance and within a foreshortened horizon'. Brannen and Nilsen (2002: 517) argue that youth are particularly likely to experience what Nowotny (2018) calls an 'extended present'; here, 'time is perceived as accelerated, the future is enveloped by 'the here and now' and thereby 'loses its meaning, in the sense that people are unable to think about the long much less plan for it'. These arguments assume young people deal with their life courses with a passive attitude lack of agency. Although 'I don't want to plan for my future' could mean 'I can not plan for my future', it could also be interpreted as an active and flexible tactic to cope with one's future. To believe the present temporalities are of little or no reference value to the future is in a sense to 'build a future project to be replaced by a constant adaptation to the present in order to promptly turn chances into opportunities' (Isabella & Mandich, 2004: 56).

A trend formed by the thoughts of peers around can also influence one's imagination of his/her future. After three years of stay in the US, Jacky felt that his overall plan was actually not getting clearer, but more uncertain and more vague. He also holds a very pragmatic and open attitude towards his future choice.

> I don't have any preference now, it depends on which opportunity is better when the time comes. From the present point of view, I am not very optimistic about my future plans for staying in the US. I think the probability of my staying in the US is decreasing. In the last two years, everyone had a growing sense that the opportunities in the US might not be as good as the ones in China, and that life in the US was not the kind of life you wanted, and it was not what you expected at the beginning. Especially in the last two years, it has given everyone an impression that China is getting better and better, and more and more Chinese international students who used to firmly say at the beginning that they would definitely stay in the US or abroad are gradually accepting the choice of returning

to China. It is what I have observed around. Everyone has this kind of consideration. (Jacky, male, 21 years old, upper-middle-class background, from a capital city of Central China)

In the transnational social field, where international students are caught between old and new 'reference groups' (Tu, 2017) in both China and the US, traditional certainty and security are gradually replaced by the constant readjustment of mobility goals. Facing a declining America and a rising China, Jacky was being influenced by the return intentions of a growing number of other Chinese international students around him. Being reflective and reflexive on his life in the US, Jacky was hesitated about his future mobility in a realistic way.

Contrasting Jacky who had carefully processed his future possibility of stay or return, Adam, currently in his 2nd year of undergraduate study, had no clue about staying or returning at all, but at the time of interview he expressed his wish to travel around the world and seeing beautiful sceneries.

I actually don't know. If you ask me now, I don't know at all. Even if I am asked whether I like the US [more] or China [more], I don't know. If I choose to study a master's program in Sports Management, I would have more choices. If I study Mathematical Finance, then I would not be able to stay in the US, I would have to go back to China, that's it... [If I study Mathematical Finance] the competition [to find a job in the US] would be too fierce , so I think I would not be able to successfully stay in the US... I am studying Sports Management because I was influenced by American [sports] culture and because I want to work with NBA or NFL... I can only go one step at a time... I like traveling very much. It's a very wonderful thing to see different beautiful natural sceneries. There are many differences in every place in this world, so I just want to see them... I just feel it is good to be alive when I see beautiful sceneries. (Adam, male, 19 years old, upper-middle-class background, from a capital city of Northern China)

In Adam's narrative, the assumed impact of the choice of major on the possibility of staying in the US is identified. Sometimes, the choice of stay or return can be an 'independent variable' affecting the choice of which major to claim as a 'dependent variable'. The decision of stay or return is supposed to be a result influenced by other

structural and institutional factors as well as personal concerns, but Adam saw the relationship between them the other way around, so did Emma.

> Regarding whether returning to China or not, I haven't made up my mind. I'm still struggling whether I will study pharmacology or medicine in the future. Basically, if I study medicine I can only stay in the US. If I study pharmacology and then I can go back to China, but I would only be able to work in international hospitals, like the ones in Shanghai, so it's still quite a dilemma. Maybe I will choose medicine. (Emma, female, 20 years old, upper-middle-class background, from a capital city of Central-East China)

The decisions which individuals make in the present have a pivotal impact on the future of the individual himself/herself and on the structure of future society (Cuzzocrea, 2018: 676). Whether or not to return not only depends on how the structural and social conditions are evaluated for building a career, but also will have an impact on future demographics (Cuzzocrea, 2018: 676). It has been suggested that the future takes different shapes if we approach it from the standpoint of the present, that is, as 'present future' or from the standpoint of the future, that is, as 'future present' (Adam & Groves, 2007: 28). In this sense, the imagination of the future shapes not only the future, but also the present (Cuzzocrea, 2018: 676). Emma's dilemma is exactly a vacillation of a 'future present' self-reflexivity.

As already mentioned in my Chapter 1 Introduction, after having lived in the US for 7 years, Grace had come to realize that the US was not a good place for her spiritual well-being, so she was very certain that she would not stay in the US.

> I think I don't want to see myself in this place in the future... I think there are many things about this country that I don't agree with... I think many people in the US are very selfish. Moreover, the whole environment gives me a feeling that, its cultural deposits are quite poor... I really feel that the US can not meet the spiritual needs of my desired life at all... They are too capital-oriented and too utilitarian... I can return to China in the future, and I want to work in sports industry in China. China's sports industry is still in its start-up stage. I think I can make some changes to [Chinese people's] sense of social participation in sports. But in the US, there is very little that I can do. Or if there is a chance in the future,

> I can go to some European countries, because I have always been very attracted to the football industries in the UK and in Spain... (Grace, 21 years old, upper-middle-class background, from a capital city of Northern China)

As for the next destination, her relationship with her Chinese-British mixed boyfriend interwove with her career expectation in their future mobility direction.

> My boyfriend's mother is in China running her own company, he could go back to China, but he thinks it would be better to accumulate more experiences [abroad], so we definitely will have to discuss about our common plan. And his family is currently applying for British citizenship, if we seriously make our relationship committed for long-term, we can go there, too. (Grace, 21 years old, upper-middle-class background, from a capital city of Northern China)

'Relationships unfolded alongside and became intertwined with im/mobility in complex ways', affecting young mobile people's decision-making on 'when to move, when to stay and how to structure their relationships and their obligations to partners and families across transnational space' (Robertson, 2021: 148). Grace treasured her relationship with her boyfriend who shared the same value of and attitude towards intimate relationship. Their relationship timings and timelines thus affected their mobility decisions.

Preference for staying in the US, for staying mobile, or staying transnationally

When international students approach graduation, their high level of human capital and lack of social and cultural capitals in the US altogether make their capital highly transferable, which provides immediate returns upon graduation with little cost, thus, before graduation, students' return intentions are the highest throughout the transition period (Yu, 2016b: 105). Yet, short of social and cultural capitals in the host country does not impede some other international students, who have already developed a predisposition to stay for a different life style, economic gain, or political concerns or

all these factors combined, from imagining their future temporalities of life and work based on their experience of the past and the ongoing present.

Among all the participants, those who expressed their preference for staying in the US were a minority group. A number of push and pull factors were the reasons of their willingness to stay. One push factor was China's political regime, although only two participants mentioned it as one of the multiple reasons. As reported in the previous chapter, study abroad experience had made Frey less cynical and more understanding of China's governing policies, however, when it comes to the choice of where to settle for his life, his gay identity and his future career expectancy played a vital role in his preference for staying in the US or moving on to the Netherlands as a backup choice.

> I definitely will not go back to China if I had choices... I don't want to live with so many gossips and contempt [in Chinese society], I just want to live happily with my [future] boyfriend... and I think the research environment in the US is much better than in China. I wanted to do a research project on sexuality with a Chinese university before, but it was not allowed, because they thought it would be not allowed for publication [in China]... I just feel that the environment in China is not good, all kinds of environments, like research environment and political environment. (Frey, male, 20 years old, upper-middle-class background, from a capital city of Eastern China)

It seems contradictory that Frey accepted the way how Chinese government managed the country but did not want to live there in the future, despite that at the time of interview he was back in China due to the pandemic. But it at least reveals that he believed his choice of a social environment did not need to be validated by a certain political system. Coincidentally and interestingly, Yuri also endorsed Chinese political regime in her earlier narrative, 'China is surely doing the right thing in figuring out its own political way for developing the country instead of copying the US political system', nevertheless, like Frey, she also wanted to avoid living under China' political regime. Apart from dislike of political environment in China, freedom from parents and a standardized sequencing of transition to adulthood and freedom of personal lifestyle choices are the other two major reasons of her desire to stay abroad.

One point that I am very clear is that I don't want to go back to China. I want to stay in the US or consider going to Japan... Going back to China would be the easiest path. My parents can help me find a job and randomly 'insert' me into a job position somewhere. As long as I have money and a house, I wouldn't mind. But I am very psychologically resistant to going back. I still prefer staying abroad, either in the US or Japan... For one thing, I don't really want to stay too [geographically] close to my parents, for another, I have got used to my 'wild' life outside [abroad], additionally like I just said I don't really like the public opinion environment and political environment in China. I don't think they are suited for me, and I probably would not be able to live up with it.... And in China there is a 'mainstream' thing under a kind of group social pressure on personal freedom, but here, especially in New York, there are a lot of mavericks... there is much more freedom for personal lifestyle choices here. (Yuri, female, 21 years old, upper-middle-class background, from a coastal city of Northeastern China)

Seeking out or maintaining alternative life-paths to replace a traditional or prearranged pattern of normative and linear life-scripts is an important part of aspiration of leaving and of staying away. It has been argued that transnational youth mobility can be understood as a means of managing precarity and uncertainty (Marcu, 2017: 2). But it is equally important to simultaneously understand how transnational mobility can manifest through a desire for temporal uncertainty (Robertson, 2021: 73). Yuri preferred to keep her mobile state far away from home for an uncertain future abroad where she would enjoy more freedom brought by the uncertainty.

Yuri was in a distant relationship with a Chinese international student in Japan who was not very interested in coming to the US for life. And she was not even sure if she would compromise with her boyfriend over the place where she would like to stay, since she was not very interested in Japan either. Moreover, after years of life in the US, she had adopted a Western attitude towards relationship, which was the opposite of her boyfriend's.

Maybe it's because I have a mind for liberal life, I don't really want to get married and I am especially against having a baby... I have seen a lot here, you don't have to establish a legal marriage relationship, you can just be together in a

long-term partnership... But he is very orthodox and wants to get married and has a baby... This is a potential conflict between us, so if we want to maintain our relationship, one of us has to compromise. (Yuri, female, 21 years old, upper-middle-class background, from a coastal city of Northeastern China)

The lived and imagined timelines and timings of intimate partnerships were highly significant to defining, structuring and in different contexts both enabling and constraining young people's mobilities (Robertson, 2021: 148). To Yuri who prized her liberal style of life above a standardized sequencing of domestic transition to adulthood, her intimate relationship would not necessarily affect their decision on future im/mobility direction, rather it could be the other way around. Yuri's non-normative value of intimate relationship and their actual practice of such value was 'a rupture from a normative life sequence — a rupture made possible by her distance from families and peers' (Robertson, 2021: 154). The same goes with Cathy who shared a similar attitude toward intimate relationship, 'I don't want marriage, there must be many people who also like to cohabit without wedlock... so marriage is not necessary and cohabitation does not need to be life-term committed'. Casual dating or living with a partner before marriage or even without expecting marriage at all became possible and could be explored by being mobile away from home. In this sense, to some young people, romantic relationship formations are not 'central to their narratives of movement through time and their embodied experience of time' (Robertson, 2021: 148). Unlike Grace whose future mobility was influenced by her relationship with her boyfriend with whom she shared the same values, Yuri and Cathy's romantic relationship could be subject to their geographical mobility trajectories or geographical mobility plans rather than the other way around. Yuri and Cathy's narratives underline the fact that today's young upper-middle-class Chinese women are caught between opposing models of the feminine life script. On one hand, the still-dominant gendered life stage model is characterized by fairly rigid chronological markers of appropriate activities and states for each phase and directs women towards a family-focused identity by age thirty (Martin, 2018: 700). On the other hand, an alternative, emergent and increasingly alluring life script is

characterized by flexibility of timing in life transitions, self-development rather than family-focus as the central value, the de-linking of sexuality from marriage, and a greater diversity of life pathways for adult women (Martin, 2018: 700). International mobility in the name of education seems for some female Chinese international students to represent a step towards living out an alternative: delaying or derailing a standard life course, and elaborating new forms of gendered youth identity (Martin, 2018: 700).

Detaching from the traditional lifestyle and seeking an alternative abroad is not limited to the desire of some female international students. Some male participants in my study also imagined a lovely future in the US based on their past experiences of and present sensitivities to a more relaxed and more free lifestyle there.

> I will do a Master's program, then I hope to find a job in the US, because I don't want to go back to China immediately, I feel life in the US is more free... I feel like having a long-term touristic trip by studying in the US, life here is quite comfortable, I don't feel much life pressure, I don't have to make money to support myself, all I need to do is to ask parents for money. Maybe it will be different after I start working, but my current state of mind is to prefer staying in the US. (Yanny, male, 19 years old, upper-class background, from a major city in Eastern China)

Yanny was cognizant of his early stage in undergraduate study and his economic reliance on his parents while he was enjoying the 'long-term touristic trip' in the US. His plan on a postgraduate study and his current emotional preference for a free life in the US indicated that he subconsciously wanted to make full use of his youth temporalities to experiment more. As more young people like Yanny move into further education in the context of constant social changes, this extended stage of 'emerging adulthood' (Arnett, 2004) implies that social change is providing new opportunities for young people to take their time to experiment with a greater number of career and lifestyle options. In this approach of 'emerging adulthood', it is claimed that young adults in their early twenties are now using their time in a way once

associated with 'adolescence' (Woodman & Leccardi, 2015: 709), and such additional stage offers a psychological 'moratorium' in which exploration is possible and in which young people are 'allowed to move into adult responsibilities gradually, at their own pace' (Arnett, 2004: 7).

Unlike the above discussed participants who preferred the US for a lifestyle, the rest participants of this 'stay in the US' sub-group were more concerned about their future career niche and believed there were more opportunities accommodated in the US for their pursuit of economic interest. Florian doesn't find going back to China a good choice for him because his home city was not one of the most economically developed cities in China, which lacked good job opportunities.

> In the future, I plan to find a job in the US and try to stay here... well, there are several reasons, the first one is that wage in the US is higher... housing prices are not very high, and commodity prices are more suitable... and working hours are not as long and tiring as in China... and perspectives are also more enriched... If I went back to China, it would be more troublesome for me, I would have to rent a house... because my home city does not have good job opportunities... My classmates in my home city who went abroad or went to other Chinese cities for study rarely return... I would also have to rent a house in the US, but since I will have to rent a house everywhere [either in the US or in China], return to China is not very attractive to me... If I can not find a job here, of course I would have to go back to China. If I find one, what if I change my mind after working for a period of time? What if there are better opportunities in China? Besides, if I directly go back to China without any work experiences [in the US], I would not have much advantage, so it would be better to accumulate some work experiences first then maybe go back to China. (Florian, 19 years old, upper-middle-class background, from a capital city of Northeastern China)

It makes sense for students like Florian to act as economic persons and compare his situation in the US and in China to make a rational economic choice. From Florian's narrative emerged a surprising finding that structural inequality across difference cities in home country could play a significant role in influencing international students' decision of stay or return. It may explain why Chinese international students from relatively peripheral regions in China have a stronger willingness to stay abroad

than those from central regions.

Despite the educational attainments and professional skills that international students obtained, there are still structural and contextual forces hindering them from obtaining desired jobs after graduation in the receiving countries' contexts (Yu, 2016b: 97). Unlike Florian who at least assumed the possibility of failing to find a job in the US, all the other participants in this group, except Ria who had already possessed a green card, did not mention such possible scenario at all, and they did not even assume the possible constraints caused by uncertain visa policies which destabilize any orientations towards linear settlement. This group of students were either subconsciously underplaying the contextual and institutional constraints, or just too immersed in the imagination of their desirable future of a 'romantic', 'free', 'non-committed', and 'easy' life in the US, although these desirable futures were also full of uncertain temporalities. And such neglect of institutional constraints can to some extent be interpreted as their sincere preference for staying in the US or abroad.

Stay in the US is not the only option to stay mobile. Several other participants aspired to leave only for the aim of exploring more of the world. Brie is one of the two divergencies among my participants in terms of mobility trajectories. She falls into the conventional category of migration because she moved to the US at her middle-school age with her parents who since then worked transnationally between Chinese community in the US and their hometown in China. She identified herself as a post-2000s youth and deserved a further exploration of the world.

> About myself, as a post-2000s who hasn't explored much of the world yet, I want to go out and explore. I don't have to stay in the US or go back to China, maybe I will work in a third country for a couple of years, maybe I would not make much money, but I just want to go out and explore around. (Brie, 20 years old, upper-middle-class background, from a relatively peripheral city of Eastern China)

Imagined mobility gives power to aspire corporeal mobility, and practiced corporeal

mobility further strengthen such imaginative power of mobility, especially in terms of mobility for adventures and exploration. Having already been being mobile is not enough, only through imagining and practicing more mobilities can Levi's 'greedy' mobility needs be satisfied.

> I don't want to return to China for work. I might prefer going to work in other countries like Singapore. I would probably not stay the US, because it is difficult to stay here... Secondly, I seriously thought about the racism issue here, recently there are a lot of violent assaults against Asians... Regarding going back to China, I think I still prefer getting in touch with other cultures, all kinds of cultures, and I really like learning languages. I just want to go to all kinds of weird places for life, this is the main reason, nothing else... My most naive idea is that I can visit every place around the world one time and stay there for a year, then I leave. (Levi, male, 20 years old, upper-middle-class background, from a relatively peripheral city of Southern China)

In a retrospect of Levi's narrative of his mother's control of his social freedom in China, it was not surprising to hear that he wanted to stay away from home. However, aside of his concern over racism as the reason to leave the US, what enticed him to stay mobile around the world was his spirit of exploration. And such disposition nursed by his international mobility might be in a sense interpreted as 'cosmopolitanism'.

Distinct from those who either preferred staying in the US, or returning to China or moving on, or still hesitant between different possibilities toward a single mobility destination, Cara, inspired by her professor, aspired to become an academic professor in the future and was imagining a transnational solution to the dilemma of choosing only one place to attach to.

> I think my dream job is a one which would allow me to shuttle back and forth between China and abroad, either the US or the UK. One of my professors lecturers in our university in semester time and goes to China and teaches a course there in summer, so he travels back and forth between two the countries. (Cara, 21 years old, upper-middle-class background, from a capital city of Eastern China)

Appadurai has emphasized the importance of imagination as a constitutive feature of modern subjectivity (1996: 5), conveying imagination in the analysis of aspirations. Aspirations are thus related to cognitive elements (forms of anticipation are related to plans, preferences, desires and choices), but they also have a pivotal narrative dimension, which must be able to produce justifications, narratives, metaphors and pathways through which we tie individual desires to wider social scenes and contexts and to more abstract norms and beliefs (Andrews, 2014). Aspiration is implicitly bound up with temporality, specifically with how individuals mobilize present knowledge and resources to make decisions towards future possibilities (Robertson, 2021: 34). Although a dream job would not necessarily become actualized in the future, imagining a dream job still has significant implication in an interpretation of my participants' inclination of where and how to make transitions to adulthood.

Summary

Through an investigation of my participants' future plans and imaginations, I have found that they did not simplify their decision-making processes like how they used to when they were preparing for international mobility to the US. As experienced mobility actors, they had become more realistic in projecting their future. They gave priority to either social environment or career opportunities or both in their considerations of where to go next.

Drawing upon Cairns' conceptual tool of 'spatial reflexivity' which refers to successfully completing youth transitions through recognizing the importance of geographical movement and acting upon this realization (Cairns, 2014: 28), it is interpreted that my participants incorporated mobility into their imaginations and projects of their future critical transition-making and were being reflective and reflexive about how important mobility was for them to better themselves through

pursuing their professional career paths and desired social environments. Cairns (2014: 28) argues that spatial reflexivity is more about choosing a life rather than selecting a lifestyle. In contexts defined by uncertainty in terms of transition outcomes, planning the future takes on fundamental significance as good choices can make the difference between success and failure (Leccardi, 2005). Most of my participants were reflective and reflexive about the contextual and institutional constraints as well as advantages and opportunities in all possible destinations and were actively trying to figure out a best possible way out in the hopes of pursuing both a good life and a preferred lifestyle, although some others were still imagining 'dream-like' transition outcomes. Spatial reflexivity is a capability transformed from the combination of past experiences, sensitivity to the present and evaluation of the future. My participants, either having figured out next moves or still being undecided, are thinking spatially how mobility will help them better complete their coming transition outcomes by weighing advantages and disadvantages, possible benefits and losses, structural constraints and facilitators, between possible destinations.

Chapter 10 Conclusion

Introduction

This thesis investigates the long-standing phenomenon of Chinese international students' mobility to the US, using migration/mobility and youth transitions to adulthood as two backbone theoretical lenses to decipher their experiences, representations and aspirations. The central research questions are to explore their motivations of international mobility, lived experiences of their mobile lives in the US, their reflections and reflexivities on their sojourn, and their projecting of future mobilities, with an aim, at a general level, to investigate how such international mobility plays a role their transition to adulthood. As this study has a qualitative nature, the data was collected through in-depth and semi-structured interviews. Through their stories unfold their biographical transition processes which are not just subjective narratives about their life history but a time- and space-related reflection of past events, the present self-awareness, and future desires. When narrators tell a story about themselves, they re-experience their temporal past in narrative form, and 'they position characters in space and time and, in a very broad sense, give order to and make sense of what happened — or what is imagined to have happened' (Bamberg, 2012: 77). International students' international mobility accompanied with double social changes from home to the host society and from the past to the present intersected with diversified social contacts supported and constrained by various structures had painted a colorful lived mobility and produced reflections and reflexivities that had played an important role in their transitions to adulthood.

This concluding chapter first teases out the empirical findings of the motivations of my participants' decision of overseas study, their lived experiences, personal development and rewards in relation to their transition to adulthood and their future

mobility projecting, then expounds on a typology of their international mobility. At the end, this chapter closes with a delineation of the metaphors of 'fantasy' and 'reality'.

In pursuit of an alternative transition process

In exploring the motivations of their overseas study, I have identified several traditional push and pull factors and several other relatively new ones. A relatively new motivation uncovered is that a large group of my participants including top students were pushed by the study pressure at schools in China, and their parents played an important role in helping relieve such pressure by sending them abroad to improve their well-being. In the very few of recent literature, resentment towards China's test-oriented pedagogical system has been detected (e.g., Tu, 2021), but my study has unveiled that for many it was the unbearable study pressure that had fueled such resentment. In addition to previous studies which disclose that families of affluent class background in China regarded overseas study as a means to maintain their advantaged social status (Biao & Shen, 2009; Fan & Cheng, 2018), my study has spotted a nuance that class segregation process in China has already begun even before an overseas study project has been planned, for example, when a privileged Chinese student feel unsatisfied with the study environment of a public school in which there are many peers of lower class background. For those of middle- and upper-middle-class backgrounds who studied in private international schools or international classes of some public schools, an international mobility to overseas education was a 'natural' and even the only educational transition path. Another emerging motivation observed in my study is the heart of exploration and adventure that encourage young Chinese to go abroad. Although such exploratory spirit is traditionally classified into the category of push factors, it is not really in a rigid sense a factor pushed by domestic condition, rather, it is more of a manifestation of individual agency.

In regard to the choice of the US as a destination, procurement of a credential from a prestigious US university for future career development is a persisted motivation since the 21ˢᵗ century, as has been reconfirmed by a few of my participants' narratives. However, trivial reasons for some of my participants to choose the US, such as contempt for British accent and preference for American accent, and being out of spite for personal reasons are new interesting findings. These trifling contingencies that had played a key role in their decision-making process not only reveals their immature teenage mindset besieged by emotions at the time of mobility, but also verifies their non-instrumental motivations for overseas study. An important life decision is usually made with a solemn attitude rather than with a frivolous and impulsive one. However, perhaps it was their simplified and 'childish' thinking pattern that had right distinguished them from older international students who were more likely to be more considerate towards an international mobility project. And such simplified thinking pattern could also be one of the reasons that had shaped their expectation of the US to be a more relaxed study environment where they would be able 'to have fun', which emerged as a recurrent theme across the narratives of many participants. Another more frequently mentioned expectation to gain international horizon was barely understood by my participants as a means to pragmatically accumulate cultural and social capital, instead it was mostly considered as an end in itself. The theme of Chinese people's freedom in China appeared not only in many previous scholarly debates of Chinese international students, but also prevalent in Western media. Those scholarly studies, especially the ones conducted around two decades ago, mainly focused on political freedom. Through an investigation of today's young Chinese, in the case of my study, specific freedoms expected to gain through overseas study are found to be mainly social freedoms from study pressure, from school disciplines and from parents' control, rather than from Chinese government. All of my participants moved to the US as teenagers, and a majority of them were parachute kids at the time of relocation, it makes sense that they had no or at least very limited political awareness back then. And in a horizontal comparison, one of the motivations of

Korean international students' overseas study is to escape gender discrimination, a degree caste system, and an authoritarian learning culture (Kim, 2011), even though South Korean is a country that adopts the Western-style democratic political system. Therefore, it is mainly the Confucian cultural tradition, rather than a political regime, shared across East Asian societies that has structured a variety of social constraints.

As still young teenagers prior to their mobility to the US, their lack of the sophistication of 'spatial reflexivity', which refers to successfully completing youth transitions through recognizing the importance of geographical movement and acting upon this realization (Cairns, 2014: 28), limited their capability to think strategically of their international mobility. As already shown in the narratives of a majority of my participants, their motivations were not directed at their future school-to-work transition outcomes or postgraduate study that was to happen four, eight or even a longer time later, although they and their parents probably knew they would have to confront that critical moments years later. But at the time of their moving, it was a believed better social environment where they could study and live through their secondary and tertiary education that they were longing for. This thus again leads to my argument that my participants' primary motivation of overseas study in the US was to seek a better social condition for an alternative transition process through which they were convinced that they would not be able to make in China. In Cairns' (2014) study, 'peripheral youth' use international mobility as a strategy to secure 'better' transition outcomes. But how to define such 'peripheral youth'? The young people in Cairns' (2014) study refer to those from peripheral regions of Europe. If we compare these youth with the ones from the Global South, they are not peripheral at all. And what about the privileged youth from these peripheral regions of Europe? Can they be counted as peripheral at all? Let's borrow this relational concept of 'peripheral youth' for a scrutiny of the young Chinese international students in my study. Compared to American youth, Chinese youth in general are peripheral in many aspects, in terms of GDP per capita, and in terms of the binaries between developed V.S. developing countries as well as the Global North V.S. the Global South.

However, if we take my participants' individual conditions in China into consideration, for example, the educational opportunities and career opportunities they could obtain in China, they are not necessarily peripheral. On the contrary, their economic capital, social capital and cultural capital in major Chinese cities make them central youth compared to other Chinese youth. Even compared to many American youth in terms of economic capital, my participants are not peripheral in the US, either. Therefore, I argue in contrast to 'peripheral youth' who move transnationally toward 'better' transition outcomes, privileged ones consume international mobility for 'better' transition processes.

The experienced self-socialization

By delving in to my participants' lived experiences in the US which they had once expected, imagined and idealized before relocation, I have found that most of them had encountered various kinds of unpleasant experiences, social hardships as well as racism despite some had also received kindness from the host society. These pleasant and unpleasant social experiences in their narratives are not just randomly selected life episodes, but imply the important role of such episodes in their transitions to adulthood and is the 'temporary sum total of their aspirations and assessments of past successes and failures and interpersonal recognition and rejection in the social arenas where autonomy and self-responsibility are expected' (Furlong, 2009: 8).

All the structural supports both in China and in the US provided for my participants implicated constraints and risks. In China, the study pressure, exam-oriented pedagogy, abrupt institutional changes, and limited places in elite universities all constituted structural constraints to their educational transitions. In the US, the possible conflicts with homestay families and with roommates in dormitories, discrimination and social exclusion by American peers on- and off-campus, and lack of institutional supports for their integration, all undermined their well-being and the

quality of their transition processes. However, my participants had been exercising their agencies the whole time. The decisions of internal migration for a more relaxed study environment in another Chinese city and the followed international mobility for overseas study in the US were exactly a practiced agency to circumvent the structural constraints in China. The choices, either willingly, naturally or helplessly, of social segregation were also an active negotiation with the contextual constraints in the US.

Having experienced a compact and intensive social change from home culture to another, my participants had to try to adapt, acculturate and integrate to the host society as quickly as possible. The consequence of this social change is that cultural and social knowledge pre-established in home society is no longer referable in the new social context (Heinz, 2002: 52). Under such condition, home-culture-based socialization is losing touch with the changed life course in another culture (Heinz, 2002: 52). Therefore, mobile youth have to 'solve transition requirements that their home-based socialization cannot prepare them for' (Heinz, 2002: 52). This social change may undermine young people's self-development, but it also push them to invent creative solutions when facing choices of different social transitions to adulthood 'when self-initiated coordination of multiple roles and optional futures are possible' (Heinz, 2002: 52). Giddens (1991: 85) argues that in post-traditional society people have plural choices to make between diversified social contexts and life styles, and the micro dynamics of the life course become evident in life plans which are 'typically revised and reconstructed in terms of alternatives in an individual's circumstances or frame of mind'. Especially for mobile youth who experience both horizontal and vertical social changes across different societies, they acquire an internal reflexivity through the life course 'because it is not guided anymore by pre-established social conditions both in host society and home society' (Heinz, 2002: 52). In facing social obstacles and contextual constraints in a new social context which is ever changing itself, my participants had to socially adjust themselves and to redistribute their time by making social choices wisely. Though the range of choices is constrained by unequal access to options (Dannefer, 1999), individual agency is at

play whenever there is a chance. This is especially the case for many of my participants who were willing but had failed to integrate. However, some others did not find it mandatory to integrate, but rather considered social segregation in particular aspects of their life to be natural or even necessary. Their helpless, voluntary, natural or necessary segregation also found expression in their choices of romantic dating.

From the perspective of self-as-agency approach, life course is not determined by social structure and cultural traditions, rather 'it is shaped by individuals who are interpreting life events and actions in terms of their self-identity' (Heinz, 2002: 55). It is evident that self-reflexive action and participation in social interaction are important for self-development across the life stages (Heinz, 2002: 55). To fulfill self-development through making choices implies a process of self-socialization, because the individual is responsible for the consequences of his/her actions which in turn cause him/her to reflect on intentions and choices made previously and be reflexive about the range of options available for further actions (Heinz, 2002: 55). My participants constructed their own life course by exploiting opportunities and negotiating constraints concerning their social transitions, and to 'select [transition] pathways, act and appraise the consequences of their actions in terms of their self-identity in reference to social contexts which are embedded in institutions' (Heinz, 2002: 58).

Personal development to approaching adulthood

In terms of how my participants had been reflective and reflexive on their mobile life in the US, few of them made any substantial evaluation of their academic rewards, instead, they mainly shared their sense of achievements in personal development, social capital accumulation, and self-awareness. Compared to the acquired international horizon and some other particular benefits they had expected to gain

before relocation to the US, independence and self-awareness, psychological composure, confidence, tolerance, braveness, social resources of friendship and connections with other Chinese international students of privileged backgrounds, more profound understandings of the US and China, and a clearer sense of belonging and identity were hindsight rewards which were collected only after having lived through their mobile life.

The most impressive finding is the importance that my participants attached to their spiritual and psychological growth. As have been argued in previous chapters, young people's personal feelings of their own spiritual and psychological metamorphosis have long been under-researched by youth transitions studies, although with a few exceptions (e.g., Wyn et al., 2015; Wyn, 2008). These spiritual and psychological growth are usually 'turning points' in their transition processes in respond to their past 'critical moments' when they were powerless in confrontation of social constraints and social hardship. In fact, these 'critical moments' are directly or indirectly related to structural constraints and agency practices, which are key concerns of youth transitions studies. Social difficulties are, to a large extent, the consequence of structural and contextual constraints, whereas spiritual and psychological growth are achieved through the individual agency of choosing how to give meaning to these social encounters.

When my participants were making reflective and reflexive reviews of their lived experiences, they were also evaluating the choices they had made throughout their international mobility, either actively or passively. The decision of overseas study in the US was a choice, although most of their parents played a key role; which major to declare was a choice; forgiving the past unpleasantness is a choice; with whom to hang out and to date is a choice; whether to get marriage or not in the future is a choice. Each choice-making suggests a rupture and a compromise. Behind these choices were countless moments when they had no power to choose under various cultural, social and structural constraints and when they practiced their helpless or

natural preferences that had developed through their previous self-socialization. When they were making choices or were 'forced' to make choices frequently, they had been constantly negotiating identities at the same time. Relocation to the US implicated a changed identity from 'a student' to 'a Chinese international student' and 'an Asian'; switching study fields meant a transformation from 'an art student' to 'an economics student'; when defending China's sovereignty, one became a patriotism. Identity negotiation is always accompanied with the biographical construction of my young participants.

As Beck (1992) has argued through his theory of 'individualization', social changes in late modernity have made collective sources for identity formation less available, individuals are thus required to respond to these social conditions through creating their own identities and 'choice biographies' in reflexive and conscious manners since uncertainty related to changing social conditions necessitate 'individualized' responses entailing increased flexibility and self-responsibility. This means young people need exert agency to develop identity narratives that try to fit late modernity and the current neoliberal economic agenda as much as possible. They are positioned in and position themselves within this discourse as they develop capacities to be reflexive and responsible and able to make choices (Stokes, 2012).

As young international students, my participants had experienced both horizontal social changes (from home social context to the US social context) and the constant vertical social changes (from past to present and to the unpredictable future in both home and host social contexts). Through constant adjustments to social changes and contextual constraints, they had developed a self-awareness and had become more independent, more tolerant, more confident and braver. By virtue of non-stop accumulation of knowledge and cultural capital, they had cultivated a critical thinking pattern to critically and rationally offer deep insights into the differences, advantages and problems of China and the US. The years of mobile life abroad had only strengthened their sense of belonging and self-identification to China. The exposure to

different cultures and people reinforced their self-awareness of their 'Chineseness', and their independent social negotiation and dependent economic status had made different senses of approaching adulthood to them. They knew they were no longer naive boys and girls who had once idealized and even almost fantasized the US any more. They had been disenchanted by the life they had lived through in the US. A realistic understanding of the US and China, especially in aspects highly related to themselves, is not only a better understanding of the structural constraints of both countries, but also an eye-catching signal of their approaching to adulthood

Spatial reflexivity in projecting future mobility

My participants, except one 1st-year graduate student, were all undergraduate students, who were close to their next 'turning points' although to many not really near at head yet. Some senior students had already started projecting their next moves, such as having planned for a further graduate study in the US, having secured a job placement back in China and having admitted to a Master's program in a British university, others either were still undecided or have no preference. The remaining time worked as a cushion for them to slowly figure out their next transition trajectories. None of them had experienced any bumpy twists and turns in school-to-work transition yet. In another word, so far in a macro sense their structural transition processes from secondary schools to colleges since their arrival in the US were quite smooth and linear.

Unlike last time before relocation to the US when my participants were pursuing a better social environment for an alternative transition process and were not sophisticated enough to incorporate geographical mobility into their transition projects, this time when looking into the future, as already-experienced mobility actors, they all started to harness spatial reflexivity for their next mobility trajectories and considered 'mobility decision-making as part of a meditative process of spatial

reflexivity rather than purely impulsive' (Cairns, 2014: 80). Their temporal past, feelings of the present and foresight into the future were all maneuvered to serve such decision-making process.

Due to the unequal numbers of different groups by different future mobility directions, it is not easy to categorize them into equally numbered groups. However, following the logic of the question 'whether they will return to China?' rather than 'whether they will stay in the US', finally three nearly equal groups are sorted out: return to China; undecided; stay in the US and stay mobile in other countries and stay transnational. The considerations behind their future mobility intentions are diverse, future career opportunities and social concerns are considerations all shared across the three groups. Among them, while some made a reference to past experiences, present sensitivity and future possibilities in their decision-making process, others gave more weight on either one or two of the three temporal dimensions.

One interesting finding is that a couple of participants who did not want to go back and live in China for its political conditions supported China's political system in their narratives of their understandings of the two countries. It seems very self-contradictory, but one explicit explanation is that China's political condition is just one among the many reasons why they did not want to return, and another possible reason could be that they supported China's stability under such political conditions so that their loved ones back there could keep enjoying a good life but they did not want to live in such political environment themselves. Another impressive finding is that among the six green card holders, only one, the one who still self-identified as Chinese and felt a strong sense of belonging to China, confirmed her plan to stay in the US and future possibility to obtain the US citizenship. The others either preferred returning to China, or moving to a third country, or were still undecided.

The narratives of green card holders who preferred leaving the US are very important

empirical data to further support my argument that my participants were seeking an alternative transition process when they were teenagers in China and they were using migration/mobility to the US as a pragmatic means to seek such alternative transition process which they believed to be better than the one they would have in China. In contrast to the other majority international students who stay temporarily in the US with 'student' visa, green card holders do not have administrative constraints that fragmentize their job seeking and residence permit in the US. Other majority international students including parachute kids who have the intention of staying in the US would have to use OPT as a transition to obtain the lottery-like HB1 visa, the process of which is very uncertain and eliminates a large amount of applicants every year. And only after many years of H1B visa possession can the lucky ones apply for permanent residency－the green card. This group of my participants who are former parachute kids obtained green cards through their parents' immigrant investor programs, and then moved to the US, namely, they became immigrants first and then parachute kids! They completed the whole immigration process within just one step even before they landed in the American soil, while many other international students have to go through a staggered 'long march' through years full of uncertainties and may not even make it to a documented entrance into American society in the end. Their plans of returning to China or moving to a third country are firm proofs of their incipient motives of overseas study for a 'better' transition process rather than for a 'better' transition outcome.

A typology and theoretical implications

In order to synthesize my empirical findings, I have structured a typology addressing the relationship between my participants' motives of international mobility and their future mobility projecting. This typology can serve as an analytical tool to make sense of my participants' international mobility experiences.

Identified motives of mobility are summarized into three groups: escape social control, explore/personal development, and instrumental goal. To escape study pressure, to seek freedom from school disciplines and parents' control, and resenting exam-oriented education fall into the 'escape social control' group. To adventure, to explore new things and to expand horizon are allocated into the 'explore' group merged with the 'personal development' group which includes to seek individualized, better quality and more relaxed education, to acquire critical thinking ability, to learn specialized knowledge, to gain international horizon and to improve English proficiency. The minority group 'instrumental goal' comprises to obtain symbolic credential and to seek future economic gain and expanded career opportunities.

In regard to the factors taken into consideration of future mobility projecting, priority to career opportunities and priority to social environment are two minority groups, while priority to both career opportunities and social environment is the majority one. Belief in better and more career opportunities in the US or China or elsewhere corresponds to 'priority to career opportunities' group. 'Priority to social environment' group subsumes push factors and pull factors. Push factors include political system, traditional life transition pattern, parents' control, group pressure, work culture, and high rent against relatively low salary in China; racism, social exclusion, discrimination, glass ceiling, poor public security, political correctness, failure in containing epidemic, consumer prices, messiness, unfavorable visa policies, cultural difference, public health insurance, and individualism in the US. Pull factors include social and family ties, public health insurance, public security, convenience of life, patriotism and entertainments in China; lifestyle, freedom, reasonable consumer prices and work culture in the US. The desire for more exploration around the world does not fit in push-pull model.

Typology	Priority to career opportunities OR to social	Priority to both career opportunities and social

	environment	environment
Non-instrumental motives	(16) A	(20) B
Instrumental motives	(1) C	(3) D

Table 4

To better visualize my empirical findings, I have elaborated the typology in the following way. I further merge 'escape social control' and 'explore/personal development' into one 'non-instrumental' group, and 'priority to career opportunities' and 'priority to social environment' into one 'priority to career opportunities OR to social environment' group. In this way there are only two groups in each dimension, framing four ideal-types, in Weberian words, in the typology. Through distributing my participants into each ideal-type, I have identified two main ideal-types in this typology. As shown in the typology table, ideal-type A and B, as two almost equally majority types, frame those who moved to the US for non-instrumental purposes and gave priority to either career opportunities or social environment, or both in consideration of their future mobility projecting. The minority ideal-types C and D coordinates those who moved to the US for instrumental purposes and gave priority to either career opportunities or social environment, or both in projecting their future mobility. While ideal-type A and B cover all former parachute kids and most degree-seekers, ideal-type C was a migrant kid who migrated to the US with his economic migrant parent and ideal-type D only includes three degree-seekers. So how can we understand this?

As I have argued repeatedly, most of my participants' urgent desire was to have a better social condition where they would like to study and live through their transition processes rather than a 'better' transition outcome at the time of practicing international mobility from China to the US. This study conceptualizes a transition

outcome as an achievement that bear a significant influence on one's entry to adulthood. In this sense, a 'better' transition outcome in most cases refers to a better job, which is one of the achievements to reach adulthood. While a transition process refers to the course prior to achieving a transition outcome. So most of the early phases of young people's educational transition are part of a transition process. In some cases, to pursue higher education is also to seek a transition outcome when an individual's main target is to obtain a university credential and specialized knowledge that can help him/her to land a desirable job. However, if learning knowledge itself and enjoying the course of study through higher education are the main goals, then it is a transition process that one is after, although the instrumental value of a symbolic credential and specialized knowledge is also acknowledged. A transition process is closely related to a transition outcome, since a 'good' transition process can be conducive to a 'good' transition outcome. The nuance between to seek a 'better' transition outcome and to seek a 'better' transition process is that the former is instrumental while the latter is largely an end in itself featured by non-instrumental or at least less instrumental motivations. However, there is another situation when a transition outcome is rather an unintended 'product' than an instrumental goal, for example, self-sensed psychological growth as a consequence of experiencing certain social encounters.

The former parachute kids in my study were around 11-15 years old at the time of international mobility, which was way earlier before their future admission to undergraduate and postgraduate education as well as their future entry to labor market. As escaping social control and desire for exploration and personal development were their motivations for overseas education in the US, their international mobility thus was a means to improve well-being and enjoy the course of studying and living in a believed better social condition where they would be able to develop their own interests and hobbies, explore new things and expand horizon, and immerse themselves in better quality education, and not need to feel stressed by the study pressure and parents' control anymore. Likewise, a majority of the degree-seekers in

my study who finished high school in China before relocation to the US also resented Chinese education system and expected to explore and enjoy the learning process in American colleges. Therefore it is a 'better' transition process rather than a 'better' transition outcome that most of my participants were craving for. Although a 'better' transition process is still eventually directed at a 'better' transition outcome, before their relocation to the US, their desire for a 'better' transition process was their priority goal.

And such longing is also manifested in their narratives of their lived experiences in the US and their reflections and reflexivities on these experiences. Although this sociological research does not specifically aim to investigate academic performances and academic achievements, my participants could voluntarily share these aspects. They barely substantially narrated such issues. Instead, they spontaneously dwelt on their social experiences and shared their insights into the social world. The 'critical moments' (Thomson et al., 2002), especially the unpleasant ones, in their past temporalities, as episodes and dynamics of their transition processes, unexpectedly contributed to some transition outcomes－spiritual and psychological growth, which in a sense were also rewards and 'critical moments' that might help to achieve another ensuing transition outcome in the future. In this instance, a new type of transition outcome in the form of spiritual and psychological growth is identified. When reviewing their negotiation through double social changes, their constant social choice-making in their narratives also to a large extent mirrors their care for their well-being and transition processes, which would in some ways affect their future transition outcomes.

In respect of the concerns for future mobility projects in relation to the previous mobility motives, the ideal-types A and B shows a majority among those who held a non-instrumental attitude towards their overseas study in the US took into account both career opportunities and social environment when anticipating their future destinations, and a relatively smaller number gave priority to either one of them. As

experienced mobility individuals, they naturally incorporated spatial mobility into their projecting when contemplating on their future plans, regardless of whether they had made up their minds for mobility directions or not and whether they were considering entry to labor market or furthering their education to the post-graduate level. In this transitional stage, imagining and aspiring a transition outcome had been given more weight in relation to their future mobility than last time of their international relocation. A majority considered social environment as an important concern in their decision-making process for choosing their next destinations, which means they value their future well-being more than or equal to their future career, which means they were still expecting a 'good' transition process while working towards a 'good' transition outcome. For those who planned on a postgraduate study in a third country because of resentment of social environment in the US and an attempt to try a new environment, both a 'better' transition process and a 'better' transition outcome had been unintentionally set on agenda to be the goal to attain by means of international mobility. Likewise, those who preferred staying in the US for an alternative life-style and better career opportunities and those who were inclined to returning to China for career development, better public security and family reunion were also aspiring for both a 'better' transition process and a 'better' transition outcome. Whereas, for those who wanted to maintain mobile state by traveling around the world, the aim was to pursue a prolonged transition process.

As for the several degree-seekers whose motives of mobility to the US were instrumental, their concerns for both social environment and career opportunities in their scheme of future mobility tells that they had realized the importance of both well-being and instrumental harvests after having experienced international mobility and pragmatically desired for both a 'good' transition process and a 'good' transition outcome in their next mobility journey.

Based on the analysis of the typology, I thus summarize that today's Chinese international students in the US, especially the younger ones, practice international

mobility mainly for an alternative transition process through which they believe they can better enjoy the course of study and life towards their future transition outcomes-making, and they mediate their future mobility projecting by their concerns of either career opportunities or social environment or both. Whereas some older Chinese international students in the US hold a more instrumental attitude towards their international mobility to the US but later give priority to both career opportunities and social environment in their consideration of future mobility. At a more theoretical level, Eastern youth, more specifically East Asian youth from Confucian societies, seek international mobility for escaping social control at home and an alternative transition process abroad.

Youth transitions studies had long been underplaying transition processes but leaning towards transition outcomes as if the latter happen all of a sudden without having an antecedent course. Most of my participants accentuated how their spiritual and psychological growth had played a significant role in their transition to adulthood. And some of them even claimed their adulthood achieved for their independent living and psychological maturity, which implies there is a decoupling between how youth transitions studies perceive youth people and how young people understand themselves. Although criteria set by youth researchers to measure whether one has become adult still have indicative value in diagnosing social changes and structural constraints that hinder young people's transitions to adulthood, young people's own sensitivities to and awareness of their transition processes and thereafter transition outcomes both need to be addressed by youth transition studies. We know more about the impact of time and space, institutions, and personal agency on the timing of transitions than about the ways in which linked lives, the relationships between young adults and parents, peers, or partners, contribute to the course and outcome of transitions (Heinz, 2009: 12). But the impact of private transition support received from or deprived by social relationships is as equally important as that of institutions and structures on transition processes and outcomes. I thus call upon youth transitions researchers to give equal, if not more, quota of scholarly attention to youth transition

processes as to youth transition outcomes.

From 'fantasy' to 'reality'

The 'fantasy' in the title of my thesis was an inspiration from Grace, one of my interviewees. Although she withdrew this term and used 'idealize' instead to describe how she was expecting the US to be like, 'to idealize' an unrealistic imagination of perfection is in lexical sense a synonym of 'to fantasize'.

The metaphor of 'from fantasy to reality' has three dimensions of meanings. The first metaphorical implication is that most of my participants had idealized the US to be perfect prior to coming to the US, but then have seen with their own eyes a US with a lot of problems after having lived there; the second is that most of my participants had idealized their future life in the US to be free and carefree, but then have suffered a lot of social hardships there; the third is that they had transformed from naive and innocent kids to relatively more independent and more mature youth in their transitions to adulthood.

As has been recounted by my participants, most of them had learnt about the US through multifarious and glamourous media, social connections and/or previous short-term trips to selected areas in the US, which combined to shape a fantasy that had lured them to the US. Piaget (1930) argued that young children are overly credulous, in part a result of their inability to differentiate reality and fantasy. Morison and Gardner (1978) proposed that children initially believe everything to be real and slowly develop a realm of fantasy and the unreal. My participants, especially the former parachute kids who were aged between 11 and 15, were young enough to be regarded as children before their international mobility to the US, at the time when they had developed a partial perception of the US. When they were suffering and resenting social control in China, they generated a strong need to escape. Fueled by

such strong need, the partial perception then evolved into a positive fantasy which depicts an idealized version of future situations and events, and portrays a wonderful future that is easily and smoothly attained (Oettingen & Mayer, 2002, as cited in Kappes et al., 2012: 300), and allows them to mentally enjoy the fantasized future in the present moment, free from restrictions (Kappes et al., 2012: 300).

After arrival in the US, and after they had seen, lived and thought reflectively and reflexively, they had realized the real America was not what they had expected and idealized. Coincidentally, in Ma's study, her participants' attitudes towards the US also changed from a romanticized perception to a critical and realistic one (Ma, 2020: 203). Growing up in a rapidly changing society, my participants from major Chinese cities teemed with skyscrapers had been accustomed to many modern and advanced infrastructures and living conditions. When they started their real American life and saw the desolation in remote villages and outdated infrastructures in metropolises like New York, they had realized the US was not as modern as they had imagined. Having lived in two extremely different political regimes, they had come to understand both in a more critical and profound way. And they had been disenchanted with many problematic aspects of American society concerning social, cultural and political issues. In terms of their social life, the selected episodes of their social encounters indicate that they had not expected the possible social hardship they would have to confront before arrival. But how would a naive child anticipate unpleasantness in a destination that they had already fantasized? Their reflections and reflexivities on their personal development attributed to their social past marks one of their first critical steps to approaching adulthood. Casting off their child-like beliefs in the fantasy of a perfect America and adopting a rational, critical and realistic perspective to view both China and the US and in relation to their projecting of their future is a metaphor of their transition process from youth to adulthood.

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Appendix 1 Questions to collect demographic information

1. Gender?
2. Age?
3. Which city are you originally from?
4. Are you the only child of your parents? If not, how many siblings? Sisters or brothers? Younger or older?
5. Have you taken Gaokao in China?
6. Where did you study in middle school and high school?
7. Have you been abroad before you moved to the US for study? If yes, where have you been to?
8. At which university are you studying?
9. Which major are you studying?
10. How many years have you stayed in the US?
11. What are your parents' professions?
12. What are your parents' highest educational qualifications?
13. What are your financial source for study and life in the US?
14. Are you living in the university dormitory or are you renting outside?
15. Where are you now?

Appendix 2 Interview questions

1. Tell me about how you had developed the aspiration of going to the US for study at the beginning when you were still in China? What and who influenced you in making such decision? And why did you choose the USA?
2. How did people around you react to your decision of going to the US?
3. At that time when you were making this decision, what did you expect to get from this study experience in the US?
4. Tell me about your life in the US? You can start with the first day of your arrival. (follow-up questions: how is your interaction with other students and friends at school and in the accommodation? how is your communication with your teachers? What do you do in your leisure time?)
5. What media do you use? Social media, news media, entertainment media, and what is the content of the media that you use?
6. What are the most impressive experiences you had in the US? Either good or bad.
7. How do you see your friendship and social interactions with Chinese and/or non-Chinese in the US?
8. What do you think of the social segregation of Chinese international students?
9. Can you tell me about your romantic relationships and sexual experiences? Do you have any preference in dating? Why?
10. What do you think of racism in the US? Have you experienced racism there?
11. What do you feel you have been rewarded with from these years of study and life in the US? How have you changed personally?
12. How do you compare the US and China? How do you compare your life in the US and in China?
13. How do you compare the freedom in the US and in China?
14. How do you compare the political freedom in the US and in China?
15. How do you think the (non)freedom in the US and in China affect your personal life and personal development?
16. What do you think your identity is and where do you feel belong to?
17. Do you think you are an immigrant? What kind of person do you think can be counted as an immigrant?
18. What is your future plan? Where do you want to go? Why?
19. Are you optimistic about your future? Why?
20. When do you plan to establish your own family in the future?

Added follow-up questions to which 30 participants have answered:
21. What do you think youth is? What advantages and disadvantages do you think young people have?
22. What kind of person do you think can be counted as an adult? Do you think you are an adult?
23. Do you have any new opinions on the US and China after the pandemic?
24. How do you think this pandemic have affected your present and would affect your future?

Appendix 3 List of participants with demographic information

No.	Pseudonym	Age	Gender	Years of stay in the US	Grade	Father's educational background	Mother's educational background	Location at the time of interview
1	Jenny	22	female	7	3rd year	PhD	Bachelor's degree	China
2	Angela	21	female	7	2nd year	Master degree	Master degree	The US
3	Oliver	22	male	8	3rd year	PhD	PhD	The US
4	Clark	22	male	3.5	4th year	Master degree	Bachelor's degree	China
5	Ria	22	female	7	4th year	Technical secondary school	Technical secondary school	The US
6	Celia	23	female	8	4th year	Bachelor's degree	Bachelor's degree	The US
7	Frey	20	male	5.5	2nd year	Bachelor's degree	Bachelor's degree	China
8	Tony	21	male	7	3rd year	Master degree	Master degree	China
9	Dina	22	female	4	4th year	Bachelor's degree	College diploma	The US
10	Levi	20	male	7	3rd year	Bachelor's degree	Master degree	The US
11	Jacky	21	male	2	3rd year	Bachelor's degree	Master degree	China
12	Filip	26	male	4	4th year	Bachelor's degree	Bachelor's degree	China
13	Sam	22	male	3.5	4th year	Bachelor's degree	Bachelor's degree	China
14	Rick	22	male	7.5	4th year	College diploma	College diploma	The US
15	Emma	20	female	5	2nd year	Master degree	PhD	The US
16	Mary	20	female	5	2nd year	College diploma	College diploma	The US
17	Yanny	21	male	3.5	3rd year	EMBA	Bachelor's degree	The US
18	Myra	21	female	4	2nd year	Bachelor's degree	Bachelor's degree	The US
19	Brie	20	female	5	2nd year	Bachelor's degree	Technical secondary school	The US
20	Carlen	22	male	2.5	4th year	Master degree	Master degree	China

21	Adam	19	male	6	2nd year	Bachelor's degree	Master degree	China
22	Eddy	20	male	2	3rd year	Bachelor's degree	High school diploma	China
23	Haily	22	female	8	4th year	Master degree	Master degree	The US
24	Rubina	21	female	6	3rd year	Master degree	Master degree	China
25	Matt	21	male	3	4th year	Bachelor's degree	Bachelor's degree	The US
26	Hanker	19	male	4	1st year	Bachelor's degree	Bachelor's degree	China
27	Elena	20	female	1.5	3rd year	Master degree	Master degree	China
28	Jimmy	19	male	8	2nd year	Bachelor's degree	Bachelor's degree	The US
29	Josef	21	male	8	3rd year	Master degree	Master degree	China
30	Jane	23	female	4	4th year	Master degree	Master degree	China
31	Yuri	21	female	7	4th year	MBA	Bachelor's degree	The US
32	Perry	22	female	2	5th year (extended)	Middle school	On-job postgraduate	China
33	Scott	19	male	6	3rd year	Middle school	College diploma	The US
34	Cara	21	female	7	4th year	Bachelor's degree	Bachelor's degree in music	The US
35	Cathy	23	female	3	4th year	High school diploma	High school diploma	China
36	Florian	19	male	1.5	2nd year	On-job postgraduate	On-job postgraduate	The US
37	Joe	24	male	4.5	4th year	Overseas Bachelor's degree	Bachelor's degree	The US
38	Carter	22	male	6	4th year	High school diploma	High school diploma	The US
39	Grace	21	female	7	4th year	Bachelor's degree	Bachelor's degree	The US
40	Sean	20	male	2	3rd year	Bachelor's degree	Don't know	China