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ABSTRACT

Amid the pandemic, the quality of international higher education has seen a decline, due in part to the challenges posed by online classes, and the behaviour associated with international student mobility (ISM) is deemed to present significant health risks. Most of the existing research primarily focuses on examining the impact of the pandemic on students' mobility experiences, with little consideration given to the influence of family in the educational migration process in these unique circumstances. Through semi-structured interviews with 18 Chinese postgraduates enrolled in UK universities during 2020–2021, this study reveals that familial connections in the host country have become significant determinants for migration decisions during the pandemic. Additionally, it underlines the reciprocal nature of migration decisions, with individual migration behaviour impacting the lives of their family members, leading to behavioural changes driven by the principles of 'responsibility' and 'solidarity.'

1. Introduction

Given the context of the knowledge economy and neoliberalism, higher education has come to be widely recognized as a field of profound social significance, not just as a process of knowledge acquisition but also as an avenue to social mobility (Haveman & Smeeding, 2006). It can affect advantages accumulation and social class reproduction in various ways, including the unequal distribution of educational opportunities and sources, and the cultivated cultural bias favourable to the dominant social class within institutions' curriculum (e.g. Bourdieu, 1987; Findlay et al., 2012; Triventi, 2013; Waters, 2010). However, the significant expansion of higher education, while initially seen as a positive step towards enhancing social mobility, has also brought about negative consequences that undermine its intended goals (Collins, 2019). Instead, it has led to the overproduction of educational credentials, as well as credentialism and a greater need for a hierarchical evaluation mechanism to satisfy education levels, quality, and institutional distinctions (Collins, 2019).

Under such contexts, the more exclusive and capital-selective higher education experience seceding state boundaries associated with its anticipated benefits have motivated favourable students' and families' increasing engagement in transnational education mobility during the last several decades (Brooks & Waters, 2011). For example, in China, it is demonstrated that the expansion of higher education since the 2000s has diluted the value of domestic credentials, resulting in diploma inflation and skill mismatch in the Chinese labour market, where studying at home universities no longer promises a lucrative professional position (Reimer & Pollak, 2010). Furthermore, the high-risk GaoKao (the National College Entrance Exam) in China has bred anxiety among both its students and parents, thus inspiring more Chinese families' intention to study abroad to escape from the hyper-competitive and stress-inducing exam-oriented education system and gain admission to a better-ranked international university (Waters, 2012).

Between 1978 and 2019, China has witnessed a total of 6.6 million student outflow. In 2019, the number of Chinese international students exceeded 0.7 million, making China the largest international student mobility (ISM) sending country (Education Ministry of China, 2020). However, the outbreak of COVID-19 has introduced significant and unparalleled transformations in the field of transnational higher education. These shifts include the imposition of stringent travel and visa restrictions, and the controversial transition from traditional, in-person learning to online education (Bilecen, 2020). Such disruptions have not only hindered cultural immersion and social network development in host countries (Schleicher, 2020) but have also exacerbated psychological stress among international students due to isolation, food and housing insecurities (Hari et al., 2023), and heightened anxieties regarding future career prospects (Aristovnik et al., 2020). Furthermore, Chinese international students have faced unique challenges stemming from the perception linking COVID-19 to China, which has been perpetuated by public opinion, influential politicians, and mass media narratives, thereby heightening safety concerns among this group (Su et al., 2020; Yu, 2021). These compounded circumstances in both home and host countries necessitate a re-evaluation or even adjustment of international students' (im)mobility strategies (Mok et al., 2021; Yu, 2021; Yu & He, 2024). Empirical data indicates that outbound Chinese student numbers halved in 2020, with only around 350,000 students choosing to study abroad, underscoring a significant shift in their mobility patterns (Statista, 2020). This makes this group a particularly illuminating population for interrogating assumptions and challenges underlying transnational higher education and international student mobility in the context of the pandemic.

The existing literature has predominantly focused on investigating the impacts of the pandemic on students' migration experience, while little paid attention to the role of family and household on the education migration process under such special contexts. Families are instrumental in facilitating and enabling international education migration (Tu, 2019; Waters & Wang, 2023), as individuals' decisions are deeply embedded within interdependent social structures where familial influences are reciprocal (Coulter et al., 2016). Under the context of the pandemic, how did the families of physically mobile international students make decisions, and what role do family resources play? How does a student's migratory behaviour impact their family?

To answer these questions, this study conducted in-depth semi-structured interviews with 18 Chinese postgraduate students who physically enrolled in UK universities in the 2020–2021 academic year. The study is organized into five sections, namely an introduction to the research, a review of relevant literature, a description of the research methods employed, a presentation of the findings, and a conclusion that summarizes the paper and its limitations.

2. Literature review

2.1. Background

During the COVID-19 pandemic, the health risks for Chinese international students extended beyond the immediate threat of the virus itself. Prolonged isolation due to lockdowns and social distancing measures led to increased reports of anxiety, depression, and other mental health issues among these students (Li et al., 2021). The sudden shift to online learning, coupled with time zone differences and lack of physical interaction with peers and educators, exacerbated these psychological stresses, impacting their academic performance and overall well-being (Ma & Miller, 2021).

Additionally, the pandemic coincided with a rise in xenophobia and racism, particularly towards individuals of Asian descent (Lantz et al., 2023). Chinese students abroad frequently encountered microaggressions, such as being unfairly blamed for the spread of the virus (Cheng et al., 2022). More severe incidents included verbal assaults and physical attacks, which were fuelled by racial stereotypes and misinformation (ibid). These experiences of discrimination not only posed a direct threat to their safety but also contributed to a sense of alienation and fear, further complicating their adjustment and integration into the host society. This hostile environment compelled many students to reconsider their overseas educational plans and influenced their interaction with the community, often leading to a preference for staying within their cultural groups to avoid confrontation and ensure a sense of safety.

Historical events have consistently influenced the dynamics of international student mobility (ISM), with various historical contexts shaping migration flows and decision-making processes in distinctive ways. For example, the outbreak of Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS) demonstrated how health crises could swiftly affect the mobility of international students. Primarily impacting Asian nations, especially China, Hong Kong, and several Southeast Asian countries, SARS led to significant disruptions (Biao, 2003). Health and safety concerns compelled numerous international students and prospective scholars to cancel or delay their educational plans, particularly in areas most severely affected by the outbreak. This resulted in a notable decline in international student populations in certain regions. Additionally, some students selected geographically safer countries for their education, thereby altering the demographic composition of international students in various destinations (Bodycott & Lai, 2012). Furthermore, the 2008 financial crisis impacted the global economic framework significantly, influencing ISM profoundly. The economic slowdown deteriorated the financial standing of many families, directly affecting their ability to support international tuition and living costs (Macrander, 2017). Consequently, some students were compelled to abandon their plans for overseas education or to select institutions in countries with

comparatively lower tuition fees. Moreover, the contraction of the job market made it difficult for many international students to find employment or internships after their studies, leading to increased caution among students when selecting their study destinations (Cairns, 2017). These incidents underscore the volatility of geopolitical and socioeconomic factors, which can either accelerate or hinder student mobility. Unlike prior occurrences such as SARS and the financial crisis, the quality of international education noticeably declined during the recent pandemic, partly attributed to the constraints of online learning (Baber, 2020) and the perception of international student mobility as a significant health risk (Yu, 2021). Moreover, Chinese and other Asian international students face varying levels of discrimination (Haft & Zhou, 2021).

Collectively, these situations placed families considering mobility in a challenging position, as the pandemic necessitated a re-evaluation of the 'investment' logic behind international education and migration. Chinese parents, in particular, experienced unprecedented psychological and emotional pressures. On one hand, the attraction of international educational migration remained deeply entrenched; on the other, they found it difficult to dissociate the idea of studying abroad from the risks of infection and the notion of staying safe domestically, especially when the pandemic was relatively controlled within China (Zheng, 2020). According to prior research, the majority of Chinese parents opted to delay their children's educational plans abroad (Yang et al., 2022). Nonetheless, this study posits that even during the pandemic, the role of families in the decision-making process for Chinese students who continued to pursue higher education in the UK was complex and multifaceted, an aspect insufficiently examined in prior research.

2.2. Life couse perspective and confucian philosophy

Life course theory offers a comprehensive framework for understanding the role of parents in youth's migration behaviours (Haldimann et al., 2022). As Coulter et al. (2016) note, individuals are embedded in a social structure where their decisions have a significant impact on others, and the behaviour of others also affects them. This interdependence operates on two levels. Firstly, individuals' lives are linked by shared experiences of life course events, such as marriage or the birth of a child, leading to synchronicity (Elder et al., 2003). Secondly, linking also manifests through social ties and bonds that connect individuals' life course careers (Coulter et al., 2016). Among family relationships, the bond between parents and children is often considered to be the most intimate and enduring, characterized by intergenerational solidarity (Bengtson & Martin, 2001; Maccoby, 1999). In particular, the legal and moral responsibility of parents towards their children is frequently lifelong and does not cease when the child reaches the age of majority (Mulder, 2018). An intergenerational contract is proposed to exist, in which adult children reciprocate this responsibility to their parents by being 'filial', meaning the child's responsibility to their parents (Liefbroer & Mulder, 2006). This unique and significant parent–child relationship and responsibility underscore the critical role of the family in making migration decisions, surpassing that of other social networks (Mulder, 2018). Thus, the life course framework of migration behaviour posits that the connections and interdependencies between individuals, such

as responsibilities from parent, can influence youth migration patterns. Moreover, migration can also have a reciprocal effect on relationships over time (Mulder, 2018).

Moreover, the influence of Confucian philosophy on the structure of Chinese families is profound, particularly in decisions regarding education and migration (Tan, 2017; Tu, 1996). Core Confucian values such as filial piety and a sense of familial duty not only mandate respect and obedience towards parents but also emphasize the responsibilities and obligations among family members, becoming an integral part of family decision-making (Sung, 1998). In the decision-making process of educational migration, this hierarchy and sense of duty are especially prominent, with parents and grandparents often playing pivotal roles, directly influencing the educational paths and study abroad choices of their children.

With the development of economic globalization and social modernization, the structure of Chinese families has undergone significant changes, such as a reduction in family size and an increased pursuit of individual autonomy among the younger generations (Sheng, 2005). Nonetheless, core Confucian values such as filial piety and family cohesion continue to occupy a central position in the decision-making of modern Chinese families. Contemporary research reveals that even against the backdrop of globalization, these traditional values profoundly impact the educational migration decisions of Chinese families. For instance, older family members might be more inclined to enhance the family's social status through educational investments, which typically manifest as support for children's overseas education to access superior educational resources (Chen, 2023).

Education is viewed as a key mechanism for social mobility within Chinese families, not only as a means of acquiring knowledge and skills but also as a symbol of family honour and social status. The educational values transmitted among family members, especially in the process of selecting international education, reflect the family's high regard for education and their profound aspirations for their children's future development. This educational ethos, derived from Confucian philosophy, not only influences daily decision-making within families but also exerts a significant impact on the choice of international education.

2.3. Family and youth ISM

Distinct from other types of migration like labour or refugee movements, transnational education migration primarily involves younger individuals, including children and teenagers (King et al., 2010). The primary impetus for these individuals is to secure access to enhanced educational resources and experiences, thus increasing their reliance on familial financial backing (Choudaha & Chang, 2012). Consequently, parents are considered to have a more crucial influence on their children's education migration decisions compared to other migration forms.

Transnational educational mobility as a strategy for further investment in youth by visionary and 'responsible' parents to accumulate capital inaccessible at home countries—often associated with the core 'North' and the periphery 'South' division in the global higher education system—that subsequently feeds into the reproduction of advantages and social class (e.g. Brooks & Waters, 2009; Waters, 2006). Lucas (2001, p. 1652) reveals that students typically gain social advantages 'in a twofold manner',

that is, on the one hand, they seek to distinguish themselves vertically with higher level of education degrees such as PhD, and on the other hand, they utilize their already-possessed advantages 'to secure quantitatively similar but qualitatively better education'. In China's contexts, in line with its domestic higher education expansion in recent 40 years is the large-scale devaluation of domestic credentials (Bai, 2006) and the decreased employment rate faced by Chinese university graduates (Mok, 2015), leading to the serious overeducation and skill mismatch in labour market—the failure pursuit of vertical distinction. Under such logic, to exceed within the rising competition for lucrative jobs and the narrowed, or even no longer existing, potentials for vertical distinction due to declined differences in accesses to the expanded domestic higher education (Reimer & Pollak, 2010), a 'first and foremost' 'necessity' for privileged families would be to distinguish their children from less advantaged groups (Netz & Finger, 2016, p. 83). And, the long-standing Chinese traditional culture and familial values further reinforce this trend: the education-first culture nurtures Chinese parents with a sense of self-responsibilities of sending sons and daughters to the perceived best institutions (Liu, 2016).

Notably, the worldwide higher education system exhibits an uneven and hierarchical structure resting on the dominance of Anglophone countries, in which the institutional quality has been geographically stratified and legitimated by various criteria such as global ranking (Yang, 2022). Therefore, in order to enhance competition and avoid failure or anticipating failure in domestic university entrance examinations, Chinese parents with advantaged backgrounds, in resonance with Bourdieu's (2011) perspectives, have increasingly encouraged and invested their children to step outside national borders to the Western countries for a more exclusive form of education to maintain and reproduce their privileges (Reimer & Pollak, 2010). To extend this point further, by separating mobile students from those who only attend less prestigious local universities, a certificate from Western highly-ranked universities is perceived to function as a self-explanatory proxy of expected characteristics and qualifications among the mobile group and confer their higher values, so that in many cases its conventionalized positional advantages based on stratified recognition and rewards may result in the 'unequal treatment' in favour of preferable foreign degrees in domestic labour markets (Gerhards & Hans, 2013, pp. 673–674). Therefore, through investing in their children's transnational education, mobile parents are able to provide mobile students with a range of advantages upon their return, including a resultant economic success in the labour market (Beech, 2015), satisfying monetary return (Cebolla-Boado et al., 2018), the embodied cultural capitals such as global competence and soft skills (Cubillos et al., 2008), cosmopolitan awareness and global engagement (Gu & Schweisfurth, 2015; Paige et al., 2009).

Parents and families' volume of accessed capital can provide a robust basis for international student mobility which is economically, cultural and socially selective, and politically selective, especially in Chinese contexts. Economically, it is estimated that the British classroom-based courses annually charge a Chinese postgraduate an average £14,096 in 2020, the amount for laboratory-required courses is £16,222, and £21,767 for clinical-based courses (Study in the UK, 2021), exclusive of the extra maintenance costs such as accommodation, transportation, and other living costs. These fees are extremely expensive and especially unaffordable for disadvantaged parents if there are no scholarships, compared with the annual disposable incomes of Chinese national residents

in 2020, £3,550 (National Bureau of Statistics of China, 2021). Furthermore, students' choices for international education are demonstrated to be closely associated with parents' cultural values (Lörz et al., 2016), as mobile students who were cultivated with better academic profiles or cosmopolitan identities are more prepared and advantaged to choose international education. As a result, they typically normalize overseas educational mobility as an accepted practice or a standard phase in their life journey, rather than a supplementary factor.

In terms of social capital, Portes (1998) highlighted that social capital influences individual behaviours mainly through 'trust and norms within a group' which reduce the costs and risks of actions, and 'bridging ties' that connect different groups, providing access to external resources. These 'bridging ties' are particularly vital for international students because they involve cross-cultural and transnational support networks. The presence of relatives or family friends in the host country, for example, offers crucial on-the-ground support for living and studying, which becomes indispensable when students first arrive in an unfamiliar environment (Beech, 2015). In the context of globalization, the role of family social capital in international student mobility (ISM) has grown increasingly complex and multidimensional. Recent research supports Portes's views on social capital, especially emphasizing the significance of 'bridging ties' for educational migration. These ties are essential for cross-cultural adaptation and educational success (Brooks & Waters, 2010). Families with transnational social capital can provide effective support and guidance for their children studying abroad, enhancing their academic and social adjustment. This is because such connections facilitate everyday life and offer emergency support (Pang, 2018).

2.4. Youth ISM to parents

The 'linked lives' principle also underscores that an individual's migratory actions can have ramifications on other lives (Mulder, 2018). The distinct and crucial responsibility to parents underscores the paramount role of the family in migration decisions compared to other social networks (Mulder, 2018). For instance, middle-aged individuals with working lives are more likely to encourage their parents to move to their locality to provide care for their grandchildren (Bastia, 2009), while younger children are inclined to relocate to care for their elderly and infirm parents (Mulder, 2018).

Previous research has shown that the impact of student migration behaviour on families can be divided into three areas: economic, psychological and cultural. Economically, as mentioned above, youth studying abroad may result in a financial burden on their families, primarily parents, who often provide financial support (Pimpa, 2005). The impact may require adjustments in financial plans and the need for additional support from extended family members (Lörz et al., 2016). Also, students studying abroad may elicit emotional distress in family members who remain behind, especially parents, due to the deep emotional connection they have established with their child. The separation from their child for an extended period may create a feeling of loss and separation anxiety for parents (Thapa et al., 2018). These emotional repercussions of a student's absence not solely affect parents but may extend to other family members such as siblings, grandparents, and others. The departure of the student may lead to a feeling of loss and loneliness, in addition to the disruption of family routines,

traditions, and dynamics. These changes can create a ripple effect that adversely affects the emotional well-being of the entire family (Gonzalez et al., 2012). Despite technological advancements, the possibility of timely communication between international students and their families through remote means exists. Nevertheless, time zone differences and geographical distance may still hinder communication between family members and result in reduced interaction. Such limitations in communication may potentially contribute to misunderstandings and tensions among family members (Cummings et al., 2002; Livingstone & Bober, 2004). Furthermore, students pursuing education overseas serve as conduits for cultural exchange (Schartner, 2016). As these international students gain exposure to diverse cultures, they frequently relay their experiences to their family members. Consequently, this may result in an enhanced appreciation or conflict between various cultural norms, languages, and traditions. On the one hand, such exposure may foster open-mindedness and cultural sensitivity among family members; on the other hand, it may also evoke concerns among family members that their children are becoming excessively acculturated to Western values (Phinney et al., 2000).

Despite the significant findings of previous studies on migration behaviour in the context of the life course framework, two key areas remain understudied. First, historical scholarly discourse concerning parental 'responsibility' in shaping children's decisions to pursue education abroad has concentrated mainly on the implications of economic capital, inadvertently marginalizing the role of social capital. Particularly within the framework of the pandemic, opting for overseas study is deemed an 'unsafe' migratory practice. Accordingly, the mechanisms through which parental social networks inform children's decisions about international study remain an understudied aspect of this field. Specifically, it remains unclear whether the impact of individual migration behaviour on other lives differs in particular historical contexts. Consequently, the principal objectives of this research, within the milieu of the pandemic, are: 1. To investigate the role of the family in youth education migration behaviours through a social network perspective. 2. To examine the repercussions of youth's decisions to study abroad on their familial structures.

3. Data and method

In choosing between the two broad qualitative and quantitative research paradigms, this paper selected the former as this model is more useful in helping to examine in-depth data based on personal beliefs, perceptions and understandings of individuals' experiences (Pathak et al., 2013). Amongst the specific qualitative data collection methods which include observation, interviews, focus groups and surveys (Rabionet, 2011), semi-structured interviews seemed to be the most suitable method to explore my selected research questions as they elicited detailed narratives and information (DiCicco-Bloom & Crabtree, 2006).

The participant sampling procedure for this study followed four practical steps proposed by Robinson (2014) for interview-based qualitative research. Firstly, we defined two sampling criteria: in the beginning, the participants would be 2020 Fall-entry Chinese postgraduates pursuing a degree certificate in UK higher education institutions; and then, they should have moved to the UK upon the time of interview. The initial

worldwide outbreak of the pandemic at the end of 2019 meant that students (and students' families) enrolling in the academic year of 2020 were almost the first group to face decisions regarding studying abroad, attending online classes, or deferring their admission. Consequently, this study targeted Chinese master's students who physically arrived in the UK for the 2020 academic year and conducted interviews between the end of 2020 and early 2021, to gather data relevant to our research discussion of the role of families within ISM during special time. Next, a snowball sampling strategy based on my personal social networks by sending informal invitations via WeChat (a Chinese social media platform) was utilized to recruit participants. And, the agreed participants were asked to recommend more postgraduates who fulfilled my sampling criteria, forming 'referral chains' (Robinson, 2014, p. 37). Eventually 11 women and 7 men enrolled in five universities and different postgraduate programes in England. The name information of those universities is anonymized as this study does not engage with the institutional analysis of international student mobility. All participants were sent the 'Information Sheet' which included my contact details and project information before interviews. In our study, we ensured ethical integrity through rigorous measures: we maintained anonymity by using pseudonyms and removing personal identifiers. Confidentiality was upheld by restricting data access to the research team and storing it securely. We protected data using encryption and secure storage methods. Participants provided informed consent, fully understanding the study's aims and their rights. These steps safeguarded participant privacy and enhanced the credibility of our findings.

An interview guide contains a set of short but concrete sub-questions that are grounded by the motivations of their mobility to the UK during the pandemic. To investigate reasons and rationales behind Chinese international postgraduates in the UK, the sub-questions were designed in reference to the interview guide conducted by Li (2004) who studied the mobility of mainland students to Hong Kong and Macau. While semi-structured interviews in our study are guided by progressive questions to achieve relatively systematic data, they still maintain a level of flexibility that allows for participants to provide new information during the interview rather than being rigidly limited to these sub-questions (Cohen et al., 2011).

All the interviews lasting one to two hours were conducted in person in Mandarin in order to create a relaxing and comfortable interview atmosphere for interviewees, thus, ensuring the coherence of the conversations and saving more entire mobility experiences. All interview contents were fully translated into English. Thematic analysis was applied to analyze the data. All names of participants in our finding parts are pseudonyms.

4. Findings

In response to the COVID-19 pandemic, China has implemented a range of stringent safeguards that far exceed those taken by other countries. These include travel bans and quarantines, closures of schools and institutions, restrictions on socializing, temperature checks and contact tracing, digital monitoring of citizens, comprehensive testing, and utilization of technology to track and assess risk (Yu & Li, 2021). In addition, the Chinese government has made a concerted effort to raise awareness of the virus and advocate preventative measures, such as wearing face masks and frequent hand washing

(Song et al., 2022). These measures keep the number of infections in China at a low level in 2019–2022 (Wang et al., 2022). Moreover, unlike most Western countries, China is more aggressive in publicising the pandemic. State-owned media channels including Xinhua News Agency, China Central Television (CCTV), and People's Daily provided daily updates and instructions on the outbreak. These sites also underlined the importance of the public adhering to government measures to contain the virus, such as wearing masks and practising social distancing.

According to Social Cognitive Theory (Bandura, 1989), the Chinese government's measures and mass media campaigns may have influenced people's beliefs and attitudes about the virus, including their perceptions of the seriousness of COVID-19 and the importance of taking public health actions. Safety concerns, therefore, have been prioritized by many Chinese international students (Xiong et al., 2020). Our study participants frequently mentioned phrases such as 'personal safety' and 'the likelihood of infection in the host country' when discussing their decision-making process. All participants reported delaying their travel to the UK from the original starting date in order to wait for the high-risk transmission period of the pandemic to pass.

4.1. Parent's social connection and ISM

In addition to these external factors, this study found that family resources are crucial when they decide to migrate abroad for study during the pandemic. The availability of family resources can help ease the transition and provide a supportive foundation for the student's migration. Unlike before the pandemic, most of my participants ($n = 15$) revealed that their migration decisions during the pandemic were significantly influenced by social connections at the destination.

In general, prospective mobile students and their families need to acquire the necessary study abroad-related information such as the campus culture, program information, university ranking, housing situations, healthcare, and more in their target countries before departure. To note, this information-gathering process for transnational higher education-level mobility is usually done by international students themselves, while parents mainly provide mobility aspiration, social desire, related material and emotional support. Parents would not deliberately seek help from friends in the local area. For example, as Yang (2018, p. 694)'s study demonstrated, some 'responsible' parents encourage youth to study abroad while 'turned a blind eye' to where students go, or we can say, they just want anywhere but India.

However, when an outbreak occurs, the networks of relationships that parents in their home country (China) have in the destination can indeed have a significant influence on their decision to relocate their children, according to our research. During such a challenging time, the support and guidance provided by trusted individuals in the local network can play a crucial role in shaping parents' choices, like Shyla's story:

> Shyla: I would choose the United States before the COVID-19. My bachelor's degree is gained from a Sino-American cooperative program … However, because of the serious pandemic situation in the USA at the time, I finnally choose the UK … My parents firmly refused to let me go to the United States, they watched the news and heard from relatives and friends that the United States is very chaotic and the law and order is not good, they do not control guns, my parents think it is too dangerous for a girl!

Shyla mentioned that she had also received offers to study in the United States, but her parents decided against it due to feedback from their friends and relatives residing there claiming that they were 'dangerous for a girl'. They rely on personal networks to gather information about the outbreak and its impact on the destination decision. Insights and firsthand experiences shared by individuals in their network can help these parents make more informed decisions regarding the well-being and safety of their sons or daughters. Similarly, Meko's parents also got news revealing mass demonstrations and sometimes shortages of supplies in the US and then changed mobility host country after family negotiation. They sought updates on the current situation, local preventive measures, healthcare facilities and the overall safety of the area and made a family meeting to draw the final mobile decision.

Based on all participants' answers, we found that their parents have a stronger level of trust in information provided by their friends compared to media reports. They perceive their connections as more reliable and trustworthy sources due to their personal relationship and firsthand experiences. Also, compared to media reports, networks in the destination can provide real-time updates on the situation, which can be perceived as more accurate and actionable by these parents when making decisions about their sons or daughters' study abroad plans.

Moreover, parents may turn to their network for practical assistance in relocating their sons or daughters during the pandemic. Social networks such as friends, relatives, or acquaintances in the destination can provide invaluable support in finding suitable accommodation, navigating logistical challenges, and ensuring access to essential resources during the outbreak. Their presence can provide a sense of familiarity and ease the transition for both parents and youth during a stressful time. Through the interviews, we found that some of the respondents would choose a place close to their parents' friends or relatives as a residence.

> Ethan: My parents felt that the UK (during the pandemic) was dangerous and there was a shortage of material, medical resources. So they asked a local friend to help find me a house near them.

> Berry: My current residence is near my aunt's house. Although it is far from school, my parents feel that if anything happens to me, they(aunt) will be able to take care of me.

Based on the respondents' information above, we found that parental social connections were important judgement criteria to realize youth's study abroad behaviour during the pandemic. Their presence near the student's residence provided a sense of familiarity and assurance for parents, knowing that their child would have someone reliable nearby to rely on in case of any emergencies.

The decision to study abroad, particularly during a pandemic, does not solely lie with the students but emerges from a multifaceted array of elements, wherein parental support, especially in financial matters, plays an indispensable role. Moreover, this paper focuses on the social network perspective and the findings presented above significantly illuminate how the pandemic has reshaped the use of social networks among parents when making decisions about their sons and daughters' study abroad plans. Prior to the pandemic, while parents did utilize their social connections to a degree, this was mainly for providing emotional and moral support rather than as a primary

source of practical information for making such decisions. However, during the pandemic, there has been a distinct and notable shift towards an increased reliance on these networks for critical, real-time information concerning health, safety, and logistical considerations.

This shift underscores a broader transformation in the role of social networks from being supportive in nature to being instrumental in decision-making, especially in contexts marked by uncertainty and risk, such as that posed by the pandemic. The enhanced reliance on trusted personal networks over more impersonal sources like media reports or general online information highlights a strategic adaptation to the unique challenges of the pandemic, reflecting a pragmatic approach to mitigating risks associated with international mobility during such times.

These changes suggest that the pandemic did not merely increase the frequency of social network usage but fundamentally altered the nature of this usage, emphasizing the acquisition of timely, reliable information crucial for ensuring the health and well-being of students abroad. Therefore, the pandemic has indeed intensified the use of social networks in new ways, aligning with the broader necessity of navigating the complexities and uncertainties introduced by such global crises.

4.2. ISM and their family

The repercussions of the pandemic on ISM extend beyond heightened reliance on social networks. The phenomenon also manifests in the capacity of a child's migration behaviour to influence the attitudes and behaviours of family members. Existing literature predominantly emphasizes the economic, psychological, and cultural ramifications of International Student Migration (ISM) on familial structures (Livingstone & Bober, 2004; Pimpa, 2005; Thapa et al., 2018). Nonetheless, these investigations overlook the influence of ISM activities on families within the unique purview of public health incidents, such as pandemics. Through our interviews with the participants, we discovered that the majority of them concurred with the findings of the aforementioned study regarding their families.

Amidst the COVID-19 pandemic, the attitudes of parents towards their sons and daughters' choice to pursue higher education overseas have undergone a notable transition. With the perceived comparative safety of China in contrast to the UK, parents' priorities have shifted from considerations of educational resources and Western cultural values to safety concerns of their offspring. All of our 18 interviewees reported that their families were not fully supportive when they discussed plans to physically study in the UK during the pandemic. However, respondents indicated some differences in the views of their parents and grandparents. As Howard's experience has shown:

> My parents were hesitated whether I can go abroad or just take the online course, but my grandparents were very much against me going abroad. You know old people, they watch the news all the time, and the news is all about how many people today and how many people yesterday. They think I've gone to England and never come back.

According to the parents' perception, despite the elevated risk of contracting the virus abroad, it would be a 'waste' for their child to take a gap year. The elderly members of the family (grandparents), in particular, consider foreign countries to be a '*high risk*'

place to live. They express concern that while there may be no noticeable after-effects during the early stage of the infection, there is potential for the emergence of such effects in the future.

This finding suggests that Chinese mobile families holding perceived threats to disease inevitably faced a dilemma: one side is students' higher education investment with perceived or imagined benefits for future development, and the other side is deeply-rooted health concerns. Grandparents, who are often older and have more life experiences, prioritize the safety and well-being of their grandchildren over their education and future development. They may view the COVID-19 pandemic as a serious health threat and may be more concerned about the risks of their grandchildren travelling abroad and living in a foreign country during the pandemic. This concern may be heightened by the fact that older adults are at a higher risk of severe illness or complications from COVID-19. This is in the line with Health Belief Model (Rosenstock, 2000) that the individual belief of health conditions can predict individuals' health-related behaviours. As shaped by Chinese macro backgrounds, public perception about COVID-19 in China is much more serious than in Western countries, so as to take various necessary measures to guarantee safety. In contrast, parents, who are often younger and may have more immediate concerns about their sons and daughters' education and future development, prioritize the opportunity to study abroad and gain valuable experiences and skills. They may view studying abroad as a way to expand their children's horizons, develop their independence, and prepare them for future careers and personal growth.

After the family ultimately decides to allow the youth to study abroad, we found that the behaviour of the families of students undergoes changes. As in Sandy and Jay's examples:

> Sandy: It's very interesting that when I decided to come out (to the UK) to study, my close relatives like my parents and my grandparents started to follow the developments of the pandemic in the UK every day. They would even forward me news and information about the UK on WeChat (a Chinese social networking app).

> Jay: They (the elderly) would even burn incense and worship Buddha every now and then to pray for the pandemic to pass. Sometimes when they see on the news that the pandemic is not under control abroad, they will even blame the foreign leaders. You know, they almost didn't care about foreign news before.

The observed behavioural 'abnormalities' in families during the pandemic, particularly in the context of preparing their children for studying abroad, manifest in two distinct ways. Firstly, the pervasive concern for the safety of their children leads families to engage in vigilant monitoring of pandemic-related news. In some cases, this concern extends to religious practices, where families seek divine intervention to protect their children abroad (Liu, 2011; Wang et al., 2015). These practices could range from special prayers to more structured rituals including Chanting and Reciting Scriptures, reflecting a deep-rooted belief in spiritual safeguards against physical harm. This reliance on faith-based activities often intensifies during times of crisis, as documented in various cultural studies that highlight the role of spirituality in managing anxiety and uncertainty.

Secondly, families may seek to gain a more comprehensive understanding of the response measures to the pandemic by following pandemic-related information. By doing so, they hope to equip their sons and daughters with the necessary knowledge

and skills to avoid infection or effectively deal with the consequences of infection. Some interviewees stated that their parents and elderly relatives finally compromised and insisted on preventing transnational mobility and fierce worries of life abroad during the pandemic but with prerequisites: only if they are in well-prepared state in their eyes, like bringing enough medication, masks, and getting fully vaccinated before departure. What's more, despite the UK's relaxed pandemic prevention measures such as no mandatory mask-wearing and party restrictions lifted, these Chinese students have to compromised to frequently report to '*go out less often*,' '*wear a mask when outside*,' and '*avoid crowded places*' when physically abroad.

Our research has found that the impact of students' mobility on their families during the pandemic is significantly different from that in pre-pandemic times. These behavioural changes are rooted in the principles of 'responsibility' and 'solidarity' among family members, which are consistent with the 'linked lives' principle. However, these differences in behaviour also reflect the possibility of stronger family ties during a special historical period (the pandemic). This suggests that the difficulties and challenges brought about by the pandemic may lead family members to become more united and supportive of each other. They may pay more attention to each other's health and safety, and work together to face the various challenges brought about by the pandemic.

5. Conclusion

International student mobility has attracted booming families' attention in recent decades as a step-further familial investment strategy to accumulate advantages inaccessible in home countries. Therein, post-secondary mobile Chinese students have become part of everyday reality at many overseas universities and are currently the largest group of migrating students in the world. Among various destinations, the UK holds the second-largest population of Chinese international students. However, the sudden emergence of COVID-19 has upended the ISM and international education, leading to considerable unexpected changes for both transnational students and related family members. Chinese students, in particular, have faced unique challenges due to the association between COVID-19 and China propagated by general perception, influential politicians and mass media, leading to parents' more concerns about safety issues and the re-evaluation of mobility decisions than ever before. Therefore, it makes sense to explore the role of Chinese mobile families in their higher-education level children's education mobility during the COVID-19 period. Based on semi-structured interviews with 18 2020-fall-entry Chinese postgraduates enrolled in UK universities, this paper has the following two key findings:

First, among the various factors influencing their decision-making process, whether have social connections in the mobility host country to provide the required support to their sons and daughters during the ongoing pandemic emerged as the most significant determinant. In this vein, though a growing body of work shows cohorts of mobile students and families are becoming more socially diverse, that is, mobile students are increasingly from diverse social backgrounds not only limited to elite and middle-class privilege, the pandemic has contributed to the emergence of further mobility stratified selection and screening mechanism. It has further required the convertibility and utilization of familial resources and connections within transnational contexts. As

highlighted by Hu and his colleagues' similar finding (2022, p. 83), as families assume the role of responsible parties for the risks and opportunities associated with (im)mobility, the phenomenon of transnational (im)mobility 'has become increasingly embedded in an unequal terrain.' This finding also emphasizes the importance of family in international student mobility decision. To note, under the pandemic context, the underlying rationales behind Chinese international student mobility prove to be hardly shakeable in mobile families' belief even with health or safety threats, which is still important based on the perceived gains from higher education at the mobile destination. In this regard, this study once again suggests the importance of image effects, especially familial aspiration and imagination, in precipitating, promoting and perpetuating the education-related decision-making of movement actions. More dynamic socially situated accounts of the imaginative dimensions of place always provide meaning to student mobility.

Secondly, different from the previous research on migration behaviour based on the 'linked lives' principle of life course theory has primarily examined the impact of other individuals' lives, such as friends and family, on migrants' migration behaviour, this study presents a departure on migration behaviour and highlights the reciprocal nature of migration decisions, suggesting that the behaviour of individuals seeking to migrate can also impact the lives of those closely around them, particularly their families. With the perceived comparative safety of China in contrast to destinations like the UK, during the COVID-19 pandemic, parents' priorities have shifted from considerations of educational resources and Western cultural values to concerns for the personal safety and well-being of their offspring. Notably, grandparents within the family unit exhibit even greater apprehension. Therefore, significant changes occur in the behaviour of family members. Parents and grandparents begin to closely monitor the developments of the pandemic in the host country, often forwarding news and information to their students abroad. These behavioural changes reflect the principles of 'responsibility' and 'solidarity' among family members, aligning with the notion of linked lives.

Implications for practice

This research offers valuable practical lessons for institutions and policymakers relating to international student mobility (ISM). More specifically, during the COVID-19 pandemic. First and foremost, this text emphasizes the essential role that support networks and social connections can play for international students. Educational institutions may utilize mentorship programs and cultural integration efforts to foster strong social ties that help students build up strong academic success as well as overall wellbeing. As part of an overall effort to address stratification in mobility selection, policymakers must also aim at decreasing access inequalities between students from diverse socioeconomic backgrounds. Scholarships or financial aid could provide more equal and accessible ISM opportunities that reach more learners than before.

Effective communication should be one of the primary concerns. Host countries' educational institutions must take proactive steps to inform international students and their families of safety measures or pandemic-related updates in a timely fashion. Clear and accurate information can ease concerns surrounding health and safety issues, building the confidence of both students and parents alike. Institutions seeking to attract international students should emphasize the long-term advantages of their educational

offerings by emphasizing quality instruction and potential career development prospects. This marketing approach can assist with alleviating concerns pertaining to safety and wellbeing while acting as an attractive prospectus for international students. Families have increasingly become active participants in mobility decisions; institutions can offer resources and assistance to parents of international students so that they are informed and equipped for their student's journey abroad.

Limitations

Acknowledging the limitations of our study, it is important to note that the focus on the initial stage of the pandemic may not encapsulate the full spectrum of evolving responses and adaptations that occurred as the pandemic progressed. This temporal limitation means that our findings primarily reflect the early impacts and decision-making processes, potentially differing from those that would be observed in later stages when policies, individual perceptions, and global circumstances had further developed. Moreover, as a result of travel restrictions during the pandemic, our study only included Chinese students residing in London. This may introduce potential bias in our findings, as the severity of the pandemic and associated restrictions may differ across different regions of the UK, potentially affecting students' levels of worry and well-being. Furthermore, our study did not include a comparison with students who were offered places in UK schools but chose not to come. Future research could beneficially explore how these dynamics shifted over the course of the pandemic to provide a more comprehensive view of the changing landscape of international student mobility. In future studies, it would be beneficial to include both groups of students in order to gain a more comprehensive understanding of the impacts of the pandemic on international student migration. More research may also be required to determine whether and how these altered patterns and behaviours of international student mobility continue to persist in the post-pandemic age. Additionally, we plan to extend our investigation to include parents, which would allow us to compare and deepen our insights into how familial decisions are influenced by social capital in the home country.

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No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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