

## **Family-mediated migration infrastructure: Chinese international students and parents navigating (im)mobilities during the COVID-19 pandemic**

### **Abstract**

The outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic and associated responses such as border closure, lockdown measures and flight controls have severely disrupted transnational infrastructures that sustain, channel, organize, and condition international migration. This infrastructural disruption has led to the double exclusion of temporary migrants from both sending and host societies. In this context, we explore how Chinese international students in the United Kingdom and their parents in China navigate transnational (im)mobilities during the pandemic. In doing so, we develop the conceptualization of “family-mediated migration infrastructure” to elucidate the role played by transnational family relationships in brokering information, mobilizing resources, and coordinating disjointed acts of institutional players in order to sustain transnational (im)mobility. We also reveal a distinctive emotional double-bind in the process of family-mediated infrastructuring, which requires members of transnational families to strategically perform emotional engagement and detachment in complex ways. Our findings highlight the functional resilience and emotional vulnerability of family-mediated transnational migration infrastructure, and render visible the intimate fabrics that contribute to sustaining transnationalism during the pandemic.

**Keywords:** Chinese, COVID-19, Family, Infrastructure, International Students, Migration, Transnational

## Introduction

In an age of global mobilities, the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic has brought the world to a halt (Kraemer et al. 2020). Nation-states have tightened their borders. International flights are curtailed. As distinct states devise vastly different responses, information on the pandemic is fragmented along nation-state lines (Cornelson and Miloucheva 2020). Unlike in regional disasters such as earthquakes and hurricanes where transnational mobilization forms a key dimension of disaster relief (Comfort 2005; Cook and Butz 2016; Floristella 2016), immobility has been imposed to slow down the spread of COVID-19. As the pandemic severely disrupts transnational migration infrastructures, including transportation, regulatory frameworks, institutional coordination and commercial brokerage, millions of temporary migrants are stranded in their host countries (Chakraborty and Maity 2020).

The disruption of normative social order provides an opportunity for the development of new, alternative ones. The context of “infrastructural disruption” raises several pertinent questions: How do temporary migrants navigate transnational (im)mobility during the pandemic? How, if at all, does an alternative set of infrastructures emerge to sustain such (im)mobility? What are the characterizing features of the alternative infrastructures, and what are their implications for transnational mobilities in a post-pandemic world?

To answer these questions, our empirical case focuses on how Chinese international students in the United Kingdom (UK) and their parents in China navigate transnational (im)mobility during the COVID-19 pandemic. Specifically, we ask how Chinese international students and their parents make sense of risks associated with COVID-19 in a transnational context and how they make decisions regarding whether to remain in the UK and subsequently navigate when and how to return to China. As the largest body of international students, 928,090 Chinese students studied overseas at a tertiary level in 2019 (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization [UNESCO] 2020)—120,000 of

whom are enrolled in British universities (Jeffreys 2020). Despite global curtailment of geographical mobility during the pandemic, international students are among the most mobile of transnational migrants: While around 88% of Chinese international students remained in the UK in early April 2020, only around 10% did at the end of May (Stevenson and May 2020).

Our key contribution is to foreground the role of parent-child relations in constituting a resilient set of transnational migration infrastructures during COVID-19. Existing research has provided rich insights into how family relations configure Chinese students' transnational education choices and experiences (Fong 2011; Ma 2020; Tu 2018; Xu and Montgomery 2019; Xu 2020). However, we still know little about how Chinese families respond to "crises" arising from their children's transnational educational mobility. To fill this gap, we explore the ways in which parent-child relationships are mobilized to broker disparate information on COVID-19, strategize (im)mobility, and transfer resources to sustain and coordinate transnational (im)mobility. We reveal a shift in the role of families from regulated users of transnational infrastructures to coordinators of the infrastructures during the pandemic. In doing so, we highlight the involuted, mutually constitutive processes of "doing" family relationships and "infrastructuring" transnational migration (cf. Xiang and Lindquist 2014). We also draw attention to the emotional double-bind inherent in family-mediated migration infrastructures and discuss their well-being and inequality implications.

### **Theoretical framework**

To flesh out the interplay between transnational (education) mobility and parent-child relations, our theoretical framework brings together three sociological traditions—risks, transnationalism and mobilities, and family studies. Specifically, we first theorize the context of transnational (im)mobility during COVID-19. We then explore the theoretical potential of conceptualizing family relationships as "migration infrastructures" under the exceptional

circumstance of the pandemic. We discuss how family-mediated migration infrastructures differ from the role played by families in shaping migratory dynamics in “normal” times. Finally, we specify the distinctive features of family-mediated infrastructures during the pandemic, elaborating on how they may differ from other forms of infrastructure.

### ***Risk, transnational (im)mobility, and infrastructural disruption during COVID-19***

How do we understand the context in which transnational (im)mobility operates during the pandemic? COVID-19 represents a quintessential example of Beck’s (2009) theorization of “risk society,” which posits that modern societies are organized in response to risks. International, national and local institutions devise (pre-emptive) governance strategies in response to (anticipated) risks, and individuals revolve around a tendency to be risk-proof (Beck 2009). Disaster relief in events such as earthquake, nuclear contamination, and tsunami have typically relied on transnational mobilization of information and material resources (Cook and Butz 2016; Horton 2012; Sapat and Esnard 2012; Solomon et al. 1993). However, responses to perceived and actual risks associated with COVID-19 are distinctively characterized by an “anti-mobility” tendency, as more than 100 countries had instituted either a full or partial lockdown by the end of March 2020 (British Broadcasting Company [BBC] 2020).

Transnational migration is intensely mediated by a coordinated system of infrastructures formed of “interlinked technologies, institutions, and actors that facilitate and condition mobility” (Xiang and Lindquist 2014, 122). In the case of transnational education mobility (Fong 2011; Ma 2020), migration infrastructure is formed of complex interplays between the institutional (e.g., states), the regulatory (e.g., immigration policies), the commercial (e.g., education agents), the social (e.g., migrant network), and the technological (e.g., communication and transport). Departing from a fixation on specific institutions, migration infrastructure emphasizes the processual synergy and coordination between

multiple institutions and actors in forming a dynamic system (Lin et al. 2017). According to Xiang and Lindquist (2014), the verb “infrastructuring” refers to the animation of the system to sustain migration. A focus on migration infrastructure thus encourages us to reconceptualize migration not as a reified movement between places, but as a “social *process* that organizes and channels mobility” (Xiang and Lindquist 2014, 132).

The outbreak of COVID-19 has severely disrupted the taken-for-granted infrastructures dependent on which transnational migration takes place. Since the outbreak of the pandemic, nation-states have tightened their borders (BBC 2020); international flights are curtailed, for example, by China’s “five-one” policy;<sup>1</sup> and local lockdowns are imposed. As different nation-states take considerably different political stances to speculate the origin of the virus and take divergent measures to tackle the pandemic, information on COVID-19, often racialized, is particularly fragmented (Cornelson and Miloucheva 2020). These developments have not only disabled specific modular components of the transnational migration infrastructure, but more importantly disrupted transnational *coordination* that is essential to the operation of the infrastructure (Xiang and Lindquist 2014). As nation-states retreat from a transnational social space (Vertovec 2009), the rise of state-centered risk governance, biopolitical nationalism, and competition for essential medical resources have also stymied the efforts of organizations such as the World Health Organization and United Nations to coordinate transnational initiatives (Kloet, Lin, and Chow 2020).

The breakdown and (re-)establishment of normative social order is a key concern for sociologists (Weber 2009 [1915]). The infrastructural disruption poses two important questions for the transnationally mobile. First, as many temporary migrants, such as international students, are stranded in their host countries, they are faced with the conundrum of whether, when and how to return to their sending countries. Second, as people navigate

their transnational (im)mobility amid heightened uncertainties, what (new) order may emerge to form alternative infrastructures that sustain and condition transnational migration.

### *Transnational family relationships as migration infrastructure*

What roles do family relationships play in sustaining transnational (im)mobility during the pandemic? The familial institution has long played a pivotal role in weathering crises (Sapat and Esnard 2012; Solomon et al. 1993; Young 1954). In adverse situations, families are often taken for granted as a safety net for individuals to access essential support and resource. The theory of “latent kin matrix” posits that “family members may remain dormant for long periods of time and only emerge as a resource when the need arises” (Silverstein and Bengtson 1997, 431). Even the most advanced welfare states actively draw on the strong social capital carried by family ties to sustain social reproduction and a sense of social cohesion (Esping-Andersen et al. 2002). Given a strong emphasis on familial collectivism and China’s incomplete welfare legislation, Chinese families are often held responsible for the well-being of their members (Hu and Scott 2016). For Chinese international students, their families play a pivotal role in shaping their education and migration choices and experiences (Fong 2011), and in many cases, the families provide essential resources to sustain their mobility (Ma 2020; Xu 2020).

Disaster research has produced extensive evidence on the crucial role played by the familial institution in transnational mobilization of disaster relief and rehabilitation (Cook and Butz 2016; Sapat and Esnard 2012). Essential resources are channeled through family networks (Le Dé et al. 2016). People move away from disaster zones to join their families, and such movement often involves transnational border-crossing (Loebach 2016). In disasters such as flood, hurricane and earthquake, resource and human mobilities are clearly defined by the spatial demarcation between disaster and “safe” zones (Horton 2012; Loebach 2016;

Sapat and Esnard 2012). However, what makes the COVID-19 pandemic unique is its sheer scale, which blurs the boundary between disaster and “safe” zones, although a clearer distinction may emerge as different countries phase out of the pandemic at different times.

Nevertheless, research on transnational migration has yet to more fully explore the ways in which family relations may constitute migration infrastructures. Although migration scholarship has provided illuminating insights into how family dynamics trigger or constrain transnational migration (Baldassar 2014; Foner and Dreby 2011; Tu 2019; Wilding 2018), family relations remain largely invisible in research on migration infrastructure that primarily focuses on labor migration (Lin et al. 2017; Xiang and Lindquist 2014). Conceptualizing family relations as migration infrastructure requires us to go beyond considering families and institutional players (e.g., states) and systems (e.g., technology, transport) as separate, antithetical entities or conceptualizing individual families as regulated users of institutional infrastructures. Rather, it emphasizes the blurring of the individual-institutional boundary and the ways in which families form a self-organized system of architectures and coordinate the acts of institutional players (as opposed to being coordinated). As many states and institutional players retreat from a transnational space to focus on national priorities during the pandemic, we ask how, if at all, transnational families have stepped up to assume a governance function, in helping broker fragmented information, legitimize and regulate (im)mobility, mobilize resources, and coordinate the acts of distinct institutions and individuals to enact (im)mobility (cf. Xiang and Lindquist 2014).

### ***Family-mediated transnational migration infrastructure: Distinctive features***

How does family-mediated migration infrastructure differ from other institution-brokered forms of infrastructure? Family-mediated infrastructure serves two goals. First, it organizes and channels transnational migration, as do institution-brokered infrastructures. Second, it serves to maintain the relationship between family members, which is beyond the typical

scope of institution-brokered infrastructures. What renders family-mediated infrastructuring unique is the co-constitutive nature of its two goals: As transnational (im)mobilities are enacted to sustain family relationships and they are also sustained through family relationships, family-mediated transnational migration infrastructure has a self-serving and involuted nature (Lin et al. 2017). While the two goals serve each other, they may not always be in alignment. Therefore, it is important to interrogate the tension between them. Moreover, we must ask how distinctive characteristics of parent-child relationships in the Chinese family inform the assembling of transnational migration infrastructures, and how the infrastructuring of transnational (im)mobility (re)configure the substance of family relationships.

Family norms can be re-appropriated to provide stable moorings that sustain (im)mobilities, particularly in uncertain times (Cooper 2014). Existing research has provided crucial insights into how transnationally located and mobile family members overcome geographical and symbolic borders to maintain a sense of “familyhood” (Wilding 2018; Tu 2019). However, far less attention has been paid to how “familyhood” can be mobilized to sustain transnational mobility. Our focus on the latter does not suggest that family-mediated migration infrastructure equates to reified family norms; quite the contrary. As Chinese international students and their parents react to rapidly evolving circumstances during the pandemic, we argue that the relationship between family members must be constantly reconfigured in order to sustain transnational (im)mobility. Thus, we argue that it is the concurrent durability and agility of family relations that render them particularly apt for infrastructuring transnational mobility in response to heightened uncertainties.

Family-mediated infrastructuring of transnational (im)mobility, despite its goal to support and sustain family relations, could paradoxically strain parent-child relationships. The unprecedented scale and uncertain nature of risks posed by COVID-19 require Chinese international students and their parents to reorientate “familyhood” around the navigation of



“risks,” over and above baseline risks in “normal” times (Ma 2020). As “doing” family becomes “doing” risks, “even in the smallest conceivable microcosm, risk defines social relations” (Beck 2009, 188). In a transnational context where risk perceptions are localized and fragmented (Cornelson and Miloucheva 2020), it also requires the proactive collaboration between family members, beyond the usual state of parents caring for and investing in their children’s international education mobility (Ma 2020; Tu 2018).

Due to its paradoxical configuration, family-mediated infrastructuring of transnational migration is charged with and lubricated by emotional mobilization. We argue that this is a distinctive feature that sets family-mediated infrastructure apart from its state and market-mediated counterparts (Lan 2019; Xiang and Lindquist 2014). Core to the navigation of risks is the sense of liability, which, according to Beck (2009), can be categorized into two types—personal (i.e., the decision maker accepts the consequences of his or her decision) and social (i.e., responsibility for others). While social rather than personal liability is salient to institution-brokered infrastructuring (Lin et al. 2017), the social and the personal are inextricably interlinked in family-mediated infrastructuring. Members of transnational families often need to both work with their emotions (e.g., worry and anxiety) and work against their emotions to maintain a sense of normalcy by suppressing emotive expressions. To understand the inner work of family-mediated infrastructuring of migration during the pandemic, it is crucial to explore the intricate emotional work underpinning how family members strike a fine balance in the double-bind of emotional attachment and detachment, and when and where emotional slippages take place to tip families off their balance.

## **Methods**

### ***Research setting***

Our empirical case focuses on Chinese students in the UK and their parents in China. Our fieldwork spans one month from April 7 to May 7, 2020. The UK experienced its sharpest increase in the number of COVID-19 cases and deaths between the end of March and the beginning of May (UK Government 2020). The UK government's initial, controversial "herd immunity" (Horton 2020) strategy was widely perceived as a major health and safety risk. China, on the other hand, imposed a "brutal but effective" lockdown policy (Graham-Harrison and Guo 2020) and was regarded as a "safe" place when COVID-19 broke out in Europe. While the contrasting contexts suggest a likely scenario in which Chinese students flee the UK to return to China, such mobility was severely hindered by changing border and quarantine policies and transport provision.

### ***Data collection and analysis***

We adopted a snowballing strategy to have sampled Chinese students (from mainland China, Hong Kong and Macau) who remained in the UK at the end of March 2020 after the UK's national lockdown. We focused on undergraduate, non-graduating students and final year students who intended to pursue a master's degree in the UK. We did not include graduating students because they tended to stay in the UK to complete their studies. Our goal was to understand how the students and their families navigated whether to remain in the UK and their subsequent (im)mobility experiences. Therefore, when interviewing the students, we also inquired whether we could interview their parents. Most of the students were reluctant to involve their parents, as they were concerned with potential emotional impacts on their parents. As we will discuss below, emotional work constitutes a key aspect of parent-child relationships during the pandemic. Two students referred their parents to take part in this study. To gain a broader understanding of parents' perspectives, we recruited six additional

parents through personal networks and online forums and chat groups for parents whose children study overseas during the pandemic. None of the parents was willing to refer us to their child, for a similar reason provided by the students. We stopped recruiting further respondents as we reached a point of qualitative saturation in relation to our key research questions. As presented in Table 1, our sample includes 16 students and 8 parents.

[Insert Table 1 Here]

We conducted semi-structured in-depth interviews online, which allowed us to overcome spatial constraints in accessing transnational family members (Janghorban, Roudsari, and Taghipour 2014). Capturing the perspectives of both parents and students, our approach is particularly suited to unravel intergenerational dynamics (Tu 2018). Our sample is diverse in at least three ways. First, geographically, the students originated from various parts of China (e.g., Guangdong, Beijing, Shandong, Hubei, Inner Mongolia, Zhejiang, etc.) and their places of study also spread across the UK (i.e., London, South England, Northern England, Wales, Scotland, and North Ireland). Second, our participants' family backgrounds vary in terms of parental occupation and education, capturing nuanced socioeconomic heterogeneities within a broad (upper) middle class (Goodman 2014). Finally, the participants were at different stages of their "journey home." While most of them remained in the UK at the time of interview, three students were in quarantine in China and one had returned to China. The diverse (im)mobility statuses of our participants enabled us to explore how and why the families made sense of and navigated the process of transnational (im)mobility in different ways.

Our data analysis followed three steps. First, within-case analysis was conducted to understand a given family's lived experiences. In our subsequent cross-case analysis, we coded and synthesized shared concerns, experiences, and feelings expressed by our participants who were at different stages of (im)mobility. We then explored differences across

cases, with particular attention to how such differences are situated in specific institutional and familial settings. Iterative inter-coder verification was conducted between the three authors to ensure the reliability of data interpretation. The interviews were conducted in Mandarin or Cantonese based on each participant's preference. We then transcribed all interviews, analyzed the data in Chinese, and translated the quoted excerpts into English.

## **Findings**

### ***Transnational double exclusion of international students during the pandemic***

Before the pandemic, international education mobility was widely valorized in both China and the UK (Cebolla, Hu, and Soysal 2018; Fong 2011). Extensive infrastructures ranging from state policies, commercial agents, university services to transport were put in place to support this mobility. Following the abrupt national lockdown on March 23 in the UK, however, the regimes that had supported international students' routine life and studies were severely disrupted. According to our interviewees, many British universities were slow in developing a coordinated and informed response to the pandemic. Staying in shared accommodation became "difficult" and "risky." University facilities were no longer accessible. International transport and postage services were severely curtailed.

When COVID-19 broke out in the UK, Aiqing, a first-year student, was determined to stay put in her dormitory. In preparation for the impending lockdown, she stock-piled food supplies, only to find out one morning that her university had planned to move all international students to another campus across the city. She was given three hours to pack up her belongings and move out of her dormitory:

He (the dormitory manager) said there is no guarantee how long I need to live on the new campus, so I needed to pack everything. I nearly broke down. How can I

finish packing in three hours? I felt exhausted. It was at that moment that I decided I must go back to China.

Making the crisis worse, the rapid rise of COVID-19–related racism aggravated the vulnerability of Chinese international students. Like Jiaya (female, Year 2), many of the students described their experiences of being verbally abused by passers-by for wearing a facemask in public places. Yet the students considered not wearing a facemask to be equally risky. The abrupt disruption of supporting infrastructures—local, national and transnational services—led many students to report that they felt “vulnerable” and “unsafe.” The racialization of COVID-19 made many of the students we interviewed feel that they were “no longer welcome” in the UK.

While experiences of social exclusion in the UK prompted them to return home, the students were met with unexpected hurdles as they turned to their home country to seek help. Despite multiple attempts to contact the Chinese Embassy, Xunying (female, Year 1), like many others, was prevented from returning home by China’s tightened border control, quarantine measures and flight constraints. The students’ encounter with newly erected borders was accompanied by a mass vilification of returning Chinese international students as “irresponsible virus carriers” on social media platforms such as Weibo. Echoing Langjuan (female, Year 2), many of the students felt excluded from their home country:

Chinese media blame returning international students for importing COVID-19, as if we were a burden to China. Instead of welcoming fellow citizens home, they attack and criticize us for wanting to return. This makes me feel sad and ambivalent. We’re in a foreign country. If we fall ill, we’ll definitely not receive full support from the local government because we’re foreigners here. But even people in China see us as enemies. It makes me feel very sad and lost.

Caught between sending and host countries, the Chinese students in the UK and their parents in China grew increasingly anxious over their double exclusion from both countries. It was clear from our interviews that stigmatizing rhetoric such “burden,” “enemies,” and “foreigners” were often cited to illustrate the double exclusion. Before the pandemic, the UK and China together established and sustained a transnational social space which Chinese international students inhabited (Lan 2019; Vertovec 2009). In this space, the students were institutionally and socially embedded in both societies. However, as nation-states devised geographically bound and country-centered responses to the pandemic, Chinese international students were excluded from both societies.

*Navigating (im)mobility: Making sense of risks amid conflicting (mis)information*

International education mobility was rarely regarded as highly risky. However, the outbreak of COVID-19 threw international students and their families into a vortex of risks. The transnational infrastructural disruption and double exclusion of Chinese international students compelled them and their parents to make sense of the situation in which they found themselves. The sense-making process was challenging. Conflicting messages were sent by different governments and misinformation was widespread on the internet (Cornelson and Miloucheva 2020). Unsurprisingly, parent-child communication often involved comparing the situations in China and the UK. While some media sources accused China of under-reporting the number of COVID-19 cases (Davidson and Beaumont 2020), mainstream media in China depicted the country as a “safe haven” amid “global chaos” (e.g., Xinhua News 2020). Such conflicting information made it extremely confusing for our participants to make sense of their situations:

I think the greatest uncertainty for international students comes from the discrepant information between Chinese media and Western media. Chinese

media kept emphasizing the virus-control success in China, portraying the West as a negative example [...] that Western countries don't take the virus seriously. The conflicting media representations make us feel really confused. (Aiqing, female, Year 1)

My parents don't really know what's going on. Their source of information is Chinese media, which tend to exaggerate the bad situation (overseas). It made them really worried. (Xunyin, female, Year 1)

Parent-child communication played a key role in brokering and validating messy and widespread (mis)information. While a few parents who are proficient in the English language routinely followed media outlets such as the BBC, most of the parents relied on their children as a main, credible source of information. For example, in response to a rumored "food shortage" in the UK, which caused the parents much anxiety, Xunyin and some of the other students we interviewed dismissed the rumor by showing their parents photos of their local supermarkets. Fragmented and selective media portrayals of the pandemic generated a need for the students and their parents to frequently exchange information in order to dispel myths and misinformation. In this case, transnational family relationships served as an efficient vehicle for gathering, corroborating and authenticating the information. In doing so, the students and their parents collaboratively filtered and processed information to construct a transnational understanding of "reality" and "risk."

Although many of the students and parents had associated mobilities (e.g., rushing through crowded airports and being trapped with strangers in a flight cabin) with the risk of contracting COVID-19, the UK's "herd immunity" strategy marked a turning point, which led many of the families to think that it was no longer safe to stay in the UK:

I was really scared. My parents also said they were scared by the policy (herd immunity). They learned about it from the news at home and was shocked. (Anna, female, Year 3)

I can't believe it! "Herd immunity" is only a theory. There's no scientific basis to it. What about my child? We're not near him. If he contracted the virus, we parents cannot sit back and do nothing. (Henry's mother, Year 1)

In the backlash of "herd immunity," the focus of the conversations between many of the Chinese students and their parents shifted from whether to return to China to how to return. While Henry's parents had previously decided to cancel a pre-booked air ticket for him to remain in the UK, they soon altered the plan and insisted on Henry's return. For many of the other families who had not purchased an air ticket, how to return then presented a formidable challenge.

***Preparing for the move: Family-mediated resource mobilization***

As they prepared to return to China, the Chinese students and their parents were faced with a major challenge—obtaining an air ticket. When COVID-19 first broke out in the UK, most of the interviewed families awaited announcements from their universities. As many universities were slow in issuing their guidance, many of the families missed the opportunity to secure an air ticket. Ms Zhai complained about the ambivalent stance of her son's university:

We had begun to realise the danger he (her son) was in. However, he had not received any announcement from his university regarding exam arrangements. After all this is a four-year undergraduate degree<sup>2</sup> and this final year is really critical... It was such a dilemma for us—to leave or not to leave? Had the university made their [class suspension] announcement earlier, my son would have returned home much earlier.



Ms Zhai's account resonated with many of our interviewees in noting that universities' slow response to the pandemic had hindered their timely planning of return migration. Echoing many of the other students we interviewed, Ms Zhai's son complained that "mum, I could have returned [earlier]."

Not only was it stressful to wait for an institutional "green light," the families' fight for an air ticket was fraught with anxiety. As international airlines became increasingly unreliable and difficult to access, they had to mobilize multiple forms of resource to secure an air ticket, especially following China's "five-one" flight reduction policy implemented on March 26 and the border closure in Hong Kong<sup>3</sup> on March 25, 2020. Ms Ding, whose son studies in Edinburgh, resorted to a multi-ticket strategy:

As soon as we heard about it (class suspension), we started to buy air tickets. We originally bought one for March 28, but the flight was canceled. After that I immediately bought another one for April 2, but I was notified that the flight was changed to April 5, and was then told that there was no longer a vacant seat on the flight. Every day I called CTrip (an online ticket booking platform). They were very polite, but it was to no avail. Now we have bought three tickets in May. The first one on May 7 is with the Oriental Airline with a transit in Amsterdam... After I bought that ticket, I learned in a parents' (WeChat) group that some students had poor experiences with the transit. They found that the connecting flight was canceled and were stranded in a strange place. Because of this, I bought another ticket for May 11 with a transit in London. This way no matter what happens he will still be in the UK. Even if he was not be able to board the connecting flight, he can still get on a train and go back to Edinburgh. I also bought another one with the same route for May 16, so three tickets in total. Now everyone has a few air tickets in their hands, at least 20,000 *yuan* each. All the tickets I bought can be fully refunded. I dare not buy too many tickets, because it may not be possible to refund them. (Son, Year 1)

Pre-empting the risk of their children not being able to return home, many of the other families adopted a similar strategy to have hoarded multiple air tickets, with different routes and on different dates. Given constantly changing border policies, erratic flight provisions, and the complexity of negotiating ticket purchases, cancellations and refunds, the families had to mobilize multiple forms of resource in order to secure an air ticket. Economic resource was mobilized to fund multiple expensive tickets. Cultural capital was mobilized as the families designed distinct routes to mitigate the risk of being stranded in transit. Latent social capital was activated via online chat groups to share essential information. Such sharing, as we observed, helped transform individual tactics into collective strategies. Notably, the latter coalesced to form an alternative set of infrastructures that helped to synthesize information, mobilize resources and provide a much-needed sense of belonging and reassurance as the families prepared for their children's return to China.

Nevertheless, not all families could afford the multi-ticket strategy. For example, David (Year 1), whose father works as a civil servant and whose mother is a housewife, had budgeted £700 for an air ticket, which was not enough for even one ticket, let alone multiple tickets. Xunying (female, Year 1) was in a similar situation. In early March, Xunying's mother declined her request to buy an ¥8,000 (£900) ticket because it was twice the price of a "normal" ticket. By late March when the UK became engulfed by the pandemic, Xunying was no longer able to afford a ticket. However, not every decision to remain in the UK was made out of financial constraints. In a few cases, the students were reluctant to risk traveling through crowded airports. As their relatively well-off and well-connected parents were able to secure suitable accommodation, protective equipment, and trusted friends to look after them in the UK, they decided to stay put. Therefore, the type and amount of resources a family commands interact with their risk perceptions in shaping their (im)mobility.

***Making the move: Family-mediated infrastructuring on the go***

Obtaining air tickets only marked the beginning of a prolonged journey. Uncertainties cut through local traveling to the airport, last-minute flight rescheduling or cancellation, unexpected border closure, and rapidly changing quarantine policies. As the infrastructural disruption left transnational families to their own devices to be liable for their risk-taking, the families found themselves “fighting an endless battle,” in the words of Mr Ren, whose goddaughter studies in London. Such battles required members of transnational families to coordinate information gathering and develop strategies on the go across multiple localities. Kaxuan, for instance, described in great detail how she and her parents worked closely to manage unexpected changes to her multi-legged flight:

The first change took place after my connecting flight was canceled, which forced me to switch to a different date. I called my parents to discuss what changes we wanted to make, because that ticket was bought by them and they needed to provide information about the purchase. Then one day at 6 p.m., which was 2–3 a.m. in China, I learned that the first leg (of the flight) from Edinburgh was canceled. My parents stayed up with me, made all sorts of phone calls, until about 4 a.m., which was 9 p.m. in the UK... In the end, we figured out a solution to have booked an alternative first leg from Manchester. (Female, Year 3)

Before the pandemic, it was common for institutions such as airlines and travel agents to coordinate connecting flights, which formed a core part of the migration infrastructure. However, under the circumstance of infrastructural disruption, such institutional coordination can no longer be taken for granted. Having just passed the security check at Manchester airport, Kaxuan was informed that her onward flight from Amsterdam was canceled, although her ticket had already been issued. In shock, Kaxuan and her parents had to secure their own connecting flight. Soon after they managed to do so, they found out that the Netherlands was about to tighten its transit policy just five minutes before her scheduled landing in

Amsterdam. This entailed another night staying up for Kaxuan's parents to coordinate with the two airlines involved, the Chinese embassy, and Amsterdam airport. Their efforts eventually brought together the airlines, airport and Dutch border authority to have granted an exception for Kaxuan to continue with her journey. The experience of Kaxuan and her parents was echoed by Mr Ren:

We had initially bought a ticket and canceled it and bought another one to fly on March 20. We then learned that passengers can no longer transit via Hong Kong to Shenzhen from March 19 onwards. So it was quite challenging because I had to make a lot of phone calls. I called the airports in Shanghai, Haikou and Hong Kong. Because the (quarantine) policies changed every day, I had to make daily phone calls to obtain up-to-date information. It was strange that Haikou airport initially gave me very clear answers, but they became very vague later. In the end they directed me to the Customs and Excise Department. When I called this department, they said they only knew their own policies and didn't know what other departments would do. Basically, they kept shirking responsibilities.

As the families implemented their migration strategies, they came to realise that not only did individual institutions (e.g., border authority, airline, travel agents, etc.) cease to function as normal, the inter-institutional coordination also dissipated, as illustrated by the cases of Kaxuan and Mr Ren. Therefore, efforts were made by the families to bring together different institutions, re-establish the broken links between them, and coordinate their actions. As the families had to make swift decisions on the move, they had to deploy a contingent, minute-to-minute response mechanism—a process that required intense and rapid collaboration between the students and their parents.

The families' capability of "infrastructuring-on-the-go" appeared to be stratified by their command of cultural and social currency in a transnational context. For example, Kaxuan's parents were well-seasoned global travelers, and their experiences equipped them

with the knowledge and confidence to plan Kaxuan's journey on the go. Having lived in the UK for four years for his PhD, Mr Ren was quick in helping his goddaughter make a return decision, gather information and "pull some strings" (in Mr Ren's words) to have materialized his goddaughter's return. Mr Ren said, "I spent years in the UK, I know what it's like there. So I'm less worried. But many parents have never been abroad, they don't know, that's why they're afraid." Indeed, after several failed attempts to secure a flight ticket or negotiate border clearance, some of the less-educated or internationally experienced parents decided for their children to stay put in the UK. Therefore, although Chinese students' international education mobility has often been considered a (upper) middle class privilege (Goodman 2014), the pandemic has given rise to further, nuanced distinctions between these relatively privileged families, depending on the recognition and convertibility of their resources in a transnational context.

*(Un)feeling family-mediated infrastructuring: Emotions and emotional work*

Intense family-mediated infrastructuring of transnational migration went hand in hand with intense emotions and emotional work, which represents a distinctive feature of family-mediated infrastructuring, as illustrated by Ms Zhai's account:

When such an international crisis suddenly breaks out, national measures are beyond the control of individuals. Many parents desperately buy air tickets, but keep having their tickets canceled. Although they try their best to mitigate risks, they feel that they are without any chance and are helpless... It's so difficult.

For both the students and their parents, having to manoeuvre institutional forces that seemed beyond their control resulted in repeated frustrations. The torment of having their hopes repeatedly ignited and extinguished when flights were canceled induced strong feelings of helplessness and anxiety. The students described instances in which they hid their fear and

anxiety from their parents. Nevertheless, as the parents kept such emotions to themselves and tried to appear calm, their emotional work often went unnoticed by their children. For example, when asked about how she thought her parents felt when her consecutive flights were canceled, Xuedang said:

I feel that they (i.e., her parents) must have made peace with it. After all, all our efforts (in getting tickets) have come to no avail... So maybe they think we should just let it be. (Female, Year 1)

However, in our interview with Xuedang's mother, she revealed that she consciously hid her frustration from Xuedang so that Xuedang could stay calm. To keep each other calm and sane, the students and their parents consciously modified their emotive expressions (e.g., downplaying worries and foregrounding concerns) in order to maintain a sense of normalcy. The sentiments of Xuedang's mother resonated with most of the other parents we interviewed. Ms Zhai's account was particularly revealing of the intricacies of the parents' emotional work: "Sometimes we cannot tell our son our feelings, because it would make him anxious. However, if I act as if nothing mattered, then it would appear strange to him." However, striking a fine balance between being emotionally calm, engaged and authentic was not always easy for the parents, as illustrated by Aiqing (female, Year 1):

I was very angry and upset every time my dad told me "whatever decision you make, we support you." I felt that such words were in effect making me shoulder all the risks and they (i.e., her parents) did not share the burden with me. After that I felt more indecisive and unsure about what I really wanted to do.

Aiqing's parents were by no means disengaged. In fact, they had lengthy discussions with Aiqing to analyze the pros and cons of different options in response to the crisis, and

then left the decision-making to their daughter. However, their lack of explicit emotive expression led Aiqing to believe that they shirked their parental responsibility. While the emotional work done by Aiqing's parents may have gone unnoticed by their daughter, others such as Xunying were clearly aware of their parents' emotional work:

My parents don't want to disturb me with their questions. They feel that if they keep asking me questions, I'll be annoyed. So after they read or watched some news (about the pandemic in the UK) without knowing how trustworthy it was, they held back from asking for my opinion and kept the worry to themselves. Then they fall into a (vicious) cycle and get even more anxious. (Female, Year 1)

The emotional work performed by the students and their parents was partly driven by a need to reassure their broader family network such as concerned grandparents, as described by Ms Gao:

Some parents whose children are stranded abroad told me that both their children and the grandparents were very anxious. So for parents like us, we're having an excruciating time because we're caught in between. For me and my husband, it's better as our son doesn't give us pressure. Our parents, even when they suffer from insomnia, they wouldn't reveal their anxiety to us. Sometimes my son would leave messages in our family WeChat group when he bumps into difficulties. Even on such occasions, our parents wouldn't pressure us so that my husband and I can have an easier time.

Ms Gao's account suggests that parents may be placed under the dual burden of emotional work in front of both their children and other extended family members. Moreover, other family members such as grandparents may also perform a considerable amount of emotional work, particularly because they are often emotionally and financially invested in their grandchildren's upbringing and international education (Tu 2018). The family has long

been a place where the personal, the affectionate and the emotional hold sway. As vividly shown in our interviews, however, the process of family-mediated infrastructuring demanded the families to act “rational,” “calm,” and “cool headed.” Our findings render visible the huge amount of emotional mobilization involved in family-mediated infrastructuring. As our respondents—both the students and their parents—were occasionally brought to tears during our interviews, our findings draw attention to the emotional vulnerability, in addition to the functional resilience, of transnational families during global crises such as the COVID-19 pandemic.

### **Conclusions and discussion**

This article has explored how Chinese international students studying in the UK and their parents in China navigated transnational (im)mobilities during the COVID-19 pandemic. Focusing on the intersection between international (education) mobility and transnational parent-child relations, we have provided fresh insights into how Chinese international students and their parents made sense of the pandemic across nation-states, how they made migratory decisions regarding whether to remain in the UK or return to China, how they mobilized diverse forms of resource and family relationships to prepare for and enact their return migration to China, as well as the intricate and intense emotional work involved in these processes. Although the (im)mobility of international students during the pandemic has been subject to heated public debates, this article has offered one of the first sociological interventions in these debates.

Our findings reveal the severe disruption of transnational migration infrastructure during the COVID-19 pandemic, which was characterized by at least three features. First, institutions such as universities, border authorities, international transport and commercial agents that were constitutive of the pre-COVID-19 infrastructure were paralyzed by the pandemic. Second, the coordination between distinct institutions that brought the process of



migration infrastructuring to life was disrupted. Third, as different countries took a largely state-centered approach to tackle the pandemic, the disruption also entailed state actors' retreat from a transnational social space (Vertovec 2009). These developments have significantly squashed the transnational social space, resulting in the transnational double exclusion of Chinese international students. The infrastructural disruption has brought to the fore some of the taken-for-granted set-up required to sustain international migration.

Our study renders visible the pivotal role played by family relationships in infrastructuring transnational (im)mobility during the pandemic. In the context of infrastructural disruption, the resilience of family relationships is relied upon, as a diffuse collective strategy, to make up for paralyzed institutional infrastructures. Family-mediated infrastructuring of international migration involves close collaboration between family members in information gathering, synthesis and validation as well as the mobilization of multiple forms of economic, cultural and social resources. The process often involves intense, real-time and round-the-clock coordination between family members across transnational localities. Family-mediated infrastructuring has a unique self-serving, involuted quality (cf. Xiang and Lindquist 2014), in so far as family relationships are mobilized to sustain transnational (im)mobility and they are also sustained through transnational (im)mobility.

Family relationships have long played an important role in channeling people's (im)mobility motivation and behavior (Baldassar 2014; Fong 2011; Ma 2020; Wilding 2018). What renders family-mediated infrastructuring distinctive during the pandemic is a shift in the role of transnational families, from users of institutional infrastructure who are subject to institutional governance to proactive managers who coordinate, bridge and to some extent govern disjointed institutional acts (e.g., of airline, border authorities, and commercial agents). In this process, the individual-institution distinction is blurred, as transnational families become integrated into the institutional regime that establishes and maintains the

means of (im)mobility as both the consumer and architect of the regime. This is qualitatively different from the role played by families in motivating or constraining (im)mobility in “normal” times (Baldassar 2014; Foner and Dreby 2011). As a result, the pandemic has brought to the fore the resilience of the intimate fabrics of transnationalism vis-à-vis the fragility of institution-brokered transnationalism.

Different from institution-brokered infrastructuring, family-mediated infrastructuring is also unique in the emotional work it involves and the emotional double-bind it entails for members of transnational families. The process of infrastructuring induces intense emotions such as anxiety, worry, frustration, and anger. Meanwhile, to keep the infrastructure functional, family members must also suppress their strong emotions to appear calm. Being pulled into opposite directions, transnational families often must strike a delicate balance between being emotionally authentic, engaged and composed to maintain a sense of intimacy between family members and to sustain the infrastructuring process at the same time. The emotional double-bind provides unique clues to highly dynamic relationships between family members in the infrastructuring process, as they constantly shift between multiple roles as collaborators, parents, children, and liability guarantors. Despite its functional resilience, family-mediated infrastructuring of transnational migration exposes transnational families to heightened emotional vulnerability and mental stress.

Family-mediated infrastructuring of transnational migration, as we have shown, represents a shift in the liability of risks associated with (im)mobilities from institutions to individual families (cf. Beck 2009). Echoing an emerging body of research (Kloet et al. 2020; Hu, 2020), our study uncovers the significant threat state-centered responses to the COVID-19 pandemic pose to the security and well-being of the transnationally mobile and their families. As individual families become the liable guarantor of risks and means of (im)mobility, transnational (im)mobility has become increasingly embedded in an unequal

terrain, in that the families' capability to be (im)mobile becomes closely anchored in their command of economic resources (e.g., buying expensive air tickets), cultural capital (e.g., gathering and processing information on a transnational scale), and social connections (e.g., securing trusted guardians for their children in the UK). Many international students are from relatively affluent and privileged families (Xu and Montgomery 2019; Xu 2020). However, our findings suggest that such privilege is closely embedded in and sustained by the architecture of global capitalism, whose malfunctioning during the pandemic has led to severe forms of social exclusion of the supposedly privileged. This prompts future scholars to rethink the constitution of transnational social inclusion and exclusion in the post-pandemic world.

The limitations of this study suggest a few promising directions of future research. First, while we focused on Chinese students in the UK, future research could expand the scope to focus on other major international education destinations such as the United States, Canada, and Australia. Second, the difficulty of securing a large number of paired interviews, although substantively informative in itself, prevented us from fully comparing and triangulating the perspectives of parents and children. Third, while we focused specifically on intergenerational parent-child relations, the dynamics of broad family and kin networks in family-mediated infrastructuring and potential gender difference in maternal versus paternal roles present some worthy areas for further exploration. Finally, while we have presented snapshots of the transnational (im)mobility of Chinese international students, further research could trace the students' long-term, ongoing experiences as the pandemic unfolds.

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### Notes

1. The policy specifies that one airline can only operate one flight to/from a given country per week during the pandemic. See Civil Aviation Administration of China website for “Notice on Further Reducing International Passenger Flights during the Epidemic Prevention and Control Period.” Accessed April 20:  
[http://www.caac.gov.cn/en/XWZX/202003/t20200326\\_201748.html](http://www.caac.gov.cn/en/XWZX/202003/t20200326_201748.html)
2. This is a 2+2 program. The student joined the UK element of their program as a Year 2 student, having completed two years’ studies in China.
3. Hong Kong is a popular port of transit for our participants.

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**Table 1.** Characteristics of participants

	Pseudonym	Gender	Year of study	Occupation (father)	Degree (father)	Occupation (mother)	Degree (mother)	(Im)mobility status at the time of interview
<b>Students</b>								
1	Ranjan	Male	Foundation	Entrepreneur	Bachelor's	Bank employee	Bachelor's	In the UK, no flight ticket
2	Kelly	Female	Year 1	Retired manager	Bachelor's	Office clerk	Bachelor's	In the UK, no flight ticket
3	Xuedang <sup>a</sup>	Female	Year 1	Teacher	Bachelor's	Housewife	High school	In the UK, no flight ticket
4	David	Male	Year 1	Civil servant	Bachelor's	Housewife	Bachelor's	In the UK, no flight ticket
5	Zhenghao	Male	Year 2	Senior manager	Bachelor's	Housewife	Unknown <sup>c</sup>	In the UK, no flight ticket
6	James	Male	Year 3	Pastor	High school	Social worker	Bachelor's	In the UK, no flight ticket
7	Nathan	Male	Year 3	Policeman	High school	Office clerk	Bachelor's	In the UK, no flight ticket
8	Yajia	Female	Foundation	Civil servant	Bachelor's	Civil servant	Bachelor's	In the UK, bought return flight ticket
9	Aiqing	Female	Year 1	Entrepreneur	Bachelor's	Entrepreneur	Bachelor's	In the UK, bought return flight ticket
10	Langjuan	Female	Year 2	University lecturer	Bachelor's	University lecturer	Master's	In the UK, bought return flight ticket
11	Athena	Female	Year 2	Entrepreneur	High school	Entrepreneur	High school	In the UK, bought return flight ticket
12	Jiaya	Female	Year 2	News agent	Bachelor's	Housewife	High school	In the UK, bought return flight ticket
13	Henry <sup>b</sup>	Male	Year 1	Retired policeman	High school	Retired employee	High school	In China, in quarantine
14	Xunyin	Female	Year 1	Civil servant	Master's	Civil servant	Bachelor's	In China, in quarantine
15	Kaxuan	Female	Year 3	Routine employee	Unknown <sup>c</sup>	Unknown <sup>c</sup>	Unknown <sup>c</sup>	In China, in quarantine
16	Anna	Female	Year 3	Routine employee	High school	Housewife	High school	In China, with family
<b>Parents</b>								
1	Ms Xue <sup>a</sup>	Female	Year 2			Housewife	High school	Daughter not returned, no plan to return
2	Ms Zhai	Female	Year 3			Entrepreneur	Master's	Son not returned, trying to buy a flight ticket
3	Ms Gao	Female	High school			Entrepreneur	High school	Son returned, in quarantine
4	Ms Ding	Female	Year 1			Unknown <sup>c</sup>	Unknown <sup>c</sup>	Son not returned, trying to buy a flight ticket
5	Ms Ho <sup>b</sup>	Female	Year 1			Unknown <sup>c</sup>	Unknown <sup>c</sup>	Son returned, in quarantine
6	Ms Bian	Female	Year 3			Civil servant	Bachelor's	Son returned, with family
7	Mr Ren	Male	Year 3	University lecturer	PhD			Goddaughter returned, in quarantine
8	Mr Shang	Male	Master	Architect	Bachelor's			Son returned, with family

Notes: <sup>a</sup> Mother–daughter dyad. <sup>b</sup> Mother–son dyad. <sup>c</sup> Interviewee did not wish to reveal.