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# The 'chosen' UK? Remapping of international education mobility for prospective Chinese master's students during and post the COVID-19 pandemic

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**Abstract**
The COVID-19 pandemic has caused unpredicted disruption to international students' mobility, which has created challenges for the principal host and sending countries (i.e. the UK and China). This study focuses on the UK's prospective Chinese master's students who have, reluctantly, deferred their education abroad during the COVID-19 pandemic and explores the factors influencing their choice of deferral and how they strategically reimagine their overseas education in the future. A mixed-methods approach was adopted using 16 semi-structured interviews and 102 questionnaires. In addition to the health crisis and varying travel policies that have significantly impacted the outward mobility of prospective Chinese students, the findings highlight that the intensified geopolitical situations during the COVID-19 have confined students' overseas education destination to the UK as the 'choice of no choice'. Additionally, the unanticipated and unconventional 'gap year' was identified to impel this cohort to choose the shorter duration of postgraduate programmes in the UK as a potential 'life circle remedy'. Students who participated in this study also demonstrated their strong agency on their deferral and education destination decisions—that is their 'agency in immobility' which facilitates their international education progressions. This paper draws insights from these findings and discusses implications for the mobility of international students from China in the coming years and provides recommendations for how UK universities can better support this cohort and other international students who may be in similar situations during and post the pandemic.

**Keywords** Prospective Chinese international students · COVID-19 pandemic · UK · Education immobility · Agency

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## Introduction

The outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic has significantly influenced international student mobility (Altbach & de Wit, 2020). Universities in destination countries kept updating related policies to sustain (prospective and enrolled) international students' education activities, including hybrid approaches of teaching and postponement of international student admissions (Mok et al., 2021). Prospective international students, who are not physically abroad yet, have suffered from anxiety and instability due to the cancellation of visa applications, interrupted airlines and the suspension of in-person teaching (Salazar, 2021). Seemingly, the pandemic has changed the key factors affecting the decision-making regarding studying abroad and destination choices for prospective international students and their families; for instance, health security and safety may have become the priorities (Marginson, 2020).

Nevertheless, previous research has ignored and oversimplified the complexities in the socio-cultural contexts and the diversity of individual (prospective) international students during the pandemic. Few research studies have ascertained how the unanticipated experience has shaped the education (im)mobility trajectories and how they have strategically responded during the COVID-19 pandemic. One such study was conducted by Wang (2022), who confirmed that a large number of Chinese students had no option but to change their planned overseas education journey to alternative plans in their home countries. Much less research attention has been paid to the cohort of Chinese students who have deferred their overseas study and taken a gap year. Although the gap year might be common and popular in some Western countries, for Chinese students, taking a long-term gap (i.e. months or years) is not socially common in their usual education trajectories (Wu et al., 2015). In China, the intensive competition for places in universities and the increased competition for job opportunities and advantages in age in the job market make the gap year almost impossible for the majority of Chinese students and their families. Also, this unplanned disruption of education trajectories might bring a 'sticky and suspended' immobile time with 'a strong sense of forced stuckness' (Wang, 2021, pp. 1–2). Understanding this unanticipated gap year/immobility experience as part of their education trajectories will help to piece together the puzzle of remapping of international education and student (im)mobility globally within and beyond challenging pandemic situations.

This study focuses on the gap year/immobility experience of prospective Chinese international students during the COVID-19 pandemic. Specifically, it combines the push–pull and agency theory approaches to examine why and how prospective Chinese international students made deferral decisions while still preferring to the UK as their final destination, instead of shifting to other options (e.g. further education in China or other countries or online courses). This study provides fresh insights into factors that have dynamically affected Chinese students in the remapping of international education mobility, how the traditional perspectives on the gap year are potentially shifting, and how the new Chinese generation demonstrates their agency in their own education and life plans while balancing and negotiating with the significant powers or forces in the traditionally less-preferred gap year (e.g. their parents).

## The gap year and time sensitivity among Chinese students

The gap year, which first emerged in the UK (Jones, 2004), has gradually gained acknowledgement and grown in popularity globally in the last few decades (Harmer & Rogerson, 2017), including China. Previous research has noted that the wider socio-cultural and

institutional factors have influenced the behaviour and community's attitudes towards gap takers (Wu, 2013). This has resulted in the divergence in the gap year concept and gap takers within various cultural contexts. For instance, in China, due to the higher education system and social culture, the concept of gap time has not yet been widely integrated into social awareness (Wu, 2013). Instead, the gap year is relatively more accepted as a career break by young people in their early careers and tends to be not as long as that of the Western gap takers in their pre-university transition (Wu et al., 2015).

Additionally, for Chinese students, the intense competition for places at Chinese universities and the lack of administrative flexibility to deal with older university entrants (i.e. those with gaps in their education journeys) have restrained the possibility of the gap year (Wu et al., 2015). Universities are not administratively set up to delay entry into study. Once enrolled in the university, Chinese students are expected to closely follow the study plans and schedules the university has provided. Unlike the more flexible credit-based approach in most of the Western universities (Quality Assurance Agency, 2021), it becomes very time-consuming and difficult to obtain administrative approval to defer or change one's programme in most Chinese universities. Furthermore, going directly to university after school is regarded as a 'natural transition' by families and the wider society. Deferring one's study for reasons other than health issues tends to be 'unacceptable' in the traditional values (Wu et al., 2015).

Additionally, the intense competition and the 'unwritten preference' for recent young graduates in the Chinese labour market might serve as other crucial contributors to Chinese students' strong 'time sensitivity' and hesitation or even refusal to take any gap time. With the rapid expansion of higher education in China, there seems to be an increasing oversupply of university graduates (Mok & Wu, 2016), which challenges the Chinese labour market capacity and, unfortunately, results in greater difficulty in securing satisfying jobs. The recent graduates (regarded as the young talents with high skills but higher acceptability of low pay) are more welcome than those with more work experience and higher expectations of salary in many posts (Mok et al., 2016). Some students even decide to pursue postgraduate education immediately after graduation primarily for maintaining their 'advantages in age' while accumulating more cultural capital (e.g. knowledge, higher degrees) (Li et al., 2011). In this regard, taking a gap has been considered as unusual behaviour among Chinese students on individual, educational, cultural and social dimensions.

## Push–pull approach in international education mobility

As one of the most popular approaches to describe the trend of international migration, the push–pull model has often been used to explain international students' mobility decisions, directions and destinations (Mazzarol & Soutar, 2002; Yu et al, 2022). Within the model, education-related factors have been highlighted as the key in the decision-making of overseas learning. For instance, factors such as competitive entry requirements, a lack of world-class universities at home or certain specialisations, complex admission policies and strong academic hierarchy have pushed students to consider pursuing further education abroad, whereas factors related to cultural attraction, the reputation and prestige of the host university, and work prospects after study have pulled students to move to those host countries (Inouye et al., 2022; Roy et al., 2019).

### Geopolitical factors

Besides educational considerations, in recent years more geopolitical factors are emerging to impact international student mobility. For instance, as the US–China rivalry intensifies, tightening regulations on both sides have squeezed the number of Chinese students undertaking further study in the US (Yu, 2021), yet fewer studies have followed up with their alternative destination choices. The COVID-19 pandemic has severely disrupted transnational migration infrastructures, including transportation, regulatory frameworks, institutional coordination and commercial brokerage; millions of prospective migrants are constrained at home countries due to the cross-border regulation (Chakraborty & Maity, 2020).

### Social and family dimensions

Additionally, the increase in reports about 'anti-Asian hate crime' and 'mask haters' in traditionally popular destination countries (e.g. the US and Australia) has negatively affected (Chinese in particular) students' plans for international education (Ma & Zhan, 2022; Madriaga & McCaig, 2022; Nguyen & Balakrishnan, 2020). Furthermore, the Chinese government expressed formal caution against visiting countries such as Australia due to discriminatory treatment by the public (Ross, 2020). Prospective international students have expressed concerns about their safety abroad following the pandemic due, in part, to depictions of racism towards international students on social media (Yang et al., 2020).

Apart from social factors, the decisions on overseas education may vary due to families' attitudes towards study abroad and their socio-economic status, which leads to a unique set of influences and considerations that affect their choices of destinations and institutions (Yu, 2021). Existing research has provided rich insights into how families play a pivotal role in shaping Chinese students' transnational education choices and experiences (Ma, 2020; Tu 2019). In China, many Chinese parents and families view studying abroad as an alternative route to social mobility for their children, and therefore, it becomes a 'family project' (Brooks & Waters, 2011, p. 53). Chinese parents and families, as the largest sponsors for international education, invest time and resources for their children (usually the only child at home) to study abroad. Furthermore, they usually have a specific expectation for their children: enter a good university to secure their advantages in social mobility (Tu, 2019).

Meanwhile, in many cases, families provide essential resources to sustain their children's overseas mobility (Ma, 2020), e.g. full financial support until the students find full-time jobs. In other words, Chinese parents seem to have more power in the students' education and life choices (Brooks & Waters, 2011). Accordingly, Chinese young people often feel intense pressure to be successful, both financially and in terms of self-realisation (Fong, 2016). Although the role of parent-children relations has been confirmed in constituting a resilient set of transnational migration infrastructures during the pandemic (Hu et al. 2022), it is not known to what extent the pandemic has affected the attitudes and plans of Chinese parents towards their children's overseas study and how students responded to that. We also know little about how Chinese parents and their children responded to the crises in these students' international education mobility plan.

Although the push–pull model has highlighted the influence of various factors on students' decision-making in terms of international education mobility, it has been suggested that more research was needed to explore this more systematically. For instance, Li et al. (2021) further examined how the structure conditions in the national, social and educational levels in home and host countries co-contribute to the trends of mobility. Additionally, the structural factors or forces can shape and regulate individuals' mobility or immobility trajectories; however, arguably,

individuals do not passively accept the structural forms. In addition to the national, social, educational and family dimensions that have pulled and pushed the decision-making regarding international education, the nature of the mobility process on the micro level and the personal characteristics of students have largely been ignored, even though individual international students might respond to different push–pull factors in various ways (Li et al., 2021). It seems that the role of students' agency and how they activate their agency to negotiate with the complicated factors that co-contribute to international education mobility have been neglected (Yu, 2021).

## Agency among international students

Individual students are capable of actively determining their practices and responding to structural circumstances, and they usually demonstrate their agency through certain strategies, such as taking advantage of structure enablement and avoiding constraints (Anderson et al., 2022; Archer, 2003; Baker, 2019). In this process, individuals continue the reflexivity and internal conversations in relation to the society and culture (Archer, 2003), to manage to make meaning out of their unanticipated life periods to 'experience other alternatives', 'discover other rhythms' and 'develop an openness for the unexpected' to rearrange and facilitate their life progressions. They even utilise these forces as a strategy or approach to enhance their capital accumulation (Robertson, 2019). The ability of students to engage into changes and challenges, interpret and negotiate, make diverse choices, demonstrate their eagerness in personal development to control their lives (Oldac, et al. 2023).

Agency is activated throughout the whole consideration process, which continues in individuals' communications and navigations with their surroundings (Archer, 2003). In exercising agency by negotiating educational, social and cultural capital and transnational social spaces (Gargano, 2009), international students can actively redesign and reimagine their overseas study and life pathways to better achieve life and career aspirations. It is evident that students possess agency in their responses to challenges, changes and even conflicts in their attitudes and behaviours over time (Tran & Vu, 2018). These students may use their 'agency in mobility' not only to respond to a temporary and specific need when confronted with the potential institutional influence but also, more importantly, to make changes in which they can potentially transform their present and future (Tran & Vu, 2018). It has been acknowledged that the role of the agency of international students relies on the comprehensive judgements about themselves based on their changing situations, where students are encouraged or driven to engage in learning, interpreting, negotiating, making diverse choices and finding a balance between themselves and the changing situations (Marginson, 2014; Yu, 2020). However, regardless of the emerging significance of distance learning in knowledge production and circulation (Alea et al., 2020), few studies have focused on other forms of 'agency in immobility' in international education mobility, for instance, taking distance learning (Chan, 2017). Furthermore, the 'agency in the shift between mobility and immobility' among international students has been largely ignored to understand how individuals made efforts to survive from immobility to mobility, or vice versa, taking the transnational and educational deferrals.

Within the context of the global mobility of students, although 'agency in mobility' afforded a framework for unpacking how international students engage, create and differentiate personal and structural resources to construct their own study trajectory, yet such agency cannot be alone without the acknowledgement of structure. 'Agency in mobility' is affected by and involves a complex myriad of socio-cultural-educational relations, activities and symbols (Xu, 2021, pp 759). Personal agency is subjected to how students judge,

utilise, produce and imagine the structure; on the other hand, agentic navigation of a study trajectory shapes the structure that they situate themselves in.

This study combines the push–pull model with agency theories to rationalise the dynamics behind students' choices related with their education mobility to the UK. This study will explore how Chinese prospective international students exercise their agency to navigate through different types of dissonances between education mobility and immobility. The combination of the theories overcomes the disadvantage of agency and pull and push theories and offers a comprehensive approach to uncover the decision-making regarding Chinese students' education (im)mobility to the UK during, and potentially beyond, the pandemic. Both theories tackle how individuals struggle for social life chances when faced with new situations, where they have the agentive power to explore their needs and respond to unanticipated circumstances in their education (im)mobility. While agency theory provides a critical lens to understand to what extent prospective Chinese international students agentively reflect and choose to defer when facing unexpected situations, the push–pull theory concentrates on the framework of factors that impact individuals' thinking and actions during and post the pandemic. Therefore, push–pull theory offers the analytical framework to uncover how students' intentions and acts could be understood from the agency approach, as well as how the related structural factors shape the students' decision-making.

## Methodology

Semi-structured interviews and surveys were used in this longitudinal two-stage mixed-methods study. Mixed methods with the 'combination of [a] quantitative and qualitative approach provides a better understanding of research problems than either approach alone' (Creswell & Clark, 2017, p. 9). In stage one (September to December 2020), semi-structured individual interviews were employed to investigate Chinese students' decision-making regarding the deferral of their taught master's education in the UK and the related experiences in this unanticipated and extraordinary gap time (i.e. deferred from Academic Year 2020/21 to 2021/22). In stage two (June to November 2021), survey and semi-structured individual interviews were employed to investigate participants' decision-making (in survey) and gap year/immobility experiences (in both survey and interviews). Given the widespread impact student sojourners faced during the COVID-19, we adopted a survey at this stage for exploring the potential generalisability of the qualitative findings in stage one with a larger sample size (Bryman, 2008). Survey questions include decisions regarding studying abroad, psychological and social experiences during the decision-making process, and host university's student support. The data in the current paper was primarily from the interviews in stage one of this study and the survey in stage two for understanding this cohort's decision-making on the deferral of their one-year master's education in the UK. Interview data in stage two mainly focuses on participants' gap year/immobility experience and hence was not included in this paper.

The sample in the overall mixed-methods research study includes 16 prospective Chinese postgraduate students to the UK who participated in the semi-structured interviews (see Table 1 for participants' profile) and 102 survey respondents (79.3% of the survey respondents [$N=102$] were female, 19.6% were male, and 1.1% identified themselves as other gender) identified by using the snowball sampling strategy. Participants were recruited based on the following criteria: (1) they were Chinese students who had accepted a postgraduate taught programme offer from a British university and planned to start their

**Table 1** Interview Participants' profile (*N*=16)

| Pseudonym | Gender | Age | Programme |
|---|---|---|---|
| Xin | Female | 22 | Geography |
| Fang | Female | 21 | Digital humanities |
| Xiao | Female | 22 | Clinical psychology and psychotherapy |
| Lu | Female | 22 | Material and visual culture |
| Dan | Female | 23 | Education |
| Ting | Female | 20 | Museums and galleries in education |
| Lin | Female | 22 | Applied linguistics |
| Tan | Female | 22 | Education psychology |
| Ran | Female | 22 | Engineering with finance |
| Jing | Female | 21 | International marketing |
| Lynn | Female | 22 | Education leadership |
| Jin | Female | 25 | International education |
| Shu | Female | 23 | International education |
| Jun | Male | 23 | Remote sensing and environmental mapping |
| Cheng | Male | 24 | Oral science |
| Hu | Male | 24 | Public policy |

education in September 2020, and (2) they had decided and officially applied to defer their master's education to September 2021 entry. Participants in this study were primarily from Social Science or Humanities programmes (e.g. Education, Geography, Accounting and Finance, Marketing, Applied Linguistics, Counselling Psychology, and Visual Culture) with only four participants from STEM programmes (i.e. Statistics, Computing, Chemistry, and Mathematics). Interview participants held offers from QS Top 100 universities (2021) while survey participants were QS Top 300 universities (2021) offer holders. All interview participants were physically in China while the majority of survey participants were physically in China or the UK during the data collection stage.

The interview schedule containing open-ended, non-directive questions was used to encourage free narrative and detailed responses. Additionally, metaphors as a creative research method was utilised to facilitate participants' comprehensive reflections by 'combining to detail a more significant whole' (Bazeley & Kemp, 2012, p.61). All the interviews were conducted online via WeChat (without video) and lasted between 60 and 90 min. This non-video (telephone) interviewing is an effective tool which facilitated us to reach participants in various sites (including many of them who were in lockdowns) during the COVID-19 while also helping our interviewees become less distressed or conscious due to the interviewer's presence in face-to-face interviews (Bryman, 2008). However, we were also aware of the limitations of telephone interviewing such as body language was impossible to observe while body language could be an important source of information for understanding interviewees' stories (Bryman, 2008). Hence, we paid more attention to interviewees' verbal expressions and tones and tried to immediately follow up with points that needed clarification or might lead to misinterpretations for enhancing the trustworthiness in this study. All interviews were audio-recorded with the consent of interviewees, and all the interviews were conducted in the participants' mother tongue (i.e. Chinese) to achieve more comfortable and appropriate communications.

The interview data was transcribed and cross-checked by the team members in this study. NVivo software was used to perform thematic analysis following steps suggested by Braun and Clark (2006). A hierarchy with key themes and sub-themes was then identified from the interview data analysis (Smith & Osborn, 2008). The themes and interpretations were cross-checked and validated by the research team. The data was translated by one of the researchers in the team and cross-checked by other team members, who are Chinese native speakers with a professional level of English proficiency, to ensure the proper interpretation of the selected quotes and codes (Temple & Edwards, 2002). The survey data collected in this study was mainly analysed by using descriptive analysis in Excel. The frequency measurement was conducted for understanding the count and percentage of responses (Bryman, 2008).

## Findings

Prospective Chinese international students who participated in this study shared their remapping of international education abroad, in particular, why and how they made the decision to defer their overseas study in the UK for 1 year. It has been acknowledged that due to the pandemic, prospective international students have lived under the pressure from multiple sources, such as the cancellation of visa applications and travel restrictions (Salazar, 2021). Participants in the study have confirmed the national/institutional factors including border controls, vaccine and quarantine requirements, racism (Mittelmeier & Cockayne, 2020) across different countries during the pandemic (e.g. China, the UK, the US and Australia in particular) in their choice of deferral, more significantly, they further indicated other factors that highlighted their reasons for studying abroad and their preferences on the UK. Chinese students have proactively activated their agency to negotiate the push and pull relationships among various pivotal influential factors, although 76 participants in total (interview and survey, $N=118$) took more than a month to make this difficult decision. Such a decision generally implied their courage to take untraditional breaks in their education/life trajectories and apply the agency in remapping their own future plan.

## Geopolitical and educational navigations

Eleven participants in the interviews ($N=16$) stated that the geopolitical issues during the pandemic had affected their consideration of whether and where to go in the near future. According to the survey, 65 participants in the survey ($N=102$) had options other than the UK as the destination (e.g. the US and Hong Kong) in their decision-making process. However, one-fourth of those with multiple options ($N=16$) highlighted that the unstable situation in Hong Kong (Fang_F), Sino–Australia/US relationships in trade (Ting_F/Xin_F) or similar concerns about other options almost directly led to the UK being the best and/or only choice of destination. For example, Xin indicated the limited choices in her decision-making process:

> *I do not think we have many places to choose [to study abroad] ...The US, the UK, Hong Kong, etc. [But] the relationship between China and the US has been very bad since the Sino–US trade war in 2019, and the riots and chaos in Hong*

*Kong at that moment, very disappointing… My major (Geography) is, to some extent, very sensitive. I had no other choices [than the UK].* (Xin_F)

As shared by many other participants in the study, the international or regional tensions and conflicts have made the UK the '*choice of no choice*' (Ting_F) if they still want to pursue their overseas education. The relatively stable Sino–British geopolitical relationship reassured these Chinese prospective postgraduate students that 'normal and safe overseas education' was possible. Conversely, the trends of Chinese student mobility to the US have been further interrupted due to the COVID-19 pandemic combined with the US–China rivalry and anti-Asian racism (Yu, 2021). National and international relations and their impact on security and wellbeing issues have been a priority in Chinese prospective students' decision-making. Beyond health security and safety (Marginson, 2020), the stability of host geopolitical situations in particular related to mainland China and Chinese people is regarded as another significant factor that may affect their international education plans.

Apart from the geopolitical concerns, participants in this study struggled to decide whether the overseas postgraduate education was still worthwhile. Due to unpredictability during and post COVID-19, further education in China should have been a safer alternative with minimum physical movement and potentially less health and safety risk from the travel. However, the majority of the participants in the survey believed that the quality of UK higher education (e.g. the professional development and academic climate in particular) could allow them to have better education experiences and help them to be more competitive in their future education and/or career. In the navigation of the academic climate and education quality at home and host countries, Chinese students who participated in the study confirmed their motivations and expectations regarding their international education mobility, which is consistent with the factors identified in a previous study (Inouye et al., 2023; Roy et al., 2019).

## Time sensitivity and anxiety

Furthermore, the UK taught master's education is characterised as having high cost-effectiveness, that is, high education quality in a shorter education duration and with less financial cost. Over three-quarters of the participants in the interviews highlighted the advantages of UK taught master's degree programmes, such as their shorter duration and the related financial cost and efficiency of capital return after graduation (e.g. knowledge, master's degree), as nearly 90% of survey participants supported.

*I was interested in British culture, but more importantly, the PGT (Postgraduate Taught) programme in the UK only takes one year, which is much shorter than in other countries.* (Jun_M)

*The 1-year master's degree is particularly attractive to me, as it means I could get my degree in a short time and return to China and start work as soon as possible… The time requirement for doing a master's degree in China is almost three times more than that [in the UK]... and that is wasting my time.* (Lynn_F)

Jun and Lynn's concerns about the 3-year master's degree programme in China were echoed by other Chinese students who participated in this study. Another two female participants further emphasised the age anxiety and their aim to finish their master's study in a short time. Ran explained:

*As a girl, if you do a 3-year master's degree in China, you might lose your competition in the Chinese job market [because] you might be older than other graduates, for example, graduates from the UK in the same year.* (Ran_F)

In addition to China, a few other students acknowledged the long period of time spent in their professional programmes in other countries. For instance, Jin (F) noted that her programme in the US and Australia would be almost double the duration and cost in the UK; and for Lin (F), she would have had to learn Japanese if she had changed her mind and chosen to study at a university in Japan, which means their master's education would be much longer than that in the UK. Taught master's degrees in the UK have become the degrees with high cost efficiency where students can undertake world-leading training and obtain a widely recognised degree with less financial cost in a shorter time compared with similar degree programmes in other countries.

Although previous research has highlighted the cultural attraction and the cultural experience as the motivations for studying abroad (Roy et al., 2019), in this study, less than 10% survey participants in this study were interested in British culture and indicated their cultural interests in their potential education mobility. Participants tend to pay more attention to the degree programme itself and its potential to transform into social or economic capital (e.g. age advantage, value of degree certificate, advanced training) for their future careers. This reimagined education mobility seems to be more degree programme-oriented, which, interestingly, outweighs the cultural value or cultural-related experiences among prospective international students.

## Critical response to parental impacts

Another typical source of pressure that has aggravated the hardships in Chinese students' deferral time is parental expectations, suggestions or even force. In traditional Confucian societies such as China, major decisions related to education and future employment are 'fundamentally a family project, imbued with familial expectations and goals' (Brooks & Waters, 2011, p.53). While personal desires and familial aspirations are inextricably interlinked, Chinese parents, in many cases, have the ultimate say in their child's choice of study destination and academic programme. Therefore, it is not surprising that in this study, very few students indicated in the interviews that they had total freedom to make the deferral decision. The majority of the interview participants experienced negotiations or even conflicts with family members about whether or not to defer their study in the UK and what to do in their gap time. According to the survey, 58 participants ($N = 102$) received understanding and support from their parents to defer their master's education. Yet from the interviews, such support was noted to be followed by some 'strong suggestions (pressures)', including *'no wasting time'* (Cheng_M), *'doing something useful'* (Wei_F), and *'do not be left behind'* (Lu_F). Besides the essential resources to sustain those students' deferral during the pandemic (Ma, 2020), some parents made use of their resources and helped their children with internships or even full time jobs.

In contrast, almost half of the participants in the interviews did not receive the support from their parents in terms of their deferral or even the study abroad plan. One of the participants Jing typically indicated that:

*My parents kept suggesting that I work immediately…they thought a girl did not need to further her study or get a higher degree. They highly encouraged me to go back to*

*my hometown and be a civil servant…I was rather anxious…They didn't support my choice of studying abroad. It was me who really held on to it. I have been sticking to my own ideas. I think I could improve myself in many ways… it's very necessary.* (Jing_F)

From Jing's experiences, it was clear that the power relations between parents and children and the family conflict in terms of whether or not staying at home country had brought out the anxiety and struggle among participants. Traditional and collective values on job hunting, girls' expectations, etc. become the barriers between Chinese parents and their children (Tu, 2019).

Nevertheless, though most participants' parents had exerted their influence on these students as usual, many participants demonstrated their strong insistence on their own thoughts and plans about their deferral and study in the UK. Jing's insistence was shared among other participants who were in similar situations, and all of them adhered to their personal plans while negotiating with their parents under great pressure. Given the financial dependence on and pressure of becoming successful and achieving self-realisation through overseas education from Chinese parents and the social expectations (Fong, 2016), Chinese students demonstrated their strong 'agency in immobility' to communicate with the power relations of their parents, traditional values and society.

## Challenges with the potential opportunities

In addition to responding to their parents in terms of what to do in the gap time and the overseas education plans, students who participated in this study critically and agentively considered the potential meanings of gap experience and studying abroad when they were making the deferral decisions. In general, nearly all interview and survey participants [$N = 118$] had struggled to make their decision to defer their study in the UK. Meanwhile, almost two-thirds of them regarded the deferral as an opportunity. For example, in the interview Ran noted:

*I honestly regarded it [the deferral] as a kind of opportunity. The short term might be one of the advantages for UK degrees, yet it could also be a disadvantage, for example, you do not have any internship experience [because of the tight education schedule] … now I have time to do the internship. So when I graduate, I could be more competitive in the job market.* (Ran_F)

Ran considered the deferral would give her more working and social experience, as it may potentially contribute to her future career development (as 37% of survey participants agreed). Likewise, some other participants (7 out of 16 interviewees and 23% of survey participants) even noted that the gap/immobility experience, interestingly, have assumed the positive meaning through their 'inner push and pull' navigations, as Xiao_F shared:

*…whether or not I was making the right choice to study abroad… I didn't think clearly. So the pandemic and the deferral, to some extent, gave me more time to consider whether or not I really want to go abroad. Did I just want to escape because I failed in the national postgraduate entrance examination, or did I just want to follow suit since I have a number of friends who have been abroad?...*

Regardless of the potential pressure from the traditional 'stigmatised' view towards gap year in China (Wu et al., 2015) (i.e. the gap takers may be considered 'a loser' or 'a time waster'). While the turbulence during the pandemic has caused their anxiety and depression due to the uncertainty in their education mobility, students flexibly and critically navigated the situations and changed accordingly. Chinese students in our study further explored the meanings of the break, and many of them (two-thirds of interviewees and 62% of survey participants) even used their agency to uncover potentially positive impacts from this difficult situation. To some extent, participants in the study did not just respond to their needs through the decision of deferral and destinations for overseas study, but also planned to produce the individual spaces in accordance with the dissonances in the immobility. The gap year/immobility, although socially biassed and structurally unacceptable, provided the time and space for them to understand their professions through internships, to develop personal interests while 'wasting time' (Cheng_F), and to reimagine the meanings of international education comprehensively and deeply and also the gap year itself.

## Discussion

Focusing on the prospective Chinese international students who have deferred their overseas master's education in the UK for the academic year 2020/21, this study applies an integrative perspective that combines the push–pull approach and agency theories in the discussion about the international student (im)mobility. Specifically, the study explores the decision-making processes of prospective Chinese international students in terms of their education deferral/immobility to the UK during the pandemic. The complex of the health, geopolitical issues and the changing education and job markets have led to a non-linear process for Chinese students to participate in the international education mobility. The COVID-19 pandemic has disrupted these Chinese students' steps into their international journeys, and researchers have found hybrid responses among those prospective master's international students (Wang, 2022). For instance, some have given up their study and applied for a full-time job, continued their further education in China or changed to distance learning without any gap time (Mok et al., 2021). Conversely, in this study, participants chose to have a gap time, which is almost the same length as their master's programme in the UK, and then continue their education abroad as planned.

The dynamic push and pull relationships around various influential factors have played a pivotal role in students' decision-making regarding deferral of and reflections on the international education mobility in the future (Mazzarol & Soutar, 2002). Key influential factors identified in this study are, for instance, border controls, vaccine and quarantine requirements, racism (Mittelmeier & Cockayne, 2020), geopolitical factors, Chinese academic systems, traditional Chinese culture (e.g. age anxiety, gender expectation) and parental-children relations. However, students were not passively trapped in challenges and pressures during the pandemic, but rather actively activated their agency to respond to the unanticipated dilemma in their attempts to defer their education (Yu, 2021). In combination, these various push and pull factors and emerging possibilities in Chinese international students' education (im)mobility have arguably provided a remapping of international education and student mobility after their self-exploration and inner push and pull. Furthermore, Chinese students comprehensively considered the personal meaning of international

education, overseas learning motivations and expectations, and the relationship between education mobility and immobility. In this sense, the study extends Tran and Vu's (2018) 'agency in mobility' and highlights the 'agency in immobility' for prospective international students. Chinese students in the study made holistic judgements about themselves based on changing situations and actively engaged in learning, interpreting, negotiating, making diverse choices and finding a balance between themselves and the changing situation.

Students' strong agency in education immobility or between the immobility and mobility is highlighted as the key for effectively challenging, managing and negotiating influential factors. To some extent their agency in immobility has challenged traditional cultural values and social acceptance in China. In terms of the traditionally unaccepted gap time in Chinese society (Wu et al., 2015), if the high time sensitivity is considered at the same time, the gap year is never an easy and natural alternative for Chinese students, even though they have identified their need to study overseas and the temporal immobility in practice. Since going directly to the next level after completing one level of education is regarded as a 'natural transition' by families and wider society in China (Wu et al., 2015), students are expected to closely follow designated study plans and schedules. Students who participated in this study bravely challenged the traditional pathway of no gaps in the education trajectory (Li et al., 2011; Wu, 2013) and agentively chose to wait for a year, which is the same as the length of their master's programme, to continue their overseas education. Indeed, the majority of students reported their parents' negative attitudes towards the gap year/immobility, regarding it as a waste of time, and some even forced their children to move forward with alternative pathways (e.g. find a full-time job). Parent-children relations have indeed constructed a set of essential and financial support for students to survive in their deferral during the pandemic (Hu et al. 2022). Nonetheless, the parent–child relations have also resulted in the tensions due to their divergent attitudes towards traditional values, social expectations, responding to the pandemic crisis and international education (im) mobility plan, especially for female students.

The meaning of gap year for students goes beyond the simplicity of passive acceptance and contains complex mediated connections from the immobility to mobility that potentially have innovated their education pathways. Students who participated in the study critically reflected on their actual situations and pondered about the meaning of education mobility and immobility for them. Additionally, it is worth highlighting that Chinese students who participated in this study have critically imagined the positive possibility of a gap time/year in education (or even life) trajectories rather than holding the traditional 'stigmatised' view towards it (Wu et al., 2015). While international education mobility tends to be regarded as an ideal and positive experience (Yu, 2021), based on the findings of this study, immobility could also be meaningful and valuable for international students. Students carefully scheduled their gap time and developed their deferral planning and education mobility in the future, such as wider social networks, to gain their initial yet short social experience in job market and self-explore their potential jobs, to enhance their family relationships and understand the meaning of unconventional education trajectories in their lifetime. Confidence, independence, self-efficacy, openness, and adaptability in various contexts including home, working, leisure, all these could potentially contribute to diversifying their competences and soft skills (Harmer & Rogerson, 2017). This study suggests that Chinese policymakers, universities and society should offer the administration space for students to choose a gap year based on their own needs in their education trajectories. It also suggests that British universities should provide more flexible admission choices, personal or professional development and wellbeing support during the gap time/year for their prospective or even current students.

Meanwhile, even though the pandemic has temporarily ruled out the possibility of physical mobility, the lack of high-quality education and a positive academic climate in universities in China, as well as factors related to competitive entry requirements, such as the relatively more dynamic academic climate in the host countries (Altbach, 2004), still have an impact on students' choices of overseas education post pandemic. By comparing the academic climate and education quality in China and other countries, the seemingly safer alternative of studying in China was excluded after the balancing and judgement in terms of the education climate, quality and system (Li et al., 2021). Regardless of the pandemic, the relatively less favourable academic climate and education quality in Chinese universities where students are acknowledged or experienced have encouraged them to consider pursuing academic study overseas.

Studying abroad does not necessarily mean that prospective Chinese students have to choose the UK as the destination. This study found that the complicated geopolitical situations globally have pushed and pulled the UK as the 'choice of no choice' among Chinese students who participated in the study. In this regard, their choice of the UK could relatively ensure their safety in the learning environment with fewer international political conflicts than other countries have with China. To some extent, this echoed the decreasing number of Chinese students in the US due to the US–China rivalry (Yu, 2021). Geopolitical relations among countries have shaped the directions of international mobility and the proportion of Chinese international students, especially in the traditional destination regions.

Furthermore, the time sensitivity and its related age issues that this study uncovered is a new dimension that contributes to understanding the students' comprehensive decision-making regarding overseas education destinations. Due to the time sensitivity and competition in the job market, particularly in China (Mok et al., 2016), the shorter time that they spend on undertaking their master's degrees in the UK, the advantage of overseas learning experience and high-quality professional education are considered to be beneficial for their job hunting in the future. On the contrary that longer term education mobility is with greater benefits than the shorter term (Waters, 2023), for Chinese students they believed that shorter duration (1 year) of the taught master's programmes in the UK could be transformed into more relative advantages, such as more experience in full-time internship or jobs if compared with others pursuing overseas learning in the US or other countries with longer durations. Chinese students who participated in this study believe that they could have a stronger CV in job markets when competing with those who may have less full-time working experience due to the restraints of the longer duration of full-time education. Even if they did not try any working experience, this cohort believes that they still maintain the age advantages in the job markets. Furthermore, UK taught master's degree programmes are regarded by prospective Chinese international students in this study as the degrees with 'high-cost efficiency' where students could undertake world-leading training and obtain a widely recognised degree in a shorter time. Therefore, the shorter taught master's degree programmes in the UK are expected to enable these Chinese students to maintain their advantages in age while accumulating more cultural capital (Li et al., 2011). Fitting well with the time sensitivity of Chinese students, UK taught master's programmes have demonstrated their irresistible attraction for Chinese students in the international education markets. It seems that this degree-oriented education mobility has transformed the dynamics behind education mobility. Prospective Chinese international students tend to prioritise the education quality, the education system and the potential professional competition among international students and, surprisingly, show less interest in the cultural experience in the host country.

## Conclusion

Regardless of the 'push–pull' factors among various factors and concerns, prospective Chinese students in this study demonstrated their 'agency in immobility' to facilitate their international education progressions. Geopolitical factors, high-quality education and the shorter-term taught master's programmes have led to the UK being the 'choice of no choice' in students' overseas education destination decision-making. The findings of the study have beneficial implications for policymakers and stakeholders (e.g. universities), as well as for individual students and their parents. It is recommended that future research considers the potential long-term impact of the pandemic and how it may affect Chinese or even other international students' international education (im)mobility in other traditionally popular destinations. Due to the limitations of recruitment for research participants in this study, future research could also include some students from STEM subjects for a more comprehensive understanding of this cohort. Also, given that the majority of the participants in this study were female (though they offered meaningful insights about the time sensitivity among Chinese females), it would be interesting to explore the potential gender differences and implications related to time/age sensitivity among Chinese international students.

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**Data Availability** The data that supports the findings of this study are available on request from the author. The data are not publicly available; they are containing information that could compromise research participant privacy/consent.

## Declarations

**Conflict of interest** The authors declare no competing interests.

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