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## **Reconceptualizing International Student Mobility: A Multipolar Structure Lens**

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### **ABSTRACT**

*This article examines shifting patterns in International Student Mobility (ISM), primarily the move from a South-North paradigm to a more multipolar structure. With emerging education hubs in South Korea, Malaysia, India, the Gulf States, and China challenging the West's centrality, the study advocates a more nuanced approach to ISM research. It underscores the necessity of a geographical turn towards non-traditional areas and promotes a multipolar epistemology that privileges non-Western knowledge creation. The article also encourages investigation of sociocultural dynamics related to ISM, and suggests exploring underrepresented perspectives such as ethnicity, ecology, and gender in the post-pandemic world.*

**Keywords:** international student mobility, multipolar structure, epistemological multipolarity, sustainability

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International student mobility (ISM) has traditionally witnessed a global South-North pattern, as a result of and a driving force for the center-periphery divide between the West and the Rest. Despite its remaining salience, the core-periphery structure has undergone some shifts for the past two decades, witnessing a multipolar geography of international student mobility that provides a counterbalance to the long-standing asymmetry, with planned and emerging hubs such as South Korea, Malaysia, India, Gulf States and China diluting relative power of traditional space (Glass & Cruz, 2022). That said, it remains limited when it comes to examination of why and how shifting patterns of ISM occur given that the majority of scholarship focuses on traditional geographies of movement, contributing to “reproduce a very circumscribed definition of international student mobility” (Brooks & Waters, 2022, p.522). Confronted with shifting geopolitical and economic dynamics, intensified national and institutional competitions, and diversified individual aspirations

and paths, we need to scrutinize ISM via a multipolar structure lens (Glass & Cruz, 2022), which is a prerequisite for working towards an international education landscape that features more equity, plurality and heterogeneity. Aiming to discussing possible approaches to serving that purpose, this paper hopefully can provide some insights for concerned parties such as scholars, institutions, faculty staff and students.

A multipolar structure lens in a most immediate sense calls for a geographic turn, namely attending more to non-traditional geographies other than those East–West patterns that have been widely investigated for decades. Some recent efforts offer valuable insights in this regard. For example, delving into African students’ pursuit of Chinese capitals in Chinese universities, Xu (2022) nuanced an emergent mobility pattern within the Global South. Using Malaysia as an emerging successful case, Abdullah et al. (2022) examined relevant policies, initiatives, opportunities, and threats with respect to the role of Malaysian higher education as an international student hub.

Important and insightful as a geographic perspective is, a multipolar structure lens should embrace more dimensions, not least producing and practicing epistemological multipolarity that promotes non-Western forms of knowledge creation and circulation in pertinent research on ISM. One of such possibilities is to adopt a decolonial approach, activating and capitalizing on values, knowledges and traditions of Southern theories embodied and transmitted by international students and academics. Song’s (2022) recent study stands as a good reference, manifesting how EMI programs targeting international students in Chinese universities were constructed as a decolonialized contact zone by the co-inclusion of English and Chinese language versions of Chinese classics and of academic references from local Chinese scholars and overseas sinologists.

Another possibility is to conceptualize ISM with linkages to new sociocultural dynamics, situating relevant exploration in dimensions that remain largely under-explored. So far, those oft-researched dimensions based on the push-and-pull model, core-periphery dichotomy, capital theory and cultural adaptation abound, with an emerging body of research attending to ecological, gendered and agentic perspectives. That said, many shifting complexities that underpin international students as a collective cohort and individuals are yet unpacked, leaving lacunae to be addressed. A recent study incorporating an ethnicity-sensitive perspective is an exemplar of such efforts. Casting light on life trajectories of a group of Tibetans with studying abroad experiences back to China, Yang et al. (2023) highlighted intersections of educational mobility, ethnicity, and (de)capitalization processes. As we enter a post-pandemic era that is plagued by the aftermath of geopolitical tensions and economic recessions, shaped by AI-induced challenges and opportunities for educational and labor markets, more endeavors are needed to delve into emerging issues in ISM so

that we can keep abreast of an updated picture and work towards a more desirable international education landscape.

To sum up, despite the past few years having been volatile for ISM, it holds a promising future with these shifting patterns and energies for growth. Echoing Brooks and Waters (2022) in that “international” in ISM implies a global scope that should encompass many geographies, I add that the same “international” also implies epistemological multipolarity that underpins different engagements and aspirations in these geographies. To build a more robust and sustainable international education for mankind necessitates a multipolar structure lens that goes beyond geographic and epistemological limitations in the current perceptions and practices of ISM.

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