Longing for Home and Nurturing Hope: International PhD Students' Experiences of Disrupted Mobility during COVID-19

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ABSTRACT

This essay explores the emergent precarity of not being able to go home of a Vietnamese doctoral student in New Zealand when the COVID-19 pandemic hit the globe in early 2020, resulting in banned international travel. The longing for home became a new source of strength for the student to grow more resilient and calm amid the global crisis and reinforced her sense of belonging to both the home and host countries. This article provides a story of an international doctoral student that may resonate with a large number of international students who have been influenced by the global crisis for the past two years. It adds an international student voice to the pandemic discourses revolving around mobility and immobility, precarity and hope.

The COVID-19 pandemic has turned many of the world's human mobility dynamics upside down. People's attempts to protect themselves from the virus have reversed popular patterns of mobility, leading to new trends of mobility such as cross-border return migration (Martin & Bergmann, 2021). Due to the outpacing public health efforts to contain it, "many everyday human mobilities were brought to an abrupt halt, while others were drastically reorganised" (Adey et al., 2021, p. 1). A group of population that is among the most adversely affected by the abrupt immobility caused by the global crisis is international students. When the COVID-19 started to hit the globe in early 2020, it was predicted that international students in general would likely experience social and psychological issues, "including (1) emotional distress, (2) impaired sense of personal self-worth, (3) loss of inter-personal contacts, and (4) impaired task (academic) performance" (Firang, 2020, p. 2). The temporary residence and non-citizen status of international students cast them out of the conventional framing of migrant populations (Fouron & Schiller, 2001) and may even "marginalise them in a different way from settled migrants" (Durance, 2016, p. 3). What emerges from the pandemic is 'fragile transnationalism' (Nehring & Hu, 2021), or the retrenchment of transnational social spaces and processes due to the nation-states' countermeasures to calm the tide of the virus.

The unprecedented measures taken to cope with the global crisis have disrupted the very characteristic of international education: mobility. Worldwide travel restrictions, border closures, quarantine regimes, mobility surveillance through location tracking software have been used to regulate cross-border mobility (Liu & Bennett,

2020). In Xu's (2020) comment, "student mobilities, no matter daily commutes to and from universities, or transnational movements from one country to another, have been curtailed, unduly reinforced or coerced" (p. 750). Mobility now is less a desired privilege than a fear-invoking, risky and infectious possibility (Phan, 2022). It is even a pathology (Cresswell, 2020). Furthermore, the COVID-19, as a cultural artifact, has resulted in two phenomena: the reassertion of Western elitism dominance, and the hostility towards those who appeared Asian, including and mainly international students (Xie & Shaheen, 2021). Unprecedented societal lockdowns happening in many countries challenge international students with the emotional and economic negative influences besides pre-existing vulnerabilities related to funding shortages and restrictive migration policies that have been cited as what cross-national students frequently encounter (Sherry et al., 2010; Lomer, 2018). In many cases, international students, from being perceived to be educational consumers contributing to the growing economies of destination countries, to being seen as virus carriers. In a sense, their bodies are disciplined by borders, racism, and health insurance insecurity.

This essay reports the experiences of being stranded in the study country, New Zealand, of a Vietnamese doctoral student whose name is Ha (pseudonym). When the news of border closure broke out and the whole nation went into its first national lockdown in March 2020, Ha just started her fourth year of candidature at the time. Right before that, Ha had booked a flight to Vietnam for a conference and family visit. The pandemic shattered her hopes and plans. I interviewed Ha in June 2020 via Zoom meeting when she was still in lockdown in New Zealand. The interview lasted around 45 minutes in which I asked Ha about her feelings, her anxiety, her communication with friends in New Zealand and home in Vietnam, and the

support she received from her institution. This article is part of a large research project that investigated Vietnamese doctoral students' lived experiences during their doctoral journeys abroad. As the pandemic occurred during the data collection of the project, this article, focusing on the experience of one Vietnamese doctoral student, potentially addresses a critical gap of the extant literature on international Vietnamese doctoral students and their coping strategies with the COVID-19 crisis. An elucidation of Ha's emic meaning-making of her situation will contribute to the pertinent literature by illuminating these under-researched, yet important facets of the topic of the COVID-19 impact on international graduate students. Although the article outlines the experience of one student only, it may resonate with the experiences of many international students, regardless of race and level of education. It adds an international student voice to the pandemic discourses revolving around mobility and immobility, precarity and hope.

Longing for home

Ha started her study in New Zealand in 2017. She sojourned by herself, leaving her husband and two children of seven years old and one year old in Vietnam. Right after New Zealand had first COVID cases and subsequently did not allow non-citizens to enter the country, flight routes were cancelled. Ha, among thousands of international students, "felt trapped" as in her words. Ha detailed her emotional reactions to the New Zealand border-closure announcement.

> When I heard the news of shutting borders, I felt as if I was struck by a lightning. Border closure meant I would be far away from my husband and my children until...I don't know when. Every day after getting up, I asked myself when I could go home. I found the reality difficult to accept. It took me

several months to feel better, and only until recently have I accepted the new normal. It has been so difficult for me to be far away from my husband and my little girl. It is not easy to just describe that feeling in words. But that feeling is helplessness, something like helplessness.

The halt in movement came as a shock to Ha, leaving her in a state that she described as "struck by a lightning". When borders were closed, international students in New Zealand and elsewhere in the world were put in an (im)mobility crisis because the route home was now suspended. In that sense, an additional form of precarity to international students has emerged out of the pandemic: the fear of not being able to go back home that might lead to an extended, indefinite stay in the host country. Ha, as well as many other international students, were put in a state of in-betweenness, a 'fragile and emotional space' (Palmer et al., 2009).

I had a flight ticket but I was not allowed to travel. I kept hoping. [...] But the situation was still the same. [...] I was stuck in New Zealand. I couldn't escape to be home with my family [...] When can I come home?

The question that Ha asked herself every day "When can I come home?" reminds us of what Bissell (2007) terms as the "promise of the event-to-come that necessitates and brings about this experience of waiting" (p. 289). The day of her return to Vietnam was an event-to-come, but when-to-come was unknown and uncertain. That was why Ha kept feeling in-between.

As Calvo et al. (2021) notice, Global South students face specific challenges due to their third country national status, particularly during a pandemic. Ha's longing for home and anxiety when the route home was terminated and the indefinite suspension of mobility was generated highlights a new and pre-existing forms of precarity for

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international students. This issue invites further debate in the field of international student mobility. Ha's experience also leads us to revalue and rethink about her mobility. While she engaged in border-crossing education to be mobile for academic pursuit in the first place, the immobility entailed by the global health crisis turned her border-crossing activity to be less desirable. At the same time, as Ha had wished to be mobile for education away from her home country, she now wished to be mobile to be with her family in her home country.

Nurturing hope

Ha talked to her family every day, and she had other doctoral student friends who were in the same lockdown situation to mitigate the loneliness feeling. Ha also received the encouragement from her supervisors and institutions during the hard time. She then started to appreciate the 'safety' she had while the coronavirus was sweeping the world. Regardless of the stranded situation filled with uncertainty and anxiety, Ha carved out an opportunity to renew her connection to the host country while sustaining the longingness to her home country.

> I planted a Vietnamese coriander. I took care of it as if it was my child. Then I planted a lemongrass. At first it looked weak. I thought it would not survive, and my flatmate also said it couldn't. But I took care of it, watering it every day, asking myself when it would grow. And it survived. It grew and there was a new branch. [...] They reminded me of home. They were my hope. They were the image of Vietnam in the moment when I felt so lonely.

In times of extreme uncertainty like the COVID-19 pandemic, homesickness is intensified to the extent that international students like Ha had to find ways to feel as connected to home as possible. Ha's recreation of a sense of home by planting a Vietnamese coriander and

lemongrass was not only to bring the sense of home of Vietnam to New Zealand, but also to help her gain the sense of home in New Zealand, making New Zealand her temporary home. The herbal plants reminded Ha of her rootedness, strengthened her belongingness to her home country, and restored her connection to her host country.

Ha continued "I told myself everything needed time. My lemongrass needed time to adapt to the new environment. Me too. I was the lemongrass. I needed time to accept the new reality." In a sense, Ha was aware that mobility was contagious, similar to the comment by Linka et al. (2020) that mobility is a strong contributor to the global spreading of COVID-19'. By recognising the "ambiguous, unsettled, or unresolved" of the particular situation (Emirbayer & Mische, 1998, p. 998), in this study the new situation of banned international travelling, Ha learned to be patient and counter the challenges to be as strong as her lemongrass and to survive. Her acceptance of reality was not an act of surrendering. It was her self-transformation to be resilient against the pandemic. Ha learned to embrace her temporary immobility, reminding us that under these exigencies of the crisis, we need to adopt new routines, new habits, and new ways of stilling ourselves (Bissell & Fuller, 2011). With the ongoing pandemic as a backdrop of thought, Ha's experience shifts our attention to international students not as subjects and victims of the crisis but as agents to transform their individual context. Ha's acknowledgment of her vulnerability and fear was the first step to grow resilient. Her 'nurturing hope' activity was in fact an act of 'stillness', understood "as state of contemplativeness and introspection re-energised by the pandemic" (Lipura, 2021, p. 254). The coriander planting was not only a symbolic anchorage of home for Ha, but also a way for her to embrace the present in order to go past it and wait for the future.

Concluding thoughts

Corporeal travel has been highly problematised during the COVID-19 pandemic, leading to the curtailment of many previously taken-for-granted mobilities such as the circulation of international students (Cairns et al., 2021). The global health crisis, in international higher education and to international students, has been a global mobility crisis. The global spread of the coronavirus and the suspended mobility by border closure is an example of falling into a 'territorial trap' as a response to something that is not territorial (Wang, Zou, and Liu 2020; Agnew 1994). As international students have been thrown into a turbulence, new precarities may emerge, making them feel unsafe and uncertain about the future. International students can be a group that are most vulnerable to the new normal situation. Favourable study destinations such as English-speaking Anglophone countries may become less desirable to students because of traveling limitations and the distance between students and their family during a global turbulence. The heightened precarity among international students who found themselves cut-off from emotional support at a time of vulnerability calls for more attention to their lived experiences and their struggles with major social, emotional, educational and mobility challenges. As everything is constantly changing and unpredictable, "the one certainty among all the uncertainties is that it will not be a return to *normal*, but rather that it will be *a new normal*, which will be quite different from anything that we have known before" (Neuwirth et al., 2020, p. 3, *original emphasis*). What the new normal appears to be based on is a view of the world that is suspicious of mobility and rooted in a sedentarist view of the world. On a positive note, while the COVID-19 pandemic represents an influential external upheaval that potentially destabilises people's lives, strength and resilience will arise and triumph. The paper illustrates the need for educators to

broaden the scope of their support strategies to better ascertain the holistic student experience, especially both off-campus during the critical time. It is important to note that Immobility and mobility are no-longer taken for granted, or neither of them should be marginalised. They are both meaningful and emotionally felt.

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