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International Student Mobility in a Deglobalizing and Post-Pandemic World: Resilience, Reconfiguration, Renewal

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Writing about international student mobility (ISM) at such a juncture, there is a certain temptation to go with hyperbolic statements about how the ISM landscape has shifted dramatically in a world characterized by deglobalizing momentum (Irwin, 2020) or how the COVID pandemic was a “game-changer” (Yang & Lu, 2022, p. 133). Undoubtedly, the past several years have been volatile for international students and all those involved in various aspects of ISM. The unsynced trajectories of the pandemic in different regions/countries of the world, aggravated by the pandemic’s multifarious global repercussions – social, economic, geopolitical, etc. – have created a cacophony of experiences for international students, about which scholarship is rapidly emerging, both in this journal (to mention just a few: Sustarsic & Zhang, 2021; Thorson et al., 2021; Zabin, 2022) and elsewhere (e.g., Gomes, 2022; Xu & Tran, 2022; Yang, 2022b). Moreover, all these were on top of broader trends of deglobalization or slowbalization (The Economist, 2019), trade and geopolitical tensions, right-wing nationalist/xenophobic politics, and so on, which were already intensifying worldwide even before the pandemic. Of course, the pandemic added proverbial fuel to fire, and it is obvious that ISM underwent an extremely bumpy ride.

However, contrary to such narratives, here, we wish to draw attention to observations that speak to the resilience of ISM. By resilience, we mean

not only the resilience and tenacity demonstrated by international students in coping with the past few challenging years (Cheng, 2022; Cheng et al., forthcoming); more importantly, we refer to the resilience of ISM as a phenomenon, an agenda, and a field of activities. While the world is not yet fully out of the pandemic's shadows, we are already witnessing a robust bounce back of youth's demand for study abroad globally. For example, universities in the UK received record numbers of applications from key international markets for the January 2022 deadline, with applications from China growing by 12% and those from India almost doubling since 2019 (UCAS, 2022). In the United States, "After suffering steep losses in new international student enrollments in 2020 and 2021, US colleges are on track for recovery given a surge in applications for degree studies in 2022/23" (icef Monitor, 2022). In the Asia-Pacific, Australian universities are currently said to be "inundated" (Packer, 2023) with international students (although a closer look at evidence suggests that it is a resurgent demand from Indian students that largely accounts for the surge). In the tiny Asian city-state of Singapore where the first author resides and works, demand from international students, particularly those from China, also appears to be increasing. Overall, notwithstanding the shock event of COVID in a wider context of deglobalization, ISM proves to be exceptionally resilient and appears to be on the cusp of a powerful revitalization.

How can we understand the resilience of ISM, even when globalization is supposedly dying and when the global economic outlook seems grim as we enter 2023? We think it has to do with the remarkable versatility of ISM as a container of social promise and hope and as a locus of individual fantasy and desire (Chowdhury & Phan, 2014; Yang, 2016). The specific shapes these fantasy/desire and promise/hope take may have changed, but educational mobility seems to remain the appropriate means to realize those changed goals and objectives. For example, twenty years ago, when a globalizing China was just emerging as a major sending country of international students, ISM was the means for many Chinese youth enamored with a "paradise"-like West to seek flexible citizenship and cosmopolitanism (Fong, 2011). Two decades later, in a pandemic-struck China crippled by the "zero COVID" policy, youth who are losing faith in a better future at home start to contemplate "run philosophy" (Yuan, 2022), for which studying abroad provides a potential escape route.

Another example is the #TakeUsBackToChina movement on Twitter by South Asian international students who could not return to China for studies during the "zero COVID" period. We initially could not fathom why these students would even want to return to a country that was

implementing what appeared to the rest of the world as a totally unreasonable and inhumane pandemic control regime. However, browsing through the #TakeUsBackToChina twitter posts and seeing students sharing pictures connoting fond memories and an appreciation of China's relative state of prosperity and advanced development, we realized that for these students, China meant something very different compared to how the country was perceived by those of us who are mostly fed a Western (and decidedly negative) portrayal in the past several years. Educational mobility to China for these students may well be a precious experience into which dreams and resources have been invested. They wanted to return to China, even as the rest of the world saw China as a place to avoid.

Above, we have only considered things from the students' perspective; we have not even touched on how institutions and nations with vested interests in ISM will continue to promote and reinvent this field of activity, with reconfigured and renewed rationales and discourse. As we wrap up these unsystematic and inchoate thoughts in early January 2023, China has just recently pivoted from "zero COVID". Given the country's significance as both a sending and receiving country of ISM (Yang, 2022a), the implications are worth close observation (though perhaps not prediction, since what a wild card China has consistently proven itself to be). To conclude, even as the world remains under the shadows of COVID-19, war, inflation, and economic slowdown – all in a wider context of deglobalization – the story for international student mobility going forward may well be one of resilience, reconfiguration, and renewal.

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