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Reimagining the Agency of International Students of Color During Global Pandemic and (Neo)Racism

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ABSTRACT

The global imaginary contributes to the perpetuation of neo-colonial and neo-liberal mentalities, which reinforce the political, cultural, and social dominance over international students. Through an exploration guided by interrelated theories of agency and transnational social fields, this study employs a narrative inquiry methodology with a constructivist research approach to comprehend and investigate the agency of international graduate students of Color amidst transnational mobility during the COVID-19 pandemic within a four-year public research institution in the United States. The research findings demonstrate that specific contexts and spaces shape the agency of international graduate students and (trans)form their present and future. This article reveals four distinct forms of agency: agency as negotiation in uncertainties, agency as resistance to forms of (neo)racism, agency for personal growth and (trans)formation, and agency within transnational futures.

Keywords: agency, COVID-19 pandemic, international graduate students of color, (neo)racism, transnational, United States

The United States has consistently maintained its position as the leading destination for international students pursuing education abroad (Open Doors, 2021). Previous studies have emphasized the value of international students and international education from a neoliberal perspective (Cantwell, 2015; Chen et al., 2019; Glass & Lee, 2018). For example, international students are considered cash cows, objects, ATMs, and competitors (Hou & Jam, 2020; Cantwell, 2015; Stein & de Andreotti, 2016). However, there has been relatively limited research exploring how international students, particularly those of Color, respond to

challenges and navigate the complex dynamics of their lives as normal human beings from an ethical and humanized perspective. Specifically, there is a lack of research on how international students, especially international students of Color (ISC), cope with challenges and tensions as ordinary individuals with ethical considerations. The COVID-19 pandemic has introduced numerous obstacles and uncertainties for international students, yet research investigating how international graduate students of color exercise their agency in the face of these difficulties remains scarce (Hou & Wang, 2021; Thorson et al., 2022). ISC refers to international students originating from non-White or non-English speaking countries (Yao et al., 2019) as well as international students from Western countries who are non-White, encompassing individuals of Black, Hispanic, and Asian backgrounds, among others. This study specifically focuses on ISC hailing from non-White or non-English speaking countries.

Agency is commonly defined as “the ability of young people to make decisions and take action toward their own life and well-being” (DeJaeghere et al., 2016, p. 2). By engaging international students with their agency, a humanized perspective emerges regarding the independent and heterogeneous nature of international student identity (Heng, 2019; Tran & Vu, 2018). Additionally, the concept of transnational social fields offers a conceptual lens to incorporate local contexts and nation-states into the everyday lives of international students, revealing their navigation of identity as both being and becoming (Hou et al., 2020; Tran & Vu, 2018). The COVID-19 pandemic has further reinforced transnational social fields through the expansion of virtual internationalization (Bruhn-Zass, 2021).

The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic has resulted in increased challenges, negative experiences, racism, and xenophobia for ISC (Chen et al., 2020). Specifically, Asian international students have encountered severe prejudices, cultural discrimination, and threats stemming from anti-Asian sentiments (Schulmann & Trines, 2020). It is important to note that this narrative inquiry study does not aim to generalize the experiences and responses of all ISC during the pandemic. Instead, it seeks to explore the nuanced experiences of international students in the United States and how they enact their agency to respond to challenges in transnational mobility during this time. By employing a transnational lens, this study aims to understand how ISC utilize their agency, focusing on the following research questions: How do ISC demonstrate their sense of agency in response to challenges during the COVID-19 pandemic? In what ways have their being and becoming been shifted? How do their experiences shift their transnational mobility?

LITERATURE REVIEW

International Students During the COVID-19 Pandemic

The global COVID-19 pandemic has had a profound impact on higher education worldwide (Johnson et al., 2020; Martel, 2020a). According to Martel (2020b), around 96% of institutions canceled on-campus activities, 82% canceled international travel for students, and 54% closed dorms and student housing in March 2020. As a result of travel restrictions, the risk of contracting the virus, and exorbitant airfare prices, the majority of international students found themselves unable to return to their home countries and have to remain in the United States (Martel, 2020b). International students who relied on financial support from their home countries or families faced anxiety over potential disruptions to their funding due to banking closures or financial difficulties faced by their sponsors. These financial hardships have led to increased uncertainty and anxiety regarding paying rent and meeting essential needs such as purchasing groceries (Fischer & Whatley, 2020; Hou & Wang, 2021). The empty campuses during the spring of 2020 resulted in limited access to campus services for international students, creating a sense of isolation (Whatley & Castiello-Gutiérrez, 2021). Shifting to virtual education due to the pandemic has also contributed to feelings of loneliness among international students (Wilczewski et al., 2021).

Moreover, international students have been grappling with significant emotional challenges and anxieties concerning their health, future prospects, and the well-being of their families in their home countries (Bilecen, 2020; Hou & Wang, 2021). The inability to visit their families or vice versa, along with concerns about their families' health, have further contributed to emotional distress among international students. Unclear COVID-19 executive orders during the spring of 2020 intensified health concerns (Hou & Wang, 2021). Additionally, although public health authorities recommend wearing masks in public, the practice of mask-wearing raised concerns for international students (Hou & Wang, 2021; Kwon, 2022). People tend to consider that whoever wears a mask might be infected by the coronavirus (Ma & Zhan, 2020). Furthermore, research conducted by various scholars (see Hou & Wang, 2021; Sustarsic & Zhang, 2021) indicates that international students are experiencing uncertainty regarding their future due to immigration policies and the ongoing pandemic. The financial crisis caused by the pandemic has led organizations to lay off employees, thereby increasing the risk of being unable to sponsor H1B visas for international students (Hou & Wang, 2021).

(Neo)Racism Among ISC

Yao et al. (2019) found that the history of colonization in the United States has contributed to a racial hierarchy, with White occupying the top position and all other racial and ethnic groups situated at the bottom. The findings indicated that Whiteness as property and White supremacy have positioned the White culture and traditional White values as dominant, and international students need to acculturate and adjust to the host environment. ISC are embedded within this

racial reality (Stein & de Andreotti, 2016; Yao et al., 2019). They have encountered challenges when confronting and navigating the differences in socialization related to race in the United States.

Lee and Rice (2007) found that international students encounter neo-racism. Unlike traditional racism, which is based on skin color and biological differences, neo-racism operates through a hierarchy of cultural preferences (Lee & Rice, 2007; Spears, 1999). International students from Western countries, such as New Zealand and Canada, often report positive experiences (Lee & Rice, 2007). Conversely, international students from Asia, Latin America, and the Middle East tend to perceive higher levels of discrimination, including verbal assault, racial slurs, threats, or even physical attacks, compared to their Western counterparts (Hou & Jam, 2020; Lee, 2020; Yao, 2018).

Furthermore, the COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated the discrimination and anti-Asian sentiments targeting international students from East Asia (Bilecen, 2020). Terms like “Kung flu” or “Chinese virus” have been inappropriately used to refer to the COVID-19 virus, contributing to the stigmatization of Asians (Rogers, 2020). Asians have been viewed with suspicion as potential carriers of the virus, resulting in an alarming increase in anti-Asian racist attacks (Tessler et al., 2020). Zhang et al. (2020) adopted an intersectionality framework to explore the experiences of Asian Chinese international students regarding the intersection of race and nationality during the pandemic. The findings demonstrate that Asian, particularly Chinese, international students have become victims or scapegoats of politicized racism and xenophobia, leading to psychological exhaustion (Zhang et al., 2020).

Conceptual Framework

The study utilizes interrelated theories of agency (Biesta & Tedder, 2007; Edwards, 2005; Emibayer & Mische, 1998; Hopwood, 2010; Tran & Vu, 2018) and transnational social fields (Duff, 2015; Fouron & Schiller, 2001; Hou et al., 2020) to frame transnational educational contexts where ISC experience and respond to challenges and uncertainties in their lifecourse during the COVID-19 pandemic. Agency is defined as “the temporally constructed engagement by actors of different structural environments—the temporal-relational contexts of action—which, through the interplay of habit, imagination, and judgment, both reproduces and transforms those structures in interactive response to the problem posed by changing historical situations” (Emibayer & Mische, 1998, p. 970). Cultural and social contexts are embedded in the temporal-relational context, which encompasses symbolic patterns, formations, network patterns, and social ties to enable actions in transnational contexts (Emibayer & Mische, 1998; Tran & Vu, 2018).

The dimensions of agency, namely iteration, projectivity, and practical evaluation, encompass “a simultaneous internal orientation towards past, future, and present” (Emibayer & Mische, 1998, p.972). Iteration involves the incorporation of past thoughts and actions into practical activities, providing

stability and order to sustain identities and interactions. It includes selective attention, recognition of types, and categorical location as interrelated components (Emibayer & Mische, 1998). The process of iteration also involves selecting from “practical repertoires of habitual activity” (p. 980). Habitual interactions, navigation, and negotiation are acted in transnational social fields, which provide certain knowledge with patterns of expectations to predict the future (Emibayer & Mische, 1998; Fourn & Schiller, 2001). Projectivity refers to the impact of potential future actions, leading to the reconfiguration of thoughts and actions based on one’s hopes and/or fears for the future. It entails a transition from past experiences towards an orientation focused on the future, shaping how past experiences shape future actions (Emibayer & Mische, 1998). When international students face challenges or difficulties, they have the ability to reconstruct their identities (Emibayer & Mische, 1998; Tran & Vu, 2018). Within the temporal complexity and flow, international students extend “beyond themselves” in transnational social fields, envision their desired destinations, and reconstruct their images of “where they think they are going, where they want to go, and how they can get there from where they are at present” (Emibayer & Mische, 1998, p. 984). Practical evaluation involves making practical judgments and taking actions in response to emerging demands or dilemmas of the present (Emibayer & Mische, 1998).

These three dimensions are constructed through ongoing temporal actions in past, present, and future. They are embedded with the flow of time and transnational social fields (Emibayer & Mische, 1998; Fourn & Schiller, 2001; Tran & Vu, 2018). ISC as actors navigate and transition between different contexts and spaces while these contexts and spaces themselves undergo changes in their thoughts and responses within the constraints of social structure (Emibayer & Mische, 1998). Within this social structure, there are constraints imposed by cultural, political, economic, and other societal factors (Ross, 2023). Social structure “can take on more explanatory power in virtue of the fact that it operates as a *casual constraint* on individual agency” (Ross, 2023, p. 2). Internally, individuals with agency experience the world in various ways; externally, individuals with agency interact differently with their surroundings within various constraints (Emibayer & Mische, 1998; Ross, 2023). This also means that agency is social and relational (Edwards, 2005; Emibayer & Mische, 1998).

ISC, as agents, possess the capacity to form their decisions and identities, but they also need relational support from their institutions, communities, and other sectors in the transnational social field (Hou et al., 2020; Tran & Vu, 2018). A transnational social field is defined as “an unbounded terrain of interlocking egocentric networks that extend across the borders of two or more nation-states, and that incorporates its participants in the day-to-day activities of social reproduction in these various locations” (Fourn & Schiller, 2001, p. 544). The social field encompasses institutions and experiences, among other elements (Levitt & Schiller, 2004). International education, as a social field, involves multiple networks characterized by uneven distribution of practices and resources. (Hou et al., 2020; Levitt & Schiller, 2004). Individuals within this transnational

social field may access diverse social contacts and/or resources, exercising their agency at different levels. Simultaneously, international students, with the multiplicity of identities and social experiences, traverse national boundaries and move fluidly among various nation-states (Hou et al., 2020).

METHOD

Research Design

In this study, a constructivist research paradigm (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018) is employed to investigate and comprehend the agency of ISC in transnational mobility amidst the COVID-19 pandemic. Constructivists argue that reality is subjective due to diverse perspectives and experiences of individuals (Adom et al., 2016). Narrative inquiry (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000) is used as the methodology to explore the experiences of ISC during the pandemic. By placing ISC narratives at the core of this qualitative study, the aim is to document and examine how international graduate students exercise their agency to respond to challenges brought about by the COVID-19 pandemic.

Data Collection and Participants

Approved by the Institutional Review Board (IRB), this study was conducted at a four-year public research institution in the Northeast of the United States. The institution has a historical association with serving a predominantly white student population, but it has been committed to promoting diversity and inclusivity through recruiting a diverse student body over the years. Purposeful sampling was employed to recruit graduate students of color who held either an F1 or J1 visa status while studying in the United States during the COVID-19 pandemic. Graduate students were selected because they experience distinct academic, financial, and social environments compared to undergraduate students (Ma, 2020). For instance, graduate students often hold teaching or research assistantships within their departments, while undergraduate students are commonly sponsored by their families. Through social media, eight participants were recruited, which was considered an appropriate sample size to gain a comprehensive understanding of participants' narratives (Kim, 2015). In order to protect the privacy of the participants, they were given the option to preferred names or pseudonyms (see Table 1). The study utilized in-depth semi-structured interviews, which aimed to facilitate organic conversations and prioritize participants' voices (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990). The interviews were conducted between Fall 2020 to Spring 2021, exclusively through Zoom, with each interview lasting about 45-60 minutes.

Table 1: Participant Demographics

Names	Sex	Country	Program Type
Helen	Female	Sri Lanka	Doctoral
Shana	Female	Mongolia	Master
Hai	Female	China	Master
Serina	Female	India	Master
Jim	Male	China	Master
John	Male	Iran	Doctoral
Yue	Male	China	Master
Henry	Male	Saudi Arabia	Master

Data Analysis

Initial coding was the first step in the coding process. It involved a line-by-line or even word-by-word analysis aiming to “*open up* the inquiry” and to produce concepts that fit the data (Strauss, 1987, p. 29). I thoroughly reviewed all the transcripts and my notes to develop codes in accordance with the conceptual framework and the guideline for initial coding, which is to “*analyze the data minutely*” (Strauss, 1987, p. 31), such as the codes like “whether to wear masks,” “financial struggles and support,” “improve,” etc. This approach facilitated the creation of an “impressionistic cluster of categories” by swiftly reading through the data (p. 31).

Next, axial coding was employed, which is “the process of relating categories and properties to each other, refining in the category scheme” (Merriam, 2009, p. 200). This process allowed for the identification of dominant and less dominant codes (Saldaña, 2013). Particularly, drawing on the conceptual framework and the three components of agency, I organized and categorized all the codes into themes. The focus was on coding properties (characteristics or attributes) and dimensions (locations of property, conditions, causes, or consequences) of a category to better understand the *when*, *how*, and *why* behind the narratives (Saldaña, 2013). For instance, in the theme Agency as Resistance to Forms of (neo)Racism, properties included actions such as choosing to withdraw from the program, reacting, and fighting back while dimensions encompassed self-improvement through activities like reading, exercising, cooking, and finding entertainment in daily life.

Researcher’s Positionality

Research is a collaborative realm shaped by the collective efforts of both researchers and participants (England, 1994). As a researcher, I identify myself as a Chinese international female graduate student who was born, raised, and completed my undergraduate education in China. Currently, I am pursuing a doctoral degree in the United States. It is my personal and academic experiences, both prior to and during the COVID-19 pandemic, that motivated me to undertake

this narrative inquiry research. Being an insider in this context allowed me to establish rapport, fostering a deeper understanding and connection with the narratives and stories shared by participants. Moreover, this insider perspective facilitated my reflection on the profound meanings woven into these narratives.

RESULTS

The narratives of each participant illustrated their process of navigating and negotiating with a sense of agency when confronted with uncertainties and various manifestations of (neo)racism. The study also revealed that ISC, as resilient agents, have undergone growth and learning as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. Regarding their future mobility, participants expressed a strong inclination towards engaging in transnational activities after graduation, influenced by factors such as geopolitical tensions, visa regulations, uncertainties, and the prevalence of virtual education. Participants acknowledged that, despite the safety risks associated with studying in the United States, the lockdowns in their home countries, costly airfare, and the high risk of COVID-19 transmission during air travel have caused their immobility to stay in the United States for now. The findings have resulted in the identification of four prominent themes: agency as negotiation during uncertainties, agency as resistance to forms of (neo)racism, agency for personal capacity and (trans)formation, and agency within transnational future.

Agency as Negotiation in Uncertainties

Participants' experiences and negotiations are contextualized within diverse institutional and social environments, characterized by inherent uncertainties. The agency displayed by ISC as they navigate through uncertainties highlights their ability to make decisions based on their individual needs while operating within the constraints imposed by structural factors. The practical actions of each participant were influenced by their past thoughts, actions, and the prevailing social structure. They exhibited a heightened awareness of various needs and uncertainties in different contexts and spaces, such as accommodation, financial situations, instructional formats, health concerns, and immigration regulations. The lack of clear regulations regarding mask-wearing promoted many individuals to forgo wearing masks, except in mandatory locations. Participants expressed apprehension about grocery shopping in public stores, where there was a risk of contracting the coronavirus. While they were drawn to the freedom experienced in the United States, they also recognized the potential danger associated with this freedom. John eloquently expressed, "The country should uphold freedom, but it is unethical to hurt other people because of the freedom. Wearing masks is not only protecting yourself but also protecting others." Yue noted that people's religion and beliefs influenced their decision not to wear masks. He further elucidated, "Many American people were Christians and believed they could go to heaven after death, whereas many Chinese people believed their lives would end after death." Shana, who arrived in the United States to pursue her graduate

studies amid the pandemic, shared her story of feeling isolated and lacking information from her institution, contributing to her sense of loneliness:

I quarantined myself for two weeks and then eventually you'll get bored because it's difficult to stay in the house and then especially this town is new to me and I went for a walk for a couple of hours, then come back and just explored the city all by myself. There was no friend...the funny thing is that there was no event, no organization, no information provided at [my institution] (Shana).

Prior to the onset of the COVID pandemic, the majority of participants did not harbor concerns about their financial situation, as they were supported either by their families or through graduate assistantships provided by their institution. However, the pandemic triggered a significant exacerbation of international students' financial circumstances. Lockdowns imposed in certain countries rendered it impossible for participants' parents to provide timely financial sponsorship. Additionally, the institution itself experienced a dearth of financial assistance specifically allocated for international students. Henry shared his predicament of being unable to afford rent due to the lockdown in his home country and the absence of scholarships within his institution. Serina, on the other hand, did not secure an assistantship from her own department, but fortuitously obtained one from another department during the summer.

Participants had to shift from in-person instruction to virtual learning. Initially, they had a preference for in-person instruction because it allowed for direct interaction with fellow students and facilitated easier communication. However, the campus lockdown forced them to isolate themselves and adapt to virtual classes. Hai expressed her preference for studying and working in her office, where she found it easier to concentrate and collaborate with peers. Unfortunately, distractions like social media and other factors made it challenging for her to maintain focus while studying at home. Similarly, Jim and Henry also experienced difficulties with remote work due to distractions but were determined to adjust their mindset and make the most of their time at home. Nevertheless, they voiced concerns about the lack of interpersonal interactions with peers and professors in a virtual setting, as international students value the opportunity to experience U.S. culture and build networks while studying in the United States. On the other hand, Serina found virtual classes easier to manage because they required less preparation time compared to in-person classes. Prior to the pandemic, John relied on notes and presentations to communicate effectively with his advisor but working from home made communication more challenging. Despite the difficulties, John appreciated the ability to work from home as an introvert.

The political and social structure shapes ISC to make practical judgments and act to the ever-changing immigration regulations. The U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) has ruled that international students cannot enter or stay in the United States if their institutions offer online classes in the fall semester, considering the COVID-19 pandemic (NAFSA, 2020). Consequently,

international students faced a dilemma: either attend in-person classes during the pandemic or risk deportation to their home country. International students holding F1 visas could take a maximum of one class or three credit hours online if they attended in-person classes. Students attending a hybrid class are eligible to take more than one class or three credit hours online. Although participants were not currently concerned about their student status, they harbored worries about potential changes in immigration regulations that could impact their post-graduation plans. International students with F1 status must secure employment within 60 days after graduation, and the uncertainties caused by the pandemic and immigration policies have made it more challenging for them to find suitable jobs. Serina faced difficulties securing a summer internship due to limited opportunities and acknowledged the urgency of finding a job by December; otherwise, she would be compelled to return to her home country. The situation was further exacerbated by the significant inflation in international flight ticket prices caused by the pandemic.

Agency as Resistance to Forms of (Neo)Racism

This theme highlights the experience of participants who have encountered various forms of (neo)racism, such as discrimination and xenophobia while studying in the United States during the pandemic. Despite the uncertainties, they expressed gratitude for the opportunity to pursue their studies in the United States. However, Asian international students, in particular, have faced increasing stress and anxiety due to the heightened expectations placed upon them by their advisors, coupled with experiences of discrimination from others. For instance, John shared his discomfort and feeling of exploitation when his previous Graduate Assistantship supervisor questioned his academic capability and demanded excessive work, neglecting the need to balance coursework. Ultimately, his assistantship was terminated, and he had to transfer to another university. Similarly, Jim faced challenges in a math class where his English proficiency was questioned by his professor, and he did not receive adequate support, leading to his withdrawal from the course.

In addition to the standard (neo)racism experienced by ISC in general, Asian participants, particularly those from China, expressed concerns about their safety amidst a significant rise in hate crimes targeting minority racial groups. They shared the fear of being associated with the term “Chinese virus” following its use by then-President Trump in a tweet to refer to COVID-19. However, they acknowledged that their university was generally welcoming. In response to incidents of (neo)racism, participants made practical judgments and took action. Hai highlighted the difficulty of staying in the United States, especially in areas with a high concentration of Chinese international students like California, where they faced discrimination and became targets. She mentioned recent cases where one Chinese was killed, and another was assaulted by a White man. To mitigate the risk of such incidents, Hai chose to buy groceries online. Similarly, Yue expressed concerns about potential incidents targeting Chinese and Asian

individuals after watching news reports. He also noted that the COVID-19 pandemic had intensified geopolitical tensions between the United States and China, potentially impacting the safety of Chinese people:

It is hard for Chinese people to stay in the US now and in the immediate future. Asians remember the fate of many Japanese people in the 1940s, when the US government forced Japanese, even American citizens with only a Japanese heritage, into internment camps, during World War II. The US and China are in a cold war, and we might have to pick a side in the future (Yue).

Unfortunately, Jim experienced a targeted incident while crossing the street as a pedestrian. A driver refused to let him pass, shouting derogatory remarks such as “Build the wall” and “Go back to your country.” In response, Jim expressed his defiance by flipping the driver a middle finger. He further emphasized the importance of reacting and standing up against such situations when they do not pose a threat to one’s life. Remaining silent would only perpetuate discrimination and bullying.

Agency for Personal Capacity and (Trans)Formation

This theme revolves around ISC’s continuous navigation of their paths and their willingness to embrace challenges in order to sustain and reconstruct their identities during and beyond the COVID-19 pandemic. The participants have actively made conscious changes to their usual actions in response to the uncertainties and concerns brought about by the pandemic. They have taken deliberate steps to cultivate personal growth and capacity, aiming to become more independent, autonomous, and mature.

All the participants have learned the value of utilizing their time for self-transformation. John discovered the importance of spending time being true to himself and engaging in self-reflection. Despite facing mental health challenges, Hai learned to “be alone and find the inner peace by living alone.” Jim believed that self-adjustment was key to various aspects of life, describing “You don’t blame other people, just improve yourself and become a better person.” The pandemic also allowed Henry to develop a deeper appreciation for human interactions.

As a Fulbright student, Shana was highly motivated to experience American culture and improve her academic performance. Having previously enjoyed traveling due to her work as a tour guide, the pandemic made it difficult for her to travel with friends. Now, she chose to allocate time for reading, exercising, cooking, and entertainment daily because she could not hang out or travel with her friends. Shana found self-improvement to be fulfilling, engaging in various endeavors like reading books, listening to TED talks, and participating in online workshops. Studying in the United States during the pandemic provided Shana with the opportunity for personal growth through self-reflection.

When I was in my country, I would always wait for other people to reach out to me and ask to hang out, but this time, I was so lonely. So, I often reached out to people first. So even though I suffered mentally and emotionally, I kind of learned some lessons; like I shouldn't stay quiet, I must be the one who should reach out to people first. And you know if they don't want to talk to me at this hour, I can say okay, that's fine. Because I was the one who needed that support emotional, mental, you know, social presence. So, if I don't create that scenario, I will be bored and cry and suffer more. So that's how I learned, and I would say that's a kind of growth. Mentally, the downside helped me grow, and those struggles helped me become who I am now (Shana).

ISC's agency for personal capacity and growth has the power to transform the context in which it operates. Helen, for example, demonstrated her agency by working to improve the sense of unity and assist others. She strongly believes that every country shares the responsibility to collectively combat the pandemic.

Agency Within Transnational Futures

Agency within transnational futures demonstrates that ISC are complex and versatile agents in navigating and transcending existing and potential social structures. Their thoughts and actions are also demonstrated by their future plans and shape their future plans. These plans are influenced by various factors, including geopolitics, virtual international education, the labor market, and immigration regulations. The US-China geopolitical tensions have created challenges for Chinese international students in finding employment opportunities in the United States. Yue expressed the sentiment of having to "pick a side" due to these tensions. The virtual learning environment has also diminished the appeal for some international students, as they come to the United States to experience culture and life rather than solely studying online classes. Yue described, "It is not worth paying high tuition to study online classes. We can study anywhere." Jim echoed this sentiment, stating that the virtual learning environment was less attractive to international students.

In the face of executive orders signed by Former President Trump in 2020, participants described their flexibility and resilience when it came to their future plans. Henry, for instance, remained optimistic about the future despite the challenges posed by these orders. He said,

The US doesn't want international students, and now COVID makes it harder. However, international students are fast to adapt and will easily fit into the market. There might be new emerging jobs because of COVID (Henry).

John, originally from Iran, encountered numerous challenges in both his home and his host countries. Due to the unstable political situation in Iran, he had

difficulties returning home and had to extend his program. In order to overcome this obstacle, John was open to breaking away from the conventional binary pattern and considering the possibility of traveling to a third country.

I can't go home at the moment because Iran doesn't have a good economic situation. The political situation is unclear. I don't see any difference between staying here or going to Canada or Europe (John).

Despite uncertainties and negotiations, international students found ways to cope with their anxiety and adapt flexibly and resiliently to their environments. Their agency developed and evolved within various contexts, influenced by geopolitics, social environment, and power imbalances in transnational social fields.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The study sheds light on the experiences of ISC during the COVID-19 pandemic and their perceptions of negotiation, being, and becoming. Specifically, it highlighted the needs and challenges faced by international graduate students of color as human beings (instead of cash cows) during the pandemic, and how they enact their agency to process those challenges and (trans)form themselves. It challenges the notion of international students being treated as objects and ATMs (Hou & Jam, 2020; Stein & de Andreotti, 2016). Instead, it demonstrates that ISC are active agents and human beings that *have* different needs and challenges, *engage* in negotiation of challenges, and *(trans)form* themselves in transnational contexts (Deuel, 2022; Tran & Vu, 2018).

Guided by the agency and transnational social fields conceptual framework, this study reveals that ISC have a positive attitude towards studying in the United States during the pandemic, appreciating their institutions' prompt action to switch to virtual instruction despite campus lockdowns and the ever-changing immigration regulations. Through iteration, projectivity, and practical evaluation processes, ISC draw upon certain types of past experiences, act and respond to present experiences, and situate themselves in specific contexts and places to shape their transnational future. Agency as negotiation in uncertainties demonstrates ISC's capacity to make decisions based on their needs and navigations within structural constraints. It aligns with the concept of "needs-response agency," where students respond to needs in their host countries, as well as "agency as struggle and resistance," where students respond and resist challenging situations (Tran & Vu, 2018). Agency as resistance to forms of (neo)racism recognizes ISC to confront (neo)racism on academic, personal, interpersonal, and structural levels. It speaks to "agency as struggle and resistance" where students challenge forms of oppression (Tran & Vu, 2018) and adds that agency is shaped by the intersectionality of race, country of origin, academic stage, and geopolitics. Agency for personal capacity and (trans)formation, linked to the concept of "agency for becoming," emphasizes students' personal growth and transformation (Tran & Vu, 2018). Further,

reactivated by past thoughts and actions and incorporated into practical activities, agency for personal capacity and (trans)formation acknowledges ISC's continuous navigation of their paths, embracing challenges, and reconstructing their identities during and beyond the COVID-19 pandemic. Agency within transnational futures echoes the concept of "agency for becoming" by emphasizing that students' decisions about the future are influenced by their perceptions of the past, present, and future (Tran & Vu, 2018). More importantly, agency within transnational futures highlights the complexity and versatility of ISC as agents capable of navigating and transcending existing and potential social structures. While social structures impose various constraints on their experiences, ISC exercise their agency to envision and work towards transnational futures that transcend borders and dismantle barriers.

Within the social structure, ISC experience constraints in different ways concerning their past, present, and future. Prior to the pandemic, they could engage in various extracurricular activities and interact with the host culture. However, the pandemic has exacerbated the constraints imposed by cultural, political, academic, and financial factors. These constraints have shaped and regulated ISC's behaviors and responses. Often seen as *the other*, ISC face exclusion, discrimination, and marginalization (Lee & Rice, 2007), which is further compounded by the intersectionality of nationality and race. For instance, the study highlights how Chinese international students are influenced by the dynamics of racial and national backgrounds, as well as geopolitical tensions. Nonetheless, ISC exhibit autonomy, resilience, and positivity while negotiating uncertainties and constraints, which shape their values and personal growth. The findings also indicate that ISC refuse to remain silent in the face of (neo)racism, taking action to challenge racial dynamics. This challenges the perception of international students, particularly Asian students, as quiet and passive (Tran & Vu, 2018). By exhibiting agency for personal growth and (trans)formation, ISC engage themselves in spaces and contexts to reconstruct their identities and (trans)form their being and becoming (Emibayer & Mische, 1998; Tran & Vu, 2018). Moreover, their existence and personal development also influence their trajectory toward their transnational future.

Limitations

I acknowledge the limitations arising from a singular institution, which means that the findings may not be generalizable to all international graduate students of color. Each student's experiences and narratives could be influenced by their distinct circumstances, given the heterogeneity of international students (Heng, 2019). Due to time constraints, participants may not have had the opportunity to fully express their stories. Additionally, the selection of participants may not represent the entire spectrum of international students of color, thus limiting the range of narratives obtained. Future research should encompass African international students, Latin American international students, multiracial international students, and other diverse groups to provide a more comprehensive understanding.

Implications for Higher Education Policy and Practice

While the study primarily focuses on ISC's experiences during the pandemic, its findings and implications can extend beyond that context to enhance our understanding and support for ISC in non-pandemic settings. The key lies in comprehending the diverse experiences, needs, and challenges faced by ISC at different stages, enabling higher education institutions to offer suitable and equitable resources and support (Heng, 2019). For instance, despite the prevailing perception of international students as financial assets (Cantwell, 2015), the findings reveal their financial needs and the lack of institutional support, thus initiating a shift away from the neoliberal mindset (Hou, 2023).

With that said, the study presents several implications for higher education policy and practice. Firstly, recognizing the varied and nuanced needs of ISC within different contexts can guide higher education institutions in providing appropriate and equitable support for international students. Ultimately, international students are not homogenous but have heterogeneous needs (Glass et al., 2022). Secondly, it is crucial for higher education institutions and professional organizations to establish safe spaces where ISC can openly share their stories, experiences, needs, difficulties, and identities, ensuring that their voices are heard (Koo et al., 2021). Acknowledging ISC's resilience against (neo)racism should not overshadow their need to support from professionals. Moreover, ISC should have opportunities to engage with Student Affairs offices and policymakers to communicate how these sectors can better provide resources and support. Lastly, higher education institutions should prioritize career development and opportunities to equip ISC for their transnational futures. Collaboration between career development offices and international student offices is essential to understand the unique circumstances of ISC and offer appropriate resources and support.

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