The Spatial, Occupational and Social Mobility of Skilled U.S. Migrants in China:

A Capital-mobility and Intersectional Analysis

by

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ABSTRACT

Increasing globalization and the knowledge-based economy creates a higher-than-ever demand for skilled migrant labor. While Global North countries are the traditional destinations for skilled migrants, Global South countries have recently joined the race for such talent. The conventional migration scholarship does not adequately explain this increasing Global-North-to-South skilled migration. This dissertation fills the gap by studying mobility and its underlying factors for skilled U.S. migrants in the Pearl River Delta region of China. Using data from semi-structured interviews and sketch mapping, this dissertation develops a capital-mobility framework and employs intersectionality theory to examine the impacts of skilled U.S. migrants' capital and intentionality on global and local spatial mobility as well as occupational and social mobility. The first empirical paper highlights skilled U.S. migrants' cross-border im/mobility and introduces the capital-mobility framework that argues migrants' im/mobility outcomes are shaped by their aspirations to move, and the accumulation, transferability and convertibility of various forms of capital. While the migrants' capital was smoothly transferred to China and facilitated their voluntary mobility, the continued accumulation of capital in China could not be fully transferred to the U.S. upon their return, thus causing involuntary immobility. Although they mostly had little intention of staying in China permanently, the COVID-19 accelerated their return. The second empirical chapter shows that one's accumulation of capital could generate both enabling and limiting effects on their everyday mobility through influencing the capability to move and the demand for local travel. Whether migrants had intention to move around in the local city also affects their everyday im/mobility. The third empirical paper discusses skilled U.S. migrants' occupational and social mobility and how they are influenced by the intersections of race, gender and citizenship. I coined the term "glass box" to explain the limited professional growth and segregated occupations of skilled U.S. migrants' occupational mobility in China. Although their social mobility improved after moving to China, it declined after rising racial discrimination and xenophobia during the pandemic. This dissertation sheds light on the aspirations and capabilities for mobility among Global-North-to-South skilled migrants and provides policy recommendations for attracting and retaining skilled international migrants.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

The spatial flows of skilled international migration have changed significantly over the past few decades. While the Global North countries remained highly attractive to skilled migrants, some Global South countries have developed proactive policies and programs to attract the global talent to contribute to the innovative development and knowledge economy (Li et al. 2019; Li et al. 2022). After the financial crisis of 2008, economic growth languished in developed countries while (re)emerging economies like China has sustained economic growth and provided ample job opportunities for the skilled professionals (Kawashima 2020). In this context, the Global South is increasingly becoming the new destination for global talent (Camenisch and Suter 2019; Farrer 2014).

The conventional migration scholarship, focusing on skilled migrants from developing to developed countries or their return to the homeland in the Global South (Alberts and Haze 2005; Kofman 1999; Lowell and Findlay 2001), is not adequate in explaining the increasing Global-North-to-South skilled migration. To bridge literature gaps and illustrate the increasing importance of Global-North-to-South skilled migration, this dissertation focuses on skilled U.S. migrants in the Pearl River Delta (PRD) region of China. Since 1978, China's economic reform ushered in an era of rapid domestic modernization and globalizing expansion. The country's economic restructuring, rapidly aging population, and the “brain drain” issue in recent decades all led to a high demand for global talent. In order to recruit skilled international migrants, China initiated the points-based work permit system in 2017 that is highly selective of skilled professionals and it has relaxed regulations for permanent residency since 2015 (Chinanews 2018; Gautel 2017). Based on China's 2010 census, the U.S. is the country that sends the second largest number of international migrants to China (National Bureau of Statistics of China 2011[1]). The PRD region, which pioneered China's economic reform with policies that opened up the country to participation in the world market, not only serves as a major destination for foreign investment and global talent but is also economic stratified with diverse demand for skilled labor to support sustainable growth during the transitions to knowledge economy.

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[1] The latest 2020 census data on numbers of international migrants by country of origin is not publicly available by the time the dissertation is completed.

In this dissertation, I propose a capital-mobility framework that argues migrants' im/mobility outcomes are shaped by their aspirations to move, and the accumulation, transferability, and convertibility of various forms of capital. The framework further differentiates voluntary mobility, voluntary immobility, involuntary mobility, and involuntary immobility. Guided by the capital-mobility framework, I examine the experiences of skilled U.S. migrants in the PRD region of China in terms of their cross-border mobility, their everyday spatial mobility, their occupational and social mobility, and the impact of their personal aspirations and capital. Specifically, the dissertation addresses three research questions: 1) What drives and enables skilled U.S. migrants' mobility to and from China? 2) What affects their everyday mobility, and what are the implications for their social inclusion or exclusion in the local society? and 3) How does the intersectionality of their race, gender, and citizenship, along with their aspirations, shape their occupational and social mobility in China?

To achieve these research goals, I mainly used semi-structured interviews and sketch mapping to collect primary data. The qualitative approach best enables the reflexive and interactive exploration of a target group and provides rich, meaningful, and deep analysis (Bernard, Wutich and Ryan 2016). I spent a total of nine months in my study site in the PRD region between 2017 and 2019. Such immersion allowed me to build connections with the target study group and I conducted 27 preliminary in-person interviews and on-site observations. After successfully defending my dissertation proposal in December 2019, I planned to travel to China in 2020 to conduct more immersive fieldwork. However, with the global outbreak of COVID-19 and the associated travel restrictions since 2020, travelling internationally for fieldworks became less feasible. In these circumstances, I adjusted my data collection methods to look for alternatives to continue my work. First, I used synchronous online interviews through video-conferencing programs such as Zoom and WeChat to maintain real-time co-presence with the interviewees. Second, the approach of conducing sketch mapping on a tablet was no longer feasible given I could not be physically present with my research participants. As an alternative, I used an online mapping survey with base maps and survey questions. To help bridge the technical barriers, I created a short tutorial video with instructions on how to complete the mapping survey. Such adaptive strategies allowed me to conduct remote fieldwork research and ensured that I completed data collection in a timely manner. In total, my sample included 58 interviews and 33 valid sketch maps. Among the 58 participants, 46 were recruited in 2020 while 12 were participants that I followed up with after the in-person interviews in 2018.

Despite the disruptions to my fieldwork, COVID-19 also added an additional layer of nuance allowed me to examine the complicated and shifting im/mobility experienced by the skilled Americans in China due to the pandemic. The mobility of skilled migrants is susceptible to disturbance from global geopolitical relations, in the context of growing nationalism and xenophobia intensified by the outbreak of COVID-19. Although skilled migrants from the Global North are normally perceived as relatively privileged migrants, they were also exposed to precarity, risks and marginalization to various degrees after the pandemic. As such, while COVID-19 intensified the fragility and instability of the symbolic values of all races and citizenships, it made the vulnerability of whiteness and U.S. citizenship in China more discernable, which were oftentimes less visible during regular times. Such reconfiguration of their experiences during the COVID-19 has significant implications for their spatial, occupational, and social mobility in China. In the end, instead of writing a separate chapter on COVID-19 to discuss its roles on migrants' mobility independent of other factors, I integrated the analysis of pandemic disruptions into each of my three empirical chapters.

This dissertation adopts the '3-paper' structure with empirical analysis presented in the format of three journal manuscripts, in addition to the introduction and conclusion chapters. Specifically, Chapter 2 examines the cross-border spatial mobility of skilled U.S. migrants in China. The empirical analysis shows that skilled U.S. migrants enjoyed smooth transfers of their capital and voluntary mobility to China. Yet, over time, they tended to shift to immobility, either voluntarily because the locally-developed capital anchored their stays, or involuntarily due to the low transferability of their capital back to the home country. In the long term, the skilled U.S. migrants planned to eventually leave China primarily because they had little intention of staying permanently. In addition, migrants' capability to stay was also influenced by relatively strict regulations for permanent residency and age restrictions for work permits in China. The global spread of the coronavirus exacerbated anti-immigrant backlashes and pushed them to leave China ahead of schedule unwillingly. This chapter thus enriches our understandings of how unequal power relationships between the Global North and the Global South countries shaped migrants' cross-border mobility over time.

Chapter 3 focuses on the skilled U.S. migrants' everyday spatial mobility in cities in the PRD region. By combining online sketch maps with interviews, I study the underlying factors of the migrants' everyday mobility and their implications on their social inclusions or exclusions in the local society. I employ the concept of "activity space" to represent their everyday spatial mobility. The analysis shows that migrants' capital, or the lack thereof, influences both the demand to travel daily and the capability to do so. In addition, migrations' intentionality to move around in the local city also matters. Some participants consciously chose to live in "expat bubbles" and did not wish to expand the range of their activity space. Such im/mobility has implications on the migrants' experience of social inclusion or exclusion. In most cases, high levels of everyday mobility indicate social inclusion and low everyday mobility suggests social exclusion by locals or self-exclusion. But there are exceptions when the im/mobility results more from the changes in travel demand than migrants' capabilities to move. During the COVID-19, participants all ended up having more confined activity spaces and were unwillingly excluded from the local society because of the rising xenophobia and racial prejudice.

Chapter 4 discusses the skilled U.S. migrants' occupational and social mobility and how they are influenced by the intersections of race, gender and citizenship. I coined the term "glass box" to explain the occupational mobility of skilled U.S. migrants in China. White participants had the most upward mobility but would still hit a "glass ceiling" as their non-Chinese citizenship prevented them from reaching the top positions. All the employed participants were pigeonholed into segregated occupations by "glass walls" due to their intersectional social identities. However, their various forms of capital formed a "glass floor" that protected them from extremely precarious jobs, although the COVID-19 pandemic exposed them to the risks of abrupt employment termination. While some participants were unwillingly confined in the “glass box”, some others intentionally chose to do so to benefit from the privileges gained from their citizenship, race, and/or gender. Meanwhile, all the participants enjoyed upward social mobility prior to the COVID-19 and then downward mobility after the rising racial discrimination and xenophobia during the pandemic. Their social mobility was complicated by the feelings of being a “token” or “trophy”, and further disrupted and destabilized by the pandemic. Finally, the analysis shows that occupational and social mobility do not always change in the same direction.

Chapter 5 concludes by summarizing the major findings of this dissertation and discussing its theoretical contributions and policy implications for both China and the U.S. I will also reflect on the limitations of this dissertation research and possible directions for future research.

CHAPTER 2

CROSS-BORDER IM/MOBILITY OF SKILLED MIGRANTS FROM THE U.S. TO CHINA

Abstract

There is an emerging trend of skilled migrants from the Global North to the Global South. This paper proposes the capability-mobility framework while providing empirical evidence on the new international migration landscape of skilled U.S. migrants in the Pearl River Delta Region of China. Guided by the literature on im/mobility and capital, this paper asks the following questions: What affects skilled U.S. migrants' mobility to and from China? How do they experience the dynamics of voluntary and involuntary immobility in China? Drawing on 58 semi-structured interviews, this paper found that the level of capital accumulation, transferability and convertibility was influential to one's mobility or immobility. The global outbreak of COVID-19 facilitated mobility for some while hindered the mobility for others. This study contributes to literature by revealing the differences between North-to-South and South-to-North skilled migration and illustrating the continuum of im/mobility experienced by skilled migrants during their migratory trajectories.

Keywords: skilled migration; mobility; immobility; capital; COVID-19; China

Introduction

The international movement of skilled individuals has become more common with increasing globalization and knowledge-based economy. The landscape of skilled international migration is shifting, shaped by unbalanced economic development across regions. While Global North countries are the traditional destinations of skilled migrants, Global South countries like China have recently joined the race for talent (Li et al. 2021; Tan 2021). Over the past two decades, the number of international migrants from developed to developing countries has surged from 9,814,079 to 11,612,215 (calculated based on UN 2019), an 18.3% increase, leading to growing need to comprehend the North-South international migration flows and Global South countries' practices in managing cross-border migration (Adamson and Tsourapas 2020).

Migration studies, especially those on skilled migration, often suffer from the “mobility bias” which over-concentrates on mobility and overlooks the determinants and experiences of immobility (Carling 2002; Schewel 2020). Conventional scholarship focuses on either skilled migrants from developing to developed countries (Beaverstock 2005; Kofman 1999; Lowell and Findlay 2001) or their return to the homeland in the Global South (Alberts and Hazen 2005; Chacko 2016). But can the classic migration theories adequately explain the increasing trend of Global-North-to-South skilled migration and the implications of their im/mobility experiences? Using the U.S. and China to embody the Global North and South respectively, this paper asks the following questions: What affects skilled U.S. migrants’ mobility to and from China? How do they experience the dynamics of voluntary and involuntary immobility in China?

Three realities provide the rationale for this focus. First, skilled migrants moving from the U.S. to China suggests the uneven but changing process of globalization. Since the economic reform in 1978, China has received increasing foreign investment. In 2020, China surpassed the U.S. as world’s largest recipient of foreign direct investment (Hannon and Jeong 2021). Such internationalization of investment contributed to the demand for more international talent. When the pandemic plunged the world into recession, China was the only major economy that expanded 2.3% in 2020 compared to a year earlier (He 2021). China, in particular its Pearl River Delta (PRD) region, is an integral part of the global economic network and has attracted skilled talent during China’s transition to knowledge economy. Secondly, the U.S.-to-China skilled migration reflects how Global South countries are joining the race for talent to combat the “brain drain” situation. Finally, the U.S.-China relationships have evolved from strategic partnership to intensified adversary with ongoing trade and technological wars. COVID-19 has worsened the U.S.-China relationships and may eventually affect the migrants’ mobility.

The next section reviews relevant literature and introduces the capital-mobility framework, followed by the research setting of skilled U.S. migrants in the PRD region. After presenting the research method, the paper analyzes mobility to and from China and examines how they experience the voluntary and involuntary immobility dynamism while staying in China.

The conclusion highlights the im/mobility continuum and illustrates the differences between North-to-South and South-to-North skilled migration.

Conceptual Model: Capital-mobility Framework

While the “mobility turn” in social sciences centers on movement and fluidity (Sheller and Urry 2006), there is a recent call for “immobility turn” (Bélanger and Silvey 2020). The needs to rethink mobility, immobility, and the relationship between them in skilled migration research are threefold. First, in comparison with the proliferation of studies on the mobility of skilled migrants, “immobility” as a research subject has long been missing until recently (Axelsson 2017; Babar, Ewers, and Khattab 2019). Second, immobility needs to be conceptualized not only as negative and involuntary, but also as people’s voluntary decisions with positive outcomes (Schewel 2020). Third, to avoid separating mobility and immobility as dichotomies, there is a need to examine mobility and immobility as non-binary and co-constitutive in one’s migratory trajectory (Bélanger and Silvey 2020).

In order to investigate the divergent forms and determinants of im/mobility, Schewel (2020) proposed the aspiration/capability framework, which was developed from the aspiration/ability model (Carling 2002; Carling and Schewel 2018). The aspiration/capability framework categorizes four forms of im/mobility, i.e., mobility (have both aspiration and capability to migrate), involuntary immobility (have the aspiration but no capability to migrate), voluntary immobility (have the capability but no aspiration to migrate) and acquiescent immobility (have no aspiration nor capability to migrate). The aspiration/capability framework is beneficial to im/mobility research since it “provides the conceptual tools to analyze processes that lead to both mobility and immobility outcomes” (Schewel 2020, 334). Moreover, Schewel (2020)’s work enhances our understanding of people’s preferences to stay through retain factors in the current country of residence (Kõu et al. 2015; Vertovec 2002) and repel factors that are linked with prospective challenges of migration.

While the aspiration/capability framework significantly advances the research agenda on immobility, there are still three deficiencies. First, its emphasis on mobility and immobility is not balanced. Particularly, it does not distinguish the intentionality of mobility (i.e., voluntary vs. involuntary) as it does for immobility. Furthermore, the notion of “capability” is too broad and vague to be effectively operationalized in empirical research. Finally, there lacks a continuum perspective in studying the changes of mobility and immobility during one’s life course.

Therefore, this research builds on Schewel (2020)’s work and proposes the capital-mobility framework (Figure 1). The main tenet of the framework is that capital accumulation, transferability and convertibility across space would influence one’s prospects of mobility and immobility, and positions in the im/mobility continuum. Specifically, the vertical axis points to the level of capital accumulation, transferability and/or convertibility.

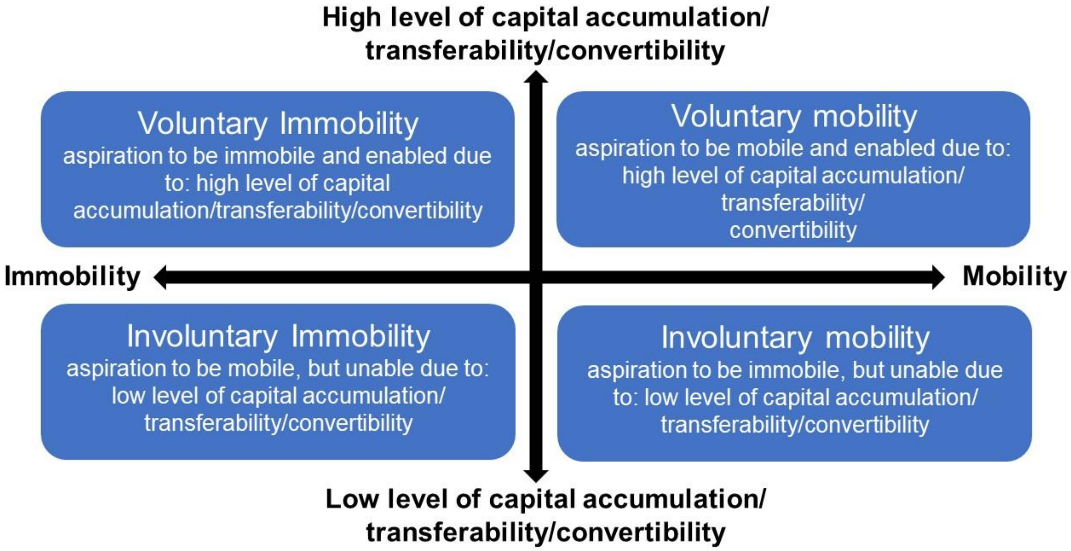

High level of capital accumulation/ transferability/convertibility
Voluntary Immobility
aspiration to be immobile and enabled due to: high level of capital accumulation/transferability/convertibility
Voluntary mobility
aspiration to be mobile and enabled due to: high level of capital accumulation/ transferability/ convertibility
Immobility
Mobility
Involuntary Immobility
aspiration to be mobile, but unable due to: low level of capital accumulation/ transferability/convertibility
Involuntary mobility
aspiration to be immobile, but unable due to: low level of capital accumulation/ transferability/convertibility
Low level of capital accumulation/ transferability/convertibility

Figure 1. Overview of the Capital-mobility Framework

Bourdieu (1986) identifies four principal forms of capital: cultural, social, economic, and symbolic capital. Bauder (2003) extends Bourdieu’s theory and argued citizenship is also a form of capital and distinguished between formal citizenship (legal and institutional) and informal citizenship (cultural, identity, belonging). Therefore, I build on Bourdieu and Bauder’s theories and incorporate the following capital -- cultural, social, economic, symbolic and citizenship capital – when studying skilled US migrants. Capital can be transferrable and different forms of capital are convertible into each other under certain circumstances (Bourdieu 1986). The horizontal axis refers to the im/mobility continuum. The concepts of “mobility” and “immobility” are multi-dimensional and including various forms such as cross-border and everyday spatial movement, and changes in occupational and social status. In this paper, “mobility” is considered as migration or movement. Accordingly, “immobility” means non-migration or “continuity in an individual’s place of residence over a period of time” (Schewel 2020, 344). The experience of im/mobility is not static but could change over time during one’s migratory trajectory (Karell 2021).

The capital-mobility framework proposed four im/mobility categories (counterclockwise from the top right quarter in Figure 1): 1. voluntary mobility (i.e., having the aspiration to be mobile, enabled by high level of capital accumulation/transferability/convertibility). 2. voluntary immobility (i.e., having the aspiration to be immobile, enabled by high level of capital accumulation/transferability/convertibility). 3. involuntary immobility (i.e., having the aspiration to be mobile, but unable due to low level of capital accumulation/transferability/convertibility). 4. involuntary mobility (i.e., having the aspiration to be immobile, but unable due to low level of capital accumulation/transferability/convertibility). This framework provides an analytic lens of the divergent intentions and outcomes of im/mobility. It also allows a temporal dimension to examine the shifting positions along the im/mobility continuum over time as one’s level of capital changes.

While many existing research used im/mobility and capital theories separately (Bélanger and Silvey 2020; Erel 2010), the proposed capital-mobility framework offers potentials to connect them together and examine how macro-level structural forces and power dynamics could shape one’s migration or non-migration. Tying im/mobility and capital together is the notion of “power geometries”, suggesting the flows and movement are shaped by power (Massey 1994). Similarly, Cresswell (2010) argues for the “politics of mobility”, meaning that mobilities are productive of and produced by “social relations that involve the production and distribution of power” (Cresswell 2010, 21). The axes of social differences such as age, gender, race, ethnicity, class, and citizenship all produce structural inequalities and power imbalances that shape how capital is transferred and converted across space, and further manifest as the “inequalities in control over mobility” (Bélanger and Silvey 2020, 3425).

I employ this capital-mobility framework outlined above to examine the im/mobility of skilled U.S. migrants in China, including their movement to China, stays in China for short-term and long-term, and their returning to the U.S. The role of public health emergency such as COVID-19 in the capital-mobility relationships is also to be uncovered.

Attracting and Retaining Skilled Talent in Pearl River Delta Region of China

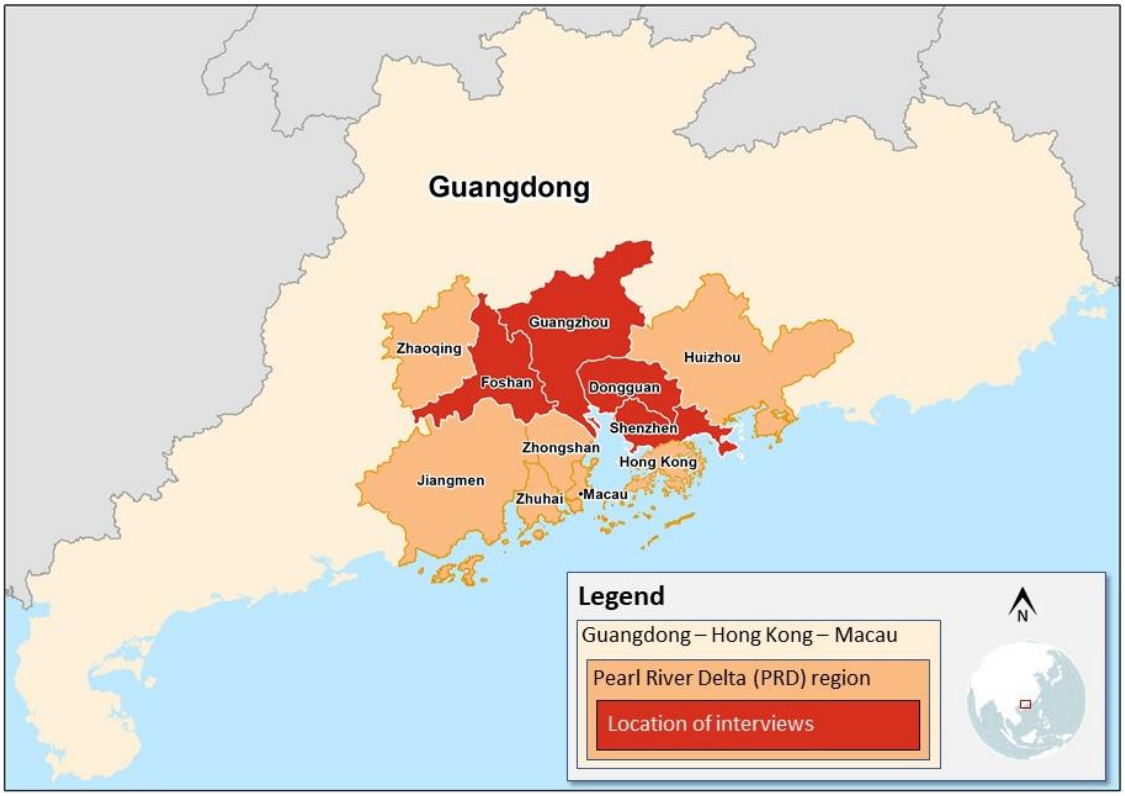
As China is transforming into knowledge economy and Chinese enterprises are increasingly engaging with globalization, the demand for skilled workforce is expanding. Meanwhile, China's domestic labor force continues shrinking since 2015 (National Bureau of Statistics of China 2020). China struggles with "brain drain" with large numbers of people staying overseas after finishing their studies. Thus, the realities in economic restructuring and demographic trends have pushed Chinese government to search for global talent, including both overseas Chinese and non-Chinese foreign professionals. According to the 2010 census, a total of 593,832 foreigners resided in mainland China, among whom 71,493 were US nationals, ranking the second highest among all (National Bureau of Statistics of China 2011).

To attract global talent and manage the inflows of international migrants, China has implemented several initiatives. In 2017, China launched a new work permit system that is similar to the existing points-based system in Western countries like Canada and Australia. The system numerically grades applicants based on various aspects of their qualifications, such as age, education, work experiences and Chinese language proficiency, and then classifies applicants into three categories based on the accumulative points: Type A (85 points or higher), Type B (between 60 and 85 points), and Type C (below 60 points) (Gautel 2017). In 2018, China issued 336,000 work permits to non-Chinese professionals (SCIO of China 2019). The work permit system highlights China's preferences for attracting skilled migrants. Particularly, educational degrees and work experience are weighted heavily among all the criteria in the work permit system. Bachelor's, masters' and doctorate degrees are awarded 10, 15, and 20 points, respectively. Two years' work experience is assigned 5 points, and one point is added for each additional year, for up to 20 points (Gautel 2017). The system also reflected the labor market's preferences for young and middle-aged professionals. According to this system, 15 points are assigned for ages ranging between 26 and 45, and from there the point values gradually decrease to 0 for those over 60 years old (Gautel 2017).

Despite the initiatives to attract global talent, China has a tight immigration regime where the pathways to permanent residency and citizenship were narrow. Officially implemented in 2004, China’s permanent residency permit (also known as “Chinese green card”) system was extremely restricted. Only 7,356 green cards were granted ten years after the implementation of the system (Wong 2018). Although the country has relaxed the criteria for granting permanent residency since 2015, the numbers of green card applications and approvals were still exceptionally low. In Guangdong Province alone, there were only 475 applications and 320 approvals for green card from 2016 to 2018 (Chinanews 2018). The limited green card issuance suggests the selectivity and exclusion codified in the immigration policies. In 2020, the government proposed new regulations to loosen the criteria for international migrants to apply for permanent residency. The proposed rules include changing the requirement for annual income from six times of local average income to three to six times, depending on industry, region, and the length of working years. Another proposed change was to lower the requirement of the lengths of living accumulatively in China from 5 years to 1 year for those with PhD degrees or had worked in key industries or regions (Ministry of Justice 2020).

The spatial distribution of global talent in China is uneven. Guangdong Province, the first opening to the outside world since the open-door policy, hosts the largest number of international migrants in mainland China (National Bureau of Statistics of China 2011). Within Guangdong Province, the Pearl River Delta (PRD) region serves as the strongest magnet for skilled migrants (Figure 2). Pioneered China’s economic reform since 1978, the PRD region ushered in the era of rapid modernization and globalizing expansion. In 2016, the concept of “Greater Bay Area” was initiated to indicate a geo-economic megapolis consisting of nine cities in Guangdong Province, and Hong Kong and Macau special administrative regions (Zhang 2019). Among all major cities in Guangdong, Shenzhen, Guangzhou, Foshan, and Dongguan ranked the top four by GDP in 2020 (Wangyi 2021). Shenzhen has a strong emphasis on innovation. By 2020 it marked the 40th

Anniversary of Shenzhen Special Economic Zone, whose population increased by 42 times and GDP grew by nearly 14,000 times during the four decades (Wangyi 2020). Guangzhou, the capital of Guangdong Province, houses 148 higher education institutions. Since 1957, it had hold the “China Import and Export Fair” twice a year before the COVID-19 pandemic. In 2018, Guangzhou ranked the top in business environment among 34 cities across China, housing more than 30,000 foreign-invested enterprises (Newsgd 2019). Foshan is one of the major hometowns for overseas Chinese and has long histories of foreign contact. In 2017, 60% of foreign professionals were employed in the education sector while 20% worked in manufacturing industries (Chinaqw 2017). Dongguan, a hub for foreign investments and manufacturing industries since the 1980s, has recently undergone industry upgrades to encourage innovative development. The four cities complement each other and contribute to the attractiveness of the PRD region to global talent.


Guangdong
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Foshan
Dongguan
Shenzhen
Zhongshan
Hong Kong
Jiangmen
Zhuhai
•Macau
Legend
Guangdong – Hong Kong – Macau
Pearl River Delta (PRD) region
Location of interviews
N

Figure 2. Study Site of the Pearl River Delta region, China

When COVID-19 broke out in China in December 2019, many international migrants had left China for Christmas or Chinese New Year and did not make it back before China closed its border at the end of March 2020. According to the statistics released by Guangzhou Municipal Government, while 86,475 international migrants resided in Guangzhou in December 2019, the number went down to 30,768 in April 2020 with more than 50,000 international migrants having left China (NBD 2020).

Research Methods

This paper draws from semi-structured interviews with skilled U.S. migrants in PRD region. I define “skilled migrants” as those who have at least a bachelor’s degree or equivalent professional experiences, i.e., classified as “Type A” or “Type B” talent by China’s work permit system. My samples included U.S. citizens who have stayed in China for at least six months consecutively at the time of research. I selected the informants through the stratified purposive strategy (Patton 2002), maximizing representation in age, gender, race, and marital status, which are key social dividers based on literature and preliminary fieldwork. The participants were recruited via a variety of channels such as personal contact, snowball recruitment, expat forums, and social media.

From 2017 to 2019, I spent a total of nine months in the PRD region. The intense immersions in the field site allowed me to build rapport with the study groups and search for participants. In 2018, I completed 27 preliminary in-person interviews. In 2020, I converted to online interviews due to COVID-19 and the resulting travel restrictions and completed 46 new interviews and 12 follow-ups with previous participants I interviewed in person in 2018. Each interview lasted about 60 to 120 minutes. Interviews were conducted in English and were digitally recorded with the consent of participants.

By the time of online interviews in 2020, 19 participants were outside of China either because they fled home during the pandemic or were stuck elsewhere before China’s border closed in March 2020. All the interview participants provided retrospective assessment of their rationales coming to China. For participants who had left China, I inquired about their original migration plan prior to COVID-19 and how it may have changed as a result of the pandemic. This approach ensured that participants could reflect on their return intentions within similar timeframes.

While converting to remote interviews is necessary for responding to the challenges of doing fieldwork during COVID-19 (Woodworth et al. in press), am fully aware the potential differences cause by interviews of two different modality. Despite existing research showed no significant differences in terms of data quality, validity and reliability between in-person and online interviews (Shapka et al. 2016), I found online interviews posed extra challenges in rapport establishment. To overcome this obstacle, I always tried to share my own migration stories with the participants prior to interviews to build trust.

Among all the 58 participants (Table 1), 31 are men and 27 are women. At the time of interview, 29 are unmarried (either single or divorced) and 29 are married. Their ages ranged between 20 to 65 years old. Despite the efforts to maximize representation in race, the participants are predominantly whites, except one Asian American, five African Americans, and three mixed-races. The participants are highly educated, with 25 bachelor’s degree holders, 20 having master’s degree, seven holding doctoral degrees, and the remaining six participants either had some undergraduate experiences or were pursing bachelor degrees. Their occupations in China varied but were concentrated in the education sector, with 24 participants working in professions related to education, such as university professor, English teacher, curriculum developer, and school director, etc. Other occupation types include entrepreneur, project manager, architect, artist, voice actor, counselor, etc. Their durations of stay in China varied from 1 year to 37 years. All the participants were self-initiated migrants to China instead of company transferees.

Table 1. Demographics of Participants

Pseudo name	**Gender**	**Age**	**Race**	**City**	**Marital Status**	**Year to China**	**Highest Degree**
Mia	F	20	White	DG	Single	2009	Undergrad student
Jasmine	F	25	White	GZ	Single	1999	BA
Reese	F	26	White	GZ	Married	2016	BA

Pseudo name	Gender	Age	Race	City	Marital Status	Year to China	Highest Degree
Hailey	F	27	White	SZ	Single	2001	Some Undergrad
Vincent	M	28	White	SZ	Single	2015	BA
Rachel	F	29	White	GZ	Single	2013	BA
Rebecca	F	29	White	GZ	Single	2013	BA, Pursue Masters
George	M	29	White	GZ	Single	2009	BA, Pursue Masters
Jayden	M	29	White	GZ, SZ	Single	2013	MA, Pursue PhD
Hope	F	30	Black	FS	Married	2014	BA
Ebony	F	30	Black	GZ	Single	2014	MA
Jocelyn	F	30	White	GZ	Married	2010	BA
Sam	M	30	White	GZ	Single	2012	BA, Pursue Masters
Kyle	M	30	White	GZ	Single	2013	BA
Olivia	F	31	White	GZ	Married	2011	MA
Cody	M	31	White	DG	Single	2017	BA
David	M	31	Asian	SZ	Single	2018	MA
Cecilia	F	32	White	DG	Single	2019	MA
Harper	F	32	White/Latino	FS	Married	2014	BA
Kevin	M	32	White	DG; GZ	Married	2011	BA
Ella	F	33	White	FS	Married	2017	BA
Lucy	F	33	White	GZ	Single	2013	MA
Fernando	M	33	White/Latino	DG	Single	2018	MA
Hunter	M	33	White	FS	Married	2017	Some Undergrad
Randall	M	33	Black	SZ	Single	2009	BA
Monica	F	34	Black	GZ	Married	2012	MA
Edward	M	34	White	GZ	Married	2011	MA
Greg	M	34	White	SZ	Single	2013	BA
Luke	M	34	White	SZ; HK	Single	2013	MA
Justin	M	35	Black	DG	Married	2015	MA
Brandon	M	35	White	DG	Married	2013	BA
Hector	M	35	White	GZ	Single	2009	BA
Ryan	M	35	White	GZ	Single	2010	BA
Andrew	M	36	White	SZ; HK	Married	2004	MA
Zoey	F	37	White	FS	Divorced	2006	Some Undergrad
Grace	F	37	White	GZ	Married	2008	BA
Lauren	F	38	White	GZ	Single	2019	PhD
James	M	39	White	DG	Married	2018	BA
Alan	M	40	White	GZ	Married	2005	BA

Pseudo name	Gender	Age	Race	City	Marital Status	Year to China	Highest Degree
Ronaldo	M	41	White/Black	DG	Married	2012	MA
Mark	M	43	White	SZ	Divorced	2010	BA
Nolan	M	43	White	SZ	Married	2015	MA, Pursue PhD
Mason	M	46	White	GZ	Married	2009	BS
Smith	M	52	White	DG	Married	2015	MA
Charlotte	F	53	White	GZ	Married	1983	PhD
Norah	F	53	White	SZ	Married	1991	PhD
Jackson	M	53	White	SZ	Divorced	2002	PhD
Ruth	F	55	White	SZ	Divorced	2018	MA
Anna	F	58	White	GZ	Married	2014	MA
Sophia	F	58	White	SZ	Single	1995	BA
Richard	M	58	White	GZ	Married	2014	PhD
Susan	F	59	White	SZ	Divorced	2016	PhD
Evelyn	F	60	White	DG	Married	1990	MA, Pursue PhD
Jane	F	60	White	DG	Married	2009	Some Undergrad
William	M	60	White	DG	Married	1990	PhD
Pat	M	60	White	DG	Married	2009	Technical School
Tracy	F	63	White	GZ	Divorced	2013	MA
Nicholas	M	65	White	GZ	Married	2015	MA

Note. DG = Dongguan, GZ = Guangzhou, SZ = Shenzhen, FS = Foshan, HK = Hong Kong. BA = Bachelor's degree, MA = master's degree

All the recordings were transcribed using the software Express Scribe. I then conducted content analysis of interview transcripts using the software MAXQDA for coding, identifying themes, and analyzing patterns and meanings. A hybrid of deductive and inductive approaches was employed to create coding schemes. I first manually developed the coding system based on literature and research questions. First-order codes include “mobility”, “immobility” and “capital”. I then created second-order codes under each first-order category. For example, under “mobility”, I differentiated between “voluntary mobility” and “involuntary mobility. Under “capital”, I built codes such as “capital accumulation”, “capital transferability”, and “capital convertibility”. I then employed an inductive and data-driven coding strategy that allows the themes and patterns to emerge from the fieldwork. For example, under “aspirations to China”, I identified themes such as “economic reasons”, “social networks”, “adventures”. In identifying themes, I also used in vivo coding, a technique that explicitly uses the interviewees’ actual words and phrases to name themes. The combination of deductive and inductive coding ensured the logical consistency and subjective interpretation of the textual materials (Fereday and Muir-Cochrane 2006).

Mobility to and from China

Skilled U.S. migrants moving to China illustrates the voluntary mobility of individuals with aspirations to migrate and are enabled through their possession of cultural, social and citizenship capital, which were highly valued in Chinese context and could be converted to economic and symbolic capital after migration. On the other hand, the involuntary mobility when leaving China was largely facilitated by the lack of formal and informal citizenship capital, demonstrated through the external challenges and lack of intentions of acquiring citizenship or permanent residency status in China and the negative meanings associated with U.S. citizenship during the pandemic.

Voluntary Mobility to China

The aspirations to China consisted of employment opportunities, potentials to save money and adventure-seeking, although different age groups in various career stages displayed different combinations of these factors. Macro-level environment in both the sending and receiving countries, including the financial crisis in 2008 and the sweeping modernization and urbanization in China, further shaped their aspirations to China. The cultural, social and citizenship capital accumulated in the U.S. facilitated their cross-border mobility. Unlike skilled migrants from the Global South to the Global North who often experienced inadequate skill transfers (Purkayastha 2005), participants in this study enjoyed smooth transferability and convertibility of their capital after moving to China.

Job opportunities and the potentials to save were believed to be the primary attracting factors, especially among young migrants. Almost half of the participants were in their twenties and recently graduated from college. For them, working in China was helpful for saving money to pay off student loans. Their job offers in China typically included benefits such as rental allowance and airfares. Utility and other living costs in China are relatively lower than those in the

U.S. The accessibility of public transportation in Chinese cities reduced the need for cars and other associated costs. For example, Randall immediately moved to China after graduating from the Asian Studies program, “it was 2009 in the middle of financial crisis. I thought why look [for jobs] in America and get rejected, especially as a humanities major.” Moving to China was an opportunity for life-making, a term Carling (2002) used to suggest young migrants who went abroad to work for economic success.

Beyond helping young migrants to launch their careers, China was also considered a promising place for middle-aged professionals to accelerate their career development which they had already enjoyed in the US or a third country. Nolan had practiced urban design for almost two decades in North America and Europe prior to moving to Shenzhen, attracted by the urban development and technology innovation in this region. Similarly, Ebony valued the supportive environment and preferential policies in Guangzhou when registering her company. For them, the socio-economic environment in the destination society would facilitate capital cultivation and sustain upward occupational mobility (Ho 2011; Liu-Farrer, Yeoh and Baas 2020).

In addition to the economic motivations, skilled U.S. migrants were also attracted to China to seek unique cultural experience and fulfill their dreams for overseas living. While all the participants agreed leaving home and working in a different country was an exotic experience in a sense, the young and older migrant cohorts showed stronger aspirations for adventure, especially when they had little domestic responsibilities at home. For instance, when Ryan dropped out from graduate school, he realized that “you suddenly had no connections to anything [in the US], so you're very free to go wherever you want.” This sentiment was widely echoed by the older migrants who were in their fifties by the time of moving to China. All armed with a master’s or PhD degree and decades of professional growth, these older migrants cared little about career advancement but wished to pursue old dreams to live overseas, dreams that they had been holding onto since they were young but were delayed due to multiple responsibilities in job, marriage, and caretaking in the U.S. For example, Tracy remarked, “China was always in my heart.” Divorced at the time of migration, Tracy said: “I wish I had come here when I was younger, but I am still glad I did it.” The opportunity came when her parents passed away and the children all grew up. For these older migrants, once they no longer had to shoulder the domestic responsibilities, they were able to follow their old dreams to work and live in China.

In sum, the migration landscape is shifting with the Global South gradually becoming the land of opportunities for skilled migrants. One the one hand, after the economic crisis, skilled migrants searched for job opportunities in (re)emerging economies in the Global South like China. On the other hand, China, similar to some other developing countries, experienced fast economic growth and urbanization since the economic reform. The speed and scale of the development was hardly found in any Global North countries. As Hector put it, “It's exciting in China. There's always new things being built and there's this kind of excitement about a developing country.” Thus, the socio-economic transformations in the Global South bring about numerous opportunities for skilled migrants.

Having the above migration aspirations in mind, the participants’ mobility was facilitated by the high level of capital, and its high transferability and convertibility to China. First, cultural capital was critical for their capability to move. All the participants agreed that their degrees and professional qualifications earned in the U.S. had facilitated their migration to China. Moreover, their English language skill was desired in local labor market and had high symbolic values (Lan 2011). Ultimately, migrants’ cultural capital could be converted into economic capital, helping them secure job opportunities and achieve financial stability.

Second, social capital also enhanced their mobility to China. The overseas social connections, through prior U.S. migrants or Chinese contacts they established during short trips to China, encouraged imagery about living abroad and became social capital for them to secure job opportunities in China. For example, Ryan reconnected with his Chinese contacts that he met during a cultural exchange program in China. With their help he quickly landed a job to teach English in Guangzhou. Meanwhile, Ruth relied on her social network in the U.S. to acquire migration information. Always wanted to live abroad, Ruth applied through an agency to find a job as a counselor in Shenzhen, the same occupation she had in the U.S. Their stories support previous literature that social network is important social capital that facilitate the development of migration (Ryan et al. 2008).

Finally, the symbolic values of citizenship capital also enhanced their capability to move. A number of participants mentioned that “U.S. passport has opened a lot of doors in China”, suggesting that the education qualifications and professional experiences gained in the U.S. have high symbolic values in China. The unequal power relations between the U.S. and China not only signal the smooth transfers of cultural capital acquired in the Global North to the Global South, but also suggest its convertibility to symbolic and economic capital after moving to the Global South. In comparison, when skilled migrants move from the Global South to the Global North, they often struggle with inadequate valorization of skills from their home country and are often channeled into secondary labor market with more vulnerabilities in employment (Erel 2010; Ong 1999; Purkayastha 2005).

Involuntary Mobility Leaving China

Although the skilled U.S. migrants’ citizenship capital produced symbolic values in social and cultural realms, it cannot be directly transferable in the legal and institutional systems in China, thus contributed to migrants’ desire to leave the country eventually. The COVID-19 pandemic heightened the tensions between the Chinese natives and foreign migrants, and problematized the cultural representation of U.S. citizenship in Chinese society, all contributing to the involuntary mobility of skilled U.S. migrants and demonstrating the precarity of migrants regardless of their skill level and country of origin.

The participants experienced constraints in transferring their formal citizenship capital to China. The narrow pathways for Chinese citizenship and green cards for international migrants constrained their capability for permanent settlement in China. Mentioned by a number of participants, China was perceived as an immigrant-unfriendly country, where there were limited opportunities to obtain permanent residency status other than marrying a Chinese person. Moreover, the age restrictions in work visa permits also prevented some older migrants to stay forever. For instance, Anna worried her work permit couldn’t get renewed after she turns sixty, which is the cutoff age for most work permit approvals. Thus, the regulatory immigration regime in China made it hard for U.S. citizenship capital to realize its values in legal and institutional terms.

The global breakout of COVID-19 led to temporary border closures in China and posed challenges to renew visas, leaving participants with more frustrations about transferring their citizenship capital to China and were forced to leave the country eventually. When I video-interviewed Alan in July 2020, he was at a friend’s apartment in Guangzhou packing the belongings of that friend, who had been stuck outside of China for seven months by then. Alan flipped the camera and showed me what was going on inside of the apartment, “See? Everything is packed up. The moving company is here.” He added, “If you have a family and you're kicked out of the country for seven months, you can't just keep waiting for it [the border] to open up and go back, and expect things will still be there for you. ……. They never plan to go. They were forced to do it.” Similarly, Ryan had to return to the U.S. after his visa expired. In these cases, state policies in response to the pandemic have heightened the involuntary immobility experienced by the skilled migrants.

COVID-19 also accelerated participants’ mobility to return given the hostility and backlash they experienced as a result of their citizenship and racial status during the pandemic. The fears of the virus, along with the lack of informal citizenship or cultural membership in Chinese society, eventually facilitated migrants’ mobility by moving up their schedules to return. For instance, Mark fled China and returned to the U.S. in February 2020 when China was hit the hardest by the virus, “COVID-19 actually precipitated me coming home earlier than I planned to do.” Similarly, when I interviewed Greg in October 2020, he was concerned about the rising tensions between the U.S. and China after the U.S. closed the Chinese Consulate in Houston and China shut down the U.S. Consulate in Chengdu in return. Although Greg still planned to stay in China for a short-term because “China did a good job containing the virus”, he moved up the schedule of returning because of the discrimination towards international migrants during the pandemic, “it made me believe I don’t want to end up in China forever. Because as a foreigner, I cannot get true stability.” These participants were worried about the long-term geopolitical impacts with the increasingly intense U.S.-China relationships. COVID-19 and the associated border closures had exacerbated the existing social boundaries between migrants and the local community (Heller 2021).

International migrants were further “othered” during the pandemic given the rising xenophobia and anti-immigrant sentiments (Xie, Li and Tan in press).

Dynamics of Voluntary and Involuntary Immobility in China

In this study, immobility refers to the stay in the current country. While voluntary immobility emphasizes on the preferences to stay, involuntary immobility highlights the constraints on movement. Mobility and immobility, along with the voluntary and involuntary aspects of im/mobility, are relative to a temporal framework. While skilled U.S. migrants often enjoyed mobility when moving to China, their establishment of capital in China could increase their propensity to be voluntarily immobile in the country. The continuum of im/mobility may change again when expanding the timeframe. In the long run, although migrants’ aspirations to leave China increased, they found it hard to because of the dim prospects of capital transferability back home, and thus were involuntarily immobile in China. Underlying the changes along the im/mobility continuum temporally is the possibilities for capital accumulation, transferability, and convertibility across space.

Voluntary Immobility in the Short Term

The participants aspired to stay for short-term, and their immobility was enabled through the continuous accumulation of economic, cultural and social capital as well as its smooth convertibility to economic and symbolic capital that elevated their socioeconomic status.

The buildup of economic capital in China was prominent in retaining skilled migrants. When evaluating whether to stay, participants usually compared their financial prospect in China with that in the U.S. After finishing the work contract, Pat chose to continue looking for job opportunities in China, “I wasn’t really ready to go back. The job market in the U.S. was still not that great then.” Meanwhile, the relatively low living cost in China allowed migrants to live comfortably while saving money. For instance, Harper and her husband, moving to Foshan after graduating from college in the U.S., extended their stays from one year to four years to save money. In these cases, working in China improved their economic capital and reinforced their willingness and capability to stay.

The anchoring effect of social capital from families, friends and romantic relationships all made migrants more attached to China, reducing the likelihood to return. About one third of the interviewees either married to or had a Chinese partner, who became their strong social support. The findings resonated with literature on how ethnic intermarriage gave immigrants access to the social capital of the natives, and further enhanced embeddedness to the local society (Fu 2001; van Tubergen and Maas 2007).

More importantly, the high convertibility between different types of capital could further improve their economic wellbeing and social status. A number of participants emphasized the importance of *guanxi* (i.e., social relationships) with Chinese in helping them gain more economic success. For instance, Brandon said, “having a Chinese family shows employers that I am not the come-and-go type of foreigner” and opened more job opportunities for him. The cultural capital from knowing Chinese language could be converted to other forms of capital and further improved their migration experience. Alan explained the reasons for his extended stay, “Investment in the language made me feel that I have the little seeds planted. I don’t want to leave because then the plant would die. I want to stay and keep cultivating it.” Similarly, Jocelyn commented, “It (knowing the local language) is not as helpful in the resume but it’s helpful in making relationships”, demonstrating the power of conversion from cultural to social capital (Erel 2010). The capability to speak Chinese helped them expand their social network, engrain themselves to what is going on, and enhance their opportunities to be more embedded into the local society, all contributing to their attachment to China.

Involuntary Immobility in the Long Term and During the Pandemic

Although participants showed preferences to stay for the shorter term, they were reluctant to permanently settle down in China. Their aspirations to return to the U.S. stemmed in part from the low citizenship capital in the destination country. However, they often found themselves unable to return. Ironically, although they accumulated more capital over the years in China, the increase in capital did not guarantee its smooth transferability to their home country when returning.

The low informal citizenship capital in China, including lacking belongingness to the local society and the constant feeling as “outsiders”, deeply influenced the participants’ reluctance to stay forever. Andrew, who had lived in China for thirteen years, said, “I am a foreigner, and I will always be a foreigner. That will never change.” Similarly, Hailey, who moved with her parents to Shenzhen when she was eight and spent most of her life growing up in China, claimed that “no matter how long I have been in China, because I am white and I look differently, I am always a foreigner.” Both Andrew and Hailey were fluent in Mandarin, had Chinese friends, and had lived in China for over a decade; however, the feeling of “inability to fit in” never faded away. Skilled migrants, whether originated from the Global South or the Global North, still faced challenges in integration and lacked belongingness to a social system (Heckmann 2005).

Intrinsically, participants were more attached to the social and cultural values as U.S. citizens and identified more with education and lifestyle ideologies from their home country. Hope, married to a local, planned to move her family back to the U.S. when her child reaches primary school age. An African American herself, Hope elaborated on her decision, “I really think they have a more well-balanced and multi-racial school system [in the US]. In public schools here [in China], they won’t be nice to a half-Chinese half-black child. They won’t be sensitive to my child. I want a diverse school rather than a segregated one.” Hope’s comment was echoed by other participants even though they had Chinese partners. In comparison with skilled migrants from the Global South to the Global North who considered children’s education as one of the deciding factors for their stays in the destination country (Khoo 2014), this study found that skilled migrants from the Global North were more suspicious of the quality of basic education in the Global South and thus were less willingly to stay permanently.

Moreover, participants yearned for the lifestyle characterized by slow pace and quietness, which they associated with the informal citizenship capital in the U.S. and believed it was hard to achieve in China. Jane stated, “I guess the kind of things we think for retirement, the things that I want to do are difficult to do in China, like travelling a little more, maybe getting a mobile home…Also China doesn’t seem very relaxing. Even though China has become home, it is still stressful.” The example illustrated that although China represented the new land for economic opportunities, it rarely became the top choice for long-term residency. Ironically, while the rapid development and exotic lifestyle attracted the migrants to China in the first place, these exact same elements also kept them from staying longer. This finding contrasts with research on skilled migrants from the Global South to the Global North that found social environment and life quality in the destination country contributed to their willingness of permanent migration (Khoo, Hugo and McDonald 2008; Yang and Welch 2010).

Despite the reluctance for permanent stays, participants often found it too challenging and risky to return because of the low transferability and convertibility of the capital back to the U.S. For example, Pat, who moved to China ten years ago, admitted that “the longer we stay, the harder to go back.” Compared to skilled migrants from the Global South to the Global North who have little concerns of transferring their capital accumulated abroad to home country, skilled U.S. migrants in China were more worried about the prospects of capital transfers back home. They doubted if the professional skills, social networks, and language competences acquired in China would be adequately appreciated in the U.S. Thus, the challenges to convert their social and cultural capital accumulated in China to symbolic and economic capital in the US may eventually lead to downward economic mobility, reducing their likability to return.

In sum, this study uncovers one significant difference between skilled migrants in the Global South and their counterparts in the Global North. Those migrating to the Global North are less worried about the inadequate transfers of their skills and capital acquired abroad to their home country and may be more likely to return as a result. Comparatively, skilled migrants from the Global North experience more uncertainty about transferring their capital obtained in the Global South to their home country and consequently less likely to return. The disjuncture in capital transferability and convertibility between migrant sending and receiving country was ultimately determined by the unbalanced power dynamics between the Global North and the Global South (Erel 2010).

Nevertheless, the im/mobility dynamics was disrupted and complicated by the global outbreak of COVID-19 and the associated border closure, which caused another form of involuntary immobility, evident in skilled U.S. migrants unable to enter China even if they wanted to. The strict limitations on international travel destabilized their lives to an unprecedented level. Alan commented on his American friends who were stuck outside of China due to post-COVID-19 border restrictions, “We've never known so many people to be stuck and not able to move. It's the lowest mobility ever.” Their immobility was resulted from the low formal citizenship capital since state policies and bordering practices in China could limit U.S. migrants’ cross-border mobility, resembling the entangled and restricted mobility experienced by migrants from the Global South (Mau et al. 2015; Wang 2021). Although skilled migrants from the Global North normally benefit from global mobility in the past, the blanket restrictions on travels in the wake of the pandemic drastically limited their movement across borders. Thus, the pandemic had exposed the vulnerability of all kinds of migrants, whether they were from the Global North or the Global South.

Conclusion

This paper proposes the capital-mobility framework and applies it to examine skilled U.S. migrants to China. The framework differentiates four forms of im/mobility, i.e., voluntary mobility, involuntary mobility, voluntary immobility and involuntary immobility. It argues that skilled migrant’s cultural, social, economic, symbolic and citizenship capital, as well as its transferability and convertibility could influence their position along the im/mobility continuum.

In this empirical case, the skilled U.S. migrants’ voluntary mobility to China was supported by smooth transfers of cultural, social, and symbolic capital from the U.S. to China. Their involuntary mobility to leave China, on the other hand, was caused by the low transferability of the citizenship capital in the legal and institutional context in Chinese society. Once they were in China, they tended to shift from voluntary to involuntary immobility over the time. While voluntary immobility was mainly attributed to the economic, social, and cultural capital accumulated in the receiving country, involuntary immobility was caused by low level of citizenship capital as well as low transferability and convertibility of the capital from China to the U.S.

By connecting citizenship capital with the prospects of im/mobility, this framework provides unique perspective to capture the role of power dynamics between migrant sending and receiving countries in shaping migrants’ im/mobility across borders. Particularly, the study uncovers the differences between Global-North-to-Global-South and Global-South-to-Global-North skilled migration. First, contrary to the belief that skilled migrants from the Global North have frictionless mobility, I found that they also experienced immobility and they were situated in various positions along the continuum of im/mobility during their migration trajectories. Second, they enjoyed smoother transfers of capital when moving abroad but experienced more challenges about transferring capital back home. While overseas study and professional experience often prepares skilled returnees for upward mobility once returning to the homeland in the Global South (El-Mallakh and Wahba 2021), it may not have similar stimulating effects for skilled returnees to the Global North. Third, they were more unwilling to permanently stay and integrate in the receiving society. The global hierarchy structure and asymmetrical international relation are associated with countries' level of development and determines the stratification of social groups based on their citizenship capital. Although the rising of the Global South in economic development attracts skilled migrants, it still cannot subvert the hierarchy where Global North countries dominated the cultural, economic, and social norms.

COVID-19 complicated the dynamics of mobility and immobility. While the pandemic could facilitate mobility by accelerating plans to return to the U.S., it could also cause involuntary immobility due to border closure and immigration regulations. Particularly, when the societal attitudes became hostile towards immigrants, it created an enduring negative image of the country and was more likely to push out the skilled migrants eventually. Border control and visa policy in the wake of COVID-19 was another factor that limited skilled migrants' cross-border mobility. While scholarship and media has captured the exodus of global talent from the US after the restrictions on H-1B visas and the anti-immigrant sentiment during the Trump administration (Blizzard and Batalova 2019), this study uncovers how the pandemic and its long-term social and political consequences are likely to cause brain drain with global talent leaving China.

While the capital-mobility framework could provide guidance on migrants' cross-border spatial im/mobility, it calls for future research directions in two areas. First, to better understand the multi-level mobility, more research needs to be undertaken to investigate the everyday spatial im/mobility patterns of skilled migrants. Moreover, given migrants' multiple social identities, such as race, gender, class and citizenship would affect the process of capital buildup, transfers and conversions, future studies could focus on the intersectional analysis of how im/mobility is negotiated through simultaneous influences of migrants' social identities.

CHAPTER 3

EVERYDAY IM/MOBILITY OF SKILLED U.S. MIGRANTS IN CHINESE CITIES IN THE PEARL RIVER DELTA REGION

Abstract

This research examines the influencing factors and implications of skilled U.S. migrants’ everyday spatial im/mobility in cities in the Pearl River Delta region of China. Combining online sketch mapping with in-depth interviews, this research asks the following questions: What roles does capital play in influencing skilled U.S. migrants’ everyday mobility? How does migrants’ intentionality to move, or the lack thereof, shape their everyday movement patterns? What are the implications of everyday im/mobility on migrants’ in/voluntary social inclusion or exclusion in the local society?

The study finds that the participants exhibited different levels of everyday spatial mobility. Their capital, including human, cultural, social, economic and citizenship capital, not only influences their capability to move around in the city but also affects the demands for travel to conduct routine activities. Contrary to conventional literature that believes high levels of capital contributes to high mobility, this research finds that migrants’ capital has both enabling and limiting effects on their everyday mobility. Whether migrants have intentionality to move around on a daily basis not only reflects the in/voluntary nature of their everyday im/mobility but also suggests whether their social inclusion or exclusion in the local society is by choice or constraint. The research integrates GIS visualization with qualitative data to uncover nuanced lived experiences of skilled migrants from the Global North to the Global South. The research also contributes to geographical research by highlighting the spatial im/mobility at individual and local scales and has policy implications for retaining global talent at the city level.

Keywords: everyday mobility, immobility, sketch map, skilled migration, social exclusion

Introduction

Mobility is increasingly conceptualized as an everyday practice (Cresswell 2010; Sheller and Urry 2006). Everyday mobility, defined in this research as spatial movement in everyday life, is vital because it not only has direct consequences on individuals' economic achievement, social engagement, and health outcomes, but also inherently reflects and shapes the relationships between individuals, social structures, and spatial contexts (Perchoux et. al. 2013; Rau and Sattlegger 2018; Ta et al. 2021).

The characterization of everyday mobility is diverse and evolving. In this study, I employed the concept of "activity space" as a geographical indicator of everyday mobility (Schönfelder and Axhausen 2003; Sherman et al. 2005). Defined as "the subset of all locations within which an individual has direct contact as a result of his or her day-to-day activities" (Golledge and Stimson 1997, 279), activity space is a "micro-geographical concept which captures the spatial extent of daily mobility patterns" (Schönfelder and Samaga 2003, 3). I adopted the four dimensions of activity space as introduced by Wang, Li and Chai (2012) – extensity, intensity, diversity and exclusivity - to characterize the everyday im/mobility patterns. Taking into consideration of these four dimensions, this study not only examines the geographical reach of everyday activities, but also the temporal frequency of visits and the accessibility of activity space in everyday life (Perchoux et al. 2013; Ta et al. 2021).

The mobility turn in the social sciences calls for more mobile methods to analyze the complex and nuanced everyday mobility experiences, with a wide range of approaches that include mobile ethnographies that involve the movement of participants while conducting ethnographic research, cyber-research, and multimedia methods, (Sheller and Urry 2006). More possibilities have been explored to study the everyday movement of individuals, such as travel diary surveys, GPS tracking and sketch mapping (Boschmann and Cubbon 2012; Li and Tong 2016; Long and Nelson 2013; Rogalsky 2010). This paper uses the qualitative GIS approach by combining semi-structured interviews with online sketch mapping to examine the patterns and underlying factors of everyday im/mobility. Such an approach challenges the generalizability in positivist science, highlights the individual differences, and contributes to the critical GIS agenda that advocates for the bottom-up approach as a way for knowledge production (Curtis 2012; Kwan and Ding 2008; Schoepfer and Rogers 2014).

Research shows that there is inequality in control over mobility, suggesting the uneven distribution of power across different social groups (Cresswell 2010; Massey 1994). While the existing literature primarily focused on the limited everyday mobility of less privileged social groups such as domestic workers, the elderly, low-income populations and low-skilled immigrants (Ho et al. 2021a; Gilow 2020; Ureta 2008; Yu 2016), relatively privileged social groups have not received sufficient attention in the conceptualizations of everyday mobility. Among them, skilled migrants from the Global North mostly possess high levels of human, social, cultural and citizenship capital that enable their migration to the Global South (Tan, Li and Tsuda 2022). But does their cross-border mobility translate into everyday mobility after migration? What roles does capital play in influencing skilled migrants' everyday mobility? How does individuals' intentionality come into play in determining their everyday movement patterns? What are the implications of everyday im/mobility on their in/voluntary social inclusion or exclusion in the local society?

This paper investigates the connections between mobility, capability, and intentionality through the analysis of everyday im/mobility of skilled U.S. migrants in the Pearl River Delta (PRD) region of China. With its re-emerging economy and globalizing economy, China has increasingly become an important destination for global talent. Guangdong Province, where the Pearl River Delta region is located, accommodates the largest number of international migrants at provincial level in the country (The State Council of PRC 2021). By drawing on the qualitative GIS approach, this paper contributes to explaining nuanced everyday im/mobility experiences. The study deepens our understanding of the role of capital by examining how it impacts the needs for everyday travel and the capability to do so. It also advances the burgeoning literature on the "immobility turn" in social sciences (Bélanger and Silvey 2020) and differentiates between the voluntary and involuntary immobility.

In the following sections, I will first discuss relevant literature on the role of capital and individual intentionality in influencing everyday im/mobility, and the implications on social inclusion and exclusion. Then I will describe the contexts of the study site. In the research methods section, I introduce the operationalization of everyday mobility and the approaches to measure it. I will then present the analysis of the research findings drawing from GIS visualizations and qualitative data. I conclude the paper with contributions of this study and policy implications.

Everyday Im/mobility: Capital, Intentionality, and Implications on Social Inclusion

Everyday mobility patterns are significantly shaped by the possession and utilization of one's capital. Research found that the lack of economic and human capital of low-skilled migrant workers led to confined living space and low access to the diverse urban space in the city (Tan 2021). On the other hand, skilled migrants usually possess higher levels of human and economic capital, increasing their capability to move (Colic-Peisker 2010; Delanty 2006). Social capital built from the relationships with various social groups contributed to enhancing individual's everyday mobility. For example, exposure to and interactions with the locals increased the spatial boundary of migrants' activity space (Ta et al. 2021). Additionally, cultural capital, including language proficiency improves immigrants' access to urban space while lacking language skills hinders one's mobility (Yu 2016).

Moreover, individual preferences and intentionality to move also shape everyday mobility, particularly among privileged and skilled migrants. Some literature portrays skilled migrants from the Global North as cosmopolitans who can freely cross physical and cultural boundaries and are willing to explore and be more adventurous in their everyday mobility (Colic-Peisker 2010; Delanty 2006). Meanwhile, some other scholars argued that skilled migrants lived in "expatriate bubbles", which are enclave communities for the expatriates (Croucher 2012; Fechter 2016). In these cases, migrants intentionally chose to live in private gated communities and primarily visit Western style bars, restaurants and social clubs in order to be self-segregated from the locals (Harvey and Beverstock, 2016; Tseng 2011). Consequently, their activity space is further confined and segregated from the locals due to personal preferences.

While different types of capital and individual intentionality have been explored that determine everyday mobility, there lacks a systematic conceptualization of these factors and the relationships among them until recently. Tan, Li and Tsuda (2022) proposed the capital-mobility model that argues that an individual's capability to move is based on the accumulation, transferability and convertibility of various forms of capital, such as economic, social, cultural, symbolic and citizenship capital. This framework also takes into consideration migrants' intentionality and agency to move or not when examining the cross-border spatial im/mobility of migrants. It thus differentiates between four types of im/mobility, namely, voluntary mobility, voluntary immobility, involuntary mobility, and involuntary immobility. This paper advances the capital-mobility framework by extending its application to everyday mobility. It enriches our understanding of the role of capital by investigating how each type of capital not only enables local mobility but may also constrain it.

Everyday movement is essential to the prospects of social inclusion or exclusion. The mobility-related dimension of social exclusion is defined as the "process by which people are prevented from participating in the economic, political and social life of the community because of reduced accessibility to opportunities, services and social networks, due in whole or in part to insufficient mobility in a society and environment built around the assumption of high mobility" (Kenyon, Lyons and Rafferty 2002, 210–211). In this study, I consider not only externally imposed exclusion but also self- segregation by choice. But the relationship between everyday im/mobility and social inclusion or exclusion is complicated and inconsistent throughout the literature. Some research found a strong correlation between low degree of mobility and high level of social exclusion in everyday life (Kenyon, Lyons and Rafferty 2002). For example, after 9/11 Muslim women's fears of being attacked due to hate crimes and discrimination restricted their daily activities and accessibility to public spaces and exacerbated their social exclusions (Kwan and Ding 2008). However, other studies suggested differently. Scholars found that racial and ethnic minorities may be more mobile than the white counterparts because of the suburbanization development and systemic segregations in the job market (Jones and Pebley 2014). This study contributes to investigating how different dimensions of activity space, namely, extensivity, intensity, diversity, and exclusivity, may be associated with social inclusion or exclusion. By examining which dimension(s) are more influential in leading to inclusion/exclusion than others, this paper provides new lens in viewing the correlation between everyday im/mobility and social inclusion/exclusion.

In sum, while most existing research tends to separate the analysis of capital and intentionality on everyday mobility, more studies are needed to integrate them in the same framework. Moreover, since the existing literature on the relationship between everyday mobility and social inclusion and exclusion is inconsistent, this paper adds to such a debate by investigating the in/voluntary nature of social inclusion or exclusion, and the underlying factors. Finally, by coupling online interviews with online sketch mapping, this study adds to the existing scholarship on qualitative GIS and contributes to the emerging literature of exploring remote data collection methods to cope with challenges of in-person fieldwork after COVID-19.

Study Context

As China increasingly integrates into the global economy, the number of international migrants living in China has grown by 42% in the past decade from 2010, reaching 845,697 in 2020 (National Bureau of Statistics of China 2011; The State Council of PRC 2021). However, the geographic distribution of international migrants is uneven across the country. In between 2009 and 2020, the numbers of foreign citizens who have resided in Guangdong Province for over six months have more than doubled from 57,793 to over 117,000 (Sina 2009; Sohu 2020).

The continued attractiveness of Guangdong Province to international migrants is attributed to the socio-economic and urban development in the area, especially in the Pearl River Delta (PRD) region. First, since the 1980s, the inflow of foreign direct investment has fueled the industrialization and economic growth in the PRD region. After the mid-2000s, cities in PRD gradually seek for industrial upgrading and innovative economy. During the transitions of economic structures, the demand for skilled talent has grown accordingly. Second, the PRD region has witnessed fast urbanization. The urbanization rate in the area reached over 85% in 2018, four decades after the start of China’s economic reform and open-up policy (Sina 2019). The rapid urbanization has fueled the development of public transportation system and transit-oriented development (Li et al. 2022).

At the same time, the increasing inflow of international migrants to the PRD region has contributed to shaping the urban environment in the destination cities. Particularly, it has led to the creation of ethnic enclaves in cities and development of international style urban space. For example, the Xiaobei area in Guangzhou, the capital of Guangdong Province, has developed into the cluster for African diasporas (Castillo 2014; Zhang 2008). The Shekou area of Shenzhen has large concentration of foreign residents with high-end residential buildings, Western style bars, nightclubs, and shopping plazas (Pik 2021). However, there were no established ethnic enclaves for U.S. migrants, even though the U.S. citizens are the second largest international migrant population in China (National Bureau of Statistics 2011).

The social environment, especially the tolerance and receptivity to international migrants, also affect people's intentions to move around in cities. While the overall social environment in this region is open and receptive to international migrants, the heightened tensions between the local community and foreign nationals during the COVID-19 also made international migrants concern about moving around in this area. In particular, African nationals have become target of discriminations, evictions, and forced quarantine (Sun 2020), reflecting and reinforcing the disruptions to everyday mobility in the aftermath of COVID-19.

Research Methods

The paper draws from data from online sketch mapping and in-depth interviews with 33 U.S. migrants in the PRD region in 2020. Participants were recruited using the snowball sampling. The sample consisted of 21 males and 12 females. The majority of participants are white (n=29), with two African Americans, one Asian American, and one Latino. All were college-educated and have lived in China for over six consecutive months. All of the names used in this paper are pseudonyms. In the remainder of this section, I will explain the operationalization and measures of the key terms used in this study. I will then outline the rationale for data collection methods and describe the procedures to collect and analyze the data.

In this research, I employed the concept of "activity space" and its four dimensions to characterize everyday mobility. In Wang, Li, and Chai (2012)'s four-dimensional framework of activity space, extensity refers to the spatial extent of activity space while intensity suggests the frequency of visits to places. Diversity is used to describe the array of different types of places visited, and exclusivity measures the degrees of segregation of activity space. Table 2 below lists how each of the four dimensions is operationalized and measured in this study. One's everyday mobility is likely to be the highest when the individual's activity space is high in extensity, intensity and diversity and low in exclusivity. Among the four dimensions, extensity is the most important indicator of everyday mobility as it provides a base for comparing the intensity, diversity and exclusivity of places visited. The diversity and exclusivity dimensions are more influential when examining individuals' social inclusion and exclusion as a result of local mobility as they are more directly related to one' social life and accessibility in the destination society.

Table 2. Overview of Operationalization and Measurement of Activity Space

Dimension	**Operationalization**	**Measure**
Extensity	Size of activity space	Maximum convex hull (MCH).
Intensity	Frequency of visits	Number of visits to each place in a month
Diversity	Types of places visited for different trip purposes	Number of types among all places visited
Exclusivity	Whether the place is mainly visited by locals or expats	Proportion of expat-oriented places among all places visited

While the methods to collect data on activity space varied, this study uses online sketch mapping and semi-structured interviews. The rationale for method selection is two-fold. First, while approaches such as household surveys and travel diaries can help characterize the everyday movement patterns (Røe 2000; Rogalsky 2010), they are not sufficient to reveal individual experiences and explanations of such movement. Alternatively, sketch mapping is a spatial data collection tool that generates the locational experiences of individuals (Boschmann and Cubbon 2014). It is often integrated with interviews to produce rich spatial narratives. Such an approach to integrate qualitative interviews with sketch mapping provides more nuanced understanding of people's lived experiences (Bagheri 2014; Brennan-Horley and Gibson 2009; Ho et al. 2021a; Kwan and Ding 2008). Second, recent scholars started to use a web-based mapping application in lieu of the conventional paper sketch maps (Chaix et al. 2012; Kestens et al. 2018; Perchoux et al. 2016). This approach reduces the data processing procedures and improves data accuracy. It has become more commonly used to collect data remotely during the COVID-19 when travel restrictions disrupted in-person fieldwork (Woodworth et al. in press).

Specifically, participants first took part in online sketch mapping using a web-based mapping tool and then were interviewed via Zoom or WeChat programs. Prior to the start of each sketch mapping session, I sent the participants a short self-made tutorial video with instructions on how to complete the mapping online and made myself available for addressing any questions or concerns. During the online sketch mapping session, the participants were provided a list of places that were critical to their everyday life, including their primary residence, secondary residence, workplace, work-related places (e.g., meetings or errands out of the office), school, childcare, dining, nightlife, groceries, shopping, arts and entertainment, sporting events, fitness and recreation, parks and outdoor space. Participants would mark each place that was applicable in the map with the corresponding scheme of icons, which were used consistently across the participants. Then participants answered a few survey questions about each place, such as visiting frequency prior to the outbreak of COVID-19 (everyday, 2-3 times/week, weekly, 2-3 times/month, once a month, less than once a month), the changes of visiting frequency during COVID-19 (less frequently, about the same, more frequently, no longer visiting here), and whether the place is mainly visited by expat/international migrants, local Chinese, or mix of both. Then participants drew their self-perceived neighborhood boundaries on the map and marked places that are either friendly or unfriendly to expats. After sketch mapping, semi-structured interviews were conducted where participants filled in any geographical data missing from sketch mapping, described the motivations and transportation modes of their everyday trips, and explained the emotional experiences regarding their mobility patterns and feelings of social inclusion or exclusion in the local city. I also asked how their everyday movement patterns had been affected by COVID-19, including the quarantine, perceived health risks and any cases of denied entrances to public places. In addition to the interview questions related to their everyday mobility, participants were also asked questions about their cross-border, occupational and social mobility. Each interview was recorded and lasted about one to two hours.

The data generated from the interviews was used for content analysis with thematic coding in MAXQDA. Spatial analysis was performed in ArcGIS. First, distance calculations were completed for each participant's routes to places outside of home. Second, the sizes of participants' self-defined neighborhood polygon were calculated. MCH was calculated to provide information on the farthest points travelled. Each point was weighted by the visiting frequencies. Third, using the overlay analysis in ArcGIS, I added layers of interview transcripts, key places, neighborhood boundaries, and mobility-related experiences. For example, I did overlay of participants' reasoning of everyday movement with layers of neighborhood boundaries and activity space to discover whether everyday mobility is restricted by self-choice. By incorporating qualitative data into maps, this step provides geographic context for the visualization and analysis of the informants' movement patterns and subjective experiences (Kwan and Ding 2008).

Enabling and Limiting Effects of Capital on Everyday Mobility

This section combines the data from interviews and sketch mapping to examine the relationships between the skilled U.S. migrants' capital and everyday mobility in the PRD region. Through the analysis of migrants' activity space, this section reveals how the characteristics of migrants' activity space indicate the level of everyday mobility and the role of capital in it. The findings show that migrants' possession of capital contributes to facilitating or constraining their everyday mobility through influencing both the demands to travel and the capability to fulfil such travel needs.

The analysis finds that skilled migrants' human capital equipped them with the skills to undertake the high-level occupations, and then increased the need for them to travel within the city and expanded the extensity of their activity space. Their human capital, including education and professional experiences, helped them land high-achieving and high-demanding careers. For example, Nolan, who had worked in America, Europe and Asia for decades and was pursuing a doctoral degree, established his own architectural practice in Shenzhen. He exhibited high everyday mobility with large activity space (MCH=7,826 km^2) primarily due to work-related travels, including meeting clients and visiting project sites. Similarly, Zoey, owner of a marketing and consulting firm, “spent thousands of yuan (Chinese currency RMB) on taxi each month” to travel for projects in Guangzhou. As shown in Figure 3, while the participants’ workplaces were generally not far from the primary residence (all within 10 km from home), the job-related meeting places nearly doubled the distances, indicating the increased travel needs associated with work.

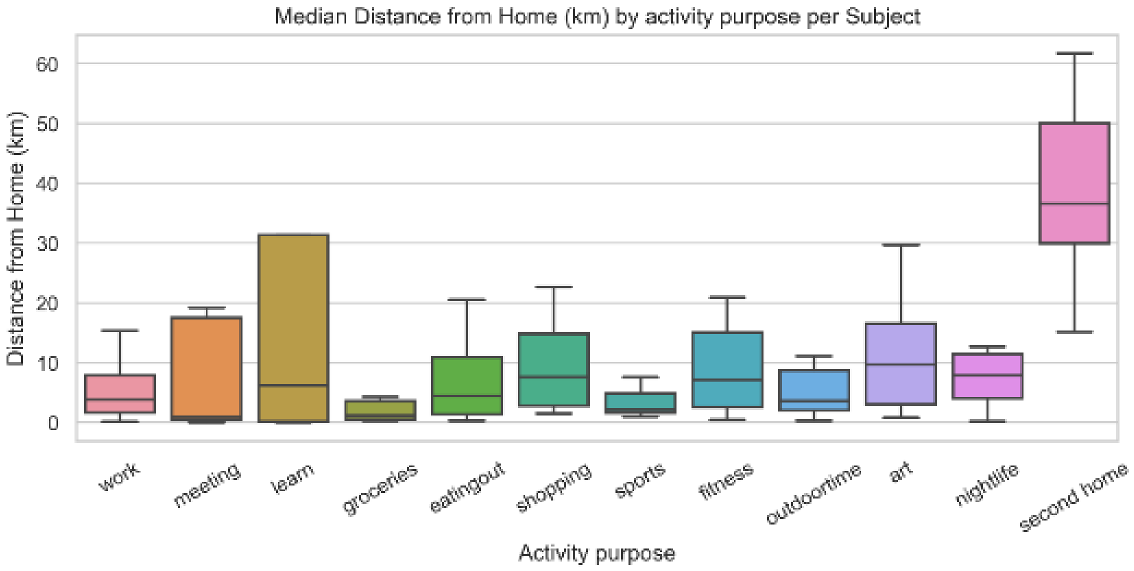
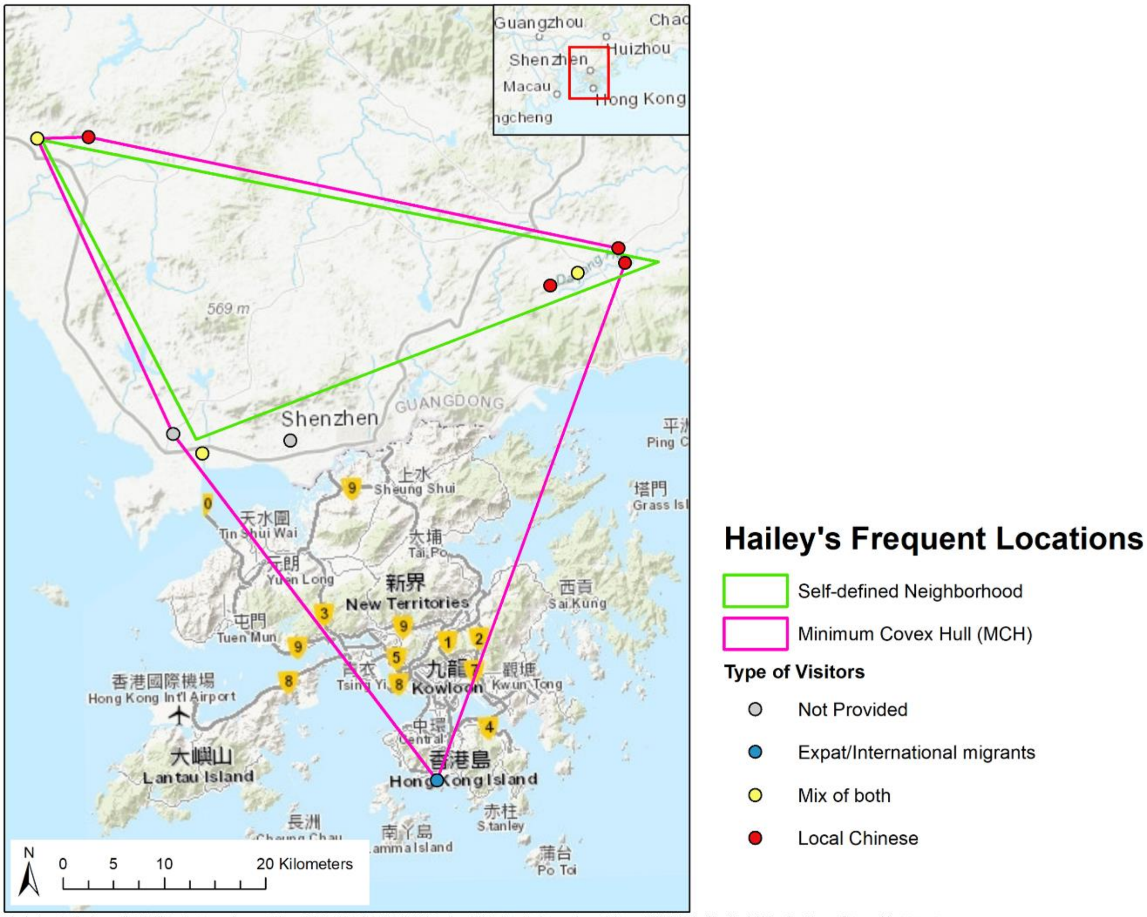


Figure 3. Median Distances from Home by Activity Purpose for All Subjects

Meanwhile, as migrants gradually built up their social capital with the local Chinese or expat community, the needs for travel to visit families and/or friends were further increased. Particularly, participants who had families or romantic partners in the local region typically had more dispersed activity space. They would travel further for social and leisure activities such as dining, shopping, entertainment, nightlife, and fitness. Some even had a second home, which was about 50 km far from the primary residence on average (Figure 3). For instance, Hailey, a white woman in her early twenties, had the most dispersed activity space with the largest size of MCH (27,597 km^2) among all the participants (Figure 4). As a “1.5 generation immigrant” (meaning those who migrated at a young age), Hailey left the U.S. for China with her parents when she was 7 years old. Working in Shenzhen herself, Hailey visited her parents’ place in Dongguan frequently on weekends and considered it a second residence. Having studied at international schools, Hailey now maintained a friend circle with 40% locals and 60% expats. She enjoyed shopping and visiting her expat friends in Hong Kong. As such, she maintained not only a large spatial range of activity space but also had a high intensity of visits to these places across cities. Echoing earlier literature, this finding confirmed the role of diverse social capital in increasing the opportunities for everyday movement (Ta et al. 2021).


Hailey's Frequent Locations
Self-defined Neighborhood
Minimum Covex Hull (MCH)
Type of Visitors
Not Provided
Expat/International migrants
Mix of both
Local Chinese
Guangzhou
Huizhou
Shenzhen
Macau
Hong Kong
Shenzhen
GUANGDONG
New Territories
Kowloon
Hong Kong Island
Lantau Island
Hong Kong Int'l Airport
N
0
5
10
20 Kilometers

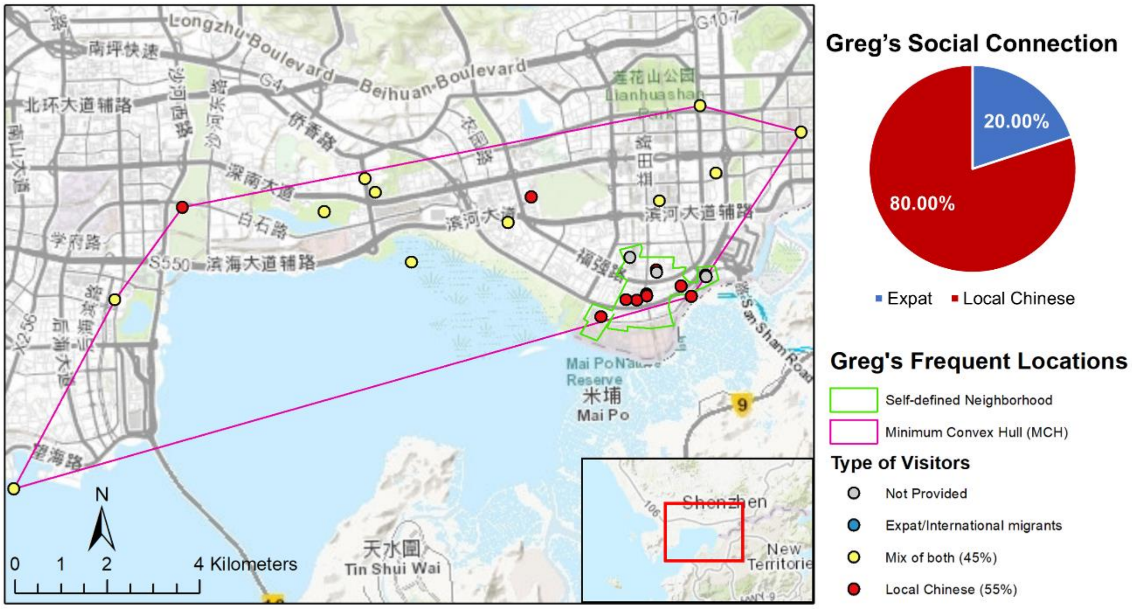
Service Layer Credits: Sources: Esri, HERE, Garmin, Intermap, increment P Corp., GEBCO, USGS, FAO, NPS, NRCAN, GeoBase, IGN, Kadaster NL, Ordnance Survey, Esri Japan, METI, Esri China (Hong Kong), (c) OpenStreetMap contributors, and the GIS User Community

Figure 4. Hailey’s Activity Space Spanned across Cities

In these cases, the accumulation of human and social capital impacted the spatial extent of migrants’ everyday mobility as their needs for everyday travels grew with the nature of their occupations and the expansion of their social networks. In addition to the spatial dispersity of activity space, the intensity of traveling for work, social and familiar needs also increased, signaling the elevated level of everyday mobility.

While the previous cases illustrated how capital increased the demands for travel, the examples below show the ways that capital could enhance one's capability to move locally. To start, migrants' localized cultural capital, such as the knowledge of Chinese language and culture, enabled them to move around in the local city with fewer barriers. For example, Kevin owned a car and was able to drive by himself on a daily basis. He admitted that knowing the Chinese language helped him navigate everyday travels while driving since the English translations of road names and directions were sometimes confusing. Being able to drive allowed him to commute daily from his residence in Guangzhou, where his Chinese wife was working, to his workplace in Dongguan (about 22 miles one way by freeway). As a product manager in a manufacturing factory in Dongguan, he also enjoyed more flexibility for visiting suppliers and clients in the region by driving. Other participants noted that even though the public transit system in PRD usually has English translations, knowing the local language is still reassuring and making them feel more comfortable when travelling by themselves. As such, the accumulation of localized cultural capital could enable migrants to travel further to places outside of their residential neighborhood and ease their everyday mobility experiences. It further illustrates that the locally acquired cultural capital not only helped expand the spatial range of migrants' everyday mobility but also provided them with more diverse options of transportation modes and enhanced their mobility experiences by reducing the frustrations from not being familiar with the local cultural and language background.

Additionally, migrants' social capital could also improve their capability for reaching more diverse urban places. Half of the sample did not visit places that were primarily catered to expats at all, suggesting the relatively low exclusivity of their activity space. For these participants, they actively developed social networks with the local community who then introduced different types of places to visit. For example, Greg started taking Chinese lessons from tutors eight years ago since he arrived in China. He consciously tried to socialize with locals and later had a Chinese girlfriend. Having maintained a social network with 80% Chinese and 20% expats, Greg showed high level of everyday mobility, demonstrated in both the extensity and diversity of the places he visited. He was able to reach places that were less known among expats but popular with locals such as restaurants in urban villages in Shenzhen. While 45% of the places he visited were primarily frequented by Chinese locals, the remaining 55% had a mix of expats and Chinese visitors, indicating the low degree of exclusivity of his activity space (Figure 5).


Greg's Social Connection
20.00%
80.00%
Expat
Local Chinese
Greg's Frequent Locations
Self-defined Neighborhood
Minimum Convex Hull (MCH)
Type of Visitors
Not Provided
Expat/International migrants
Mix of both (45%)
Local Chinese (55%)
N
0 1 2 4 Kilometers
Longzhu Boulevard
Beihuan Boulevard
Lianhuashan Park
Mai Po Nature Reserve
米埔
Mai Po
天水圍
Tin Shui Wai
Shenzhen
New Territorie

Service Layer Credits: Sources: Esri, HERE, Garmin, Intermap, increment P Corp., GEBCO, USGS, FAO, NPS, NRCAN, GeoBase, IGN, Kadaster NL, Ordnance Survey, Esri Japan, METI, Esri China (Hong Kong), (c) OpenStreetMap contributors, and the GIS User Community

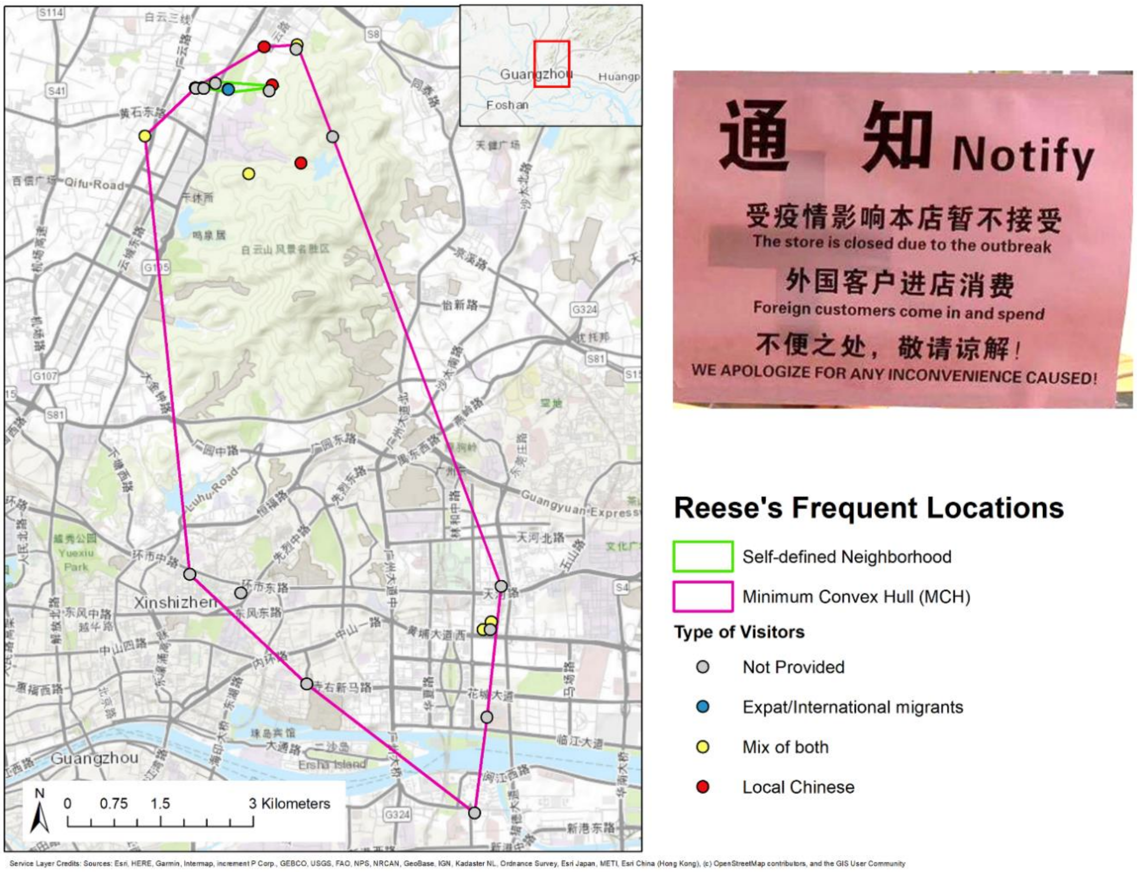
Figure 5. Greg's Activity Space was Either Local Chinese Style (55%) or Hosted Both Locals and Expats (45%).

By contrast, Ryan described how lacking local social capital could limit the boundary and diversity of space that migrants could reach, "There is a set of places that foreigners go and that becomes the entire city for the foreigners. Because they don't have any connection or reason to go to, or possibly even ability to go to places that local people go to." As such, these examples showed that migrants who maintained social networks with both locals and expats were more likely to be exposed to diversified types of places in the local city. While the local social capital improved the geographical mobility of the migrants on an everyday level, the capability to visit diverse types of places with both local and expat customers facilitated the bonding and networking among migrants and other social groups, further helping them build more social capital through the interaction processes.

However, the analysis found that migrants' possession of capital could also limit their everyday mobility, through diminishing the demands for travel or weakening the capability to move around. First, the accumulation of capital could afford the migrants with alternative options to fulfil their everyday needs other than making daily trips, and thus reduce their everyday mobility. Particularly, human and citizenship capital and their convertibility to economic capital enabled some participants to live close to the workplace, and thus lowered the needs to commute and consequently limited the size of their activity space. These participants were either in the English teaching industry with employment-sponsored housing or housing stipends, or working as high-level consultants or project managers who earned high salaries and could afford to live in apartments near the workplace. As such, they had low extensity of activity space and their daily activities were most likely to cluster in their residential neighborhood. This finding reflected that skilled migrants from the Global North usually had an easy time converting their human and citizenship capital into economic capital in the Global South and enjoyed socio-economic privileges (Tan, Li and Tsuda 2022).

Meanwhile, participants' high cultural capital, illustrated by proficiency in Chinese language and skills to navigate online shopping in local platforms, allowed them to take advantage of China's highly developed e-commerce and delivery services and further reduced the needs to conduct daily trips for getting necessities. For example, Jasmine was another "1.5 generation" immigrant and came to China with her parents when she was four and had since then studied and worked in Guangzhou. Surprisingly, the extensity and diversity of her activity space was only in the middle range. During the interview, she explained that she did most of her grocery shopping online through Hema Fresh, and that she loved shopping on Taobao, one the largest online marketplace in China, similar to e-bay. Like Jasmine, some other participants also believed their Chinese language skills enabled themselves to buy necessities online and reduced the need to travel. With the development of the internet and delivery services in China, online shopping has transformed people's purchasing habits and everyday spatial behaviorsas the symbolic values of U.S. citizenship dropped significantly during the pandemic. This finding echoed the recent literature that argued the vulnerability and victimization of social groups during the COVID-19 on the basis of their citizenship, race and ethnicity (Elias et al. 2021; Xie, Li and Tan in press).

In addition to the restrictions from quarantine and lockdowns, participants also experienced denied entry to public places like restaurants, grocery stores, cafes and hospitals because of the diminished values of citizenship capital. For example, Reese showed me a photo of a flyer posted at a massage shop that she used to visit frequently before the pandemic. The flyer included bilingual notifications that indicated foreign customers would not be served in the massage shop. During the COVID-19, many local stores did not allow foreigners to enter because of the suspicion of foreigners as carriers of the coronavirus when the “imported cases” surged in China (Figure 6).


Guangzhou
Foshan
Huangp
Qifu Road
Luhu Road
Xinshizhen
Yuexiu Park
Ersha Island
Guangyuan Express
N
0 0.75 1.5 3 Kilometers
Reese's Frequent Locations
🟩 Self-defined Neighborhood
🟪 Minimum Convex Hull (MCH)
Type of Visitors
● Not Provided
● Expat/International migrants
● Mix of both
● Local Chinese

通 知 Notify

受疫情影响本店暂不接受

The store is closed due to the outbreak

外国客户进店消费

Foreign customers come in and spend

不便之处，敬请谅解！

WE APOLOGIZE FOR ANY INCONVENIENCE CAUSED!

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Figure 6. Denied Entry During the COVID-19 Pandemic and Everyday Mobility of Reese (photo provided by participant)

As such, COVID-19 exposed international migrants to vulnerabilities such as xenophobia and discrimination. In their cases, although the citizenship capital from being an U.S. passport holder facilitated their cross-border mobility from the Global North to the Global South (Tan, Li and Tsuda 2022), it ended up limiting their everyday mobility at local level. The symbolic values of their citizenship capital diminished rapidly due to unexpected global crisis like the COVID-19 pandemic, suggesting the instability of citizenship capital in impacting migrants’ im/mobility.

In sum, the analysis showed that migrants’ accumulation of capital could generate both enabling and limiting effects on their everyday mobility through affecting the demands for travel and the capability to move. On the one hand, the skilled migrants’ human capital could increase the work-related travel needs, and their Chinese language capital and social capital could increase their capabilities to reach far and diverse places, thus increasing their everyday mobility. On the other hand, their capital could lower everyday mobility by reducing the demands for everyday travels in two ways. First, their human capital could be easily converted to economic resources that enabled them to live close to their workplaces which were typically located in areas with high rental prices, and thus reducing the needs to commute. Second, their locally-acquired cultural capital could reduce their needs for everyday travel by giving them access to local online shopping and delivery services. Additionally, their ability for everyday mobility was lowered during the COVID-19 when the negative perceptions of their citizenship capital was amplified due to the heightened racist sentiments and ethno-nationalism.

Intentionality and In/voluntary Im/mobility

In addition to the impacts of capital on im/mobility, one’s intentionality (or lack thereof) to move around also matters. The combination of sketch mapping and in-depth interviews helped tease out the reasons behind the everyday mobility patterns. Not all participants had intentions for everyday travels in the destination equally. Their intentionality was shaped by macro-level factors such as power asymmetries between the Global North and Global South countries, the COVID-19 and the related fears of contagion and an escalated level of stigma and discrimination towards non-Chinese migrants.

Several participants expressed enthusiasm to explore the local city. Nicholas, an assistant director in a private college in Guangzhou, mentioned, “I just spend a lot of time going out…parks, historic sites, shopping centers. For some weekends I would get a hotel in town in another district.” Having grown up in the mid-West in the U.S., Nicholas always had a passion for exploring the outside world. Prior to arriving in China in 2015, he had decades of overseas living experiences in countries in Europe and Africa and was interested in getting to know local places. Similar to Nicholas, five other participants that shared a passion for exploring the local urban context all had prior overseas experience, which reflected and contributed to their intentions for mobility. Their stories demonstrated how the aspirations of migration could directly influence the mobility outcomes during and after migration (Carling 2002; Karell 2021).

The unequal development between the Global North and the Global South also affected migrants’ intentionality for everyday mobility. Some intentionally wished to be voluntarily immobile in the expat community and chose to live in expat-concentrated and confined urban space. They described themselves as “living in an expat bubble”, spending most of their time in the neighborhood with a selection of Western style restaurants, bars, social clubs and residential complexes. For example, when Jane and her family first arrived in Shenzhen, they deliberately chose to live around the Sea World in Shekou, an area popular with international migrants in Shenzhen, to “feel some connections to home”. In Jane’s sketch maps, she located a few Western restaurants that she visited frequently for family dinners and gatherings with her expat friends in the Shekou area. As a result, the activity space was not only spatially confined but also exclusive, with over 70% of the places she frequented primarily catered to expat customers. But Jane’s limited everyday mobility was voluntary. Coming from the Global North, migrants like Jane preferred their own social and cultural values while being suspicious of the ideologies and culture in the local society. Their lack of intention to venture out of the “expat bubble” contributed to their confined and excluded activity space. However, their everyday immobility reflected more of an individual choice than external constraints. These skilled migrants usually possessed high levels of economic capital that afforded them to live in relatively expensive expat communities. In other words, their preferences to live in less dispersed and more exclusive space that limited mobility were supported by their high levels of capital and indicated their relative privileges in the destination society (Croucher 2012; Fetcher 2016).

Since the outbreak of COVID-19, some participants chose to be immobile voluntarily to avoid more interactions with the local community because of not only fears of the spread of the virus but also concerns of racism and xenophobia. For example, Hope, an African American, indicated that she stopped visiting venues for shopping and art/performance after the pandemic and had visited places for eating out and nightlife less frequently (Figure 7). She recalled an incident when she went to get coffee from a local café, “the entire people in the café completely freaked out. They left their table and ran. Not walked fast, but ran away from me. They yanked at their children. The children were not that close to me, but they were like ‘get away from her’. It caused a whole big scene in that café.” Had never experienced anything like this before the pandemic, Hope expressed her frustrations and tried to not make many trips to public space unless necessary after the incident. Her encounters illustrated that citizenship and race intersected, intensifying the discrimination and hostility towards African Americans after the outbreak of COVID-19.

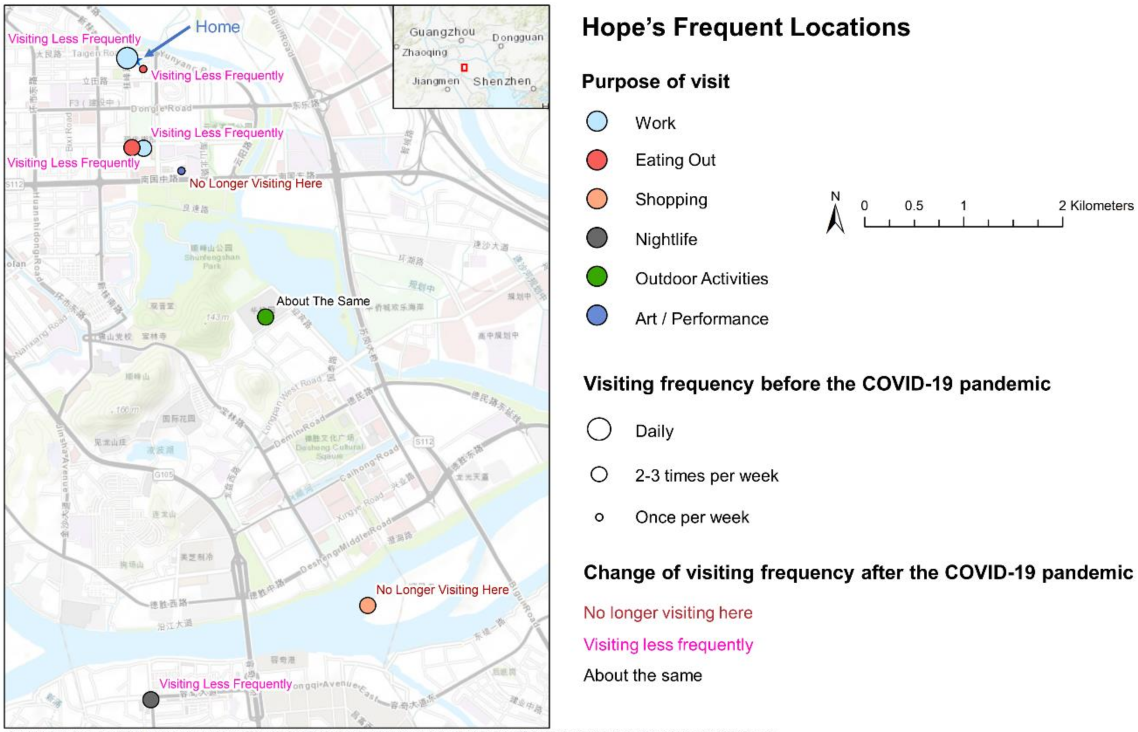
Home
Visiting Less Frequently
Visiting Less Frequently
Visiting Less Frequently
Visiting Less Frequently
No Longer Visiting Here
About The Same
No Longer Visiting Here
Visiting Less Frequently
Guangzhou
Dongguan
Zhaoqing
Jiangmen
Shenzhen
Hope’s Frequent Locations
Purpose of visit
Work
Eating Out
Shopping
Nightlife
Outdoor Activities
Art / Performance
N
0
0.5
1
2 Kilometers
Visiting frequency before the COVID-19 pandemic
Daily
2-3 times per week
Once per week
Change of visiting frequency after the COVID-19 pandemic
No longer visiting here
Visiting less frequently
About the same

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Figure 7. Hope’s Reduced Visiting Frequencies During the COVID-19 Pandemic

Some white Americans also expressed decreased willingness to travel outside of home during the pandemic. They described that locals would quickly walked away from them or pulled their masks up when seeing them in the streets. Therefore, the white participants experienced escalated racialization, which is “a dialectical process by which meaning is attributed to particular biological features of human beings, as a result of which individuals may be assigned to a general category of persons which reproduces itself biologically” (Ang, Ho and Yeoh 2022, 586). In the context of COVID-19, negative meanings were assigned to their biological features, which reproduced the boundaries and inequality between the different groups. Feeling uncomfortable, Reese and her husband decided not to go out of their apartment for a while. Likewise, Alan and his expat friends chose to stay put in their own community where the residents consist of mostly expats and their families, during the peak of the pandemic. For these participants, their spatial dispersity of activity space and the intensity of visiting places outside of their residential complexes decreased, suggesting a decrease in everyday mobility. Their experiences were similar to that of the Muslim women after 9/11, who experienced more limited everyday mobility due to fears of discrimination and hate crimes (Kwan and Ding 2008).

There were also a few cases where participants were forced to be mobile during the COVID-19 crisis. For instance, Reese and her Chinese husband had paid a deposit for a rented apartment in Guangzhou, but the landlord later decided to not rent it to foreigners with increasing “imported cases” in the city. Talking about her experiences, Reese said, “I only heard that some landlords did not want to rent out to the African community. I didn’t realize that even for a white American person, they would also treat it like that.” While Reese’ comment suggested the victimization of international migrants in China during the pandemic, it also reflected the privileges of white Americans prior to the COVID-19 due to the intersection of their race and citizenship, as well as the social inequality among different migrant groups. Reese and her husband ended up moving to Panyu district, a suburban area where Reese’ husband owned an apartment. After the relocation, Reese had to commute for three hours between residence and workplace each day. As a result, although the spatial extensity of and the time spent on her daily movement increased significantly, it was involuntary and was perceived as a temporary coping strategy to deal with the unwelcoming social environment for foreigners after the pandemic. In this case, the discriminations in the housing market due to the migrants' citizenship status compelled them to travel further to fulfil their everyday needs.

In sum, this section delineates the influences of migrants' intentionality on their everyday im/mobility. As relatively privileged migrants prior to the COVID-19, some skilled Americans in China were willingly living in an "expat bubble" and voluntarily chose low everyday mobility. Ultimately, the lack of intention to move around for skilled U.S. migrants was shaped by their suspicion of the lifestyle, social norms, and cultural values in the destination society in the Global South. Although through sketch mapping, this study found that all participants experienced immobility after the outbreak of the pandemic, the in-depth interviews helped tease out the reasons behind the altered travel patterns. The fears of the hostility towards foreigners made some less willingly to travel outside of their residential complex or neighborhood. Meanwhile, forced mobility reflected skilled U.S. migrants' vulnerability to stigma and discrimination, even though they possessed high human, cultural and economic capital. The findings contributed to discussions on the "immobility turn" in recent literature that emphasized the various forms of immobility and their underlying factors (Bélanger and Silvey 2020).

Implications on In/voluntary Social Inclusion and Exclusion

As migrants shifted in the continuum of in/voluntary im/mobility, they were in a continuous process of negotiating the social differences with the local community and urban environment. Their everyday im/mobility often reflected and reinforced the "othering" between migrants and the locals (Nagel 2005). When evaluating whether everyday mobility necessarily leads to social inclusion and whether everyday immobility always suggests social exclusion, the diversity and exclusivity dimensions of activity space took precedence over the extensity and intensity dimensions. Additionally, when examining the implications of migrants' everyday im/mobility on their experiences of social inclusion or exclusion, it is important to highlight the role of intentionality in affecting the social outcomes of migrants.

Everyday mobility, if demonstrated solely by large spatial extent of activity space, may not necessarily indicate social inclusion. For example, although Ryan travelled extensively in the city (MCH = 2,524 km^2) for work-related trips in the consulting industry, he confessed that “I never really felt a connection to the people I was living close to. I didn't feel like a kinship with them or that we were sharing experiences in some way.” As such, although the geographic extent of Ryan’s activity space was large, the lack of diversity of places he visited beyond work-associated purposes made him feel disconnected from the local community, and thus reduced the degree of social inclusion. On the contrary, when migrants’ everyday mobility was characterized by high levels of all the four dimensions of activity space, their degree of social inclusion was the highest. In the case of Hailey (Figure 4) who travelled frequently to visit her parents in a neighboring city and socialized intensively with both her Chinese and expat friends, her high everyday mobility translated into social inclusion. A comparison of the two cases revealed that high diversity and low exclusivity of individuals’ activity space could facilitate social inclusion, similar to the findings from previous studies (Ho et al. 2021b; Ta et al. 2021).

Meanwhile, everyday immobility, characterized by high exclusivity and low diversity of activity space in particular, oftentimes correlated strongly with social exclusion experienced by the migrants. Just as immobility is further differentiated between voluntary and involuntary forms, social exclusion could be either chosen or forced as well and is therefore also an issue of individual intentionality. For those who preferred to stay immobile in “expat bubbles”, the spatial confinement of their activity space and the high exclusivity of places that primarily catered to expats further exacerbated migrants’ social exclusions in the local society. Their voluntary everyday immobility reflected and reinforced the intentional self-exclusion from the locals.

In other cases, migrants experienced forced immobility, which then translated into involuntary social exclusion. The pandemic worsened the social divides between the locals and the international migrant community and exacerbated the systematic discriminations and racism against minority groups (Elias et al. 2021). While “race and racism is deeply entangled with mobility” (Raghuram 2022, 782), it is also often used as a tool for boundary-making in social and spatial ways. For instance, after Kevin was rejected services in the gym because he is a foreigner, he said, “I have never felt such a divide between us and the local people”. In an Asian society where the local population is predominately non-White and non-Black, the notions of race and nation are oftentimes conflated, fueling the flare-up in xenophobia and racism at the same time in a heightened COVID-19 context. As argued by Tsuda (2022), new racism could involve discriminations based on culture, practices, and nations that go beyond skin color. It is similar to the notion of ethno-cultural racism that is aimed specifically at people from certain cultures or countries, and produces inequality and domination based on differences in not only biological but also cultural and territorial boundaries (Ang, Ho and Yeoh 2022). As a result, the American participants faced spatial segregation due to the intersection of their race and citizenship, which further excluded international migrants from the Chinese society. This finding echoed studies in other countries where Asians and Asian descendants were shunned or attacked due to the rising xenophobia and “othering” during the COVID-19 (Wu, Qian and Wilkes 2021; Xie, Li and Tan in press).

In sum, whether or not everyday im/mobility would indicate social inclusion or exclusion was largely dependent on the diversity and exclusivity of activity space because these two dimensions reflected more on the social richness of migrants and accessibility of places than the other two dimensions (i.e., extensivity and intensity). In other words, the “why” and “with whom” aspects of everyday travels are more important than the “how far” and “how frequent” features in influencing how individuals are socially included or not in the destination society.

Conclusion

This paper analyzed the everyday spatial im/mobility of skilled U.S. migrants in cities in the Pearl River Delta region of China through combining sketch mapping with interviews. By comparing the extensity, intensity, diversity and exclusivity of the activity space among the participants, the study found that one’s human, social, cultural, economic and citizenship capital shaped both the demand and the capability to move. Migrants’ intentionality significantly influenced their voluntary or involuntary everyday im/mobility as well as the implications on voluntary or involuntary social inclusions or exclusions. Therefore, by placing im/mobility at the heart of understanding everyday spatial behaviors, this study deepens our understanding on how the individual level of everyday mobility plays a significant role in the spatial and social organization of people's everyday lives.

The findings of the study encourage us to rethink the role of capital in shaping migrants' everyday im/mobility and its social implications. First, this research advances the capital-mobility framework by revealing that capital could affect both the demand for travel and the capability to move. While all capital exerts influences on everyday mobility simultaneously, it sometimes could produce opposite outcomes. Therefore, contrary to the conventional literature that suggests that higher levels of capital would necessarily lead to higher degree of mobility and vice versa, this study argues that one's capital could also contribute to immobility. Such influences are exerted through either reducing the needs for travel or weakening the capability to move. Second, not all capital affects everyday im/mobility equally, and some capital has more prominent effects than others. There is a need to differentiate between emplaced capital that is accumulated in the destination society and capital that is brought over from the home country. Particularly, locally-derived social and cultural capital are more likely to affect the subject feelings associated with everyday movement and the levels of social inclusion or exclusion when navigating the differences in the destination city.

The macro-level structural forces not only influence the processes of utilization, transferability, and convertibility of the capital across borders, but also shapes one's everyday mobility in the local city. One the one hand, the unbalanced power dynamics between the Global North and the Global South countries facilitated the smooth transfers of human capital to the destination city, which affected the work-related needs for travel on a daily basis. On the other hand, the power asymmetry between the Global North and the Global South affected the formation of one's intentionality to move around in the local city. Some skilled U.S. migrants intentionally chose to live in "expat bubbles" and be self-excluded from the local Chinese, suggesting the unwillingness to be socially included in communities in the Global South.

This study makes a contribution to geographic studies through an integrated analysis of qualitative and spatial data to examine migrants' everyday experiences as their lives unfold in space and time. Methodologically, it shows how qualitative GIS can provide a fuller picture of migrants’ everyday im/mobility patterns. While the sketch mapping provides information on the everyday spatial behaviors, the interviews further revealed the reasoning of the everyday movement and provided more nuanced information on the emotional dimensions of mobility beyond the routes and dispersity of travels. This approach also prepared for situating the migrant’s everyday spatial routines in thematic analysis of social inclusion and exclusion.

This research has several recommendations for policymakers to consider attuning their strategies to retain and engage skilled international migrants. First, the local authorities and employers should incentivize the development of multilingual web applications and road signs that are essential to the everyday living needs of international migrants. Lowering the language barriers can facilitate both the physical and virtual mobility of immigrants. Second, the local planning agencies should consider increasing the development of urban space that caters to both international migrants and the local community to encourage the interactions between the different social groups. Through the co-presence of immigrants and natives, the spatial configuration can contribute to the social inclusions of the newcomers to the destination city and reduce the ethnic divide (Rokem and Vaughan 2019).

CHAPTER 4

OCCUPATIONAL AND SOCIAL MOBILITY OF SKILLED U.S. MIGRANTS IN CHINA: AN INTERSECTIONAL ANALYSIS

Abstract

Research on skilled migration has grown substantially in recent years. Guided by the intersectionality framework, this paper interrogates the simultaneous influences of one's social identities such as race, gender, and citizenship in shaping the occupational and social mobility of Global-North-to-South skilled migrants. Drawing on 58 in-depth interviews with skilled US migrants in the Pearl River Delta region of China, this paper asks: How does the intersectionality of skilled U.S. migrants' race, gender, and citizenship shape their occupational mobility in China? How does such intersectionality affect their social mobility after migration? Do their occupational and social mobility change in the same direction? The findings suggest that skilled migrants' race, gender and citizenship simultaneously generate advantages and disadvantages in their occupational and social mobility. In analyzing the occupational mobility of the skilled North-to-South migrants, the term "glass box" was coined to indicate how the migrants reached a "glass ceiling" and faced "glass walls" with segregated occupations, while a "glass floor" protected them from descending to extremely precarious and low-level jobs. Additionally, migrants' intentions also contribute to (re)structuring the mobility experiences. Migrants' social mobility was analyzed from the dimensions of economic gains and subjective social status. While their social mobility improved after moving to China, it declined rapidly and unexpectedly after the outbreak of COVID-19. While one's occupational and social mobility shifted in the direction in most cases, this study also discovered situations where migrants had contradictory occupational and social mobility.

Keywords: skilled migration, occupational mobility, social mobility, intersectionality, China

Introduction

With the globalizing economies and internationalizing education, the cross-border flows of skilled migrants increasingly have drawn attention in media, policymaking and academia. Migration not only affects people's spatial mobility, but also their occupational and social mobility. Most existing literature suggests that people "move out" with the goal of "moving up" in occupational ladder and social class (Conradson and Latham 2005; Iredale 2005; Skeldon 2006). However, their experiences of occupational and social mobility are heterogeneous, influenced by a variety of their social identities. Although "skill level" is a prominent characteristic of skilled individuals, it sometimes masks the influences of other social identities such as citizenship, gender, and race, in producing im/mobilities (Crenshaw 1994). Research shows that skilled workers from less developed countries to developed countries sometimes experience "de-skilling" or "brain waste" when they could not find jobs that match with their skills and thus often experienced decreased social status (Ho 2009; Parreñas 2015). Comparatively, what is less known is the occupational and social mobility of skilled migrants from the Global North to the Global South. How can research on the new directions and patterns of skilled migration advance migration theory and enrich our understanding of the occupational and social outcomes of such migration?

Occupational mobility and social mobility are multidimensional and complex. In this research, I argue that occupational mobility means changes in occupational status not only vertically (e.g., move up occupational ladder) but also horizontally (e.g., access to diverse occupational categories). Such conceptualization allows for more nuanced understanding of migrants' occupational attainment in the destination country. Meanwhile, the conceptualization of social mobility in this research includes both objective and subjective dimensions. It suggests not only variations in economic status, including wealth and income, but also changes in subjective social status (Nicklett and Burgard 2009; Vaquera and Aranda 2017). Incorporating the subjective component is important because migrants' social mobility is an ongoing negotiation process that depends on not only income and wealth but also one's social positions and identities such as race, gender and citizenship (Bailey and Mulder 2017; Roy, Uekusa and Karki 2020).

To analyzes the impacts from migrants' race, gender and citizenship on their occupational and social mobility, this paper employs the intersectionality framework to guide the analysis. Coined by Crenshaw (1994), "intersectionality" was first used to describe the interlocking oppressions faced by women of color. While this framework was employed mostly to analyze multiple sources of disadvantages, it has recently been applied to reveal how different social identities could produce advantages and disadvantages at the same time (Anthias 2012; Kynsilehto 2011). For example, for skilled women migrants, while their education qualifications were beneficial for career development, the conventional gender roles created barriers for upward mobility (Riaño 2011). This paper aims to further extend the applicability of the intersectionality framework to relatively privileged skilled migrants from the Global North to the Global South, and contributes to a nuanced understanding of how race, gender and citizenship intersects to simultaneously generate advantages and disadvantages for their occupational and social mobility.

In this context, this paper draws from the empirical study of skilled U.S. migrants in the Pearl River Delta (PRD) region of China. Although developed countries such as the U.S., Australia and the U.K. have long been the destination for skilled international migrants, China and other developing countries have recently joined the global race for talent (Li et al. 2022; Tan, Li and Tsuda 2022). Since the global outburst of COVID-19 in December 2019, the international migrants in China experienced disruptions to their career development and social status. This paper, focusing on skilled U.S. migrants in the PRD region of China, aims to address the following questions: How does the intersectionality of skilled U.S. migrants' race, gender and citizenship shape their occupational mobility in China? How does such intersectionality affect their social mobility after migration? Do their occupational and social mobility change in the same direction?

In the following sections, I will discuss how this research is guided by the intersectionality framework and then review relevant literature on skilled migrants' occupational and social mobility. Following this, I will contextualize how China emerges as a destination for global talent, and the role the Pearl River Delta region plays in the process. After outlining the qualitative research methods used for this paper, I will discuss the research findings and implications. The paper ends with scholarly contributions and future research directions.

Theoretical Framework: Intersectionality

Coined by Crenshaw (1994), intersectionality not only highlights the hierarchies of social positions in relation to gender, race, and class, but also emphasizes the interconnections and simultaneity of multiple social forces in producing social inequality (Anthias 2013). Recent development on the intersectionality theory applies it to migration and transnationalism studies (Bastia 2014; Pukayastha 2010). During the migration process, migrants "destabilize fixed borders and boundaries, whether geographic or intercategorical" (Bastia 2014, 238). As such, intersectionality is negotiated by individuals in an ongoing basis (Leung 2017). Migrants not only cross national or regional borders, but also straddle multiple boundaries such as race, class, and nationality (Bastia, 2014). The intersectional framework, therefore, captures the inter-group differences among migrants and proves useful in migration studies.

Although intersectionality was conceptualized to describe the multiple forms of discrimination and exclusions experienced by less privileged social groups, it does not mean that it is not applicable to (partially) privileged individuals. In fact, since intersectionality emphasizes inter-group difference, it has the potential to account for both marginalized groups that are subjugated to the power structure and those who benefit from the power structure (Bastia 2014; Nash 2008). Recently, the intersectionality framework has been employed to study skilled migration, but those studies still mainly focused on the various barriers for skilled women migrants to achieve professional advancement (Bolzani Crivellaro and Grimaldi 2021; Rodriguez and Scurry 2019). The few exceptions include Sang and Calvard (2019)'s work that revealed the relative and shifting forms of privileges and disadvantages of migrant academics due to the intersections of race and gender. Moreover, while the framework has been extensively analyzed within the Euro-American context, more research needs to be undertaken to examine the under-studied socio-spatial context in the Global South countries in producing social (in)equality. As such, this paper will extend the application of the intersectionality framework to skilled migrants from the Global North to the Global South, and study how their social characteristics simultaneously affect their occupational and social mobility.

Occupational and Social Mobility of Skilled Migrants

Occupational mobility typically suggests changes in one’s occupational status. Most existing literature focused on the vertical movement of one’s professional development. For example, studies have found that women and Asian Americans find it hard to break through the “glass ceiling” or “bamboo ceiling” in professional growth, respectively (Pendakur and Woodcock 2010; Yu 2020). Some other research examined lateral career movement and suggested occupational segregations for women to penetrating “glass walls” in male-dominated professions (Bowling et al. 2006). This study examines both the vertical and lateral movement of migrants’ occupational mobility to get a full picture of their occupational attainment after migration.

Skilled migrants’ occupational mobility diverged because of the intersections of their citizenship, race, and gender. Non-Western skilled migrants faced more disadvantages in recognition of their foreign credentials in the Global North than skilled professionals from the Global North (Beaverstock 2005; Ho 2011; Yeoh and Willis 2005). Additionally, the identification of “skills” can negatively affect the selection of women, whose skills are not recognized or rewarded equally as men (Lysenko and Wang 2020; Purkayastha 2005). Foreign-born women were more likely to suffer from income and occupational inequality (Xie and Connor 2022). Furthermore, research shows the “racialized regime of skill” where skills were more attached to the skin colors of the migrants than their actual qualifications (Guo 2015).

Recent research also found one’s mobility outcome is also shaped by individual intentions (Tan, Li and Tsuda 2022). In particular, some skilled migrants were willing to settle for occupational downward mobility for a variety of reasons such as family unification, cultural experiences, or using the less-than-desirable jobs as steppingstones before landing desired positions (Ho 2011; Jaskułowski 2017). As such, in this research, I attempt to differentiate between the voluntary and involuntary occupational mobility and analyze the influencing factors behind them.

Social mobility and occupational mobility are closely related but not the same. While changes in occupational mobility would influence social mobility, the latter has a broader scope. In this research, social mobility is conceptualized from both objective and subjective dimensions. It is assessed through not only the economic wellbeing such as wealth and income, but also the perceptions of subjective social status (Cederberg 2017; Friedman 2014). The perceived social mobility is drawn from diverse comparison groups. Research shows that whether migrants feel they are better off compared to the reference groups is a more important determinant of their wellbeing than absolute economic gains (Gelatt 2013; Vaquera and Aranda 2017).

When evaluating the heterogeneous social mobility experienced by skilled migrants, scholars paid attention to the role of intersectionality of citizenship, race, and gender. The citizenship capital from the Global North countries is of paramount value in the Global South, creating the prestige and privileges of the Global-North-to-South migrants (Bauder 2008; Tan, Li and Tsuda 2022). The interlocking influences from citizenship and race also mattered. Migrants of color from the Global South tended to experience more accumulative disadvantages in both economic gains and subjective social status, demonstrated in the case of African traders and entrepreneurs in Guangzhou, China (Lan 2016). Further, the intersecting impacts of gender, race and citizenship revealed that white men from Western countries enjoyed more advantages in navigating social locations in the local society than the women counterparts, benefiting from their social identities (Fechter 2016; Maher and Lafferty 2014).

Some literature on migrants' occupational and social mobility oftentimes suggest that these two forms of mobility always move in the same direction (Impicciatore and Panichella 2019; Kwiek 2015). However, other research found that occupational mobility and social mobility may not necessarily be aligned, partly attributed to the intentionality of migrants. For example, Kawashima (2020) found that during the economic crisis, skilled professionals from Japan were willing to work in less developed areas in China for less prestigious jobs with less earnings in order to maintain their middle-class social status. Other research has found the “contradictory class mobility” when migrants chose downward occupational mobility intentionally in return for better economic gains for the entire household (Cederber 2017; Parreñas 2015). In such cases, migrants' intentionality played a critical role in affecting the trajectories of their mobilities beyond the macro-level social structures and migrants' own social identities.

In sum, while most existing research uses the intersectionality framework to study how the various social identities simultaneously (re) produce disadvantages, more research is needed to study how the intersection of one's social identities could generate privileges and marginalization at the same time. This paper aims to bridge such literature gaps by focusing on the skilled U.S. migrants in the Pearl River Delta region of China. It will analyze the role of the intersections of race, gender, and citizenship in shaping their occupational and social mobility. Particularly, while the U.S. citizenship is generally perceived as prestigious, it calls for more nuanced studies to understand how the white and non-white Americans of men and women may experience the professional and social outcomes in China differently. The global outbreak of COVID-19 has caused xenophobia and racism in many countries (Xie, Li and Tan in press), and it is thus timely to understand if the symbolic values of citizenship and race would be reconfigured after the pandemic and any implications on migrants' occupational and social mobility.

Pearl River Delta Region of China: Opportunities and Challenges for Attracting Global Talent

The process of globalization is uneven (Inda and Rosaldo 2002), with the diffusion of skills and knowledge taking place at different rates in different world regions. Skilled migration is fueled by and reproduces the unbalanced development in the global economic hierarchy. In the global race for talent, multiple countries have established the skill-based programs to attract skilled workers, including Australia, Canada, Japan, and Singapore (Liu-Farrer, Yeoh and Bass 2020). Recently, traditional migrant sending countries like China started to attract skilled talent to combat the "brain drain" situation of skilled Chinese workers migrating abroad. Aiming to increase the number of skilled international migrants while curbing the less-skilled, the Chinese government launched a new work permit system that assigns points to applicants based on their qualifications such as educational background, professional experiences, salaries, Chinese language proficiency among others (Gautel 2017). In particular, education and working experiences weigh significantly, making a possible 40 out of the total 100 points. The system classifies all foreign workers into one of three categories, i.e., Type A (外国高端人才/high-level talent), Type B/ (外国专业人才/foreign professionals), Type C (其他外国人员/other foreign worker). Sponsorship from employers is needed for work permit applications and the dependent spouses of foreign work permit holders are not authorized to work in China.

As a rising intellectual gateway, the Pearl River Delta (PRD) region attracts diversified international migrants, including international students, academics, foreign traders (especially those from Africa), and skilled professionals. While the immigrant receptivity is generally high in the PRD region, the discourses on foreignness and race in China were ambiguous and sometimes contradictory. For example, research found that although the media representation of international migrants in China conveyed the message of China's globalist visions, it also reinforced the self-other boundary with the nationalist discourses (Gan 2022). Meanwhile, the meanings of race are shifting in China as it rises to be a global economic power. While the whites enjoy privileges, they also must navigate the otherness in their ongoing encounters with the locals. The racialization of blackness is also complex while it is sometimes perceived as inferior and at other times superior to Chinese (Lan 2016; Liu and Dervin 2020). As such, the PRD region in China provides an ideal site to explore the stratified occupational and social experiences of skilled international migrants in relation to their race, citizenship and gender in a non-Western context.

The U.S. has been the second top sending country of international migrants in China since over a decade ago (National Bureau of Statistics of China 2011). However, in recent years, with the ongoing trade war and tech war between the U.S. and China, the bilateral relationships have evolved from strategic partnership to intensifying rivalry (Fischer 2020). As a result, the knowledge transfers and economic connections between the U.S. and China have encountered serious challenges in the past few years. The global outbreak of COVID-19 since December 2019 has worsened the situation and further raised concerns among the international migrant community in China with implications for their spatial, occupational, and social mobility. As China enforced more restricted border controls and travel restrictions, these regulations had disrupted the travel plans and employment of many skilled migrants in China. Additionally, the expatriate community was also blamed for flouting social distancing guidelines and even as carriers of the virus (Hale and Shepherd 2020; Vanderklippe 2020). As such, China is now facing more challenges to attract and retain global talent since COVID-19.

Research Methods

As a qualitative study to illustrate skilled migrants from the Global North to the Global South, this research presents a case of skilled Americans in mainland China through the lens of changes in their occupational and social mobility after migration. The primary data in this research was drawn from 58 semi-structured interviews conducted from 2018 to 2020. The selected participants have at least a bachelor's degree or equivalent professional experiences, i.e., classified as "Type A" or "Type B" talent by China's new work permit system; and have lived in China for at least six consecutive months at the time of research. The criteria of educational and visa background ensured the participants are skilled migrants according to the widely adopted standards. The minimum six-month stay requirement helped make sure the participants have sufficient understanding of the socio-cultural environment they moved into. Among all the participants, 27 are women and 31 are men. Despite the goal of maximizing racial representation, the samples were unbalanced. While the majority of the participants are white (n=49), five are black, one is Asian American and three are mixed races.

During the interviews, I asked participants questions about the changes in occupational type and social class compared with pre-migration. Participants also reflected on factors influencing their occupational and social mobility, including their own intentions and external environment. This approach allows me to discover if occupational and social mobility change in the same direction, and whether such mobility is voluntary or involuntary. Questions about whether and how COVID-19 may affect employment opportunities and social status were also asked. Since March 28, 2020, China prevented most foreign workers from entering the border even for those with valid visas. As a result, some participants were stuck in the U.S. or other countries. Those participants provided critical insights on how COVID-19 impacted their travels and interrupted their career decisions and job opportunities.

Each interview lasted about 60 to 90 minutes. All the interviews were recorded with the consent of participants. The recordings were transcribed into texts for content analysis and thematic coding via the program MAXQDA. I used a hybrid of deductive and inductive coding to integrate both theory-driven and data-driven empirical analysis. First, I manually developed the coding structure based on research questions and theories (Miles and Huberman 1994). Examples of first-order codes include “occupational mobility”, “social mobility”, “race”, “gender”, “citizenship” and “COVID-19”. I also created a list of second-order codes under each first-order category. For example, under “occupational mobility”, I created codes such as “occupations pre-migration”, “first occupation in China”, and “changes of occupations in China”. Then I employed an inductive and data-driven coding strategy that allows the themes and patterns to emerge from the fieldwork (Glaser and Strauss 1967). During the analysis, all participants were assigned with a pseudo name to protect their identity.

“Glass box”? Occupational Mobility of Skilled US Migrants in China

This study found that skilled migrants’ social characteristics, including citizenship, race, and gender, could possibly work in different directions at the same time to (re)produce advantages and disadvantages in the labor market, simultaneously enabling and constraining their occupational mobility. As a result, the skilled U.S. migrants in China oftentimes ended up in a conundrum, which I coined as a “glass box”. Most of them enjoyed improved occupational mobility but eventually reached a “glass ceiling”. They were also easily pigeonholed into narrow selections of occupations and faced “glass walls”. Nevertheless, the combining effects of their human and citizenship capital also created a “glass floor” that protected them from descending to extremely precarious and low-level jobs.

Most participants experienced upward occupational mobility, albeit at different levels. Among all, white men usually enjoyed the highest level of career advancement. The enabling effects from the U.S. citizenship, whiteness and being male accumulatively fueled the escalation of their career development more than other migrant groups. As a result, some were able to reach positions that were beyond their educational and work experiences. Ryan, a consultant at a marketing firm, said,

> When I was managing my own team, people often felt, and rightly so, that I wouldn't have the job that I had if I wasn't a foreigner. Because the position that I had is like three or four ranks up [compared to the job I had in the U.S.]. And if I had been a Chinese person coming into this industry, I would have had to start from the bottom. And the people who had the same rank as me were very experienced people, but I've got a leg up because I was a good face for the client.

In Ryan’s case, his racial appearance and citizenship ensured him advantages when interacting with the clients, thus helping with their upward occupational mobility in China. In other cases, the white male participants moved up faster in the occupational ladder than what he could have if he had stayed in the U.S. For example, before working in China, Jackson was a math teacher at a public elementary school in the U.S. for seven years. After four more years’ teaching in China, he moved up to the administration level and became the director of an international school in Shenzhen in his forties. Reflecting on his occupational trajectory, Jackson admitted that “I was able to get into administration quicker overseas… I probably would have stayed longer in teaching had I been in America.” In such examples, the symbolic value of the citizenship was amplified by their race and gender, further improving their chances of getting higher-level jobs faster in China than they could have in the home country. Thus, their race (being white), gender (being male), and citizenship (being US citizen) worked in the same direction to boost the migrants’ upward occupational mobility to the largest extent. This finding echoed existing literature that revealed how the whiteness coated with Americanness were perceived as a capital that could be converted into prestige and privileges (Liu and Dervin 2020; Stanley 2013).

Nevertheless, while whiteness could imply possession of skills one might not actually have, darker skin would sometimes be perceived as a lack of qualifications. African American participants in this study experienced more limited upward mobility than the white counterparts. For instance, unlike Nolan, a white architect, who felt that “[because] people think I'm white, they really just assume I know something”, Hope, an African American entrepreneur, talked about her struggles, “Yes, I have a degree, but I also have darker skin. A lot of people here are very uptight about that.” Although Hope had obtained educational qualifications from the U.S., her race constrained the transferability of the human and cultural capital to China and limited her occupational growth after the migration. Even so, the citizenship capital still provided advantages to the U.S. migrants when they entered the labor market. For instance, Luke commented, “they (Chinese employers) still value if you have a US passport. I've noticed that holds more power no matter what your race or background is.” Therefore, these examples further illustrated that citizenship (being U.S. citizens) and race (being non-white) could work in the opposite directions. While their citizenship elevated the occupational status, their race had limiting effects on the professional development at the same time. In such cases, the symbolic value of U.S. citizenship was highly desired in the host society that it took precedence over other social characteristics in influencing migrants’ labor market performance. Consequently, the intersectionality of African American migrants’ social identities improved their upward occupational mobility, although to a lesser extent than the white counterparts.

However, the migrants eventually reached a “glass ceiling”. While the symbolic values of their race and citizenship had speeded up their professional advancement in the beginning, they were not very helpful for sustaining their continued career growth. For instance, although being a white American had improved his occupational mobility and made him a consultant leading his own project team, Ryan was unable to move up to high-level management positions in his company. He admitted that “the professional opportunities that my race got me were also limited in a way… I wasn't getting a good feeling of accomplishment or that I was developing anything while I was there because it just felt like I was sort of a decoration.” In another case, Pat was classified as a Type A talent by China’s work permit system. Although his formal title was a “Senior Director” and should include responsibilities such as team management and product development, he felt it as merely a fancy title without much decision power in personnel management and admitted that he could never get to the leadership team who were all Chinese. As such, while enjoying privileges, participants also complained about the narrow pathways for career progression. Even though they demonstrated high-level professional credentials like education and skills, they eventually reached a “glass ceiling” that blocked the upward pathway to secure top posts. Such “glass ceiling” was fortified by the structural constraints where the Chinese employers generally only allowed Chinese citizens to take the top leadership positions, but the participants had little interests in seeking Chinese citizenship. The unwillingness to give up their U.S. citizenships[2] was not only because of their hesitance to give up the privileges associated with their U.S. citizenship, but also stemmed from their suspicion about permanently living in China, influenced by the global stratification of countries that polarized developed and developing countries (Tan, Li and Tsuda 2022). Previous literature typically used the notion of “glass ceiling” to conceptualize the barriers for disadvantaged social groups such as women, immigrants from the Global South, and minorities to “rise to the top” (Bowling et al. 2006; Pendakur and Woodcock 2010). This study applied the concept to study the blocked upward pathways for relatively privileged migrants such as those from the Global North and/or the white migrants.

In addition to facing “glass ceiling”, the participants also confronted “glass walls”, the invisible barriers that confined their lateral movement, which caused segregated occupational options. Because of the stereotypes and racialization of whiteness and Americanness in China, white Americans in China were usually steered into narrow job niches, which were highly dependent on their language and cultural background, such as English teaching, voice acting for English movies and cross-cultural training. As Jocelyn pointed out, “in China, there are great job opportunities for international people, but mostly in the teaching realm, or international business or trade.” Similarly, Sam, teaching English at a college, said, “as far as the range of work, I don't know that I'd have the ability to get all the same kinds of jobs in China as I would in the US. As far as teaching, yea there were more opportunities to be a teacher in China than to be a teacher in the US with reasonable salary.”

While some participants chose such professions that heavily rely on their cultural and citizenship capital when moving to China, some others found it increasingly difficult to break the walls to enter other occupations. Fernando, having a master’s degree in digital media, first moved to China to explore art projects in Yunnan Province, and then decided to teach at an international school in Dongguan for more income. Although he only had planned to take the teaching position temporarily, he failed to land a job that would match with his qualifications and preferences. Gradually, he found it less likely to be successful given the relatively fewer job opportunities in that field and lack of social connections as a foreigner in China. By the time of interview, he just decided to renew his contract with the international school. In a similar case, as Jasmine put it, “I was searching for a long time to find a job that was not English teaching. It wasn’t really easy unless you were already in that position abroad and they sent you here to work at the Chinese office”. Not wanting to teach, Jasmine found a job as an assistant of the executive in a marketing company after graduated with a bachelor’s degree in Chinese culture. But feeling lack of professional growth in that job, she quit and started to do voice acting for English movies. Eventually, she accepted a position as a curriculum designer and English teacher two years ago in order to support herself better financially. Therefore, while the intersection of the participants’ citizenship and race contributed to their desirability in certain industries, it also limited migrants’ abilities to penetrate the “glass walls” to enter a wide range of employment types, similar to the “cultural ghettoization” identified in earlier research (Lan 2011). This finding also echoed the earlier studies on “glass doors” or “glass walls” which suggested the gender- and racial-based occupational segregation to obtain employment at high-wage firms or sectors (Finley 2009).

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[2] China does not allow dual citizenship.

Finally, even though participants were pigeonholed into certain types of occupations which only enabled their occupational upward mobility to a certain level, there was a “glass floor” that protected their job security. Specifically, being U.S. citizens facilitated the transfer or their cultural capital as well as its conversions to economic capital, preventing them from falling to the bottom of the occupational rank, thus forming the “glass floor”. Zoey gave an example, “I'll never go hungry here because I am always able to teach English, you know, in America there's nothing I could do like that.” This story demonstrates that the Global-North-to-South skilled migrants were better off than their counterpart from the Global South to the Global North, who were more likely to end up in precarious occupational types due to insufficient skill transfers (Mucci et al. 2019). However, the “floor” was not always made in concrete and could be shattered unexpectedly.

During the COVID-19, a few participants were stuck outside of China due to border closures for international migrants after March 28, 2020 (China Briefing 2021). Although they were allowed to work remotely in the beginning, their employment was eventually terminated because of their extended period of physical absence in the positions. In such cases, despite having valid work visas, they were unable to enter the Chinese border due to the restrictions on their foreign citizenship status, which exposed them to risks of declining unemployment status.

In sum, the "glass box" conundrum suggested the struggles as well as the benefits resulting from their multiple social characteristics. Similar to skilled migrants from the Global South to the Global North, the skilled U.S. migrants in this study also encountered the issue of professional limitation, but for rather different reasons. While skilled migrants from the Global South experienced challenges to get their credentials recognized in the Global North (Erel 2010; Purkayastha 2005), skilled migrants from the Global North usually did not have such problems. Rather, they were more likely to benefit from the high transferability of their cultural, human and citizenship capital to the Global South (Tan, Li and Tsuda 2022). However, the intersection of their social identities often ended up masking the values of their cultural capital and creating blockages in securing top-level positions. As a result, even though the participants in this study were relatively privileged skilled migrants from the Global North countries, they still faced the "glass ceiling" that prevented them from the ascension into top jobs as well as "glass walls" that limited their access to diverse occupational types. Yet, their social identities also brought in privileges, which was demonstrated in the "glass floor" that protected them from ending up in extremely precarious jobs.

Divergent Social Mobility

In this study, social mobility includes changes to both objective economic gains and subjective social status after migration. Although the economic status did not necessarily move up for all the participants, their perceived social status all improved after moving to China. Among the participants' intersecting social identities of citizenship, race, and gender, the U.S. citizenship played the most prominent role in impacting their social mobility. However, the advantages generated from the citizenship were ambivalent and could quickly turn into disadvantages after the breakout of COVID-19.

The objective economic gains after migration depended largely on wealth and income. Most participants found their gross income did not change much compared to their last jobs in the U.S. But the relatively low living costs in China and the generous employment benefits such as housing stipends and free airplane tickets, allowed the participants to enjoy more disposable income than they had in the home country. While the African American participants indicated their pays were less than the white peers in similar positions, they believed they earned more than their Chinese colleagues. However, with the social stratification and wealth inequality in China, the economic class among the Chinese differed drastically and they did not always feel they were economically better off than the Chinese. In such cases, the U.S. citizenship helped elevate the socio-economic status while being black hindered the economic attainment. The uplifting effects of their citizenship outweighed the blackness in producing economic inequality.

Comparatively, the participants' perceived social mobility was more complex. Prior to the COVID-19 crisis, the white participants believed their citizenship and race simultaneously augmented their subjective social status. As Andrew pointed out, compared to in the U.S., "your salary doesn't necessarily go up, but your feeling of status goes up." Participants expressed that they acquired a sense of superiority and privilege during their everyday interactions with the locals. As Ella mentioned, "I do feel like a celebrity here sometimes. You know, people want to talk to us; they take pictures with us.". Previous research revealed the racialized privileges associated with whiteness in the Chinese society given its semi-colonized history and predominantly non-White social environment (Farrer 2010; Lenard 2008). As a result, the white Americans usually enjoyed white capital (Lundström 2014) which elevated the symbolic prestige perceived by the local community.

The African American participants believed the changes to their perceived social mobility were largely dependent on the reference groups. They found the improvement to their social status was less than that of the white Americans. Hope, an African American woman, described her experiences, "People come over and take me pictures. It really made me feel like a monkey in a zoo. They take pictures of all foreigners, but I know they say ‘wow they are so beautiful’ when they take pictures of my white friends. When they take picture of me, it was complex and insulting. I am a bit paranoid about that.” Although Ella and Hope both had experiences of being taken pictures by the locals, they had drastically different feelings. While Ella, a white woman, got a sense of “celebrity” feeling, Hope, an African American woman, felt insulted and upset. Such unequal social outcome could be attributed to the racialization of black people in China and the ascribed meanings to their race (Gan 2022). The deep-rooted global racial hierarchy shapes the power asymmetries and racial prejudices towards black people. As such, the racial inferiority discourses and stereotypes fueled by institutional racism continue to marginalize black people and in turn further perpetuate racial inequality (Udah 2017).

Comparatively, all the African American participants indicated that their social status was unanimously more elevated than all Africans. Randall described one of his encounters with a Chinese street vendor, “She (the street vendor) said, ‘China is probably better than where you come from’. She implied Africa. Then I said, ‘I am an American’. When she heard my nationality, her attitudes changed.” As such, although their race had limited the social mobility for African Americans, their citizenship still augmented their social standing compared to Africans. In China, the media has amplified the positive influences of African American celebrities, such as Barack Obama and Kobe Bryant, which then reinforced the sense of uniqueness attached to African Americans and enhanced their social status as a result. Thus, compared with the situation back in the U.S., African American participants in this study felt their social status was improved, more often as a result of the sense of distinctiveness derived from their citizenship capital, which exerted more influence on their social mobility than other forms of capital. These examples confirmed that social mobility is relative and shifting, contingent on the comparison groups (Gelatt 2013; Vaquera and Aranda 2017). For African Americans, they also experienced both increases in occupational and social mobility, but to a lesser extent.

However, the increase to the subjective social status was ambivalent. While the intersection of participants’ race and citizenship lifted their social status, it also perpetuated the otherness and bias towards them, reproducing social inequality and further isolating them from other social groups. For instance, Ryan wished he could just be understood as “a complex human being” rather than a vague figure based on the local people’s preconceptions and stereotypes of white foreigners. Additionally, it was commonly reflected by the participants that they sometimes had the feelings of being treated as “token” or “trophy” by the locals in the social setting. Like Andrew said, “sometimes you can find yourself just being like a toy… they (local Chinese) would invite you to something and then you realize you're really just there to show off.” Thus, somewhat similar to the “token minorities” in the U.S. society, the Americans in China felt their personal characteristics are often ignored or distorted to fit the stereotypes, reinforcing the perceived homogeneity of their groups (Hewstone et al. 2011; Niemann 1999). But in this case, the skilled American migrants’ perception of “token” stemmed from their racial and citizenship privileges, unlike the disadvantaged social locations of the “token minorities” in the U.S. Such observations resonated with the feeling of “white decorations” in the workplace, suggesting how the intersectionality of the social identities had permeated into both the professional and social lives of the skilled U.S. migrants in China, where whiteness is also racialized markers of minority in the pre-dominantly non-White society. The findings echo earlier research that found white Euro-Americans in China experienced the contradictions of their white privilege that resulted in not only advantages but also otherness, leading to the “simultaneous elevation and subjugation” in their positionalities (Camenisch 2022, 128; Liu and Dervin 2020).

After the global outbreak of COVID-19, the participants’ perceived social mobility declined significantly. As the cases of COVID-19 infection and death in the U.S. and other countries increased drastically in 2020, the local Chinese community became nervous and suspicious of any international migrants, especially those from the U.S. given it had the highest number of COVID-19 cases at the time of interview. As Cody, a white American in Dongguan, stated, “I used to have privileges before COVID-19. Through COVID, I learned how to give up some of those privileges.” Participants like Cody experienced denied entry to public places, including restaurants, supermarkets, and hospitals, which prohibited all foreigners to enter. They were perceived as the carriers of the virus and often felt the locals acted uncomfortable around them or being shunned. Such “xenophobic racism” (Elias et al. 2021, 785) included not only exclusionary sentiments but also racial intolerance towards the “outsiders” in the country. As such, although the U.S. citizenship and whiteness are generally associated with high symbolic values in China in normal times, their ascribed values are highly volatile and contingent upon the geopolitical and race relations, and could be easily disrupted by the global crisis like the COVID-19. Accordingly, the uplifting effects of the U.S. citizenship and whiteness on their social status were not permanent but rather subject to changes rapidly and unexpectedly.

While all the participants experienced downward perceived social mobility during COVID-19, the African American migrants were hit the hardest. While darker skin migrants already experienced prejudice before the pandemic, COVID-19 further deepened the divide between them and the local community. As Ebony mentioned, “people would walk away from me or hurriedly get their masks, which is something I had not experienced before.” Two other African Americans experienced difficulties of renewing rental contract or extended mandate quarantine, which were more common among darker skin migrants than the white participants. Therefore, although scholars argued that the racialization and racism have long existed in Asia (Ang, Ho and Yeoh 2022; Raghuram 2022; Tsuda 2022), the COVID-19 pandemic has unveiled the racial prejudice and discriminations to an unprecedented level. Even so, African Americans admitted that the Africans experienced even worse marginalization than themselves during the virus. They hardly got forcefully evicted from their apartments like some of the African migrants in Guangzhou. As such, the race and citizenship of African Americans both contributed to their declines in subjective social status, although their U.S. citizenship saved them from extreme precarity experienced by the African diasporas during the pandemic in China. The only Asian American participant indicated that because his physical traits did not stand out from the locals and he could speak Chinese, he did not experience the prejudice like the white or black participants.

In sum, the intersection of one’s social identities influenced their social mobility in important ways. Not all the social characteristics exerted influences equally. Citizenship was in a more central role and created advantages in their social mobility prior to the COVID-19, but its effects were oftentimes challenged by the migrants’ race. While white Americans enjoyed the most privileges among all, they also struggled with tokenism due to their whiteness. African Americans grappled with racial discrimination and backlash, but they still had higher social standings compared to Africans or Chinese locals with similar education and qualifications. Compared with the more explicit influences from citizenship and race, the role of gender in shaping migrants' social mobility was more subtle. Overall, the women participants enjoyed upward mobility regardless of their racial background. However, the migrants' upward mobility was unstable. Particularly, their citizenship capital was volatile and subject to change due to broader geopolitical forces. After the global outbreak of COVID-19, they all experienced downward social mobility to various extent.

Contradictory Occupational and Social Mobility

My analysis reveals that while the changes to skilled migrants' occupational and social mobility aligned most of the time, there were some exceptions where these two forms of mobility shifted in different directions. Such contradictory movement was caused because of the migrants' own intentionality and the intersectionality of their race, gender and citizenship.

In some cases, participants experienced voluntary downward occupational mobility but upward social mobility after moving to China. Some intentionally took jobs with lower occupational status than their last occupations in the U.S. to fulfill their aspirations for cultural experiences, lifestyle preferences, and family reasons. For example, when Ryan quit his analyst job in the U.S. and moved to China, he started with teaching English, considering it "a fun thing to do." For him, moving to China was more of a means to obtain unique cultural experience through exotic adventures than to build the careers. His own cultural capital of having knowledge of Asian culture from his undergraduate studies shaped his decisions for occupation selection after migration. In another case, Jocelyn was a landscape architect in the U.S., but chose to teach English in China as she became frustrated with the frequent overtime working in her profession in the U.S. and aspired for a more relaxing lifestyle. This type of voluntary downward occupational mobility differed from involuntary occupational downward mobility because the migrants purposely chose to do so. But they still maintained upward social mobility in China because of the social prestige they enjoyed as white Americans. They felt they were treated especially nice and were always looked up to by her Chinese colleagues and friends, something less common when working and living in the U.S.

In addition to deliberately choosing occupations with less prestige than the ones they held in the U.S. after migration, some trailing wives decided to give up employment altogether after moving in China. For example, Evelyn moved to China with her husband almost three decades ago. Despite having a college degree and having worked as a music teacher in the U.S., Evelyn did not work for a long time in China until all the children grew up. But even not formally employed, these trailing wives usually had abundant economic resources to live comfortably in China with their spouse’s incomes. Meanwhile, their subjective social status was elevated through the day-to-day interactions with the locals.

A closer analysis revealed that the contradictory locations of the migrants’ occupational and social mobility demonstrated the simultaneity of their social characteristics in shaping their professional and social outcomes. For one, although both men and women were susceptible to voluntarily downward occupational mobility, women were more likely to take less prestigious occupations in China while being voluntarily channeled to feminine occupations. Although their decisions were voluntary, these women were still conditioned by the conventional gender norms and ideologies that prioritized women’s fulfillment in the household than the success in careers (Stone 2007; Tan 2021). For the other, while gender limited the women participants’ career growth, the citizenship and race still afforded them with elevated social status. It further illustrated that when skilled migrants from the Global North moved to the Global South, their social status was rather detached from their skills and qualifications and more attached to their citizenship and race.

During the pandemic, the participants’ social mobility plunged significantly as they were dismissed and even discriminated as the carriers of the virus, but the changes to their occupational mobility varied. While some lost jobs while they were stuck outside of China and couldn’t re-enter Chinese border due to border closures and travel restrictions, some others had upward occupational mobility. First of all, China quickly opened up the economy and took measures to return to economic growth in 2020, creating more job opportunities for the skilled workers (Xinhua 2020). Second, a large number of skilled international migrants fled China when COVID-19 broke out in China, thus decreasing the supply of global talent in the country. As Mason said, “I get more job opportunities, because most of the foreigners left immediately and a lot of them went back to America… I'm in very high demand now.” However, the level of upward mobility was limited. Admittedly, skilled Americans who remained in China had better chances to climb up the occupational ladder after the exodus of skilled international migrants during the pandemic. Yet, they still could not shatter the “glass ceiling” given the restrictions on their citizenship based on the organizational rules and bias. Their new job opportunities were also still in industries that traditionally favored international migrants, further reinforcing the “glass walls” and preventing them from reaching other occupations available to the locals. But at the same time, their subjective social status decreased as a result of xenophobia and racism fueled by the COVID-19. As a result, some skilled Americans in China experienced the contradictory occupational and social mobility during the pandemic. The rights entitled to citizenship, including border entry, was reinforced while the symbolic value of citizenship became volatile and unstable given the international migrants especially Americans were not well received in China during the pandemic.

Conclusion

Drawing on the case of skilled U.S. migrants in the Pearl River Delta region of China, this paper examines the emerging trend of skilled international migrants from the Global North to the Global South and how the intersection of their race, gender and citizenship shapes their occupational and social mobility after migration. I have coined the term “glass box” to describe the growth, limitations, and partial privileges regarding the skilled migrants’ occupational mobility. Meanwhile, their social mobility all shifted upward prior to the COVID-19 but declined drastically after the pandemic, illustrating the fluidity and contestation of the advantages and disadvantages brought about by the migrants’ intersecting social identities. Beyond the influences of social identities, the analysis also includes migrant's intentionality as a factor that affects the in/voluntary mobility in professional development.

This paper contributes to the scholarship on intersectionality. It applies the intersectionality framework to skilled and relatively privileged social groups to examine their contradictory social locations. In doing so, the paper responds to the call to increase the analytic strengths and nuanced understanding of intersectionality in migration research (Rodriguez and Scurry 2019). The analysis suggests that not every social characteristic, including race, gender, and citizenship, shifts one's positionality in the same direction. In other words, while some social identities would create advantages for migrants, some others would cause disadvantages at the same time. In particular, the U.S. citizenship exerts the most influence on skilled U.S. migrants' occupational and social mobility than their race and gender. But its benefits were in flux and would disappear rapidly with the changes in geo-political dynamics, bi-lateral relations and sudden outbreak of a global pandemic. Moreover, this paper explained how individual intentionality and intersectionality are combined to complicate the social locations of the migrants, bringing together the analysis of micro-level human agency with macro-level power structures.

Further, this study enriches our understanding of the social constructions of race and citizenship in a non-Western, predominantly non-White, and rapidly developing Global South country. While dark skin has long been a source of prejudice and discrimination under the "racialized skills regime" in the labor market in both Global North and Global South countries (Guo 2015; Zhou, Shenasi and Xu 2016), the meanings and interpretations of whiteness are context-dependent and contested. Meanwhile, in social settings, the "othering" of white migrants reduced the level of "white privilege" in social relationships with the local Chinese. On the other hand, the social status of African Americans was still high compared to Chinese with similar qualifications or members of the African diaspora in China, which is significantly different from the situations where racial minority skilled immigrants from the Global South struggled with occupational and social mobility in other Global South countries (Kynsilehto 2011; Pukayastha 2010). As such, this study contributes to the interracial relationships beyond the black-and-white paradigm and the simultaneous boundary-crossings of race and citizenship.

Finally, empirical evidence from this research supports a more nuanced understanding of occupational and social mobility of skilled middling migrants. Previous research tended to believe occupational mobility is always aligned with social mobility. This research finds otherwise, and these two forms of mobility could shift in different directions. It explores the role of migrants' intentionality in shaping such mobility beyond the influences from their social identities. As such, this study also advances the capital-mobility framework by expanding the forms of mobility from spatial mobility to occupational and social mobility and considering how migrants' aspirations and capabilities contributed to their im/mobility trajectories.

In light of these findings, further research is needed to systematically investigate how various forms of mobility interact with each other and eventually contributes to the lived experiences of skilled migrants. More understandings are needed regarding skilled migrants who return to the Global North after working and living in the Global South for some time, including how their overseas experiences would shape their occupational and social mobility after the return. Further, it also calls for more studies to test the application of the intersectionality framework in other contexts, such as the Global-South-to-South skilled migration or the Global-South-to-North return migration. More social identities such as sexuality and age could be included in such intersectional analysis.

CHAPTER 5
CONCLUSION

By developing a capital-mobility framework and employing the intersectionality theory, I studied the various forms of mobility and its underlying factors for skilled U.S. migrants in the Pearl River Delta (PRD) region of China. Drawing from data collected from 58 semi-structured interviews and 33 sketch maps, this dissertation looked at the impacts of skilled migrants' capital and intentionality on both (cross-border and local) spatial mobility as well as occupational and social mobility. I argued that migrants' divergent im/mobility outcomes depend on both their aspirations and capabilities, which are based on capital accumulation and its transferability and convertibility across space. Together, this dissertation's three empirical chapters offered new perspectives on the emerging trend of skilled U.S. migrants moving from the Global North to the Global South. The findings are also relevant for national and local governments in the global race for talent to attract and retain skilled international migrants.

This dissertation developed a capital-mobility framework building on Schewel (2020)'s aspiration-capability model. This framework emphasizes the roles of both capital and migrants' own intentions in shaping their cross-border and everyday spatial mobility, as well as occupational and social mobility. Starting with the role of capital, the first empirical paper highlighted how the accumulation, transferability, and convertibility of capital across space could influence skilled U.S. migrants' cross-border im/mobility. Specifically, while the migrants' capital could be smoothly transferred to China and thus facilitate their voluntary mobility to China, the continued accumulation of capital in China may not be fully transferrable to the U.S. upon their return, thus causing immobility. The second empirical chapter added an important layer to the capital-mobility framework by revealing that one's accumulation of capital could generate both enabling and limiting effects on their everyday mobility through influencing the capability to move and the demand for local travel. Finally, the third empirical study enriches the capital-mobility framework by moving beyond the focus on spatial mobility to investigate migrants' occupational and social mobility. It expands the conceptualization of an im/mobility continuum by incorporating the vertical and lateral movement of occupational mobility, and the objective and subjective dimensions of social mobility. It also draws on intersectionality theory to show how the intersection of race, gender and citizenship provides both advantages and disadvantages for the migrants' mobility outcomes.

In addition to capital, migrants' intentionality also shapes their im/mobility outcomes. Such aspirations for mobility, or the lack thereof, are significantly influenced by the unequal socio-economic development between the Global North and the Global South. In particular, skilled U.S. migrants were generally reluctant to permanently live and work in China because of their preferences for the American social and cultural values. At the local level of spatial mobility, some skilled U.S. migrants had no intentions to visit places outside of their "expat bubble" and thus chose to be self-excluded spatially and socially in the local society. Additionally, although most migrants migrated for the purpose of upward occupational mobility, some intentionally chose downward mobility to fulfill other purposes such as family unification and adventure. Such downward occupational mobility did not prevent them from enjoying upward social mobility because their U.S. citizenship capital is highly valued in Chinese society, suggesting the uneven power dynamics between the Global North and the Global South. Migrants' intentionality for mobility was further interrupted after the COVID-19 pandemic, which deepened the divide between countries, and exacerbated the "othering" between local community and migrant groups. In this research, the participants' willingness to stay in China further diminished as a result of their fears of the coronavirus that originated in China and the increased hostility of local Chinese residents towards the international migrant community. Similarly, the rising xenophobia and racism after the pandemic further reduced Americans' desires for daily movement to avoid day-to-day interactions with locals. In terms of social mobility, the skilled Americans' relative privilege was challenged by the COVID-19, which worsened the backlash towards foreigners in China.

While the three empirical chapters of this dissertation are stand-alone pieces, they all interconnect with each other to enrich analysis on the im/mobility experiences of skilled U.S. migrants in China. Cross-border spatial mobility provides both opportunities and challenges for migrants to reconfigure their everyday lives after migration, including their everyday spatial movement, occupational attainment and social status. Meanwhile, migrants' mobility in everyday local travels, and their occupational and social mobility in the host society are all closely related to their decisions to stay in China or return, thus impacting their cross-border mobility.

Although the COVID-19 was not the focus of the dissertation research design, it turned out to play a significant role in altering the im/mobility patterns of the participants. First, the pandemic expedited some migrants' plan to permanently leave China given the difficulties to renew work visa and make international travels during the peak of COVID-19. While the impacts of border closures on the flows of skilled international migrants were temporary, the rising xenophobia and racism in the country had more enduring influences on deterring global talent from wanting to choose China as the destination. Second, although lockdown and forced quarantine would eventually stop after the contain of the virus, the microaggressions towards foreigners and racial discrimination experienced in migrants' everyday life would have more long-lasting influences on limiting their local mobility. Finally, although participants who had stayed in China during the peak of the pandemic claimed they gained more job opportunities given China's fast economic rebound and decreasing supply of skilled international migrants in the country, the global economic recovery was stalled and subject to derail with new waves of COVID-19 infections and social unrest (UN 2022; Word Bank 2021). As such, the professional development and social mobility of skilled migrants were subject to considerable uncertainty in the long run.

This dissertation contributes to the literature about migration, mobility and intersectionality in several ways. First, through evidence-based research on skilled migrants moving from the Global North to the Global South, this research contributes to the understanding of how their aspirations and capabilities for mobility are similar to, or different from, those from the Global South to the Global North, which has been extensively studied by researchers. Second, by examining im/mobility as a continuum, and differentiating between voluntary and involuntary im/mobility, this study contributes to developing a capital-mobility framework that can be applied to other migrant and non-migrant groups. Third, this study expands the intersectionality framework by explaining how intersectionality does not operate uniquely in the direction of social exclusion; rather, one's social identities (such as gender, race, and citizenship) interact and may produce social advantages and disadvantages at the same time. Finally, this dissertation offers timely analysis about how global crises such as the COVID-19 pandemic could reinforce deeply-rooted racism while exposing the vulnerabilities of even skilled migrants from the Global North. It challenges migration scholarship to rethink the capabilities and constraints of skilled international migrants and their implications on globalizing economies in the age of uncertainties.

In addition to theoretical contributions, this dissertation offers key insights to policy makers. The research outcomes have policy implications for the U.S government to manage its diaspora overseas and re-integrate returnees into society and improve economic competitiveness of the U.S. Programs could be designed to target migrants and non-migrants at different stages of migration. For example, universities and professional organizations could organize more public workshops or seminars about the opportunities and challenges of working/living in a non-Western context. Such events should be made public and accessible for the broader communities in order to reach wider audience in the society. To increase the transnational connections for current skilled U.S. migrants abroad, the national government could circulate newsletters to keep migrants informed about the trends of professional development in their respective fields in the U.S. Such measures could help the skilled American diaspora maintain professional attachments to the homeland while benefiting from their overseas working experiences. Finally, for U.S. returnees who have completed their study or working experiences overseas, programs to help with their re-adaption to the U.S. society are highly recommended, including providing information for returnees to find jobs that appreciate their overseas experiences and launching workshops to help alleviate reverse culture shock.

Meanwhile, the dissertation's research findings have broader policy implications for governments such as in China and other developing countries that are trying to attract and retain global talent. First, I recommend further streamlining the visa application process and relaxing the requirements for permanent residency for skilled international migrants in China. To fully capitalize on the global talent and retain migrants' families, I recommend offering employment authorization for dependent spouses. Second, local governments could advocate for orientation programs for new arrivals, like free short courses on Chinese language, culture and traditions, the local rental market, and road safety in local cities. Such programs would better prepare recently arrived international migrants to adjust to post-migration realities. Further, educational programs in local K-12 schools and colleges could increase teaching about race, ethnicity and different cultures, in order for the next generations of Chinese to be more prepared to work together with global talent from different backgrounds and to increase the overall social tolerance of the society.

Despite the significance and broader impacts of this dissertation research, it still has some limitations such as its focus on one geographical region, a limited number of interviewees from non-representative samples, and the absence of a full-fledged research design on the impacts of COVID-19. First, the empirical data of this dissertation was drawn from less than sixty participants, among whom a majority are white. Therefore, it was not possible to fully examine divergent mobility experiences based on race and ethnicity. While sexuality could be an important dimension for intersectional analysis, it is not included in this dissertation due to an insufficient number of research participants with different sexualities. Second, although COVID-19 has been integrated into the empirical analysis, it occurred after the initial design of the dissertation, and therefore, it was not possible to study it through a more sophisticated research design and approach.

Finally, this dissertation has laid the groundwork for several lines of inquiry in the future. First, more studies are needed to explore how different localities within China and in other developing countries play a role in affecting the spatial and social mobility of skilled international migrants. Sets of comparative studies could be conducted for this purpose. For example, how does the PRD region compare to the Yangtze River Delta region of China in attracting and regulating global talent? How do the two regions’ different economic structures and histories of foreign contact shape the migrants’ intentionality to come and stay, as well as their capabilities to do so in terms of capital? Another comparative study could be conducted between the PRD region of China, which is transforming from manufacturing to innovative sectors, and the Southern Key Economic Zone of Vietnam, which is Vietnam’s industrial hub that is receiving an increasing amount of foreign investment (Vietnam Briefing 2019). Such a comparative analysis will reveal how developing countries at different stages can best strategize to recruit skilled international migrants to meet their diversifying needs for economic development. Second, research on the return migration of skilled Americans would enrich our understanding on the dynamic nature of skilled migration and “brain circulation”. Since most extant research on skilled returnees focuses on those returning to their homelands in the Global South, we know little about the re-integration process of skilled returnees in home countries in the Global North after living abroad for some time. While overseas study and professional experiences often prepare skilled returnees for upward occupational and social mobility once returning to the homeland in the Global South (El-Mallakh and Wahba 2021), do they have similar stimulating effects for skilled returnees to developed countries? Third, future research could target a more diverse sample of US skilled migrants. More balanced numbers of participants across race, ethnicity and sexuality could help better reveal the analytic power of intersectional analysis. In addition, given the enormous consequences of the pandemic in altering our lives, future research could more accurately gauge the impact of COVID-19 on skilled migrants’ im/mobility. While COVID-19 is a one-time event, its consequences are long-lasting. How would a global crisis like the COVID-19 pandemic change the trajectories of globalization and economic development, and what are its implications on the shifting needs of skilled migrants? How can countries better prepare for public health emergencies like this in the future to regulate the everyday and international mobility of the skilled migrants while facilitating their occupational and social mobility? Answers to the above questions will contribute to further advancing the scholarship on migration, mobility and intersectionality.

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APPENDIX A

HUMAN SUBJECTS INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD REVIEW APPROVAL DOCUMENTS

ASU Knowledge Enterprise Development

EXEMPTION GRANTED

Wei Li
Social Transformation, School of (SST)
480/727-6556
Wei.Li@asu.edu

Dear Wei Li:

On 5/24/2017 the ASU IRB reviewed the following protocol:

Type of Review:	Initial Study
Title:	Global Talents in Developing Countries: A Case Study of China
Investigator:	Wei Li
IRB ID:	STUDY00006310
Funding:	None
Grant Title:	None
Grant ID:	None
Documents Reviewed:	• interview guideline, Category: Measures (Survey questions/Interview questions /interview guides/focus group questions); • recruitment script, Category: Recruitment Materials; • HPR-503a, Category: IRB Protocol; • consent form, Category: Consent Form;

The IRB determined that the protocol is considered exempt pursuant to Federal Regulations 45CFR46 (2) Tests, surveys, interviews, or observation on 5/24/2017.

In conducting this protocol you are required to follow the requirements listed in the INVESTIGATOR MANUAL (HRP-103).

Sincerely,

IRB Administrator
cc: Yining Tan
Yining Tan

APPENDIX B

INTERVIEW GUIDE

I. Opening:
My name is Yining Tan. I'm currently a Ph.D. candidate at Arizona State University in the U.S. My focus of research is on skilled foreign professionals moving from the US to China. I would like to ask you some questions about your migration background and your experiences working and living in China, and how covid-19 have an influence. The interview should take about one hour. Our conversations will be recorded with your permission. In analysis we will not disclose any of your personal information.

II. Body:
1. Migration background

Where did you grow up?
Have you lived in other countries before China?
WHEN did you come to China?
WHY did you decide to come to China?

- What were the factors in China that attracted you to move in?
- Were there any factors in the US that influenced your decision to leave?
- Did you know any friends or relatives who had previous working/living experience in China before you moved? If yes, did their experiences influence your decision to move here?
- Did you come on company assignment or did you come to China on your own?

WHERE:

- Where was the first stop in China?
- Where have you lived in China so far?
- Why PRD? Or Why Guangzhou

What is your current visa status in China? (follow up: type of work permit?)

2. Job related, skill sets, education background:

What is your highest degree and where did you get it? In what field?
What languages do you speak? How good is your Chinese proficiency?
What was your job when you were in your home country?
What is your job now?
Do you think you have more or less job opportunities after moving to China as compared to back in your home country? How?
Have you changed jobs in China?
How do you like your work experiences in China so far?
How would you describe your relationships with the coworkers

- Chinese locals
- Americans
- Other foreigners

3. Social relationships

Among all the people you socialize with, can you roughly break down the percentage of the locals, Americans, and people from other countries?
Did you consider your social class/status has changed as the result of your migration?
How would you evaluate your social class/status compared to other foreigners in China?
How would you evaluate your social class/status compared to other foreigners in China?
How would you identify yourself from using the following categories?
(skilled migrants; expats; privileged migrants, elite migrants, immigrants, transnational professionals)

4. everyday mobility-related:

What is your perception of neighborhood? Why did you draw the neighborhood boundary like this?

Tell me about the places or areas that you feel unsafe or unfriendly to foreigners?

What about the places/areas that you feel most safe or friendly to foreigners?

Do you have a car? If not do you think if it is easy to get around in the city?

5. Future plan

How long do you expect to live in China?

When you think about whether you would stay in China for longer term, what are the factors you would take into consideration?

Have you thought about applying for Chinese green card?

How would you assess the immigration policies in China? Do you think they make your life here easier?

We know the relationship between China and US is getting very intense lately. Does that have any impacts on your future migration plans?

6. COVID-19 related:

- Were you in China during the COVID-19?
- Did you experience quarantine since then?
- How did the COVID-19 change your everyday life?
    - Did you experience more or less career advancement opportunities as the result of COVID-19
    - How did it impact the way you go to work? Or were you working from home?
    - How did it change the way you get grocery and household essentials?

    Prompt:
        - Did you have to change the places and frequencies of going groceries?
        - I know some of my Chinese friends ordered groceries online. Did you encounter language barriers or any other issues of accessing the online services?
        - My mom said only one person from each household was allowed to go out for groceries every two days and she had limited options of places to go. What about you?
    - How did it change the way you socialize with your friends?

- Have you noticed any changes about the ways how foreigners are treated by local Chinese?
    - How is the change? Pre- or post- covid-19?
    - What do you think are the reasons?
- I saw some media coverage of discriminations towards foreigners in China after the global breakout of covid-19. Did you personally experience that?
    - If so, can you describe what happened, where and when? How did you feel?
    - If you haven’t experienced personally, have you witnessed or heard any incidents? How would you comment on these incidences?

- How does COVID-19 impact your travel plans to other countries?
- How does it have any influence on your future migration plans?

Demographic Info:

Education level:
Income:

Age:
Marital Status:
Gender:
Citizenship:
Race:

III. Closing

a. I really appreciate the time you spent with me for this interview. Is there anything else you think would be helpful for me to know and understand you better?
b. Do you know someone else that I should talk to?
c. Would it be alright to contact you if I have follow-up questions?

APPENDIX C

SKETCH MAPPING SURVEY QUESTIONS

1. Frequently-visited places:
Drag as many icons to the map as you would like, when applicable. Approximate location is fine. Once an icon is placed to the map, a pop-up window will display asking about follow-up questions.

- Home
    - This building/community's residents mainly consist of:
        - Expat/International migrants
        - Local Chinese
        - Mix of both
- Secondary Home
    - This building/community's residents mainly consist of:
        - Expat/International migrants
        - Local Chinese
        - Mix of both
- Workplace
    - Before COVID-19, I go here:
        - Daily
        - 2-3 times/week
        - Weekly
        - 2-3 times/month
        - Monthly
        - Less Than Monthly
    - During/After COVID-19, I go here:
        - Less Frequently
        - About The Same
        - More Frequently
    - No Longer Visiting Here
    - This place is mainly visited by:
        - Expat/International migrants
        - Local Chinese
        - Mix of both
- Work-related places (Where do you have meetings or work-related errands out of the office?)
    - Before COVID-19, I go here:
        - Daily
        - 2-3 times/week
        - Weekly
        - 2-3 times/month
        - Monthly
        - Less Than Monthly
    - During/After COVID-19, I go here:
        - Less Frequently
        - About The Same
        - More Frequently
    - No Longer Visiting Here
    - This place is mainly visited by:
        - Expat/International migrants
        - Local Chinese
        - Mix of both
- Learn (Where do you attend school/college, if applicable)
    - Before COVID-19, I go here:

        - Daily
        - 2-3 times/week
        - Weekly
        - 2-3 times/month
        - Monthly
        - Less Than Monthly
    - During/After COVID-19, I go here:
        - Less Frequently
        - About The Same
        - More Frequently
    - No Longer Visiting Here
    - This place is mainly visited by:
        - Expat/International migrants
        - Local Chinese
        - Mix of both
- Dining
    - Before COVID-19, I go here:
        - Daily
        - 2-3 times/week
        - Weekly
        - 2-3 times/month
        - Monthly
        - Less Than Monthly
    - During/After COVID-19, I go here:
        - Less Frequently
        - About The Same
        - More Frequently
    - No Longer Visiting Here
    - This place is mainly visited by:
        - Expat/International migrants
        - Local Chinese
        - Mix of both
- Nightlife
    - Before COVID-19, I go here:
        - Daily
        - 2-3 times/week
        - Weekly
        - 2-3 times/month
        - Monthly
        - Less Than Monthly
    - During/After COVID-19, I go here:
        - Less Frequently
        - About The Same
        - More Frequently
    - No Longer Visiting Here
    - This place is mainly visited by:
        - Expat/International migrants
        - Local Chinese
        - Mix of both
- Groceries
    - Before COVID-19, I go here:

        - Daily
        - 2-3 times/week
        - Weekly
        - 2-3 times/month
        - Monthly
        - Less Than Monthly
    - During/After COVID-19, I go here:
        - Less Frequently
        - About The Same
        - More Frequently
    - No Longer Visiting Here
    - This place is mainly visited by:
        - Expat/International migrants
        - Local Chinese
        - Mix of both
- Shopping
    - Before COVID-19, I go here:
        - Daily
        - 2-3 times/week
        - Weekly
        - 2-3 times/month
        - Monthly
        - Less Than Monthly
    - During/After COVID-19, I go here:
        - Less Frequently
        - About The Same
        - More Frequently
    - No Longer Visiting Here
    - This place is mainly visited by:
        - Expat/International migrants
        - Local Chinese
        - Mix of both
- Arts & Entertainment
    - Before COVID-19, I go here:
        - Daily
        - 2-3 times/week
        - Weekly
        - 2-3 times/month
        - Monthly
        - Less Than Monthly
    - During/After COVID-19, I go here:
        - Less Frequently
        - About The Same
        - More Frequently
    - No Longer Visiting Here
    - This place is mainly visited by:
        - Expat/International migrants
        - Local Chinese
        - Mix of both
- Sporting Events
    - Before COVID-19, I go here:

        - Daily
        - 2-3 times/week
        - Weekly
        - 2-3 times/month
        - Monthly
        - Less Than Monthly
    - During/After COVID-19, I go here:
        - Less Frequently
        - About The Same
        - More Frequently
    - No Longer Visiting Here
    - This place is mainly visited by:
        - Expat/International migrants
        - Local Chinese
        - Mix of both
- Fitness & Recreation
    - Before COVID-19, I go here:
        - Daily
        - 2-3 times/week
        - Weekly
        - 2-3 times/month
        - Monthly
        - Less Than Monthly
    - During/After COVID-19, I go here:
        - Less Frequently
        - About The Same
        - More Frequently
    - No Longer Visiting Here
    - This place is mainly visited by:
        - Expat/International migrants
        - Local Chinese
        - Mix of both
- Park & Outdoor Space
    - Before COVID-19, I go here:
        - Daily
        - 2-3 times/week
        - Weekly
        - 2-3 times/month
        - Monthly
        - Less Than Monthly
    - During/After COVID-19, I go here:
        - Less Frequently
        - About The Same
        - More Frequently
    - No Longer Visiting Here
    - This place is mainly visited by:
        - Expat/International migrants
        - Local Chinese
        - Mix of both

2. Draw the boundary of your perceived neighborhood on the map

3. Expat-friendly Places

- Drag an icon to locations that you think are friendly and safe to international expats.
    - Drag an icon to locations that you think are unfriendly or unsafe to international expats.