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Navigating Geoeducational Dilemmas:

Singapore as a Migration Hub for Students from China

Zachary M. Howlett

Abstract

In a post-pandemic world of escalating tensions between China and the West, increasing numbers of students from China are eschewing Western destinations for places in Asia, including Singapore. For these migrants, this Chinese-majority city-state has emerged as an important geoeducational hub between China and the West. A portmanteau of geopolitics and education, the term geoeducational refers to the reciprocal effects of both. Employing an anthropological approach, this article theorizes the geoeducational as a crucial subdomain of the geosocial—a concept proposed by geographers to analyze how social subjects and spaces are influenced by and impact geopolitics and geoeconomics. Using ethnographic interviews and observations, I argue that Singapore's emergent junctional position helps Chinese student migrants navigate their geoeducational dilemmas. These dilemmas are conditioned by rising US-China superpower competition amid economic stagnation in China and growing xenophobia in the West. Under these conditions, many students see Singapore as a safe liminal place from which they can pursue security, flexibility, freedom, cultural belonging, and family togetherness—by "springboarding" to the West, returning to China, or remaining in Singapore. This article contributes to the mobilities turn in education studies and enhances understanding of multiple migration—migration characterized by multiple changes in destination—by analyzing the interplay between domestic and transnational movements. The geoeducational lens it develops is useful for illuminating international student mobilities cross-culturally and comparatively as well as investigating their systematic interrelationships, including implications for demographic change, brain drain and gain, university financing and rankings, and hypercompetition in a time of eroding meritocracy.

Keywords: China, Singapore, education, geopolitics, international student migration, multiple migration, migration hubs

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Introduction

It was March 2023 at a Singaporean university. Over a cup of coffee in a campus Starbucks overlooking undergrads playing frisbee in the tropical heat, Chloe, a humanities master's student from China, explained what made Singapore attractive as a migration hub for Chinese students:

> Singapore is a junction (*jiaohuichu*) between Eastern and Western cultures. … When you absorb this kind of Eastern and Western culture at the same time, you can move ahead (*jin*) or go back (*tui*). If you go back to China, your credential is going to be recognized and accepted. If you want to move ahead and go to America or Australia, they'll recognize it, too. I think being here means having more opportunities. … [Still,] if you go to the West, you may face discrimination … [and] if you go back to China, you might become the target of fanatical nationalism (*kuangre de minzuzhuyi*). … Maybe Singapore is a springboard (*tiaoban*), but it's also the place that you can return to in the end. It's safe here, there's no culture shock, and Chinese people don't face racial discrimination.[1]

Chloe's description of Singapore as a junction between East and West, and as a potential home, describes the geopolitical—or what I term geoeducational—position of the Chinese-majority Southeast Asian city-state as both a hub and liminal place between the West and China. Geoeducational, a portmanteau of geopolitics and education, refers to the reciprocal effects of both, with geopolitics conceived broadly to include politics, geography, and economics. Using an anthropological approach, this article theorizes the geoeducational as a subdomain of what geographers Kathryn Mitchell and Kirsi Pauliina Kallio term the geosocial: a concept designating how social "subjects and spaces are constituted in and through the everyday geopolitical and geoeconomic and *vice versa*."[2] I argue for examining education's role in this geosocial dynamic, suggesting that Singapore's emergent junctional position helps Chinese student migrants navigate their geoeducational dilemmas. This navigation and its underlying logistics have significant geopolitical and geoeconomic implications. Since the early 2000s, China has become the leading source of international students.[3] Chinese student

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[1] Chloe, interview by author, Singapore, 8 March 2023.

[2] Katharyne Mitchell and Kirsi Pauliina Kallio, "Spaces of the Geosocial: Exploring Transnational Topologies," *Geopolitics* 22, no. 1 (2017): 6, https://doi.org/10.1080/14650045.2016.1226809.

[3] Jacopo Gutterer and Carla Skikne, "Diversify with Data: Insights for Higher Ed Institutes," *Studyportals*, January 2023, https://studyportals.com/report/benchmarking-geographic-diversification/.

mobilities profoundly affect university funding structures, mold talent cultivation strategies within China and abroad, and entail lasting social, economic, and demographic consequences for all stakeholders.

Students' dilemmas, and Singapore's rise as a cultural junction, are both influenced by and contribute to shifting geopolitical and geoeconomic conditions. At the heart of these shifts is US-China superpower rivalry amid China's economic stagnation and rising Western xenophobia. In China, the youth grapple with mass unemployment and involution, or hypercompetition for diminishing gains, prompting many to pursue education abroad.[4] But the West, including the United States, despite boasting most of the world's top universities, is not as attractive as it once was. Chinese migrants face discrimination, marginalization, and xenophobic violence in Western countries. They were widely scapegoated for the COVID-19 pandemic, sometimes with official endorsement.[5] Simultaneously, Cold War-style paranoia is growing on both sides of the Pacific. In the US, scholars of Chinese origin are targeted for accusations of spying.[6] In China, those with Western degrees may become politically tainted, barring them from pursuing coveted careers "in the system" (*tizhinei*): government jobs in the civil service or in state-owned companies. Under these conditions, rising numbers of student migrants are preferring Asian destinations over Western ones, shifting geoeducational power axes and reconfiguring talent development in Asia and the West. As geopolitical tensions rise, many Chinese students are increasingly seeing Singapore, with friendly ties to both the US and China, as safe neutral ground.

As Chloe's statement suggests, there are several types of Chinese student migrants who use Singapore as a hub: migrants who return to their China hometowns or larger cities, those who springboard abroad, and those who remain in Singapore. Certainly, the boundaries between these types are not always clear, with many migrants changing course or following opportunity, but as heuristic ideal types, they illuminate migrants' strategies for navigating geoeducational dilemmas and their impact on China and host countries.

This article contributes to the shift toward examining mobilities, or "mobilities turn," in education studies and adds to scholarship on "multiple

[4] Zachary M. Howlett, "Performative Secularism: School-Sponsored Prayer in China's National College Entrance Exam," *Critical Asian Studies* 54, no. 3 (2022), https://doi.org/10.1080/14672715.2022.2099439; Cindy Yu, "Chinese Graduates Are Asking Where All the Good Jobs Went," *Foreign Policy*, 17 May 2023, https://tinyurl.com/2rcmff8m.

[5] Sylvia Ang, *Contesting Chineseness: Nationality, Class, Gender and New Chinese Migrants* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2022); Feifei Gu et al., "A Regionalism Shift? Chinese Undergraduate Students' Choice of Study in Asia Under COVID-19," *Research in Comparative and International Education* 18, no. 2 (2023): 186–205, https://doi.org/10.1177/17454999221143976.

[6] Matt Schiavenza, "How the China Initiative Went Wrong," *Foreign Policy*, 13 February 2022, https://tinyurl.com/p7ws36ss.

migration": migration characterized by multiple changes of destination.[7] Whereas conventional approaches to multiple migration focus on transnational mobility, this article adds to studies investigating the interlinkages between domestic and transnational movements.[8] By developing a framework for focusing on the reciprocal effects of education and geopolitics, it joins efforts to take the school-geopolitics nexus seriously and think through the ethics and politics of international student mobility.[9] To be sure, many individual researchers, including those cited in this study, address topics that could be characterized as geoeducational; however, there remains a need for more systematic and focused exploration, as well as for countering the tendency to dismiss the geopolitical relevance of educational research.[10] This relevance includes exploring implications for demographic shifts, brain drain and gain, university financing and rankings, and state legitimacy in a time of eroding meritocracy. Applied cross-culturally, the geoeducational lens can enhance understanding not only of student mobilities comparatively but of their systematic global interrelations.

My analysis is based on ethnographic interviews of Chinese student migrants in Singapore. To assist with the interviews, I recruited student researchers who themselves are members of the research population. To date, we have completed 56 interviews, each lasting between one and two hours, with 15 interviews conducted in teams and the rest by individual members. We identified interview subjects by advertising on the Chinese social media platform Xiaohongshu and conducting snowball sampling, allowing each interviewee to recommend two further subjects. The interview subjects are representative of the diverse educational trajectories of Chinese

[7] Johanna L. Waters, "Education Unbound? Enlivening Debates with a Mobilities Perspective on Learning," *Progress in Human Geography* 41, no. 3 (2017): 279–298, https://doi.org/10.1177/0309132516637908; Rachel Brooks and Johanna L. Waters, *Student Mobilities, Migration and the Internationalization of Higher Education* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011); Susanne Yuk-ping Choi, "Global Multiple Migration: Class-Based Mobility Capital of Elite Chinese Gay Men," *Sociology* 56, no. 5 (2022): 946–966, https://doi.org/10.1177/00380385211073237; Anju M. Paul and Brenda S. A. Yeoh, "Studying Multinational Migrations, Speaking Back to Migration Theory," *Global Networks* 21, no. 1: 3–17, https://doi.org/10.1111/glob.12282; Elaine Lynn-Ee Ho, *Citizens in Motion: Emigration, Immigration, and Re-Migration across China's Borders* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2019).

[8] Cora Lingling Xu and Catherine Montgomery, "Educating China on the Move: A Typology of Contemporary Chinese Higher Education Mobilities," *Review of Education* 7 (2019): 598–627, https://doi.org/10.1002/rev3.3139; Russell King and Ronald Skeldon, "'Mind the Gap!' Integrating Approaches to Internal and International Migration," *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* 36, no. 10 (2010): 1619–1646, https://doi.org/10.1080/1369183X.2010.489380; Biao Xiang, "Multi-Scalar Ethnography: An Approach for Critical Engagement with Migration and Social Change," *Ethnography* 14, no. 3 (2013): 282–299, https://doi.org/10.1177/1466138113491669; Yi'En Cheng and Mark Holton, "Geographies of Citizenship in Higher Education: An Introduction," *Area* 51, no. 4 2019): 613–617, https://doi.org/10.1111/area.12527.

[9] Nicole Nguyen, "On Geopolitics and Education: Interventions, Possibilities, and Future Directions," *Geography Compass* 14, no. 9 (2020): 1–11, https://doi.org/10.1111/gec3.12500; Peidong Yang, "Toward a Framework for (Re)Thinking the Ethics and Politics of International Student Mobility," *Journal of Studies in International Education* 24, no. 5 (2020): 518–534, https://doi.org/10.1177/1028315319889891.

[10] Nguyen, "On Geopolitics and Education."

student migrants in Singapore: Some are returning from the West whereas others are outbound from China, and some arrived in the city-state as teenagers while others came for advanced degrees. To maintain confidentiality, I use pseudonyms. I also omit the names of universities and, when necessary, specific majors and courses of study. Interviews were recorded with permission, and interviewers kept meticulous notes. These materials were uploaded to Dedoose, a qualitative research software platform, where I coded and analyzed data, training assistants to help. All interviews were conducted in Mandarin and all translations are my own. To add ethnographic depth to the project, I incorporate insights from my participant-observer role as an instructor at a Singaporean university.

The Geoeducational as a Domain of the Geosocial

Mitchell and Kallio propose the idea of the geosocial to complement and enhance the study of geopolitics and geoeconomics.[11] As they note, the latter two concepts tend to devolve into a "dualistic ontology," an either/or framework.[12] For example, a popular narrative suggests that the world is shifting from an era of territorial and containment-based struggles (geopolitics) to one characterized by cross-border flows and integration (geoeconomics). In contrast to such binaries, Mitchell and Kallio regard the geopolitical and geoeconomic as "cogenerative" and posit the geosocial as a third pillar of this cogeneration: The geosocial adds "a necessary third leg to the stool, disrupting the linguistic bipolarity of geoeconomics and geopolitics."[13] The three terms are complementary attentions, with the geosocial illuminating the "production of social subjects in and amidst these transnational ties and tensions."[14]

The geosocial consists of lived worlds and spaces organized through ongoing social relations, discourses, and networks.[15] Whereas conventional theories analyze how geopolitics and geoeconomics shape social life from the top down, geosocial analysis draws attention to how causality runs both ways. In examining this reciprocal dynamic, the geosocial draws inspiration from feminist geopolitics, including: (1) an emphasis on multi-scalar and local-global flows transecting peripheral and central places; (2) a focus on embodied statecraft, including how biopolitics and geopolitics converge in the management of borders and territories; (3) an attention to emotion and identity; and (4) a focus on intimate politics on the ground.[16]

Building on these approaches, this article theorizes the geoeducational

[11] Mitchell and Kallio, "Spaces."
[12] Mitchell and Kallio, "Spaces," 5.
[13] Mitchell and Kallio, "Spaces," 5.
[14] Mitchell and Kallio, "Spaces," 5.
[15] Mitchell and Kallio, "Spaces," 5.
[16] Mitchell and Kallio, "Spaces," 5–14; Vanessa A. Massaro and Jill Williams, "Feminist Geopolitics," *Geography Compass* 7, no. 8 (2013): 567–577, https://doi.org/10.1111/gec3.12054.

as a crucial subdomain of the geosocial. Naming both an analytical attention and an empirical object, the geoeducational refers to the interplay of education, geopolitics, and geoeconomics. Moving beyond the classroom and school walls, a geoeducational attention builds on the mobilities turn in education studies to illuminate how educational spaces are suffused with diverse multi-scalar flows of discourses, people, and technologies.[17] Embodying such multi-scalar flows, Chloe first resolved to go abroad after watching a Taylor Swift concert on TV at age twelve. Bound for the West to avoid what she terms fanatical nationalism, she nevertheless retains close connections to her village and the city where she attended high school. Maintaining her Asian ties, she experiences Singapore as a cultural junction to which she can always return. Attending to the multiple scales that Chloe's educational path exemplifies (e.g., village, city, national, regional, and global), this article moves beyond taking the nation-state as the fundamental unit of analysis, or methodological nationalism, by examining how migrants' journeys combine domestic and transnational mobilities as they navigate the global migratory gyre.[18] Broadening from a conventional focus on "origins" and "destinations," this perspective attends to complex migrations like Chloe's, which often encompass multidirectional mobilities with multiple start and endpoints, including return migration and partial departures and returns.[19] In its broadest conception, the geoeducational would incorporate Cora Xu and Catherine Montgomery's full typology of higher education mobilities including those of students, scholars, and institutions.[20] Zooming in on student mobilities, this paper heeds Xu and Montgomery's call to take a longitudinal approach through retroactive interviews that reveal long-term and intergenerational mobility patterns, illuminating the experiences of interviewees whose parents' pioneering migrations set the stage for their children's trajectories.[21]

In addition to eschewing methodological nationalism, my conception of the geoeducational guards against methodological behaviouralism, the tendency to examine individual agency as a discrete object rather than embedded within assemblages of infrastructural constraints and affordances.[22] Such assemblages incorporate travel documents, immigration policies, cultural and linguistic environments, and communication and transportation

[17] Waters, "Education Unbound?"; Brooks and Waters, *Student Mobilities*.

[18] King and Skeldon, "Mind the Gap"; Xiang, "Multi-scalar Ethnography"; Xu and Montgomery, "Educating China."

[19] Choi, "Global Multiple Migration"; Paul and Yeoh, "Studying Multinational Migrations"; Anju M. Paul, "A Home Away from Home: The Halfway-Return of Western-Trained Asian Scientists," *Global Perspectives* 4, no. 1 (2023), https://doi.org/10.1525/gp.2023.70266.

[20] Xu and Montgomery, "Educating China."

[21] Xu and Montgomery, "Educating China," 618.

[22] Biao Xiang, "Beyond Methodological Nationalism and Epistemological Behaviouralism: Drawing Illustrations from Migrations within and from China," *Population, Space and Place* 22, no. 7 (2016): 669–680, https://doi.org/10.1002/psp.1929; Leya Mathew, "Merit and Permission: Gender, Education, and Migration in Western India," *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, advance online publication, https://doi.org/10.1080/1369183X.2024.2337036.

technologies, all of which have their own geopolitical and geoeconomic contexts and histories. In my research, global university rankings have emerged as a salient node in these infrastructural assemblages: Rankings form a type of institutional and national capital as well as constituting a hegemonic global higher-education geography that shapes and is shaped by student migration flows.[23] For migrants, attending high-ranking universities relies on and constitutes mobility capital—a distinct combination of economic, cultural, and social capital that marks migrants as cosmopolitan and enables their further mobility.[24] Echoing many interviewees, Chloe remarked that "everyone knows that Singapore's public universities are well ranked, not like those fake [*shui*] degrees in many other countries."[25]

Despite a growing body of work on the education-geopolitics nexus, more research is needed on how geopolitics affects people's everyday lives and how their everyday choices remake geopolitics.[26] My hope is that the geoeducational framework will encourage further research while countering the tendency to overlook the geopolitical implications of education and educational migration, including ramifications for higher-education financing, brain circulation, nation building, citizenship, and state legitimacy.

Geoeducational Dilemmas: Stuck between Involution and Marginalization

Geopolitics shape Chinese student migration from the ground up, starting with domestic migration. By pursuing development and urbanization, the Communist party-state reinforces its legitimacy, which hinges on providing meritocratic opportunities and erasing colonial-era humiliations by "catching up with the West."[27] The party-state pursues a spatial fix for its development goals by urbanizing people and places, but people also pursue a spatial fix for their economic and existential immobility by seeking developed-world citizenship.[28] This journey involves navigating educational rites of passage, including the national college entrance exam, or *gaokao,* and the graduate school entrance exam, or *kaoyan*, to move up the spatial hierarchy from

[23] Heike Jöns and Michael Hoyler, "Global Geographies of Higher Education: The Perspective of World University Rankings," *Geoforum* 46 (2013): 45–59, https://doi.org/10.1016/j.geoforum.2012.12.014.

[24] Choi, "Global Multiple Migration."

[25] Chloe, interview by author, Singapore, 8 March 2023.

[26] Nguyen, "On Geopolitics and Education," 9.

[27] Zachary M. Howlett, *Meritocracy and Its Discontents: Anxiety and the National College Entrance Exam in China* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2021).

[28] Harry Pettit, *The Labor of Hope: Meritocracy and Precarity in Egypt* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2024): 147–148; Eli Friedman, *The Urbanization of People: The Politics of Development, Labor Markets, and Schooling in the Chinese City* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2022); Benjamin Mulvey, *Mapping International Student Mobility between Africa and China* (Singapore: Springer, 2024): chapter 2; Vanessa L. Fong, *Paradise Redefined: Transnational Chinese Students and the Quest for Flexible Citizenship in the Developed World* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2011); Havva Ezgi Doğru, "University-Industrial Complex as a Spatial Fix for Local Development: Massification of Higher Education in Turkey," *Geoforum* 149 (2024): online first.

peripheral places to developed urban centres, where aspirants hope to attain white-collar employment and urban household residency and the resulting access to education, healthcare, welfare, employment, and retirement benefits.[29]

But rather than pursuing a simple point-to-point migration, many families acquire multiple residencies across the central-place hierarchy, maintaining connections to their places of origin. Chloe and her parents had acquired urban hukou in Fuzhou, the capital of Fujian, but her grandparents maintained their rural hukou, which came with land rights in their native village. This pursuit of multi-scalar flexible citizenship enables migrants to accrue the benefits of both urban and rural residency.

Overseas migration extends these spatial fixes to transnational spaces while also feeding back into domestic migration and development through remigration.[30] In the pursuit of flexible developed-world citizenship, families like Chloe's often follow an intergenerational pattern of rural-urban-transnational migration, acquiring Chinese hukous and foreign residencies. For those who stay in Singapore, the city-state can be a site of partial departure or partial return, enabling migrants to maintain close cultural and spatial ties to China. Host countries like Singapore or the United States pursue myriad goals by "spatially fixing" student migrants, including talent development, enhanced university rankings, and nation building.[31]

Since the beginning of China's reform and opening era in 1979, the transnational migration of Chinese students has shifted from a small-scale, mainly state-sponsored phenomenon to a mass one by the 2000s, growing from 39,000 in 2000 to 284,000 in 2010 and one million by 2021.[32] Singapore and other Asian countries experienced inflows since the 2000s but have multiplied in popularity in the 2020s.[33] Domestically, the rise in outward student migration corresponded with a massive expansion of higher education since the 2000s, which has increased educational opportunities but also resulted in hypercompetition and increasing stratification.[34]

Hypercompetition has led to general complaints of an educational arms race spiralling out of control accompanied by a sense of "suspension," an endless, restless striving for mobility.[35] The so-called nine-nine-six work culture (nine a.m. to nine p.m., six days a week), which begins when students study

[29] Howlett, *Meritocracy and Its Discontents*.

[30] Ho, *Citizens in Motion*; Aihwa Ong, *Flexible Citizenship: The Cultural Logics of Transnationality* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1999).

[31] Doğru, "Spatial Fix"; Ho, *Citizens in Motion*; Ang, *Contesting Chineseness*.

[32] Biao Xiang, "Educational Mobility and 'Human Nature': Changes in Student Migration from China since 2000," *MoLab Inventory of Mobilities and Socioeconomic Changes* (Halle/Saale: Max Planck Institute for Social Anthropology, 2022), https://doi.org/10.48509/MOLAB.1101.

[33] Ding Rui, "Changing Course: Why More Chinese Students Are Eyeing Southeast Asia," *Sixth Tone*, 9 January 2024, https://www.sixthtone.com/news/1014434; Gu, "A Regionalism Shift?"

[34] Jean Wei-Jun Yeung, "Higher Education Expansion and Social Stratification in China," *Chinese Sociological Review* 45, no. 4 (2013): 54–80, http://dx.doi.org/10.2753/CSA2162-0555450403.

[35] Biao Xiang, "Suspension: Seeking Agency for Change in the Hypermobile World," *Pacific Affairs* 94, no. 2 (2021): 233–250, https://doi.org/10.5509/2021942233.

for the gaokao, has become a widely reviled norm within China's top companies. University graduates, inundating the employment market, struggle to find good jobs, and earn less on average than migrant workers.[36] Degree inflation has ensued. Whereas any university degree formerly guaranteed lifetime employment, by the 2010s only graduates with sought-after majors from top universities were assured stable middle-class employment.[37] Increasingly, a master's degree is required for success. Unless they attend elite institutions, foreign-degree holders find they no longer have an advantage, sometimes referring to their own degrees as "fake." Under a worsening job market, graduates are flocking toward stable employment "in the system," the so-called "iron rice bowls" (*tiefanwan*) of civil service and state-owned companies. But demand outstrips supply, and, unable to find better jobs, some master's degree holders find themselves working on factory assembly lines.[38]

The term involution, or *neijuan*, has gone viral to describe increasing competition for diminishing gains. Involution and hypercompetition have led to backlash movements, including "lying flat" (*tangping*), akin to quiet quitting, and "letting it rot" (*bailan*), an attitude of renouncing the rat race altogether.[39] As Joel, a computer science master's student from Gansu Province, said, "Some of us studying abroad are still trying to lie flat. It's a little like trying to be Zen [*foxi*]. But the ones who really let it rot never even try to go to graduate school."

Involution is not the only factor driving young people away from China. Many also feel disillusioned by tightening political controls, including crackdowns on feminism and queer spaces.[40] Whereas most students used to return, the trend may be shifting.[41] Yet Western countries are not the destinations they used to be. COVID blame has exacerbated anti-Chinese racism in many Western countries.[42] People of Chinese descent fear assault and other hate crimes, while tightening visa policies and border controls have made it more difficult to travel.

A further complication to migrant ambitions is the rise of Cold War-style suspicions on both sides of the Pacific. Chinese scientists in such places as the US and Australia are targeted for allegations of espionage, while in the US graduates from universities with alleged ties to the People's Liberation Army have been blacklisted from studying.[43] In China, too, paranoia is rising.

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[36] Yanjie Huang, "China's Educated Underemployment," *East Asian Policy* 5, no. 2 (2013): 72–82, https://doi.org/10.1142/S1793930513000172.

[37] Howlett, *Meritocracy and Its Discontents*.

[38] Yu, "Chinese Graduates."

[39] Howlett, "Performative Secularism."

[40] Leta Hong Finger, *Betraying Big Brother: The Feminist Awakening in China* (London: Verso, 2018).

[41] Gu, "A Regionalism Shift?"; Rui, "Changing Course."

[42] Ang, *Contesting Chineseness*; Gu, "A Regionalism Shift?"

[43] Schiavenza, "How the China Initiative."

Students say that studying in the West, especially the US, may disqualify them from pursuing some government careers, especially those relating to national security.

These geoeducational constraints present Chinese student migrants with difficult dilemmas: If they do not study abroad, they face domestic hypercompetition and an increasingly repressive political environment. But if they do study abroad, they may grapple with racism and marginalization, struggle to secure a long-term work visa, or find themselves politically tainted upon returning to China. Under these circumstances, Asian destinations are rising in popularity, with Singapore emerging as an important hub.

Navigating Geoeducational Dilemmas: The Singapore Junction

Singapore's postcolonial statecraft has forged it into a cultural junction between China and the West, providing migrants with a unique assemblage of infrastructural affordances for suspending, avoiding, or resolving their geoeducational dilemmas.

Positioned between the South China Sea and the Bay of Bengal, the region now home to Singapore was known in early times for its strategic importance on maritime trade routes connecting East and West. A nineteenth-century British colony, the port city of Singapore experienced an influx of Chinese labour before World War II which established a three-quarters Chinese ethnic majority.[44] Independence in 1959 set the stage for "soft authoritarianism" and, in the decades to come, a burgeoning economy that morphed from industrialization in the 1960s to a more recent knowledge-based system.[45] Fearing Western influence, Singapore began boosting Confucian morals and initiated the Speak Mandarin Campaign in 1979.[46] Concurrently, state policies promulgated English, the main instruction medium in Singaporean schools. Balancing these linguistic and cultural influences in the face of China's re-emergence onto the world stage, also in 1979, Singapore positioned itself geoeducationally between East and West.[47]

To square the circle between encouraging immigration and maintaining Asian values, policy makers strove to maintain the racial composition of the country at independence, forming a system of bureaucratic racialization

[44] Peidong Yang, "Desiring 'Foreign Talent': Lack and Lacan in Anti-Immigrant Sentiments in Singapore," *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* 44, no. 6 (2018): 1015–1031, https://doi.org/10.1080/1369183X.2017.1384157.

[45] Denny Roy, "Singapore, China, and the 'Soft Authoritarian' Challenge," *Asian Survey* 34, no. 3 (1994): 231–242, https://doi.org/10.2307/2644982; Garry Rodan, *The Political Economy of Singapore's Industrialization: National State and International Capital* (Basingstoke, UK: Macmillan, 1989).

[46] Yang, "Desiring 'Foreign Talent,'" 1020; Lily Kong, "Cultural Policy in Singapore: Negotiating Economic and Socio-Cultural Agendas," *Geoforum* 31, no. 4 (2000): 409–424, https://doi.org/10.1016/S0016-7185(00)00006-3.

[47] The newly independent Singapore first instituted a process of "de-Chineseness," marginalizing the Chinese-educated in favour of English-educated elites, before re-Sinicizing after 1979. See Ang, *Contesting Chineseness,* 43–50.

favouring ethnic Chinese migrants with preferential treatment in permanent residency applications.[48] Many such migrants came from Southeast Asia, but as Chinese citizens became more mobile in the 1990s, increasing numbers were welcomed from mainland China. Through this convergence of biopolitics and geopolitics, Singapore became a hospitable environment for Chinese migrants. These so-called new migrants (*xinyimin*) have in turn profoundly impacted the city, often to the chagrin of Singapore-born Chinese.[49]

To be sure, mainland-born migrants face co-ethnic discrimination from Singapore-born Chinese, including bullying in school or difficulty renting an apartment. But my interviewees did not report these experiences as severe, noting that such discrimination tends to be more pronounced against non-elite, working-class migrants.[50] The temporary nature of many migrants' stays in Singapore may lessen the impact of discrimination, with only those who stayed long term citing it as a significant concern. But new migrants may also downplay discrimination experiences to rationalize their migration choices.

Chinese student migrants follow a variety of routes to the city-state. Some are recruited by the Singaporean government through the so-called SM1 and SM2 programs, which identify talented Chinese students for school and university scholarships.[51] Others self-fund study in Singaporean secondary schools or, joining parents who migrated to the city-state, become 1.5-generation immigrants. Still others complete secondary school in China before studying in Singaporean universities or polytechnic institutes, or they complete university in China before seeking a master's degree in Singapore. Many come to Singapore for their doctorates, with some arriving directly from China and others first completing master's degrees in Western countries. Further, migrants undertaking partial returns from the West include those who attend Western secondary schools or universities before seeking advanced degrees in the city-state.

Across this diverse group of student migrants, the reasons for seeing Singapore as an attractive destination are remarkably similar. As Kitty, a master's student in an interdisciplinary management field, said, "The universities are good here, and comparatively cheap."[52] Indeed, Singapore's universities are relatively affordable and well ranked globally. In 2023 the National University of Singapore (NUS) and Nanyang Technological University (NTU), Singapore's premier public research institutions, rose to the eighth and twenty-sixth places worldwide, respectively, in the Quacquarelli

[48] Matthew Aviso, "Bureaucratic Racialization: Documents, Translation, and the Filipino Chinese Migrant in Multiracial Singapore" (senior honour's thesis, Yale-NUS College, 2023); Brenda S. A. Yeoh and Weiqiang Lin, "Chinese Migration to Singapore: Discourses and Discontents in a Globalizing Nation-State," *Asian and Pacific Migration Journal* 22, no. 1 (2013): 31–54, https://doi.org/10.1177/011719681302200103; Ang, *Contesting Chineseness*, 44.

[49] Ang, *Contesting Chineseness*; Ho, *Citizens in Motion*.

[50] See also Ang, *Contesting Chineseness*, chapter 2.

[51] Yang, "Desiring 'Foreign Talent.'"

[52] Kitty, interview by research team, Singapore, 6 March 2023.

Symonds rankings, which are closely watched in China.[53] Other private or autonomous universities like Singapore Management University and the Singapore University of Technology and Design have strong reputations in their respective categories, as do its polytechnic academies. Meanwhile, the tuition cost for ordinary courses of study at NUS or NTU is around US$29,000, whereas the cost at, for example, UC Berkeley, including non-resident supplemental tuition, rises to $52,300 per year, and the cost at the University of Oxford is above $42,000.

Another attraction of Singapore for Chinese student migrants is its cultural and geographic proximity to China. Many of those interviewed mentioned that Singapore almost felt like China, categorizing it more as an extension of the domestic realm, or *guonei*—literally, "inside the country"—than part of the foreign world, or *guowai,* "outside the country." In most places, migrants could get by speaking Mandarin, which minimized culture shock. For instance, they could converse in Mandarin with staff at university health centres, order food from the cafeteria, and even take some Mandarin-medium courses in majors like Chinese studies. Meanwhile, the visuals, noises, and scents of the city's vibrant wet markets and renowned hawker centres, or food courts, reminded many students of southern China, the main ethnic origin of Chinese Singaporeans. As Kitty, who hailed from China's northeast but had gone to university in southeastern Fujian Province, said, "Coming to Singapore feels more like going to the south than going abroad."[54] Singapore is even in the same time zone as China. There are direct flights from many Chinese cities, and Chinese visitors can travel to Singapore visa free, enabling families to maintain close ties.

Finally, many Chinese student migrants are attracted to its physical and political safety. Although those who stayed longer would sometimes note prejudice against mainland Chinese, interviewees observed the lack of racism against Chinese migrants. The city's almost non-existent crime rate made migrants feel physically safe, and many reported that this gave them a sense of freedom they could not experience in the West. As Huimei, an undergraduate anthropology major who had transferred to New York City, said, "I miss Singapore. I know America is supposed to be all about freedom, but we have to talk about the definition. If it's the freedom to go on the subway in the evening, I don't feel that in New York."[55] In addition to physical safety, those who intended to pursue a career "in the system" mentioned political safety, considering their Singapore sojourn unlikely to taint them politically.

All these factors underscore the dynamic interplay between geopolitical contexts and the lived worlds of students, shaping Singapore into a cultural

[53] QS World University Rankings 2024, accessed 9 August 2023, https://www.topuniversities.com/university-rankings.

[54] Kitty, interview, 6 March 2023.

[55] Huimei, interview, 17 May 2023.

junction and providing migrants with affordances for navigating their geoeducational dilemmas. Both for migrants planning to move to the West and for those intending to return to China, studying in the city-state facilitated their subsequent journeys by endowing them with valuable mobility capital. For those planning to go to Western countries, Singapore's high-ranking universities formed a springboard, giving them a globally recognized credential while cushioning their transition to a fully English-language environment. For those intending to return to China from Western countries, Singapore offered the opportunity to get back in touch with their Chinese identity. And for those going back to China, the city-state allowed them to avoid domestic involution safely and affordably in a culturally conducive environment.

Passing through the Junction: Homebodies, Phoenixes, and Springboarders

While geoeducational choices propel many Chinese students abroad, further decisions await them upon completion of their educational goals. They may return to China or continue on their personal diaspora.

Return Migrants: Homebodies and Phoenixes

Of those who return, those I term homebodies return to their home cities, which tend to be large, developed cities, whereas phoenixes hail from lower-tier cities and return to China, diploma in hand, to metropolises. The term phoenix derives from the Chinese expression "phoenix man/woman" (*fenghuang nan/nü*), which refers to people of rural background who rise from their humble origins to obtain urban citizenship. The stereotypical phoenix is someone who overcomes social disadvantage, yet remains out of place in the city, lacking urban connections. I use the term somewhat differently. None of the phoenixes I identified came directly from farming origins, though their parents sometimes did. Still, returning to their hometown was not an option. As Joel, the computer science student, explained of his native Lanzhou, a relatively underdeveloped provincial capital, "for Chinese university students, going back to your own town is shameful, a sign of failure."[56] For such students, studying in Singapore provides a domestic springboard, helping them consolidate their move up the hierarchy of central places in China.

An example of this phenomenon is Wenyue, a Chinese studies undergrad from a small town of about 30,000 in Inner Mongolia, where her father ran a bus company. Wenyue did well on the high school entrance exam but struggled her first semester, balking at the hypercompetitive environment of intensive gaokao preparation. Concerned for her health, her parents sent her to school in Australia and, leaving the daily management of the bus

[56] Joel, interview by research assistant, Singapore, 22 March 2023.

company in the hands of a trusted lieutenant, they accompanied her. Wenyue excelled academically but felt marginalized in her Australian high school, where Asian students were ostracized by white students. To reconnect with her Chinese identity, she decided to attend university in Hong Kong or Singapore. She settled on Singapore because she felt the degree would have more cachet in China. After graduating, Wenyue intends to look for a job in Beijing, where she has completed internships and where her parents bought an apartment for their use during retirement. As she said, "There are many opportunities in Beijing, and my parents and I can be together."[57] At the same time, the family plans to maintain ties to Inner Mongolia, where they have relatives and friends.

In contrast to phoenixes, homebodies perceive their hometown as a satisfactory destination. Often, their parents had already migrated from peripheral places to a metropolitan centre. An example of this pattern is Qiuhui, who moved at age eight from rural Jiangxi Province to Hangzhou, a city of 11 million and the capital of wealthy coastal Zhejiang Province. Qiuhui's parents ran a medical supply business in Hangzhou while Qiuhui attended private gaokao-preparatory boarding schools. She did well on the gaokao, gaining admission to Zhejiang University, where she majored in editing and publishing; however, her marks were not good enough to qualify for direct admission to the master's program. To avoid the hypercompetitive graduate school entrance exam, she pursued her master's in Singapore, ruling out options in Japan due to her lack of Japanese language skills, and Hong Kong, which she saw as "really part of China." Upon graduation, she intended to pursue a PhD in the West, but her time in Singapore made her realize she missed her family, from whom she was often separated as a child. She decided to return to China to become a teacher or get a civil service job, which will give her family stability and status. Hangzhou, a metropolitan centre, has everything she wants and is close to Jiangxi, where her family maintains close ties. Although she worries about the political environment in China, she says, "Whatever happens in China, even if it closes completely to the outside world, I won't regret going back. At least I can be with my family and go through it together with them."[58]

Among homebodies and phoenixes, Qiuhui was relatively unusual for worrying about political developments in China. For the most part, if return migrants mentioned politics it was because they were anxious that overseas study could negatively impact their resumes. To cite one example, Jade, a humanities master's student from Zhejiang Province, hoped to follow her mother's footsteps by joining the civil service. She failed the graduate school entrance exam, after which her mother encouraged her to pursue Singapore as a politically safe study-abroad option. As she put it, "An overseas study

[57] Wenyue, interview by author, Singapore, 28 January 2023.
[58] Qiuhui, interview by author, Singapore, 8 March 2023.

background can make it harder to get some jobs in the system because of sensitivities to spies or leaking national secrets, but Singapore should be okay."[59]

For both homebodies and phoenixes returning from overseas, coming to Singapore could be a way of reconnecting with their Chinese identity. Like Wenyue, many migrants who had studied in the West felt marginalized, with little sense of belonging. Sometimes, they felt that integrating would require them to compromise their Chinese identity. As Wenyue said of her experience in Australia, "Some Chinese kids would make friends with the white kids by acting like them—putting their feet on the desk and that kind of thing—but I could never do that."[60] Other migrants originally wanted to study in the West but were put off by rising xenophobia. Yige, a chemistry PhD student, said, "The best PhD programs are in the US. I did an exchange there as an undergrad and have good connections through my undergrad thesis advisor. But I don't want to go anymore. My parents say it's not safe because of the racism and violence targeting Chinese people."[61] For students like Wenyue, Singapore could serve as a cultural steppingstone back to China. For those like Yige, it was an acceptable compromise, combining academic excellence with safety.

Others would have gone to study in the West but felt excluded without setting foot there. A case in point is Joel, the computer science student from Lanzhou. After performing well on the gaokao, Joel gained admission to Beijing University of Posts and Technology (BUPT). His dream was to go to a US graduate school, but in 2020 BUPT was listed on US Proclamation 10043, which denies visas to students from universities with purported ties to military or government. "Competition for admission to graduate programs in China is too involuted," Joel said, "so NUS was a logical fallback. It's a high-quality foreign degree at an affordable price."[62] Upon graduation, Joel plans to return to China, where he is confident his qualifications will enable him to obtain a Beijing or Shanghai household registration.

Onward Migrants: Springboarders

In contrast to the returners, springboarders see Singapore as a steppingstone for getting out of China completely. Like other migrants, springboarders are worried about involution in China. But while return migrants intend to work in China, migrants who are determined to leave (including remainers, discussed below) see China's nine-nine-six work culture as a reason to seek opportunities elsewhere.

One example is Yiyi, a Chinese studies master's student who was born in Nanjing. During her secondary school years, she moved to New Zealand with her parents, who were engineers. She started a course in statistics at a New

[59] Jade, interview by research assistant, 31 March 2023.
[60] Wenyue, interview, 28 January 2023.
[61] Yige, interview by research team, Singapore, 11 May 2023.
[62] Joel, interview, 22 March 2023.

Zealand university but felt no sense of belonging and did not identify with her compatriots there, who she saw as bad students. "They could not even go into a second-tier university in China," she said.[63] She returned to China, took the gaokao, and studied Chinese literature to reconnect with her Chinese identity, gaining admission to prestigious Sichuan University. Afterward, she worked in an investment bank in Beijing; however, she hated the work pressure. "I felt like a machine," she said, "and I was so tired all the time. … Only the people with connections make it in that career."[64] She tried pursuing educational opportunities in the West, which she imagined as less alienating and more meaningful, but after failing to secure admission to Western PhD programs, she opted for a master's in Singapore as a steppingstone. Summarizing her experience, she said, "Before working in China, I didn't understand why so many young Chinese people decided to run to unfamiliar countries and start their life again. But now I know the reason is work pressure."[65]

Other springboarders were worried not just about work pressure but tightening political control in China. Those entering academia often cited academic freedom as a reason to leave. Many were also eager to see the world and broaden their horizons. An example is Chloe, whose description of Singapore as a "junction" opens this article. Chloe hails from a small town in rural Fujian Province, where her father worked as a middleman between local businesses and government, and her grandparents were farmers. Chloe went to high school in Fuzhou and university at Fujian Normal University, where she studied early childhood education and Chinese literature. She dreamed of pursuing a Western PhD, which she saw as a pathway to personal and intellectual freedom. When I asked if she worried about the political environment in China, she turned the recorder off, saying, "My university classmates and I talk about this a lot. The fanatical nationalism in China and tightening political controls are just going to scare off foreign companies and make the economy and involution worse. … Many of us want to vote with our feet."[66]

In sum, both returners and springboarders study in Singapore to navigate geoeducational conditions of rising involution, Western xenophobia, and Cold War-style paranoia. In so doing, they engage in a complex process of transnational identity formation that is both intimate and geostrategic, balancing the constraints and affordances presented by superpower competition. In addition to seeking spatial fixes through migration for flexibility and security, they have non-material goals, including freedom, cultural belonging, and family reunion. For many, Western destinations are impossible or politically compromising, increasing Singapore's appeal as a

[63] Yiyi, interview by research assistant, Singapore, 24 March 2023.
[64] Yiyi, interview, 24 March 2023.
[65] Yiyi, interview, 24 March 2023.
[66] Chloe, interview, 8 March 2023. Chloe granted permission for her unrecorded statements to be used.

safe neutral ground. For some, their Singaporean credential paves the way to metropolitan household registration in China. For others, it is a springboard from domestic repression and political control. And still others see Singapore as a cultural steppingstone back to China. Across these diverse multi-scalar trajectories, the city-state's status as a cultural junction or neutral third place helps migrants navigate their geoeducational dilemmas.

Dwelling in the Junction: Remainers

Whereas returners and onward migrants do not regard long-term residency in Singapore as an option, others plan to stay. Remainers see Singapore as offering a liminal space between China and the West, with the advantages of both.

For some, coming to Singapore is a partial return. An example is Rose, a first-year social sciences PhD student from China. Originally from a peripheral city in Sichuan Province, Rose completed her undergraduate and two master's degrees in the US before working in a public relations firm there. But she never felt she belonged in the US, nor did she make American friends. Fearing the rise of anti-Chinese xenophobia during the pandemic, she decided to pursue a PhD in Asia, gaining admission to programs in Hong Kong and Singapore.

Singapore was the perfect fit. The city-state's liminal status, "close but not too close" to China, helped her navigate her relationship with her divorced parents, a relationship complicated by her sexuality.[67] As a queer woman who had not come out to her father, she enjoyed the personal freedom that living overseas afforded; concurrently, she desired to be close to her mother, who was supportive of Rose's identity, and to maintain relationships with her extended family. As she put it, "It's good to keep some distance. My father doesn't know I'm gay. He has a son with his second wife, and there's no place for me at home. … But my mother and I talk a lot, and sometime in the future, I could see bringing her here."[68] In addition to being conveniently located, Singapore was clean, safe, and most importantly felt like home, offering familiar sights, sounds, and flavours. Rose did not worry about racial discrimination or physical safety, and she had just met a new romantic partner. While Singapore did not offer the right to same-sex marriage, she still enjoyed personal freedom "much more than in China." She had no desire to be "out and proud like gay people in the West," preferring instead what she called a "low-key" life.[69] Meanwhile, Rose's cousin, who taught in a Chinese university, urged her not to return to China because of the tightening ideological control. As Rose said, "I'll look for a job teaching in Singapore,

[67] Rose, interview by research team, Singapore, 10 March 2023.
[68] Rose, interview, 10 March 2023.
[69] Rose, interview, 10 March 2023.

but I'm open to a job in industry."[70] She hoped to apply for permanent residency (PR) and settle down.

Bosheng is another partial returner who hoped to remain in Singapore. A social sciences PhD student native to Shanghai, Bosheng had first been exposed to the West during a university exchange program in New York, after which he earned a master's degree at an American university. He decided to pursue a doctorate and got into a Singaporean university as well as some British programs on his second try. He was more attracted to Singapore partly because of his good impression of the city, where his father had been posted briefly in the 1990s as a journalist. Bosheng's father, now a lawyer, urged Bosheng not to return to China, fearing the country's increasing political repressiveness. Bosheng thought his father's worries were overblown but nevertheless preferred to settle in Singapore. He never felt at home in the US, where he did not identify with what he termed the "political discourse." "The fights between the 'left' and the 'right,' the whole thing, it never made any sense to me," he said. "Also, when my parents visited me [in the US], they did not feel safe."[71] By contrast, Singapore was safe and welcoming to Chinese people. It was also a place where, as he said, "even if just a little tiny bit, you can get outside of US hegemonic discourses." His main reason for not returning to China was the lack of academic freedom. His parents did not need him to take care of them in their old age, but he liked being nearby.

For Rose and Bosheng, Singapore formed a place of partial return. They came back to a Chinese cultural sphere and feeling of belonging while maintaining distance from China's ideological and political strictures. For others, it was a place of partial departure. An example is Kate, who entered Singapore as a secondary school student through the state-sponsored SM2 program. Hailing from Hefei, the capital of Anhui Province, she is the daughter of foreign-trade entrepreneurs. She studied computer science at a Singaporean university and works for a Singaporean company. Her scholarship required her to stay in Singapore for six years, but like many other migrants, she did not want to return to China because of the nine-nine-six work culture. She also liked the freedom from her family that distance allowed her. To be sure, she was dissatisfied with some things about the city-state. As she put it, "I have limited interactions with local people. Almost all my friends are from China. … The weather is too hot, and the cost of living is expensive."[72] But she was close to home, which made it easy to take care of parents and family matters, and it was straightforward for friends and family to visit Singapore. "In some ways," she said, "it doesn't feel like I've left China."[73]

Not all remainers stay in the country long-term. Mingzhong, also from

[70] Rose, interview, 10 March 2023.
[71] Bosheng, interview by author, Singapore, 21 March 2023.
[72] Kate, interview by research assistant, Singapore, 30 March 2023.
[73] Kate, interview, 30 March 2023.

Hefei, joined her father in Singapore as a teenager when he opened a restaurant in the city. She went to high school, university, and graduate school in Singapore, specializing in translation. But at some point, she began to feel the city was too small. She met a boyfriend online from her hometown and, after letting the relationship develop, decided to join him in Beijing, where he was pursuing a PhD. "My boyfriend and I want to make a life in Beijing. I'll get a PhD too and either do research or work as a translator."[74] Other remainers did not return to China but rather moved to other countries. For example, Castor, a migrant with an IT degree from a Singaporean polytechnic, worked for several years in Singaporean companies, obtaining PR. But after travelling in Switzerland and Germany, he fell in love with the beautiful alpine scenery and relocated to Germany. Although he did not have a university credential, his IT diploma and work experience gave him mobility.[75]

Whereas onward and return migrants—the springboarders, phoenixes, and homebodies—navigate their geoeducational dilemmas by passing through the junction, remainers do so by dwelling within it. Constructing Singapore as an in-between place and safe neutral ground, migrants experience the city-state as uniquely positioned to help them resolve, suspend, or avoid their dilemmas. For partial returners like Rose and Bosheng, Singapore provides relative personal and academic freedom while offering a sense of belonging. "Close but not too close" to China, it has the advantages of both. Partial departers like Kate remain in the city for similar reasons and often feel they have not left China. Together these types form what could be termed para-transnational migrants, experiencing the city-state as only partly *guowai,* or "outside the country." Of course, some remainers go back to China or move on to other destinations, even after receiving PR. Singapore's status as a global business hub and cultural junction facilitates such multinational mobility.

Conclusion: Geoeducational Consequences of Post-Pandemic Mobility Regimes

The migrant types I analyze above are not static. For example, Castor and Mingzhong decided to leave Singapore after becoming PRs while Chloe thought she might "come back to Singapore in the end."[76] As ideal types, however, they illuminate migrant trajectories and the geoeducational dilemmas that condition them. Instead of following straightforward origin-to-destination pathways, Chinese student migrants combine multiple domestic and transnational migrations in their pursuit of security, belonging, flexibility, safety, and family togetherness—goals that are not merely

[74] Mingzhong, interview by research assistant, Singapore, 5 April 2023.
[75] Castor, interview by research assistant, Singapore, 19 May 2023.
[76] Chloe, interview by author, Singapore, 8 March 2023.

economic in nature but involve lifestyle choices, ideological preferences, and the pursuit of personal freedom.[77] These aims are shaped by an interplay of political, geographic, and economic factors that geoeducational analysis can help illuminate.

Even as geopolitical and geoeconomic factors structure migrants' constraints and opportunities, the intimate politics of their everyday geoeducational choices reverberate across these larger spheres. For instance, international students help finance Western universities through their tuition fees, with students from China contributing a major share since the 2000s.[78] Because the Chinese state created the Chinese middle class by privatizing urban housing in the 1990s, the government has essentially subsidized higher education in many Western countries, where funding cuts have made universities more reliant on fees.

But housing values in China are dropping as the economy slows, undercutting people's ability to finance overseas study. The number of Chinese studying abroad remains high, reflecting their determination to navigate unemployment, involution, and ideological control; however, their destinations are shifting under the changing geopolitical environment.[79] The US remains the most popular choice, but numbers are dropping off across the West, with the exception of the UK, while the popularity of liminal Asian destinations like Hong Kong, Japan, and Singapore is increasing.[80] Amid escalating superpower tensions and stringent US visa policies, many Chinese student migrants are re-evaluating their view of the US as the apex of higher education. Their sense of alienation and concerns about safety and racism in Western countries deepen their reservations. Concurrently, with China's economy faltering and its political environment becoming more repressive, these migrants grapple with whether to "go ahead" or "go back." Their decisions will reshape the landscape of international student migration, with significant implications for Western higher-education financing and rankings.

These developments also have national security implications. First, there is the problem of brain drain. Cold War-style paranoia and xenophobia have made Western countries feel unwelcome to many educated Chinese migrants.[81] In the US, for example, Proclamation 10043, and allied programs such as the China Initiative, which targeted Chinese scientists for espionage investigations, have prompted many Chinese intellectuals to consider "running" from the US even as their counterparts in China are thinking about "running" from China.[82] During the 2010s, the majority of Chinese student migrants returned to China, but the future is now uncertain. China

[77] Pál Nyíri and Biao Xiang, "Migration and Values," *Intersections* 8, no 2. (2022): 201–206, https://doi.org/10.17356/ieejsp.v8i2.1059.

[78] Yang, "Toward a Framework."

[79] Gu et al., "A Regionalism Shift?"

[80] Gu et al., "A Regionalism Shift?" Rui, "Changing Course."

[81] Gu et al., "A Regionalism Shift?"; Schiavenza, "How the China Initiative."

[82] Rui, "Changing Course."

has successfully wooed back many scholars, yet others are travelling to junctional places like the Gulf states or Singapore, where they can safely maintain collaborations on both sides of the Pacific.[83] Second, there is the problem of diminishing mutual understanding as academic exchanges between China and the West decline.[84] Because Western-based scholars now face difficulty conducting research in China, such exchanges provide crucial awareness of contemporary developments within Chinese culture, society, and politics.

These geoeducational developments also have implications for Chinese state legitimacy, an important source of which is meritocracy—the notion that people can earn economic and political power.[85] As this dream fades in the era of hypercompetition and involution, some young people are "voting with their feet" by lying flat, emigrating, or choosing not to have children.[86] These geoeducational choices ramify in the geopolitical and geoeconomic spheres, exacerbating demographic crises and increasing the need for the party-state to rely on forms of legitimacy other than meritocratic. As the economy stagnates, Chinese leaders turn more toward stoking nationalism, confirming Chloe's fears, and raising the chances for armed conflict with the US.

The geoeducational lens introduced in this article not only helps us understand Chinese student migration but can illuminate student mobility cross-culturally and comparatively. Although their specific experiences differ, students globally face similar geoeducational dynamics. Geopolitically, rising superpower competition and waning US hegemony is producing a more multipolar world. As colony-metropole dyads attenuate and countries pursue "derisking" and "friendshoring," regional market systems are resurging—a phenomenon both shaping and shaped by elite mobility patterns.[87] Geoeconomically, inequality is growing within countries even as it shrinks between them, leading to globalized hypercompetition among those fighting to attain or maintain elite status under a global crisis of meritocracy.[88] Demographically, countries everywhere outside of Africa are facing unprecedented declines in birthrates strongly correlated with women's educational outperformance of men, which is another geoeducational

[83] Denis Simon, oral testimony before the US-China Economic and Security Review Commission, hearing on "China's Challenges and Capabilities in Educating and Training the Next Generation Workforce, 24 February 2023, https://tinyurl.com/yuwzzb2c.

[84] Scott Kennedy and Jisi Wang, "Breaking the Ice," Center for Strategic & International Studies (report), 7 April 2023, https://www.csis.org/analysis/breaking-ice.

[85] Howlett, *Meritocracy and Its Discontents*.

[86] Carl Minzner, "China's Doomed Fight Against Demographic Decline," *Foreign Affairs*, 3 May 2022, https://tinyurl.com/mrxn2vhk.

[87] Engseng Ho, "Inter-Asian Concepts for Mobile Societies," *Journal of Asian Studies* 76, no. 4 (2017): 907–928, https://doi.org/10.1017/S0021911817000900; Henry Farrell and Abraham Newman, "The New Economic Security State: How De-Risking Will Remake Geopolitics," *Foreign Affairs*, 19 October 2023, https://tinyurl.com/yfyn5243.

[88] Branko Milanović, *Global Inequality: A New Approach for the Age of Globalization* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap, 2016); Pettit, *Labor of Hope*.

phenomenon with massive political-economic ramifications as societal aging accelerates.[89] Globally, these dynamics are undergirded by the understudied interlinkages between domestic and transnational migrations examined in this article.[90]

Against the backdrop of this new era of globalization, geoeducational analysis promises the possibility not just of illuminating specific cases but unpacking their systematic interrelationships, for instance by studying the recent increase in Indian student migration to North America against the context of falling Chinese student migration to the same destination.[91] Geopolitics condition such shifts, but migrants are also geopolitical actors shaping this new phase of globalization.[92] Contrary to the notion that geoeconomics is supplanting geopolitics, this emergent era underscores the importance of examining the mutual constitution of the geoeconomic, geopolitical, and geosocial spheres, of which the geoeducational is a key element.

National University of Singapore, Singapore, July 2024

[89] Marcia C. Inhorn and Nancy Smith-Hefner, eds., *Waithood: Gender, Education, and Global Delays in Marriage* (New York: Berghahn, 2021).

[90] King and Skeldon, "Mind the Gap"; Ho, *Citizens*; Paul and Yeoh, "Studying Multinational Migrations."

[91] Yang, "Toward a Framework"; Susan Thomas, *Indebted Mobilities: Indian Youth, Migration, and the Internationalizing University* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2024).

[92] Ho, "Inter-Asian Concepts"; Mitchell and Kallio, "Spaces"; Nguyen, "On Geopolitics and Education."