



# Career imagination of Chinese international students in UK universities in a ‘post’ pandemic world

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*International students are often*  
*statisticised* as lifeless figures that constitute graduate  
employment indicators;  
*individualised* because they are frequently assumed to  
be ‘individual free agents, able to respond to [migration policies] in  
line with their individual career or lifestyle preferences’  
*homogenised* because they are typically portrayed to fit  
this financially-secure persona

NOTE: THIS PAPER IS PRIMARILY BASED ON FINDINGS PRESENTED IN

XU, C. L. (2020). TIME, CLASS AND PRIVILEGE IN CAREER IMAGINATION: EXPLORING STUDY-TO-WORK TRANSITION OF CHINESE INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS IN UK UNIVERSITIES THROUGH A BOURDIEUSIAN LENS. *TIME & SOCIETY*, 0(0), 1-25. DOI:10.1177/0961463X20951333

# A temporal perspective is lacking

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- Instead, there are prevalent focuses on the present, the *Now* of the international students' employability and much oblivion of the 'unpredictable' future and impact of 'the passage of time' on these students' post-study career enactment (Collins & Shubin, 2017, p. 19).
- The ongoing COVID19 pandemic can arguably bring along such 'unpredictable' futures to shape international students' career imagination.
- little empirical understanding about how time features in and shapes the career imagination of international students.

# The study

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- Participants: 21 Chinese international students / graduates with British degrees
- Aged between 18 and 33
- Duration: interviewed between May 2018 and April 2019, with follow-up interviews in 2020.
- Degree levels: bachelor's (6/21), master's (10/21) and PhD levels (5/21)
- Gender: 15 were females, while 6 were males.
- Institutions: a range of UK universities, including post-92 (3/21), plate glass (4/21), redbrick (5/21) and Russell Group (9/21)

# Temporal career strategies

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**Deferred gratification** in career imagination refers to the phenomenon that ‘When planning and enacting their career trajectories, some participants chose to withstand unfavourable conditions for a period, with a view to reaping ‘rewards’ of autonomous career time in the future’ (Xu, 2020, p. 12).

**Temporal destructuring** refers to some of these Chinese international students who ‘directly confront[ed] the capitalist market logic that attempted to extend their ‘work time’ or the temporal structures that regulated their career path and pace’ (Xu, 2020, p. 15) and ‘they searched for alternative career pace and paths that were not subjected to the uniform rhythms, pace and timetables prescribed for them by their families and the broader society in China. Instead, they strove to build their autonomy of career choice’ (ibid., p. 16).

# The case of Qie

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Initially rejected three job offers in China—due to concern about 996-model, lack of personal time

- My classmates who have returned to China are in a pitiable position...some of them entered some good companies, e.g. Huawei, Tencent and Baidu – but they find it very stressful. In Huawei, they have compulsory overtime work, and some have lost all their hair...All these are quite scary...Your salary will surely be very high, but you may not be able to live long enough to spend the money that you make (*youming zhuanqian, meiming huaqian*) – this feels horrific.

Chose to work in the UK for three years; At the point of interview, was considering returning to work in China; this time having his own say on his time autonomy:

- There are many high-end talent schemes like A Thousand Talent Scheme. If I join this scheme, my development in China would be fast...Basically they have all kinds of money to give me convenience and I can set my own rules at work.

# In a 'post' pandemic world

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Follow-up interviews:

some Chinese international students/graduates are temporarily suspending their career plan by engaging in further studies or staying in their current jobs longer in order to weather the lack of job opportunities as a consequence of the economic 'storms' /pressures brought along by COVID19.

Now that the initial strikes of COVID19 have passed, some participants are beginning to see emerging opportunities for them to challenge temporal structures that they felt previously constrained by, e.g. the opportunity to work from home for overseas companies.

COVID-19, or the 'post' pandemic world, therefore, provides impetus for these Chinese students / graduates to exercise their temporal autonomy and agency in more nuanced and creative ways?

# Reference

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Xu, C. L. (2020). Time, class and privilege in career imagination: Exploring study-to-work transition of Chinese international students in UK universities through a Bourdieusian lens. *Time & Society*, 0(0), 1-25. doi:10.1177/0961463x20951333





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