International Student Mobilities and Voices in the Asia-Pacific

Letters to Coronavirus

Edited by
Yi'En Cheng

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Navigating Desire, Despondency, Disconnectedness, and Disillusionment: International Students' Emotional Turmoil Amidst COVID-19 Pandemic

Peidong Yang and Yanxuan Lu

Since early 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic has ended "normal" life as people knew it across the entire globe. There are few—if any—spheres of human activities that have not been severely disrupted by the pandemic. When it comes to education, for instance, UNESCO (2020) estimated that at one point as many as 1.37 billion students across 138 countries were affected by nationwide school/university closures. Owing

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to the highly infectious nature of the coronavirus disease, educational activities involving border-crossing mobilities of people have been particularly hard hit. In countries around the world, governments imposed border restrictions and sometimes repatriated citizens, including tertiary students studying abroad (Grove, 2020; Ye, 2020). Higher education institutions (HEIs) suspended overseas mobility programs such as inbound/outbound student exchange, scrambled to switch to online learning, and had to deal with the added challenge of providing support to stranded international students (Gomes & Chang, 2020; Wang, 2020). Caught up in such unprecedented chaos caused by the pandemic, international students has been identified as "[o]ne of the most vulnerable population groups" (Firang, 2020, p. 1), facing a multitude of challenges such as emotional distress, loss of income (due to lockdown and/or job loss), lack of social contact/support, and separation from family (Bilecen, 2020; Firang, 2020).

In this chapter, we examine and comment upon the emotional turmoil experienced by international students amidst the pandemic, as vividly captured in the four "letters to the coronavirus", penned respectively by Betina Choa (Philippines-Singapore), Mawutor Kwame Ahiabu (Ghana-Indonesia), Pengfei Pan (China-Australia), and Shunan You (China-USA). Suffused with raw feelings and authentic voices, these letters offer poignant insights into the turbulent emotional journeys traveled by four international students as they navigated the extraordinary circumstances of the pandemic. While the four international students were differently situated in terms of their sending/receiving countries, stages of academic career, and, not least, their personal circumstances, certain themes seem to reverberate across their emotional narratives. By attempting to unpack their narratives, our agenda in this chapter is broadly twofold: first, to shed some analytical light on the pandemic's impact on international students from the conceptual perspective of emotions; secondly, to make a modest contribution to the broader scholarship located at the intersection of emotion and mobility/migration.

From the outset, emotion may be defined as the "dynamic processes through which individuals experience and interpret the changing world, position themselves vis-à-vis others, and shape their subjectivities" (Svašek, 2010, p. 868). From the etymological lens, the word emotion, which derives from the Middle French word *esmovoir* meaning "to set in motion, move the feelings" (Zlatev et al., 2012, p. 424), seems to hint at the interplay between *motion* and *emotion*. Indeed, more than a decade

ago, scholars Conradson and McKay (2007) called for greater attention to be paid to the emotional experiences associated with migration, arguing that "[f]ar from being a secondary or unimportant dimension of mobility […] affect and emotion are central aspects of international migration" (p. 172). Since then, the emotional dimension has gained increasing visibility in the literature on migration research (e.g., Svašek, 2010 [special issue]; Carling & Collins, 2018 [special issue]). Within this growing body of work, for example, some scholars have explored how transnational family configurations engender emotional dynamics (Skrbiš, 2008). Others have analyzed the emotive intensities involved in the host society's reception of im/migrants, particularly anti-immigrant or xenophobic sentiments (Yang, 2014a, 2014c, 2018a, 2019). Still, others have examined less intense yet nonetheless evocative emotions arising from mundane everyday coexistence in multicultural contexts (Wise, 2005, 2010; Ye, 2016). Suffice it to say, over time, emotions have emerged as a notable theme within the mobility/migration scholarship, encompassing a diverse range of empirical settings and cases.

Educational mobility and, more specifically, *international student mobility* (ISM)—defined as the flows of students who pursue tertiary/higher education outside their countries of citizenship (Migration Data Portal, 2018)—can be considered a sub-category of international migration (King et al., 2011; Raghuram, 2013). In contrast to the growing interest and knowledge about emotions in the general migration literature, however, the emotional dimension of ISM has remained relatively understudied. We argue that an appropriate understanding of the emotional aspect of ISM needs to be anchored in the first instance in an appreciation of the intense aspirations—or *desires* (Yang, 2016, 2020)—that often underpin the pursuit of educational mobility. Thus, in the next section, we first address the issue of educational desire, its emotionality, and then how educational desires are being disrupted and suspended by the current pandemic in both spatial and temporal terms. Subsequently, drawing on the narratives presented in the four student letters, we offer a thematic unpacking of the salient emotions witnessed therein, in terms of *desire*, *despondency*, *disconnect*, and *disillusionment*. We then turn to discuss briefly how the students have sought to cope with the pandemic-caused emotional turmoil, especially through exerting emotional labor. Finally, we end this commentary with a few brief concluding thoughts.

Anchoring ISM Emotions: Educational Desire and Its Spatial–Temporal Disruption

To undertake educational mobility—be it within-country mobility (for example see Yang, 2014d) or international mobility—is first and foremost motivated by an aspiration to pursue education. With education often being touted as the key to achieving social mobility and worldly success (see Yang, 2018b, 2022), much is perceived to be at stake. Unsurprisingly, thus, students themselves and the families and communities behind them (see illustrations in Yang, 2018c) often invest considerable emotional energy in their collective educational projects, in addition to large amounts of tangible resources. It is for this reason that anthropologist Andrew Kipnis (2011) coined the expression "educational *desire*" to designate the enormous longings for educational qualifications and scholastic attainment that he observed in contemporary China.

Viewed through a Bourdieusian theoretical lens (Bourdieu, 1986), to pursue education is essentially a process of converting resources and *time*—labor time spent on accumulating knowledge and developing skills and qualities—into embodied human capital (in particular, *cultural capital a la* Bourdieu), which in turn is expected to express a greater market value in future. As Bourdieu noted, this conversion process is by no means risk-free but is characterized by a degree of uncertainty concerning its eventual outcome (ibid.). This goes to explain why the pursuit of education may entail emotions such as hope and optimism due to anticipation and expectation, while at the same time being accompanied by feelings of anxiety and frustration owing to the unknownness of the future. In short, due to the saliency of education as a temporally unfolding accumulative process with uncertain future outcomes, education-related emotions may be usefully thought of with reference to *temporality*.

International educational mobility adds to education a *spatial* dimension. When international students travel to and reside in a foreign country/territory to pursue education, their human capital accumulation process not only takes place across time but also straddles across geographical space. This spatial mobility is widely believed to be desirable: it is supposed to equip mobile students with cosmopolitan qualities through cultural exposure; to give them access to knowledge and skills unavailable domestically; and to lead ultimately to greater socio-economic opportunities and better life outcomes in general. In other words, there is

a general assumption that spatial mobility—especially mobility that transcends international borders—adds tremendous value and accelerates the accumulative process that education is. Indeed, this assumption arguably remains the most powerful driver behind young people's desire for and pursuit of ISM the world over.

As far as emotions are concerned, the added spatial dimension in ISM can be expected to further intensify as well as complicate the emotionality of pursuing education. The unknownness and unfamiliarity associated with a foreign and often distant ISM destination can make subjective feelings such as excitement, hope, and optimism more intense, whereas the practical challenges of international mobility (issues such as obtaining visas, clearing immigration, overcoming language barriers, finding accommodation, etc.) also render the process objectively speaking riskier and more uncertain, and thus potentially more emotionally volatile. Evincing this, in a rare example of research that explicitly talks about the emotionality of ISM, Lan's (2020) recent study on Chinese international students in Italy found these students' experiences to be "marked by notable contradictions between mobility and immobility, hopes and frustrations, self-appreciation and self-reproach" (p. 163). As such, spatial mobility introduces more factors of uncertainty into the picture; and consequently, educational desire involving a spatial dimension can be both more exciting and more unnerving for the international students.

Although scholarship that explicitly brings ISM and emotions together remains very limited and emerging (e.g., Lan, 2020; Sidhu et al., 2020), the work by several ISM scholars over the past decade can be read as having addressed the emotionality of international student experiences in a more implicit way. For example, taking Kipnis's (2011) seminal concept into an international and cross-cultural context, Yang (2016) re-defined "educational desire" as "all manners of aspirations, longings, and interests that students experience and develop in an evolving way as they pursue and undergo education across national, cultural, linguistic and other borders and boundaries" (p. 16). With this redefinition, Yang (ibid.) examined the cross-cultural encounters of a group of Chinese international students in Singapore, shining a spotlight on the intense feelings and psychosocial dynamics in their educational mobility experiences (see also Yang, 2014b, 2016). Also using the trope of "desire", Collins et al's (2014) work on regionally mobile students in Southeast Asia highlighted how these students' educational desires were "recalcitrant, shifting" (p. 673), and thus generative of evolving imaginaries and

emotions in a constant process of *becoming*. Taken together, existing studies such as these illustrate that spatial mobility plays a fundamentally important role in shaping international students' emotional experiences. Thus, in seeking to understand the emotionality of ISM, *spatiality* should be taken as another crucial dimension in addition to the temporal axis.

Having understood how the pursuit of educational mobility is an emotively charged process entailing a matrix of emotional possibilities across temporal and spatial dimensions, it is not difficult to see why the COVID-19 pandemic triggered a surge of turbulent emotions from international students. What the pandemic did (and continues to do in many places), essentially, was to disrupt and/or suspend on a massive scale all the "normal" temporal processes and spatial arrangements that constitute ISM. What seemed sure to happen suddenly got canceled or postponed indefinitely; mobility suddenly became *immobility*; all the taken-for-granted temporal and spatial flows were suddenly replaced by stasis, limbo, and uncertainty. For aspiring international students, these spatial–temporal disruptions have first and foremost given rise to more uncertainty in their materialization of educational desire. In addition, these also caused severe anxiety regarding their safety, security, and social connectedness in educational mobility, thus exacerbating international students' emotional predicaments into more vulnerable states. It is for endless limbo under disruption and immobility that we would say the pandemic has brought much turmoil to international mobile student's emotional life.

Such disruptive temporal and spatial effects of the pandemic were more than evident from the narratives offered by the four student letter authors. For final-year undergraduate Betina, the pandemic caught her at a critical juncture when she was about to transition out of student-hood; moreover, the travel restrictions meant she was unable to be with her mother in the Philippines when they missed and needed each other the most. For Ghanaian Ph.D. candidate Mawutor, COVID-19 prevented him from experiencing the spatial mobility of traveling to Indonesia to begin his studies, instead of leaving him to grapple with punishing time zone differences as he underwent virtual learning. For final-year Ph.D. student Pengfei, the untimely pandemic struck when he was back in China for the Lunar New Year holiday—a holiday that morphed into a "resentful wait" and a long state of "limbo" that caused him to rethink his choice to study in Australia and his position in life in general. For doctoral student Shunan, surviving the pandemic in the United States similarly entailed

an experience of "living in-between life in limbo", triggering agonizing thoughts about "to leave, or to stay".

Clearly, the spatial–temporal disruptions and suspensions brought by the pandemic lay at the root of much of the emotional turmoil witnessed in the student letters. To further understand the specificity of their emotional turmoil, in the next section we unpack their emotive narratives under three headings: educational *desire* and *despondency*; familial and social *disconnectedness*; and *self-doubt* and *disillusionment*.

Emotional Turmoil Unpacked

Educational Desire and Despondency

The authors of the letters displayed toward educational mobility a desire strong enough to evoke emotions. Best illustrating this was probably Ph.D. candidate Mawutor from Ghana: he labeled himself a "fervent seeker of higher education" and regarded higher education "prominent in [his] life's objectives". With Africa having historically been disadvantaged when it comes to economic and social development, the opportunity to obtain international spatial mobility as well as potential social mobility clearly meant a lot to Mawutor, and this perhaps explains the emotional intensity of his narrative. The same logic applies to Betina, even though the sending-receiving contexts are different from that of Mawutor's. For Betina too, she was convinced that "there was something better here [namely, Singapore] for my education, something they couldn't give me at home". Spatial mobility in education was desired because it was seen to offer superior education, and ultimately a better future. On top of the academic qualifications, internationally mobile students' desires and aspirations were also focused on the cosmopolitan experience and lifestyle in the global north. This is particularly the case with Pengfei and Shunan, who studied in two developed Anglophone countries known for hosting large numbers of international students. Pengfei confessed that he was "always obsessed with the possibility to experience something new" and studying abroad had allowed him to do that.

However, as the COVID-19 pandemic caught the world by surprise, international students' hopeful desires and aspirations toward education and cosmopolitan life were suddenly thrown into disarray, resulting in much despair and despondency. Indeed, the greater the desire and expectations that had been attached to the project of educational mobility, the

more intense such despondent feelings were likely to be. Betina illustrated this very well when she wrote that "planning and probabilities now seem like empty promises". As far as *empty promises* were concerned, Betina was far from alone. For Mawutor, not being able to travel to Indonesia to embark on his doctoral studies had also been deeply disappointing, in spite of the resilient tone of his letter. After having to struggle with various technological ("stable regular internet source"), financial ("needed a well-functioning laptop"), and temporal (namely, the time zone difference) challenges, Mawutor's frustration and resentment were evident when he wrote that COVID-19 had "marred [his] expectations of the level of academic and social engagement in international education".

Student migrants' cosmopolitan aspirations and ambitions were similarly thrown into jeopardy amidst the pandemic. For Pengfei, his cosmopolitan life was suddenly suspended due to the Australian government's ban on direct travel from China, without any indication then when normalization of travel would be possible. To worsen the matter, the bilateral relationship between China and Australia deteriorated notably, bringing in more uncertainties. Such confusion, anxiety, and pain have all the more aggravated his emotional predicaments. As he reported: he experienced more unstable moods, low productivity, and poorer sleeping qualities in those days. Taken together, the onslaught of the pandemic had suddenly hindered international students from materializing their educational desire and/or cosmopolitan aspiration, often leaving them in a state of despondency, at least for the time being.

Familial and Social Disconnectedness

At the level of interpersonal connectedness, student migrants were emotionally challenged not only by the prolonged separation from family in their home countries but also by the social isolation in the receiving context (Bilecen, 2020).

Homesickness, worries, even painful feelings of guilt, and compunction toward their loved ones were expressed by a few letter authors. Betina was deeply saddened when COVID-19 took away her friend's mother, her teacher, and even her grandmother's life. Seeing that the loss of a loved one could be so real and close, she prayed that she could "be with [her] Mama" while her mother also told in a call that she "wanted nothing more than to fly here [Singapore] and to embrace" her dear daughter. Likewise, Shunan recalled how when the pandemic first broke out in

China, "the horrific news kept [her] awake" all night and she "felt guilty of [her] absence in this monumental moment and emotionally draining for [her] family and friends back home". Separation from family, already an emotional hardship commonly experienced by transnational subjects, became more intense because of a deadly pandemic that posed a real threat to people's lives.

Adding to prolonged separation from family, at the destination setting international students also had to grapple with loneliness and depressed mental states because of the social isolation brought on by mass lockdowns and social distancing (Bilecen, 2020; Firang, 2020). For instance, Betina described vividly what it felt to her to be cut off from all real social contact and to be confined indoors: "it feels even more endless—I did not think it possible, for one endlessness to feel more endless than another." Pengfei, too, mentioned that when being stuck in China, he was "being socially disconnected […] and not able to experience the normal life." For him, having left China for some years already and set up a "normal life" in Australia, being stuck in his "home" country ironically meant social isolation. In the US, Shunan talked about the effects of social isolation by observing, not without a touch of humor, how Zoom evolved from a "lifeline" initially to a "lifestyle", and eventually to a kind of "void" that people stared into. Playing to her strength as a social scientist, she theorized social isolation in the digital age as what she termed *"I-depressed" society*, one where social isolation had a "separate and individualizing effect". "Everyone was in different velocities of getting depressed and seethed in their emotional roller coaster"—she thus described social disconnectedness during the pandemic. In such ways, COVID-19 plunged international students into varying degrees of *disconnectedness*, be it familial or social, exacting no small emotional tolls on them.

Self-Doubt and Disillusionment

The aforementioned *despondency* and *disconnectedness* at times further culminated in international students' *self-doubt* and *disillusionment* with respect to their hopeful desires or aspirations (Hari et al., 2021). In Betina's case, this was evident in how she reflected on her initial desire to pursue educational mobility; she wrote in what seemed a remorseful tone—"if only I had known this would happen, I wouldn't have said to myself back in high school, that I so desperately needed to get away

from this country, from my family". For Pengfei, as he witnessed a surge of "hostile comments" online toward Chinese international students, he underwent a great deal of "uncertainty, […] anxiety, self-doubting, reflection, and fatigue". He began to question his decision of pursuing his Ph.D. in Australia and whether his host country even welcomed him in the first place—"what did I do wrong, it's a strong sense of being betrayed. I made a big mistake, I was not supposed to study in an unwelcoming country", he wrote emotionally.

Related to such sentiments of self-doubt was also a creeping sense of disillusionment over *cosmopolitanism*—a value and experience supposedly characteristic of and central to ISM. This came across strongly from the two Chinese doctoral students' letters. Shunan, in her own words "a self-claimed cosmopolitan", became "concerned about the unprecedented crisis of cosmopolitanism in the time of rising localism and nationalism." Keenly aware of the rising hostility toward migrants and minorities in an America caught in the double whammy of pandemic and President Trump, she had to negotiate with oscillating thoughts between leaving or staying on in the US. Once again, activating her academic training in sociology and anthropology, Shunan proposed the notion of "cosmopolitan precarity" to deromanticize cosmopolitanism, emphasizing instead the "extra socio-economic, cultural, and emotional burdens of living in between due to the multiplication of the border". In a similar vein, Pengfei, contemplating his "rootless" status as an international Ph.D. student, also became "suspicious of [his] belief on the cosmopolitanism". Above all, these emotions of self-doubt and disillusionment left him confused and disoriented, not knowing "what the next destination could be".

Coping Strategies: Emotional Labor and Beyond

Confronted with such overwhelming emotional turmoil, how did the four international students cope with and manage their chaotic inner feelings? From their letters, we noted clear evidence of *emotional labor*, which Wang and Chen (2020) defined in a migratory context as "[a] set of practices conducted by mobile individuals to respond to and alter their emotional experiences, [which are] enacted to obtain a higher quality of life and more effectively actualizing and/or fine-tuning their migration aspirations" (p. 4).

For Betina, who has been tortured by the loneliness and uncertainty of her disrupted final year of study in Singapore, emotional labor consisted of learning to "honor small joys in the waiting" such as talking with her professor or encountering the lively children on campus. These small acts of emotional management seemed to "[spark] something like hope" in her. In the case of Shunan, emotional labor involved her invoking philosopher Nietzsche's famous saying "what doesn't kill you make you stronger" to describe how she "endured, suffered, and finally thrived from the isolation [caused by the pandemic]". Most vividly and effusively exemplifying the exertion of emotional labor, however, is perhaps Mawutor's poetic letter, in which he likened COVID-19 to a formidable enemy. To fight this "defiant oppressor of our generation", Mawutor drew strength from the emotional capital of Ghanaian nationalism and liberation; he wrote in a heroic tone:

> But as the line in the Ghanaian national anthem composed by Philip Gbeho says, "*and make us resist oppressor's rule with all our hearts and might forevermore*"— I shall resist your negativity and take advantage of the lessons you are teaching the world. I, the human race, rise above the ashes and emerge victorious in my struggle for success.

As illustrated above, emotional labor can entail seemingly small gestures of adjustment (e.g., seeing "small joys" of life) or evidently effortful acts of resilience, hope, and optimism, sometimes achieved through tapping into symbolic and/or ideological resources (e.g., philosophical aphorism, nationalistic sentiments, etc.) available to the subjects. Insofar as such emotional labor is targeted at the *self*, these deliberate acts of coping are somewhat reminiscent of what Foucault (1988) has termed the "technologies of the self"—acts and processes aimed at managing, constituting, and reconstituting the subject. Thus, we argue that emotional labor, in addition to being a context-specific response under pandemic circumstances, warrants more research as part of a larger question about international student subjectivity and self-formation (see Marginson, 2014).

Beyond emotional labor which may be understood as a form of inward-oriented subjective coping, seeking social support through community—real or virtual—was another coping strategy mentioned in some of the letters. For example, Shunan found the "Chinese ethnic communities in China and Boston [...] critically pivotal to [her] logistic and emotional

support" as she chose to stay put in the US over the pandemic period. Pengfei, on the other hand, resorted to spending more time in the virtual world while he was stranded in China, because the online forums provided him "an echo chamber" where he could "find some comfort"—comfort in the knowledge that he was not the only one suffering loneliness and insecurity. Though Pengfei himself realized this was not the best choice since his excessive engagements in the online community would, in turn, hinder his connection with the local community, at the moment such a strategy still brought him much emotional comfort to counter the sense of limbo.

These coping strategies used by international students in the face of the emotional turmoil, we believe, constitute another thus-far neglected research direction that future ISM scholarship can do well to explore further.

Concluding Thoughts

International student mobility (ISM) can be an emotionally charged affair for the subjects involved—be it for the mobile students themselves or others who are connected to them in one way or another. This is because *to pursue education* and *to be mobile*—the two constitutive elements of ISM—are both processes accompanied by emotional volatility. The emotional volatility stems not only from the *temporal* structure of education as an inherently uncertain process stretching into an unknown future, but it is also exacerbated by the *spatial* distantiation that adds further uncertainties and challenges to the process.

In contrast to the greater visibility given to emotions in the general migration scholarship in recent decades, ISM research has been comparatively slow in acknowledging the emotional as an important domain of analysis, particularly for the emotional experiences of internationally mobile students. The COVID-19 pandemic, by causing disruptions to the temporalities and spatialities of ISM on a scale previously unimaginable, triggered heightened emotional reactions from international students, as shown in the four letters we commented on here. Inspired by the spirit of optimism shown by these students, we suggest that the pandemic represents something of an opportunity for advancing the study of ISM emotions—albeit an opportunity that no one could deliberately have wished for.

Through unpacking the emotional turmoil witnessed in the four "letters to the coronavirus", in this commentary we have attempted to shed some light on how the four differently situated students navigated—each in their own ways—educational desire and despondency, familial and social disconnectedness, and sometimes senses of self-doubt and disillusionment. We also drew attention to their coping strategies, in particular their exercise of emotional labor which involved heroic acts of resilience, hope, and optimism in the face of great adversity. We argue that both the emotional experiences of international students and their ways of emotional coping are topics worthy of greater research attention in future.

Lastly, echoing the recurrent theme of *uncertainty* in the student letters, we want to end this commentary with a general note on the uncertainties confronting ISM. The COVID-19 pandemic may well be a game-changer for ISM. With the pandemic-caused temporal-spatial disruptions lasting longer than most people had initially expected, there now seems to be a good chance that many of the educational changes which were initially meant as temporary responses are in fact here to stay. Virtual learning is likely to become more prevalent and even preferable under many circumstances; "internationalization at a distance" (Mittelmeier et al., 2020) may become a more accepted and normalized form of international education, perhaps at the expense of physical mobility; and mobilities involving nearer destinations (such as regional mobilities as opposed to trans-continental ones) and more flexible durations and configurations may emerge as new models of ISM. Furthermore, as the pandemic triggered and/or accelerated macro-geopolitical, geo-economic, and geo-cultural shifts (e.g., the accentuated rise of China, on the one hand, the volatile relations between China and many Western countries on the other), the structural conditions underlying ISM development in the past several decades seem to have been altered significantly, perhaps irrevocably. Altbach and de Witt's (2018) ominous prediction a few years earlier—"[w]hat one might call 'the era of higher education internationalization' over the past 25 years (1990–2015) that has characterized university thinking, and action might either be finished or, at least, be on life support" (n.d.)—rings more true today than ever. To confront and make sense of the vast uncertainties and complexities lying ahead for ISM shall be an exciting and challenging task for ISM scholars going forward.

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