Disenchanted With the Immigrant Dream: The Sociological Formation of Ex-Immigrant Subjectivity

Abstract

Just as the identity of individuals must adjust to the loss of a relationship, job, or membership in a group, many formerly aspiring immigrants give up on immigrating. I analyze data from oral history interviews and social media narratives of 121 Chinese ex-immigrants from sixteen different countries. I show how disappointments, the language barrier, cultural alienation, racial-ethnic discrimination, intersectional-gender issues, barriers to upward socioeconomic mobility, and/or restrictive immigration policies interact with each other together constitute ex-immigrant subjectivity. This contributes to the broader sociological literature on how in different and similar ways processes of abandoning important life projects in other social domains form social identities.

Introduction

For decades scholars have examined how foreigners who migrate and settle into a new society subjectively transform through acculturation, assimilation, incorporation, or integration. These processes are analogous to other micro-level socialization processes, like becoming a member of a family, political party, religion, or company. Yet just as individuals painfully adjust their identities to the sudden loss of a relationship (Vaughan 1986), job (Gabriel, Gray, and Goregaokar 2013), religious faith, (Zuckerman 2015), or loyalty to a political party (Barnfield

and Bale 2022), many formerly aspiring immigrants go through a parallel process in deciding to give up their former plans to immigrate. [1]

But how often do immigrants give up immigrating, especially considering the substantial amount of time, money, and energy they typically invest in doing so? A study in the United States (hereafter the US) during the pre-Immigration Reform and Control Act (IRCA) 1980s found that 37.5 percent of the 400,000 who legally immigrated to the US later returned to their country of citizenship (Keely and Kraly 1978). More recently, 20 to 50% of prospective migrants abandon high-income per capita countries within five years of arrival and generally leave before their permits expire (OECD 2008, 2019). Since most migration scholars reside in migrant-receiving societies, they likely find it easier to collect and analyze data from those who have immigrated or are in the process of immigrating. In contrast, they less frequently observe and study those who have given up immigrating since they leave before researchers can identifying them. This arguably structures what such scholars observe and how they think about immigration. We can potentially gain a different perspective by collecting data in a migrant-sending society from those who gave up immigrating and thereby better understand what social forces and experiences constitute the subjectivity of these ex-immigrants.

As illustrated in Figure 1, with respect to migrant intentionality and behavior over time, ex-immigrants are a specific sub-class of return migrants who had previously intended to immigrate but later decided not to do so and to instead return to their country of origin. They are distinct from another sub-class of return migrants who had always planned to return to their

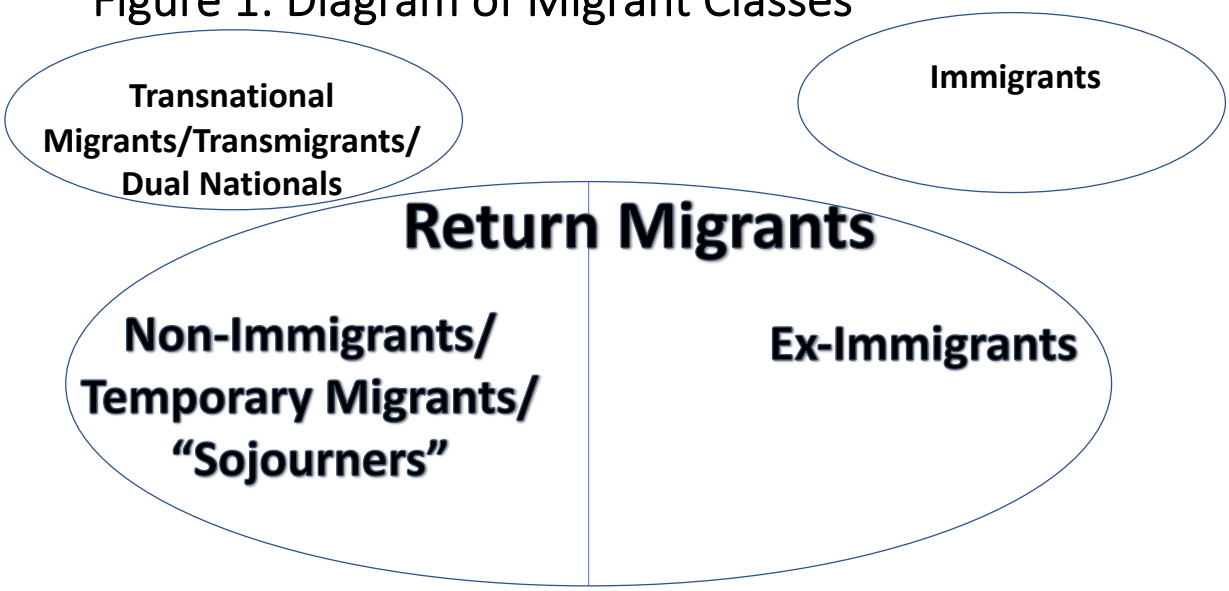
[1] I define immigration not as changing one's nationality, which is what it means in the Chinese language, or even gaining legal immigration status, but rather in the sense that most inhabitants of Western society understand the term: as settling into and becoming an inhabitant of a society (Liu-Farrer 2020). Hence, people who reside in a migrant-destination society with a non-immigrant visa, a green card, or no visa are immigrants, but foreigner who obtains the nationality of a country and returns to live in a country of origin is not an immigrant.

country of origin, a sub-class that governments and scholars refer to as "non-immigrants," temporary immigrants, or sojourners. The observed behavior of non-immigrants who never intended to migrate and ex-immigrants who give up immigrating is the same (return migration). However, their migration experience is subjectively distinct because an ex-immigrant's project of migration changes over time, whereas for a person who intends to return to their country after some years their migration project remains the same. Ex-immigrants are also substantively important as a sub-class of return migrants because their decision to return to their country of origin is partly a product of their subjective experience with social forces in the migrant-receiving society. In contrast, those return migrnats who always had intended to return to their country of origin do not change their identity from that of a prospective immigrant to that of a return migrant. The social forces behind this change in a prospective identity are of theoretical importance to how we counterfactually and critically think about those return migrants who may have immigrated if their social experience in the migrant-receiving country had been different. This study contributes therefore to past research programs about the "contexts of reception" that immigrants confront (Luthra et al. 2018) by providing additional processual insights into the social forces in that context that ultimately lead prospective immigrants to give up immigrating. Note from Figure 1 that return migrants are also distinct from immigrants and those called transnational migrants, trans-migrants, or dual nationals, which research suggests are typically first or second-generation immigrants who divide their lives between their migrant-host society and migrant-origin society (Waldinger 2015).

Ex-immigrants are of substantive interest to both scholars and policymakers because 1) many enter the country on non-immigrant visas that provide opportunities to transition to more permanent visas (e.g., H1-B and employment or marriage-based permanent residence permits),

2) many prospective immigrants are the type of individuals governments, employers, and society hope will transition to an immigrant visa and immigrate, and 3) migrant-receiving societies who would benefit from their presence and contribution suffer a loss if they choose not to immigrate. Although many scholars primarily based in migrant-receiving societies have had opportunities to observe and study those who did not intend to immigrate but eventually ended up immigrating, they have not paid as much attention to ex-immigrants which seems to be an equally important change in intentionality. Therefore, understanding how social forces lead previously aspiring immigrants to become ex-immigrants arguably has more important consequences for the demographic size and composition of immigrant-receiving societies than those return migrants who never intend to immigrate.

Figure 1: Diagram of Migrant Classes



To respect how the intentionality of a return migrants changed due to various social forces is a way of respecting the autonomy of a prospective immigrant to choose not to immigrate and also invite analysis into the social forces and social experiences that may lead an immigrant to

not to immigrate. If we do not analytically distinguish between those who always intended to return and those who do not, we will be unable to distinguish between those who might have immigrated if they had a better experience in migrant-receiving countries and those who would never immigrate no matter what experience they have. The analytical distinction would enable us to come to terms with the consequences of how social forces discourage intending immigrants form immigrating.

Much past qualitative research about "return migrants" tends to focus on "non-immigrants" who never intended to immigrate or settle down abroad (Waters 2008), like students from a high socio-economic class whose parents encourage them to study abroad so they can return and have a better life in their country of origin (Tong et al. 2020). The New Economic of Migration model migration (Stark and Bloom 1985) rested on the assumption that once a migrant has earned and saved a certain target threshold of income or assets through work in a migrant-receiving society, they would return to their country of origin. Yet prospective migrants have agency, and social experiences in the migrant-receiving society—as different as they are from their migrant-origin society—may alter their prior decision. To not analytically distinguish "return migrants" who intended to return and "ex-immigrants" who gave up immigrating, would seem to assume all migrants either follow the New Economics of Migration model (Stark nad Bloom 1985) or the Neoclassical model (Borjas 1989) of explaining why people migrate. However, social experiences (particularly in a foreign society) likely will change migrant's intentions about immigration. We can learn more than we have from the above literature about the diversity of specific processes by which those who intended to immigrate gave up on immigrating.

As long as alternative opportunities exist in a migrant's society of origin, social forces in the migrant's host society may lead those who previously aspired to immigrate to quit immigrating

voluntarily. Such forces gradually disenchant them with the idea that they will have a better life by immigrating—an idea we may generally call the immigrant dream. If the intensity of migrant suffering and uncertainty about their current situation and future becomes much greater than how they believe it would be in their country of origin, immigrants will reasonably begin to question or doubt whether migrating will make their life any better. Formerly aspiring immigrants will initially become ambivalent about their prospects and eventually decide to cut whatever losses they have invested in the migratory project. Thus, ex-immigrants are both "exceptional cases" (Ermakoff 2014) and "negative cases" (Emigh 1997) of what migration scholars more often study— immigrants. Knowledge about ex-immigrants can help us more fully and richly understand the challenges of immigration and how giving up an identity as an immigrant is analogous to but also distinct from micro-level transformations of subjective identity in other domains of social life.

Past Research On Why Ex-Immigrants Give Up On Immigrating

Mainland Chinese ex-immigrants are a contextually special and quantitatively consequential case of the general ex-immigrant, considering the large numbers of Chinese migrants in many migrant-receiving countries worldwide. Due to China's exceptionally rapid economic growth, the country has recently offered returnees many profitable economic opportunities to motivate return. However, restrictions on political freedom in China periodically make Chinese citizens anxious about the country's future. Therefore, my findings from this study are probably more generalizable to ex-immigrants originating in societies that also have had a rise in material living standards and restricted levels of political freedom than other less similar cases.

Becoming an ex-immigrant is a case of the more general phenomenon of an individual's subjective social identity changing. Once ex-immigrant subjectivity forms, immigrants abandon

their prior life project of immigrating into another society. Like marriage, taking a new job, buying a house, or becoming a member of an important affiliative group or community, a project to immigrate is a major investment. Like these other decisions, giving up on immigration also entails associated changes in social identity that are often fraught with ambivalent emotions. For example, a popular and academic discourse respectively characterizes ex-immigrants from migrant-sending societies as "failures" and "negatively selective" (Borjas 1989: 476) in strict terms of their income-generating potential in migrant-receiving economies and a Neo-Classical rational choice model of migration which assumes that as long as an individual can earn a higher income by migrating than returning to their country of origin (which is often the case), they will do so. However, I argue that diverse social forces can lead prospective immigrants to give up immigrating, making immigration a far less certain process than viewed by those who may take a rational choice approach.

Past quantitative research about such "return migrants" has focused on measuring how strongly the probability of return migration is associated with discrete migrant traits and aspects of a migrant-origin and migrant-destination society. Generally, migrants are more likely to return if the context of migrant reception is more rural (Treacy 2010), xenophobic, and racist; keeps migrants more spread out and unable to form networks (Basok 2002); and contains professional associations that reject immigrants' educational credentials (Coniglio, Arcangelis, and Serlenga 2009; Thomas-Hope 2019; Venturini and Villosio 2008). Migrants are also less likely to return if they can obtain a secure legal status in the destination society (Constant and Massey 2002; Dustmann, Bentolila, and Faini 1996). Human capital-rich ("high-skilled") migrants often return due to a limited social network in the migrant destination society (Khoo, Hugo, and McDonald 2008). Scholars find that compared to immigrants, return migrants also tend to be married

(Zweig and Wang, 2013) older, remit more (Treacy 2010), have better information about the law and debt bondage (Liu-Farrer 2020), lack friends or a romantic partner in the immigration country (Bloch et al. 2013), have acquired a sufficient amount of retirement money or obtained pension rights, and feel they have culturally adapted less to their host society (Carling 2004).

Scholars disagree, however, about whether return migration is associated with age, sex, state/province of residence in the destination country, proficiency in their host society's language, or their earnings or occupational prestige (Constant and Massey 2002; Hagan, Hernandez-Leon, and Demonsant 2015; Khoo, Hugo, and McDonald 2008; Lam 1994; Thomas 2008; Treacy 2010). Migrants are more likely to return if their country of origin is closer, more "balanced" in economic sectors, and not much poorer than their destination (Basok 2002). Finally, many migrant-origin country governments incentivize emigrants to return. For example, during World War II, Japan actively recruited Japanese-Americans to incorporate their expertise in agricultural development in Japan or Japanese settler colonies of Taiwan, Manchuria, Southeast Asia and Pacific Islands and even later fight militarily against the US (Azuma 2019; Jin 2021). Although the People's Republic of China (hereafter PRC) has specific programs to attract migrant "talents" to return, like the Thousand and One Talent (Youth) Program or its "green card" policy (Hao et al. 2017), scholars have found that these are not representative of returnees in general. Researchers have noted that such programs only target a very selective group, with around 91% consisting of male scholars and STEM scholars (Biao 2011; Zweig, Fung, and Han 2008). Most returnees also have found these programs disappointing (Hao et al. 2017). Notably, none of the participants in this study claimed to have benefited from such programs. In other studies of Chinese human capital-rich return migrants, scholars have found that male student return migrants deciding whether to return tend to be more concerned about

factors affecting their future career development, like their family socio-economic status, human capital, and social networks. In contrast, female students are more concerned about social/family concerns like parental influence toward migration, belonging, and support (Lu et al. 2009). This suggests that gender may be important in mediating decisions to give up immigrating among middle-class migrants.

With respect to time, for decades scholars have argued that the longer migrants stay in a migrant-destination country, the less likely they are to return (King 2015). Therefore, length of stay seems to be an important variable to consider in any analysis. This is especially true if there is a large time zone difference with the origin country (as is often the case for migrants from China) and their jobs reduce the free time to communicate with their origin country (Waldinger 2015). Furthermore, all immigrants often experience anxiety and uncertainty about plans associated with "visa depression" (Jasso 2011), which they confront if the host government implements more restrictive immigration policies while trying to maintain their status. Anti-immigrant policies and various social forces can become so frustrating that immigrants decide it is better to cut their losses and return.

Conceptualizing the Specific Social Forces Behind the Formation of Ex-Immigrant Subjectivity

A migrant's choice to return can be as fraught with ambivalence as the initial decision to migrate, especially considering migrants have already incurred what economists call "sunk costs" (Arkes and Blumer 1985), the expectations of those both the migrant-destination and migrant-origin society that a prospective immigrant will immigrate , and the powerful discursive normative power of the immigrant dream. Scholars have often emphasized that individuals give up immigrating due to a single social force—typically racial-ethnic discrimination (Waters 2008;

Jin 2021). However, this conclusion often seems to derive from retrospective interviews and does not account for how this changes or interacts/intersects with other social forces. Aspiring immigrants must sacrifice much emotionally, mentally, and physically in their journey, investing energy, time, and money. For this reason, the decision to give up on immigrating is frequently gradual rather than sudden and results from multiple interrelated social forces. But what type of social forces unfold across the biography of the ex-immigrant and accumulate to form ex-immigrant subjectivity?

I hypothesize that multiple forces contribute to an ex- immigrant's decision not to immigrate. I diagram these and how they contribute to each other in Figure A1 within the Appendix. These forces are two different general types: adaptational challenges and macro-structural forces. In the early years of an immigrant's arrival to the host society, immigrants' frustration is due to adaptational challenges like their disappointment that the society is not as they had imagined, language barriers they confront, and cultural alienation. Only over time, as they become more fluent in the local language and culture and adjust to the reality of the migrant host society, will immigrants become more acutely sensitive to more macrostructural forces like racial discrimination, the intersectional difficulties of navigating unfamiliar gender norms, the durable obstacles they confront to achieving upward socio-economic mobility, and the government's visa restrictions.

To derive from the narratives of ex-immigrants' a broader range of social forces that interact and reinforce each other, I collected oral life history interviews and some social media post data from middle-income to high-income ex-immigrants of 21 different countries[2], similar to how previous researchers have done with low-income migrants (El Miri 2011; Sarkar 2017).

[2] These countries include Australia, Britain, Canada, Finland, France, Germany, Japan, Netherlands, New Zealand, Norway, Poland, Singapore, Spain, Switzerland, South Korea, and the US.

These narratives document how their identity as an aspiring immigrant gradually first formed from the perceptions of foreign countries during the pre-migration period of their youth and later evolved into the identity of an ex-immigrant from their migratory experiences, allowing them to retrospectively reflect on the meaning and importance of the experience to their decision not to immigrate.

During their earlier phase of migration, ex-immigrants confronted social forces that represented challenges of adapting to the new society. Since I hypothesized that ex-immigrants might find their migrant-receiving society disappointing due to how it differs from their country of origin, I collected data about the ex-immigrants' pre-migration knowledge of foreign countries to understand better their expectations and why they become disappointed with their life in the migrant-destination society.

Although visa policies of the migrant-destination government require many foreigners to typically invest much energy, money, and time within China learning the language of their host society, I hypothesize that many aspiring migrants still confront a language barrier. This makes communicating and understanding social interactions challenging, often amplifying their boredom and frustration. This also contributes to cultural alienation.

In contrast to the strict requirements for prospective migrants' language ability, migrant-destination governments do not have systematic ways to assess potential immigrants' cultural adaptability. Although governments might assume that if a migrant becomes sufficiently fluent in the language they will automatically pick up the culture, I hypothesize that the difficulties in cultural adaptation are consequential even for those who learn to speak the language of their host society fluently. Prior research suggests that in culturally similar societies like Japan, Chinese immigrants often interact more with Chinese than people from other ethnic backgrounds. Such

homophily (McPherson et al. 2001) contributes to them becoming culturally alienated, lonely, and homesick, feeling a "lack of belonging" (Liu-Farrer 2020: 50), even if they have the cognitive ability to master the language to pass required standardized language exams sufficiently. This prior research reveals how such a "lack of belonging" often leads many Chinese people to return because many re-acquire a sense of belonging upon returning to China.

Even after Chinese ex-immigrants adjust to the reality of their new society, acculturate and become more conversant in the language, a different set of four structural-level factors are likely to compel them to give up immigrating. Whereas before, they may have thought the barrier to feeling a part of their host society was related to their lack of culture, language, and adapting to the local lifestyle, even after they overcome such adaptational challenges, they still will suffer a sense of exclusion. First, I hypothesize they are likely to more frequently attribute their exclusion to racial discrimination due to experiences of double-consciousness (DuBois 1965) and stereotype threat (Steele and Aronson 1995). They will come to interpret it as a sign that they will always be a cultural and ethnic "outsider," no matter how hard they strive to become accepted by acquiring Western cultural and economic capital. They know that in their country of origin they would have less reason to wonder if how people interact with them is related to their race.

I hypothesize this sense of exclusion will be particularly acute for those who face challenges navigating the system of gender relations in their host society and do not have a steady romantic partner (Liu-Farrer 2020:50). The Chinese immigrant experience of singledom is quite gendered however: For Chinese men, prior research suggests this can lead to particularly acute intersectional difficulties dating and developing partnerships with and marrying native-born people (Kao, Balistreri, and Joyner 2018). Young Chinese adults, especially women, also

face stronger pressures from their parents to marry and bear children than their counterparts in Western society. Therefore, I would hypothesize that especially for those who reach an age where they feel biologically ready to find a partner, start a family, and bear children and face social pressures to do so, many ex-immigrants see much better prospects for this in their country of origin, which also will incentivize them to return.

Many immigrants can cope with a racialized and gendered sense of exclusion by working harder. But I hypothesize that this generally will not lead them to achieve a sense of belongingness. Instead, ex-immigrants will continue to confront limited upward socio-economic and cross-career mobility due to how historically the labor markets in Western societies in the past 200 years have commodified East Asian immigrants as "alien capital" (Day 2016), which merely serves to more efficiently and extensively expand the migrant-receiving economy's physical and cyber infrastructure while simultaneously limiting immigrants' capacity to contribute to content and design of products. Immigrants' cultural alienation and their higher propensity to interact with those in their ethnic in-group due to homophily will result in difficulties in bridging structural holes (Burt 2009: 349) to individuals and groups with traits different from theirs, limiting their ability to acquire satisfying jobs and other opportunities via "weak ties" (Granovetter 1977: 1360). Even if they can "culturally match" the preferences of employers (Rivera 2012: 1000), culturally embrace more "assertive" leadership styles that are more rewarded in many migrant-receiving societies than in China (Lu, Nisbett, and Morris 2020: 4591), and evade employers' unconscious tendencies of type-cast them via stereotype threat (Aronson and Steele 2016: 797) and stereotype promise (Lee and Zhou 2015: 124), employers in the labor market will prefer only to hire foreigners to pursue technical careers rather than the creative and human-based careers like advertising, product design, counseling, and the arts.

In contrast, ex-immigrants learn and hear of how if they return to their countries of origin with foreign degrees and work experiences, they will find far more opportunities in China to have a more fulfilling career in these latter types of industries. Due to the above factors, barriers to social-economic mobility are far more complex than simply a gap in career opportunities and earnings between migrant-sending and migrant-receiving countries. Other scholars with a more rational-choice orientation have assumed that return migration is driven by the same economistic mechanisms as emigration decisions (Wiesbrock 2008). But the type of "bamboo ceiling" described above calls into question this framework if immigrants derive more psychic or social utility from being in a particular profession than pure monetary compensation.

Exacerbating all the factors mentioned above is how the migrant-receiving society's government usually legally constrains employers' ability to employ immigrants and limits immigrants' choice of occupation. I hypothesize that this results in an "unfree," constrained, or indentured labor and forces ex-immigrants to continually spend energy, time, and money in filing immigration paperwork to maintain a legal status–a form of what others have called "surplus value appropriation" by government and visa brokers (Sarkar 2017:173). This increases their uncertainty about the future and increases the risk of making long-term investments that tie them to the migrant-host society, like purchasing a car, a mortgage on a home, or starting a business and creating jobs for the migrant-host economy.[3] In contrast, aspiring immigrants know that if they return to their society of origin, at least they will not have to regularly file paperwork and pay fees to remain authorized to exist under the law. This makes life back in their country of origin appear relatively carefree and less stressful. For many ex-immigrants, the probability of withstanding all the above-mentioned social forces results in immigration becoming a far less

[3] Not all ex-immigrants are necessarily challenged by or confront all these forces, but how many of them are necessary to constitute ex-immigrant subjectivity is an empirical question.

likely outcome for these prospective immigrants than most migration scholars have conceptualized it in the past.

Analytical Strategy

I draw upon narratives from oral histories and social media posts of ex-immigrants between 2018 to 2022 to generate a data set of 121 ex-immigrants. Unlike many studies of "high-skilled" Chinese migrants that interview individuals in migrant-receiving societies (Lu et al. 2009; Tu and Nehring 2020), I decided to sample ex-immigrants in Mainland China because of recurring empirical evidence of the Attitude-Behavior Consistency problem (Jerolmack and Khan 2014) in empirical research about international migration that results from the widespread over-reliance of interviewing methods: Many immigrants in migrant-receiving societies claim they plan to return to their own country but never do (Al-Rasheed 1994) and migration scholars also have found that many of those who claim they want to emigrate never do so (Siu-Lun 2001). I sampled interviewees in the economically prosperous cities of Beijing, Hangzhou, and Shanghai because I ascertained from prior research (Hao et al. 2017) and pilot fieldwork that most return Chinese migrants returned to settle in such cities rather than their hometown, so they can have a lifestyle that is relatively "freer", less traditional, and more amenity-rich in such cities than in their home town. Return migrants also frequently prefer to work in service occupations (e.g. finance, tutoring, translation services, information technology, education), in which jobs are more plentiful in such cities.

I recruited PRC citizens into the study if they had gone abroad to a foreign country and had hoped to immigrate to that country. I excluded anyone from the sample who naturalized or acquired foreign citizenship, as China's government does not permit its citizens to hold dual nationality. I recruited seed participants from WeChat groups and Western social media

applications, websites, and social media communities with many ex-immigrants. For example, people that have been abroad tend to be overrepresented in specific cyber-communities like those for US university alumni and entrepreneurs. I would often attend their social events which usually function as sources of elite status and social distinction for participants. I found it relatively easy to enter these spaces and interact with participants given my past attendance at selective educational institutions and identity as a White American. Communicating in both English and Mandarin, I was able to recruit and network with people who had been abroad because I met many people through websites like Couchsurfing and MeetMe which are more popular in the West and were accessible from behind China's strong internet firewall via a Virtual Proxy Server (VPN). These Western sites were only visited by a minority of those who know about them in part because they had migrated outside of mainland China.

I concluded that biographically contextualized oral-history interviews were the most practical and appropriate primary method for tracking these shifts from the identity of an immigrant to that of an ex-immigrant. I supplemented this with additional narrative data from social media posts by some of the ex-immigrants on websites like Little Red Book, Zhihu, Wechat, and Bilibili, which contained demographic data and accounts of their experiences shortly after they happened and therefore were not so prone to retrospective bias and reconstructive memory as retrospective interviews (Loftus and Palmer 1974). I interviewed both in Mandarin and English according to the interviewee's preference. I translated oral history interview transcripts and social media posts in Mandarin to English.

Despite my efforts to field-test, compose and ask questions in culturally and linguistically appropriate ways, my positionality as a White US-citizen male researcher inevitably introduced both advantages and disadvantages for data collection. I reflexively learned that many Chinese

ex-immigrants were favorably prejudiced toward someone of my race, which may have aided me at the recruitment stage. However, I was concerned as an American that participants might be reserved or reluctant about revealing negative opinions of the United States and immigration countries. Some may have developed some nationalistic and antagonistic feelings toward the US and other Western societies due to their negative experiences abroad. Fortunately, I have previously traveled widely throughout all the migrant-destination countries they mentioned and every province of China. Mentioning my familiarity with these places may have helped me effectively establish rapport and encourage them to be more open about their experiences.

Table 1 includes relevant summary statistics of my sample for their sex, their age at the time of the interview, age at time they migrated abroad, the number of years they spent abroad, the distribution of educational attainment of all participants, and their parents' joint income in Chinese renminbi. Participants were roughly divided between men and women. All participants migrated legally. US immigration policy is highly selective in admitting those with much higher educational attainment and socio-economic resources than the median citizen within Mainland China so they were mostly middle- to upper-class by the standards of China's society. Most participants at the time of the interview had attained either an undergraduate or graduate degree. Although the income of parents may be a relevant factor, most people in China are reluctant to disclose and even calculate their income, income in China comes from many grey sources, and children do not even learn of their parent's income, so if I could not obtain income data, I computed income figures by linking data I collected about parents' occupation, data on pay by economic sector from the PRC's National Bureau of Statistics, Pew Research Center, Stastica, the Chinese General Social Survey (CGSS) of the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, confirming that most ex-immigrants had parents who earned above the median monthly income

TABLE 1

MEANS, MEDIANS STANDARD DEVIATIONS, MAXIMA AND MINIMA OF KEY VARIABLES, N=121

Binary Variables	yes	no			
female	57.0%	43.0%			
Continuous Variables	Mean	Median	SD	Min	Max
age at time of interview	28	29	7.6	20	65
age at time went abroad	22.8	22	6.3	2	53
years spent abroad	5.8	6	3.9	1	19
estimate of parents joint annual income (RMB)	84404	61724	69485	240	700000
Categorical Variables					
educational level	high school	associate degree	bachelors	masters	Ph.D
	2%	2%	56%	30%	10%

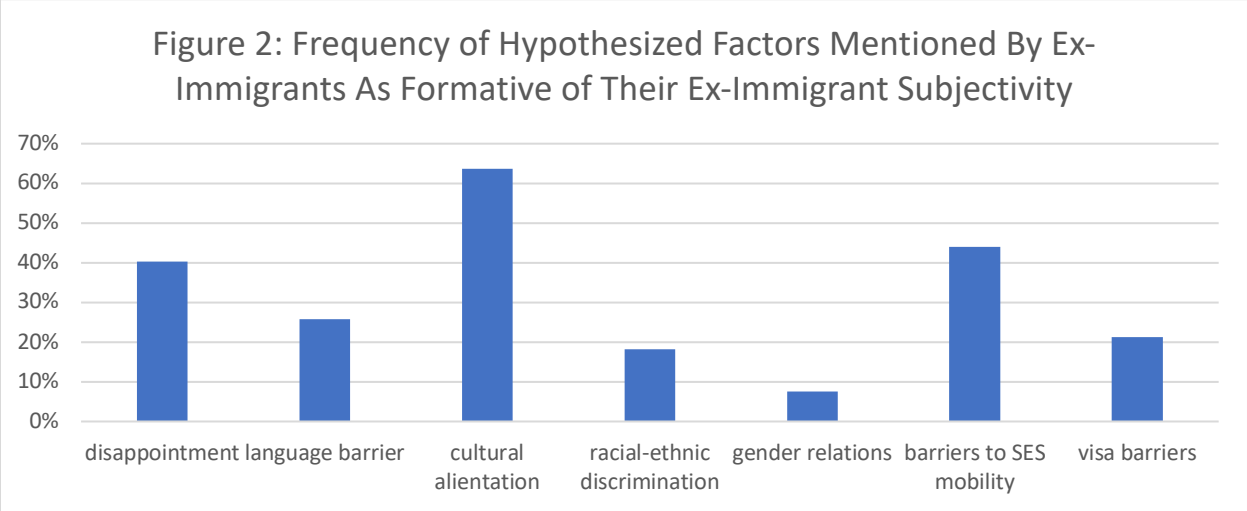
in Mainland China. In the Appendix, Figure A2 shows the percentage of individuals who went to the nine most frequently countries and all the others.

The mean age of someone going abroad was 22.8, and most cases were within six years of this mean, with only a few outliers in the distribution. The mean number of years they spent abroad before giving up immigrating was six years, with most being abroad for two to ten years. This would explain why by the time I interviewed many ex-immigrants they were, on average, 28 years old and most were between the ages of 20 and 36. Over 50% ex-immigrants had acquired overseas full-time work experience ranging from one year to more than six years before returning, similar to previous large-scale surveys of high-skilled return migrants like the Center

for China and Globalization's Report on Employment & Entrepreneurship of Chinese Returnees 2017 (Tu and Nehring 2020). Whereas most previous extensive studies of Chinese returnees in which most individuals have academic backgrounds in STEM subjects and work in next-generation information technology, biological engineering, and the pharmaceutical industry (Wang and Bao 2015), participants in my study have a higher diversity in academic backgrounds and occupations, including many who work in cultural industries, government, and finance. A few participants came to the US before they were 13, and some had lived most of their lives in the country of immigration (1.5 generation immigrants) before they gave up immigrating. A few older participants were fortunate to be among the few that went abroad in the 1980s or in the 1990s soon after Deng Xiaoping allowed more of China's citizens to acquire passports and go abroad, so they had spent many years abroad. But most went abroad to study for either an undergraduate or graduate degree after China's government liberalized its passport laws and joined the World Trade Organization in 2001, and sudden economic growth provided people with more financial resources to go abroad. The median interviewee at least both attended a higher education institution for a 4-year degree and worked for one to two years—typically in their twenties—before they gave up immigrating. Their parents at the time they went abroad had an average income of 84,404 RMB though this varied greatly depending on the year they migrated with a few who migrated in the 1980s or 1990s having parents with substantially lower incomes than most participants who more recently migrated.

I designed my interview schedule—included in the Supplementary Material file—in such a way that did not probe or solicit the factors I had hypothesized but only ask them to share their life history with me and to see which social forces they mentioned, particularly with respect to

how they perceived society other than their own and their experiences as a migrant above. Then I inductively coded their raw narratives to search for the most



frequently mentioned factors forming ex-immigrant subjectivity. Figure 2 shows the frequency with each factor that emerged in ex-immigrants' narratives. None of my questions prompted them to mention any specific factor. As one can observe, cultural alienation is the most common theme, followed by similar percentages mentioning disappointment with the life style of the host-country and barriers to socio-economic mobility, and somewhat fewer participants mentioning language barriers, visa barriers, and racial-ethnic discrimination.

Since much of a participant's experience abroad as an ex-immigrant is related to their pre-immigration life, I begin my interview in the context of their childhood and upbringing, asking how and what they first learned about and perceived other countries, and how those ideas changed as they grew older. This had the methodological benefit of encouraging participants to gain more distance in how they viewed the current state in their life, share experiences, and be more thoughtful, reflective, and aware of how they changed over time as they aged, rather than merely explaining and rationalizing retrospectively to me why they gave up immigrating as is the habit among interviewees without any guidance. This approach also helped guard against

problems qualitative methodologists report encountering with Chinese interviewees—which are arguably applicable to all interviewees—like 1) the tendency to search for the "correct answer" to a question; 2) the wish to move on to the next question rather than elaborate and reflect upon their answer; and 3) a tendency to talk about abstract examples or offer general explanations rather than describing specific experiences from their own lives (Gustafsson, Blanchin, and Li 2016). I followed up with many interviewees if possible and allowed them to amend what they had told me before.

No ex-immigrant regretted going abroad—even though some wished they had returned earlier and not wasted so much time outside of China. Participants often reflected on how their migratory experience transformed them into a citizen of China who—compared to their non-migrant compatriots –was more happy, independent, self-aware, open-minded, appreciative of different lifestyles and choices available to them, and more objective in their view of differences between China and other societies, particularly in recognizing China is not as bad as they had thought earlier. Although migrant-receiving countries also gave many positive impressions to ex-immigrants, due to space constraints, I focus on social forces that led ex-immigrants to gradually become ambivalent and ultimately abandon immigration, since this is the focus of the study. Many interviewees often seemed relieved to honestly express why they changed their mind about immigrating, especially as some noted that they were uncomfortable expressing such views while in migrant-receiving societies and to most people in China whom they felt could not understand or relate to the experiences that the ex-immigrants had had abroad.

Social Factors Constituting Ex-Immigrant Subjectivity

Disappointment With the Migrant-Destination Society

Aspiring Chinese immigrants were disappointed by how their migrant-host society was not how they envisioned it based on what they had learned about it from books, movies, news, television, and friends' stories. Most of what ex-immigrants knew about countries outside of China came from their geography and history classes and prominent current events that teachers in China thought warranted discussion, like the 1999 US bombing of the People's Republic of China (PRC) embassy in Belgrade. Generally, they learned mostly about the negative aspects of foreign societies from the PRC government-controlled news, like gun violence, racism, and widespread drug addiction. Their most important source of information about foreign societies was popular culture, especially the limited number of television and commercial films the government censorship system approved of and would permit to enter the country. However, their parents often conveyed to them the idea that "developed countries" were richer and offered a better education than China.

Yet many prospective immigrants found that little of the information they had received about their host society was relevant to prepare them for what would disappoint them. Notably, due to the positively selective visa policies of most migrant-receiving governments, most grew up in large and developed cities. Many first settled in less urbanized communities of their host society, so many were disappointed by how inadequate and under-developed the transportation infrastructure was relative to their city of origin. Many discovered they needed a car or to take the buses that ran infrequently or did not even arrive on time. Feng, an engineer, described how inconvenient life was for him in Norway and the US without a car: "I needed to spend a half hour in a bus just to go to the supermarket and get food to eat, and then I could only carry home so much on one trip." Ex-immigrants like him also complained about being unable to find affordable Chinese food that they liked, even in nearby countries like Korea. Even those who

lived in more urbanized places, like Wei, a legal assistant, were shocked by how poor the infrastructure was:

"New York City was much dirtier than I expected. The apartments were very aged. The road, the bridge, the electricity grid. They even have those wooden electricity poles for the power lines! Trains did not run according to schedule. It was very dangerous in subway system. People could just push you onto the tracks. Bathrooms were filthy, with big mice running all over the place. All types of homeless people. I witnessed a robbery and a street fight a couple times."

However, despite Wei's initial shock about these conditions, he then explained that over time he gradually adjusted to the reality that the particular neighborhood in Flushing where his parents could afford to rent would not have "new and fancy facilities and people who were much better behaved than in China."

Ex-immigrants were also shocked by the general inefficiency of their host societies. Participants frequently complained about the length of time it took to obtain a debit card, visit a doctor at a hospital, or deliver a package. Lei recounted how she had a toothache when she was in Britain and could not sleep. She made an appointment at a public hospital because it was free for students. But she had to wait for a month before she can register. She learned that she would not be able to see the dentist for one to three months, so she made an appointment at a private hospital, paying two or three times more than she would pay in China. Lei was surprised by this because back home typically she could inexpensively see a doctor on the same day. She also found the process of clarifying the costly medical bills exhausting, as she had to call the insurance company constantly, and no one ever picked up.

Some ex-immigrants described how they found some of the native-born in the migrant-receiving society as "selfish", "obsessed with freedom," and lacking in "self-discipline" and "morality". They were surprised to receive this impression because of a much more prevalent widespread belief in China that people in many migrant-receiving societies were of "high quality" (e.g., meaning well-mannered and better behaved) compared to those in China. Kino, a

journalist, described how she found Americans “spiritually vulnerable”. When asked to elaborate on what she meant by this, she said,

“I think some people are screaming for things that's not a big deal. When I was doing my masters degree, I had a close friendship with this American girl. But every time we were getting ready for our exams, or we had to do a core project, she would go nuts, saying I have a heavy headache, and I have to take some pills. But I think people are making themselves more vulnerable to turn on to drugs to find a release.”

Kino realized she had taken for granted the fact that drugs were not such a pervasive problem in China after observing how extensive the abuse of drugs was in the United States.

Even if Chinese ex-immigrants adapted to such disappointments, what they found most intolerable over time was how “boring”, “quiet”, "monotonous”, and “slow” their host society was compared to China, which they described as far more “innovative”, “dynamic”, and filled with people “eager to achieve something.” When I asked them for examples of what they meant, they said they found fewer stores open for shorter hours, fewer choices in entertainment, and only activities they did not enjoy, like hiking, skiing, sporting events, watching movies, and the pub. Li, a trader and ex-immigrant of Australia, noted how,

“Here [in China] I can have freedom to live a life here and have many choices. In Sydney, it is quite a simple, day-by-day life, like the retired life. That kind of life for me is too simple, and every day is the same. Meanwhile, China keeps changing, every day is different.”

Fen, a trader, seemed to echo this perspective after I asked her what she thought of the lifestyle of Germans. She bluntly proclaimed,

“BORING! You know at the weekend in China, so many people are outside, but in Germany thestores close early and some are not even open on Sunday. In China we can go shopping, then eating, and then singing, but in Germany all I can do is ride the bicycle, read a book, or take walk in the forest.”

Since Fen came from a city where shops stayed open quite late, she was disappointed to find that businesses in Germany did not operate such long hours as those in China and have the practice of a rest day. Neither Li nor Fen found the tranquil activities she mentioned as enjoyable or stimulating as the continuous urban activities they could enjoy in China’s large, bustling (热闹)

cities. Although many found their education and work challenging and engaging, ex-immigrants found life far less convenient (方便) and dull abroad than in China. Such boredom also seemed exacerbated by frustration they experienced communicating with non-Mandarin speakers.

Language Barriers

Despite the tremendous amount of energy, money, and time ex-immigrants needed to invest in learning the local language and pass a language exam so they could acquire a visa, after arriving in their host society many still had trouble understanding the local vernacular language. An education consultant, Jing, found it difficult after arriving in Alabama to understand local people's accent. Their English sounded completely different from what she learned from television and school:

"I kept thinking my English was so bad. I didn't understand at all whatever they were talking about. I had to spend a whole extra year to master learning their English, but I was really struggling. Almost like I don't want to talk to anyone during the first year because I don't know what they are saying to me."

Understanding little of what most people around Jing were talking about would further contribute to her boredom since she could not follow people's conversations. She found herself trying to listen carefully and understand what they said exhausting. She would often tune out and just find herself lost in her own thoughts. Only after an extra year of English study did she gradually begin to understand Southern American English.

Even if ex-immigrants understood nearly all of what they heard, they often had trouble quickly comprehending and responding to their holistic meaning, jokes, and the plays-on-words that they would often hear in more casual conversations outside the workplace. Bo, a former photojournalist immigrant in Canada, spoke of how,

"It's just hard for me to understand what they were talking about, right? When I was helping edit a magazine, I checked the grammar of what they printed in the sample issue. I saw there's a word called Movember. I was going to take it to the chief newspaper editor, thinking it is an error, but then he explained that it was referring to it is November. Because they have this activity where people kept growing their moustaches in November to raise awareness of cancer or something. You might think that sort of thing is rare, but I observed it happening a lot for me."

This made it difficult for Bo to share the cultural meaning that Canadians had and therefore edit their work appropriately.

The language barrier was especially daunting for those in professions which require much cultural knowledge. Mei, an advertiser and ex-immigrant of the United States, recognized her difficulty understanding the language puts immigrants in the marketing profession at an enormous disadvantage compared to the native-born:

"English is our second language. Even if your language is very good, they know more about the cultural background of the language. A professor wants someone to answer a question. Although we (foreigners) may figure out the answer to the question after thinking for a while, we cannot respond as fast as natives because we still need to translate the language before we can answer. We cannot succeed in competing with them."

Silvia said this led her to anticipate that she would also be disadvantaged in getting a promotion in the workplace if she decided to immigrate.

Many spoke of how although they had no trouble communicating with native speakers on a one-on-one basis and in professional settings, they especially had a much harder time communicating even with the same colleagues around the water cooler or in more informal after-work settings in large groups. Tim described how this made it difficult to foster a shared perception, thereby reducing his sense of cultural belonging: "It is difficult to fully integrate into the culture. It is no problem to communicate with colleagues in English, but if you want to talk and laugh, you can't do it." Similarly, Li, a social worker who had tried immigrating to the US, noted how, "If three local people are together and they talk about their local things, it is hard for me to understand. Their use of language made me feel like I was not welcome." Although the

native-born may not have intended to be unwelcoming, ex-immigrants perceived natives' more colloquial use of language during after-work hours and cultural settings—when ex-immigrants admitted to being the most bored—as culturally alienating.

Cultural Alienation, Loneliness, and Homesickness

Many ex-immigrants' boredom with the local people's lifestyle and hobbies and the language barriers both contributed to their cultural alienation, loneliness, and/or homesickness, particularly during the Western holidays and Chinese New Year. Exchange programs for students, au pairs, and work-and-travel cultural visitors often strived to reduce these sentiments and promote acculturation and adaptation by providing accommodation with a local host "pseudo family" (Selling 1931) in the form of a host family or a college dormitory hall community. Yet ex-immigrants faced difficulties communicating deeply with locals due to a lack of shared cultural background even if they had such pseudo family and had to interact with the native-born since there were few Chinese people in their community. A counselor, Zixin, described how he initially wanted to "immerse myself into the local culture" of Grand Rapids, Michigan as a psychology student there. But over time, he confessed

"I realized it's really hard! Maybe for Americans going to a new place in another country,cit only takes a few months to learn about the local scene and make a Chinese friend, but for Chinese people it will take three or four times longer to get to know an American friend…I think having a host family helped, but it also made me realize how difficult it is to really be a part of American society…If you were not born in that culture, you cannot understand what's even funny. You need to wait for an explanation …It's just that strange feeling you have when you are in a community but don't feel like you are a part of it…it affirmed my decision to return to China." Hence, the process of acculturation paradoxically accentuated Zixin's desire to return rather than remain because of the way he became disappointed at the limits of how culturally connected he was to his host family.

Many ex-immigrants described a sense of alienation even in culturally similar societies like Singapore. Shu, a 25-year-old computer program, spoke of how she did not communicate with local Singaporeans because she felt she had a different cultural background from the local people, so she did not communicate much with them. "They don't want to talk about the same

topics. It is not a problem of the language itself," she clarified. Others like Jianyu, a software developer who immigrated to Canada while he was still in primary school, felt that he did not share interests with the native-born he had to work with and felt that social norms constrained him from speaking his mind in big North American cities:

"I don't like football or sports, but I feel that in the US when you meet people around the water cooler you need to know about football to talk to people. I also am not interested in their American politics, all their political dramas! My coworkers in America want to talk about it and I really don't care. And when I speak, many people just disagree with me. I did not feel free there to speak my mind as in China. Here I can criticize gay marriage as freely as I want. I can criticize America. In Canada I can't criticize feminism. But I can criticize feminism here. I feel I can express my thoughts more here. It's ironic, but I feel we have more free speech here in China."

Jianyu began to feel uncomfortable expressing his opinion over time and described feeling more comfortable doing so in China. This extended to the lack of cultural affinity some ex-immigrant toward the popular activities of the native-born. Yao, an engineer who gave up immigrating to Norway, described how, "It's hard to get into the local people's social activities. They like to go to pub very much. I wouldn't say I like it; It is very noisy. I don't like the entertainment. They don't have entertainment in Norway—besides the pub." Due to a lack of interest in spending his leisure time like the native-born, Yao like many ex-immigrants never formed strong friendships with locals.

A lack of interest in locals' conversation often resulted from a lack of understanding about their people's sense of humor. Similarly, Sun, a financier who gave up immigrating into Spain reflected on how when his colleague at a dinner party would tell "a connotative joke, you understand everything literally, but you don't understand why everyone is laughing…how lonely and horrible." A few ex-immigrants described how they would worry about being perceived as awkward or dumb in such situations if they asked the native-born to explain their implicit understanding of something, so they did not ask them, and the native-born rarely proffered an explanation of what was funny. Ex-immigrants would often describe how they would have to

invest a lot more time to befriend a local person, unless that person was the rare type who earnestly wanted to befriend a foreigner and was comfortable spending time with and relating to someone with a different cultural background. When I asked why Lin, an ex-immigrant accountant from Poland, did not make more efforts to interact with locals, she recollected, “I feel like it's troublesome for them”. Therefore, she would avoid befriending locals even though she wanted to get to know them better. Over time, she had the feeling that she would be imposing himself on the native-born to even approach them.

When ex-immigrants tried to connect with others, they felt their efforts were in vain. Lei, an ex-immigrant of Canada, described how,

> “There was a time when I liked to make sandwiches. A black girl who lived next door to me rejected my invitation to come and have sandwiches with me three times in a row, and she said to me: I think we’re just friends. So you start to walk alone, but you fill up your schedule with activities because you know that once you have nothing to do, this feeling of loneliness will overcome you. After you get used to it, you will gradually discover the feeling of watching the world from the sidelines, which will give you a good illusion that you can live by yourself. This illusion terrifies me.”

Many admitted to thinking that this sense of isolation was being a normal part of immigrating due to their perception of their host society as more “individualistic” than China. For many, everyone appeared to be much more on their own in their host society than in China. Although Chinese ex-immigrants recalled how many native-born would jokingly comment on how they were too hard-working and needed to have more fun, many ex-immigrants explained that they threw themselves into their work as an escape from feelings of cultural alienation. For this reason, many ex-immigrants eventually ended up spending time with their co-ethnics if they were around, even though several felt this was out of necessity and for mutual benefit rather than genuine friendship.

Eventually, ex-immigrants concluded that striving to become more "cool" or likable necessitated that they would have to become like somebody they were not, provoking their desire to return. The photojournalist Bo spoke of how he would ask as he looked at himself in the mirror,

"Should I change myself, whiten myself to be more like the local people, or maybe I should not, because this may lead to an identity crisis? Why should I do this? Why should I give up all my unique cultural background? If you want to immerse in the local people, you have to do that. For example, they play baseball; they watch baseball. Do I really want to talk about this? I would have to learn how to play, but that takes time…Even if you adjust yourself, that does not mean everybody will accept you. you're just an immigrant, and everyone knows you are just an immigrant."

Bo and other recent immigrants viewed adapting to life in another culture as not only a process of addition but also of subtracting from their cultural perspective. This necessitated sacrificing an integral part of their identity. Eventually, many ex-immigrants realized that those who were comfortable around the native-born had a much stronger aspiration and will to immigrate. Still, many did not really desire to become part of a different culture that was not their own. As a 26-year-old teacher, Xi, reflected on her time studying and working in the United States,

"After six years, I have come to understand that integrating into American society is not an objective state that can be judged by 'understanding 95% of late-night talk shows', but a psychological state. And I haven't reached it yet. The more critical problem is that I don't want to reach it. I don't want to get involved."

As Xi elaborated, she would much rather check her We Chat for news about China that interested her than learn about the news from a US source. These ex-immigrants of color, however, who successfully acculturate eventually realize that racial-ethnic discrimination constitutes another formidable barrier for them to become recognized and accepted by the native-born as members of society.

Racial-Ethnic Discrimination

Although ex-immigrant interviewees expressed having a vague awareness of racial-ethnic discrimination, most only became more sensitive to it after they had overcome the previously mentioned challenges of adapting to society. Ting, a human rights lawyer, described how a high-school trip to Britain enchanted her. At an early age, she became an avid reader of Jane Austen novels and a viewer of the British Broadcasting Corporation, even believing British people to be more elegant and bettered-mannered than Chinese people. She spent more than five years studying and working in France and another year in Britain. But the more time she spent in both countries, the more she realized Europeans did not respect her. Even in the cosmopolitan city of Paris, she repeatedly encountered anti-Chinese verbal attacks. Ting stressed how she did not decide to return to China right after a single experience but only after multiple experiences. To her surprise, she paradoxically confronted more racial-ethnic discrimination the *more* fluent and conversant she became in the English and French culture and language. Chaoxiang echoed Ting's experience in noting how the first time he had someone shout "Ching Chong" to him in Australia, it did not bother him at all—he was just perplexed. But after he learned what it meant and heard it several more times, it started to bother him. Hearing "Ching Chong" also was a common experience of other Chinese ex-immigrants in public spaces, with others being robbed and not reporting it to the police, both due to concerns about racial discrimination. Over time, many even became more suspicious of strangers who walked close behind them in public places where they might be attacked.

Compared to those ex-immigrants who came to their migrant-receiving society as an adult, ex-immigrants who grew up in their host society seemed to have developed a stronger form of racial consciousness due to their experiences of racial discrimination. Jianyu realized other schoolchildren were not willing to become his friends around the age of nine: "All the

people that were willing to become my friends were Chinese, Korean, and Russian immigrants." He acknowledged that it was only a couple of children who were overtly racist in making remarks to him like, "You fucking immigrant, go back to your country!" Rather than becoming angry, he tried to be "objective" and rationalize why he confronted such hatred. He learned of how many native-born feared that so many Chinese people were moving to Vancouver and their investment in real estate was causing housing prices to increase, so people could not afford to rent a place. He reasoned that the racial attacks were just the local people's irrational way of expressing their frustration about this phenomenon. However, as he repressed his anger about it, he discovered "I became even more nationalistic, more self-aware of my Chinese identity. As China developed more of its own search engines and websites, I could learn more about China and see that it was better" than either Canada or the US, both societies into which his parents had earlier expected he would immigrate. This gave Jianyu information about China which he identified more with culturally and began to view as superior to Western societies. He eventually decided to return to China since he eventually identified more as Chinese than Canadian or American.

Other ex-immigrants perceived racial-ethnic discrimination as undermining their inherent worth, so they come to cynically perceive it as "a means to an end" due to the lack of a reciprocally affective relationship with the migrant-host society. I met Cui outside Beijing's US Embassy in March of 2015 while I was doing a survey of denied non-immigrant visa applicants. He burst out laughing when I approached him, soliciting an interview from him in Mandarin. He responded with the strong drawl evocative of a native-born American from the South, "What the fuck are you talking about? Visa interview? I just surrendered my green card man!" When I asked him why he did so, he responded: "I don't want to have to keep paying taxes when most of

my businesses are in China. I think obtaining a ten-year tourist visa makes more sense, and I want to get one before Trump becomes president and takes it away. That motherfucker is crazy." Cui elaborated on how he understood Trump's political rise as symbolic of what really disturbed him about US society:

> "the racism. I lived in Nashville, Tennessee, so I experienced the worst of it. They treat me like shit over there until I come into a store and spend over a thousand dollars. The country is full of all these stupid white men that vote for Trump and they treat you like crap. Which is stupid because I am more whitewashed than you are. I am a DJ here and own clubs where I fuck lots of white girls, most of them dancers!"

From Cui's perspective, if the US government was only going to tax the profits from his business and yet its society still did not offer him the respect that he felt he deserved, he would much prefer to remain a national of China, where he can enjoy more of his income, have more fun, and bolster his racial and masculine ego through the seduction of white women. Indeed, how racial discrimination undermined ex-immigrants in such an intersectional way also touches on the parallel challenges ex-immigrants faced in navigating a different system of gender norms in their host society.

Navigating Unfamiliar Gender Norms As a Source of Disenchantment

When I asked many ex-immigrants what might have led them to immigrate rather than return to China, the modal response was if they had found their "significant other" in the host society. Dating native-born members of the opposite sex seemed more challenging for the men I interviewed than the women. Most Chinese ex-immigrant men I surveyed were more reluctant than women to discuss their direct experiences dating and interacting with the opposite sex. Typically, they would explain why they had not found a partner through observations or their beliefs rather than their own experiences. Jianyu spoke of how after giving up on immigrating into Canada, he encountered the same problem in the US as he did in Canada:

"I was a programmer, so dating was hard. In the US, most Asian American women only date white guys. Just go to any restaurant in Seattle. All the Asian women in the restaurant are with white guys. All the Asian guys are single. Here [in China] at least I can get dates. In Seattle, every Asian guy is either an electrical engineer working for Boeing or a software developer working for Microsoft or Amazon. It is more homogeneous…If I stay in the US, I probably will be single forever."

This feeling of being physically undesirable made life in the US unattractive for Jianyu—even if he could earn a far higher income as a computer scientist in North America than he would back in China. Whenever I probed further for specific dating experiences he and other Asian men had, they often would not mention any, alluding instead to cultural prejudices like how Asian women prefer white men to Asian men because the US colonized Asia or that Americans and other Westerners see China as a threat, with Asian men demonized and depicted as creeps or losers, and Asian women are sexualized.

Those male ex-immigrants I interviewed who did succeed in finding a native-born partner in the US often decided to break up with them due to fear that their parents might disapprove of them as a spouse. Peng, who dated a white American girlfriend for a long time, recalled how in the US, he was worried that his parents would not be able to accept her culturally. "I had a good relationship with my ex-girlfriend. We just could not stay together because my Chinese parents would not accept a wife from a foreign culture. I had to listen to what mom and dad said." Many other male ex-immigrants would often note that their cross-cultural relationships enriched their time abroad, but they viewed them neither as having marriage potential nor avenues for immigration. Regardless of age or education level, more than half of the several Chinese ex-immigrant men who immigrated with their Chinese partners or wives later separated or divorced them and returned to China. In contrast, their ex-partner (who several sometimes obliquely suggested had left them for another man) remained in the US. Geneticist Huizhong explained how he and many other Chinese men were much more tempted by the growing opportunities that

China's dynamic economy offered them than women, whereas their wives were more risk-averse and preferred more "stable" places, which relative to China they understood the migrant-host society to be.

Young ex-immigrant women often said they returned to China because they faced pressure from their parents to marry before they were 28. Based on both personal experience and "sad stories," Ruan discovered that men in the US were not dating to find a marriage partner as much as they were in China: "You definitely will have sex with your boyfriend. In the US, finding the right person is not so easy." After a while, she reasoned that it might be easier to find a more suitable partner back in China. Similarly, Nuo, a 26-year-old engineer, told me, "I thought if I can't find someone in the US, then I probably could find someone in China. So that is one reason I came back." Her parents, frequently asking her about when she was going to marry, eventually persuaded her that she would have an easier time finding a partner in China. But she became very emotional in our interview that after having been in China for around a year she had not found "Mr. Right." She seemed anxious and insecure about being single. She explained how returning to China brought her comfort that at least there her parents could help her find a marriage partner.

Several ex-immigrant women and gay men described how they feared giving up their independence by immigrating through marriage, even after several men proposed to them and offered a clear pathway to citizenship. Fen, a 29-year old interior designer, described how while she was working as an engineer in San Francisco she dated a US citizen in San Francisco. At one point, he asked her if she wanted to just marry him and eliminate her daily-mentioned stress of applying for student visas at community colleges while working until she could win the H1-B lottery. But she chose not to do so: "Getting a green card did not seem a good enough reason to

marry someone and somehow wrong. I did not think either of us wanted to marry, even though we were romantically involved. I ended up giving up and coming back here [China], so we split up." Similarly, despite the happy relationship that Zhan had in Switzerland with her boyfriend, she eventually decided to return to China due to the lack of economic opportunities there. As she reasoned, "I don't want to be a housewife. If I stayed, I don't speak the local language. The best thing I can get is like a tourist guide or a housewife or, you know, earn shitty money." Zhan's comments point to how even those who manage to establish a satisfying, stable, and equitable relationship are not willing to continue to immigrate if the immigrant-host society presents too many obstacles for them in ascending their careers.

Limited Opportunities for Socio-economic and Career Mobility Relative to China

Racial discrimination, language barrier, and cultural alienation contributed to the difficulties ex-immigrants had in obtaining vertical socio-economic and career mobility. One male ex-immigrant, Yu, who worked for 7 years in Canada as an engineer, reflected on how,

> "When faced with a job, your output value is higher than your colleagues, and you have also worked hard to socialize to integrate, but the upper management will still put other people before you for "racial' reasons. Some people can be promoted after working for a year, and some people can be promoted after working for ten years."

This was not unique to Western countries, as another ex-immigrant of Japan, Hu, spoke of how Japanese managers would always treat their Chinese employees as "little brothers." Eventually, even if they sometimes noted that the pressure was less and the pace of work was slower than in China, most of the ex-immigrants became frustrated with barriers to upward mobility the longer they worked, especially if they were ambitious. The geneticist Huizhong came to the US in the 1980s to earn a Ph.D. He then worked hard with the dream of earning a Nobel Prize. Huizhong spoke of how he found it hard to accomplish anything due to how developed and established

most industries were in the US. In contrast, his industry was booming when he returned to China in 1997. This attracted him back, even if it required him to live far away from his wife and children who remained in the US.

Others who returned in more recent decades also spoke of how they preferred to pursue more high-risk and high-return ventures and self-employed careers that were increasing in China even if they had a stable job abroad, which they viewed as limiting in terms of upward socioeconomic mobility or not aligned with their career goals. Ai, a businessman and ex-immigrant of New Zealand, noted,

"Although Asian people work especially hard, they usually don't get very good jobs like office jobs. I was a sales assistant in New Zealand. I mean, it's not bad. It makes money. But in China, I make more money by running my business without working every day. Working in New Zealand, you work today, you make some money; you don't work tomorrow, you don't make money. I think having your own business in New Zealand as a foreigner is very difficult, especially since I can't invest that much."

Ai, like many entrepreneurs, saw far more opportunity in China to run his own business than he could have in New Zealand, since he found it far easier to attract investors than abroad.

Ex-immigrants expressed how due to a greater range of career opportunities in China, they felt like they had more "freedom" in China than they did abroad. Fen explained how in Germany,

"I face the ceiling, so I cannot get the higher promotion. In China, it is different because here I have freedom: If I remained in Germany I would work in a low-level occupation like a waitress or a secretary in a small company or just be an employee at a Chinese business. But in China, I can find a good job, like in the export-import business. To stay Germany would be a waste of my life."

For her and many other ex-immigrants, "freedom" meant not civil liberties and political rights as it does for many Westerners but instead not facing the constraints of either socio-economic ceiling or limited range of career options. Therefore, for her and other ex-immigrants, China was a much freer than any liberal-democratic society, even if that derived more from economic freedom than political freedom. This was true even for ex-immigrants in cultural industries that

greatly valued political freedom, like the arts. Wu, a director and dancer of a cultural institute in Beijing who was an ex-immigrant in Germany, noted how he even had more opportunities to engage in new artistic activities in China than he had during his eleven years in Europe. But for many, freedom also was also the ability to engage in the broader array of occupations, which was particularly the case for those in cultural industries. Many noted how unfortunately if you want to both be an international student and work abroad, "you can only bite the bullet and learn computer science," or in the words of another, "I can only do a technical job and give up my favorite investment/entrepreneurial projects/small businesses. For me, I feel that life is less fun. I didn't want to limit my youth to this one position, so I chose to go back." Returning to China therefore expanded the career possibilities of many ex-immigrants.

Wei, who cared deeply about social justice, helped his immigrant mother campaign for Hillary Clinton in her race to become governor of New York. He was inspired to tears when Obama won the presidential election. He once aspired to become a political leader in the US. But he began to become disenchanted with the idea of immigrating to New York City while completing his J.D. in immigration law. Although he had completed two additional bachelor's degrees as a double major in US History and American Political Science on top of his bachelor degree in English from China, other law students of color told him that he was not qualified to speak about racial issues as a Chinese immigrant.

> "They would tell me you are even more economically well-off and privileged than whites. They would talk about economic differences between Indian and Chinese immigrants. They would say your country grows fast. Once you get a US education you can go back, whereas Indians will not go back. Even though I was very committed to American society and social justice, I feel like I was marginalized there."

Despite his best efforts to contribute to US society through progressive politics, Wei did not feel an adequate sense of belonging and inclusion as an immigrant, even within progressive political

movements, reducing his sense of belonging even among those segments of US society he genuinely aspired to belong.

But Wei confronted an even more visible ceiling when he moved with his two-year old daughter and wife to Arizona so she could get a Ph.D in Accounting and he could obtain a Ph.D. in Sociology.

> "In New York City, people would treat you politely and quietly even though you are in their eyes you are a perpetual foreigner. But in Arizona, they are more straightforward. They don't care how long you have been in US, how much you know about the US, or whether you are better educated than many people in Arizona. They see you like an invader."

Concerned he would continue to confront barriers to upward socio-economically mobility if he pursued an academic position in the US even after earning a bachelors from China and two bachelors, a J.D., and a Ph.D from the US, he reasoned that after 15 years of immigrating that he would be able to contribute more to society as a professor in China. As he reflected upon why everyone in his family gave up immigrating, he spoke of how "all of my family members ran into things that made our American dreams…delusional." Since research cited earlier suggests that having a high level of education, being married, and having children in the migrant-host society are all strongly associated with the probability of immigrating, Wei represents a strikingly "least likely case" of an immigrant confronting socio-economic obstacles to upward mobility and becoming an ex-immigrant.

Others began to recognize that their cultural capital remained a liability and a handicap in how productive they could be abroad compared to China. Bo, the photojournalist, migrated to Canada when he was 29 and at first believed that his ability to earn income with his camera skills was a definite strength because it allowed him to evade the cultural and language barriers that limited how much other immigrants could contribute to their host society. But over time, he realized how,

"When you are an immigrant, you're working for another country, and so you don't have that much of a privilege. Your language skills, social skills are weaknesses. So, you need to work even harder than the locals. You do more than other people, but even so, you may not achieve what you want. It is harder for immigrants to reach the top of the social system. But when you're in your home country, you don't have this same problem, because what was a weakness in the immigration country is a strength where you are from. So, I started thinking, okay, should I stay there [in Canada] and always make up for that weakness my whole life? Or should I just go back to China, where that weakness is a strength? Some people are just living in a Chinese community for their whole life. But if you do that, then what made you go to another country in the first place? And that group is so small, what can you achieve with them?"

Bo evoked how by migrating abroad, much of the education that immigrants had acquired as children, in fact, becomes a liability and is wasted in a social context in which it has little value. By returning, Bo could suddenly capitalize on both his Chinese and foreign education in a society where *both* were more highly valued than in Canada. In sum, if racial-ethnic discrimination limits upward socio-economic mobility to such an extent that migrant-origin society offers more economic freedom and opportunity than "countries of immigrants," many will give up immigrating, despite any sunk costs they had incurred. Visa policy and bureaucratic procedures further intersectionally magnify such occupational immobility, making legal immigration even less desirable for those who want a fulfilling and meaningful career.

Visa Restrictions

Many ex-immigrants reported how visa restrictions contributed to the above-mentioned lack of upward socio-economic mobility and their decision to give up immigrating before their visas expired. Ex-immigrants noted how uncertainty about immigration status induces more uncertainty about other time-sensitive aspects in life, like a romantic partnership and marriage, financial investments, further education, child-rearing plans, rental leases, investments in durable goods (e.g. cars or household appliances), mortgage-committed home purchases, or career choices. Many confronted a firm deadline date of what I term "visa reckoning," after which they will face a multi-year bar from re-entering if they overstay their visa. Before this day, ex-

immigrants described how they had to consider whether they are willing to remain in their host country as unauthorized or return to legal employment in their migrant-sending country.

All the ex-immigrants I interviewed, coming from relatively middle-class backgrounds, dismissed the overstay option as infeasible and even "stupid". They interpreted this as asking them whether they should take a job in the highly exploitative informal economy with its foreign language and culture over a high-status career in the formal sector within China. Song, a marketer who gave up on immigrating to both the Netherlands and Britain, noted how in both countries she had to renew her visa all the time to maintain her legal status. This was a particularly wrenching, frustrating, and opaque process in the Netherlands:

> "It's a very bureaucratic society, so it's not very transparent. You don't know where your application is in the queue. Sometimes I got a visa but by the time I received it, it is already expired. I couldn't leave the country during that process—I could not do anything about it. And there is many limitations to the jobs I could do. My employer had to prove that I have unique skills that they couldn't hire an EU citizen for. I got tired of the lack of job security and just wanted a stable career, so I came back to China."

Song noted that if the visa procedure had been more straightforward, she might have considered remaining. But like many ex-immigrants she reasoned that in China they could more fully focus on being more efficient and productive in their job and advancing in their career since they did not need to engage in bureaucratic procedures to maintain legal immigration status continually.

Some countries like Australia restricted visas to remain to only those that could obtain high scores on standardized language exams than they needed to enter. Ju, an international trader, noted how although she could understand enough English to comprehend what Australians were saying, she had to obtain a higher score on an exam, but she continually failed to do so: "I didn't want just to stay there and take tests. The process will cost you a lot of time and money. The time I am spending on studying, I could instead be working. The whole process

was too costly in terms of time." Eventually Ju realized that she had to study additional hours that she could devote to earning income, reducing her ability to contribute to the Australian economy and society.

Others alluded to how in many countries like Japan and the US to "win" a skilled worker visa (e.g., H1B visa in the US) via a lottery system, ex-immigrants would maintain their status even after graduating with a post-graduate degree by enrolling in a community college or some sort of educational institute. Many ex-immigrants would only attend a certain number of classes to pass because they found the coursework boring and unchallenging. They became tired of taking classes so that they can maintain legal immigration status. Winning such a "lottery" for a skilled worker visa was particularly hard for ex-immigrants that had studied humanities or social science subjects. As Shu, an ex-immigrant interior designer from the US, described it, this liminal, quasi-legal game of "pay-to-stay" by attending classes in which she had very little interest was extremely tedious and she found returning to China and having "a real career" much more appealing.

Most interviewees viewed migrant-receiving societies as more politically unstable than China since the policy frequently shifts depending on which political party and leader controlled the current government, making it difficult for them to plan over the period of a single election cycle that courses of academic study often straddled. After Donald Trump's election in the US, given his anti-immigrant politics many college graduates describe to me how they decided that obtaining the paperwork would be too daunting and frustrating to hang on for additional years with hopes that another more immigrant-friendly party would win the next election. Although ultimately an ex- immigrant's decision to not immigrate was likely most influenced by all the social forces I described previously, even if they still did not give up despite such forces,

increasingly restrictive visa policies ultimately led most to conclude that they would have a happier life in China than as an unauthorized immigrant in a foreign country.

Conclusion: Ex-Immigrant Subjectivity Formation As An Instance Other Identity Changes

This research contributes to a more biographically rich and processual perspective than prior scholars of "return migration" on how formerly aspiring immigrants become ex-immigrants. Knowledge about how aspiring immigrants give up on immigrating also contributes to the broader social science literature about subjectivity formation in other domains of social life like marriage, jobs, education, and group membership. In these domains, actors also have devoted themselves to some life project and have become attached to it being successful and the identity they develop associated with the project. Yet if immigrants cumulatively confront the above social forces over time, many eventually cut their losses and abandon those projects along with the social ties associated with them.

Exit from life projects in other domains is both different from and similar to abandoning immigration, however. For example, "uncoupling" (Vaughan 1986: 7-9) or the dissolution of a romantic relationship, is a similarly formative experience redefining an individual's identity. This type of loss also leads to a transformed identity with respect to emotional affect, attachment, and support provided by others. As in the formation of ex-immigrant subjectivity, relationship dissolution transforms the social relationships of the subject. As with the decision not to immigrate, the process is typically first only known to the closest friends of those separating becoming aware a separation is happening and those less close to them realizing it only later. The phenomenon is also asymmetrical insofar as the "initiator" of the dissolution, like the ex-immigrant, makes the first move to exit.

But abandoning immigration is different from uncoupling in that the ex-immigrant is not breaking off ties with another person but with a whole society. This may make the process easier since often separated individuals do not leave their physical communities and therefore maintain more of their prior ties. But this can make it more costly because whatever benefits are associated with inhabiting the society may not be recoverable. Compared to ex-immigrants, those exiting relationships more frequently face the challenge of redefining and self-validating their new uncoupled identities more outside of the partnership to others that seem them as changed.

Another related yet distinct analog to the ex-immigrant subjectivity is what happens when an individual converts from one religion or leaves a changing political party. This is also related to a group identity, even though it is subnational. For example, like ex-immigrants, those who lose religious faith often experience intense loss (Zuckerman 2015:155) and lack the affective bonds and intensive interactions with those in the religious group that facilitate conversion and retention (Stark and Finke 2000). A person about to give up a religion (or a political party or another group that involves conformity in personal belief) also can experience a loss of friends and experience cognitive dissonance in saying things they do not actually believe, particularly if the group suddenly changes over time. They also often witness behavior by religious leaders they deem immoral but did not notice Field (Zuckerman 2015:89), similar to how many formerly aspiring immigrants begin to recognize negative aspects of their host society that causes them to question immigrating. As the narratives above demonstrate, those who give up immigrating also experience a similar type of cognitive dissonance as those frustrated with changes in their religion, their political party, or another group either between what they believed about migrant-receiving countries and what they discover after arriving there or due to the way the society's character changes while they are there.

However, the subjectivity of leaving a macro-social group is also different from the formation of ex-immigrant subjectivity in that the subject in the former case often continues to live in the same physical area. Those who leave social groups still occasionally confront the former group members as an ex-member, and frequently they become alienated by family and friends ostracize them (Zuckerman 2015:71). This can be socially and cognitively toxic or draining for them, particularly if former group members ostracize them or designate them as a traitor. Yet ex-immigrants are not only giving up their social ties to the migrant-receiving society. They also typically move away from others in the group they formerly belonged to. They often have family in the country of migrant origin. Therefore, they do not have to so frequently confront group members or relive any trauma or cognitive dissonance associated with the experience as a former group member. Furthermore, becoming an ex-immigrant does not necessarily involve changing one's ideological beliefs or behavioral practices as much as religious conversion or changing one's political party does.

Ultimately, ex-immigrant subjectivity then constitutes another way in which many in society give up a social identity. Yet, although many social scientists have extensively documented the sacrifices that migrants make to become part of immigrant-receiving societies and have studied return migrants as a general population, far fewer have theorized what it subjectively means for someone to give up immigrating. Further research about how ex-immigrant subjectivity forms can potentially contribute additional sociological insights into how identity forms in distinct different social domains and vice versa.

One limitation of this study is that some of my participants may have been unwilling to discuss some negative and deeply personal experiences from the recent past. This sometimes seemed to be the case with issues like navigating gender norms, relationship break-ups,

acknowledging an individual's failure to achieve their goals, or traumatic changes in familial relations. In terms of the scope conditions for the study, the experiences of the ex-immigrants quoted here are also not necessarily generalizable to migrants from other nation-states, especially those whose societies of origin have tragically become embroiled in civil war or that suffer from so much rampant life-threatening crime that they arrive to migrant-receiving societies with a desperate state of mind or seek refuge. Yet since historically, most scholars of migration have focused on how migrants endure all the obstacles to their immigration or return migrants who never intended to immigrate, we have until now relatively less knowledge of those that change their minds about immigrating into migrant-receiving societies. The above accounts of ex-immigrants reveal how social forces and factors in "countries of immigration" result in many not immigrating. Although ex-immigrants' experiences have received less attention than those of immigrants, greater knowledge about them is just as important as that of immigrants to empirically understand how immigrants are different than ex-immigrants and more deeply appreciate what an important sociological phenomenon immigration is.

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