‘Grafted Transnationalism’: the Learning Experience of Stay-at-home International Students

Abstract: What new forms of education transnationality are being introduced by the COVID-19 pandemic? How does this new transnationalism intersect with and contribute to international students' existing (dis)advantages in longer processes of transnational connections and social reproduction? This paper employs Henri Lefebvre's rhythmanalysis to examine the contextual and situated experiences of stay-at-home students in China who completed their degrees remotely during the pandemic. By dissecting the embodied spatio-temporal routines and disordered practices of stay-at-home transnational students, rhythmanalysis sheds light on the fabrics of stay-at-home transnationalism. Furthermore, this paper suggests that the dual regime of digital mobility and physical immobility gives rise to 'grafted transnationalism': a distant, nonlocal life is seemingly 'grafted' onto the local one through a regular, recurring mixture of two sets of rhythms, causing corporeal and social consequences. Students were not subject to these consequences uniformly but exhibited uneven capacities for avoiding rhythmic deviations and disruptions.

Keywords: rhythmanalysis, educational transnationalism, international students, remote learning, COVID-19

Introduction

The last two decades have seen a growing interest in the study of educational transnationalism. Scholars have proposed that the movement of students be seen as an integral part of the international migration system (Vertovec, 2002). International students have comparable motivations to other migrants, such as seeking employment opportunities (Liu-Farrer, 2009), career transitions (Wiers-Jenssen, 2008), or even permanent residency (Baas Michiel, 2006; Hazen & Alberts, 2006). Furthermore, schools and universities provide students with opportunities to grow their transnational networks and succeed as potential skilled workers (Vertovec 2002; Wiers-Jenssen, 2007). However, the rewards of transnational education are not indiscriminate. Mobility is increasingly recognized as a kind of capital in itself (Murphy-Lejeune, 2003), which intersects with, or is nested within, other forms of mobilities, such as family formation, career development, or even class reproduction (Findlay et al., 2012; Xiang & Shen, 2009).

The outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic disrupted the taken-for-granted social order of international education and provided a new scenario for the debate on education transnationalism. International students are one prominent group among millions of migrants leading precarious lives under the new ‘immobility regime’ of COVID-19 (Brandhorst et al., 2020; Merla et al., 2020). Physical immobility hinders the development of conviviality and close relationships between students and their international professors (Cairns et al., 2021; B. Wang, 2021), as well as their plans to enhance their international employability, form nonlocal social networks, and develop an attachment to other transnational communities (Cairns et al., 2021; Skovgaard-Smith, 2021; Wang, 2022). Before we thoroughly rethink the supposed gains and losses for international students, their home countries, and their host countries, we need to examine the emerging educational transnational life after COVID-19.

Using Henri Lefebvre's ([1992] 2004) rhythmanalysis, a perspective that explores time, space, and place holistically, this study reveals the lapses and orders of the international students' everyday lives, as well as their dynamic subjectivities within this historically situated context.

The article proceeds as follows: we will first briefly review two specific perspectives in the studies of educational transnationality that are of particular relevance to our study: the embodied approach and the temporal approach. Then we will introduce Henri Lefebvre's ([1992] 2004) rhythmanalysis as a lens that integrates the advantages of both approaches and provides a valuable framework for examining our research questions. Then we will elaborate on the alternating, sometimes conflicting sets of rhythms that the student bodies live through as international students and local residents respectively. After we explain why a constant readiness of the individual body to respond to and orchestrate different rhythms constitutes the core of the new 'grafted transnationalism', we will finally point to the uneven nature of this new transnationalism and the costs of the immobility regime under the unprecedented context of the pandemic.

Body, Place, and Time of Education Transnationality

International education constitutes a vibrant sphere of 'sustained forms of transnational activity' (Portes et al., 1999). Studies have focused on what these activities produce or comprise about transnationality. Two of the approaches that emerge from these studies are of particular interest to our research: an embodied approach and a time-sensitive perspective. Before proceeding to a review of rhythmanalysis, in which this study is theoretically rooted, we will first outline the critical contributions of the two approaches to see how they could inform our rhythmanalysis and bring new insights into the challenges of immobile transnationality.

To prevent an unbounded adoption of the term 'transnational,' an embodied approach debunks the 'frictionless' myth of movements (Connor, 2009; Dunn, 2009) and reveals the necessity to acknowledge the impact of national power and territorial borders on transnational mobility (Crang et al., 2003). Accordingly, international students are considered part of an economic and social network where they are 'historically situated and culturally constituted' (Collins, 2013; Yeoh et al., 2003), bound within specific 'law, economic and political power, and regulating and regularizing institutions' (Crang et al., 2003). Being both 'bearers' and 'agents', international students' everyday practices to navigate the different physical and nonphysical places continually reconfigure time and space by creating new identities and maintaining cross-border relationships (Spangler, 2022; Yeoh et al., 2003; Collins, 2009a). The emphasis of this approach on the 'embodied-self' also draws attention to the uneven landscape of 'gains' and the significance of in situ and bodily presence (Ley, 2004; Dunn, 2009; Sidhu & Dall'alba, 2012; Waters and Leung, 2013).

When considering educational transnationality from a time-sensitive perspective, scholars theorize opportunities, struggles, and predicaments of migration at both the everyday and life course levels (Hansen, 2005; Griffiths et al., 2013; Robertson, 2014). Rather than viewing migration as a one-time event, scholars encourage considering mobility as a process that can be disrupted, linear, cyclical, or repetitive (Wang, 2021; Connor et al., 2022; Marucco, 2022), thereby allowing immobile communities to be included in transnational studies (Robertson, 2014; Baas and Yoeh, 2018). Researchers can also examine how different stages of mobility affect individuals' life pathways from a processual angle. Student

mobility at some point in time impacts decisions made by themselves in the past, present, and future (Frandberg, 2014). This lens thus requires investigating students' everyday strategies in the context of a broader time frame (Spangler, 2022).

As we join this discussion genre, we argue that the 'immobility regime' of COVID-19 creates a new scenario for 'possibilities, politics, and costs' (Yeoh, 2005). On the one hand, structural barriers such as the closure of campuses, the reduction in international flights, unpredictable visa appointment scheduling, and reduced employment opportunities in host countries have created a situation of embodied stuckness, one that is inherently unequal when it intersects with individuals' economic and social capital gaps (Salazar, 2021; Wang, 2021). On the other hand, courses have been moved online and necessitated the prevalence of 'practices of simultaneity' (Cairns et al., 2021; Wang, 2021), creating what might be termed 'digital mobilities' (Urry, 2016).

Our study thus aims to explore the dual spatial-temporal regime of international education under COVID-19 and its ambiguous implications regarding the emergence of alternative forms of educational transnationalism. This paper asks: What new forms of education transnationality are being introduced by the intersection of digital mobility and physical immobility? How does this new transnationalism intersect with and contribute to students' existing (dis)advantages in longer processes of transnational connections and social reproduction? This paper is interested in answering these questions by taking on the everyday spatio-temporal 'details' (Collins, 2009a). Through exploring the everydayness of immobility, this paper provides insight into the structures of stay-at-home transnationalism and reveals more profound changes that channel skilled migrant workers and generate uneven cosmopolitan gains. The following section introduces rhythmanalysis as a framework that integrates both approaches' advantages.

Rhythmanalysis: approaching the immobile everydayness

Studies of rhythms have its roots in temporal ethnography, which emerged from studies of rhythmic religious practices and social interactions in the 20th century (Kwon, 2018; Evans-Prichard, 1969). Contrary to the traditional perspective that treats the whole society as connected and coordinated, cultural anthropologists nowadays criticize the monolithic interpretations of social temporality by unfolding manifold levels of rhythms, from the social to the economic. Following this line of research, most of the findings treat rhythm as objects of investigation that interact with other objects, through which we could grasp the diversity and coexistence of cultural practices (Iparraguirre, 2015). Scholars explore how transnationals develop rhythms and coordinate their schedules of transnational life according to recurring orders and patterns, an arrangement frequently intersecting with gender, health, and citizenship (Yoeh et al., 2020; McNamara, 2020; Kwon, 2018). Munn's (1992) analysis of rhythm goes beyond an exclusive analysis of time by noting that rhythm is a medium through which we can glimpse how political power disposes of time through its close connection to the body and space, and how the body serves as a conduit between the world and the self.

Henri Lefebvre's rhythmanalysis provides a more explicit intervention as to how rhythms should be treated as a tool rather than merely an object of investigation (Elden, 2004: ix). The rhythms, understood as repetitive actions and ordered practices, are everywhere in the 'interaction(s) between place, time and expenditure of energy (Lefebvre, [1992] 2004: 15). To track everyday rhythms, rhythmanalysis delves beneath the surface, tracing and

explaining the hidden structures that give rise to them (Reid-Musson, 2018). Ambitiously envisioning the approach as a science to understand all 'things and beings', Lefebvre invites scholars from all fields to contribute evidence and intelligence (Lefebvre [1992] 2004: 32). Over two decades, researchers have employed this tool to conceptualize rhythms, tempos, beats of coach tours, ethnic relations, migrant farmworker life, organization studies, and many other topics. (Edensor and Holloway, 2008; O' Connor, 2018; Reid-Musson, 2017; Nash, 2018).

Concerning human activities, Lefebvre attributes primary significance to the body, since it is from the daily reproduction of the organic body that the rhythms of human society are derived (O' Connor, 2018). Through the bodies as a medium, rhythmanalysts explore how the regulated systems govern individuals and how, occasionally, it also leads to deviations and reconstructions (Kwon, 2018). This approach thus provides a material foundation for 'grounding' transnationalism (Crang et al., 2003). In Dunn's (2009) words, transnational bodies are at once mobile and positioned, 'providing a negotiated space between social processes and action'. Rhythmanalysts have also noted that structured opportunities and imbalanced precarity invoke body movements across space and time, generating specific repetitive activities and exposing bodies to susceptible conditions. For example, urban pollution is widely perceived as a humanitarian crisis, with less awareness that certain social groups not only unevenly share the threat it poses, but also possess structurally different capacities to avoid the breakdown of their health rhythms due to pollution exposure (Walkers et al., 2022). Furthermore, Christie (2013), while examining place formation in South African education, argues that Lefebvre's rhythmanalysis excels at detecting multiple nuanced logics without confusing the mechanism by which inequality operates, thus enabling practical policy interventions.

Notably, rhythm is by no means static or closed, but are dynamic, connected, materialized, and historical (Lefebvre ([1992] 2004). Essentially, each part of an ensemble produces particular rhythms imbricated to places, and each rhythm interacts with the others (Lefebvre, 1996: 230; Edensor, 2010: 3; Reid-Musson, 2018). Accordingly, rhythmanalysis allows researchers to observe and analyze the constants and flows of everyday life. A set of musical terminologies such as '*polyrhythmia* (polyrhythmic),' '*eurhythmia* (eurhythmic),' and '*arrhythmia* (arrhythmic)' facilitate rhythmanalysts to probe into how rhythms intensify, synergize, collide, and breakdown in bodies (Lefebvre, [1992] 2004: 16; Reid-Musson, 2018). In further detail, *polyrhythmia* refers to multiple concurrent, diversified, coexisting rhythms; *eurythmia* is a state of being in which things flow in a regular pattern, operate with harmony, and perform optimally; and *arrhythmia* is a condition of rhythmic performing incongruently, incoherently, or abnormally (Lefebvre [1992] 2004: 16).

Following this perspective, the following sections explore the 'polyrhythmic' ensemble of 'stay-at-home' transnationalism. In this study, students' bodies are seen both as sites that suffered barriers to transnational activities and as sites of agency for resisting, negotiating, and shaping spaces (Winchester et al., 2003: 156–173; Haraway, 2004). By looking at international students' daily rhythms and their disruptions as both international students and local residents, this paper illustrates how the two types of interconnecting and coexisting rhythms lead to the emerging new transnationalism with profound, and uneven, biological and social ramifications.

Research Context and Methods

This study examines the research questions by examining the experience of stay-at-home international students in China. Chinese students overall represent the largest share of foreign students in the world's higher education market in the past two decades (Gu, 2015). Since the outbreak of COVID-19, almost all countries have suffered from varying degrees of immobility, from border shutdowns to airline slashings. Chinese students, among them, have suffered one of the earliest and most stringent entry restrictions and political gamesmanship, such as consistent visa rejection or an outright ban of travel from China during the 14-day period preceding their entry into the host country (Zwetsloot et al., 2021). The situation of Chinese students thus provide us with a glimpse into one of the most severe immobilities experienced by the international student community.

The data for this study were drawn from our virtual fieldwork (Skovgaard-Smith, 2021) conducted between November 2021 and March 2022, which consisted of semi-structured in-depth interviews, non-participant observation of social media posts and discussions, and archival research. We acknowledge the limitations of this method that conducting fieldwork only through digital means would sacrifice our 'contextual understanding of social action' for the lack of physical co-presence and persistent, face-to-face interactions (Lindlof & Shatzer, 1998). Despite this, virtual methods allowed us to transcend certain constraints on space of time that was typical of traditional methods (Piacenti et al., 2014), which was not only advantageous for reaching a broader scope of participants during the pandemic, but also provided additional insights into the transnational social networks formed by these participants and their teachers, peers, and relatives.

The researchers conducted in-depth interviews with 25 students (11 males and 14 females) enrolled in international programs but took or had taken their courses in China for at least one semester. Participants were recruited primarily through personal connections and advertisements posted on social media platforms, with a small number recruited through snowball sampling. The researchers intentionally tried to diversify the participants' backgrounds to minimize the possible bias. The participants ranged from 19 to 26 years old, and their supposed destination countries included the United States, the United Kingdom, Australia, and Ireland, with the former three also the leading destination for Chinese students studying abroad (Statista, 2021). Participants were from various disciplines including Sociology, Business, Engineering, Medicine, Journalism, Data Science, etc. Eight of our interviewees completed their international program entirely online in China. In contrast, others went to local campuses which had cooperative relationships with their programs or spent part of their academic year in their destination countries.

We do not aim to provide the most comprehensive account of the international learning experience of Chinese students during COVID-19. Instead, our goal is to capture some familiar yet emblematic rhythms that these students were struggling to adjust to and customize, thus providing a window into what the new transnationalism entails for a globally immobile group. Participants were asked about their trajectories in pursuing their studies during COVID-19, and we especially invited them to self-observe and describe how they accommodated themselves to the new mode of remote learning and realigned their everyday routines with their life course plans. To provide additional evidence for reference, we also interviewed four students who completed their international program abroad and asked them to reflect on what impacts COVID-19 had on their lives. All the interviews were conducted online via Zoom or Tencent Meeting, each lasting between 60 to 130 minutes. Consent on the purposes and procedures of the research were obtained individually, and all participants were

anonymized to ensure confidentiality. Each of the interviews was recorded and transcribed verbatim by the two researchers.

Besides interviews, we undertook archival research on macro-level analysis as well as existing policies regarding Chinese international students. Texts such as white papers, popular publications, and central and local government's regulations were collected and reviewed to complete our perspective. We also conducted a non-participatory observation of two online platforms mainly composed of Chinese international students: '1point3acres' and 'Tough International Students in 2020s'. We paid particular attention to the posts asking for advice on adapting to the 'conflicts' or 'disconnections' in organizing their life around the two places or those practical experiences on redirecting their life courses in either bureaucratic procedures or psychological transitions. These two methods helped us triangulate our findings from the in-depth interviews.

Rhythms of discontinuity: life as international students

The rhythmic orderings of the daily lives of international students in China constituted, first of all, an abrupt discontinuity with their immediate surroundings — or, in other words, a rupture from the 'unreflexive, normative practices' (Edensor, 2010: 2) that structure the spatiotemporal routines of their parents, relatives, neighbors, and friends. Existing studies that examine deviations from dominant rhythms have primarily focused on how power-laden ideologies denigrate them as unusual ways of being (Lager et al., 2016; Reid-Musson, 2018). However, in our case, these left-behind international students intentionally sought to acquire 'nonlocal' rhythms that differentiate them from their vicinity in an effort to facilitate their virtual 'co-presence' with their distant professors and classmates. The new rhythms, characterized by repeated, interrelated patternings between corporal needs, social interactions, breaks and holidays, and familial events, were predominantly oriented towards the 'academic regime' dictated by their international education programs. On the one hand, the students cultivated their bodily routines that could cope with an eight-hour, or even twelve-hour, time difference daily to attend classes, seminars, or office hour meetings, as well as to meet critical deadlines such as major assignments, final exams, and capstone projects.

On the other hand, online teaching also required the students to become accustomed to an alternative spatial arrangement in which the only mode of interaction was virtual. At the same time, their physical bodies needed to remain undisrupted by the hustle and bustle of their local environment. As a result, these students constantly felt detached from their bodies' typical habitus, with the sense of 'solitariness' frequently coming up when talking about their stay-at-home learning experience. Samuel, for instance, had to go to another empty apartment a few blocks away from his own home every night for his classes to avoid disturbing his parents while they were sleeping. 'The sheer quietness and lack of human noises' in the small, confined room were not something he particularly enjoyed. Many participants also reported barely being able to have regular meals with their families or being 'desperate to interact with a living and breathing human being.' The fact that the academic regime was not totally under their control further added to the discontinuities they had to live with. Charles, for example, was a master's student who was enrolled in a U.S. program but spent his whole year in China. He had different timetables every quarter, but regardless of the timeline, he was always alone, 'staring at the computer for several hours continuously' to keep up with the live courses. As he described,

> ‘All my classes were scheduled after 11 pm in the first quarter. I rented an apartment in Beijing, so my family was not by my side. I could only occasionally interact with the professors via Zoom. I usually went to bed around 8 am and got up at noon. I spent the whole afternoon doing my homework; then I had to prepare for my next class starting at 11 pm. The second quarter was easier but in the third quarter, the horrible schedule came back, so I had to go to bed in the morning again, just like in the first quarter.’ (Charles, male, 26)

The bodies of these stay-at-home students had to develop a kind of ‘responsiveness’ to be always ready to take up new rhythms required by their ‘international’ life. Their readjustment of bodily dispositions involved an involuntary acceptance of ever more spontaneous, fragmentary, and even ‘chaotic’ spatial-temporal arrangements for study. In a way, this constant readjustment became a ‘rhythm’ governing and disciplining their mundane daily activities that were no longer under control. During our interviews with these students, many have mentioned their most ‘unforgettable’ moments of their study life, including taking online classes while having meals with their family, trying to concentrate on the coursework when surrounded by relatives during the Spring Festival, etc. Zac, an undergraduate student in Australia who spent his last year at home, told us about his experience of participating in group discussions via Zoom on a high-speed train. ‘It was a sudden meeting. I felt uncomfortable at first, but I soon got used to it. As long as the internet connection is stable, I’m fine with this kind of meeting.’

To counteract the discontinuities that the set of new rhythms imposed on their lives, these stay-at-home international students actively sought ways to normalize their ‘transnational’ ways of being. One of these efforts was to create and maintain peculiar ‘life zones’ where they could isolate themselves from their immediate surroundings and further distinguish themselves from their local counterparts. Participants talked about going to the same study room with their program mates every day to create the feeling that ‘we are seemingly also on an imagined campus.’ Or, they would painfully enjoy the flooding of social media complaining about exams and assignments when they were all going through their finals, which were usually scheduled during the holiday seasons of their local peers, thus sharing a sense of ‘virtual solidarity.’ Some would even organize their voluntary activities or monthly gatherings. Whether in a virtual or a physical form, the ‘sense of simultaneity’ constructed through these ‘life zones’ sets them apart from the students at local universities.

The rhythmic differentiation and fragmentations that these stay-at-home international students experienced in a way allowed them to tap into a ‘normal’ life that typically belonged to the ‘authentic’ international students. Through carefully crafting their nonlocal rhythms, the hierarchies attached to ‘home’ and ‘international’ degrees in the ‘international knowledge system’ and the associated privilege of educational mobilities (Prazeres, 2019) could be reproduced onto nonmobile bodies (Altbach, 1981). The potential of communication technologies — including virtual meeting tools, emails, instant messaging apps, and virtual teaching platforms — to virtually facilitate the gathering of bodies and the transmission of knowledge made possible the symbolic discourses of ‘transnational institutionality’ (Benwell, 2006). Even in cases where students are generally expected to gain hands-on, practical experience in class, the teaching mode evolved gradually as teachers and students become more proficient in utilizing technology to ‘stimulate senses of sight and sound’ (Collins, 2009a), thus creating an affective feeling of being ‘onsite.’ The participants thus saw themselves as embodying the ‘value’ of the knowledge and skills they had acquired from

their programs, even though that could mean they had to stay up the whole night for three or four days a week. Additionally, this embodied symbolic capital was recognized institutionally by the Chinese government through its authentication of these remote-based education certificates and by major employers in the local labor market where their credentials were still appraised and rewarded (Waters, 2009). As one participant said, 'it's been a tough and tiring year as I kept messing up my sleeping schedules… but I still find it worth the effort because I wouldn't have passed the first round of job applications this easily without this haigui (returnee from overseas) degree'.

It is, however worth noting that the interactive rhythms these stay-at-home students are living could, at best, partially embody the lives of a real international student. In other words, these students' daily lives were discontinuous with local residents and their classmates overseas. As Munn (1992) theorizes, the body-time-space regime that shapes an individual's rhythm encompasses a complex contour of 'administrative time, techniques, social discipline, and rhythms of human and non-human time.' In this sense, only to a minimal extent are the bodies of stay-at-home international students capable of embodying their expected overseas lives because of their submission to political control in their home society and their lack of regulatory belongings in the destined country. A case in point is the imposed censorship on the source and content of information that people within China can access. To overcome the institutional regulations of their embedded society is to equip themselves with the basic skills and software of *fanqiang* (getting over the wall), that is, using a VPN. Some students performed this so frequently that it had become a bodily instinct. As one participant described, 'I always turned on the VPN on my laptop even when I didn't necessarily need to browse on Google. This was the first thing I did every day before I checked the email or logged onto Canvas.' For others who had difficulties in 'getting over the wall' due to the increasingly strict government regulation, their attempts to compose the 'international' rhythms could only be incomplete. In another case, while stay-at-home international students maintained their institutional identity through means such as university-authorized library access, they did not go through the whole formalities – such as processing their medical insurances in destined countries – further pointed to their lack of proper emplacement. As a result, the body-time-space regime typically associated with international students could never be fully established but only be partially achieved by these stay-at-home students.

Rhythms of stitching: life as local residents

In this section, we reveal the second side of the story: staying local forces students to stitch their lives back to their embedded surroundings, particularly regarding the school-to-work transition they are confronted with.

Participants reported quickly realizing that if they were required to remain at home for the duration of their non-local degree, they would be unable to qualify for an international internship or job after graduation. Scholars have pointed out that international education serves as a channel to forge transnational networks that offer resources and professions to smooth the global circulations of future skilled labor (Vertovec, 2002). Studying abroad facilitates a processual 'school-to-work transition' whereby students gain concretized and place-based experience in job search, recruitment, adaptation, and progression, as well as adjustment to changes in social life (Peng, 2020). Physical immobility, however, hinders such a long-taken-for-granted transition pathway, putting students behind in their overseas employment careers and even causing them to drastically change their plans. These

international students exhibited a sense of restlessness and uncertainty when comparing their experiences with those of their counterparts who had previously studied in the same programs. ‘It was clear where previous pathways led,’ according to Leo, our interviewee, that ‘many Chinese students completed our programs, obtained internships in the Bay area, and then became skilled workers’. The routines failed to work well in this cohort, resulting in a state of 'arrhythmia' in which previous forms of school-to-work transition 'break apart, alter, and bypass synchronization'. (Lefebvre, 2004: 67, original emphasis, quoted in Lager et al., 2016). Interestingly, the participants compared themselves to seeds, which, though originally meant to be transplanted overseas, had unexpectedly returned home. These students had to learn the local employment rules and social customs, not those of the distant societies they intended to study in. They described feeling 'flurry,’ 'overwhelmed,’ and 'continuously catching up' as they repeatedly familiarized themselves with the new routines that were not anticipated before.

Fiona was pursuing a master's degree at a US graduate school. Following a bordering shutdown that disrupted her initial plans to work in the US, she began preparing for a job search at the beginning of her year-long master's program. Having to stay in China, Fiona faced different rules for job applications. She told us that as a student who was going to graduate in 2021, she was classified as a “fresh graduate of 2021” (*Yingjiebiyesheng*, 应届毕业生). Because companies that hire fresh graduates are eligible for government subsidies, a new graduate may be entitled to certain institutional benefits, such as more job openings or lower entry thresholds. However, these benefits are only available during the year after their graduation. Additionally, there are “spring hiring” (*chunzhao*, 春招) and “fall hiring” (*qiuzhao,* 秋招) specifically designed to facilitate their job-seeking process. This seasonal hiring rhythm constitutes the local job search rules, to which students like Fiona have to adjust their work-life-study rhythm accordingly.

> ‘The year I spent studying remotely can be divided into two parts. Before I received an offer for my dream job, I submitted resumes, attended job interviews, interned, and completed assignments. Taking classes was my last priority - mostly watching recordings.” The job offer came in November 2020, and “'it wasn't until then that I felt relaxed and invested more time in my academics”.’ (Fiona, female, 23)

While Fiona's proactivity is admirable, stay-at-home international students may also find it challenging to transition from school to work (Peng, 2020). Some of the respondents did not have clear career plans. They were not necessarily interested in obtaining permanent residency in their destined country. However, displaced mobility was still critical as a ‘fail-safe’ option for them to temporarily postpone ‘adult’ decisions related to career and life (Frändberg, 2015). Now that these students had to stay statically, job seeking in the local labor market became an imperative rather than merely an option, among many others. Zhen told us about her 'stitching life' in a more compromising tone,

> ‘I thought I could work in the UK after graduation and be comfortable exploring my career interests. However, in China, age matters much more. Everyone is in a hurry to find a job, and the competition is fierce. I don't necessarily want to find an internship during my master’s study, but I have to. It would be very challenging to do so many things at once if everyone was studying abroad. However, you can do it now due to the time difference, as long as you don't need to sleep and rest.’ (Zhen, female, 24)

As our participants carefully decided the prioritization of their time and energy between academic assignments, internships, and other matters, every repetition of decision-

making and implementation established the everyday rhythms of stitching for them to navigate the different temporal regimes in both of their home and host countries. As Zhen points out, it was difficult for participants to reject this set of rhythms because their rhythms intertwined with others, constantly shaping and scaling up the competition in the hiring landscape and ultimately reinforcing the local rules.

Besides taking priority in negotiating a work-life pattern to compete for an ideal job, the students' school-to-work transitions were also interwoven with regular reflections and contemplations on their transnational subjectivity and the embodied norms and rules it entails. Many participants expressed concern about the rise in unemployment worldwide, and the racial hostility that migrant workers, especially Chinese, face in their destined countries. As a result of previous experiences, news, and stories shared by friends and family, this concern constituted an imaginative transnational terrain. Adolf, who studied in the United States for his undergraduate degree, originally intended to become a journalist in the US. He returned to China following the outbreak of the pandemic when he was studying for his master's degree. In the face of the racial tensions in Illinois and a declining economy worldwide, he decided to stay in China after graduation.

> 'As an outsider without citizenship rights, I am unable to defend myself or fight back as others do, which makes me worried about my safety there.' (Adolf, male, 25)

Additionally, students developed relationships, acquired in-situ experience, and firmly rooted themselves in the local soil in an 'adult' manner. During his online courses, Adolf completed two internships in Shanghai and Shenzhen (a city in Southeastern China). 'Unlike in the US, Chinese journalists earn so little that I can't provide for myself. Rent was expensive in both cities. In Shenzhen, I finally gave up my dream of being a journalist and joined a big tech company where employees work crazy hours over 72 hours a week. I was told this is the industry norm'. Leo described his 'gains' as the rewards for his wise decision to remain in China.

> 'I'm glad I didn't go abroad. I regularly visited my undergraduate professors throughout the year, and they connected me with people in industries. I realized that I needed to build a domestic network regardless of whether I had been abroad after COVID-19. Besides, I spent more time with my family and friends. If I had taken classes abroad, I would not have had these opportunities.' (Leo, male, 24)

Scholars have noted that migrant students do not arrive with preconceived ideas, but rather their years abroad induce a 'dynamic subjectivity' (Carlson, 2013; Mosneaga and Winther, 2013). As a result of the seasonal rhythm of employment, as well as the arrhythmic events that these stay-at-home international students must coordinate on a day-to-day basis, the students' perceptions of physical immobility and their ideas of life plans were constantly altered by the ongoing formations of imagined transnational sites and embodied networks. The second dimension of the emerging new transnationalism, which is deeply rooted in the local context, is thus manifested in their rhythmic routines of 'stitching,' where they must realign their continuously evolving life plans with the unexpected yet necessary requirement of staying local.

Grafted transnationalism

The lives of stay-at-home international students exhibited a 'regular alternation' of bodily rhythms between being an international student and a local resident (Kwon, 2018). As the

two series of rhythms were not naturally compatible within a limited spatial-temporal regime, the careful orchestration of their alternation, the deft handling of arrhythmic consequences, as well as the strategic prioritization of the 'primary' rhythms based on specific contexts had become a patterned, yet unrecognized rhythm on its own. Each student developed their own informal understanding of how to recraft their life course plans and reinsert their bodies into different 'situations' with varying encounters, relationships and values on a day-to-day basis.

We hereby argue that a new form of transnationalism has emerged from this mode of learning in which a distant, nonlocal life is seemingly 'grafted' onto the local one through a regular, recurring mixture of two sets of rhythms. At the core of the 'grafted transnationalism' is the implicit demand that individuals need to master the tacit knowledge of processing conflicting rhythms across different spatial-temporal regimes. As Lefebvre ([1992]2004) have conceptualized, a well-functioning, 'eurhythmic' body requires a healthy and sustainable interaction between its internal rhythms and those external to it; however, as the foregoing analysis has shown, the emphasis of the new 'grafted transnationalism' on individual responsibility to continuously 'steal time from their body clock' could easily introduce bodily arrhythmia, with their 'rhythms break[*ing*] apart, alter[*ing*] and bypass[*ing*] synchronization' (ibid). In other words, considering the long working hours these students are exposed to and the lack of time for rest at night, to achieve this new form of 'grafted transnationalism' risks accumulative bodily weariness and deprivation, both physically and mentally (Kwon, 2018). Such 'corporeal rhythmic breakdowns' (Walker et al. 2022) were pervasive among the participants, not only affecting their ability to engage in their study routines, but also raising serious concerns about the chronic consequences on the body organs. Charles, for example, described one of his 'miserable' experiences to us,

> 'I remembered that one night in November my heart was feeling horrible. At two am my heart was beating so fast and I even had trouble breathing. I called my dad, then my aunt. They were both terrified. It got better later. My aunt said it was probably because I had too much coffee. But I had to because I needed to keep myself awake.' (Charles, male, 26)

Furthermore, the emerging 'grafted transnationalism' entails costs that extend beyond the immediate corporeal consequences, but exert profound influences on the lifecourse mobility of international students. The local temporality and spatiality these students are embedded within present insurmountable constraints as to the insider/outsider difference their bodies can engage with, the power-inflected relations that can be transgressed, and ultimately, the cosmopolitan imaginary their bodies can potentially manifest (Sidhu & Dall'alba, 2012). Physical immobility disrupted many students' life plans to build up their employability in the labor market of the destined country and eventually achieve a dream life almost impossible to realize in their native society. Louis, a master's student with a major in data analysis, was planning to stay abroad after graduation and accumulate work experience in major tech companies. As he explained, statistics from past few years showed that this program was highly advantageous for international students to land a job in the US. However, like most participants, he ended up spending his whole master's year completely at home.

> 'Those leading tech companies, such as Facebook and Amazon, are much more mature not only in their technology, but also in their management. I have dreamt of spending at least three years there so that I can grow into a better data analytist, after which I will decide whether I like the life in the US or I should return to

China. Now, unfortunately, I don't have a second option. I have to start from scratch in Chinese companies with their less organized data.' (Louis, male, 24)

The miscarried cosmopolitan promises were manifested not only in the actual failure of laid-out life courses, but also in their shrinking imagination in terms of the possibilities of growth, adventures, and changes. Previous research points out that 'the cosmopolitan characteristics of flexibility, adaptability and openness to difference and risk are not just cultural dispositions, but rather embodied performances of fitness and fitting in' (Molz, 2006). In this sense, even though stay-at-home international students were trying to arrange the rhythms of their lives and emulate the possible experience abroad, the fact that they remained grounded in local contexts determined that their bodies did not go through a process of re-location to different social settings (Sidhu & Dall'alba, 2012). As one participant, Zoe, said, 'I don't really know what to expect from an *authentic* learning experience at foreign campus.' The lack of corporal mobility entailed a cost that 'grafted transnationalism' could hardly compensate with the promise of digital mobilities (Yeoh, 2005). The repetitive, day-to-day alternation of two sets of rhythms could even further anchor individuals in their local lifecycle projects and reinforce ideologies in a further encapsulated environment.

Despite the vulnerabilities, powerlessness, and costs that confronted all these students, the formation of 'grafted transnationalism' was a deeply differentiated and power-laden process. Following Reid-Musson's (2018) insightful intersectional rhythmanalysis, we argue that the bodies of the stay-at-home international students, far from belonging to an undifferentiated 'elite' group, are entangled with and dominated by the grafted two sets of rhythms in uneven ways as a result of their accumulated social differences in capital, resources and experience, sometimes passed down from their older generations. The students are thus possessed of 'unequal capacities' to avoid the intrusions of possible arrhythmia into their everyday rhythms, or to convert such arrhythmia into a new state of eurrhythmia for the purpose of longer-term temporal progression in their life course. As our interviews suggest, some students were thrown into the sudden interruption brought by the 'immobility regime' better prepared than others, more swiftly adapting to the redirected imperatives such as hunting out local opportunities while simultaneously maintaining international connections. Harry, for example, was a master's student at a renowned UK university with a major in financial engineering. He completed the whole program in China, but he did not have to struggle through the physically and mentally exhausting task of hunting internships and job opportunities while also trying to cope with his heavy academic workload. Both of his parents being bankers, he easily secured a full-time job at a local prestigious bank after graduation. Sally's coping mechanisms with the repeated exhaustion under the grafted transnationalism was another case in point. The financial security of her family allowed her to quit halfway through the academic year despite the tuition she had already paid, reapply for a second master's program, and become an *authentic* overseas international student the following year. During the year when most stay-at-home international students were miserably readjusting their lives, Sally instead had the privilege of devoting all her energy to her local internship, an experience that eventually led to her job offer from a top US tech company.

For others who have no additional social capital or financial resources for getting through this turbulent period, the arrhythmic intrusions and the corporeal breakdowns are something that must be endured in order to preserve their future rhythmic patterns of life course development. The grafted transnationalism has become a 'polluted routine' (Da Schio

et al., 2019), for it is chronically toxic for the human body, yet still necessary to carry out. Despite tremendous efforts to practice grafted transnationalism, students could still find it hard to reach their career goals. Lily was enrolled in a master's program in human resources in Ireland. As her program lasted only a year, she had little time preparing for the local recruitment season when she was fully occupied by her coursework during the academic year. As she said, she would have considered looking for intern opportunities in Ireland if she ever could make it there, but since she completed her program entirely at home,

> 'It wasn't until I almost missed all of the job application deadlines when I realized that I should have made plans earlier … but I didn't have classmates around me so I wasn't clear about the job application timeline at all. When I did take a few interviews later, I realized that what I learnt in the program was not what local employers actually wanted. I don't know how things will go.' (Lily, female, 26)

As mentioned before, practices of 'mobilities' have long been recognized as deeply embedded in career structures as a way of accessing 'social capital' for the 'elites' and ultimately reproducing social inequalities (Ackers, 2008; Xiang & Shen, 2009). The formation of 'grafted transnationalism', in our case, entails further consequences regarding the role of 'immobilities' in this process. Specifically, we argue that transnational movements operate not only within a highly unequal global landscape of 'freedom of movement' (Cheung Judge et al., 2020), but also within an often neglected, but similarly unequal one of 'freedom of affording immobility'. The coupled practices of 'physical immobilities' and 'digital mobilities', embodied in individuals' orchestrated recurrence of simultaneity between two spatial-temporal regimes, can also entrench social hierarchies within the already 'elite' group.

Conclusion and Discussion

This paper examines the contextual and situated transnational experiences of Chinese students who stayed in China and completed their master's degrees remotely during the global pandemic. The dual time-space regimes in host and home countries orchestrate everyday orders of the stay-at-home transnationality, yet the students also demonstrate their dynamic subjectivity in deviating from and remaking their prioritized commitments. We identified two types of coordinating rhythms. The first is the rhythm of discontinuity, which involves regular disruptions, differentiation, and adjustment of the remote learning experience. The second is the rhythm of stitching, where stay-at-home students arrange and collage life matters according to rules and ethics to navigate uncertainty throughout their transition from school to the labor market. The rhythms as 'international students' are weaved into their rhythms as 'local residents', as the requirement of 'staying local' inevitably leads to the situation where the body within the home territory remains unsurpassed.

We propose that this paper has first and foremost contributed empirically by revealing the grafted transnational fabric beneath the surface of the immobile international learning under COVID-19. Our rhythmanalysis detects the nuanced mechanisms by which students experience significant bodily, cultural, and life-course consequences, especially their physical and mental sufferings induced by time differences and dispositioned commitments, which are generally overlooked in previous research. In addition, this study calls attention to the students' sacrificed capacities to imagine cosmopolitan potentials in the context of forced immobility, which echoes previous disputes about the disembodied cosmopolitan gains

(Sidhu & Dall'alba, 2012). Furthermore, this paper conceptualizes the working mechanism of structured inequality under global education immobility where students do not indiscriminately suffer the above-undesired deprivations and losses, but possess different resources and backup cultural capital to avoid unhealthy rhythm disruptions and career path sacrifices.

Besides the empirical insights, this paper expands the multidisciplinary potential of rhythmanalysis in introducing it into the studies of education transnationalism. The approach aligns with spaces, times, and embodied experiences, yet, it dissects everyday details in their oneness beyond these 'dimensions.' Embracing his philosophy of rhythms and critique of everyday life, Lefebvre advocated the analysis of temporalized place, or localized time, in his late work (Edensor, 2010: 3-5). In light of this discussion, this paper understood international students as 'insiders' and 'outsiders' (Marcu, 2018), experiencing and observing situated stay-at-home from its oneness. The authors invite students to describe and self-evaluate their experiences, feeling, and, more importantly, self-choreography of situated rhythms (ibid). This study acquires empirical evidence mainly through online observations, participants' descriptions, and self-reported routines. As rhythmanalysts, we know that digital observations hinder our ability to experience and observe rhythms embodied. Accordingly, rhythmanalysis researchers will participate in transnational education fields in an embodied manner so that they can engage, internalize, and reflect on rhythms as participants and observers (Nash, 2018).

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