

## RESEARCH ARTICLE

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# Mobility against all odds: the experiences of Chinese international students in Portugal amid the COVID-19 pandemic

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## Abstract

The COVID-19 pandemic significantly affected international student mobility. Chinese international students had to deal not only with challenges such as border closures and lockdowns but also with discrimination and stigmatisation. In this paper, we examine the decisions of Chinese students to engage in international mobility and their experiences in Portugal during the pandemic, relying on 23 in-depth interviews with Chinese international students living in Portugal during the first year of the COVID-19 pandemic (2020–2021). Our findings indicate that, although these students were concerned about the COVID-19 pandemic and its risks, they tended to prioritise their academic endeavours, while their mobility plans did not appear to have been significantly affected by the pandemic. These findings provide new insights into how international students structure their mobility plans and make sense of their experiences of studying abroad during “unsettling events”.

## KEYWORDS

Chinese international students, COVID-19, (im)mobility, mobility plans, unsettling events

## 1 | INTRODUCTION

The outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic (hereafter pandemic) in 2020, with worldwide border closures and the implementation of full lockdowns, heavily affected the experiences of international students in tertiary education. For example, together with the sudden shift from face-to-face classes to the virtual environment (Nurfaidah et al., 2020), they either had to postpone their mobility plans, abruptly interrupt ongoing mobilities to return home, or were forced to stay in the host country and deal with numerous uncertainties far from their families. Such uncertainties included finances, housing, mental health, as well as their families' well-being overseas (e.g. Chen et al., 2020; Coffey et al., 2021; Gallagher et al., 2020; Lai et al., 2020; Nguyen & Balakrishnan, 2020). However, our current understanding of the impact of the pandemic on mobility and

staying decisions, as well as on the socialisation and learning experiences of international students abroad still remains rather limited (for some exceptions, see Han et al., 2022; Koo et al., 2021; Tikhonova et al., 2021).

Against this background, the present paper investigates the mobility plans of Chinese students to move to Portugal, as well as their experiences abroad during COVID-19, based on 23 in-depth interviews conducted between December 2020 and March 2021 with Chinese students living in Portugal.

To deepen our understanding of the international student experience during the pandemic, this paper addresses the following research questions:

- 1) How has the pandemic impacted the international mobility plans of Chinese students?

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- 2) How do Chinese students in Portugal make sense of their (im) mobility experiences in a context that is highly disruptive to international travelling and face-to-face education?

To answer these research questions, we draw on the notions of 'unsettling events' (Kilkey & Ryan, 2021) and 'shock (im)mobility' (Xiang et al., 2023), which are extremely useful for understanding if and how the plans of Chinese students to study abroad might (or not) have changed because of the pandemic, as well as how these students lived through the pandemic in Portugal. Kilkey and Ryan (2021) introduced the notion of 'unsettling events' to look at how individual migration projects are impacted or re-evaluated when transformations at the structural level happen. In a similar vein, 'shock mobility' relates to a radical configuration of mobility due to acute disruptions as well as 'state's reactions to disruption' (Xiang et al., 2023: 1634). Considering this pandemic as a 'political, social, and economic transformation[s] with the potential to disrupt pre-existing migration projects' (Kilkey & Ryan, 2021: 227), which lead not only to unforeseen governmental interventions but also unforeseen responses from other actors, such as higher education institutions, we look at the impact of this context of change and uncertainty on the mobility plans and experiences of Chinese students in Portugal.

## 2 | THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

Emerging scientific evidence documented the challenges international students had to deal with during the pandemic. For example, social inequalities among international students have been brought to light, exposing existing vulnerabilities and social precarity (Malet Calvo et al., 2021; Raghuram & Sondhi, 2020). Discourses such as Australia's Prime Minister, who argued that international students should "go home" (Farbenblum & Berg, 2020) challenge the idea of international students as part of an 'always welcome' migration elite (Murphy-Lejeune, 2002). While some students could afford expensive flights and were able to return home, or lived in spacious rented apartments, many found themselves in unsuitable accommodations, unable to return home for financial reasons and due to border closures (Goedegebuure & Meek, 2021). International students often lost their temporary and precarious jobs or were confined to student dorms, subject to high levels of surveillance over accessing common spaces (Coffey et al., 2023; Hastings et al., 2023; Raghuram & Sondhi, 2021).

Specifically, in the case of Chinese students, they also had to deal with the difficulties of travelling back home, after Chinese authorities introduced strict rules regarding entry into the country as a measure to control the pandemic and avoid the import of COVID-19 cases from abroad (Kloet et al., 2020). Some Chinese students overseas additionally experienced high levels of anxiety due to the perceived lack of transparency from the Chinese government about infection levels in China, which further led to heightened fears for their relatives' well-being and the perceived risk of infection with a new virus, the consequences of which were not yet understood (Zhai & Du, 2020). Lastly, as a general narrative blaming Chinese citizens for spreading the virus and causing the pandemic began to emerge, and hate crimes, online hate speech and daily

episodes of discrimination towards Chinese immigrants and students became more common (Gao & Sai, 2021; Wang et al., 2020). This exposed these students to high levels of stress not only due to the disarray caused by the pandemic in the private and public spheres but also due to the additional stigmatisation they endured (Bilecen, 2020).

Despite an apparently homogenous narrative regarding how international students, and more specifically, Chinese students, experienced the pandemic, we argue that the 'acute uncertainty' brought by the pandemic had different meanings for these students and their mobility plans (Xiang et al., 2023). Whereas the pandemic had an impact on all higher education students, it considerably varied across social groups. Consequently, how the pandemic has been experienced at the individual level can considerably vary as international students are not evenly positioned in relation to unsettling episodes (Kilkey & Ryan, 2021: 234). Kilkey and Ryan (2021) posit that episodes which carry 'unsettling potential', like the pandemic in our case, encompass material, relational, and subjective dimensions. Consequently, given the different starting positions of individuals, they are likely to be perceived and encountered diversely.

The material dimension primarily refers to the economic conditions of international students. Several studies already indicated that higher education students were very concerned about their financial situation because of the negative impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on their parent's income, the devaluation of their home countries' currencies, the disappearance of student jobs in the local labour market (e.g. Coffey et al., 2021; Malet Calvo et al., 2021) or limited access to welfare provisions of the host country (Ramia et al., 2022).

The relational dimension refers to daily social interactions students have with individuals and institutions, as well as their 'structural and discursive positionings relative to other groups' (Kilkey & Ryan, 2021: 234). Naturally, given the enforced social distance measures, these interactions were heavily restricted during the pandemic, which had consequences for the ways students organised and experienced their everyday lives (McGahey, 2021).

In addition, particularly for Chinese students, daily social interactions were also impacted in terms of discrimination experiences. Ma's and Zhan's (2020) analysis, for example, unveils how Chinese students became a target of racialisation on American campuses. Similar experiences were also reported in France, Australia and the UK (Farbenblum & Berg, 2020; Gao & Sai, 2021; Wang et al., 2020). Students reported being verbally abused by people yelling 'coronavirus' at them, staring at them with fear in public places, spitting close to them on the street, switching places on public transport and depriving them of access to public spaces (He et al., 2020; Ma & Zhan, 2020; Wang et al., 2020). Physical attacks have also been reported in many locations (Li & Nicholson, 2021; Miyake, 2021).

In Portugal, França et al. (2022) contended that, although no instances of severe attacks on Chinese students were reported, these students remained frequent targets of racial micro-aggressions, revealing underlying prejudices and discrimination against the Chinese. Consequently, it can be expected that Chinese students experienced a particularly heavy impact of the pandemic on the relational dimension.

Finally, the subjective dimension 'refers to what meanings migrants give to their circumstances and how they evaluate them. It captures the affective aspects of unsettling processes and includes feelings and emotions around belonging, identity, status security, and well-being' (Kilkey & Ryan, 2021: 234). The pandemic had an impact on the well-being of international students, as many of them experienced psychological distress (e.g. Lai et al., 2021; Zhao et al., 2022) and reported lower levels of subjective well-being compared to the native student population (Van Mol et al., 2021).

In our analysis of these three dimensions, we consider how external responses to the pandemic at the macro and meso levels, namely from the state and higher education institutions, respectively, as well as students' material, relational and subjective circumstances, led to varied experiences of 'shock (im)mobility' that coexisted with the students' initial mobility plans (Xiang et al., 2023). Although the notion of 'unsettling events' has been used primarily to investigate the impact such an event has on individuals in destination countries, we argue that the three dimensions (material, relational and subjective) are also relevant for better understanding (im)mobility decisions as it allows considering the situatedness of migrant experiences in shaping their reactions to these disruptive events. Following this framework, in this paper we examine how international Chinese students in Portugal experienced the disruption of their mobility circumstances through the lens of these dimensions, exploring how the pandemic impacted their mobility plans and experiences in financial, relational and subjective terms.

### 3 | RESEARCH CONTEXT

The focus on Chinese students and the Portuguese context is relevant for several reasons. Since 2015, Chinese students have been ranked among the top 10 largest international student communities in the country (França, 2021; França et al., 2022). Moreover, with the increasing enrolment of Chinese descendants in the Portuguese educational system (Gaspar et al., 2021), it is anticipated that the tertiary-level student community of Chinese background will continue to expand. Today, Chinese students form the most numerous group of international students worldwide (see e.g. OECD, 2022; Yang, 2022). However, existing research on Chinese students is predominantly focused on Anglo-Saxon contexts (Zhu, 2016). This is understandable given the fact that these countries have traditionally been the main destinations for Chinese students (Yang, 2022).

In recent years international Chinese students increasingly started to move to non-English-speaking countries as well, including Portugal. According to the Directorate General of Education and Science Statistics, in 2013/2014 there were 148 Chinese students enrolled in full degree programmes, while during the academic year immediately after the pandemic, 2021/2022, this number had increased to 863. Even when compared to pre-pandemic years, this number is higher (in 2019/2020, 777 Chinese students were pursuing a degree in a Portuguese higher education institution), indicating that this worldwide unsettling event did not discourage these students from engaging in international student mobility to Portugal. While the mobility of students from former

Portuguese colonies has been analysed by several authors (e.g., Alves & King, 2021; Iorio, 2020; Ploner & Nada, 2020), and studies regarding the experience of European students in Portugal are emerging (e.g. Cairns, 2017; Malet Calvo, 2018), research on new international student groups such as Chinese students is almost non-existent. Some exploratory studies (Barata, 2020; Dias, 2016), however, have shed light on their sojourns in Portuguese universities, revealing instances of discrimination and exclusion from the local community even before the pandemic.

In this context, it becomes particularly relevant to study the case of Chinese international students in Portugal and the impact an unsettling event such as the COVID-19 pandemic can have on their mobility plans, learning and socialisation experiences. Before the pandemic, the literature had already highlighted a set of diverse challenges that this population has to face when living and studying in a foreign country, such as coping with academic demands and cultural adjustment, language barriers, and discrimination and prejudice (Khanal & Gaulee, 2019; Van Mol, 2019; Nada & Araújo, 2018a). Understanding the way these challenges are perceived by them during unsettling events can provide insights for the development of better policies and institutional strategies to support international students during such events and contribute to more prepared and resilient higher education institutions.

### 4 | METHODS

The current study is based on qualitative data collected remotely between December 2020 and March 2021. In total, 23 in-depth interviews were conducted via Zoom with Chinese students who were living in Portugal at the time of our study. Out of the 23 interviewees, 14 identified as women and 9 as men. Interviewees were aged between 19 and 33 years old. Due to social distancing restrictions, participants were selected through snowball sampling and contacted via online platforms such as Facebook. Oral informed consent was obtained from the participants before the start of the interviews. Ethical guidelines regarding data anonymity and confidentiality and information on the study objectives were provided to all participants, who were also informed of their right to stop the interview at any point. Given the authors' lack of proficiency in Mandarin, the interviews predominantly took place in English. Nine participants, proficient in Portuguese either due to prior learning before relocating to Portugal or during their time residing in Portugal, opted for interviews conducted in Portuguese. All interviews were recorded, transcribed, and, in some cases, translated into English (from Portuguese) by the authors.

The interview guide focused on several dimensions of the students' experiences, namely: their motivations for moving to Portugal; previous mobility experiences; overall impressions of the mobility experience in Portugal; motivations to remain in the country during the pandemic or to return to the home country; expectations regarding the mobility experience; socialisation and integration into the academic and local community; and main obstacles and challenges faced during the pandemic.

The interview data were subject to qualitative thematic coding. At the time of transcription, an initial coding process took place,

allowing the first categories to emerge. The data analysis was continuous and involved multiple readings of the written output. After the main themes were identified, categories were refined and re-grouped according to their thematic similarities (Clarke & Braun, 2014).

## 5 | RESULTS

### 5.1 | (Im)mobility plans in pandemic times

We begin our analysis of the data with a discussion of the (im) mobility plans of our interviewees to move to or remain in Portugal after the outbreak of the pandemic. Xiang et al. (2023) posit that during periods of abrupt upheaval when migrants grapple with substantial uncertainty regarding the timing or possibility of their future movements, the delineation between voluntary and involuntary (im) mobility becomes blurred. Some students we interviewed were living in China before the outbreak of the pandemic, and the reasons they provided to support their decisions were varied. This is the case of Mei, a 23-year-old Master's student from mainland China who arrived in Portugal in October 2020. Despite the challenges posed by the pandemic, Mei opted not to cancel her mobility plans and remained committed to her original schedule:

Last year, in October [2020, when Mei arrived], the pandemic in Portugal was not as serious as it is now [January 2021]. I didn't want to change my plans, as I had already made this decision [to move]. (...) Of course, my parents were worried about me, but they respected my decision to come here to study. (Mei)

In the case of Ai, a 19-year-old male student from Macau, currently pursuing a Bachelor's degree in Law in Portugal with a scholarship sponsored by the Macau government, his decision to engage in international mobility had initially been delayed by the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic. Hence he was only able to arrive in March 2022, and waiting for yet another year was not perceived as a valid option, as he could lose his scholarship.

In my last year of high school (in 2019), I decided I was coming to Portugal to study [but that didn't happen], therefore the (scholarship) programme was postponed. The government and those responsible for this (scholarship) program decided that we could still go, but later. (...) so I had already postponed it for a year because of the pandemic and I didn't want to do it again and miss this opportunity. (Ai)

Upon initial inspection, both instances suggest a voluntary commitment to proceed with the scheduled mobility. However, when considering the uncertainties introduced by the pandemic, the decision to either remain stationary or proceed should be re-examined.

While Mei's account articulates a refusal to embrace 'shock immobility', Ai's narrative unveils the material dimension of his decision to persist with his original plan of moving abroad, even in the face of significantly altered external circumstances, challenging the assumption of a truly voluntary decision in his case. The Macau government's decision to suspend scholarships for students who chose not to study overseas prompted Ai's 'shock mobility', as the decision to stay put would entail forfeiting their financial support. For him, the experience of being in Portugal to enhance his Portuguese skills and obtain a law degree would unlock future career opportunities. Thus, the economic rationality of his decision is not only oriented towards the present but also focused on his future.

In other cases, students' main motivations for moving to Portugal were linked to the difficulty of adjusting to online teaching due to time zone differences and the quality of internet connections when following classes online from China. Ting, a 23-year-old Master's student from Mainland China, who arrived in the country in January 2021, also underlines her teachers' lack of preparedness for providing online classes, and her impression that teachers were more focused on those colleagues who were physically in the classroom.

It was a very difficult decision. When I arrived, the pandemic was already controlled in China, (...) but here it was out of control. (...) I decided to come because in China I had to wake up very early to attend classes, because of the time zone difference. (...) It was very difficult for me to pay attention to the classes in the middle of the night, not to mention the quality of the video. The professors did not have experience in teaching online, and as there were not many students attending classes remotely, only me and a colleague, they were not giving much attention to how we were feeling. (Ting)

In this case, rather than the material dimension, the relational and subjective dimensions weighed more in the decision to come to Portugal, despite the health risks. Furthermore, Ting's 'shock mobility' is influenced by her higher education institution's response to the imposed mobility restrictions, adopting emergency remote teaching without adequately prepared teachers. The online classes were perceived as spaces of exclusion for students who were attending remotely, significantly affecting the relational dimension and the opportunities for interaction with colleagues and teachers. Moreover, the subjective dimension of Ting's discourse reveals that she perceived online teaching as detrimental to her learning outcomes, especially when compared to colleagues who were physically in the classroom. This resonates with previous research on the impact of the pandemic on international students' experiences in Portugal, which revealed an overall dissatisfaction with the abrupt switch to online classes (Lyrio et al., 2023).

In my opinion, at the university, the quality of classes decreased. (...) Because the professor did not deliver

classes via video, only audio, and the class should last for 3 hours and the audio lasted for 20 min. I think this is ridiculous. (Chuntao)

It is a recurrent observation in the interviews that the perceived quality of education decreased when universities switched to online classes, as also stated by Chuntao, a Macanese Master's student in her 20s who came to Portugal a year before the outbreak of the pandemic.

For many of these students, moving abroad to pursue an international degree is a long-term investment in their future professional careers. Hence, more than simply passing their exams, they show eagerness to acquire relevant knowledge and skills. However, since higher education institutions were not prepared for the abrupt shift to an online environment, the quality of the emergency remote teaching was lower than planned online learning schemes (Skledar Matijević, 2022), and hence many students perceived a decline in the quality of their overseas education.

As for those research participants who were already living in Portugal when the pandemic began to significantly affect Europe, most decided not to return to China. This decision however does not unfold homogenously among students as it refers both to 'shock mobility and immobility' experiences. Some of our interviewees explained this decision by referring to the expectations they had about the experience of studying abroad, therefore relating to the refusal to a 'shock mobility' trajectory. For instance, Nian, a 23-year-old Master's student from mainland China who has been living in the country since 2019, considers that the difficulties associated with living abroad during the pandemic crisis are somehow part of his personal growth experience.

I chose not to go back to China because when I decided to study in Portugal, I prepared everything to be here, I prepared myself to go through different and hard situations. (...) I believe that experiencing anxiety, fear and nervousness is also important to learn how to better protect yourself. I think it is important and normal. (Nian)

This is a clear example of the importance that the subjective dimension can play in mobility decisions, despite macro and meso level responses to acute disruptions. For Nian, embarking on international mobility is perceived as a challenging and transformative experience (Nada & Legutko, 2022) through which students can grow and become more prepared to deal with difficult future situations. The literature has shown how international students see mobility as a path for personal growth, given its transformative potential to boost independence and confidence (see Lipura & Collins, 2019).

Students' resistance to shock mobility was also associated with the perception that completing their studies remained as their main priority, even when that implied not revealing the gravity of the pandemic situation in Portugal to their families. This was the case for Bohai originally from Macau, a 24-year-old student who arrived in the

country in 2017. He is taking a degree in wine science, and given the practical orientation of his degree, completing it remotely from China would not be an option.

I prefer to stay here. I needed to finish my courses, and I think it is better to stay here and don't go anywhere. (...) I never told my parents about how the pandemic is evolving here. I do think here is more dangerous than China, but I don't want them to worry about me. (Bohai)

In the case of Fen, a Master's student in her mid-20s residing in the country since 2018, academic commitments posed a barrier to her return to Macau, resulting in an unexpected 'shock immobility'. Her experience highlights that, in certain instances, limitations on mobility during the pandemic extend beyond governmental and institutional responses to encompass structural constraints associated with students' circumstances. This dynamic illustrates how, even when staying contradicts their desires and familial expectations, personal constraints can result in involuntary immobility for students.

I wanted to go back to China, but I couldn't, because now I am writing my thesis and I need to research some documents in the library. They are not available online, that's why I had to stay. (...) My parents want me to go back, they say I can write the thesis from home, but I know I can't. (Fen)

In other cases, these perceived constraints are so impactful that students do not even consider the possibility of returning to China, as Jing, a 30-year-old Ph.D student from mainland China who has been in the country since 2017, describes. In her case, due to the restrictions on internet usage in China, she considers that carrying out her teaching duties and research project remotely would not be possible. Her encounter with 'shock mobility,' triggered by the pandemic is intricately associated with the potential repercussions that a 'shock mobility' decision may entail for her doctoral studies and professional commitments, influenced by China's political regulations governing internet usage (Zheng & Wang, 2020).

I didn't think of going back because of my role as a teaching assistant, there is the time zone and because I have to use the VPN I wouldn't be able to access my work from China. (...) I have work here and I have some research here and I also think that the best thing to do now is to stay and not to move around much. (Jing)

The interviews also reveal that Chinese students' plans regarding the prospect of returning to China or remaining in Portugal during the pandemic tended to be influenced by the particular moment at which they assessed the pandemic and its risks. For instance, when the first news about COVID-19 cases started to emerge, some students



associated the risk with their own country and felt that it was better to continue living abroad rather than return to China. This was the case of Lan, a 27-year-old master's student from Macao who arrived in Portugal in 2017.

We didn't think of going back to China because at that time we hadn't heard the news about the virus in other countries, and we thought that probably Portugal was much safer than China, so we decided to stay here as planned before. (Lan)

Mei, whose earlier narrative revealed her decision to move to Portugal in October 2020 was influenced by her perception of a presumed control of the pandemic and pre-existing mobility plans, now elucidates how her decision to stay put, when the cases started to rise again in Portugal in January 2021, was also intertwined with the intricacies associated with returning to China.

I didn't think of going back because the process is too complicated. If I want to go back to China, I have to quarantine in the hotel at the airport for 15 days, and I think that the process of going home is also risky, to be on the plane and at the airport with many people. (Mei)

This is also exemplified in the experience of Chyou, a student in her 20s, who arrived from mainland China in September 2020 to pursue her master's. Perceiving the severity of the pandemic in Portugal, she decided to return to China. However, due to high costs and constraints regarding flight availability at the time, she found herself compelled into an involuntary 'shock immobility.'

The pandemic became more severe, so I thought about going back to China and I bought tickets twice and they were cancelled, so now I have to stay here because I can't afford to go back. (Chyou)

These responses portray the pandemic as an unsettling event, disrupting students' feelings about their well-being upon a possible return to their home country, stemming from uncertainties about the health situation in China. These fears highlight how the unsettling effect of the pandemic on these students at a subjective level also shaped their 'shock immobility' decisions. Moreover, it also illustrates how the material dimension, linked to the anticipated costs of such a trip and the mandatory hotel quarantine, intertwined with the Chinese government's responses to the disruptions brought by the pandemic, prevented these students from engaging in a 'shock return mobility'. The strict rules enforced by the Chinese government upon Chinese citizens returning to the country were a defining obstacle to these students' decisions to return home, as they had additional expenses. The Chinese management of the pandemic, coupled with concerns about the potential threat of 'imported cases' (Bofulin, 2021) also influenced students at a subjective level, contributing

significantly to their decision of 'shock immobility' due to apprehensions about becoming carriers of the virus to their home country upon their return.

Similar to Kilkey and Ryan's (2020, p. 248) findings in the case of Polish migrants in the UK who 'despite their anger, sadness, and resentment about Brexit' were planning to stay, the excerpts presented above reveal that most interviewees, while concerned about the pandemic and its risks, tended to prioritise their academic endeavours and decided to travel to or remain in Portugal, in an attempt to ensure that the quality of their education and academic performance would not be negatively affected by distance education and its perceived shortcomings. For some students who were already in the country, their decisions were also shaped by their evaluation of the structural constraints of returning to China due to the high costs of the trip and the mandatory quarantine, as well as the contamination risk during the journey. These decisions gave rise to complex and intricate experiences of voluntary and involuntary 'shock (im)mobility' at different levels, as students' material, relational, and subjective circumstances were impacted by the disruptions caused by the pandemic.

## 6 | EXPERIENCING INTERNATIONAL MOBILITY DURING THE PANDEMIC

Our informants' experience of studying abroad under the changing circumstances fostered by the pandemic blurred the notion of voluntary and involuntary (im)mobility. Moreover, it also affected the quality of their academic life, socialisation and daily routines, hence also how they evaluate their overall international learning experience as well as their relationship with Portuguese society.

Inevitably, for some students their overseas sojourn was characterised by disappointment and frustration regarding the quality of their learning and socialisation circumstances and increased anxiety at the prospect of becoming infected. This contrasted starkly with prevailing literature, which emphasises the transformative potential of studying abroad, attributing it to the cultivation of students' independence and confidence, the augmentation of cultural sensitivity and cosmopolitan orientation, and the fostering of substantial personal and professional growth (see Lipura & Collins, 2019). Nuo, a 22 years old student who moved to Portugal from mainland China in October 2020 to pursue a Master's degree, explained:

In comparison, in China, the pandemic is already under control. Since September everybody has been going out, all the business shops are open normally, but here there are still some restrictions, like restaurants that have to close [earlier]. So, I felt very bad living here. I am afraid to meet someone with COVID-19 and get infected. (Nuo)

Zhan, a 29-year-old Master's student also from mainland China who has been in Portugal since 2017, shares a similar feeling:

I don't know why the schools are still open, shops and restaurants when there is COVID-19 outside. When there was an outbreak in China, the Chinese government took much stricter measures to try to control all of this. I think [here], the measures in place are not good enough to control this [pandemic], and this confuses me. (Zhan)

As shown above, students constantly compared how the Portuguese and Chinese governments were managing the health crisis. Overall, among both those students who decided to move to or to remain in Portugal and those who were simply not able to return to China, the shared impression that they would have felt safer if they had been in their home country was common. By having China and its stringent control measures as the reference point, students—whether those who opted to move to or stay in Portugal or those who were not able to return to China—consistently expressed a shared belief in feeling safer had they been in their home country. Consequently, their sojourns in Portugal were characterised by an overarching sense of insecurity and discomfort, leading to feelings of mistrust towards how Portugal was managing the crisis. This highlights how the pandemic unsettled Chinese international students' relational and subjective circumstances, in ways which affected how they made sense of their learning mobility experiences.

In addition, as has been reported in other contexts (Bilecen, 2020; Farbenblum & Berg, 2020; Gao & Sai, 2021; Ma & Zhan, 2020; Wang et al., 2020), our interviewees also faced racism and discrimination in Portugal, which affected their well-being and mental health. While none of our interviewees recounted instances of physical attacks, as reported in other countries, racial micro-aggressions (Sue, 2010) were prevalent. Although micro-aggressions against international students are not a novel phenomenon and have escalated with the growing diversity of the student body (Houshmand et al., 2014; Yeo et al., 2019), the pandemic has exacerbated this situation for Chinese international students (Wang et al., 2020; Ma & Zhan, 2020; França et al., 2022). Once more, Chuntao's account offers insightful elements to be analysed:

People's reactions are too exaggerated, the way they cover their faces (when they see me). People were saying to me "Chinese virus", it happened three times in the metro. (Chuntao)

Even students who had not been in Portugal for long reported having experienced certain forms of exclusion based on their physical appearance, as reported by Zixin, a Macanese 18-year-old bachelor's student who arrived in Portugal in September 2020:

Because the pandemic came from China, some foreign people thought that the Chinese people were the cause of the pandemic, but that's not true. That is why there is discrimination. Every time I go to the supermarket, people look at me like this [fixedly]. (Zixin)

A similar account was also shared by Hua, a 23 years-old Master's student who arrived from mainland China in December 2020:

I read about this Chinese guy who was in Lisbon taking pictures, and he was pictured by a journalist who wrote an article saying very bad things about him, claiming that although the Chinese had learned our language, they did not know what "lockdown" was. For me, reading this is absurd. It's a kind of discrimination because, after this article, some Chinese journals in Portugal mentioned this, saying that it is a form of discrimination. (Hua)

The pandemic affected our interviewees' social position in Portuguese society. Chinese international students experienced a shift from their privileged status as international students (Murphy-Lejeune, 2002) to potential virus carriers, therefore aggravating the risk of being discriminated against. Afraid of being confronted with unpleasant situations, and perceiving Portugal as a high-risk environment, some students began to avoid public spaces and opted to stay mostly indoors. Shu, from mainland China, who is 23 years old and arrived in October 2020 for her Master's course, recounted:

I have to say that life here is very boring because I have to stay at home all the time and I can't go out. But staying at home makes me feel safe. I think some Portuguese people are very worried about the pandemic, but some do not care at all, and they party and jog on the street without masks. So I think they are less concerned about the pandemic than us (Chinese people). (...) I am afraid, that's why I tend not to go out, other than the supermarket or to my classes. (Shu)

These accounts highlight the disruptive effects that the pandemic had on the relational and subjective circumstances of Chinese international students in Portugal. The evaluation of Portugal as an unsafe and hostile environment limited our interviewees' opportunities to fully enjoy their experience as international students. On the one hand, it further undermined their social integration and impeded opportunities for intercultural exchange (França et al., 2022; Ma & Zhan, 2020). On the other hand, it also compromises their emotional and mental well-being (Ming & De Jong, 2021; Zhai & Du, 2020). Those students who arrived after the pandemic, although able to engage in an international mobility project, were locally confronted with a 'shock immobility' experience, which heavily affected their experience. They did not have the opportunity to get to know the city in which they live, to interact with local people and international students from other nationalities, or to enjoy the freedom of being away from their families. An illustration of this is provided by Genghis, a Master's student in his 30s who arrived from mainland China in December 2020:

For me is kind of lonely, bored. I've flown 14 h (from China) to get here and there is nothing to do, just stay

at home, looking at the screen, the only place I've been in the supermarket, I haven't done any sightseeing, I have been to SEF [former immigration office in Portugal] and the university: this is my Master's. (Genghis)

Given the uncertainties and restrictions to socialisation due to the pandemic, our interviewees' aspirations for an intercultural experience that are often associated with studying abroad (King, 2018; Krzaklewska, 2019) were intertwined with a rather segregated and monocultural logic. The volunteer 'shock immobility' choice made by some of our respondents—staying at home and choosing to interact only with their co-nationals, either because they wanted to avoid disturbing situations or because they felt more protected from the virus—, encouraged monocultural contacts (Nada & Araújo, 2017) and localised interactions, in the sense that social relations were constrained to their immediate surroundings, limiting their exposure to a culturally diverse environment. The acute unsettling effect of the pandemic on Chinese students' subjective circumstances enhancing their perception of cultural norms and values differences between the home and the host countries which, in some cases, led to self-segregation, as Genghis and Chuntao disclose:

We, Chinese people, listen, we follow the rules, we wear masks and we wash hands every time. (...) We are five young Chinese people [here] and we have a rule, "You can't interact, you can't date or stay too close to people who are not Chinese", because it is harder to see if he/she is infected. (Genghis)

I think that we, the Chinese people, have a more serious attitude regarding the pandemic, especially at the beginning. The Portuguese and other foreign people did not take it very seriously, they had a very bad attitude [towards the pandemic]. That's why I chose to live with Chinese people. I think it is safer. We [Chinese people] stay at home and we buy our groceries online. (Chuntao)

Adding to the mandatory social distance measure and the choice to avoid hostile encounters, the 'us' and 'them' narratives regarding how Chinese and Western people behaved towards the pandemic (Ma & Zhan, 2020) also contributed to limiting Chinese students' interactions with people of nationalities other than Chinese. Although some international students tend to interact more with people from their home country, others deliberately avoid interacting too much with fellow co-nationals and specifically seek to interact with locals or other international students (Nada & Araújo, 2017). However, the pandemic has affected the relational dimension of Chinese students' international sojourns, constraining the socialisation opportunities that they would have had under 'normal' circumstances.

The volunteer 'shock immobility' option as well as the intentional decision to engage almost exclusively with other Chinese students who were deemed to be more responsible regarding the measures to

reduce infection risks, suggests that the intercultural dimension of their stay in Portugal might not be fundamentally different from what they might have experienced had they not left China. For some students, this raises concerns regarding the learning benefits of their study abroad. For instance, Lijuan, a 23-year-old student from mainland China, who arrived in March 2020 to study for his Master's, is worried that he might not be able to improve his level Portuguese during his stay:

I am very anxious because I've been here for 4 months, but (...) I don't have the opportunity to speak Portuguese to anyone. I am at home all the time. (...) Here, I have to stay at home, and I cannot go to the university or speak to Portuguese people. This is a big problem for me because my Master's is only 2 years and I do not have the opportunity to improve my Portuguese. (Lijuan)

The impossibility of engaging with local people, either because students perceive public spaces as 'unsafe' or due to the shift of classes to the online environment, caused frustration among our participants regarding the expectations and goals they had for their international sojourn. By being 'trapped' at home, they share the feeling that they are missing the opportunity to achieve the academic objectives they established when moving abroad.

## 7 | FINAL REMARKS

In this article, we analysed the (im)mobility plans of Chinese international students for moving to/remaining in Portugal, as well as their experiences in the country in light of a global unsettling event that significantly affected international higher education: the COVID-19 pandemic. Its contribution towards the production of knowledge concerning student mobility is twofold. First, it advances knowledge regarding an under-studied segment of the international student population in Portugal: Chinese students. Second, it offers new insights into how mobility plans and the experience of international students can be analysed during unsettling events. The notion of unsettling events proposed by Kilkey and Ryan (2021) and the threefold categorisation of material, relational and subjective dimensions proved particularly useful in analysing the case of Chinese students in Portugal during the Covid-19 pandemic.

Regarding our first research question, which aimed to grasp how the COVID-19 pandemic impacted the international mobility plans of Chinese students, our findings indicate that despite the initial decrease in mobility due to the COVID-19 pandemic, students' mobility plans and enthusiasm for carrying out their international mobility plans did not disappear. On the one hand, amid the COVID-19 pandemic and despite its risks, many students decided to pursue tertiary education overseas and moved to Portugal. Students' motivations for moving appear unchanged by the COVID-19 pandemic and resemble typical motivations already well documented in other



contexts before the health crisis (Krzaklewska et al., 2021). These include learning or improving a new language for professional reasons, previous contact with the host country, personal networks, or colonial ties (Nada & Araújo, 2018b; Ploner & Nada, 2020). On the other hand, several students who were already living in Portugal at the outbreak of the pandemic chose not to return to their home country, as they prioritised the success of their educational trajectories, the quality of their academic experiences abroad, and their personal development, while downplaying the impact of the pandemic in their daily lives.

Regarding our second research question, which inquired how Chinese students in Portugal made sense of their (im)mobility experiences, our analysis revealed that despite the willingness of Chinese international students to continue their overseas studies, the quality of their international experiences was considerably compromised by the pandemic. Starting from their academic experiences that were massively affected, to social distancing and isolation measures undermining their opportunities to get to know their host country and engage in intercultural interactions, for some students, international mobility ended up being an 'immobility' experience. Whilst some deliberately decided to remain in the host country, their experience was marked by monocultural interactions and online learning, others were simply unable to return to their home country due to the 'bio-political containment measures' (Kloet et al., 2020) taken by the Chinese government.

In addition, racist and discriminatory encounters negatively affected Chinese students' experiences in Portugal, a finding aligned with previous research indicating an increase in discrimination against Chinese and Asian students since the beginning of 2020 (as reported by Bilecen, 2020; Farbenblum & Berg, 2020; França et al., 2022; Gao & Sai, 2021; Ma & Zhan, 2020; Wang et al., 2020). While they expected to be included and integrated into the local community, these students were constantly exposed to both subtle and direct micro-aggressions rooted in anti-Asian feelings linked to the emergence of COVID-19. In addition, given the different approaches taken by the Portuguese and Chinese governments in dealing with the health crisis, Chinese students limited their interactions to spaces and people that they judged safe, which often meant interacting exclusively with other Chinese students. Therefore, the long-awaited international mobility experience ended up being reduced to confinement in one's home, and a few trips to the local supermarket. In this sense, the experience of Chinese students in Portugal has been severely disrupted. From their learning routines to their socialisation practices, students had to restructure their sojourns and manage their initial expectations.

Although aware of these upheavals originating from the experience of international mobility during a significant unsettling event, students still valued their mobilities, as they perceived facing these adversities as a key element of the international student experience and a step towards adulthood and becoming more autonomous and independent. This finding contrasts with initial estimations according to which the COVID-19 pandemic would forever change international student mobility as we knew it (Bilecen, 2020; Marginson,

2020). As shown above, whilst the impact of this unsettling event is unquestionable, the value that students attach to international mobility and its benefits seems to outweigh the challenges brought by the pandemic. These are often not sufficient to discourage students from engaging in a study abroad experience and value its (learning) outcomes. The accounts presented here indicate that, when students attached significant value to international mobility and its academic outcomes, they became more resilient in dealing with and overcoming the additional challenges brought by the COVID-19 pandemic. In other words, academic achievement, the concretisation of previous mobility plans, and the desire to become independent, clearly outweighed potential concerns about the pandemic and its risks.

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## CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

## DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

Data is unavailable due to ethical reasons, as participants did not provide written consent for data sharing, thereby rendering supporting data unavailable due to the sensitive nature of the research.

## ETHICS STATEMENT

Ethics approval statement is not applicable.

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