



UCLA Center for the Study of
International Migration

From “Sea Turtles” to “Grassroots Ambassadors”: The Chinese Politics of Outbound Student Migration

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Will be held via Zoom (This Event May Be Recorded)



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Jiaqi Liu is a PhD candidate at University of California, San Diego, studying the political sociology of international migration. His research has been published at *International Migration Review* and *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* and won the 2020 Aristide Zolberg Distinguished Student Scholar Award from the American Sociological Association.

International student migration/mobility (ISM) has long come under the spotlight in migration and education studies. Previous research has focused primarily on inbound students in Western host countries, with much less attention on sending countries’ policies. Based on evidence from interviews, ethnography, and policy analysis in China, the world’s largest source country of student migrants, I argue that outbound student migration can be integrated into the home country’s broader diaspora politics to serve economic, governmental, and geopolitical policy objectives. These diverse, sometimes-clashing, interests are predicated upon China’s domestic politics and global positioning. To establish a conceptual bridge between ISM and diaspora studies, I depart from the mobility paradigm’s emphases on neoliberalism and de-regulation and, instead, foreground nation-states’ changing, yet-unabating, interests in regulating and strategizing about overseas students. I find that following decades of prioritizing the economic and governmental impacts of student returnees (*haigui*, or colloquially “sea turtles”) in boosting the domestic economy and maintaining political stability, China now attaches growing importance to student migrants’ geopolitical value as “grassroots ambassadors” (*minjian dashi*) in expanding China’s global influence and enhancing its national image abroad. This geopolitics- focused national reorientation, however, may not be well received by student migrants themselves or fully implemented by street-level migration bureaucrats. By examining tensions between the central Chinese state, student migrants, and frontline local officials, this article sheds new light on ISM as a dynamic policy arena where state ambitions crosscut individual desires and national grand plans are confronted with flexible local improvisation.

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