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Time and Precarity in 'South−South' Academic Mobility: A 2019−2023 Longitudinal Study of Pakistani PhD Students and Recent Graduates in China

Mengwei Tu 🆔

Department of Criminology, Sociology and Social Policy, Swansea University, Swansea, UK

Correspondence: Mengwei Tu (mengwei.tu@swansea.ac.uk)

ABSTRACT

China's rise as an education hub introduces a new dynamic to the current framework for understanding international academic mobility. This paper presents longitudinal case studies of Pakistani PhD students and recent graduates in China, comparing their imagined mobility in 2019 with their actual trajectories by 2023. Using a time-sensitive approach, this study unpacks the individual-institutional temporal entanglement against the macro-level socioeconomic changes in China and Pakistan between 2019 and 2023. Shifting from study to work, Pakistani PhD graduates face age-based discrimination, temporary contracts and lack of permanent residency prospect in China. Meanwhile, deteriorating conditions in Pakistan's academic sector, over time, further constrained options. Despite aspirations to reach the 'Global North', participants experienced reversed migration decision driven by precarity rather than advancement. This study highlights the limitations within 'South−South' academic mobility and the difficulty for highly educated migrants to align their mobility strategies with an increasingly uncertain global socioeconomic environment.

1 | Introduction

China is the top international student host country in Asia, and Pakistan became China's top degree student sending country in 2018.[1] One third (7617 out of 24,573) of Pakistani students in China study for a PhD, and the majority are funded by the Chinese Government Scholarship (CGS) (5059 out of 7617).[2] The significant presence of Pakistani PhD students in China is linked to the geopolitical closeness of China and Pakistan, especially after the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) in 2013 where investment schemes and policies stimulated new dynamics of mobility pathways. State-initiated scholarship schemes have expanded the access to PhD education among students from less privileged background in the 'Global South'.

To what extent does educational mobility to China influence the 'Global South' PhD students' future mobility trajectories?

This paper traces Pakistani PhD students' mobility trajectory after completing their education in China with a time sensitive approach (Robertson 2015; Xu 2025). A time sensitive approach recognises that international PhD students are part of both international student mobility (ISM) and international academic mobility. They are internationally mobile students who pursue tertiary/higher education (HE) outside their countries of citizenship (Yang 2020). They also share the identity of being (early-career) researchers, and they are knowledge agents in the global knowledge system to be mobilised into academic labour markets (Shen et al. 2022). PhD students' aspirations to an imagined (progressing) career are challenged with an increasing precarity in global academic job market which has been exacerbated by the Covid-19 pandemic (Horta and Li 2024; Khan 2023;

Khelifi 2022; Spina et al. 2022). In this context, Pakistani PhD students' post-graduate trajectory within and beyond China contributes to a 'Global South' approach to understanding ISM and international academic mobility in a precarity-driven transnational migration field.

Transnational mobility is increasingly associated with risk, uncertainty and unpredictability, including among the highly educated population (Nehring and Hu 2021). The experience of 'precarity' has become more relevant to mobile individuals whose biographic trajectory intertwined heavily with the 'regimes of mobility' (Glick Schiller and Salazar 2013; Mulvey 2021; Tu 2022). Instead of assuming a universal phenomenon, it is better to consider 'varieties of precarity' and the varying 'paths to precarity' in specific contexts (Martin et al. 2019, 901). It helps to move beyond a North–South inequality spectrum and explore regional heterogeneity in power relations within the 'Global South'.

To this end, this paper examines precarity in the Pakistan–China regimes of education and academic mobility and how it is navigated by graduates during their study-to-work process. In order to go beyond a cross-sectional approach and trace how precarities were constructed *over time*, longitudinal case studies of Pakistani PhD students and recent graduates are analysed to compare the imagined and the actual mobility during 2019 and 2023 against China's semi-peripheral status (Mulvey 2021) in the global education hierarchy. The findings of the study help address a broader question: How does this emerging 'South–South' academic mobility speak to the existing West-centred understanding in the global HE hierarchy, which is largely built on 'South–North' migration? The subsequent parts of the paper will first introduce the theoretical framework that incorporates the role of time to understand precarity in the regimes of mobility, and then move on to apply this framework to the context of China's ambiguous position in global education hierarchy.

1.1 | Precarity, Mobility Regimes and the Lens of Time

A mobility regime is constituted through discourses, norms and practices that legitimise the free movement of some while restricting or criminalising the movement of others (Glick Schiller and Salazar 2013; Sheller 2018). A regimes-of-mobility approach moves beyond mobility as freedom by providing a framework to examine not only movement as connection but also as an aspect of new confinements and modes of exploitation (Glick Schiller and Salazar 2013). Migration scholars have long recognised the various levels of precarity associated with the *relatively* privileged migrant cohorts, who might be labelled as highly skilled, global talent or highly educated (Baas and Yeoh 2018; Martin et al. 2019; Raghuram 2012; Tu and Nehring 2020; Zhan and Zhou 2019). Highly skilled migrants' agency in copying with precariousness are restricted by the mobility regime and stratified by their capital and resources (Mulvey 2021; Zhan and Zhou 2019). International students, who are described as 'semi-finished human capital' (Robertson and Runganaikaloo 2013, 218), are arguably more vulnerable in encountering mobility precarity than other highly skilled migrants.

Building on mobility regimes as intersecting systems that differentially allow and restrict migration across social groups, Mulvey (2021) discovers three post-study trajectories among African students in China depending on individual's class background: returnees who are deterred by host country barriers, stayers who *temporarily* overcomes these barriers by opening business, and those 'middle class' participants who *intend* to use China as a transition country to the 'Global North'. Similar patterns of temporal strategies are also found among students/recent graduates between the 'Global South' and 'North': graduates choose to endure unfavourable working conditions *now* with the view of reward *in the future* as a copying strategy against migration and employment precarity (Martin et al. 2019; Robertson and Runganaikaloo 2013; Wang 2019; Xu 2025).

While such strategies show, to some extent, agency from the graduates in their attempt to navigate precarity in the mobility regime, without longitudinal observation it is unclear whether such mobility aspirations translate into mobility reality *later*. A more important follow up question is: If not, what are the reasons? Research on ISM to China increasingly points to the close entanglement of micro-level biographical transitions and meso-level institutional frameworks (Mulvey 2021; Yang 2018). However, most of such studies were based on the future career plans among current students. Very little research has explored the actual post-graduation career mobility (or immobility) among international students who studied in China, in comparison with their imagined mobility (Baas 2012) before graduation. The absence of such a comparison leaves the viability of graduates' strategy unchecked and risk a level of romanticisation of these temporal strategies.

The time lens has unpacked precarity in international students' migration decision and their attendant career development from two dimensions: The first dimension of temporal precarity built on time as quantitative and objective, manifesting in external institutional rules such as time and age requirements. The second dimension of temporal precarity points to the qualitative and subjective aspect of 'time', that is, the sense of 'being temporary' and the feeling of precarity associated with it (Mulvey 2021; Robertson and Runganaikaloo 2013; Wang 2019; Xu 2025). The two dimensions are closely entangled. The meaning of being a student and how it influences an individual's life pace is significantly shaped by the 'temporal work done by HE policies and practices' (Brooks et al. 2021, 998). Being an international student adds to the temporal complexity and precarity as they simultaneously embed in the temporal policies in both sending and receiving countries and closely bound with visa length and overseas funding durations (Tu 2022; Tu and Nehring 2020).

The time lens used in this paper adds to a third dimension in understanding precarity in education/academic mobility. The 4-year longitudinal case studies allow an examination of how institutional policies and macro-level socioeconomic changes shape individuals' actual and perceived mobility. Adding the dimension of a macro-level socioeconomic shifts bring out a more severe aspect of time-related uncertainty, thus highlight the vulnerability of individual graduate/students' strategies that place great hope for reward *in the future*. The post-Covid global economic recession and geopolitical tension have made such macro-level time lens more relevant.

1.2 | China in the Global ISM Hierarchy: The Old Power and the New Dynamics

The terms 'Global North' and 'South' are contested for their implications on a global power relation which was largely inherited from the colonial period (Alasuutari and Andreotti 2015). However, the North—South divide is used here because the contemporary HE landscape still largely reflects a power structure dominated by a centre-peripheral relation between the 'developed West' and the rest who suffer from disadvantaged HE infrastructure and resources (Altbach 2007). While the rise of China as the world's second largest economic power appears to challenge the South—North divide, it would be a rush to render such divide irrelevant. As this paper will show, despite China's ambition to gain a leading position in global HE system, the 'old power' remains influential. Therefore, this paper proposes a nuanced angle to unpack the internal distinctions within the 'Global South' mobility while recognising the on-going influence of the South—North divide.

China sits at a unique place in the global HE hierarchy (Yang 2020). It is the largest student-sending country, reflecting a disparity of credential values between China and the 'Global North'. Meanwhile, between 2010 and 2019 the Chinese Ministry of Education (2022) had steadily increased the budget for attracting international students by fivefolds (with a decrease due to Covid-19). In 2018, nearly 500,000 students from 196 countries were studying in China (Ministry of Education China 2019), making it the third largest receiver (after the US and the UK) of internationally mobile students (Yang 2020). Most international students to China come from Asia, with Africa being the second largest sending region (Ministry of Education China 2019), reflecting China's more advanced education resources compared with those of other 'Global South' countries.

Such demographic profiles are closely linked to China's BRI which started its impact on its neighbouring countries, as well as China's role as the largest bilateral trading partner for Africa (Cheng and Koh 2022; Mulvey 2021). Regional mobility within the 'Global South' has been invoked for its narrative power to blur the 'East—West' dichotomy and show a diversifying ISM motives and trajectories. For example, Indian medical students found new, more affordable destinations such as Russia, Ukraine, China, the Philippines, Bangladesh and Nepal (Kumar and Pandey 2023; Yang 2018); a Chinese university's Malaysian campus invokes historical tie with southeast Asian Chinese diaspora and attracts students from mainland China, Malay and Arab backgrounds (Cheng and Koh 2022). A regional and 'Global South' approach has become more relevant in unpacking the new trend and the old links to the existing system of knowledge production and academic mobility.

China's shifting position to being a potentially powerful player in the global ISM hierarchy raises questions about development and (in)equality: What are the implications for countries further down in the ladder, such as Pakistan? Mulvey's (2021) description of a semi-peripheral postcolonial relationship based on African students' education aspirations to China serves as a useful starting point in shifting the analytical framework away from the West-centred tradition, and this thus highlights China's new position 'in the middle' (Raghuram 2012).

However, the education mobility from the 'peripheral' to the 'semi-peripheral' is not a simple reproduction of power relations between the 'centre' and the 'peripheral'. Existing studies on ISM from 'Southern' countries to China tend to be cross-sectional, capturing one stage of the students' life cycle (usually the stage of being a student) and interpreting their mobility trajectory for the future. Unpacking the complexities of mobility within and beyond 'Global South' requires new observations that compares education aspiration and employment/migration outcomes.

To this end, the longitudinal method in this study responds to the need to address heterogeneity within 'Global South' academic mobility, and it reveals a temporal understanding of the new power dynamics. The time between 2019 and 2023 covers an eventful period of ISM. The Covid pandemic and its aftermath magnified global inequalities and exacerbated the temporal limitations imposed on those who wished to be transnationally mobile (Nehring and Hu 2021). The cases considered in this paper provide a rare opportunity to observe how far a Chinese PhD degree can take Pakistani graduates in their academic careers when navigating their mobility over a challenging period.

1.3 | The China—Pakistan 'Education Corridor': Opportunity and Fragility in the 'Global South' Mobility Regimes

Given that Pakistan's university-age population is the third largest in the world, after India and China (Ilieva et al. 2024), its outbound student mobility is very limited relative to these two countries. Nevertheless, Pakistan's number of outbound students has seen a steady increase since the establishment of the Pakistani Higher Education Commission (HEC) in 2002. HEC was part of national scheme to expand university enrolment in Master's and Doctorate degrees, which also include providing funding for students to seek degree training overseas. From 1998 to 2010, the number of students studying overseas has increased from 13,127 to 36,366 (Kayani et al. 2015). In the last two decades, China has become a 'very significant destination for Pakistani students' (Tamim and Bari 2025, 3). The HEC Annual Report (2022) featured China-funded scholarships including the CGS, Huawei Seeds for Future and training schemes funded through the China—Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC).

The CPEC is regarded as a flagship project of the BRI and has encouraged education mobility from Pakistan to China (Xinhua News 2022). CGS are awarded to produce 'a large group of highly educated foreign graduates who are knowledgeable about China and are friendly to China' (Tu 2022, 1095); one out of three CGS-funded PhD students in 2018 was from Pakistan (Ministry of Education China 2019). From 2010 to 2018, the number of Pakistani students studying in China increased nearly fourfold, from 7406 to 28,023 (China Association for International Education 2010; Ministry of Education China 2019).

Echoing CPEC, while the China-Pakistan 'education corridor' enabled student mobility, by providing infrastructure such as fast visa procedure and a simplified scholarship application (Tu 2022), the Covid pandemic brought out the precarity of such 'mobility regime'. The Ministry of Education in China

attributed the reason for the significant deduction in its budget in 2022 to 'the drop in the number of international students due to Covid and border-control policy' (Ministry of Education China 2022). Behind this statement is the nationalist nature of state intervention: the top-down, multilevel operational logic shapes individuals' spatial and social mobility. These national-rooted apparatus (visa policies, scholarship provision, education/employment systems) also risk disrupting an individual's mobility when transnational aspiration and national-level politics clash with each other (Nehring and Hu 2021).

In their critical comment on 'the regimes of mobility' across the globe in the aftermath of the 2008 financial crisis, Glick Schiller and Salazar (2013) pointed out the dominance of nationalism in the rapid glamorisation and then demonisation of mobile people at different phases of a global crisis. A decade later and reflecting on the disruption of transnational infrastructure during the Covid pandemic, Nehring and Hu (2021) coined the term 'fragile transnationalism', with its 'long roots in nationalist politics, structural racism and the postcolonial global order', to bring forward the underlying conflict between the nation-state centred ideology from above and transnational mobility from below.

Both waves of the global crisis exposed the multi-level power dynamics shaping the mobility–immobility continuum. While many graduates sought to stay in China for career mobility, their transition was poorly supported by regulatory institutions in this relatively new migrant-receiving country, revealing institutional gaps and personal costs (Tu 2022). This study examines how Pakistani PhD students/graduates navigate evolving 'mobility regimes', where old hierarchies and new dynamics generate both constraints and openings. Their migration trajectories remain oriented toward the Global North, yet job-seeking experiences reveal the limited convertibility of Chinese credentials and highlight the complex implications of South–South educational mobility within a global academic hierarchy.

2 | Methods

The paper's data rests on 16 in-depth interviews with 10 Pakistani PhD students and recent graduates. These participants belong to a larger project exploring the education and migration mobility of postgraduate students from 'Belt and Road' countries to China. The project applied a snow-ball sampling strategy with selection criteria include (1) coming from a BRI country; (2) being at the final year of their postgraduate degree. The project recruited students from 11 countries who were based at popular destination cities including Shanghai, Guangzhou and Nanjing. The British Sociological Association (BSA) guidelines on ethical research were followed, including the obtaining of informed consent and the safeguarding of participant anonymity.

The Pakistani cohort stood out because it is the largest county cohort, and it has the highest proportion of PhD students. Table 1 below shows the details of the 10 Pakistani participants who were engaged with a PhD study. This paper takes a focus on the PhD students because early career academic job market is arguably more articulate about individuals' credential prestige. Therefore, observing PhD graduates' job-seeking

TABLE 1 | Participants' information.

	Pseudonym	Birth year	Year of arrival	Subject	Year of PhD graduation	Marital status 2019	Marital status 2023	Job in 2023
1	Kabir	1987	2016	Economics	2019	Married with 2 children	Married with 3 children	Lecturer (Middle East)
2	Aleem	1990	2014	Economics	2019	Married	Married with 2 children	Lecturer (China)
3	Fareed	1986	2015	Engineering	2019	Married	Married with 1 child	Post-doc (China)
4	Salim	1990	2016	Anthropology	2020	Single	Single	Post-doc (Pakistan)
5	Ali	1988	2017	Engineering	2023	Married	Married with 1 child	PhD student (China)
6	Najib	1988	2015	Engineering	2020	Single		
7	Jameel	1990	2017	Engineering	2021	Single		
8	Bashir	1988	2015	Engineering	2019	Single		
9	Ismail	1988	2015	Anthropology	2020	Single		
10	Hamid	1988	2018	Engineering	2021	Married with 1 child		

experience can better reflect the competitiveness of a degree from China compares with that of other countries. The paper's analysis is informed by data gathered in the larger project: it is common for master's students to express their wish to apply for a PhD in China, hence reenforce the importance of an in-depth analysis on the PhD graduates.

The 10 Pakistani PhD participants in this paper are all beneficiaries of CGS-funded PhD studentships in first tier Chinese universities. They are all male students despite effort made to keep a gender balance. Female students are believed to make up only 10% of the total number of Pakistani students to China (Tu 2024). Religion-influenced gender seclusion in Pakistan restricts women's mobility to the domestic sphere, limiting access to universities and workplaces which are seen as public and masculine (Khattak 2020). The male-dominated CGS recipient profile may have widened the gender gap, as explored in another publication (Tu 2024). All-male participants focused on education and careers, largely unaffected by marriage or parenthood-reflecting patriarchal norms in Muslim families. Yet the cultural expectation for men to be 'breadwinners' heightened their anxiety and sense of stigma during the career setback period observed in the study. As a non-Muslim, female Chinese academic, the author's position may have encouraged participants to speak more openly about failure and frustration than they might with someone from their own community.

In response to the 'temporal turn' in education and migration studies (Baas and Yeoh 2018; Brooks et al. 2021; Robertson and Runganaikaloo 2013; Wang 2019; Xu 2025) the study takes a time-sensitive methodological approach. A 'temporally engaged approach' (Robertson 2015, 53) gathers data that speaks to the openness and contingencies of migrant futures, thus shedding light on how diverse timescales interact at different 'points' in the time track which shape or constrain migrant practices and subjectivities. Therefore, this study entails two time-sensitive decisions in data collection and analysis. First, interviews are collected at two time points in the same individual's migration journey. Most of the first-wave face-to-face interviews were conducted in 2019, and were aimed at final-year postgraduate students. Two exceptions were Ismail and Hamid, who were interviewed online in 2020 and 2021. Due to the 3-year disruption of Covid-19 pandemic a substantial part of the original cohort was lost, resulting in five participants from the original cohort interviewed again online in early 2023 (in one case follow-up interviews were conducted in both 2021 and 2023). These interviews revealed the different stages of PhD students' imagined mobility and actual (im)mobility, from Pakistan to China and beyond.

The second decision concerns data analysis and presentation. The objective is to show a temporally holistic profile that encapsulates participants' transition from PhD students to early career researchers (ECRs). The 10 participants belong to a relatively homogenous cohort in terms of their gender, age, lower-class background, scholarship-funded degree, status and general education level. The homogeneity of the 2019 sample serves as good baseline comparison for observing the longitudinal diversification of the participants: while the sample size is limited, the divergence in mobility trajectories among a homogenous sample responses to Robertson's (2015) methodological challenge to understand how the macro (national and global) and meso (institutional) timescales influence and intersect with the micro organisation of migrants' lives.

In both waves of interviews, the narratives of their decisions to leave, return and remigrate as well as the participants' reflection at each time point, are especially sought after. Their transnational career change, and their interpretations about these changes, provided insights into the participants' on-going negotiation between their perceived and actual positioning in the local and global education/academic hierarchy.

2.1 | Biographic Sketches of the Five Participants

Kabir began his PhD in Economics in China in 2016, leaving a secure university lecturing job in Pakistan. He moved with his wife and baby daughter, and had a second child during his studies. Returning to Pakistan in 2019, he resumed lecturing but grew frustrated with low pay and limited international exposure. He secured an academic job in China in 2020 but was unable to relocate due to Covid restrictions. In 2022, he shifted focus to the Middle East, and by early 2023, he had begun a lectureship in Oman and had a third child.

Salim came to China in 2016 to pursue a PhD in Anthropology, as it was 'the only country that offered him a scholarship'. By 2019, he was doing fieldwork and awaiting the publication of his first journal article, hopeful for a permanent academic job in China, believing temporary post-docs as 'easy to find but too risky'. When Covid hit in early 2020, he returned to Pakistan and completed his viva online in 2021. Facing limited job prospects amid Pakistan's economic deterioration, he continued seeking opportunities abroad. In 2023, he was offered a 2-year post-doc in west China on a Pakistan-related project, which he gladly accepted, saying he wanted to 'just get out of Pakistan'.

Fareed was a university lecturer in Pakistan for 2 years, came to China in 2015 for a PhD in Engineering. He married in 2017 and brought his wife to China. After graduating in 2019, he began a 2-year post-doc in west China. Turning 35 in 2021, he faced age limits for junior academic roles in China and sought work in Pakistan, but funding cuts hindered job opportunities at home. He extended his post-doc to 2023, and his son was born in China in 2022.

Aleem left a banking job to start a PhD in Economics in China in 2014, becoming 'the first PhD in the village'. He helped several relatives, including his wife, obtain CGS-funded PhD positions. In 2019, he began a 5-year lectureship in China, but in 2020, his contract terms worsened with increased workload and reduced salary. He stayed due to Covid and had two children in 2021 and 2022. By 2023, he sought lectureships in the UK and North America, wanting his children to grow up in an English-speaking country.

Ali had worked in civil engineering for 6 years before doing a taught Master's in China (2017–2019), where he was disappointed by the teaching quality. Hoping to pursue a PhD in Europe or Australia, his plans were disrupted by Covid. Newly married, he returned to Pakistan in early 2020 and reluctantly began a CGS-funded PhD at the same Chinese university, expecting a quicker completion. With China's borders closed, he was forced to study online and had his stipend withheld. Supported by family and friends, he had a

son in 2021 and returned alone to China in January 2023 to finish his PhD.

2.2 | Academic Job Market in China: Encountering the Institutional Time Barrier

China's academic job market has undergone reform, including a tendency towards competition-based non-permanent contracts (Horta and Li 2024; Wang 2019). This trend has generated two time-related barriers for academic jobseekers. The first was an increase of fixed-term contracts, with 2-year post-doctoral positions being the most commonly available to PhD graduates. The second time barrier for participants in this study was the institutional ageism in China. Although precarious academic employment and implicit ageism in the 'Global North' are documented (Spina et al. 2022), age discrimination in Chinese academia is significantly more, overtly, institutionalised. Chinese universities have an explicit upper age thresholds for the recruitment of academics. Entry-level academic positions typically have an age cap of 35 (Horta and Li 2024). The 'curse of 35' (Reuters 2023; Wang and Yeung 2023) exists across private and public sectors in the Chinese employment market for below-managerial positions.

Institutional ageism extends beyond recruitment into the funding application and promotion structure. ECRs are referred to in Chinese academia as 'young scholars'. Unlike the way ECRs are usually defined based on time of PhD graduation (Spina et al. 2022), ECRs in China, or 'young scholars', are defined by age. Major ECR-qualified research grants in China impose an age cap of 35 for men and 40 for women, limiting PhD graduates' time window to obtain grants for their tenure/promotion. A study of 70 Chinese PhD students found that these 'tournament-like, age-based career scripts' in the Chinese academic job market remain unchallenged and accepted as the norm (Horta and Li 2024).

Such a young-age preference in ECR job market is likely to pose an even greater challenge for Pakistani PhD graduates: they were not only socialised into such a process much later in their student lives, but they also entered their PhD courses at an older age. Among the 10 participants it was common to find a nonlinear education trajectory, that is, most participants had worked for some time before starting their PhD in China. This feature reflects the lower socioeconomic background of these Pakistani students: they tend not to have the funding to sustain a full-time student status into the PhD stage. Many had to start a job and support their family after university. However, this nonlinear education journey is uncommon in Chinese HE 'career script', where students share a relatively homogeneous education trajectory without a time gap between undergraduate and postgraduate education. Students from less privileged class in the 'Global South' inherited their social disadvantage in the form 'labour time debt'. They need to devote extra time to pay back this 'debt' in order to catch up with those who inherited 'labour time wealth' (Xu 2025). As a result, the Pakistani PhD graduates' biographical time frame does not equip them with any necessary temporal advantage in the competitive Chinese job market.

Furthermore, as an immigrant, Pakistani PhD students face an extra level of time restrictions. PhD graduates in China are entitled to a favourable visa category for 'young foreign talents' which simplified their study-to-work visa transition. Nevertheless, this visa category has an age cap of 40. Fareed's case is a good example of an individual facing multiple age hurdles. Reaching the age of 35 can be detrimental to an academic jobseeker in China. Although Fareed had been successful in securing his first post-doctoral position, and had improved his CV with more publications, his career mobility was nonetheless hindered when he became 35. Even if he secured a long-term junior position at 35, in 5 years' time, he would hit another age cap in visa application. Unless he becomes a tenured associate professor and thus qualify for another 'talent' category, the Chinese immigration system will be the next barrier because of his age. The institutional process and Fareed's double time constraints are discussed further in the author's other publication (Tu 2022).

The casualisation of academic contracts in China, combined with overt ageism, places Pakistani graduates in a precarious position. Aleem was the only participant to secure a lectureship in China after graduation, but it was limited to a 5-year contract. In 2020, sudden changes to his workload and salary exposed the exploitative nature of his role, yet Covid forced him to delay job searching. By 2023, with no promise of permanence and his children's education now a key concern, Aleem was eager to move to 'one of the English-speaking countries'. Despite strong credentials, ECRs like Fareed and Aleem are being pushed out of China's academic job market-not due to lack of merit, but because of restrictive age limits and temporary contract policies shaped by government regulations.

2.3 | Re-Departure From Home: Covid and the Deteriorating Academic Career Prospect in Pakistan

The 10 participants in this study left Pakistan between 2014 and 2018 to begin PhD programmes in China, driven in part by the lack of advanced academic resources at home. Pakistan has 247 universities and degree-awarding institutes, yet none ranked among the global top 500 (Meo et al. 2024). As of 2017, only 31% of faculty at Pakistani universities held PhDs (Higher Education Commission 2017), and there remains a shortage of professors (Khan 2023). In contrast, China offers more advanced HE resources and training. According to the 2025 QS rankings, 71 mainland Chinese universities were in the global top 500, making it the third most represented country after the United States and the United Kingdom.

In 2019, all 10 participants expressed a strong desire to 'look for opportunity in China or another country' except Kabir, who was positive about resuming his academic position in Pakistan:

> Yeah, definitely. I will join my university (in Pakistan) as an assistant professor. I have a clear path and I know I can progress on that path. I have all the requirements to progress. You need to produce good research papers so you can see good progress on the ladder of career. And I already fill requirements to become an associate professor that I will be hoping after four years. So if I go back, I have a clear career.

Kabir went back to Pakistan in June 2019 to work in the same department from which he had started. However, in mid-2020 he began to apply for jobs in China; he wanted to leave Pakistan. When asked about the reasons for leaving (in our 2023 interview), Kabir did not share much, but gave 'the university was not paying that much' and for 'personal development' as the two main reasons.

Kabir's shift in migration plans may reflect deeper issues also seen in Salim's experience. After leaving China during the 2020 Covid outbreak and completing his PhD in Anthropology in 2021, Salim, despite early publications and high hopes for a stable academic role, experienced 2 years of unemployment in Pakistan (2021−2022), only managing occasional hourly-paid teaching. Financial strain in Pakistan's public universities and China's prolonged border closure blocked his return. By 2023, Salim had finally secured a postdoc in China, and in our interview, the conversation turned quickly to his reasons for wanting to leave Pakistan.

> These days not just the university, but the whole country is in financial crisis. Many universities stopped recruiting people. Before, universities paid an assistant professor the equivalent of 4000 RMB (560USD) per month. Because there are many unemployed PhDs in the market, they just recruit people on a visiting basis. They give you the equivalent of 3000 RMB (420 USD) for the whole semester! It's exploiting. This is why educated people are trying to leave Pakistan as soon as possible. I applied to three, four universities, it's been a year, and the status is 'still waiting for selection board'... In two occasions it was clear that my CV is much better, but other people had departmental, political, or military connections. Without these things, this nepotism, you cannot get a job in Pakistan. Now I am clear that I have to leave, even if I get a job, I will not survive here. Because inside it's very much political agenda. No one spend energy on teaching. Not only me, but already the people who have a job are trying to leave Pakistan now. It's because of the economic crisis, political disruption, insecurity conditions.

Salim's account echoes Kabir's reasons of leaving. Similar opinions about the declining of opportunities in Pakistani universities, especially after Covid, can be found among other PhD participants. These expressions of disappointment, and the decisions to leave Pakistan, reflect a greater problem embedded in the Pakistani HE system. The HEC's 2002 scheme to expand PhD degrees did not anticipate a deteriorating employment market 20 years later. It was said in 2019 that the initiative resulted in the over-supply of PhD graduates: '800 PhD graduates are the victims of joblessness' (Hashmi and Iftekhar 2019). In 2022, the HEC admitted that more than 4000 PhD scholars were jobless in Pakistan (Khan 2023). Such statistics correspond to Salim's encounter of 'many unemployed PhDs' and the increasingly bleak academic employment market faced by returnees.

Although most countries, both in the 'Global North' and 'Global South', suffered from the impact of the Covid pandemic, the *speed* of recovery from Covid-related impact differs greatly. The COVID Economic Recovery Index Ranking shows Pakistan at 96 among 122 countries, with China ranked at 32 (Drzeniek et al. 2024). The lower-ranking countries tend to be low-income economies from the 'Global South' with systemically weaker economic resilience. The different recovery speeds magnify the economic differences between developing and developed countries. In the case of PhD employment, a survey conducted in 2020 among 633 PhD holders in Pakistan showed a staggering 'jobless' rate of 66.8%; while another 4% identified as 'underemployed' (Khan 2023). In comparison, a study published in 2022 showed the unemployment rate for PhD graduates in OECD countries to be 2% (Hnatkova et al. 2022). Such a sharp contrast shows the intensified difference, in the face of the pandemic, of resilience and recovery between the academic eco-systems in the 'Global North' and 'South'.

The widening gap of academic career prospects of the educated generation between Pakistan and the rest of world has become a continuing element of the 'brain drain' from Pakistan. The two longitudinal cases recorded Kabir and Salim's migration trajectory changes from return to re-migration. The motivation behind their migration behaviour was the deterioration of academic career prospects in Pakistan between 2019 and 2023. According to Pakistan's Bureau of Emigration & Overseas Employment (2024), the emigration of the 'highly qualified' and the 'highly skilled' reached a record high at 68,447 in 2023; more than double the increase from 38,841 in 2022.

For universities, such an emigration trend leads to a vicious circle of deteriorating academic quality. For example, Pakistani universities had had a continuous increase of the number of research publications from 2000 to 2022; however, that rising trend reversed in 2022. The substantial number of qualified professionals who left the country is a cause of concern: it fundamentally reduces the academic and research productivity in the country (Meo et al. 2024). Given this context, Pakistani PhD graduates find themselves facing a more problematic academic environment than when they first decided to do a PhD a few years previously. The next section discusses the precarity of students/graduates caught in the academic peripheral, with a focus on the constant alignment of imagined and actual mobility.

2.4 | Navigating (Im)mobility in the Transnational Academic Space Between 2019 and 2023

The participants' initial interviews as students entailed an imagined mobility after their graduation. The longitudinal approach reveals a gap and a constant (re)alignment between imagined and actual mobility over the period between 2019 and 2023. Figure 1 below shows a map of transnational academic space between Pakistan, China and an imagined 'Global North'. After the completion of their studies, Fareed and Aleem remained in China with temporary jobs. Aleem had been applying for jobs in the UK and the US but had not been successful. Kabir and Salim returned to Pakistan for employment, only to leave home for opportunities in the Middle East and China. After failure to go to China for his job offer during Covid, Kabir had applied for jobs 'in Europe and US, but they did not send me any call for interview so that I was more
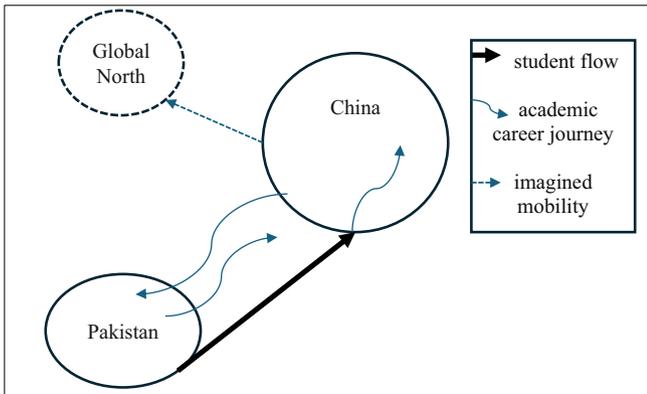
FIGURE 1 | Imagined mobility and actual mobility observed among participants 2019−2023.

focused on the Middle East'. Ali returned to Pakistan as a Master's graduate; he had wanted to do a PhD in 'Singapore, Hong Kong or Australia'. However, in 2020 his attempts to apply for funded PhD studentship in Hong Kong and the UK were not successful. Unable to be a self-funded student, his access to PhD programmes in UK or Hong Kong is extremely limited. Thus he accepted a CGS from China.

All four PhD graduates interviewed in 2023 had received job offers from Chinese universities, reflecting how their degrees were being recognised in China. Yet, despite this success, participants still aspired to move to English-speaking countries in the 'Global North' like the UK, US or Australia although none had secured jobs there. In contrast to their optimism in 2019, by 2023 participants were frustrated by the limited recognition of Chinese degrees in Pakistan. Credential inflation in Asian sending countries (Tu and Nehring 2020) meant overseas education no longer guaranteed career advancement. Returnees with a 'Global South' degree are placed in a more vulnerable position. With the increasing number of returnees with 'Global North' degrees settling for less desirable academic positions, the participants in the study, with their Chinese degree, were found to be pushed towards the lower end of the Pakistani academic job market.

Facing such pressure at home, the decision to 'opt out' was observed among all five longitudinal cases. China was the most common re-migration destination. Kabir would also have worked in China had it not been for Covid; his being 'pushed' to the Middle East job market revealed a comparison of recognitions between degrees from China and the 'Global North'. In his reflection Kabir indicated that he would be always grateful that China offered him a scholarship to complete a PhD, which had led to an entry-level qualification into the global academic job market. But he did not attribute his success in securing a job in the Middle East to the fact that his PhD came from China. Rather, he believed that his high productivity in publications made up for the deficit of his Chinese PhD degree.

> *Kabir: In Pakistan, in the Middle East, they prefer degrees from UK and America. Even if they do not have publications, even then they consider them. And sometimes they pay higher.*

> *Researcher: Do they also look at university rankings? Some Chinese universities rank very high.*

> *Kabir: Ranking matters, but not that much. The country rank matters more than the university rank, I guess. Maybe China graduates have advantage, but if based on the reputation of countries, then the China graduates are at a disadvantage. ...The second thing is that other countries don't know how good China is, okay? Because they relatively have less chance to go to China or understand how Chinese universities work, and what quality of graduates they are producing. Can you believe in my department I have the most publications in most reputable journals than anyone else? So, people have a stereotypical image of Western countries. And secondly, they don't know much about China.*

The graduates expressed frustration about their Chinese degree being 'undervalued'. They were also subscribing to the Western-centred hierarchy of credentials. Almost all 10 participants originally applied for PhD studentship in the 'West' and failed before accepting Chinese scholarship. All five longitudinal cases indicated aspirations for future career development in 'Europe or in the US'. Salim was offered a postdoc in China in 2023 (see above) and was very 'happy' about it. Nevertheless, he was enthusiastic about the imagined mobility that would lead him to the 'Global North':

> *Now my plan is that I'll never come back to Pakistan for a job. The other plan is that I'll go to China to join my job and I will search more jobs there, especially permanent teaching positions in Sino-foreign universities like XXX (a US university's China campus) who are operating in very competitive salaries...I'll try to get a position in other countries, like Singapore, in European, in USA.*

In another case, Aleem regarded himself more successful than other graduates in China because he had a fixed-term lectureship instead of a post-doctoral contract. In 2023 he was in the process of job applications to the UK and the USA. He explained a time-related reason for applying to these countries:

> *I have my family and I would like to prefer some countries where I can get the permanent residence. In China because I will not have such opportunity, that's why I wanna move for UK and USA ... So then we may able to get the Green Card and some other opportunities over there. So that's the reason why I wanna move.*

Salim and Aleem's stories highlight the temporary nature of their time in China. Echoing some African students' migration plans in Mulvey (2021) study in China, participants saw China as a potential stepping stone to the 'Global North', though their aspirations were shaped more by a general imagination of the 'West' than by specific countries. Their experiences, however, revealed the instability of academic jobs in China and the lack of pathways to permanent residency-there simply wasn't enough 'time' for them in China, either professionally or personally. Participants' Chinese degrees enabled mobility between Pakistan and China, but they are limited in terms of time and space: the precarity resulted from time regime in China; the limited recognition of their Chinese PhD degree in the

academic hierarchy beyond China. While parenthood does not immediately affect the migration and career plans of participants (all male), it tends to add time pressure for them to find an English-speaking environment before the children reach school age.

The reference to the 'Global North', in the narratives of the participants, appears to be a homogeneous abstract notion rather than a concrete destination. Their lower-class background means they probably do not have any prior connection to any of the 'Global North' countries and have a somewhat romanticised notion that associates 'an English-speaking country in the "West"' with a more desirable working and settling environment. Up to the point of 2023, no participant gained access to any of the 'Western' countries. The hope for continuing mobility towards the 'Global North' remained unfulfilled; instead, their journeys reflected compromises between aspiration and reality, driven more by the need to escape precarity than by upward progression.

3 | Conclusion

The findings from the 10 participants and 5 longitudinal cases point to three aspects of time-related precarity experienced by Pakistani PhDs who graduated from China. Firstly, the overt ageism present in the Chinese academic job market, along with the temporality of junior academic jobs, pushes the 'older' Pakistani graduates to the margins of host country academic employment. Secondly, from 2019 to 2023 the unexpected economic recession in Pakistan let to the change of migration plan for those who had hoped for career progression 'at home'. Thirdly, the Pakistani graduates' job-hunting experience after graduation confirmed the semi-peripheral positioning of China in the global educational hierarchy. It is reinforced by the academic job-market selection preferences to 'Western countries', along with the jobseekers' internalisation of such a norm. All three aspects point to a growing precarity in academic employment and a decline in the macro-level socioeconomic system globally which was not anticipated by many in 2019 before the Covid-19 pandemic.

These findings reflect a time-sensitive methodological approach. It sees migration as a complex and possibly fragmented process across time, rather than a single act of mobility in time (Robertson 2015). The *process* of *becoming* highly skilled migrants reveals institutionally imposed temporal precarity as well as the graduates' subjectification of it (Wang 2019; Xu 2025). The mobility regimes that govern and regulate PhD graduates' education and academic mobility in the 'Global South' have shown how it breeds precarity through its time regime: The age cap in job market and visa regime favours 'young' academic labour. There is a lack of 'time' offered by the host country: without an 'education-migration nexus' (Robertson and Runganaikaloo 2013, 208) there is no clear pathway for graduates to seek settlement status in China (Mulvey 2021; Tu 2022), thus normalising their identity as temporary migrants. Participants did not want to commit their future to China. English-speaking countries in the (romanitized) 'Global North' still dominate in the participants' migration *aspirations*. As a graduate's life course unfolds needs, such as citizenship rights and children's education, become important factors in migration decisions.

A new dimension of temporal precarity revealed by this study concerns macro-level socioeconomic changes and how it adds to the vulnerability of international graduates' mobility strategies because of the time lags nature of such strategies. The 4-year longitudinal case studies allow an examination of how institutional policies and macro-level socioeconomic changes shape individuals' actual and perceived mobility. The different stages of the participants' study-to-work transition reveals a process of alignment between imagined mobility and the changing reality. During the process of alignment there is a continuing ambiguity between the graduates' attempt to find a job in China and their reconfiguration of long-term migration objectives elsewhere.

The study focuses on temporally in-depth data, thus has limitations in its representativeness of broader Pakistani PhD students in China or 'South−South' academic migration in general. The 2019−2023 period limits the biographical and career stages of the graduates: they are still in their ECR stage and early in their parenthood. A time lens recognises at certain biographic stage of a migrants' life non-migration and the ability to 'stay put' for family stability and career continuation (Baas and Yeoh 2018; Tu 2022). The years 2024 and 2025 have witnessed growing instability in the 'West'. In particular, the US and UK both experienced drastic HE financial and funding crises, academic job cuts and hostile policy changes regarding skilled migration. Although the focus is on PhD graduates, the vulnerability of a time lag in their mobility strategies against an increasingly unstable macro socioeconomic environment identified here is not unique to this group. Migration decisions are increasing viewed as on-going and continuous while temporariness and non-settlement become the norm of contemporary migrant lives (Baas and Yeoh 2018; Wang 2019). As such, the present study offers a basis for extending the analysis of temporal precarity to a broader range of highly skilled mobility trajectories.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest.

Endnotes

[1] The number of PhD students from 190 countries is 25,618, among which 7617 are from Pakistan, making up a third of all international PhD students in China.

[2] The actual number of funded studentships is more than 5059. The statistics issued the MoE only recorded CGS funded studentships. There are provisional level, municipal level and university level scholarships available for those who failed to obtain CGS. However, those students need to enrol as self-funded first, hence the under-representation of funded Pakistani PhD studentships in official statistics.

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