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Permanent Imaginaries of Return and Fluid Realities: On Return Aspirations and Ambivalence among Nepali and Chinese Migrants in Australia

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ABSTRACT

Extending the line of analysis on migrants' desires and aspirations to return, this article examines the meanings and emotions attached to the question of return in the context of two migrant groups from Nepal and China in Australia. While studies have delved into aspects of return associated with reintegration into the labour market, adjustment upon return, or social remittances, here we examine return as an embedded migration experience rather than actual physical return. We draw on the cultural understanding of family, mainly the notions of *Luoyeguigeng* and filial piety to examine the common imaginaries of return among both migrant groups and situate our analysis within the 'fluidity of return' framework to show how return is continually postponed or how return might not materialise. We argue that despite the permanent imaginaries of return, shaped by similar cultural ideas of family, return remains fluid in reality, complicated by multiple factors attached to home and host country, including the levels of opportunities afforded by the home countries as well as the opportunities for careers, family and partnership/relationships in Australia. The data presented here draws on two qualitative studies conducted among Nepali education migrants and Chinese professional women migrants in Australia.

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Migration; return; *Luoyeguigeng*; Australia; China; Nepal

Introduction

'Return' is often imagined as definite or permanent in the migrants' imaginaries. Despite being away from home for years or decades or having a relatively settled life abroad, it is common to hear of migrants' desires and intentions to return home. The question of return remains central in the migrants' ongoing journeys but also a complex one fluctuating over the life course and migration cycle (Yang 2000; Baas 2015a; Roberts 2019). Return imaginaries are embedded in ambivalence and uncertainty throughout the migration journey, often effectively shaping migration trajectories differently from the ones imagined (Baas 2015b; Erdal 2017). Several migration scholars, mainly on return migration, have highlighted this 'myth of return' in reference to the migrants' desires

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to return, which are significant whether they actually 'go back' or not or very rarely 'go back' (Baldassar 2001: 4). Extending this line of analysis of migrants' desires and aspirations around return, this article examines the meanings and emotions attached to the question of return to emphasise how the lives of migrants are 'always lived in relation to the question of return' (Roberts 2019: 121). By return, we refer to the migrants' eventual return to the homeland or the end of their migration journey abroad and not back-and-forth temporary returns or visits. However, we acknowledge the multiple typologies of return mobilities and that return is not always definite or that the question of return is not limited to specific points in the migration process, and therefore consider return as part of the everyday lived experiences that are often in the migrants' imagination (Baldassar 2001; Baas 2015a; Roberts 2019). Thus, while studies have delved into aspects of return associated with careers and reintegration into the labour market (Thomas-Hope 2002; Nguyen-Akbar 2014; Dhungel 2017), adaptation and adjustment upon return (Baas 2015b; Bhatt 2015), knowledge transfer or social remittances (Dhungel 2017; Lam and Rui 2022), here we examine return as a future aspiration, rather than on actual physical return. In doing so, we ask: What does it mean for the migrants to continually postpone return and reunion with families? What does it mean to families to not know when or if loved ones will return?

Taking the cases of Nepali education migrants and Chinese professional women migrants in Australia, we draw on the culturally significant notions of *Luoyeguigeng* (the leaves always fall onto its roots, implying that young people, no matter how far they have travelled, will always find their way home) and filial piety to examine the common imaginaries of return among both migrant groups, and also situate our analysis within the 'fluidity of return' (Baas 2015b) framework to show how return is continually postponed or how return might not materialise. We argue that despite common imaginaries of return, shaped by similar cultural notions of family, return remains fluid in reality, complicated by multiple factors attached to both the home and the host countries, including the different levels of opportunities afforded by the home countries as well as the opportunities for careers, family and partnership/relationships in the host country. Following a discussion of return in migration scholarship in the next section, we discuss the research context and data that inform this article. The subsequent sections examine the imaginaries of return and the fluidity of return.

The Shaping of Return Imaginaries

Despite a level of scrutiny on migrants' intention to immigrate permanently to the West (Alberts and Hazen 2005), most do not migrate with the intention of permanent settlement (Baas 2015b). As noted earlier, most migrants consider return as definite, and return is often idealised (Erdal 2017). As Yang (2000) contends, the idea of sojourning is common, especially among first-generation migrants, and return is an alternative and often the end goal of migration for the migrants who intend to work abroad for a few years and return with savings for an economically secure life, and to buy land, or start businesses. Nonetheless, as more recent studies have shown, return is fluid – despite being definite initially, return intentions fluctuate and transform over time and circumstances (Alberts and Hazen 2005; Baas 2015b; Roberts 2019; Robertson 2021). Beyond being a straightforward decision or a process, return often involves ambivalence,

uncertainties, complex decision-making and negotiating conflicting tensions and emotions along the migration trajectories (Bakaari and Escandell 2022). Such an understanding of return challenges the linearity of migration decisions (Baas 2015b) and also gives precedence to the dominant discourse on the 'myth of return'. To move the focus beyond return 'outcomes', Bolognani (2016) emphasises on return 'fantasy' over the 'myth of return' to illustrate return as an integrated process of how individuals make sense of their present situation and imagine possible futures. Similarly, Erdal (2017) emphasises 'timespace' of return to highlight the temporalities of return. We build on this emerging body of work on return migration (Baldassar 2001; Alberts and Hazen 2005; Lu et al. 2009; Reynolds 2011; Baas 2015b; Erdal 2017) and follow them in considering the questions of return as embedded everyday experiences of migration, focusing on the process as they are being transformed rather than on the outcome (Baas 2015a, 2015b; Roberts 2019). In addition, we examine the cultural and familial themes on return in the context of two sending countries that are somewhat counterpoint to Western notions of family, despite similar emotions of family separation and transnational family life.

'Return' is an idea deeply embedded in the Chinese philosophy *Luoyeguigeng* (the leaves always fall onto its roots, implying that young people, no matter how far they have travelled, will always find their way home). *Luoyeguigeng* suggests a strong attachment to home and family and implies their eventual return. *Luoyeguigeng* is also relevant to understand the structural and cultural dimensions of families in Nepal and China, while not uniform across and within the two groups are quite different from families in most Western countries. While joint families are traditionally practised, family structures and cultural practices around family in Nepal and China are also undergoing transformation. And despite changes to traditional family forms, the 'family contract' (Tu 2018) or the notion of filial piety that defines the intergenerational relationships between parents and children, remains firmly rooted in cultural understandings. In the Nepali and Chinese cultural context, as well as across many countries in Asia, intergenerational filial responsibility is traditionally performed in proximity. Additionally, unlike the reliance on social welfare regimes in the West, Asian cultural contexts traditionally place strong dependence on intergenerational family relations for physical and financial care, including in terms of elder care provided by adult children of ageing parents. In addition to filial responsibility on the children, the one-child policy in China shapes the migration trajectories of Chinese migrants in complex ways (Yu 2021) while in Nepal, it is mainly the eldest sons who face greater pressure to fulfil filial piety. The case of Nepali and Chinese migrants in Australia thus offers a distinctive approach to examine how two different sending country contexts similarly or differently determine migrants' aspirations to return, whether imaginary or real.

The more favourable migration policies in Australia and other Western countries that enable (skilled) migration pathways to permanent settlement also play a significant role in who returns or who does not. Permanent residency or PR becomes a common topic of discussion for temporary migrants in Australia and one many aspire to obtain (Baas 2010). Nonetheless, aspirations for permanent residency are embedded within clouds of temporariness, where return features regularly in future aspirations (Baas 2015b). As the case of migrants aspiring for permanent migration in Australia shows, return is often postponed to obtain enough 'points' to be eligible to apply for permanent

residency, but also to explore intimate partner relations or to marry and settle down together, and pursue careers (Robertson 2021). Delay and postponement of return are thus equally associated to migration regimes that seek to absorb skilled workers/migrants into the labour market as much as to life paths of careers, marriage, or relationships, even when migrants do not initially have the intention of permanent settlement and non-return. Further, exposure to different cultural and gendered norms in the West can also influence return decisions. Migration to the West is often considered a temporary respite from 'gender burden' or gendered norms, including gendered household roles (Nguyen and McLaren 2020) or gendered paths to marriage and children (Martin 2018). As such, for those exposed to life in the West, return can often accompany fears of return to the same gendered life and traditional family practices as well as lifepath of marriage and family (Reynolds 2011; Ghimire and Maharjan 2015; Dhungel 2017; Nguyen and McLaren 2020). As Fong (2011: 219) argues, studying abroad offers Chinese students more freedom in deciding their version of life and developing their capacities to imagine a life that is in direct comparison with that in China.

Nonetheless, cultural capital gained through migration to the West, including education migration and the convertibility of foreign degrees to social currency back home, and the ability to transform their overseas networks to establish their relationship in the home country is considered to leverage upward social mobility upon return (Iredale and Guo 2001; Guo and Miao 2021). As such, many returned migrants, including the second generations, can enjoy a comfortable life with the earnings made abroad or with the utilisation of skills earned abroad in the job market at home (Yang 2000; Reynolds 2011; Bhatt 2015). Returned migrants to the growing economies like India (Baas 2015b; Bhatt 2015) or China (Alberts and Hazen 2005; Lu et al. 2009) can also avail of economic opportunities and better career prospects on return. In China's case, the 'returnee schemes' have successfully attracted young returnees with 'world-class skills' to work in foreign companies as well as the return of young entrepreneurs (Alberts and Hazen 2005; Liu 2018). In Nepal's case, however, similar initiatives to attract and encourage return migration remain limited to a few small-scale and short-term policies or programmes targeted at returned labour migrants (World Bank 2013). And despite the students' desires to utilise their skills and knowledge gained abroad to 'contribute' to Nepal, finding work or utilising skills in Nepal is often reported to be challenging (Ghimire and Maharjan 2015; Dhungel 2017). As such, while China has begun to address the recent 'talent drain' through global talent policies to draw skilled professionals back to China, this is conspicuously absent in Nepal's case (Wang and Bao 2015; Miao and Wang 2017). China's growing global economic dominance has thus begun to shift how return is imagined or develops over time for the Chinese participants differently from their Nepali counterparts.

Research Context and Data

The case of Australia as the host country is well-suited to explore how Western migration regimes play a key role in influencing return or non-return. The potential for temporary migrants to take up (skilled) employment, apply for permanent residency and settle permanently in Australia through skilled-migration pathways, as well as prospects to extend visas or transition between multiple visas not only shape the migrant experiences but also

determine how migrants envision return. The Nepali and Chinese migrants in Australia represent the growing trend of Asian mobility to the West through pathways of education, work, or settlement (Robertson 2021). In China's case, the one-child policy and the increase in wealth among the middle class following the rapid economic development have led to migrants from China becoming one of the largest cohorts of international students and temporary migrants in the West (Robertson 2021). In mid-2020, Chinese-born migrants made up the third largest group of overseas-born migrants in Australia, while Nepali-born migrants were ranked eleventh (Department of Home Affairs 2022). The two countries witnessed an overall increase of twice and five times respectively, over a decade (Department of Home Affairs 2022). In terms of student volume, those from Nepal comprise the third-largest student group after China and India. Amidst the increasing presence of migrants from China and Nepal, smaller body of work is available on how the Australian migration regime shapes the migrants' experiences with regard to return. This article thus contributes to the growing scholarship on the study of Asian migrants in Australia and the questions of return (Baas 2015b; Roberts 2019; Robertson 2021).

This article draws on two qualitative studies conducted by the authors on (i) Nepali education migration and transnational families among Nepali education migrants in Australia and their families in Nepal and (ii) new Chinese professional women in Australia. The Nepali study relies on observations and 20 interviews conducted with students and spouses of students on dependent partner visas in Sydney and 6 interviews with families in Nepal. The Chinese study draws on 21 life-history interviews with Chinese professional women in Sydney who had mostly arrived in Australia on student visas but also spouse visas. Data that informs this article relies on questions of future and return as part of the migration experiences as well as careers and family relations. Our interest in bringing the two cases together stems from conversations on the similarity of the imaginaries of return, the ways that the Australian migration regime shape migrant trajectories, and the subtle differences in how the home country contexts inform return for our participants. The data were analysed separately, and the emerging themes on return compiled for this article.

While Australia as the destination is common for both the migrant groups, there are also some differences in the number of years of migration, the age range of the participants, or life course, aside from the sending country context that distinguish the experience of the two groups. The Nepali education migrants had been in Australia for one year to around 5 years, while the Chinese professional women had been in Australia for longer, between 3 to around 20 years. The Chinese participants also belonged to the older cohort, with ages ranging from 26 to 49, while the Nepali migrants ranged from 19 to 36, with most in their 20s. In terms of their socioeconomic backgrounds before migration, the participants from both groups belong to a diverse range of the broad middle-class, not only from cosmopolitan cities but also from regional centres. The Nepali participants were either on student visas or temporary post-study visas, while all the Chinese participants, aside from one who was on a student visa, had obtained Australian permanent residency visas or citizenship during the time of fieldwork in 2018 and 2019, respectively. This difference in the life course and migration phase has been helpful in mapping the return imaginaries of recent migrants and examine how return aspirations evolve.

Imaginaries of Return: Familial and Cultural Obligations and Future Prospects

Despite the difference in their migration phase or visa status, both the migrant group's aspirations of the future were largely synonymous with 'return', even though their narratives also begin to illustrate the 'fluidity of return' (Baas 2015b) or how the idea of return begins to unravel with time and life course, discussed further in the next section. Focusing on the common imaginaries of return, this section highlights how the idea of return is attached to cultural notions of family and also complicated by questions of the future, mainly careers or secure financial futures and obtaining permanent residency (PR) in Australia before their return. We begin with Diwas's account, a twenty-three-year-old student from Nepal pursuing a postgraduate degree in accounting at a university in Sydney. In sharing his migration intentions, Diwas reveals how return is an important consideration in ongoing migration journeys as well as in migration decision-making.

> I completed my bachelor's and applied soon after. By the time results came out, I had completed IELTs. Then, I came to Australia […] When I was in Nepal, I was thinking *k garne* (what to do) […] my parents wanted me to apply for government jobs. I am the only son […] *Ani ma pani k garne kaso garne bhai rakhe* (I was contemplating what to do). I wanted to come abroad once. It's everyone's desire, right! That's why I said I will come, everything worked out and I got it [visa]. But from home, they [parents] never wanted me to go, even now they tell me to only stay for a max. nine to ten years, not more than that, because it will be their retired life. Later, even I do want to return to Nepal. I do not have plans to settle here […] even if I settle down here, my parents might not be able to settle down here, parents are my responsibility.

Migration, as in Diwas's case, needs to be read within the local cultures of migration. As Diwas notes, it is 'everyone's desire' – his migration aspiration was not only individual but also collective amongst his peers. Diwas was at a life stage to begin a career, and despite his parents' desire for him to establish a career in Nepal, he wanted to experience migration at least 'once'. Diwas's imagination of return reflects a common cultural and familial arrangement in Nepal and a sense of family responsibility and obligation where children are expected to care for their parents in their old age. As an unwritten understanding of filial piety, Diwas, the only male child, takes it as his responsibility to care for his parents in their old age, despite having a younger sister. Expectations of filial piety did not seem to be the same for his sister, who, as traditionally practised, will move to her husband's house after her wedding. For Diwas, concerns of care for his parents and fulfilling his responsibilities as a son are central to his intention to return. Such intentions also show the significant position of noneconomic factors such as emotional care in proximity, filial piety and family togetherness in migrants' desires to return (Gmelch 1980), even when there are no direct financial dependencies as in Diwas's case. Most of the families in the Nepali study cohort were financially self-sufficient, although some had been set back by the education loans. Yet return featured significantly in all the participants' future aspirations, even when some were in the process of applying for Australian permanent residency.

Despite definite ideas of return, Diwas also noted the importance of being financially stable before returning, noting, 'From my heart, I really want to return to Nepal. But we

cannot just go. We go when we are able to do something.' Most Nepali participants, like Diwas, desired to make their futures (for a while) in Australia before returning to eventually make a living at home – often expressed as the desire 'to do something in Nepal' (*Nepal mai kei garnu*). The notion of 'doing something' is explained in terms of starting a business or any other income-generating investment. Therefore, despite their investment in education and careers, the postponement of return resulted from the belief among the migrants that they will not be able to pursue these goals when they return. Such belief is therefore tied to questions of return – in trying to be financially stable before return or permanent settlement in the West. Being financially secure is then considered to enable a smoother transition to life in Nepal upon return. This tension among Nepali education migrants can be seen as manifested in the continual postponement of return and permanent settlement abroad (where possible). As such, the education migrants looked forward to professional careers like nursing or IT, or establishing their own business in Australia before returning to Nepal eventually.

This desire for their post-study upward mobility through professional careers and financial security was also directly tied to PR. Whether or not temporary migrants in Australia intend to apply for PR, PR eventually features centrally in their life and migration goals for most, making discussion of future and return often incomplete without discussions of PR (Baas 2015b). For temporary migrants in Australia, PR purportedly opens up pathways for being considered for professional employment that otherwise are hindered by their transient visa status (Robertson 2021). PR was thus considered a step closer to fulfilling desires to return by meeting goals of future security and financial stability. During fieldwork, the Nepali participants were still studying or were on their post-study work visas, but all 20 participants wanted to eventually apply for PR, work for some years and return home to Nepal with some financial security. Obtaining PR does not always equate to permanent settlement, but it often extends or disrupts the possibility of return. The role of PR in securing professional employment and postponement of return can be observed among the Chinese cohort; all except one had secured PR, had stronger financial stability and demonstrated their capabilities in securing white-collar professional careers.

The account of twenty-six-year-old media coordinator from China, Charlotte, illustrates how return was part of the decisions during her ongoing migration journey but also how return conflicted with PR despite not desiring to settle permanently in Australia.

> Because I don't want to immigrate here, so I choose whatever [subjects] that cannot immigrate here. But I still stayed here for over ten years. Oh, my god! Back then, in Melbourne, my aunty told me that if I wanted to immigrate, choosing nursing or whatever was easy. So I said, I don't want to immigrate here […] I probably don't have to choose whatever I want either and cannot immigrate here. And I will say I am so disgusted with this place or whatever they say, I used to be sad in my teenage time. But it wasn't my choice. Eventually, it is my parents.

Charlotte expresses ambivalence and uncertainty in her desire to return to China but also to maintain an Australian life. She was working towards obtaining PR in Australia, something that she had intentionally avoided when she was in university. Charlotte had chosen media studies as a way of rebelling against her aunt and her parents instead of

enrolling in courses that would give her a pathway to PR. Her lack of interest in obtaining Australian PR was likely influenced by her experience of loneliness away from her family and not fitting in with the local students in Melbourne when she first arrived as a high school student. Her higher education in Australia was always imagined and conditioned with a 'return' to her parents in China. Nonetheless, despite her parents' wish for her to return immediately after completing her studies, Charlotte continually put off the timing of this return by taking one course after another. Living in Australia, she appreciated the freedom to pursue a career and a life of her own will. Despite that, Charlotte repeatedly emphasised her intention of returning – as a signal of her transition to adulthood and returning many years investment, financial and emotional. The idea of return works as a strategy for *Luoyeguigeng* or returning to one's roots to establish a mutual agreement with their parents, as seen in Diwas's case earlier. Meanwhile, her choices indicated this ambivalence of return and fulfilling a familial obligation, but also not being able to secure a stable work/career stability due to her insecure/transient visa status in Australia. Like the Nepali participants, securing Australian PR would have provided the added flexibility of making careers in Australia and securing financial futures, even if things do not work for her in China. This is clearly illustrated in the case of another participant from China, twenty-eight-year-old Effy, a junior engineer.

Like Diwas, for Effy too, securing futures and future career prospects were critical discussions on questions of return and the idea of 'return' was reconfigured by the parents as an imagined possibility.

> I had several reasons [in doing two masters' degrees] because my parents want me to do that. Because maybe in the future if I go back to China, a master's degree is compulsory to get a better job. And the second reason was that I need some time to get my permanent visa before finding any job.

Effy utilises the idea of returning to convince her parents to support her overseas studies but fulfils her actual purpose of migrating to Australia. Effy followed her parents' instructions and played by their rules. In reality, she was buying some time for an agenda – a plan B of having a life in Australia. Nonetheless, return remained a possibility, with the hope of transitioning to 'better' jobs in China with a Western degree. Many other Chinese participants shared the idea of a 'better' career prospect in mainland China and associated their motives of return to the 'rise' of China following rapid economic development over the past three decades as well as incentives for 'brain gain'. A 'better' career back home, thus, reinforces the idea of returning to their family/roots.

For the Nepali education migrants, return was a future imaginary, but the cases of Chinese migrants who had been longer in Australia begin to show how return is not straightforward. Both migrant groups represent Asian cultural and familial traditions that place emphasis on filial piety and maintaining family in proximity. As such, the question of 'why return' is tied to family foremost, even when questions of return are also embedded with desires to secure futures. Despite the common imaginaries of return, consideration of careers and future prospects differentiated the (imagined or real) pathways of Nepali migrants from their Chinese counterparts. Because of limited career prospects in Nepal, return was firstly obstructed by desires to secure Australian PR and make futures abroad before eventual return. In contrast, aside from desires for

an Australian life, for Chinese migrants who had better career opportunities upon return, Australian PR and the opportunity for future abroad was a plan B if things didn't work out in China.

The Fluidity of Return

Despite definite plans of return as discussed in the above section, this section focuses on how return fluctuates over the life course and might not materialise. We begin this section with Diwas's father Jiban's narrative to reveal families' doubt and uncertainty about their family member's return. Jiban's doubt and concern about his son's return discussed below is reflected in the accounts and life paths of Chinese migrants who had spent considerable time in Australia. While the Chinese study cohort did not include direct accounts of the families, the migrants' narratives reveal how families are crucial agents in the discussions of return. Here, we also take examples of how marriage and romantic partner relationships formed in Australia transforms the idea of return.

The ambivalence of return from Australia was clearly felt by the families in Nepal. Jiban shared the informal agreement of return that Diwas had mentioned earlier – to complete his studies, accumulate some earnings, gain experience for a maximum of ten years and return home. Although Jiban shared his son's desire to secure his future through education and work, he was also somewhat sceptical about whether his son would return. He and his wife were not open to the idea of Diwas or themselves settling down in Australia, even if Diwas obtained PR. Even though Jiban mentioned that his son has agreed to their informal timeline, Jiban understands the process by which migrants get 'trapped' into settling down abroad permanently. It was something that was lingering at the back of his mind. Jiban understood that his son might fall into the same trap that he had seen in many families, as he explained:

> I have spoken to him about that. He has also agreed to it. I think he will agree too. But there is no guarantee about a thing of the future. What happens it seems is, as per my experience, even if I have not gone abroad is, they go abroad, they begin working, when they have already lived there, they take PR, buy a car – paying in instalments over several years and finally making it theirs. That's not enough, they also buy a house. Then 20 to 30 years go by. And then their children grow up there. The children get benefits. When they come here – those who stay in Kathmandu cannot stay here [a peri-urban town in Eastern Nepal near Birtamod] – like that, when those who stay in America, Australia land in Kathmandu, they feel like they have come to hell. That happens gradually and then they don't agree to live here. I am afraid that the same thing might happen.

While Jiban wants his son to return and live in Nepal, he had doubts about his son's return and was thus unsettled by the possibility of Diwas's permanent settlement in Australia. He draws on the broader 'culture of migration' or what he has seen and heard in other families to accept that his son might not return. Elaborating on the process, he has learnt that migrants begin to settle down abroad with a house and car and get used to a higher standard of living. Jiban fears the same process might take over his son's agreement to return. Research suggests that life satisfaction at the host or the home country is a decisive factor in the migrants' intentions to return (Schiele 2021). As such, re-migration of returned migrants, including students, has also occurred because of their inability to adjust to the 'lower' quality of life at home compared to the US or Australia

(Baas 2015b; Bhatt 2015). Jiban also points out the alienation of migrants from the homeland in the feeling of 'hell' upon returning and fears that his son and his son's future children might likewise develop similar feelings of antagonism and might not return. As Baas (2010: 174) remarks, the 'myth of return' relies on 'migration being, in the end, a permanent one' and simultaneously imagining migration as being temporary. Education migrants with the possibility to apply for PR might likely settle down in Australia, and Jiban seemed well aware of this.

Focusing on questions of return makes visible the parents' 'fears' and concerns about the disruption of family arrangements across generations (Limbu 2021). Jiban stresses the importance of living in proximity to family, adding, 'no matter how difficult times are, it is better to live together in a family, even if it means living on *dhido* [a type of porridge], that's my ideology.' For Jiban, family togetherness was a priority. His perspective differed from a few other parents in my study and parents in other studies on Nepali student migration (Dhungel 2017) who wanted their children to settle abroad for a secure future and financial stability. Jiban wanted his son's secure future and financial success but also wanted him to return for family togetherness.

While Jiban's present experience in relation to his son's migration and return is one of uncertainty and ambivalence, Abby's case shows how the period of transience begins to take permanence. Despite similar motives to return to their family in China like the Nepali migrants or fulfil the obligation as a symbolic partial return, the case of Chinese migrants shows how fragmental experiences and eventful choices while abroad all lead to a delay in returning. One major factor noted in this delay in return among the new Chinese professional women is to have a 'good' life – one better than their parents in China, as a form of ultimate return to their parental expectations. Thirty-six-year-old Senior Project Officer Abby talks about her educational trajectory as a series of life coincidences that pushed back return.

> After the first year of study, I don't think it's enough. Not because studying is not enough, I haven't had enough fun overseas in this country. And that's why I decided to do a second one [master's degree]. But after that, I realised how easy it was to get a permanent residency. And I'm not, at that time, sure about doing a PhD. I was thinking, if I get a permanent residency, I can do a PhD for free. That's why I submitted this skilled migration. While I was looking for jobs and waiting for permanent residency, I got a scholarship offer first. And that's how I started my PhD. And then I got married during the study and stayed here.

As the only daughter, Abby's decision to do two master's and a PhD in Australia was not part of her initial plan but one that formed along with her stay in Australia. The first master's degree was her attempt to get a glimpse of what it was like to have a life in Australia. Abby loved the feeling of being away and extended her stay by doing another master's degree and explored the possibility of obtaining permanent residency. Undertaking one course after another is a common way for students to extend their stay in Australia, often transitioning between multiple temporary visa categories of student visa or post-study visa (Robertson 2021). And this is often practiced to buy time to obtain the necessary 'points' to apply for PR, as noted in the second section. In addition, being a permanent resident would enable migrants to receive the benefits entitled to the permanent residents/locals, or in Abby's case, to be considered for a PhD scholarship. Her pursuit of a PhD thus intertwines with her immigration process. In the process, her

return was pushed back as she explored the possibility of experiencing an Australian life, the prospect of PhD scholarship, and obtaining permanent residency.

But while pursuing a PhD extended Abby's stay, eventually, her marriage made her settle down in Australia. Abby's case thus justifies Jiban's fears about his son's non-return. Other studies also show how marriage and romantic partner relationships play a vital role in migrants' non-return (Aslany et al. 2021; Robertson 2021). By staying in Australia, migrants like Abby are able to keep some distance from the traditional notion of filial piety but are not entirely free of the care burden. They nonetheless fall into the trap of ensuring demanding long-distance emotional care for their parents and in-laws (Tu 2018). Studies report that overseas studies provide a period of suspension for young Chinese to escape the social pressure of getting married and starting a family or delaying adulthood (Martin 2018). In this study, the decision to study in Australia and extend their stay is more complicated than a suspension. As *Luoyeguigeng,* Abby plans to return at some point. She considered it even after she gained Australian permanent residency, which was often considered a sign of settlement for migrants. As also noted by Diwas or by other participants from both China and Nepal who had obtained PR, obtaining PR is not equated to permanent settlement in Australia, rather, PR is a means to their end goals of migration, to secure futures before return. However, getting married and starting a family transformed Abby's approach of returning to her family. Instead, Abby sponsored her mother's immigration and invited her to Australia and an Australian life. The mobility of the Nepali students' parents between Nepal and Australia for family togetherness and their potential PR has also been discussed elsewhere (Limbu 2021). To some extent, Abby's physical and spatial return to her family in China transforms into a temporal return to her familial obligation through her mother's migration to Australia. Despite her physical non-return, fulfilling her familial obligations symbolises return to her roots/family.

Like Abby, intimate partner relationships permanently postponed return for some of the other Chinese participants in this study. Despite strong notions of filial duty and return to family, some migrants also preferred distance from in-laws or to escape from their parents' love and expectations (Tu 2018). And although studies suggest better career prospects for returned Chinese migrants/students with Western degrees, as also discussed earlier, for those without the qualifications that might make them attractive to employers in China, return can also raise concerns about career prospects and secure futures, especially when compared to the life that they can make in Australia. Darcie's case shows how partner relationship and her partner's concerns for career prospects and secure futures in China impacted her and her family's plan for her to return. Like Diwas, in revealing her intention to migrate, twenty-eight-year-old Darcie, a Junior Technician, reveals her interest in experiencing Australia or to 'see the world'.

> I would do a postgraduate degree in the same field [as my undergraduate] and return to China once I finish it. Here it was the thing, my mum didn't agree with me to go abroad and pursue further studies. She thought it was too far away. I convinced her that I was young, and I wanted to go out of China and have a look, and I will go back to China once I finish my degree. At that time, I never thought I would stay in Australia. I only chose a one-year postgraduate study. It was not a prestigious degree, but I want to see the world because I didn't go abroad before. My mum finally said yes. But unexpectedly, I met my husband now after my one-year study. He wanted to stay here. He didn't go to

> a good university for his undergraduate studies in China, and he suspected that he wouldn't be able to find a good job because of his degree. So he wanted to stay here. At least, his income would be higher than that in the same industry in China. So I stayed here with him.

Darcie convinced her parents and promised she could 'return' quickly with a world-recognised institutional qualification. Meeting her husband, however, changed Darcie's idea of 'return' mainly because of her partner's lack of qualifications for a secure career or a comfortable life in China. For Darcie and her family, the comparatively higher income in Australia outweighs their desire to be together, signalling a possibly 'better' life that Darcie can enjoy in Australia.

Conclusion

The experiences of return discussed in this article on the imaginaries of return and continual postponement of return align with that of other studies that highlight how return is permanent in the imaginaries yet remains fluid and pans out dynamically over time and life course. In this article, we have discussed the common imaginaries of return among the Nepali and Chinese migrants in Australia tied to migrants' desire to return to their roots/family (*Luoyeguigeng)* and fulfil filial piety. However, the case of migrants in different phases of their migration and life course discussed in this article shows how aspirations to return, while definite in the migrants' imaginaries, begin to disintegrate with realities of permanent settlement, career prospects and life events including partner relationships and marriages. The prospects for careers and financial security offered by the home and host countries in determining return aspirations indicate the importance of examining the macrolevel constraints and opportunities posed or afforded by the host and home countries (Alberts and Hazen 2005). This article contributes empirically to understanding the question of return as an embedded migration experience and how return imaginaries shift and transform over time, and conceptually to understand how return for Asian migrants is complicated by cultural and familial norms and practices.

The fluidity of return examined in this article suggests that if migrants could see concrete opportunities for making futures in Nepal, return would have been more definite, especially when considering the attachment to family and desires for family togetherness. This can also be said of the Chinese migrants who, without strong qualifications, were doubtful of establishing 'good' careers and comfortable life in China. Therefore, even though the higher standard of living and the quality of life in Australia and other Western countries 'pull' migrants to stay (Schiele 2021), being unable to meet expectations, for instance, of career or futures in the home country are equally strong deterrence in migrants' non-return intentions.

Aside from the sending country contexts, this article illustrates how Western migration regimes play a crucial role in how return is not only envisioned but also continually postponed, sometimes indefinitely. The possibility for students and temporary migrants to transition to post-study visas and to permanent resident visas means that many temporary migrants spend several years transitioning between different visa types in anticipation of permanent residency (Baas 2015b; Robertson 2021). As the parents' narratives show, this transience is often emotionally experienced by the families, often in the form of fear and uncertainty as they grapple with the possibility of their

children's non-return, even when they desire their children's return to home and the country (see also Limbu 2021). As such, migration regimes and home country contexts work in tandem to shape how return is envisioned and develop over time and life course.

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Ethics

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Data Availability Statement

Supporting data is not available due to ethical restrictions.

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