

Global Virtual Migration and Transnational Online Educational Platforms

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ABSTRACT

In our digital age, virtual migration—workers providing transnational services without the physical mobility of workers' bodies—has become an essential component of globalization. This chapter draws on transnational online educational platforms connecting contractors in North America with young English learners in China, especially ABCKID (pseudonym), to explore how virtual migrants from developed countries provide services to customers in developing countries. Using in-depth interviews, surveys, and online data, I illustrate how ABCKID has mobilized highly mobile and highly immobile social groups that were previously marginalized by various labor markets—military wives, digital nomads, and stay-at-home moms in the United States and Canada—to join the platform, and thus expand the pool of virtual migrants. The alignment between these virtual migrants' motivations to overcome labor-market constraints and the characteristics of ABCKID jobs has not only prompted them to join the platform but also brought them immense job satisfaction. Although this platform dislocates contractors from their local contexts, contractors from these social groups have found meaning in their jobs. I discuss how mobilizing these formerly marginalized social groups into virtual migrants has facilitated the transition of globalization forms, while clouding and justifying the control and surveillance of digital globalization. I also discuss the impact of this transition on the direction of globalization and global inequality.

KEYWORDS

digital globalization, disembodied globalization, global inequality, physical mobility, transnational platform, virtual migration

How individuals conduct work on a global scale is an essential question in studies of globalization. It is also a window through which we can observe the past, present, and future of globalization. According to Baldwin (2016, 2019), one way to understand the historical evolution of globalization is to trace how the ways in which workers utilize global labor markets have gradually transitioned from physical cross-border mobility to telemigration—using the Internet and other means of telecommunications to provide services to markets and customers in other countries. Telemigration is also known as virtual migration or teleworking (Aneesh, 2006; Delbridge & Sallaz, 2015). In this chapter, I use virtual migration to explicate the broad category of workers providing transnational work without the physical mobility of workers' bodies.

To date, most studies on virtual migration have focused on how workers in developing countries provide services to customers and markets that are based in developed countries (Aneesh, 2006; Delbridge & Sallaz, 2015; Baldwin, 2019; Sallaz, 2019). We know less about the alternative direction—whether and how workers from developed countries provide services to customers in developing countries through virtual migration.

This chapter draws on transnational online educational platforms, especially market leader ABCKID, to demonstrate this alternative direction.¹ Like its competitors, ABCKID's headquarters is in China, and it has been mobilizing American and Canadian citizens to teach young Chinese students English online. Since individuals working on digital platforms are often known as independent contractors and the primary role of ABCKID contractors is to teach, this chapter uses the words *contractors* and *teachers* interchangeably when discussing individuals working on ABCKID. Given the nature of the job on ABCKID, these contractors and teachers are virtual migrants. To the extent that ABCKID's six major competitors (7-Speak-Up, Tada English, MagiKid, Wonder Fun, Mango Lingo, ELIKid; all are pseudonyms) adopt a similar business model as ABCKID's and interact with their contractors in a similar fashion (Lin, 2021), understanding ABCKID and its contractors sheds light on the operation of all these transnational educational platforms and the work of their contractors.

In the late 2010s, ABCKID was one of the world's largest online transnational educational platforms. Even in 2019, a prepandemic year when worldwide online education was less developed than it is today, ABCKID connected over one hundred thousand North American teachers with over seven hundred thousand Chinese students (Business Wire, 2019). There are, of course, deep-rooted macro social changes that have prompted so many North American teachers to provide educational services to Chinese learners through virtual migration. One of these changes lies in the rise of China's middle-class families since Deng Xiaoping's reform and the decline of their counterparts in the United States due to soaring debts, stagnating wages, and rising costs of living.

To find out more about how individual contractors' participation has unfolded against this macro backdrop, this chapter explores the interaction between meso-level organizational characteristics and micro-level individual motivations and job satisfaction rates. Using interviews and surveys with 37 ABCKID teachers and online data,² I unpack how ABCKID's organizational characteristics have helped new social groups to overcome their labor-market constraints, thus mobilizing them to join the platform and expanding the pool of virtual migrants. Knowing these meso- and micro-level dynamics, in return, illuminates on the macro-level direction of virtual migration and related global inequality. Capturing these dynamics also sheds new light into the role of digital globalization in steering the direction of globalization—are the growing virtual connections on a global scale and the decline of physical ones leading us to “deglobalization,” the end of globalization as we know it, or simply “reglobalization,” the rise of a different form of globalization?

After introducing the platform and the basic profiles of its contractors, I illustrate how highly mobile and highly immobile social groups from the United States and Canada (e.g., global travelers, military wives, digital nomads, and stay-at-home moms) previously faced constraints in, or were denied access to, various local and global labor markets. I call these people socially marginalized groups, given these job-market constraints and barriers. As a transnational and virtual platform with flexible and portable jobs, ABCKID has been particularly appealing to these social groups, and has helped them overcome labor-market constraints. Such an alignment between ABCKID's organizational characteristics and contractors' motivations has facilitated the participation of these social groups and elevated their job satisfaction. Although this platform dislocates contractors from their local contexts, contractors from these social groups find meaning in their jobs and accept the platform's controls. At the end of this chapter, I discuss my findings' broader implications for understanding the direction of globalization and global inequality.

THE PLATFORM AND ITS CONTRACTORS

Let me first introduce the platform and its contractors. ABCKID was one of the world's largest online teaching platforms in the late 2010s, and one of the most sought-after education technology companies among global investors (Business Wire, 2018). Moreover, ABCKID is a platform in the sense that teachers indicate time slots in which they are available, while students and their parents book these slots with the teachers. ABCKID is also transnational: its headquarters is in Beijing, China; its teachers, predominantly U.S. and Canadian citizens, live all over the world and remotely teach students who live in China. ABCKID does not require teachers to work at a designated time or in a designated space. Rather, it

uses camera monitoring, customer ratings, and the involvement of students' parents to supervise a spatially dispersed workforce.

Regarding the basic profiles of workers, the analysis of my survey of the 37 ABCKID teachers provides a clue. The average age of these 37 teachers is 31.5. Twenty-nine of them are female. As for race, 32 are white and the rest include 1 African American, 2 Hispanics, 1 Asian-white, and 1 Hispanic-white. This is a highly educated group: 4 hold PhD/JD degrees, 18 hold master's degrees, and the rest have bachelor's degrees. Regarding citizenship, 36 are American and 1 is Canadian. This is to be expected, as ABCKID demands that its teachers be native speakers with North American accents.

With interest in worker mobility, I also analyzed the locations of the 37 teachers. When they had started their ABCKID jobs, 11 of the teachers had been studying, working, or traveling outside of their home countries of the United States or Canada. When the interviews were conducted in late 2018 and early 2019, 9 of the teachers were still living outside of their home countries. The host countries and regions where my informants had lived include three European countries (Germany, Sweden, and Croatia), five Asian countries and regions (South Korea, Japan, Thailand, Hong Kong, and Taiwan), as well as Mexico and Ecuador. It is notable that none of my informants were living in Mainland China during the interview.

TWO SOCIAL GROUPS AND THEIR LABOR-MARKET CONSTRAINTS

Closer scrutiny of the teachers in the sample reveals two socially marginalized groups who face substantial constraints in domestic and global labor markets. The first group includes highly mobile virtual migrants, encompassing the 11 U.S. citizens studying, working, or traveling overseas and the 3 military wives. Of those who have been traveling in Europe and Asia, 2 are digital nomads who use telecommunication and other technologies to earn a living while traveling constantly. The 3 military wives also must move frequently with their husbands within the United States or among U.S. military bases overseas. The second social group includes highly immobile individuals, with stay-at-home moms being the prototypical examples. There are 3 stay-at-home moms in my sample. They not only rarely travel, but also rarely work outside the home in their local communities.

Indeed, some workers in the highly mobile group are more mobile than others. For example, digital nomads usually travel more frequently than military wives, who in turn and on average may be more mobile than other U.S. citizens studying in a foreign country. As I will elaborate upon, however, all of these workers face similar constraints in both local and national labor markets. Therefore, I include all of them in the highly mobile group.

Partly because they are highly mobile or highly immobile, these socially marginalized individuals face constraints in either local offline labor markets or locally serving online platform markets (e.g., jobs at Uber or DoorDash), or global online

labor markets that are based on rigid schedules (e.g., call centers). Some of them even face constraints in multiple labor markets. For example, digital nomads and military wives usually encounter restrictions in seeking stable jobs in local offline labor markets. Even if they can access locally serving online platform jobs, their high mobility prevents them from working these jobs on a long-term basis.

High mobility also puts military wives and digital nomads in a situation where they are susceptible to various penalties for moving. Clara, a 27-year-old military wife and a former high school teacher, provided details about how job-market constraints, when combined with demotions as penalties in the brick-and-mortar public school system, pushed her out of the system:³

My husband is in the military, so we move quite frequently. Very very frequently . . . We just moved here a month ago. We are moving again, probably in five or six months. So getting a public school job for one semester? I would feel very dishonest if I promised to be there for a year. No one is going to hire me for five or six months. No one. We have no idea where we will be going in five or six months . . .

I have changed jobs, changed [school] districts. I taught two years in two different districts. It was a mess. We lived in three different places in Texas. And in Texas, every time you switch districts, they move you back to first-year teacher. So that sucks. (Informant no. 8)

Even for U.S. and Canadian citizens who travel to other countries to study or work, they often face institutional barriers in their host countries, such as visa regulations restricting noncitizens' work opportunities. For example, Bella is a 27-year-old white female teacher who is a U.S. citizen. She had been living in Sweden at the time of the interview. She describes how she initially suffered from a visa-related job-market constraint after losing her previous job in Sweden, and how this situation eventually prompted her to explore a virtual job opportunity with ABCKID:

I was living in Sweden at the time, and I lost the job that I had in Sweden. The visa regulations, as they were, I could not do any other work. I was only allowed to do the work I had been doing. So until I had the actual correct registration, I couldn't technically apply for any jobs in Sweden. So when I lost that job, I had to look for options of remote work that I could do as a U.S. citizen but not living in the U.S. So basically I did lots of research on online jobs . . . (Informant no. 3)

In some cases, individuals initiated global travels only because they had been trying to change career paths, but had faced barriers in doing so, in both their original regions and other regions within the same country. For example, Kristin is a 37-year-old female teacher, and she became a frequent global traveler when she failed to change careers domestically:

I started teaching in 2014 in Taiwan at a language school. Then I moved to Myanmar in 2015. Then in 2016 I moved to China. From 2017 to 2018 in Poland. And 2018 to 2019 in Japan. I majored in drama and communications, which I loved. I lived in San Francisco for five years, doing all sorts of things. Before I moved abroad, I was a

special event coordinator for a nonprofit. I mean, it couldn't be more different from what I did later. But I had reached a point where the next step up was fund-raising. And I am really bad at asking people for money. Just found it really uncomfortable. It's funny, because I was looking into, like, jobs in other states. Just kind-of needed a change. But it was easier to move halfway across the world than move to a different state. It's really funny. Unless you are there, people won't look at your application if you are not in the state. (Informant no. 22)

For global travelers, digital nomads and military wives, their high mobility is also associated with many transitional periods and situations: constant need to settle down in a new place, transitioning into a new role and acclimating to a new environment. These situations complicate the process of accessing various labor markets.

As for highly immobile groups, especially stay-at-home moms, spending a large proportion of their time caring for children at home means that they face difficulties in accessing local offline jobs, as well as online jobs that are based on rigid schedules. Although stay-at-home moms can work on locally serving platforms (e.g., Uber and DoorDash) that allow flexible schedules, the fact that they are women and that these jobs require face-to-face interactions with customers often breeds hesitation among these mothers.

For stay-at-home moms in certain areas, local culture provides an additional layer of constraint. For example, in Utah many mothers cannot go outside their homes to look for jobs because the local culture influenced by Mormonism compels them to stay home. Judy, a 30-year-old stay-at-home mom in Utah, reveals the pressure in her neighborhood as follows:

Out of the people that I know who are doing this [ABCKID], they are all stay-at-home moms. Where I live, pretty much all the moms are stay-at-home moms. That's the kind of culture where I live. It's what it's like . . . I mean, it is fulfilling and rewarding, but sometimes it's not . . . it's monotonous. (Informant no. 17)

In sum, labor markets are not very friendly toward individuals on the two tails of the mobility spectrum: those who are highly mobile or highly immobile face various constraints in accessing labor markets, although the levels and types of constraints for each group vary. For certain individuals in these groups, such as stay-at-home moms, labor-market constraints can be so overwhelming that these individuals are denied access to all labor markets.

TURNING TO VIRTUAL MIGRATION

This section will illustrate how socially marginalized individuals, especially those in the highly mobile and highly immobile groups, have become ABCKID contractors. I highlight how ABCKID's organizational characteristics are appealing to these two groups. Their participation in the transnational platform job expanded the pool of virtual migrants.

As a new type of virtual, home-based, and transnational platform (Lin, 2021), ABCKID generates jobs that are known for their relatively competitive income, schedule flexibility, and portability. ABCKID provides a relatively competitive income and stable bookings. It pays an hourly wage that ranges from \$14 to \$22, and the average hourly pay among teachers in my sample was about \$20. There is consensus among my informants that this pay is higher than most other platform jobs they have worked, such as being transcriptionists for hire or freelance clothing stylists (informants no. 8, no. 14, no. 23). According to Grace, a 36-year-old stay-at-home mom who lives in Pennsylvania and has worked multiple platform jobs, “for any other jobs, any other legitimate work-from-home jobs at the entry level, their hourly pay isn’t even close [to that of ABCKID]” (informant no. 14). Moreover, ABCKID provides more stable bookings than many other platforms, ensuring the predictability of work hours.

The relatively competitive income and stable booking are appealing even though many contractors are merely interested in using this job for supplemental income. Table 8.1 reports my interviewees’ motivations for embarking on their platform jobs, and I conducted a frequency analysis of each motivation mentioned. Of course, many joined ABCKID for multiple reasons, and 33 teachers cited multiple motivators. As table 8.1 shows, earning a little extra income is the motivation most frequently discussed by my informants. Twenty-five informants mentioned that making extra income was one of the major motivators for working on ABCKID.

Competitive compensation, when combined with flexible work hours and portability of the work, makes the job even more broadly appealing. Like other platform jobs such as driving Uber, working on ABCKID is based on flexible schedules. Contractors can decide when to start and when to stop working. Moreover, contractors only need a computer or an iPad to complete all their work on ABCKID. This means that the job is completely virtual and portable: contractors can conduct the work at home, or they can bring the work with them to wherever there is an Internet connection.

This combination of organizational characteristics is especially appealing to the highly mobile and highly immobile groups. For military wives and stay-at-home moms whose husbands usually shoulder primary financial responsibilities, what women often seek from jobs is not “bring home the bacon,” but instead a little extra income and something to work on. The flexibility of the ABCKID job is especially appealing to the highly mobile who need to travel frequently, and the highly immobile who spend much of their time caring for family members at home. The job’s portability further ensures that contractors on this platform are freed from face-to-face interactions with customers. Therefore, contractors, and especially female contractors, do not have to worry about their safety at work.

More importantly, this combination of organizational characteristics allows the highly mobile group to overcome labor-market constraints. As shown in table 8.1, 18 informants mentioned that one important reason they chose to work

TABLE 8.1 Job Motivations, Their Frequencies, and Representative Quotes among ABCKID Teachers

Motivator	Frequency	Representative Quotes
Making extra money	25	<p>“I need a little extra money.” (Multiple informants)</p> <p>“I am a teacher, so I do not make much money. I was thinking about what to do for summer work, something flexible so I can still travel with my daughter.” (Informant no. 20)</p>
Overcoming labor market constraints	18	<p>“I lost the job that I had in Sweden. The visa regulations, as they were, I could not do any other work” (Informant no. 3)</p> <p>“My husband got a job at the University of Cape Town. We moved here . . . There are some limitations on my visa in terms of what kind of work I could do. We also need U.S. dollars at that time.” (Informant no. 12)</p> <p>“My husband is in the military, so we move quite frequently . . . So getting a public school job for one semester? I would feel very dishonest if I promised to be there for a year. No one is going to hire me for five or six months. No one.” (Informant no. 8)</p> <p>“I couldn’t stand being away, you know, work for ten hours a day, missing everything, missing her growing up, basically. That’s why I have been looking for something remote for so long and I haven’t been able to find anything. So it’s definitely a motivator [for a stay-at-home mom to work for ABCKID].” (Informant no. 14)</p>
Going through transitional periods and situations	17	<p>“When I started I had just returned from Taiwan. I was actually looking at a few different companies . . . I lived in Denver Colorado, but I was auditioning for a dance company in Indianapolis. So I need something movable to both places.” (Informant no. 28)</p> <p>“I just came back from Thailand and I needed something to do while settling down.” (Informant no. 23)</p> <p>“I was in graduate school right before that. I was in physical therapy school, and I did that for a couple of semesters. I just kind of had this point where I was like, this isn’t what I wanna do with my life, so I took a break from that and I was looking for a job or something to do while I figured stuff out.” (Informant no. 1)</p>
Fitting background, interest and specialty	10	<p>“I really enjoy teaching. I taught ESL briefly, just a few weeks on a trip to China. I enjoyed it.” (Informant no. 34)</p> <p>“I used to teach English in Taiwan so I wanted to use my previous experience.” (Informant no. 28)</p> <p>“I am a full-time teacher with a master’s degree in ESL.” (Informant no. 21)</p>
Giving it a try	5	<p>“I was like, this is worth trying. If it works out, that is great. If it doesn’t, that is fine too.” (Informant no. 26)</p> <p>“There wasn’t much to lose.” (Informant no. 5)</p> <p>“I went back and forth for a while with it because of my time zone, I didn’t know if I could get through it. And I decided, you know, if I hate it, I can just find something else to do. It was worth trying. Now this is my main source of income.” (Informant no. 34)</p>

on ABCKID was because the platform helped overcome constraints imposed by host countries for noncitizens, such as visa regulations. This makes overcoming labor-market constraints the second most frequently mentioned motivation.

For military wives who travel frequently, either globally or domestically, working on ABCKID means tackling labor-market constraints head-on. For example, Rebecca is a 33-year-old female teacher and a military wife. She discussed how the job on ABCKID helped her solve unemployment issues associated with frequent moves and how the positive experience inspired her to keep this job as a lifelong career:

One of the big things for me is the portability of this career, because my husband is in the military. He was enlisted about eight years ago. He will be a career military. So every time we moved in the past, even though I was on federal employment, because it was bureaucratic and slow, I've always had a period of unemployment for at least a couple of months. Sometimes up to six months. We moved to Germany, and then moving back from Germany to Texas—those are huge moves. I mean, I was like, not working for six months. I don't like not working. I am not happy, just at home, not doing anything. So I think I will stay with ABCKID, not as a full-time thing ever. But always to be there, with the move especially. I know we've got another move coming up in November probably. I don't know where we are moving, or anything like that. (Informant no. 31)

Table 8.1 also points out that the third most frequently mentioned motivator is using the current job to smoothen transitional periods and situations. While some people were motivated to use this job while trying to settle down domestically after global travels, others were using this job because they were trying to figure out their future career paths. As I mentioned previously, many of these transitional periods are associated with frequent moves. Therefore, many of those who mentioned this motivator were highly mobile individuals, such as global travelers and military wives.

As for the highly immobile group, especially the stay-at-home moms, many were kept out of the labor market due to multiple constraints. The possibilities of overcoming these constraints and fulfilling both home and work duties have become a major consideration when evaluating a new job. Grace, the stay-at-home mom of a two-year-old girl mentioned earlier, said:

I couldn't stand being away, you know, work for ten hours a day, missing everything, missing her growing up, basically. That's why I have been looking for something remote for so long and I haven't been able to find anything. So it's definitely a motivator. (Informant no. 14)

By mobilizing social groups that had previously faced difficulties in labor markets, ABCKID has expanded the pool of virtual migrants. Since ABCKID's organizational characteristics are especially helpful for overcoming the labor-market constraints for the highly mobile and highly social groups, this job became known as ideal for these social groups.

My examination of reviews of this job by contractors on Glassdoor confirms this: when contractors were asked to list the “pros” and “cons” of the job, the most frequently mentioned “pro” for working with ABCKID, appearing in 254 of the 1,164 reviews, was “work from home or while traveling.” In fact, this job is so traveler-friendly that it is, according to an ABCKID teacher, “attracting people who shouldn’t be teachers” and who “teach in airport bathrooms” (informant no. 26). Another “pro” that appeared in 32 reviews on Glassdoor was, “this was a great job for stay-at-home moms.” When these individuals who are on the two tails of the mobility spectrum joined ABCKID en masse, the pool of virtual migrants ballooned.

VIRTUAL MIGRANTS’ WORK EXPERIENCE AND JOB SATISFACTION

ABCKID has helped highly mobile and highly immobile groups overcome job-market constraints, and the job has also enabled virtual migrants to earn extra money on a flexible schedule. Therefore, most teachers, especially those from the highly mobile and highly immobile groups, report high satisfaction with this job. Below, I first document how ABCKID organizes teaching and controls teachers. It is with this backdrop in mind that teachers’ high satisfaction rate is puzzling.

ABCKID is known for two seemingly contradictory approaches to teacher management and evaluation: its hands-off model and micromanagement. On the one hand, ABCKID enforces teacher management by encouraging parents to participate in class and to evaluate teachers. This hands-off model, which is dependent on customer evaluation, is similar across the entire platform economy sector.

On the other hand, ABCKID engages in micromanagement by intervening in what and how to teach. ABCKID offers teachers centrally prepared educational content. The platform adopts an American Common Core–based curriculum and prepares a standardized course structure for teachers. ABCKID also provides course slides to teachers and demands that teachers use these slides. It even attempts to standardize how teachers teach. For example, teachers are required to give students various forms of virtual rewards and use props (e.g., toys) as often as possible. Many teachers welcomed this centrally prepared model, primarily because it reduced their course preparation time. In addition, ABCKID prohibits teachers from being seen yawning, sipping coffee, or resting their knees over their desks. Furthermore, the platform is strict on class cancellations and teacher no-shows. Teachers need to show hospitalization records or death certificates of immediate family members to cancel classes without jeopardizing their contracts. Even if they can present this proof, they still often face fines.

Despite the platform’s micromanagement and strict rules, most ABCKID teachers I interviewed were satisfied with their work arrangements, and even found their work on ABCKID meaningful. In the survey, I asked each informant to evaluate their job satisfaction on a scale of 1–5, with 5 being extremely satisfied.

TABLE 8.2 Average Job Satisfaction across Groups

	Number of Informants	Average Job Satisfaction Score (1 = extremely unsatisfied and 5 = extremely satisfied)
The Highly Mobile and Highly Immobile Groups	17	4.59 ^a
Others	19	4.11 ^a

NOTE: There are only 36 respondents because there is one respondent with missing data.

^a The t-Test shows that the means for the two groups are significantly different ($p < 0.05$).

The 36 respondents' average satisfaction rate was 4.33. This high job satisfaction rating in my sample is consistent with evaluations of ABCKID in media reports and on job review sites. For example, *Forbes* ranked ABCKID the No. 1 “work-from-home” job in 2017 and No. 3 in 2018. In comparison, Amazon Mechanical Turk was ranked No. 3 in 2017 and No. 7 in 2018 on the same list. In 2020, predominantly positive reviews by teachers helped ABCKID rank in the Top 10 on Glassdoor's Best Places to Work in the U.S. (Business Wire, 2019).

Contractors are highly satisfied working with ABCKID not only because of its competitive pay, flexible schedule, and portability, but also because these organizational characteristics are particularly welcomed by the highly mobile and highly immobile groups. As table 8.2 shows, the 19 contractors who are in neither the highly mobile nor the highly immobile group show a mean job satisfaction rate of 4.11. Most contractors in this group are schoolteachers, graduate students, or legal staff who do not earn a high salary from their full-time jobs.

In comparison, the 17 contractors in the highly mobile and highly immobile groups are more satisfied. The average job satisfaction rating for these 17 contractors is 4.59, higher than that of the other 19 teachers. The difference in average job satisfaction rating between the 17 and the 19 teachers is statistically significant ($p < 0.05$). Of course, it is reasonable to inquire whether the test results are valid given the small sample size, and caution is needed when drawing general conclusions to the population level. Having said that, the fact that the t-test accounts for sample size and that the results are statistically significant despite the small sample has at least one implication: the mean job satisfaction rate of the 17 informants is indeed much higher than that of the other 19. In fact, the high rating of the 17 teachers boosts the overall job satisfaction in my sample.

One of the major reasons these 17 teachers were highly satisfied is because being virtual migrants on ABCKID has empowered them to overcome labor-market constraints. They are now not only able to have a job that seemed impossible in the past but also able to reconcile the conflicting obligations between remaining employed and caring for their families. Clara, the military wife mentioned earlier, called her experience with ABCKID “perfect” because she had been able to “move and still have my job” (informant no. 8). After working on ABCKID,

she also increased her visits to her extended family members in other U.S. cities because “the entire classroom can fit in the suitcase.” Being virtual migrants overseas also means not having to wake up early in the morning to teach, as many contractors in the United States do. I will elaborate on this in the following section. Moreover, stay-at-home moms’ experience was largely positive because teaching on ABCKID allowed them to join the workforce without forsaking their childcare responsibilities.

For stay-at-home moms, another source of satisfaction entails spending less time, money, and resources on commutes and therefore greater dedication to childcare. Some informants were willing to sacrifice their previous higher-paying jobs for less commute time. As mentioned previously, Grace is a 36-year-old stay-at-home mom living in Pennsylvania. She used to work in a bank but quit after her daughter was born. She elaborated on why she gave up the bank job even though its pay was higher than that of ABCKID:

I think people average about 20 dollars an hour with ABCKID. It was definitely less than what I made at the bank. But [you also have to consider] the no-commute, staying-at-home, making your own hours. The only downside is the health insurance. I have to pay my own health insurance. But everything else is just like I am fine making less money as long as I can stay home. (Informant no. 14)

The second major reason for the high satisfaction rate lies in the fact that the flexible employment arrangement under ABCKID has added color to lives and reduced monotony. These factors are also most helpful for stay-at-home moms and military wives who used to lack social lives. Judy and Madeline, who are stay-at-home moms, indicated that the job gave them “something refreshing” in the morning and “something else to break up the day” (informants no. 17, no. 29). Madeline added that working on ABCKID made it more enjoyable to take care of her daughter (informant no. 29).

The third reason behind the observed high level of job satisfaction is because being virtual migrants on ABCKID enabled some teachers to realize their dreams. For example, the two digital nomads in my sample said they had always wanted to travel while financially supporting themselves. Yet they could not possibly have led such a life had they worked within traditional work arrangements. They had chosen to travel across the world when they realized they could bring the ABCKID job with them anywhere they could use wi-fi.

Brian, a 27-year-old male teacher currently traveling across Europe, is one of them. He explained that he was first stuck between a job he disliked and unemployment after graduating from a liberal arts college with student loans. He decided to become a digital nomad traveling across Europe:

I was in Corporate America [before joining ABCKID] and it was a terrible organization. [It was in the] banking, mortgage industry. Terrible . . . So I really, I did not have another plan. But it wasn’t on desperation either, because the saving was carrying

me through it while being unemployed. I was just trying to figure out the next step because of my age. I am 27. Last year I was 25 going on to 26. My age group cohort, like we are all burdened by student loan debt. We can't finance houses because Gen-Xers can outbid us with capital we don't have. And it's like, all of my friends are in Corporate America or they are in jobs that are not satisfactory. This particular job [at ABCKID] enables me to travel. (Informant no. 4)

DISLOCATED FROM LOCAL CONTEXTS AND MEANING FOR VIRTUAL MIGRANTS

Although ABCKID contractors still have local lives and ABCKID has been helpful in overcoming various labor-market constraints, the platform dislocates its contractors from their local contexts. Various forms of dislocation are micro-level manifestations of the transition from embodied to digital disembodied globalization (Steger & James, 2020). According to the two scholars, embodied globalization is characterized as the physical mobility of human bodies, while disembodied globalization entails the digitally mediated exchange of ideas, information, and data. This transition, according to them, has been not only chaotic but also contradictory: on the one hand, the rise of disembodied globalization provides workers with greater job flexibility, higher job satisfaction, and sometimes even more access to jobs; on the other hand, the shift toward disembodied globalization is often associated with workers' detachment and disorientation from the tangible embeddedness in the local social world. Below I highlight three ways in which various forms of dislocation transpire on ABCKID.

First, ABCKID contractors are dislocated from their local times. ABCKID contractors are required to work around their students' schedules. Because Chinese students usually utilize this supplemental education service in after-school hours such as evenings, ABCKID teachers living in North America greet their students with "good evening" during these teachers' early morning hours. Typical work hours for teachers who live on the East Coast are from 6–8 a.m. Those who live on the West Coast face more challenging hours since they need to teach from 3:00 a.m. to 5:00 a.m. Teachers based in Asia and Europe enjoy more comfortable working hours in the afternoons and evenings. Bella, the Sweden-based teacher cited earlier, even said that she would not have considered ABCKID had she still been living in the United States (informant no. 3).

Since the platform job schedules are flexible, ABCKID contractors can be more dislocated from their local times than those working on other types of virtual migration work with a 9–5 schedule. On the one hand, this work schedule flexibility prevents teachers from being forced to work long hours, especially in early mornings. Teachers can also adjust their schedules to fit their needs. On the other hand, work schedule flexibility allows some teachers to self-impose demanding work hours with little supervision or organizational support. Some teachers even

have to pull all-nighters during summer and winter vacations when Chinese students have extra learning time at home. Mia, a 25-year-old female teacher living in the Midwest, spent the summer of 2018 working from 8 p.m. to 8 a.m., seven days a week. She said:

When I was doing the overnight, it felt like my days are longer than 24 hours, because, I mean, I would work 12 hours and I wouldn't want to sleep all during the day because I wanted to feel that I had a life. So I was sleeping very minimally during the day, then staying up all night long and trying to be awake. I mean, it was awful. Awful. (Informant no. 26)

Second, ABCKID dislocates contractors from their local legal environments. We have seen how the ABCKID job has allowed some teachers to overcome visa constraints associated with living outside the United States while teaching students in China. On the other hand, it is not uncommon for ABCKID teachers to be stuck between legal and policy differences among multiple countries, including the home country, the host country where they live, and China, where ABCKID is based. Even if the legal and policy differences are only between two countries, ABCKID teachers still must navigate through the gaps.

Dustin, a 30-year-old male teacher living in the United States, recalls such a situation: the Chinese government had pressured ABCKID to demand that all teachers obtain teaching certificates and wear an orange-colored uniform in order to demonstrate professionalism, but labor laws in the United States prevent contractors from being forced to wear uniforms. According to Dustin, ABCKID teachers vented their grievances to ABCKID and eventually "ABCKID had to change it because we are independent contractors so I guess they cannot require us to wear something specific" (informant no. 11).

The third way in which dislocation operates lies in the disconnect between ABCKID contractors and their local sociocultural environments. Unlike traditional international migrants who usually work for organizations in the host countries, virtual migrants work largely by themselves in a more complex sociocultural environment. What makes jobs on these transnational platforms challenging is that these platforms provide no on-site supervision, formal training, or organizational support. Contractors must navigate cross-cultural adjustment on their own. For example, contractors often find themselves stuck in divergent discourses regarding social and political issues in China. This has been especially true in recent years, as both China and the United States have witnessed growing nationalism.

Although many informants of mine were dislocated from local contexts and faced stringent controls from the platform, quite a few of them considered this job meaningful. I asked my informants if they considered teaching on ABCKID a meaningful job. Eighteen informants said yes. Among them, many belong to the highly mobile and highly immobile groups. For them, teaching on ABCKID constituted an opportunity to experience transnational culture, especially helping

children of other countries to grow. Seven informants elaborated that they found it meaningful to help children grow, bond with young students, and push the limits of what students can discuss. Clara, the military wife mentioned earlier, recalled how she had found meaning in helping a young Chinese girl. She said:

I have one student, this beautiful girl. When I first started with her, she was so quiet. Quiet as a little mouse . . . She was so nervous and so afraid of making mistakes. Every time she made mistakes, she said, "I am sorry teacher. I am sorry." I told her, "You are way smarter than everyone thinks you are." I told her, "You are good at speaking and you can do this." Once she got that, she leaped four levels . . . it is the pushing-forward that matters. (Informant no. 8)

What is important is not only helping children from another country, but also living a cross-cultural life, even if contractors are immobile. Several informants explicitly mentioned that teaching on ABCKID had helped them connect with a foreign culture. This is especially important for people who usually spend a vast amount of time in their local neighborhoods. For example, a 33-year-old mother said, "I do enjoy kind of the cultural outreach that's happening as a result. I do feel that I have a vested interest now in what happens in China" (informant no. 30).

Of course, these special groups, being highly satisfied with the job and finding it meaningful, might reflect a harsh reality: since these social groups are so marginalized in labor markets and are more likely to find meaning in child-related cross-culture work, they are also likely to tolerate the control and exploitation of the platform.

CONCLUSION AND DISCUSSION

In this chapter, I have investigated platform-induced virtual migration as an essential element of globalization. I have used ABCKID to show how this type of transnational educational platform mobilized new social groups that had previously been constrained by local and global labor markets, as well as how the alignment between the platform's organizational characteristics and contractors' motivations has facilitated contractors' participation while elevating their job satisfaction rates. By mobilizing new groups, and using global investment to boost market share, ABCKID has raced to the top among transnational educational platforms and the entire field of these platforms has thrived.⁴

My findings have important implications for understanding globalization's past, present, and future. On the one hand, globalization has indeed shifted away from the physical mobility of people. Traditionally, teaching a foreign language has been pertinent to international migration work because matching a student with a foreign teacher usually requires physical cross-country moves of at least one party. However, the rise of ABCKID and other virtual platforms has changed the dynamics. To the extent that the dominant form of teaching a foreign language

may have shifted to transnational online teaching, this chapter lends credence to Manfred B. Steger and Paul James's (2020) claim of a transition from embodied to disembodied globalization. My chapter also supports their claim on the chaotic and contradictory nature of this transition. Moreover, my findings provide further substantiation of the work experience of contractors under digital and disembodied globalization, especially their "unhappy consciousness"—an internally divided state of mind that values flexibility, greater satisfaction, and higher income, while at the same time suffering from new online surveillance measures and a general detachment from the tangible embeddedness in the local social world (Steger & James, 2020; Lin & Steger, 2022).

On a macro- and theoretical level, this chapter illuminates on the deglobalization versus reglobalization debate, as well as the nature of reglobalization (e.g., Bishop & Paine 2021; Benedikter, Gruber, & Kofler, 2022). My empirical findings on the rise of global online teaching suggest that we are not encountering an end of globalization but rather globalization in a different form. My findings on the growing consumption power of Chinese elites and middle-class families, as well as the expanding capacities of Chinese corporations in utilizing global capital and global labor, have also pointed to a major redirection of the reglobalization process. Moreover, this Internet-based reglobalization has empowered corporate managers to recruit formerly untapped social groups, while clouding the controls and surveillance over these social groups given these groups' fragmented work hours and locations.

Furthermore, the lives and job experience of ABCKID contractors call for rethinking world-systems theory and the related studies of global inequality (e.g., Arrighi & Drangel, 1986; Firebaugh, 2000; Wallerstein, 2011; Hung, 2016). On the one hand, my findings challenge world-systems theory in the sense that ABCKID reveals an alternative direction for connecting workers in core countries to customers in semiperipheral countries. On the other hand, my case and findings support and extend world-systems theory in two ways. First, the rise of ABCKID and other similar platforms could be attributable to the rise of China in the wake of the Deng Xiaoping reforms, allowing Chinese customers and corporations to purchase products and services from core countries.

Second, my findings have rich implications for the role of China in global inequality. Scholars generally agree that there has been a growing global inequality since the inception of the Industrial Revolution (e.g., Arrighi & Drangel, 1986; Firebaugh, 2000). It is worth investigating the direction in which the global inequality will move in the wake of China's market transition since the late 1970s. Hung (2016) illustrates a nuanced picture: on the one hand, the economic growth of this most populous country has greatly reduced the global inequality; on the other hand, China's successes in manufacturing and exports may have exacerbated global inequality by disrupting other developing countries' industrialization.

My findings point to a similar but slightly different direction. The rise of China may have alleviated global inequality by providing job opportunities to workers in

both developing countries and developed countries. This is especially true because I have shown the effect of China-based platforms on the income growth of previously socially marginalized social groups in North America. But the dislocation of these social groups' lives also reminds us of the pitfalls of only measuring inequality in terms of income: indeed, the financial well-being of these social groups has improved, but we should not neglect the psychological and social cost associated with the dislocation from the local lives, as well as the cost as a result of the heightened control and surveillance imposed by the platforms.

Last but not the least, the global inequality tends to persist since the name of the game under virtual migration still entails an unequal global division of labor and global exploitation. ABCKID simply presents a more nuanced picture: the unequal global division of labor does not cut a simple divide between core countries and semiperipheral countries, but rather between capital/labor from core countries and customers/managers from semiperipheral countries. This, again, attests to the nature of reglobalization as being a power reshuffle along multiple dimensions. Given the participation of previously socially marginalized social groups and their high level of tolerance for exploitation, this multidimensional reglobalization also tends to be less visible than before.

NOTES

1. ABCKID is a platform in the sense that teachers open time slots to students and their parents, and the latter book sessions with teachers. ABCKID does not require teachers to work in designated times or spaces. Rather, it uses camera monitoring, customer ratings, and the involvement of students' parents to supervise a spatially dispersed work force.

2. I recruited ABCKID teachers primarily through Reddit's ABCKID community, one of the largest ABCKID teacher forums. After I posted the project description and an interview advertisement on Reddit, 45 teachers contacted me. I selected 37 teachers who showed sufficient proof of employment (e.g., job ID, screenshots of the personal portal, etc.). Each interview was semistructured and lasted for about an hour. After the interviews, I sent survey questionnaires to these informants via email, and 36 informants responded. My survey questions focused on their demographic backgrounds, financial information, and job satisfaction. My online data included 1,164 reviews of ABCKID jobs on Glassdoor, a leading job review website. These were all the reviews about ABCKID I could find from January 2019.

3. To protect the identities of my informants, all their names used in this chapter are pseudonyms.

4. These achievements notwithstanding, the Chinese government imposed heavy restrictions on China's supplemental education industry in 2021. These new restrictions not only prohibit young children from taking supplemental lessons, but also forbid foreigners from teaching from outside of China. Consequently, the revenues of ABCKID and many other China-based educational platforms have been in a free fall since then.

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