

The Social Mobility Perception of Chinese International Students in the U.S.

Wei-Fen Chen, The Hong Kong University of Science and Technology, Hong Kong

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Abstract

This study explores the transitional identity of the youngsters who experience dual mobility—the horizontal mobility (geographic relocation) and the potential, upward mobility—in the process of pursuing higher education overseas. While individuals' identity dynamics have been examined in multiple mobility forms such as migration, nomadism, and short-term travel, the identity project of international students has been underresearched even if these globally mobile youngsters represent a unique mobility form in which often only one county is deliberately selected for a motivated, fix-term, and voluntary relocation. While studying abroad can be simply viewed as an act to convert economic capital into the globally-recognized cultural capital, the interview data collected among international students from China reveal that the informants were aware of their capital loss as much as their capital gain. As a result, they developed an alternative framework to interpret their mobility experiences. This study illuminates the emerging market youngsters' motivation to pursue higher education overseas when it no longer guarantees traditionally-defined upward mobility, and brings insights into the scholarship of youth culture regarding the youngsters' value to define their social positions and to build social class boundaries.

Keywords: identity; social mobility; international students; capital; China

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Introduction

This study explores the identity projects of the international students who experience cross-border, cross-cultural mobility, paying particular attention to how these youngsters interpret their capital possession in this process and how they reproduce their social positions in mobility. While one's social position is often defined by external demographic variables, such as income, occupation, and education (Mihić & Čulina, 2006; Hunag et al., 2017), some studies have evidenced the effectiveness of subjective socioeconomic status in terms of predicting one's psychological functioning and well-being. For example, Huang et al. (2017) indicate that the well-being perception of the rural-to-urban migrants in China is determined not only by how much they actually gained in the mobility (objective socioeconomic status) but also how much they believe they have gained (subjective socioeconomic status). As such, taking individuals' mobility experiences and their subjectivity into consideration could add considerable complexity to the discussion of how social class is lived in the everyday context.

This study grounds the discussion of individuals' subjective social class identity in the context of social mobility, hoping to illuminate how people's social mobility experience affects their perception of social standing. This inquiry echoes an emerging research agenda of the "new mobilities paradigm," which "brings together some of the more purely 'social' concerns of sociology (inequality, power, hierarchies) with the 'spatial' concerns of geography (territory, borders, scale) and the 'cultural' concerns of anthropology or communication research (discourses, representations, schemas), while inflecting each with a relational ontology of the co-constitution of subjects, spaces, and meanings" (Sheller, 2014, p. 3).

Individuals' identities in cross-border mobility have been widely examined with empirical data gathered among the migrants and travelers (e.g., see Mehta & Belk, 1991; Bardhi, Ostberg, & Bengtsson, 2010), and the findings, as Bardhi, Eckhardt, and Arnould (2012) suggested, often anchor such potential identity dynamics to either the home or the host context. This study is a departure from the mainstream accounts as it addresses a less explored mobility form, the international student mobility. The international student mobility is a unique form of cross-border, cross-cultural mobility for three reasons. First, it is neither as permanent as migration, nor as temporary as short-term travel. Instead, it is a motivated, voluntary, and fix-term relocation in one foreign country based on deliberate choices. The mobility experience of these international students should thus be differentiated from that of migrants, highly-skilled mobile professionals, global citizens, global nomads, sojourners, and travelers.

Second, the international student mobility is almost exclusive for the millennial generation, who, thanks to the global consumer culture, is often assumed to subscribe to a homogenized worldview (Kjeldgaard & Askegaard, 2006; Stein, 2013). Studying the identity project of youngsters who travel across the borders should bring new insights into their acculturation processes and their nuanced identity dynamics, which may help reveal some potential variations in a seemingly globalized youth culture. Third, given the implication for "upward mobility" that has been attached to higher education (Kupfer, 2012), the international students embody dual mobility trajectories—geographically outbound mobility as well as potential, upward mobility. The international students' identity may thus become even more elusive to define and

requires more scholarly attention to explore how social mobility is perceived by these youngsters.

International students from China who are currently studying in the U.S. are selected as the empirical focus to examine how youngsters' global mobility experiences affect their identities. The rationale is that in this second largest economy (Barboza, 2010) and the largest consumer market worldwide (Ro, 2015), overseas education is deemed a new fad among urban-dwelling, consumption-oriented, new middle class in China (Larmer, 2016; Yang, 2016). According to the Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China, 544,500 Chinese students went abroad to study in 2016, and 91.49% among them were self-funded. While most Chinese students opt for English-speaking countries as their destinations, the U.S. is the most popular choice. According to the Institute of International Education (IIE) in the U.S., in the academic year of 2015-16, about one-third of the 1,043,839 international students in the U.S. were from China, which constituted the largest international student population in the U.S. by country-of-origin, followed by the students from India, as there were 165,918 Indian students in the U.S. in the same academic year.

The large-scale movement of Chinese youngsters as international students has been an established theme in the literature regarding human capital, which explores whether and how their foreign credentials could be turned into advantages for job-seeking in both host societies and the home country (Hu & Cairns, 2017; Zweig, Chen, & Rosen, 2004). However, these accounts tend to emphasize the international students' capital acquisition, paying relatively scant attention to their capital loss in the relocation process and to how these youngsters deal with their capital change.

According to Bourdieu (1986), people use three forms of capital to pursue distinction in social life: economic capital (financial resources), cultural capital (socially rare and distinctive tastes, skills, knowledge, and practices), and social capital (relationships, organizational affiliations, networks) (Holt, 1998; Henry & Caldwell, 2008). Longhurst and Savage (1996) argue that Bourdieu's perspective "allows him to relate consumption processes to the traditional emphases of mainstream Marxist and Weberian sociologists—class, status, social closure—whilst at the same time reframing these theoretical ideas in ways sensitive to the complexity of cultural media and the specificity of different cultural fields" (p. 274). In this account, self-funded international students are usually perceived as converting their economic capital (the capability to pay for the tuition) into cultural capital (college degree; knowledge). In general, it is believed that the upper class is more capable to enact such capital conversion to expand their overall capital volume than the lower class who have little resources (Blasius & Friedrichs, 2008).

However, scholars have applied Bourdieu's theoretical framework in various contexts to argue that one's capital does not always operate in predictable ways based on the holder's social standing. For example, in the context of cross-border mobility, Bardhi et al. (2010) argue that one's cultural capital may "decrease" when traveling to other countries of different cultural backgrounds (e.g., from the U.S. to China). In their study, travelers' consumption of food abroad can reveal a low cultural capital mode, which is different from their high cultural capital status in their home country. For example, travelers may turn to Western fast food restaurants to "feel like home" when they lose interest in experimenting with local food after the first few days of travel,

meaning that they no longer perform a cosmopolitan taste, a feature of high cultural capital holders (Bardhi et al., 2010).

Therefore, the international student mobility may not be merely about how a group of privileged youngsters accumulate more cultural capital that is recognized worldwide to reproduce their advantages. On the contrary, capital loss or other unexpected capital operation may involve in the relocation process. In this sense, the international students may not perceive studying abroad merely as beneficial drive for upward mobility, which is often define by the accumulation of multiple forms of capital, say, better salaries (economic capital) and more resourceful peers (social capital). Specifically, this study aims to answer two research questions:

First, how do international students interpret their capital possession in the relocation?

Second, how do international students interpret their mobility experiences?

To answer the research questions, in-depth interviews based on a qualitative approach were conducted with twenty-seven first-generation international students from China, who were funded by their parents to pursue an undergraduate or a master's degree in a major university in the U.S. As indicated by Seidman (2006, p. 9), at the root of the in-depth interview "is an interest in understanding the lived experience of other people and the meaning they make of that experience." The informants' parents, and/or the elder members in their core families, do not have long-term overseas experiences of either education or employment. For a manageable scope of data analysis, only self-funded international students were recruited. This is not only because they are more representative of the Chinese international student group when 91.49% of outbound international students from China in 2016 were self-funded. The sampling also ensures that the informants' overseas study is a motivated, determined, voluntary decision, which is not affected by factors such as generous scholarship and corporate sponsorship. First-generation international students were recruited to exclude situations like "global citizens" who simply travel due to the relocation of the whole family. The informants' profiles can be found in Table 1.

Findings

The data reveal that the informants stress their capital loss as much as their capital gain, believing that their non-citizen status and restrained social networks will impede their job-hunting in the U.S., and that they do not have the acute sensibilities and *guanxi* to succeed in the job market in China. Therefore, the informants do not associate their study-abroad decision with the traditionally-defined upward mobility that is largely determined by career advancement and salary increase. Instead, they develop an alternative framework to define their upward mobility through their outbound mobility, meaning that they "get ahead" because of some immaterial, inner changes that are gained in their transnational relocation. The findings are discussed in detail in the following section.

Capital loss

According to Kim (2011), a major motivation for youngsters to pursue a higher degree overseas is career development. It is conceivable that studying abroad is

perceived as an opportunity for upward mobility if it means not only more education but also more incomes and a better career. However, with the growing numbers of Chinese international students and returnees, a foreign degree is no longer as valuable as it used to be. Karen, one of the informants of this study, believes that the returnees are increasingly “undervalued.” Another informant, Elsa, also feels that her overseas experience may not significantly differentiate her from her local peers if the status is evaluated by external variables.

Elsa: “I think 10 years ago, returnees were considered outstanding in China. Maybe even 5 years ago people still looked up to returnees. But at the time when I obtain my degree and work for a few years and then return home, the returnee status will be no longer valuable because there are so many people studying abroad. I am fine with the fact that eventually I may go home to do the same job and receive the same salary as my local peers. The result seems to remain the same. But personally, I have gained a broadened vision and more experiences, which cannot be accessed if I stay home all the time. I am proud that I have such experiences, I think it is truly a valuable fortune in my life.”

As Elsa said, in general, the informants talked about studying abroad less as an effort to pursue distinction and to “stand out,” but more as an act to follow the trend to seek an opportunity for self-fulfillment. As studying overseas is no longer a rare case in the informants’ communities, they do not expect their international experiences to bring a drastic, beneficial change to their material well-being and career development. Instead, they emphasize much about how the degree may not be as helpful as it is assumed, which means that the process of studying abroad involves potential capital loss and the difficulty to convert their capital into another form. For example, one of the informants, Jeff, no longer believes that studying abroad would bring “mobility capital,” i.e., the power of foreign academic qualifications to facilitate job-seeking in China (Hu & Cairns, 2017; Wang, 2012).

Jeff: “You cannot bring your social networks home after graduation, the lessons your learned here are not applicable to the Chinese society...we heard of news about how returnees became scam victims, it is because that they don’t have enough social experiences in China...Honestly, your English proficiency aside, there is little about a returnee that employers would value.”

Jeff’s sharing implies that, in China, one needs to be immersed in the local context for a long time to figure out the social norms. Therefore, the informants sometimes worry about how their away-from-home period may weaken their sensibilities that should have been sharpened through a socialization process in China. According to Warren, Dunfee, and Li (2004), following some social norms, such as *guanxi*, is crucial if one wants to do business in the emerging markets, where business does not yet operate according to institutionalized rules and regulations.

Meanwhile, although the informants anticipate some difficulties in their job-hunting in China, they also understand that they are not “Westernized” enough to succeed in the U.S. job market. Many informants mentioned their non-citizen status as a major weakness because when they need an employment visa to legally work in the U.S., it means uncertainty for the employers. For example, Stanley believes that what impedes his job-seeking is his non-citizen status rather than his capability.

Stanley: "So I got a phone call the other day, a company is interested in me and they like my resume, they asked whether a sponsorship is required for my status. They said they will think of it, but they never get back to me. I think I lost the opportunity because of the (non-citizen) status."

Besides the non-citizen status as a major hurdle for job-seeking, the informants also find it difficult to accumulate useful social capital because all of their cultural capital that used to help expand their social networks does not work in the U.S. For example, although Hannah's language proficiency is good enough to address her academic needs, she finds it frustrating to make friends with local students because they often have different extracurricular interests.

Hannah: "I have no idea about how to chat with my friends, they talked about super bowl or local games and TV series, I have never watched them and I have no idea, we don't have a topic in common to talk about, deep or superficial or entertaining. I am like the black hole, sitting there and said nothing...my roommate said that I am socially inept. When I was in China, I have abundant language resources to tackle this problem, I can express myself, but this does not work here, there is no way to cover my weakness when we chat in English."

Hannah's sharing reveals that even if some international students perform well in class, they may lack the skills and understanding of local culture to confidently interact with local students and thereby expand their social networks, which are crucial for job-seeking in addition to high GPAs. As a result, most informants tend to make friends with other international students from China. As Bonnie said, even if she seems to have all the chances to meet new friends and expand her social networks, it is easier to make friends with other international students from China.

Bonnie: "About 90% of the students in my department are from China...I make friends with those who take the same class with me, and those who live in my neighborhood, and my roommates, it is a small circle and all my friends here are from China, and my life is all about interacting with other Chinese...I would say this is not ideal, I am also thinking of other ways to expand my social network. But I think the Westerners do not actively make friends with us even if they would not reject such an opportunity, I think I have not found a way to build a steady friendship with them."

Given how the informants perceive their capital loss, one may assume that they do not expect their overseas education to bring upward mobility and that they came to the U.S. merely for experiential purposes. After all, for some new middle class families in China, paying for their children's overseas education is just like another luxury brand purchase (Larmer, 2016), meaning that it is for the "consumption" purpose rather than for the "production" purpose, i.e., securing a better position in the system of production. However, the data reveal that the informants' study-abroad decision is not simply experience-driven. Instead, they believe that these experiences would bring some internal, immaterial changes so that certain personal propensities will be developed to help them "get ahead." In other words, the informants perceive upward mobility and horizontal mobility (geographic, transnational relocation) in an overlapping manner, which is elaborated in the following section.

Capital gain and mobility perception

Despite the capital loss discussed above, the informants believe that they are gaining some valuable characteristics that differentiate them from their peers who have no international experience, such as a broadened vision, the familiarity to multiple culture forms, the capability of critical thinking, and the propensity to be more independent, inspired, and informed. Such tendency echoes Wang's (2012) argument that the motivation for privileged youngsters to pursue overseas degrees is often associated with the accumulation of cosmopolitan capital, which is defined as "bodily and mental predispositions and competence which help to engage confidently in globalizing social arenas" (Weenink, 2008, as cited in Wang, 2012, p. 3). For instance, when Rosa talked about how she is privileged if compared with her parents' generation, the comparison is based on personal characteristics rather than career and financial achievement.

Rosa: "I am not interested in acquiring power and prestige to fit into the upper class, I will live in the way I like, and eventually I may become someone just like my parents. I will be in a position just like theirs and I am fine with it. But I have the overseas experiences...compared to my father, I think I am more open-minded, I understand that there are different ways to live, while my father is not comfortable with other lifestyles that do not fit his value...I think I also dare to take risks...my parents lived under economic pressure, but I don't, so I don't have as much concern as they do. I am willing to take challenging tasks and I don't care about economic rewards. I want to experience something special, and I care about self-fulfillment."

Similar to Rosa, Jeff also describes the intergenerational upward mobility based on something personal, domestic, and "trivial." For him, the upward mobility is carried out in intangible changes in his thoughts, attitudes, and value.

Jeff: "So people tend to evaluate things by the outcomes rather than the processes. If I end up holding a position similar to those for people who never left China, my overseas education may be considered as a disappointing deal. But I don't think of it this way. While studying abroad, I have been trained to think critically and independently...I mean you need to ask "why" to everything...for example, my mother would forward some postings in her social media to me, and I find them annoying. I tried to explain to her that she should not believe in whatever she reads. Whenever she forwards something to me, I need to do some research to decide the extent to which I should believe in this message, which is a waste of my time. This is a typical example of not performing independent thinking."

In this regard, the informants tend to define their upward mobility through their horizontal mobility, i.e., geographic relocation. The informants' overlapped interpretation of upward mobility and outbound mobility could be explained by Berg's (2011) argument that individuals would develop subjective definitions of "getting ahead" if the mainstream socioeconomic valuation is not applicable to their cases. In Berg's (2011) research, Moroccan migrant women in the Netherlands define their upgraded social position by practices such as informal education (self-learning) as well as newly-acquired characteristics such as self-reliance (autonomy, emancipation), since commonly-used indicators of formal schooling and paid work are not realistic to them. In a similar sense, there are three potential reasons for the

informants to adopt such alternative account to heavily associate upward mobility with international relocation.

First, while the politically correct discourse of the “two-class” structure in China may no longer account for the current social stratification after the rapid economic growth, occupational shift, and privatization (Guo, 2008), individuals may subscribe to an ambiguous social class consciousness (Miao, 2017). When people holding diverse economic positions tend to universally categorize themselves into a similar, “middle-class” economic position (Miao, 2017), they may not feel that they have moved upwards to another economic bracket even if they have gained significant income increase. Therefore, the informants may turn to other evaluations that would acutely reflect their advantages in pursuing distinction.

Second, most informants come from privileged backgrounds as their parents have white-collar occupations or hold managerial positions, earned college or postgraduate degrees, and have enough discretionary incomes to fully sponsor their children’s overseas education. The informants may find it neither realistic nor feasible to expect to surpass their parents by moving upwards to another social class. In other words, the intergenerational mobility is not possible if it is measured by traditional evaluations. In addition, because the informants were economically secure in their upbringings, they may not value economic capital that is concretized in conspicuous forms as much as those who used to suffer from economic deprivation (Chipp, Kleyn, & Manzi, 2011). In this sense, the informants may rely on other traits that are popular among the younger generation, such as the exploratory experiences away from home (Weinberger, Zavisca, & Silva, 2017), to evaluate their social positions and to signal social class boundaries. According to Weinberger et al. (2017), the privileges of middle-class young adults are embodied in how they voraciously consume exploratory experiences that are varied, novel, challenging, and nondomestic, a pattern that is not observed among working class young adults. Such lifestyle variations may in turn be used to explain how experience-seeking individuals are perceived to hold better social positions.

Third, as previously mentioned, for the informants, studying abroad does not always mean an accumulation of various forms of capital. It does not imply a more useful social network or a more lucrative occupation. Therefore, the informants may tend to stress their immaterial, internal changes to justify their costly study-abroad decision. While the returnees are not perceived more valuable than their local peers in the job market, the informants strategically interpret their overseas education to stress how it facilitates personal growth, which does not need to be associated with a successful career or monetary rewards.

Conclusion

Through 27 in-depth interviews, this study presents how Chinese international students define their upward mobility through outbound mobility, meaning that they move to a better social position because of some immaterial, internal changes that occurred during their transnational relocation. In particular, the informants do not associate overseas education with traditionally-defined upward mobility, which is measured by better salaries, occupational advancement, and higher education. Instead, they value how their international experiences have brought them a broadened vision,

the familiarity to multiple culture forms, the capability of critical thinking, and the propensities to be more independent, inspired, and informed. The findings are expected to contribute to two scholarly fields in particular.

First, while the economic growth in China may weaken the “pulling power” of other industrialized, developed countries since the growing Chinese market means more employment opportunities, business niches, and the access to material well-being, a constant increase of outbound students from China is observed. In other words, the Chinese youngsters pursue overseas degrees with the awareness that they may eventually return to China and their career paths may not benefit much from their overseas education. While such trend can be explained by multiple factors, this study illuminates that the large-scale, outbound movement of international students from China may be related to how the youngsters have developed an alternative framework to define distinction, i.e., they view themselves as “getting ahead” when they have experienced more horizontal mobility (geographic relocation). Therefore, this study sheds light on the socio-cultural drive of international student mobility in the contemporary economic reality.

Second, the findings inform the scholarship of youth culture by showing how the youngsters’ values are shaped by macro-societal changes. Growing up in affluent and one-child family backgrounds, and at the same time witnessing the economic growth and the newly-developed business sectors, the Chinese youngsters adopt an alternative framework to define success. Such perspective may reveal an eclectic account in terms of how the youngsters on the one hand pursue social status in order to be recognized in a collectivistic culture, while on the other hand follow the global youth culture of the middle class young adults to stress individuality and self-fulfillment (Weinberger et al., 2017).

In addition to the theoretical contributions, this study also comes with a few limitations that can be addressed in future research. First, the “two-class” discourse in China is unique as it is different from, say, the westward framework that stresses personal endeavors and the caste system in which social class boundaries are pre-determined. Thus, the findings of the present study may not be applicable to other societies to explain how their youngsters’ social mobility perception might have changed along with the macro-societal reform. Second, while the sample is overrepresented by female informants, the researcher may overlook some gender-specific perspectives. In the traditional Chinese culture, the expectation to the next generation is gendered, i.e., men and women are expected to fulfill different roles in the family as well as in the society (Liu, 2006). As such, how the youth picture their future career may also be gendered. The findings regarding how the informants are less concerned about the traditionally-defined success may be due to how such evaluation is less associated with female stereotypes. Future studies may further examine whether the social mobility perception of youth varies across genders.

Table 1: The informants' profiles

	Pseudonym	Degree level	Hometown	Age	Gender	Major
1	Annie	Bachelor's	Xian	22	F	Economics
2	Carol	Bachelor's	Peking	23	F	Advertising
3	Elaine	Master's	Peking	23	F	Advertising
4	Gabriel	Master's	Anhui	25	M	Advertising
5	Hannah	Bachelor's	Shandong	22	F	Chemistry Psychology
6	Iris	Bachelor's	Fujian	20	F	Natural Resources and Environmental Sciences
7	Jeff	Bachelor's	Fujian	24	M	Computer Science
8	Karen	Bachelor's	Shanghai	23	F	Economics Mathematics
9	Lara	Master's	Shanghai	26	F	Bioenergy
10	Monica	Master's	Shanghai	20	F	Computer Engineering
11	Natalie	Bachelor's	Shandong	21	F	Finance Accountancy
12	Olivia	Bachelor's	Shanghai	21	F	Accountancy
13	Pam	Bachelor's	Guangdong	20	F	Communication Psychology
14	Rosa	Master's	Guangzhou	22	F	Accountancy
15	Stanley	Bachelor's	Sichuan	22	M	Civil and Environmental Engineering
16	Tracy	Bachelor's	Nanjing	18	F	Mathematics
17	Vincent	Master's	Hangzhou	24	M	Architecture
18	William	Bachelor's	Chengdu	20	M	Material Science and Engineering
19	Anna	Master's	Dalian	23	F	Accountancy
20	Bonnie	Master's	Guangzhou	22	F	Statistics
21	Cindy	Master's	Peking	22	F	Computer Science
22	Deborah	Master's	Shanghai	22	F	Accountancy
23	Yvonne	Bachelor's	Changsha	22	F	Statistics Computer Science
24	Elsa	Bachelor's	Guangzhou	20	F	Advertising
25	Faye	Master's	Zhejiang	22	F	Advertising
26	Gina	Bachelor's	Fujian	19	F	Psychology Industrial engineering
27	Hailey	Bachelor's	Guangzhou	21	F	Physics

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