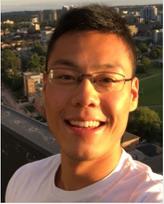


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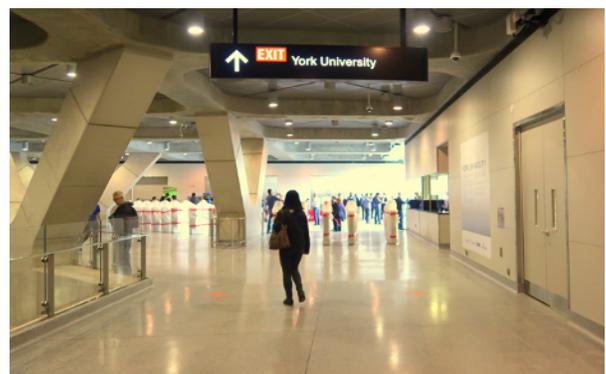
International Higher Education and Social Stratification: Education Migration Narratives of Chinese International Students in Toronto

The People's Republic of China (PRC) is experiencing studying abroad fever. The pursuit of international higher education (IHE) is no longer just for knowledge acquisition but has taken on a new significance for the middle class who aim to move out geographically to move up socio-economically. According to the PRC's Ministry of Education (2017), there were 608,400 post-secondary Chinese students who went abroad to study in 2017, making the PRC the world's largest sending country for international students. However, access has not always been this extensive. IHE emerged in the PRC in 1978 as a government-sponsored programme that was rigorously regulated. Due to its exclusivity, its pursuit was attached with potent symbolic meaning that reinforced the status of the elite. However, modern China's booming economy has since created a prospering middle class and these families could afford the high fees associated with international education. This led to IHE becoming a family investment popular among both elite and non-elite families, with the latter emerging as a dominant force in IHE participation, disrupting the old symbolic links between IHE and social stratification.

This research explores the connections between IHE and social stratification by investigating the education migration narratives of Chinese international students in Toronto. Using data from 19 semi-structured interviews, I examined the intersections between students' experiences, their family situations as well as institutional influences, which co-constitutively shape their perceptions about future career trajectories and social position in the PRC. It reveals a newly stratified landscape of IHE participation, detailing Chinese international students' (in)abilities to capitalize on family resources during their studies abroad.

Based on the narratives provided by interviewees who self-identified as originating from elite or non-elite families, I noted two types of IHE participation. Ample family resources and students' free of concerns from finances and employment characterized elite participation. Additionally, elites saw IHE as an aesthetic activity and an opportunity to socialize with fellow elite Chinese international students. In contrast, non-elite participation involved complex negotiations between individual, family and institutional factors. Moreover, distinctive IHE motivations and career planning were revealed by non-elite individuals' diverse strategies to overcome obstacles and in how they optimized institutional systems to maximize their IHE investment.

Despite the changes in IHE access over the decades, the stratified system of IHE participation found ways to resist change. My interviewees explained that



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increased demand from the middle class led to the elites becoming more selective of foreign educational institutions. Elite choices were based on their perceived status and values in order to re-establish class stratification within IHE participation. Both elite and non-elite interviewees were aware that low-ranked Western universities were labelled derogatorily as 野鸡大学/ yeji daxue (wild chicken) in the PRC and their graduates became referred to as 海带/ haidai (seaweed) for their ubiquity and replaceability. There was also a general agreement among my interviewees that upon returning to the PRC, the increasing number of graduates from “wild chicken” universities are considered far less competitive than those from highly ranked universities.

The majority of my interviewees self-identified as non-elite and expressed concerns about their future career trajectories in the PRC. Despite knowing the significant commitments ahead, they shared their apprehensions regarding the future returns that IHE would have on their careers and finances. Two major contributions are highlighted.

First, by theorizing the evolving landscape of IHE in relation to social structures in the PRC and their linkages across borders, this research engages with the ongoing intellectual debate in which researchers have asked whether IHE is primarily a strategy by elites to reproduce their class advantage or an opportunity for non-elites to improve their current social status.

Second, by focusing on student perceptions during their studies, this research adds to the current literature, which primarily focuses on Chinese international graduates' career prospects after their studies. Knowledge about international student perceptions of IHE helps us to better understand their career-shaping processes before entering the job market. Contrasting the IHE experiences of students from elite and non-elite families revealed diverse yet competing trajectories within the evolving institutional landscape of the PRC. I argue that although IHE has become a new cultural site of competition between the Chinese elites and non-elites, IHE participation remains stratified.

Guanglong is currently a doctoral student in the Higher, Adult and Lifelong Education program at Michigan State University.