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Educating China on the move: A typology of contemporary Chinese higher educational mobilities

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Paper outline (1000 words)

With the quickening pace of economic development in China and the overall shift in political economy globally, China's approaches towards globalisation, as manifested in its many new forms of educational mobilities ([Chan & Koh, Forthcoming](#); [Tan, 2013](#)), can have far-reaching social and political impacts on China itself, on Asia and the rest of the world. The scale of educational mobilities in China has seen unprecedented growth. In 2016, China sent 544,500 students to pursue higher education (HE) abroad and attracted 440,000 international students to its own higher education institutions (HEIs) ([ScienceNet, 2017](#)). China has a target of attracting 500,000 international students and they are well on the way to that with 442,773 international students studying in China in 2016, an 11.4% rise on the previous year. Korea, Thailand and the US are all sending international students to study in China and perhaps some of these students would in the past have chosen the UK, Europe or the US. In addition, large numbers of scholars from China ventured abroad to conduct research and academic staff joined Chinese HEIs from overseas. In addition to this, the number of Confucius Institutes reached 500 as of April 2017 and China will have more than 20 international higher education branch campuses abroad by 2018 ([Brown, 2016](#)). These are in addition to the existing transnational higher education within China that has been developing since the 1990s.

At the same time, educational mobilities within China have been changing. One of the major forms of mobility in China relates to higher education where students move from one part of China to another to pursue higher education, and a significant proportion of these students are displaced from rural to urban, from economically less developed and ethnic minorities-dominated Western regions to the economic centres and Han-dominated areas in the East (Feng, 2016; Wu 2016). In general, in addition to the sheer scale of educational mobilities emanating from China, there have emerged in more complex and diversified patterns, including both older and newer forms, of educational mobilities which not only impact on China itself, but have significant implications for global higher education and also for international relations. Such implications may include transforming the landscape of

higher education in China, and challenging and potentially reversing the Western-domination of global higher education.

This paper focuses on constructing a typology of higher educational mobilities in relation to China, arguing that internal and external mobilities are intricately linked with one another and that it is important to understand the overall picture. As Tindal et al (2015) argue, due to the impact of globalisation, the national competition of higher education is increasingly part and parcel of the international. Students in China are now competing for resources not only with their compatriots, but also with those who are enrolled in branch campuses of Chinese HEIs abroad as well as international students studying in China. In addition to this, internal forms of educational mobilities are often catalysts of, pre-conditions or results of external educational mobilities. For instance, students moving from rural backgrounds to big cosmopolitan cities may gain the inspiration and means to venture further abroad (Hansen & Thøgersen, 2015a), or students from mainland China to Hong Kong/Macau/Taiwan may take these territories as a stepping stone to pursue higher education further afield (Xu, Forthcoming).

As internal educational mobilities in China have been considered one of the major mechanisms to exacerbate or equalise Chinese society (Yang, 2012; Fang, 2016), it is important to see global Chinese student mobilities in the context of what is happening within the country. Instead of viewing China as a homogenous entity with a uniform set of desires, ambitions and actions, this paper brings to the fore China's rich, vast and complex internal higher educational mobilities as 'a critical lens through which to examine large social changes' (Xiang & Shen, 2009, p. 514). It is suggested here that these are critical in facilitating a thorough understanding of the advantages and challenges that China is facing in global higher education and how this might impact on the rest of the world.

Scholars have commonly recognised the theoretical and empirical significance that mobility should be accorded, as reflected through advocates and following academics of the 'mobility turn' (Sheller and Urry, 2006). Thus, advocates have conceptualised physical mobility, or mobility in general, as a form of capital in the Bourdieusian sense that can be converted and transformed into other kinds of capital. As demonstrated in the review of the literature presented in this paper and the typology which follows, there is a substantial body of empirical work across disciplinary backgrounds and perspectives which demonstrates the utility of such a conceptual tool.

Overall, within-China education mobilities have been characterised by the more noticeable one-way flows of students from the West to the East, from rural to urban, from ethnic minority areas to Han-dominated areas of the country. Such flows, while often accompanied by upward social mobility of the mobile students, are also characterised by various forms of exclusion and alienation, as manifested

in their lack of symbolic capital in multiple settings (both in urban settings and in the rural settings for the returned migrant students to undertake College Entrance Examination). Educational mobilities are intricately related to and implicated in various forms of social inequalities. As Tesfahuney ([1998, p. 501 cited in Hannam et al., 2006, p. 2](#)) notes, '[d]ifferential mobility empowerments reflect structures and hierarchies of power and position by race, gender, age and class, ranging from the local to the global'. In the Chinese context, issues of rurality and ethnicity are arguably equally prominent and relevant. In this paper, the complex entanglements of power and structure as embodied in both the Chinese nation-state and the individuals as social agents are underlined. More specifically, the paper engages with Forsey's ([2017, p. 67](#)) call for 'documenting the different forms and types of [educational] mobility discourse' in China with a view to advancing 'understanding of how inequality is reinforced in a highly mobile modernity and might even suggest ways of ameliorating these effects'.