

212 Privileged mobilities? The complexities of class in Chinese women's international education projects

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Research Domains

Student Access and Experience (SAE)

Abstract

This paper draws on an ongoing longitudinal study that began in 2012 and charts the experiences of 50+ women who travelled from China to Australia to undertake tertiary education. In general terms, Chinese students in western nations come from middle-class backgrounds; indeed, international study has been posited as a defining characteristic of middle-class lives in urban China today. However, both the concept and reality of "the middle class" in contemporary China are distinct in notable ways from understandings based on Euro-American contexts. By presenting selected participant stories, this paper will illustrate the wide range of socio-economic backgrounds represented among Chinese women who study in Australia, and will draw out the multiple vectors of financial, academic, political and cultural capitals that intersect to position individual students in complex and heterogeneous ways within the broad category of China's transnationally mobile middle classes.

Full paper

This paper draws on an ongoing longitudinal study that charts the experiences of 50+ women who travelled from China to Australia for university (Martin 2022). Here, I will sketch out the broad background of participants' classed experience in historical context. In the version presented at the conference, I will also present two to three participants' stories to illustrate the complexity and heterogeneity of their classed experiences.

Following the death of Mao Zedong, from 1979 the Chinese Communist Party initiated a series of market reforms that, four decades later, have thoroughly transformed the structure of class in China, both by intensifying social stratification and by complicating its underlying logics. Whereas under high socialism, access to resources depended almost wholly on one's political and institutional relationship to the party-state, in the reforms era a hybrid of market and reconfigured state forces has enabled increasing numbers of professionals, managers, and entrepreneurs across private, collective, and state sectors to accumulate unprecedented levels of private wealth (Bian et al. 2005; Goodman and Zhang 2008; Li Zhang 2010; Goodman 2014). Today these groups may be characterized as constituting China's new middle classes.

The central place of academic achievement in China's middle-class imaginary is well established (F. Liu 2008). A number of factors have combined in recent decades to extend the geographic range of educational credential seeking among China's middle classes to a transnational scale, producing student outflows of unprecedented size and with them a new, education-based economy of Chinese transnationalism. The upsurge in privately funded Chinese young people traveling overseas for education has been fueled, on the most basic level, by rising wealth and the Chinese middle classes' belief that standards of tertiary education in Western nations and Japan are in general higher than those in most Chinese universities. "Study-abroad fever" is also fed by the middle classes' anxieties about the reproduction of their social status in light of an ever more marketized, inequitable, pyramid-shaped, and competitive secondary education system at home.

But the cultural capital students hope to attain is not only the direct result of educational credentials that would help them land desirable jobs. It also connects to transnational mobility and cosmopolitan habitus as themselves carriers of value. As in Johanna Waters's Hong Kong example, students and parents hoped that Western education would "inculcat[e] [students] into the mores of a cosmopolitan and hypermobile middle-class lifestyle" (Waters 2008, 10). In China today, Western education has become a commodity that indicatively expresses and consolidates middle-class social status (Xiang and Shen 2009).

The family backgrounds of the core participants in my study reflect this background. Most of the students' families belonged to the professional, entrepreneurial, and managerial middle classes. They mainly lived in larger cities on the wealthy eastern seaboard and in central and southwestern provinces, although about a quarter were from smaller, less developed cities in these areas. The parents worked in state or private enterprises as managers or in a range of professional roles, including as engineers, editors, designers, teachers, doctors, accountants, and media workers; many were also entrepreneurs running their own trading, manufacturing, or other small businesses. Some were government cadres; a smaller number—largely mothers—were nonprofessional employees.

But although all participants' families could be classified at the broadest level as belonging to China's middle classes, they demonstrated a spread from the lower to the upper segments of this diverse and fragmented class formation. At one extreme, one or two families subsisted on income from small-scale family businesses that involved parents in hands-on manufacturing and retail activities; at the other extreme, some parents were high-ranking cadres and wealthy professionals with significant investment holdings. The class history of participants' families was also diverse, including some parents with only basic levels of education who began life as smallholding farmers and struck it rich as entrepreneurs in the manufacturing and construction sectors during the 1980s and 1990s, alongside other parents who were born into far more privileged situations and held postgraduate qualifications.

In light of this background, the live version of this paper will present individual stories that illustrate the complexity and heterogeneity of the deceptively simple "middle-class" status of Chinese women students in western study destinations, and the ways in which financial, academic, political and cultural capitals intersect to produce the particularity of their classed experiences of education mobility.

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