

Navigating Resilience and Symbolic Violence: A Critical Examination of Chinese Students' Educational Trajectories in Transnational Higher Education amidst the Instrumentalization of Internationalization

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Research Domains

International contexts and perspectives (ICP)

Abstract

The internationalization of higher education seeks to enhance students' competencies in the globalized world, and universities in China have established their Transnational Higher Education (TNHE) programs as important initiatives. The predominant focus on integrating these competencies into professional settings often overlooks the 'symbolic violence' faced by TNHE students. Employing Pierre Bourdieu's concepts of field, habitus, and capital as analytical tools, the research explores the resilience process of Chinese students in the TNHE context. Data analysis was conducted on in-depth interviews with a total of 35 Chinese students enrolled in the TNHE program. This study reveals distinct dispositions among participants, including self-reliance, self-exploitation, self-retreat, and self-instrumentalization. These dispositions are shaped by the pervasive influence of symbolic violence that is exemplified by the educational system's implicit expectations regarding language proficiency and academic progression within the program structure. It further criticizes the internalization of neoliberal expectations and the instrumental nature of TNHE programs.

Full paper

Amid the burgeoning interest in China's TNHE programs, including articulation programs like '2+2', '3+1', or '1+2+1', these initiatives offer Chinese students' opportunities to pursue degrees abroad, fostering intercultural learning and knowledge acquisition. Existing research has explored the adjustment and acculturation of international students, emphasizing how they overcome challenges in the intercultural space, fostering cross-system learning and resilience development. However, the overemphasis on individual adaptation can unintentionally lead to self-exploitation, where students become instrumental in the internationalization agenda (Mu 2021; Xing, Mu, and Henderson 2022). A psychological approach to adaptive resilience may inadvertently reinforce constraining social structures and inequalities by 'coercing' TNHE students to fully adapt to the new systems. As such, it is important to re-examine the resilience process of TNHE students while acknowledging the systemic roots of social inequalities that are

both created and perpetuated. As Bourdieu's theoretical framework is valuable in illuminating underlying structural or systemic factors, which provides a new lens for us to recognize the "embeddedness of resilience in social inequities, social processes, and the differentiated societal and ideological expectations of young people" (Bottrell 2013, 321). This study investigates the research question: How do Chinese students in TNHE programs navigate the complex interplay of cultural, structural, and educational factors to engage in the resilience process within the globalized higher education landscape?

This study explored the resilience process of students enrolled in Sino-American '1+2+1' articulation programs. In this model, students complete their first-year studies at a Chinese university, then transition to a partner university in America to continue their second- and third-year studies, and ultimately return to their Chinese institution to complete their final year, earning degrees from both countries upon program completion. Employing qualitative research and semi-structured interviews, this study recruited 35 participants who had joined Sino-American articulation programs.

Findings from interviews demonstrated that Chinese international students' experiences in foreign university settings are profoundly influenced by the habitus developed during their education in China, notably emphasizing the pursuit of a high GPA (Grade Point Average) and timely graduation. The data delineate students have developed intensified dispositions of self-reliance, self-exploitation, self-retreat, and self-instrumentalization to build resilience in response to the structural constraints in TNHE. These constraints, primarily attributed to classification by linguistic capital, an overemphasis on timely graduation, and the pursuit of high GPAs, constitute symbolic violence in the students' resilience-building process. This pursuit is intensified by an 'invisible power', manifesting as a stress-induced response to the deeply internalized and institutional pressures for academic excellence in the global HE field. This pressure, exerted under structural constraints, exemplifies the pervasive mechanisms of symbolic violence and structural power that are integral to the process of resilience building in the TNHE setting.

The findings reveal that participants' resilience process in TNHE is not merely individual responses but is deeply influenced by the broader sociocultural and institutional contexts in which they are situated. Furthermore, we contend that these structural constraints intrinsic to the TNHE setting contribute to an instrumentalist orientation. However, the design of TNHE program, initially conceptualized to promote internationalism through a partnership that represents a collaboration between two distinct fields of practice. As a point of fact, the field of TNHE is not a product of total consensus but the result of continuous conflict. This study reveals how symbolic violence, exemplified in the practices and norms at two distinct universities,

interacts with the broader TNHE field to shape student experiences. We argue that resilient students themselves become emblematic of the symbolic violence within the TNHE field. Therefore, the implications of this study are twofold. First, Bourdieu's framework underscores the necessity of addressing the structural roots of social inequalities when fostering resilience, providing insights into potential avenues for transforming these structural inequities within TNHE. Second, by acknowledging the embedded social and structural challenges, stakeholders involved in TNHE programs can create more responsive and supportive educational environments that truly reflect the principles of internationalism and equity.

We shall argue that TNHE setting itself has the symbolic force, which is assumed as the legitimate mode of reproduction of the foundation of domination in the field of power. It is then (mis)recognized in the TNHE field and often taken for granted by its agents. This study argues that students have internalized neoliberal and instrumental expectations regarding the burden of endless self-development in the TNHE setting, including continuous improvement of academic performance to gain cultural capital. Chinese HE institutions may have lost their intrinsic purpose and TNHE programs are used as a new instrument to emphasize individual responsibility for coping, competence, and success.

References

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