

Mobility, Social Capital, and Class Identity: Transnational Practices of Chinese Master's Students across China and the UK

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Research Domains

International contexts and perspectives (ICP)

Abstract

This study explores how Chinese master's students at a metropolitan university in the north of England understand and negotiate their class identities through international mobility between China and the UK. Drawing on Bourdieu's key concepts (capital, habitus, and field), this study, based on the first round of data from a longitudinal qualitative study, discusses students' educational strategies, shifts in class cognition, and the dynamics of social capital in a cross-cultural context. The findings highlight the internal diversity of Chinese international students and how their family backgrounds, disciplines, and institutional pathways shape mobility experiences. Participants described constraints and class sensitivity, particularly in dealing with unfamiliar norms and the loss of domestic privileges, while also demonstrating agentic adaptation and reflective self-consistency, such as strategic peer selection, re-evaluation of class status, and timely plan adjustments. This study challenges deficit narratives and calls for more nuanced, empathetic, and class-conscious approaches to supporting international students.

Full paper

International student mobility is often viewed as a symbol of global opportunities and social mobility (Findlay et al., 2012; Waters and Brooks, 2021). However, previous research has largely overlooked the internal heterogeneity of this group, as well as the unequal structures, social dynamics, and complex class negotiations they experience during and after their overseas studies (Weis and Dolby, 2012). In particular, China's rapid socio-economic transformation, intensified competition in education and employment, and the large-scale return of international graduates have given rise to complex expectations surrounding class mobility and return migration (Guo and Miao, 2024). Therefore, there is an urgent need to understand the interplay between international student mobility, class identity, and capital. Drawing on Bourdieu's concepts of capital, habitus, and field (Bourdieu, 1984, 1986; Bourdieu and Wacquant, 2007), this study aims to explore how

Chinese students pursuing master's degrees in the UK understand and negotiate their class identities throughout their educational journey.

This study presents the first round of findings from a longitudinal qualitative study that collected data from 30 Chinese students enrolled in a one-year master's programme at a metropolitan university in northern England through semi-structured interviews. The study explores participants' family backgrounds, educational trajectories, motivations for studying abroad, and early experiences in the UK. The sample includes students from education and business disciplines, providing a foundation for comparative analysis across disciplinary boundaries. Data were analysed using reflective thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2006, 2019), which reveals how participants interpret and navigate the challenges of class identity and social capital in a transnational field.

At SRHE, the following findings will be mainly presented.

1. Diverse backgrounds and "Tizhi nei" Aspirations

Participants came from a wide range of backgrounds, from children of civil servants and teachers to offspring of private entrepreneurs. These backgrounds not only influence their economic resources but also shape their expectations and strategies regarding education (including overseas study). For example, participants from Tizhinei "in-system" (state-owned or public sector) families often emphasise academic qualifications and stability, while those from entrepreneurial families view international education more as an investment to enhance market competitiveness. Despite these differences, many participants from both groups expressed a strong desire to return to China after graduation and enter the system. Employment within the system is seen as stable, respectable, and a means of re-establishing or consolidating class status through familiar institutional structures.

2. Social Capital Across Contexts

Participants widely reported a structural dislocation of social capital upon arrival in the UK. Guanxi—a form of culturally embedded social capital rooted in familial and regional networks (Feng and Patulny, 2023)—was often seen as non-transferable. While some students made efforts to establish new connections, many described overseas networks as short-term, surface-level, or driven by utilitarian goals (e.g., exchanging job information or coursework help). Pre-arrival connections formed via social media (e.g., Xiaohongshu) facilitated rapid peer group formation but also reproduced social exclusivity.

3. Shifting Class Consciousness and Reflection

Several participants described themselves as "middle class at home, marginal abroad", expressing acute awareness of their loss of privilege in unfamiliar cultural and institutional environments. However, this sense of symbolic decline often gave rise to greater class consciousness and strategic awareness. Students actively compared education systems, employment structures, and the cultural codes of class in both countries, rethinking their

career aspirations and social affiliations. For some, the experience deepened their understanding of structural inequality and global hierarchies.

The research challenges the assumptions or elitist narratives that would be made about the flaws of international students in China (Ma, 2020); instead, they present images of reflective, class-conscious and dynamic subjects. The study suggests that students navigate with uneven resources through complex environments shaped by a combination of structural constraints and transnational opportunities, are acutely aware of the changes in the way capital (especially social capital) and class operate in different cultural and institutional environments (Dai, 2020), and adapt to them with varying degrees of success. The study emphasises that international education is not only a credentialing process but also a formative experience of class negotiation and that mobility is not merely a form of capital accumulation but also a field of identity reconstruction and social struggle. Class identity and social capital are not static traits but are continually reshaped by the forces of education, migration, and belonging (Garrison et al., 2023). Recognising this complexity is essential for building more equitable and empathetic global learning environments. It calls for higher education institutions and policymakers to adopt more compassionate and contextually grounded approaches to supporting diverse student trajectories.