

# EDUCATIONAL PATHFINDERS? A STUDY OF INTERNATIONAL STUDENT MOBILITY IN CHINA



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To Mr. Choongkyung Choi and Ms. Kay Song, who made my DPhil journey possible to begin. They asked for nothing in return but “just pay it forward someday”.

[The train] is something through which one goes, it is also something by means of which one can go from one point to another, and then it is something that goes by (Foucault, 1986:24).

# DECLARATION

This dissertation is the result of my own work and includes nothing which is the outcome of work done in collaboration except where specifically indicated in the text. It has not been previously submitted, in part or whole, to any university or institution for any degree, diploma, or other qualification.

In accordance with the School of Geography and the Environment guidelines, this thesis does not exceed the prescribed word limit of 80,000 words.



Signed:

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# ABSTRACT

To date, a significant body of qualitative scholarship on international student mobility has centred around migration flows to ‘Western’ destinations, particularly to Anglophone and/or European nations. On the contrary, educational migration *from* these established destination regions *to* newly emerging study abroad destinations is a relatively recent phenomenon and, consequently, remains eminently under-researched. To fill this gap in our knowledge, I discuss the findings of a qualitative study into European and North American students undertaking an English-taught undergraduate degree in China. Using literature from human geography, sociology, education, migration studies and tourism studies, this thesis explores the ways in which ‘Western’ transnational students engage with, and make meaning of, cross-border mobility, transnational higher education, and cosmopolitanism in neoliberal times.

Drawing on a thematic analysis of in-depth interviews and social media content, I seek to understand the narratives that international students from Anglophone and European countries create and share during their study abroad experiences in China. The findings of this empirical research reveal that transnational students’ desires for mobility constitute variegated combinations of economic and non-economic (i.e., personal, emotional, and intangible) considerations. Regardless of how students’ motivations vary, in reflecting on their experiences of a ‘less-taken’ path, transnational students predominantly drew on neoliberal discourse of cosmopolitanism as an imperative part of the ongoing construction of the self as well as a narrative strategy to set themselves apart from others. In particular, visual and textual narratives on social media created by transnational students call for the need to conceptualise them as actively producing, performing, and curating cosmopolitan sensibilities while actively consuming the imagined and experienced differences of the host society. This study concludes by asserting the value of studying the emerging mobility of transnational students from the ‘West’ and its contribution to a wider project of understanding and intervening in international education’s social, economic, and cultural role in the modern world.

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# LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS AND ACRONYMS

BRI Belt and Road Initiative

ESL English as a Second Language

EU/EEA European Union/European Economic Area

ETP English Taught Programme

HDI Human Development Index

IBC International Branch Campus

IHE International Higher Education

ISM International Student Mobility

MBA Master of Business Administration

OBOR One Belt, One Road

OECD Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development

STEM Science, Technology, Engineering, and Math

TNE Transnational Education

UNDP United Nations Development Programme

VPN Virtual Private Network

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# 1 INTRODUCTION

This qualitative study investigates the motivations and experiences of international students from European and Anglophone countries to China. Through in-depth semi-structured interviews, field notes, and a thematic analysis of social media postings, I seek to understand transnational students' narratives, which portend their motivations and experience of migrating from traditionally preferred study abroad destination countries to an unorthodox, newly emerging study abroad destination.

In particular, I explore the ways in which privilege and precarity shape young people's motivations to study abroad as well as their experiences in China, highlighting the multi-faceted and, at times, ostensibly irrational and emotional aspects of motives and aspirations of educational mobility. Next, I examine how international students differentiate themselves from various 'Others' through the process of study abroad: other types of international students and travellers based on the perceived level of 'seriousness', as well as immobile Others in both home and host countries. To this end, I investigate how internationally mobile students take up and embrace the identity (and particular labels) of 'cosmopolitan' within their personal narratives about academic and life trajectories; and on what bases they have encountered (in their eyes) the *real* China. Finally, I explore the textual and visual rhetoric on social media

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made available by transnational students and international branch campuses for public consumption to explore the ways in which study participants and international branch campuses communicate their experiences in China to a mass audience.

Overall, I argue that transnational students from Anglophone and European countries engage in spatial mobility with some distinctive motivations from mainstream students emanating from the outside of the ‘West’. However, they do so in a manner that involves social and cultural reproduction, including class-based, cosmopolitan sensibilities and feelings, that is mediated through everyday practices across online and offline spaces. In the process, these mobile young people produce vibrant forms of subjectivities and politics that pose a challenge to prevalent assumptions of ‘international students’ as a homogenous group.

### Statement of Problem

Economic, political, and societal forces have pushed higher education toward aggressive international engagement (Altbach & Knight, 2007; Buckner, 2020). While the effects of internationalisation of higher education are observed across a wide range of activities, international student mobility has been the focus of attention from researchers and policymakers. Indeed, international students make up a considerable mobile population globally today, as well as a significant proportion of the total tertiary-level students in some countries, such as New Zealand and Luxembourg (OECD, 2020).

The number of students who are studying outside of their country of origin has been more than doubled in the last two decades, from 2.1 million in 2001 to 5.3 million in 2019 (Institute of International Education [IIE], 2019). With such exponential expansion of internationalisation, the global human geography of international student mobility underwent a sharp polarisation, clustering into ‘sending countries’ and ‘receiving countries’. A significant portion of internationally mobile students chooses to study in the ‘West’—especially Anglophone and European countries. According to the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) (2020), four English-speaking countries (i.e., USA, UK, Australia, and Canada) and two western European countries (i.e., France and Germany) have hosted roughly half of international students for the past decades. Correspondingly, Asia, particularly China and India, has been the primary source of international students in the past decades. In 2017, students from Asia represented 57 per cent of international students enrolled in higher education across OECD countries.

Perhaps reflecting such geographical polarisation between ‘sending’ and ‘receiving’ countries in the past decades, existing scholarship on international student mobility is predominantly concerned with educational migration to the ‘West’, particularly elite education in English-speaking countries (Kondakci, Bedenlier, & Zawacki-Richter, 2018; Lipura & Collins, 2020; Yang, 2018). On the contrary, despite evidence of growing diversity and complexity in mobility patterns, international student flows to newly emerging study abroad destinations are unequally represented in the current literature on international student mobility (Lipura & Collins, 2020; Sidhu, Chong, & Yeoh, 2019; Yang, 2018). As a consequence of such marked imbalance in the literature on international student mobility, Asian countries are largely defined as a *source* of international students rather than a *destination* for such students (Lee, 2017).

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Among several emergent study abroad destinations, the fragmentation of scholarship on China must be noted. Over the last decade, China has gained popularity as one of the world's leading *destinations* for international students (Skinner, 2019; Yang, 2020). In 2011, China surpassed France and became the third-ranked host country after only the US and the UK. Since then, China has been speedily closing the gap with the UK, from a difference of 160,050 tertiary-level international students in 2013 to just 4,385 in 2019 (Institute of International Education [IIE], 2019). Furthermore, China holds a unique place in international higher education because it is the only non-English-speaking and non-Western country among the top student receiving countries. In other words, perhaps it represents a dramatic shift in international student mobility for the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

Another void in the extant literature concerns international students from the 'West' seeking educational opportunities in 'non-Western' contexts. Such a gap results in the taken-for-granted generalisation that international students are a homogeneous entity who share similar motivations and experiences of educational border crossings (Haugh, 2008; Koehne, 2005; Matthews & Sidhu, 2005). However, although outbound transnational student flows from the West to non-traditional destinations have not yet reached a critical mass, the number of individuals from the West who choose to study abroad outside the Western world—which is commonly considered familiar and safe—is steadily growing (Prazeres, 2017). Therefore, this thesis calls for more attention to the voices and the complexity of degree-seeking international student mobility in *the other direction*.

In sum, with an ever-diversifying and complex landscape of international higher education, I argue that this topic is ripe for scrutiny. Understanding a mobility pattern that is inadequately

represented in the international student mobility literature will help illuminate the relative geographical value of international education, its links with the ways in which transnational students understand themselves within the global context, as well as the global context itself.

## Research Aims and Questions

The central purpose of this study is critically to examine how transnational students from European and Anglophone countries make meaning of their motivations and experiences of studying in China. The analytic focus is on degree-seeking students from Anglophone and European countries studying for their entire undergraduate degree at a Sino-American international branch campus in China. Drawing on qualitative data collected with these students, I seek to answer the following research questions:

1. What are the motivating factors and considerations that inform the decision to study for a degree programme in China? What factors enable transnational students from European and Anglophone countries to *eschew* Western education for education in an unorthodox destination?
2. How do transnational students make sense of and represent their experiences, both in the online (i.e., social media) and offline (i.e., interviews) social spheres?
3. What are the perceived roles of international branch campuses in legitimating and/or enabling such motivations and experiences?

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Through close engagement with the narratives of 33 transnational students from Western nations to China, I seek to arrive at a conceptual understanding of the ways in which globally mobile young people navigate new pathways through the landscape of international higher education, position themselves, and negotiate their identities within it. To this end, this study looks beyond well-documented educational migration routes—from the ‘non-West’ to the ‘West’ and the Global South to Global North, thereby challenging the taken-for-granted representation of international students as well as study abroad destinations.

### Overview of Thesis

This thesis is organised into eight chapters, including this introductory chapter. In Chapter Two, I carefully review selected literature to address key debates and gaps in the existing scholarship on international higher education and international student mobility. Chapter Three provides an account of theoretical influences of my research, followed by the research design and methodology in Chapter Four.

The next three chapters (Chapters Five to Seven) present three empirical papers that form the substantive core of the research and have been submitted to peer-reviewed journals for publication. It is through the specific lens of each of these papers (chapters) that the thesis addresses the research objectives and elaborates on the different facets of international student mobility from the ‘West’ to China. As a result, these papers were designed not only to complement one another in the framework of this book-length thesis, but also suffice as stand-alone papers that can reach broader audiences and researchers across fields of human geography, education, and sociology. This consequently led to some inevitable repetition in

presenting the research context, literature, and research methods in each paper. Despite this minor drawback, this integrated thesis format<sup>1</sup> offers the advantage of exploring the areas of inquiry through three distinct angles that ultimately reflected the methodologically inductive nature of forging original, exploratory research into a coherent and comprehensive whole.

The first paper, *In Pursuit of More Than Just Achievements: Exploring Transnational Students' Motivations to Study Abroad in China*, is under review at *Global Networks*. It critiques the tendency to reify international student mobility as the strategic pursuit of cultural capital, highlighting how personal, emotional, and intangible considerations *also* come into play in individuals' intentions to study abroad. Through the conceptual lens of desire, the paper opens up an analytical space for understanding the ways in which personal and structural, emotional, and rational aspects of motivations for mobility continuously renegotiated to create new configurations of educational migration.

The second paper, *Becoming a Bona Fide Cosmopolitan: Unpacking the Narratives of Western-situated Degree-seeking Transnational Students in China*, was published in *Social*

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<sup>1</sup> The following is institutional guidelines for integrated theses: "In the past an Oxford DPhil thesis has been submitted in monograph format, as a series of chapters presented in the style of a book. It is increasingly common, however, for theses to include published papers, or papers written intended for future publication, within the main body of the text; this type of work is known as an 'integrated thesis'. An integrated thesis may either be a hybrid of conventional chapters and papers, or be fully article-based. Regardless of the format, the content of the thesis should reflect the amount, originality and level of work expected for a conventional thesis... To ensure the format of the thesis constitutes a thematically coherent whole, an integrated thesis must include an introduction, a literature survey, and a conclusion. There should also be clarity about how the chapters are integrated as a complete text" (Education Policy Support, n.d.).

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*and Cultural Geography* in September 2020 (see Lee, 2020b) This paper examines how Western transnational students draw on cosmopolitan attributes to legitimise their unconventional educational choices and experiences, including the unorthodoxy of their study abroad destination, and their perceived engagement with the *real* China. It also illustrates how transnational students highlight ‘differences’ of their experiences, which enables them to stand out against various *Others*: other types of international students, as well as immobile Others in both home and host countries.

The third paper, “*I Post, therefore I Become #cosmopolitan*”: *The Materiality of Online-Presentations of Study Abroad in China*, was published in *Population, Space, and Place* in January 2020 (see Lee, 2020a). In this paper, I turn my attention to the online social space and explore the textual, pictorial, and cinematic artefacts of transnational mobility and education that were shared by international branch campuses and participating students. In exploring under-explored online social space through the lens of materiality and dramaturgy, the paper highlights the potential avenues to build nuanced understandings of international student mobility.

Finally, Chapter Eight concludes my research by answering the overall research questions and outlining key contributions, limitations, and possible future directions.

## A Note on Terminology

Before proceeding, a brief discussion of the terminology used in this thesis is necessary. First, I made the informed decision to use certain binary terms, including the ‘West’ and ‘non-West’ and the ‘Global North’ and ‘Global South’. These terms imply problematic representations, which suggest an underlying hierarchy of geopolitical, economic, and cultural primacy and superiority. While I recognise this, I employed a “strategic use of positivist essentialism in a scrupulously visible political interest” (Fuss, 1994, p.99), because they are well-known points of reference.

Secondly, throughout the thesis, I deliberately employ the terms ‘*transnational* students’ and ‘*international* students’ interchangeably. These terms may overlap, but each represents a distinct perspective on spatial mobility. ‘International student’ refers to students crossing borders between different nation-states for the specific purpose of education. ‘Transnational student’ refers to students partaking in social, cultural, and economic networks that traverse national borders, and belonging to multiple spaces (e.g., home and host countries) that shape their multiple identities. Collins (2009) argues that the recognition of mobile students’ transnationality has shifted the analytic focus from distinct geographical entities of ‘sending’ or ‘receiving’ countries to the transnational nature of mobile students and their experiences.<sup>2</sup> While I acknowledge the difference between the two terms, I employed these terms interchangeably because I view that international students and their experiences are, albeit to a

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<sup>2</sup> I do not intend to discuss the vast literature which defines ‘transnationalism’ or ‘transnational migration’ here; key works which summarise the debates include Collins, 2009; Fouron and Glick Schiller, 2001; Ong, 1999.

different extent, inherently transnational in light of wider globalising processes (Waters & Brooks, 2012).<sup>3</sup>

## A Note on COVID-19 Pandemic

During the writing up of this thesis, the landscape of international student mobility has been significantly changed by the outbreak of COVID-19. The COVID-19 pandemic has curtailed international mobility across the world, thus dissuading new and returning international students from pursuing education overseas. At the time of writing this thesis, it is still difficult to predict the full scale and the nature of the lasting impact of COVID-19 on international student mobility that will play out over the longer term. In light of these ongoing developments around COVID-19, it is important to note that predicting the remaining challenges caused by COVID-19 is certainly beyond the scope of this thesis; thus, COVID-19 and its impact are deliberately *not* incorporated into this thesis. The findings presented in this thesis are representative of the pre-COVID-19 world, and I did not see much value in retrospectively weaving COVID-19 into this thesis and distracting from the research's intended contributions to knowledge on international student mobility.

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<sup>3</sup> I am also aware that 'transnational student' is often used differently with respect to Transnational Education (TNE) (see Waters and Leung, forthcoming). While I recognise this, I do not think such a use will cause confusion and limit the reader's understanding of this study.

## References

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## 2 SITUATING INTERNATIONAL STUDENT MOBILITY TO CHINA

This chapter synthesises the current literature on the geographies of international student mobility, drawing on scholarship across human geography, sociology, education, and migration studies. I begin by analysing work on the rationales for enabling international student mobility from the perspectives of the state, higher education institutions, and individual students. The second section introduces a prevalent interpretation of the landscape of international student mobility. It also elucidates the recent emergence of international student mobility in China by identifying wider themes and trends pertaining to why students move and the consequences of this. Subsequently, the chapter concludes by addressing the gaps in the literature and how the gaps inform this study.

### Contextualising International Student Mobility

In the context of internationalisation marked by increasing competition among a variety of player in the global marketplace, scholars typically acknowledge that countries, institutions,

and individuals as key stakeholders seek to capitalise—economically and/or symbolically—on international mobility through education (Lipura & Collins, 2020). A wide variety of actions from different actors have consequences for the domain of international student mobility in a global context. Given the complex interactions between actors, international student mobility is not a single entity, and understanding of such mobility encompasses a range of divergent perspectives, frameworks, theoretical stances and methodologies (King, 2002).

To elucidate these complexities, in the subsequent sections, I trace the development of international higher education and international student mobility and examine the ways in which these developments have implications for a variety of actors—including countries, higher education institutions, and transnational students—in the global knowledge economy. An analysis of how multiple actors, both at the institutional and national levels, stand to gain from the attraction of international students is necessary because students' motivations to move across international borders are shaped by the scope of action carried out by these key stakeholders in student mobility. Therefore, in the following sections, I evaluate the perceived benefits from the perspectives of the nation-states and higher education institutions before discussing the transnational students' perspective.

### Nation-state Perspectives: Global Competition for International Students

The number of students who are studying outside of his or her country of citizenship has more than doubled, from 2.1 million in 2001 to 5.3 million in 2019 (Institute of International Education [IIE], 2019). With this exponential growth, international student mobility has become a hallmark of the global age, making up a significant component of knowledge

migration (Altbach, Reisberg, & Rumbley, 2019; Raghuram, 2013). International student mobility has significant implications for nation-states and its higher education systems and institutions, as they are:

sources of income, potential labor force, contributors to local economy as consumers, ambassadors for the recipient country, contributors to the recipient country's innovation capacity, contributors to the improvement of educational and research experiences of local students, and staff which increasingly relates to global university rankings (Chankseliani, 2018, p.54).

As such, nation-states have created a variety of policies to attract and retain inbound international students to serve the various needs of the state (Chankseliani, 2018; Geddie, 2015; Ziguras & Law, 2006).

While there exist different national contexts, there are three prevailing rationales for nation-states to enhance inbound international student flows. First, attracting internationally mobile students is a way to tap into the global talent pool of “flexible, resilient, reflective and self-incentivising worker[s]” (Blackmore & Rahimi, 2019, p.438) for the 21<sup>st</sup> century knowledge economy. In this context, for many countries, higher education is a key component of national strategies to attract highly skilled human capital (O'Connor, 2018) and to solicit desirable migrants (King & Raghuram, 2013). International students are viewed as a readily available source of highly skilled workers who have been adequately adjusted to the host society because of their language proficiency and educational credentials in the host country (Kim & Sondhi, 2015; Riaño, Van Mol, & Raghuram, 2018). Moreover, international students tend to be young and at the beginning of their working lives, which are beneficial for the host countries to sustain

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the working population (De Haas, 2010). In the context of fierce global competition for talent, the differentiated geographies of international higher education contribute to the uneven distribution of talent across the world, thereby perpetuating what is called ‘brain drain’ in the Global South (Brücker, Docquier, & Rapoport, 2012; Oosterbeek & Webbink, 2011; Robertson, 2006).

Second, international students contribute significantly to easing the financial burden for the public funding of universities. As Altbach et al. (2019) point out, although higher education has historically enjoyed public subsidy, the massification and neoliberal development of higher education in the last decades has led to increased financial pressure on the higher education sector across the globe. In this context, the higher tuition fees that international students pay provide a significant source of funding and keep down the cost of state funding (Brunner, 2017; Findlay, 2011; Riaño et al., 2018). For example, in the UK, between 2014 and 2015, on- and off-campus spending of international students and their visitors are estimated at £25.8 billion, creating £1 billion tax revenue and 206,600 jobs (Riaño et al., 2018; Universities UK, 2017). Another study revealed that income from tuition paid by non-UK, non-EEA students alone accounted for £4.2 billion during the same period (Findlay & Prazeres, 2017). Similarly, many studies reveal that some countries, most notably English speaking major receiving countries, strategically view international students as a source of income for the academic system (Altbach et al., 2019; Cantwell, 2019; Lomer, 2017a) and even a key to economic recovery of the nation (O’Connor, 2018).

Finally, Joseph Nye’s (1990, 2005) influential work on the notion of ‘soft power’ discusses higher education as form of ‘knowledge diplomacy’ by producing significant soft power for the country. Nye (2005) defined soft power as “the ability to get what you want through

attraction rather than through coercion or payment” that “arises from the attractiveness of a country’s culture, political ideals, and foreign and domestic policies” (p.11). Higher education is a powerful instrument for enhancing soft power and expanding its spheres of influences in world affairs because it helps cultivating a better understanding and shaping a positive attitude towards the host society and culture (Altbach & Peterson, 2008; Bislev, 2017; Lomer, 2017b; Riaño et al., 2018). Here, international students are important agents for increasing the host country’s soft power because—regardless of whether they stay or return—their experience of studying abroad has a continuing perspective on academic as well as non-academic norms and values of the host country. In turn, achieving greater international competitiveness and engagement through soft power is important for the attraction and retention of international students as well as public diplomacy.

### Institutional Perspectives: Commodified Internationalisation, Differentiation, and Student Recruitment

Today, higher education institutions are to an increasing extent defined by internationalisation, and international student mobility is arguably the most important aspect of internationalisation of higher education (Knight, 2012). While universities’ activities are fundamentally international, it is impossible for them to opt out of the national context within which they find themselves (Marginson, 2016). Put differently, in spite of the increasingly powerful globalising force, higher education essentially functions within a national context and serves local, regional, and national interests (Altbach, Reisberg, & Rumbley, 2009). In this sense, higher education institutions occupy a liminal position between the national and international contexts, and “the

local realities of wealth, language, academic development, and other factors all affect the extent to which institutions are motivated and able to internationalize” (Altbach, 2009, p.7).

As such, higher education institutions and nations that house them share a desire to internationalise; particularly, the economic motivation as described in the previous section. The financial pressures resulting from the massification of higher education as a global phenomenon, combined with the neoliberal narrative of higher education as a ‘private good’, have driven the dramatic rise of marketisation of higher education (Altbach et al., 2009; Findlay, McCollum, & Packwood, 2017). Within this heavily marketised discourse, international students serve as sources of income for higher education institutions and sector (Brooks & Waters, 2011; Chankseliani, 2018; Choudaha, 2017; Riaño et al., 2018). Such marketisation of higher education is more prominent—but not exclusive—among Anglophone ‘destination’ countries (Geddie, 2015), and correspondingly, has been studied by many authors (Beech, 2018; Findlay et al., 2017; Furedi, 2010).

In the marketised higher education systems where international study opportunities have increasingly become commodified, both universities and nations engage in a range of differentiation strategies at various scales in the provision of higher education to protect and increase their market share in the globally uneven marketplace (Findlay et al., 2017). As described in the previous section, nation-states invest heavily in expanding their soft power and ensuring that their ‘brands’ are sufficiently *international*. Such brands serve to legitimise study destinations, thereby increasing the flows of international students. Likewise, marketing, recruiting, and branding have been widely perceived as institutional practices in which ‘prestige’ and ‘excellence’ are flaunted to attract prospective students and parents (Findlay et

al., 2017). For instance, in Brooks and Waters' (2015) study of British schools, the authors found that international offerings were foregrounded on the homepages, Twitter feeds, prospectuses, and newsletters of studied institutions, suggesting that "mobility is deemed to be an important attribute of the middle-class subject, and often constitutes a key component of how elite schools present themselves to others" (p. 224).

Such rationale of privileging highly internationalised higher education institutions is further reinforced by the international rankings published by various media because performance indicators often include the international outlook of institutions (Seeber, Cattaneo, Huisman, & Paleari, 2016). While the quality of a university could be judged by highly subjective standards, such rankings have emerged as an important signifier of worldwide university quality (Jöns & Hoyler, 2013) because they "provide a cue to students—who are increasingly seen/behaving as clients, consumers and customers—regarding the potential monetary and 'private benefit' of university attainment and the occupational/salary premium they are expected to acquire" (Hazelkorn, 2008, p.194).

Furthermore, enrolling large numbers of international students also convey symbolic advantages that render universities more competitive in the global higher education market because "one would expect the best resourced universities to have the greatest capacity to recruit internationally and to project their brand to the highest paying educational markets" (Findlay et al., 2017, p.4). In this light, Ziguras and Law (2006) argue the presence of a large number of international students brings a marketing advantage for the host universities that leads to the recruitment of more international students. Furthermore, alumni and the current body of international students form a positive feedback loop that attracts prospective applicants

(see Beech, 2015; Lee, 2020). Therefore, international student recruitment, in and of itself, is evidence of ‘prestige’ and ‘excellence’ that is attached to the international education experience that is offered by the host university.

I have so far highlighted the perceived benefits of attracting international students from the perspectives of the nation-states and higher education institutions. Based on these various benefits, scholars have argued that international students have constantly been solicited for the competitive advantages they offer in the global knowledge economy (King & Raghuram, 2013; Riaño et al., 2018). In what follows, I critically review scholarship that has sought to address the benefits of studying abroad that are accrued by international students themselves.

### Transnational Students’ Perspectives: Capitalising on Mobility

International student mobility is increasingly recognised as a key differentiating experience for young people (Prazeres, 2019). Consequently, an increasing number of prospective students who are looking to differentiate themselves from their peers are contributing to a growing normalisation of transnational mobility (Collins, Sidhu, Lewis, & Yeoh, 2014). In this section, drawing on Bourdieu’s (1984) theoretical ideas in his classic text *Distinction: a social critique of the judgement of taste*, I describe participation in educational mobility as an attempt to accumulate various forms of capital, in that education mobility is a crucial mechanism for differentiating oneself from others. While this conceptualisation is not exhaustive of international student mobility, highlighting the notion of cultural capital helps to contextualise why pursuing higher education overseas has become a prominent practice among young people. In the following, I nominate two domains of capital as having particular salience to this study.

*Cultural Capital and Differentiation*

A survey conducted by World Education Services (WES) in 2016 with over 4,600 current and former international students in the US identifies the four major differentiating factors that drive international mobility of students (Roy, Lu, & Loo, 2016):

- A belief that they will have access to a better quality of higher education
- A desire to improve foreign language skills, particularly English
- A belief that study overseas will lead to better job opportunities
- An interest in permanent or long-term migration after graduation

All of the factors above not only chime with existing scholarly works on the drivers of international student mobility, but more importantly, they illustrate that international education and mobility are closely associated with acquiring globally transferable credentials and skills that affect one's long-term social, cultural, and financial prospects (Brown, Power, Tholen, & Allouch, 2016; Holloway, O'Hara, & Pimlott-Wilson, 2012; Kim, 2011; Lee, 2019; Sin, 2013; Waters, 2006, 2008). With this assumption that having international exposure and credentials may help international students' post-graduate trajectories—particularly employment and subsequent mobility—such practices of international mobility have been widely adopted by global middle-class families and guided their school choices to differentiate themselves in the global higher education and labour market (Ball & Nikita, 2014).

Correspondingly, a sizable body of work has drawn on concepts pertaining to the strategic accumulation and conversion of various forms of 'capital' (Bourdieu, 1986) to understand both cause and effect of educational migration, predominantly exercised by a burgeoning and mobile

middle class who operate on a global scale (Ball & Nikita, 2014; Findlay, King, Smith, Geddes, & Skeldon, 2012; Waters, 2008). Among others, Waters (2006, 2012) has made an important contribution to this line of argument that: international student mobility is associated with the pursuit of social and cultural capital, which may be readily transferable to economic capital at home and in the international labour market (Beech, 2018).

In her study on transnational students and graduates from Hong Kong to Canada, Waters (2006) convincingly argues that as the landscape of educational opportunities expands, the children of middle-class families increasingly engage in the accumulation of valuable cultural and social capital through spatial mobility. Equipped with overseas qualifications—such as English, ‘Western’ degrees, and cosmopolitan traits—and social networks through mobility, the author found that the majority of participants had secured sought-after careers upon or even prior to their return, thereby facilitating the reproduction of social class across generations. Similarly, several studies advocate international exposure through education for having a positive impact on subsequent employment (Bryła, 2015; Farrugia & Sanger, 2017) and highlight various forms of capital in association with international education that are revered within a labour market: English proficiency (Baláž & Williams, 2004; Blackmore, Gribble, & Rahimi, 2017; Lee, 2019), prestigious Western degrees (Kim, 2011; Ong, 1999).

While Waters’ (2006) study focuses on middle-class students and their spatial strategies, Fong’s (2011) excellent longitudinal ethnographic study, *Paradise Redefined: Transnational Chinese Students and the Quest of Flexible Citizenship*, includes the majority of participants who are academically and socio-economically average or even disadvantaged—certainly not middle-class by global standards. According to the author, these seemingly unlikely cases of

international students were also able to navigate their educational opportunities in a developed country because they, as the ‘singleton’ generation in China, received concentrated financial support from their family. However, the study also demonstrates the strong desire amongst Chinese youth to study abroad is less about strategic pursuit of capital in a particular location than about a belief “that anyone who acquires the discipline, skills, and affluence of *the developed world* can become a social and cultural citizen of that world” (Fong, 2011, p.216; emphasis added) and bringing those valuable forms of capital (e.g., experience, wealth) from the developed world back for the benefit of both their homeland and own families. On this note, Yang (2020) highlights that international student mobility is not the sole property of the privileged; thus, certain forms of capital are both *produced* and *reproduced* by mobility.

As Waters’ and Fong’s studies show, while the international education market presents unequal opportunities for overseas education, appreciation of education overseas as an instrument for social mobility at home and overseas cuts across class groups. Some studies argue that international student mobility is the outcome of individual ‘choices’ informed by their advantageous circumstances (e.g., language competence, socio-economic background) (Dreher & Poutvaara, 2005) or by inhibiting effects such as underprivileged socio-economic status (Christie, 2007; Findlay, King , & Ruiz-Gelices, 2006; Fong, 2011). Jeffrey, Jeffery, and Jeffery (2004) argue, in the latter case, although an individual’s attempts to ‘move up’ from their social background by embracing education as a form of embodied cultural distinction, this accomplishment is not sufficient to exempt them from their class origins.

While it is relatively clear that international education is often an attempt to achieve career-related objectives that may drive educational migration flows, the relationship between

education and migration is not as simple: educational objectives may drive migration flows, and vice versa, migratory objectives can be served through the pursuit of education. In relation to the former, Brooks and Waters (2011) describe such transnational and migratory practices for the educational endeavours of children are increasingly part of a “family project” (p. 52)—more than an individual endeavour—because these practices are embedded in complex familial and social networks. For some students undertaking cross-border education with the major motivation of obtaining permanent residency/citizenship in the host country, Robertson (2013) argues, “the education itself is frequently a means to an end, and the migration outcome is often more significant to the migrant than the qualification or the career outcomes” (p.22). Regardless of the lens employed, scholars increasingly acknowledge that international students have become a considerable part of a global migration industry, which comprises higher education providers, international education agents, and brokers capitalise on international students’ pursuit of long-term migration in their recruitment strategies (Beech, 2018; Baas, 2019).

Although the above works on cultural distinctions associated with Western degrees and English provide a valuable understanding of international student mobility, such understanding focuses particularly on a prevalent pattern of educational mobility from the ‘non-West’ to the ‘West’. Consequently, despite our current knowledge of international student mobility, there is far less work examining what drives ‘other’ migratory patterns of students beyond Westward mobility (i.e., North-to-North, North-to-South, or South-to South flows). However, educational migration also occurs in ‘other’ directions carried by its own drivers and effects. The group of transnational students in this study provides a compelling example of how motivations can appear differently depending on the specificities of social contexts (Holloway et al., 2012;

Prieur & Savage, 2011). Indeed, it is hard to say English and Western degrees are the driving factors for these students from English-speaking, Western countries to eschew educational opportunities at home and pursue education in other parts of the world. Thus, the emergence of new spatial frames of mobility—away from well-established ‘non-West’ to the ‘West’ mobility—highlights specificities in these flows, and thus necessitates a critical examination. This will be discussed further with respect to limitations in the extant literature in the later section.

While international credentials may not be equally valued by the mobile students across different directions of educational migration flows, the opportunity that study abroad offers for travel, adventure, and exposure to a new cultural setting is commonly desired by young people across the globe as part of global youth culture. In what follows, I review work on the youth mobilities in relation to mobility capital, which may provide a more pertinent understanding of the international student flows from the ‘West’.

### *Mobility Capital*

‘Being abroad’ has long been perceived as a source of privilege as well as a strategic education venture to broaden worldviews and realise personal ambitions. This idea can be traced back to ‘The Grand Tour’ between the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries: a ritualised, prescribed trip across European countries by which British aristocratic youth undertook to extend their education (Brodsky-Porges, 1981). With the commodification of international education, this early philosophy of travel as an educational device has made a reappearance as a central antecedent of study abroad. Indeed, there is a pervasive public discourse that study abroad is an

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opportunity for self-exploration and personal growth (Trower & Lehmann, 2017). For example, American undergraduate students are increasingly enticed to study abroad by the promise that the experience of the world will broaden their worldview and cross-cultural understanding, develop independence, discover oneself in unfamiliar surroundings, and prepare for their future (Dolby, 2004). Marginson's (2014) notion of 'self-formation' provides a theorisation of this process:

International education as self-formation takes in a larger set of behaviours of self-cultivation and self-improvement. It includes learning to speak in new conversational idioms. It includes the acquisition of knowledge and personal sensibilities via liberal education as cultural capital. It incorporates social capital; whereby higher education fosters functional relationships and social networks. It accounts for the fact that students may acquire new values and beliefs in the country of education, and perhaps greater tolerance and more cosmopolitan relations (Montgomery, 2010). Here the growth of individual capabilities and the growth of sociability are interdependent (p. 12).

In a similar vein, Murphy-Lejeune (2002) uses the cognate term 'mobility capital' to highlight how individuals enhance specific skills and competencies gained through the experience of mobility in itself. Through her study of European student travellers, Murphy-Lejeune (2002) argues: "life abroad is a powerful experience of discovery of self and others because it shakes personal and social representations and introduces into identity processes perturbing elements, notably the notions of moving identities and flexible cognitive borders" (p. 30).

In the context of a globalising labour market, mobility capital has become an ever more important source of distinction among young people. With the overproduction of

institutionalised qualifications resulting from the massification of higher education, the ways in which distinction is achieved has been somewhat shifted, with less emphasis on the academic qualifications and merits and more on the behavioural competence and embodied personal characteristics—such as openness, drive, adaptability, self-confidence, resilience among others (Brown et al., 2016). As described above, the richness of the international experience gained by living abroad allows international students and sojourners to prove their possession of such relevant “intangibles” (Waters, 2006, p.186) or “soft currencies” (Brown et al., 2016, p.193)—that they are comfortable and competent within multicultural settings. Put differently, distinction is no longer an exclusive by-product of an elite membership but also of “embodying various cosmopolitan traits” (Brooks & Waters, 2011, p.59).

Referring to the role of education in these trends more broadly, Mitchell (2003) highlights educational institutions as the social site through which the narrative of “strategic cosmopolitan” (p.387) is inscribed and perpetuated, thereby creating “hierarchically conditioned, globally-oriented state subjects—i.e., individuals oriented to excel in ever-transforming situations of global competition, either as workers, managers or entrepreneurs” (p.388). In a similar vein, Igarashi and Saito (2014) point out that education systems are integral to legitimising, promoting, and institutionalising cosmopolitan orientation as a desirable attribute of the individual living in a globalised world. Several scholars argue that cosmopolitanism is an emerging element of institutionalised cultural capital and a locus of positional advantage (Igarashi & Saito, 2014; Kim, 2011; Prieur & Savage, 2015; Weenink, 2007). In this sense, cosmopolitanism may be deeply implicated in social stratification on an increasingly global scale because mobility capital is constructed as a universally desirable resource or capacity, but access to it is unequally distributed. Therefore, in the context where not everyone is equally

eligible for international travel, mobility capital—just as other cultural capital—facilitates social distinction between internationally mobile students and immobile peers (Prazeres, 2019).

In the above sections, I have explored the factors that motivate nation-states, universities, and mobile individuals to shape a set of relationships around international student mobility, and in turn, how international student mobility is shaped by this set of relationships. In the next section, I examine the consequences of these relationships. I first review the prevailing understanding of geographies of international higher education and student mobility, followed by the recent development of China as an emerging student destination.

### The Landscape of International Student Mobility

The landscape of international higher education can be understood in terms of a Centre-Periphery model. The Centre-Periphery model has its roots in a much longer process of imperialism. Johan Galtung's (1971) influential text *A structural theory of imperialism* elucidates such dominance and inequality between and within countries. The essence of his theory is that the world is divided into Centre (Core) and Periphery nations, which again are divided into its own subset of Centres and Peripheries. Galtung conceives imperialism as a sophisticated type of dominance and power relationships through a combination of inter- and intra- relations between the Centre and the Periphery. Structural imperialism thus connects certain collectivities of Centre and Periphery in '(dis)harmony of interest': while there is harmony of interest when the gap in between two parties are small (i.e., different Centre nations, the Centres in the Centre, and the Periphery nations), disharmony of interest occurs when the gap increases (i.e., different Periphery nations, the Peripheries in the Centre and the Periphery

nations). Galtung also explicates the two forms of mechanisms of imperialism: *vertical* interactions as a major factor for inequality among nations and *feudal* interactions as a factor that reinforces and maintain the inequality. The vertical interaction is characterised by asymmetric relations between the few with access to resources (Centre) and those many without (Periphery). The resulting inequality is then perpetuated by feudal interaction structure: lesser or missing interactions between Periphery nations or multilateral interactions, contrary to high degrees of asymmetric, vertical relations between Centre and Periphery nations. This results in Centre nations' monopolisation of all significant external interactions of the peripheral nations.

While such Centre-Periphery continuum persists in the landscape of international higher education, it is in constant flux nonetheless. In this section, I discuss: 1) the Centre-Periphery structure of international higher education that shapes prevalent patterns of mobility; and 2) the recent development of China that has affected mobility in recent years. It is my intention to highlight the changes that have taken place in the geographies of international student mobility with respect to 'the rise of China'.

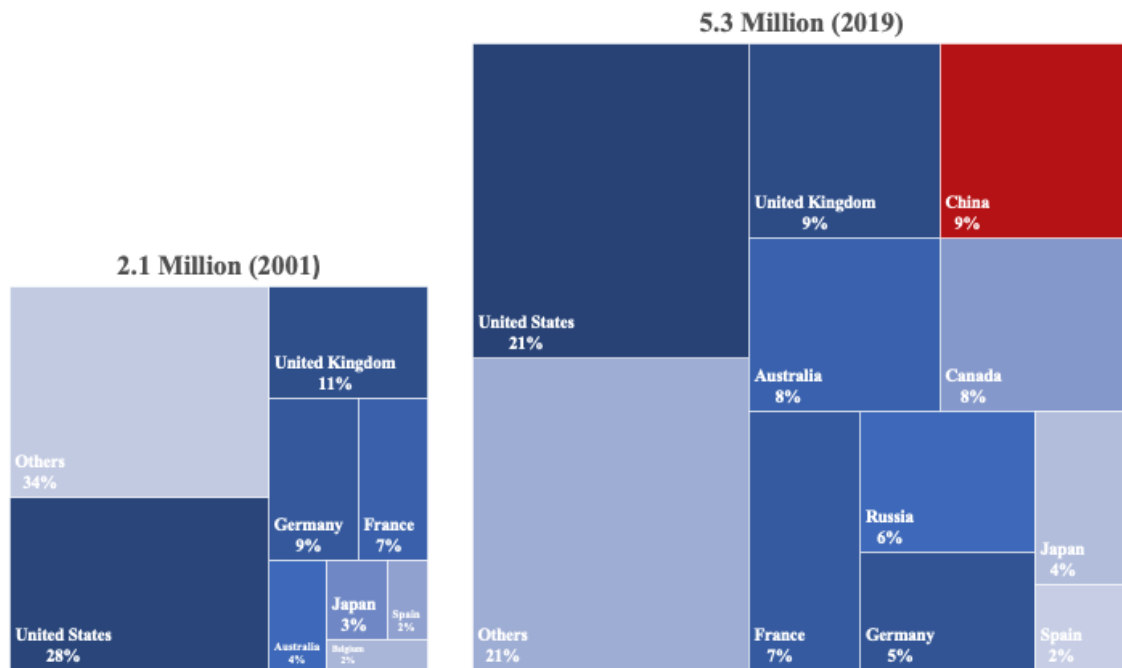
### International Higher Education Cluster

Drawing on Galtung's Centre-Periphery model, Altbach (2007) argues that international higher education has always been marked by binary categorisations of Centres and Peripheries, what he refers to as "empires of knowledge" (p.1). Some countries and their higher education systems located in the Centre hold significantly more soft power than other countries and dominate the production of knowledge for a variety of reasons—the nation's wealth, long

academic traditions and reputation for excellence, language (i.e., English), among other factors. On the other hand, Peripheral countries and higher education systems are dependent on the centre for knowledge production and dissemination. This is evident from the fact that almost all highly ranked, research-oriented universities are concentrated in a few countries, particularly the US and the UK. For example, according to *QS World University Rankings* (2021), more than half of the top 100 universities in the world are located in three Anglophone countries (27 universities in the US, 18 in the UK, and 7 in Australia). It is a testament that, despite the growing subset of top universities located outside the Global North, knowledge production is not ‘multi-centred’, and various higher education systems and institutions do not join global knowledge production and dissemination on a more egalitarian footing. On this note, Jöns and Hoyler (2013) warn that “world university rankings always provide highly partial and specific perspectives on the global geographies of higher education” (p.45).

This ‘Centre-Periphery’ landscape of international higher education and its persistent inequalities are also reflected in the uneven origin and destination patterns of international student mobility: a significant portion of internationally mobile students within higher education move from Periphery nations to Centre nations. According to the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) (2019), Asia has been the dominant actor for outbound student mobility. In 2017, Asian students constituted 56 per cent of the total number of international students enrolled in higher education across OECD and, more specifically, the largest share of students originated from China, India, and South Korea (Ibid.). Correspondingly, a significant proportion of internationally mobile students choose to study in OECD (70 per cent in 2017). Among OECD countries, four English speaking countries (US, UK, Australia, and Canada) and two Western European countries (France and Germany) have

remained the leading destinations throughout the last several decades and have hosted roughly half of international students for the past decade (see *Figure 2.1*).



*Figure 2.1* Distribution of international students by destination, 2001 and 2017 (IIE, 2019)

To apply Galtung’s theory to the above student-sending and -receiving countries, there are prevailing flows of international student to or within Centre countries, whereas there are significantly fewer international student flows in other directions (i.e., from Centre to Periphery, within Periphery countries). As I mentioned in the previous section, the existing vertical and feudal interactions—concentrated flows of transnational students to and within Centre institutions and countries—perpetuate the structure that favours a few nations in the Centre in terms of funding, research infrastructure and human capital (Wu & Gong, 2020). Consequently, Periphery countries become the *source of international students*, and Centre countries become the *provider of education* for them. While this unequal relation generates ‘disharmony of

interest' between nations in the Centre and the Periphery, there is nevertheless harmony of interest between the Centre institutions in the Centre and in the Periphery.

However, as Altbach and Peterson (2008) aptly point out, the world of international higher education is dynamic, not static. It is intricately linked to neoliberal globalisation and social and geopolitical transformations (Xu & Montgomery, 2018). Indeed, while the dominance of the US and the UK will remain unchanged for a considerable period of time, one of the recent developments in international higher education is the emergence of latecomer countries and emerging economies. In light of this, Verbik and Lasanowski (2007) discuss a shift in patterns of international student mobility. According to them, the leading destination countries “have all experienced either a decline or a ‘slump’ in the growth experienced in previous years” (p. 2). This was partially due to new recruitment efforts by emerging countries or institutions that had not been internationally engaged. The authors argue that students have become better consumers, especially given the wealth of comparative information readily available to them. Consequently, countries that offer “high quality and well-priced provision increasingly administered in English” (p. 11) were attracting more students. This was in contrast to “the rising price of tuition fees and escalating living costs” (p. 34) that may deter students from choosing to study in the US.

As the above figure shows, one of the most notable changes in the past two decades is China’s emergence as a major destination country. Only within a decade from Verbik and Lasanowski’s (2007) assertion, China has become the third top host country for international students and will continue to compete with the US and the UK as one of the world’s leading destinations for globally mobile students (British Council, 2015; Institute of International Education [IIE],

2017; Xu & Montgomery, 2018). More importantly, China is the only non-English speaking, non-Western European country among the five most popular study abroad destinations, and it is the only country that has disrupted the persistent Centre-Periphery hierarchy in international higher education in the modern world. Therefore, motivating this discussion is a conviction that the case of China may present the potential for a middle-income and/or developing country from the non-Western/non-Anglophone world to build enough international competitiveness to participate in the world knowledge system. In the section that follows, I will further elaborate on China's recent development in the internationalisation of higher education, with a strong focus on policy and its implementation.

## The Rise of China

While it is not new that many nation-states use a variety of policy levers to increase competitive edge in the market of international higher education, China is arguably regarded as the most successful examples of transforming its higher education—both quickly and on a large scale—through implementations of various policy initiatives (Pan, 2013; Skinner, 2019). Indeed, China has become a major host country with significant power to shape the trends in global student mobility (Yang, 2020). While China's position within international higher education as the biggest sending country is frequently discussed, China's strategies for internationalisation to become a new powerhouse in global knowledge production warrant exploration. This section focuses on the key initiatives that have contributed to the drastic transformation of China's higher education in relation to inward student mobility in recent years.

Since the 1980s, China has engaged in a series of massive educational reforms to cultivate its higher education institutions and ‘catch up’ with the top universities in the world (Zhang, Zhao, & Lei, 2012). One facet of its reforms has been to participate in and create spaces for transnational education.<sup>4</sup> In particular, China has pushed for a variety of initiative and policies, and that has, directly and indirectly, led to its growing desirability as a host country for both short- and long-term transnational students over the past decade (Skinner, 2019).<sup>5</sup> These strategic investments include China’s *National Plan for Medium and Long-term Education Reform and Development (2010-2020)*, *Belt and Road Initiative (BRI)*, *Double First-Class Project*, joint academic programs, among others.

*The Outline of China’s National Plan for Medium and Long-term Education Reform and Development (2010-2020)* explicitly articulates the mission and methods for internationalising higher education. According to the strategic plan, the Chinese government aims to “boost education reform and development at home, and to *enhance the nation’s global position, influence and competitiveness in the field of education*” as higher education is an essential tool “to meet the requirement of *opening up the Chinese economy and society to the world*, large numbers of talents shall be cultivated that are imbued with global vision, well-versed in international rules, and capable of *participating in international affairs and competition*” (Ministry of Education [MoE], 2010; emphasis added). In other words, such Chinese state

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<sup>4</sup> Transnational education (TNE) here refers to academic programmes delivered by ‘foreign’ educational providers (see Waters & Leung, forthcoming).

<sup>5</sup> For education policy development in China, see also Li (2017), Ngok (2008), and Zhang, Zhao, and Lei (2012).

discourse frames universities as “*geopolitical sites*” (Dimpfl & Smith, 2018, p.3; emphasis added), where institutions are expected to produce “individuals oriented to excel in ever-transforming situations of global competitions” (Mitchell, 2003, p.388).

To achieve these goals, China sought educational reforms that strongly urge “cooperation of renowned schools, education institutions, research institutes and companies outside this nation to establish education, teaching, training and research organizations or undertake such projects” (Ministry of Education [MoE], 2010, n.p.). To that end, “schools at all levels and of all varieties should be encouraged to engage in diverse forms of international exchanges and cooperation, and a good job should be done in running demonstrative joint schools or joint projects in cooperation with foreign partners. Multiple approaches to utilizing quality education resources from abroad shall be searched for” (Ibid.). The way China pursues the internationalisation of its education systems is through engagement with and assimilation to the ‘outside’ nations, particularly European and North American models, to embrace market principles of neoliberal globalisation (Yang, 2011, 2014; see also Lee, 2020).

With such successful implementation of strategic plans, China’s influence within international higher education has expanded from the largest sender into one of the top receiving countries. The number of inbound transnational students has increased almost tenfold in the past two decades, from 52,150 in 2000 to 492,185 in 2018 (Tian & Liu, 2020). Likewise, the number of institutions accepting transnational students has also more than doubled (See *Table 2.1*).

*Table 2.1* The number of inbound international students in China between 2000 and 2016  
(adapted from Tian & Liu, 2020)

<b>Year</b>	<b>Total number of transnational students</b>	<b>Annual growth rate</b>	<b>Number of source countries</b>	<b>Number of institutions accepting transnational students</b>
2000	52,150	16.64%	166	344
2001	61,869	18.64%	169	363
2002	85,829	38.73%	175	394
2003	77,715	-9.50% <sup>6</sup>	175	352
2004	110,844	42.63%	178	420
2005	141,087	27.28%	179	464
2006	162,695	15.32%	184	519
2007	195,503	20.17%	188	544
2008	223,499	14.32%	189	592
2009	238,184	6.57%	190	619
2010	265,090	11.30%	194	618
2011	292,611	10.38%	194	660
2012	328,330	12.21%	200	690
2013	356,499	8.58%	200	746
2014	377,054	5.77%	203	775
2015	397,635	5.46%	202	811
2016	442,773	11.35%	205	829

One important feature of this big growth in international students is the significant proportion of degree-seeking students. The number of international students enrolled in degree programmes accounts for 258,122 in 2017. The share of degree-seeking students out of all international students has been increasing from 44 per cent in 2014 and 46 per cent in 2015

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<sup>6</sup> This abrupt decline is interpreted primarily as the impact of the SARS outbreak (Tian & Liu, 2020).

(Ministry of Education [MoE], 2016, as cited in Wu & Gong, 2020) to 52.44 per cent in 2018 (Ministry of Education [MoE], 2019). While the majority of students are enrolled in undergraduate programmes, the number and share of international students enrolled in postgraduate programmes has grown fast, from 53,572 (29 per cent of total degree-seeking international students) in 2015 to 85,062 (33 per cent of total degree-seeking international students) in 2017. Taken together, China has increasingly become a desirable destination for degree-seeking students. As mentioned in the previous section, increased inbound degree mobility of international students can be beneficial for China in two ways: one is increasing the chance of attracting skilled immigrants who understand the cultural and economic needs of the host country, and the other is producing soft power for China.

China's growth as a major host country is the result of efforts employed through multiple channels and governmental initiatives across both sectors and national borders. Among many other state-directed efforts that have contributed to the shift in China's position in the sector of international higher education at an unprecedented speed, China's hefty scholarship schemes for transnational students have been highlighted and widely reported in Western media, often with a certain level of resistance. For example, a recent article "Why China is lavishing money" (2019) in *the Economist* about China's strategic investment in transnational student recruitment expresses scepticism that "China is using higher education for political ends" and to that end, "the rich world is selling education. China is using it to buy influence". Riaño et al. (2018) similarly point out that China's active recruitment of international students from African countries is an effort to increase its soft power in Africa. On this note, Yang (2020) and Wu and Gong (2020) analyse that the focus of China's international student recruitment strategy is

largely on enhancing global influence and achieving public diplomatic objectives, rather than on increasing revenue and attracting young labour.

To enhance its soft power further, China first proposed the *Belt and Road Initiative* (BRI)—formerly known as ‘One Belt, One Road (OBOR)’—as a global trade and investment strategy in 2013, with an ambition to foster development opportunities in the areas of policy coordination, connectivity of infrastructure, unimpeded trade, and financial integration among sixty-five countries across six main economic corridors encompassing China, Mongolia and Russia, Eurasian countries, Central and West Asia, Pakistan, other countries of the Indian sub-continent, and Indochina (Belt and Road Portal, 2016; Peters, 2020). BRI influences inbound student mobility both directly and indirectly. For example, as part of the initiative, China’s *Belt and Road Initiative* has also provided government scholarships to approximately 10,000 international students from BRI countries annually. Perhaps consequently, in 2015, 12 of China’s top 20 source countries of international students were BRI countries (Ministry of Education [MoE], 2016).<sup>7</sup> Furthermore, BRI highlights the importance of educational exchange programmes in strengthening ‘people-to-people ties’. Behind this emphasis on cultural and educational exchange lies producing significant “co-optive power—the ability to shape *what others want*” (Nye, 2005, p.12; emphasis original) for China. Put differently, higher education serves BRI’s strategic goal of maximising its soft power gradually through ‘economic inducement’ and ‘agenda setting’, and eventually through ‘pure attraction’ across

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<sup>7</sup> These twelve countries include Thailand, India, Russia, Pakistan, Kazakhstan, Indonesia, Vietnam, Mongolia, Laos, Malaysia, Singapore, and Myanmar.

the countries within BRI and beyond (Wu & Gong, 2020). In turn, China's enhanced soft power enables it to influence prospective international students' destination choices.

To strengthen further China's competitiveness in global higher education, the Chinese government also announced the *Double First-Class Project* in 2015 to promote world-class universities and subject building. The project aims to develop a batch of 42 universities and approximately 456 disciplines in 95 universities into world-class institutions and their faculty departments by 2050 (Huang, 2017; Peters & Besley, 2018). While China had implemented similar projects in the past, such as the *211 Project* in 1995 and *985 Project* in 1999, *Double First-Class Project* takes a more systematic, coordinated, and holistic approach by setting clearer timelines and quantifiable goals<sup>8</sup>; going hand in hand with other reforms to enhance China's soft power, and simultaneously advance Chinese universities in the major international league tables and developing the overall quality of Chinese higher education (so as to engage in global knowledge production). More importantly, beyond 'catching up' with the 'West', it emphasises Chinese characteristics with socialist core values. The selection of core disciplines, including Marxism, ideology, Chinese medicine or culture and some strong disciplines with a long history in China, reflects such a nationalistic tenor to the project.

With strategic support from the government, elite institutions in China have played important roles. Most importantly, highly-ranked universities serve as a pull factor for inbound student mobility (Wu & Gong, 2020). Indeed, in 2015, 18 of the top 20 host universities of international

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<sup>8</sup> For more details on the timelines and goals of the initiative, see Liu, Turner, & Jing (2019).

students are ‘211 universities’, including 13 ‘double first-class universities’ (Ministry of Education [MoE], 2016). Moreover, turning once more to the Centre-Periphery framework, these local ‘Centre’ institutions function as a contact point with Centre institutions in Centre countries, and thereby assist China—as a semi-Periphery state—to strengthen its relationship with the Centre and augment its position in the world system of higher education (Yang, 2020).

The rapid expansion and internationalisation of the higher education sector, however, have brought new strains and critical challenges to China’s vision for education reform. As Rui (2014) observes, the concept of ‘internationalisation’ in higher education is developed and based largely on ‘Western’ experiences, and therefore, China’s—or any ‘non-Western’ societies’—internationalisation of higher education entails tensions and issues between Westernisation and indigenisation. Mok (2007) similarly reflects on the extremes in performance assessment by the imposed Anglo-Saxon traditions and practices. Furthermore, Gao (2017) and Qingquan (2020) criticise how some of the development schemes have widened the gap in the distribution of resources between local institutions, especially those participating in the *Double First-class* initiative and other universities in the central and western regions of China. They also address the imbalance of regional educational development that worsens domestic inequality. From a global—or ‘Western’—perspective, Altbach (2019) expresses concerns regarding the ‘shrinking’ of academic freedom and intellectual space in China as the political ideology has increasingly reclaimed a more central place in academia and new technologies allow pervasive government monitoring and censorship. While including China’s response to these challenges is not within the scope of this research, it is nevertheless important to redress the prevalent focus on China’s ‘success story’.

This section thus far has been introduced and discussed important policy initiatives that have driven the rapid internationalisation of Chinese higher education. In the next section, I turn my gaze to the development of international branch campuses in the context of China because international branch campuses are not only the research site of this study, but also a major component of Transnational Education (TNE) in China.

### *Development of International Branch Campuses in China*

The international dimension of higher education has been predominantly characterised by international students on the move; however, entire degree programmes and even institutions have also increasingly been participating in the cross-border movement. As these territorial shifts of international education are increasingly being achieved through different forms of transnational academic programmes and educational institutions, a student can earn a prestigious degree from the US or the UK without ever setting foot in those countries. While there are different forms of transnational academic programmes in partnership with prestigious overseas universities, this thesis specifically focuses on the rapid development of international branch campuses<sup>9</sup> because this is one of the significant features in the internationalisation of higher education in the Chinese context.

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<sup>9</sup> As there are many different configurations of cross-border or borderless education, efforts to catalogue a comprehensive list of various programmes has been hampered. In this thesis, I take the definition of international branch campus by Wilkins and Rumbley's (2018): "an entity that is owned, at least in part, by a specific foreign higher education institution, which has some degree of responsibility for the overall strategy and quality assurance of the branch campus. The branch campus operates under the name of the foreign institution and offers

## Chapter 2: Situating International Student Mobility to China

In the past decade, China has actively supported and encouraged the international provision of branch campuses. Today, China is the leading host country of international branch campuses, hosting 37 in mainland China<sup>10</sup> among 305 international branch campuses across 72 host nations (Cross-Border Education Research Team, 2020). Here the strong dominance by Anglophone or Western European countries is notable: 34 out of 37 international branch campuses in China are operated by higher education providers from Anglophone and Western European countries. The US is the top provider, with 14 international branch campuses, followed by the UK (9), France (5), Australia (2), and Canada (2) (see *Table 2.2*). This is a testament to the fact China has accepted and embraced the ‘international’ norms of privileging English-speaking, Western education in the global knowledge economy.

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programming and/or credentials that bear the name of the foreign institution. The branch has basic infrastructure such as a library, an open access computer lab and dining facilities, and, overall, students at the branch have a similar student experience to students at the home campus” (p.14).

<sup>10</sup> This number does not include non-degree-conferring joint academic programmes operated by Chinese universities. Also, there are five international branch campuses in Hong Kong SAR; two of which are branch campuses of Chinese universities.

## Educational Pathfinders? A Study of International Student Mobility in China

*Table 2.2* List of international branch campuses in China (by home country)

(adapted from Cross-Border Education Research Team, 2020)

<b>Institution name</b>	<b>Home country</b>	<b>Institution name</b>	<b>Home country</b>
Southeast University, Monash University Joint Graduate School	Australia	Surrey International Institute Dongbei University of Finance and Economics	UK
SHU-UTS SLIC Business School	Australia	Bangor College of CSUFT	UK
Ivey Asia	Canada	Duke Kunshan University	US
Shanghai-Vancouver Film School	Canada	Fort Hays State University	US
Asia-Europe Business School	France	Sias International University	US
EMLOYN	France	Georgia Tech Tianjin University Shenzhen Institute	US
ESMOD	France	Hopkins-Nanjing Center for Chinese and American Studies	US
ESMOD	France	Tianjin Conservatory of Music Julliard Graduate School	US
SKEMA	France	Wenzhou-Kean University	US
Beijing-Dublin International College	Ireland	LNU-MSU College of International Business	US
DUT-RU International School of Information Science & Engineering	Japan	New York Institute of Technology, Beijing	US
MSU-BIT University	Russia	New York Institute of Technology, Nanjing	US
Ulsan Ship and Ocean College at Ludong University	South Korea	New York University, Shanghai	US
BAU Global, Xi'an International University	Turkey	Tsinghua-UC Berkeley Shenzhen Institute	US
Xi'an Jiaotong Liverpool University	UK	University of Michigan, Shanghai Jiao Tong University Joint Institute	US
Manchester Business School, East Asia International Centre	UK	Sichuan University, Pittsburgh Institute	US
China Medical University – The Queen’s University of Belfast Joint College	UK	University of Wollongong College (Hong Kong)	Australia
HBU-UCLan School of Media, Communication and Creative Industries	UK	Chinese University of Hong Kong (Shenzhen)	China (Hong Kong)
Shanghai International College of Fashion and Innovation, Donghua University	UK	Beijing Normal University, Hong Kong Baptist University United International College	China (Hong Kong)
SWJTU-Leeds Joint School	UK	University of Chicago Booth School of Business (Hong Kong)	US
University of Nottingham, Ningbo	UK	University of Upper Iowa (Hong Kong)	US

## Chapter 2: Situating International Student Mobility to China

While there is no singular explanation for this rapid growth of international branch campuses, the rationale for China's motivations for hosting branches or partnering for joint programmes can be explained as follows. First, branch campuses are expected to deliver high-quality 'international' academic programmes using partnership arrangements with sought-after foreign institutions. Therefore, international branch campuses satisfy China's need for hosting globally competitive universities at home to offering degree and other academic programmes, develop research projects, and collaborate with academic institutions in other countries in a variety of ways. Furthermore, the home campus' global brand and visibility leverage prestige, which, in turn, attract domestic students as well as international students from the same or adjacent regions—who would otherwise choose to study at home campuses in the West—to China. Moreover, from the provider perspective, the export of academic programmes, including international branch campuses, is also seen as an attractive venture because of its profitability (from fee-paying transnational students) (Marginson, 2009), the way in which it results in an increase in international visibility and the ranking of institutions (Shams & Huisman, 2012), and its contribution to the internationalisation of their home campuses (Altbach et al., 2019). Indeed, Pan (2013) indicates that universities around the world have adopted a marketised approach to international student recruitment, mainly due to widespread neoliberal discourse and decreased government funding for higher education in many countries.

In the context of the persistent post-colonial asymmetries of the global higher education landscape, Altbach and Peterson (2008) argue that transnational initiatives almost exclusively operate within the North-to-South dynamic and are dominated by the universities in the North. While this is largely true, China provides a powerful example of an exception to the Western dominance in the transnational movement of institutions. Indeed, as of 2020, there are four

branch campuses of Chinese universities overseas: three in Asia (Laos, Malaysia, and Singapore) and one in Europe (Italy) (Cross-Border Education Research Team, 2020). With international branch campuses of Chinese universities being actively set up overseas, China has pioneered—both as the host and provider—the development of international branch campuses and expanded the global trends of international branch campuses beyond ‘Western branch campus in the ‘non-West’’. As I mentioned above, such development affects the flows of potential international students from one country to another, and especially affects local students as well as students in the same region (e.g., South Korea). However, a group of international students in this study call for attention to the potential role of international branch campuses to contribute to a ‘reversed’ flow of international students, from a traditional ‘provider/home campus’ country to a branch campus in an emerging destination.

## Gaps in the Existing Literature

As shown above, a burgeoning body of literature on geographies of education and international student mobility attests to the growing significance of transnational students. However, despite the current scholarly attention to international student mobility, there remain some important gaps in the existing literature. Although King and Raghuram (2013) and Raghuram (2013) identify the dearth of empirical and theoretical approaches toward international student mobility, Lipura and Collins’ (2020) recent review of the literature reminds us that there remain significant gaps in the literature and persistent theoretical lacunae within international student mobility.

Extending from these critiques, I seek further to locate the gaps in the literature within two major themes: the lack of literature on emerging study abroad destinations (China); and the tendency towards homogenising and oversimplifying international students. In doing so, I call for incorporating complexity and diversity within international student mobility and how this thesis contributes to this.

### Moving beyond Westward Mobility

Scholarship on international student mobility to date has predominantly been concerned with movements from East Asia to the major destination countries, particularly English-speaking nations (e.g., the US, the UK, Australia, and Canada) and Western European countries (e.g., France, Germany) (Butcher, 2004; Collins, 2006; Lewis, 2005; Waters, 2005, 2006), which is often associated with the pursuit of English (Waters, 2006; Williams & Baláž, 2014) and a Western education (Mitchell, 1997). In comparison, despite evidence of rising mobility patterns of international students beyond the ‘non-West’ to the ‘West’ and/or the Global South to the North, it is a relatively recent phenomenon and, consequently, little is known about the new players in the market (Lipura & Collins, 2020; Phan, 2018; Riaño et al., 2018; Yang, 2018). This marked imbalance in the current literature on international student mobility is problematic because it primarily defines Asian countries as a *source of* international students rather than a *destination for* such students (King & Sondhi, 2016). While a growing body of literature offers some valuable insights into North-to-North (McCarthy, Sen, & Garrity, 2012); South-to-South (Ho, 2017; Mulvey, 2020; Yang, 2018); North-to-South (Prazeres, 2017, 2019); East-to-East (Collins, 2013; Lee, 2017); or a mixture of multi-directional (Barnett, Lee, Jiang, & Park, 2016) migratory patterns of students, more attention should be paid to these ‘other’ student flows.

This study makes a strong case for the need to examine student mobility *in the other direction*. Even though rapid change is taking place in the role of China in reconfiguring the landscape of international higher education, China is still unequally represented in the extant literature. Of course, there are notable exceptions to this. For example, there are recent studies elucidating: varied experiences of international students in China (Dervin, Du, & Härkönen, 2018; Wen, Hu, & Hao, 2018); motivating factors to study in China (Ahmad & Shah, 2018; Wen & Hu, 2019); or educational migration from Africa to China (Ho, 2017; Mulvey, 2020). Additionally, Xu and Montgomery's (2018) thematic review of the literature on inward student mobility to China and Mulvey and Lo's (2020) critical analysis of Chinese policy texts on international student recruitment are exemplary contributions. Overall, despite all the above scholarly efforts, much work is still needed to represent a range of theoretical perspectives and empirical foci concerning influx mobilities to China (Dervin et al., 2018; Jiani, 2017; Xu & Montgomery, 2018).

With these limitations in mind, I attempt to bring our understanding forward by examining educational migration *from* Western countries with already highly sought-after advantages—commonly known as ‘destination countries’—*to China*, an under-explored destination (Lee, 2020b). In a similar vein, international students' rationales for studying at a branch campus of a Western university has only been considered almost exclusively within the local and regional contexts. Indeed, there have been studies on local students or international students from the same region who chose to enrol in a degree programme at a branch campus as a local or ‘near-abroad’ alternative to studying abroad in the West (Belderbos, 2019; Sim, Tan, Sia, & Hii, 2020; Sin, 2013; Waters & Leung, 2013). However, why students who already have access to

prestigious universities at home *eschew* their domestic education opportunities to study at a branch campus in China remains unexplained.

Through my research I venture to build a nuanced research story that contributes to a currently under-developed body of knowledge. International students from the Global North to South have been an invisible group, largely neglected from scholarly literature because of its reputed lack of problems and presumed privilege. Nevertheless, student mobility *in the other direction* exists and is increasing as the impact of globalisation—in general and of higher education—becomes normalised, and the patterns and characteristics of international students diversify. Nevertheless, the motivating factors and considerations that inform Western-situated international students' decisions to eschew educational opportunities at home or other Western countries for those in an unorthodox destination remain neglected; and so are the experiences and skills they accumulate by studying in the Global South. Therefore, a critical examination on this mobile student flow within the global system of international student mobility is under-explored, yet highly timely and relevant.

### Reductive framings of international students

In addressing the geographical imbalance in the international student mobility literature, I also seek to problematise some dominant assumption on 'international students' in educational discourse. Indeed, 'international student' is often used as a generic term—in both policy and research—that refers to different populations without critical attention being paid to their dynamic and complex positioning. In this section, I wish to highlight two dimensions of reductive framings of international students.

First and related to discussions above, there is a significant body of research exploring many facets of ‘*the* international student’ and their experiences in ‘*the* host country’. Consequently, such postulates collectively define international students and construct a simplistic stereotype in relation to nationality, race, and ethnicity (Haugh, 2008; Koehne, 2005; Matthews & Sidhu, 2005). Arguably this has important political and social implication: a one-dimensional geographical representation of international student mobility risks reinforcing reductive assumptions of, and discriminatory behaviours towards, particular groups of participating international students. For example, such an assumption forms a ‘deficit’ narrative perspective on international students (Bista, 2018; Yates & Nguyen, 2012); which implicitly defines international students as individuals who are from ‘*non-West*’ countries and therefore *lacking* language skills (particularly English) and knowledge to contribute to the learning (Lipura & Collins, 2020; Madge, Raghuram, & Noxolo, 2015).

Another reductive conception is an emphasis on taken-for-granted privileged characteristics of international students as well as their migratory drivers regarding economic returns on education and social distinction (Lo, 2019; Yang, 2018). Indeed, several scholars have advocated an economic perspective, which largely views educational migration as a result of a combination of ‘push and pull’ factors (Altbach, 1998; De Wit, 2008; Lee, 2017; Li & Bray, 2007; Mazzarol & Soutar, 2002), or the strategic pursuit of accumulation of various cultural capital in relation to (re)production of class advantage (Blackmore et al., 2017; Holloway et al., 2012; Kim, 2011; Sin, 2013; Waters, 2006). While it may be accurate that securing positional advantage against competitors in the post-graduate labour market and increasing the likelihood of economic returns on education are important factors in mobility; nonetheless, such a narrative often fails to recognise the complex nature of motivations, experiences, and

consequences beyond an economic perspective (Raghuram, 2013). Therefore, the international student mobility literature could usefully move beyond viewing the drivers of international mobility purely in economic terms, towards an equal consideration given to underpinning of the intrinsic, emotional motivating factors (Collins, 2018; Prazeres, 2017; see also, Waters & Brooks, 2010).

In the context of diversification in the patterns and characteristics of international student mobility, inclusion of these additional viewpoints is instructive. Indeed, there has been incremental growth in research on underrepresented international students using alternative theoretical approaches. For instance, Sol (2014) conducted a study of historically underrepresented ethnic group in US study abroad programmes with five female black American international students travelling to non-English speaking countries (France, Italy, Japan, and Korea). The study shed light on the evolution of black women's self-concept from studying abroad through intersectionality and a black psychological lens. In the context of under-explored migratory movements from South to South, Ho's (2017) study of African international students in China examines their transnational connections, educational experiences, and multiple identities through the lens of the 'geo-social', revealing how student mobility from Africa to China is motivated by the pursuit of human capital as well as the geo-economic and geo-political dimensions in the China-Africa relations. Through the analysis of African transnational students' everyday sociality, the author also foregrounds how the geo-social is intertwined with the geo-economic and geo-political aspects of transnationalism. Yang's (2018) ethnographic account on lower-middle/working class Indian students pursuing medical education (MBBS) in a provincial Chinese university highlights compromise and complicity as an alternative logic of enacting social aspiration and educational desire in the

context of ‘low-end’ international student mobility. In an effort to lend support to the tenets of the above scholarship, I employed alternative approaches to explore and theorise this emerging pattern of ‘West-to-non-West’ international student mobility. I will elaborate on these conceptual frameworks in Chapter Three.

## Conclusion

Education is at the centre of increased migration and mobility globally (Arnot, Schneider, & Welply, 2013). Although the existing scholarship reviewed in this chapter accounts for the role of education in mobility in the Chinese as well as broader global contexts, this has fostered a persistent emphasis on a choice-based, economic understanding of mobility by middle-class students from the ‘non-West’ to the ‘West’. Emerging diversity, plurality, difference, and complexity of migration and the transformations that it brings to educational systems and wider society have raised new questions: the experiences of different groups of transnational students and the challenges these present for the education sector at local, national, and global levels. However, scholars often seek refuge in analysis utilising conventional theories to understand new connections and understandings. Using these frameworks with marginalised groups within educational migration does a disservice to students *as individuals*. Correspondingly, researchers have suggested that further, critical studies are needed that pay more attention to international student mobility beyond Westward flows, as well as potential theorisations of complexity in the drivers of international student mobility. Despite a relatively small population as compared to its Westward student flows, the growing trend in outbound mobility from the West is very discernible and should not be neglected. This study is therefore a timely

and unique opportunity to explore an emerging, under-explored group of international students and contributes to a better understanding of this ever-diversifying type of migrants.

With this in mind, this thesis endeavours to provide a timely response to important gaps identified in the literature in several ways: first, the distinctive empirical and geographical focus of this research is on the under-researched flow of international students from the West/Global North to a newly emerging study abroad destination in the East/Global South. I set clear and smaller boundaries in terms of the origins of study participants, their study abroad destinations, the duration of study abroad, and the educational setting (i.e., Sino-US international branch campus). In doing so, I argue that expanding the geographical scope of the inquiry offers an alternative understanding to the prevalent marketisation perspective, which is primarily relevant to some of the Anglophone countries. Secondly, this research explores the online social sphere in which international students narrate their stories and universities promote international study opportunities that offer deeper and nuanced explanations for this emerging pattern of mobility. This strategy takes into account that there is increasingly blurring between the online and offline social worlds, and views digital mediums as central to understanding how young people produce, communicate, and consume meaning. Finally, I venture to explore different approaches and perspectives—that are both well-established and emerging—in an effort to uphold the complexity, uniqueness, and intricacy within the international students' narratives. By consequence, each empirical chapter in this thesis adopts different theoretical frameworks to offer a multi-faceted (and at times contradictory) logic of international student mobility, instead of selecting one well-established social theory and aggregating participants' experiences into a whole.

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### 3 THEORETICAL INFLUENCES

While all three empirical papers in this thesis (Chapter Five, Six, and Seven) are intended to explore the same broad phenomenon, each paper approaches the central issue from a different vantage point—transnational students’ motivations, experiences, reconstruction of subject positions, and how these are represented online. Consequently, I draw upon different conceptual frameworks, as appropriate, to frame theoretically participants’ narratives. Some readers may find this approach unconventional (preferring to stick to one overarching theory), but my approach allowed the data to lead the analysis and form the central themes of the study. Therefore, throughout the analysis, I endeavoured not to prioritise well-established theories over data itself. For my purposes, one overarching theoretical framework has proven inadequate—I therefore deploy a wider range of theories in my analysis (outlined below). As Goffman (1968) wrote, “better perhaps (to have) different coats to clothe the children well than a single, splendid tent in which they all shiver” (p. xxii).

The concepts I deploy here include: cosmopolitanism; Bourdieusian concepts of fields, capital, and distinction; the notion of desire as social force; and finally, Goffman’s dramaturgical

perspective. While each empirical chapter includes a section on the conceptual framework used, the following provides a summary of these.

## Cosmopolitanism

Extant scholarship highlights various modes of being, ways of thinking and enacting cosmopolitanism (Delanty, 2012; Rovisco & Nowicka, 2013). In *Conceiving Cosmopolitanism*, Vertovec and Cohen (2002) map out the narratives within the literature across disciplines and proposed a typology for six perspectives: 1) cosmopolitanism as a socio-cultural condition; 2) a kind of philosophy or worldview; 3) a political project towards building transnational institutions; 4) a political project for recognising multiple identities; 5) an attitudinal or dispositional orientation; and 6) a mode of practice or competence. Although new critiques have refined the categories further, these characterisations of cosmopolitanism continue to be widely referenced (Rovisco & Nowicka, 2013).<sup>11</sup>

As seen above, while cosmopolitanism spans across the broad areas of human activity (i.e., morality, politics, culture, etc.), this thesis predominantly engages with practical or everyday

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<sup>11</sup> I acknowledge that—despite the accumulated theoretical work on defining and mapping the different facets and meanings of the concept—the term cosmopolitanism remains contested and there is no uniform definition of it in the growing body of literature (Beck and Sznaider, 2010; Delanty, 2012). While in-depth coverage of the wider ethical/political debate around the term is certainly out of scope of this thesis, key texts which summarise the debates include Beck, 2003, 2006; Beck and Sznaider, 2010; Delanty, 2012; Nussbaum, 1994; Rovisco and Nowicka, 2013; Skey, 2012; Vertovec and Cohen, 2002.

cosmopolitanism to theorise the ways in which transnational students from the West imagine, desire, and finally enact encounters with difference in the host society of China. In other words, I focus on “how forms of ‘lived cosmopolitanism’ are experienced by different groups and individuals in the micro-scale of everyday life interactions in concrete times and places” (Rovisco & Nowicka, 2013; p. 2).

In this light, Hannerz’s (1990) conception of cosmopolitanism provides a useful lens. For Hannerz, cosmopolitanism refers to “a *stance toward diversity itself*, toward the coexistence of cultures in the individual experience” (p.239; emphasis added). It is an individual’s attitudinal and dispositional aspect that demonstrates “*an orientation, a willingness to engage with the other. It is an intellectual and aesthetic stance of openness toward divergent cultural experiences, a search for contrast rather than uniformity*” (Ibid.; emphasis added). Furthermore, Hannerz argues, cosmopolitanism is also about accumulation and display of “competence”, which includes “*a state of readiness, a personal ability to make one’s way into other cultures, through listening, looking, intuiting and reflecting*” and “a built-up skill in manoeuvring more or less expertly with a particular system of meanings and meaningful forms” (Ibid.). Such ideas of cosmopolitan are commonly conceived in a positive light; as the (presumed) values shared by “citizens of the world” (Vertovec and Cohen, 2002, p.10), or as part of an ethical stance emphasising common humanity and universalistic morality over more parochial interests (Nussbaum, 2002).

However, other researchers have voiced critiques, and it is possible to identify two main critiques in the literature. First, cosmopolitanism is criticised for the danger of confusion with banal and consumerist cosmopolitanism, the consumption of ‘the global’ or ‘the difference’

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through global brands, multicultural foods, music, travel, fashion, and so on (Calhoun, 2002; Germann Molz, 2007; Skinner, 2010; Vertovec & Cohen, 2002). The link between consumption of foreign commodities, greater openness, and appreciation of difference is an unproved conjecture, and thus, these forms of cosmopolitanism—albeit intuitively appealing—do not necessarily produce an ethical and moral commitment to common humanity (Matthews & Sidhu, 2005; Vertovec & Cohen, 2002; Yeoh & Lin, 2012). Similarly, Calhoun (2002) cautions such pursuit of cosmopolitanism through consumption is “[the] *easy face[s]* of cosmopolitanism” (p. 889; emphasis added) because this type of cosmopolitanism tells little about the relationship between local solidarity and democracy on a global scale (Ibid.).

Secondly and relatedly, cosmopolitanism also reflects an elite perspective on the world (Calhoun, 2008, 2009; Matthews & Sidhu, 2005; Vertovec & Cohen, 2002; Weenink, 2007). Vertovec and Cohen (2002) suggest that a commonly held, stereotyped view of cosmopolitans primarily considers them to be privileged. For instance, Matthews and Sidhu (2005) criticise the taken-for-granted assumption of cosmopolitans as “free floating, fleet-footed, globally mobile individual[s] for whom the world is borderless and opportunities boundless is problematically premised on the dispositions, aspirations and opportunities of the Euro-American, first world, elite, masculine subject” (p.53). In a similar vein, Calhoun (2008) critiques that while openness to foreign cultures are often discussed as if it were “simply a free-floating cultural taste, personal attitude, or ethical choice” (p.109), in fact, it is often social, cultural and economic capital that made possible to acquire such cosmopolitan attitudes. For this reason, the author alerts us not to celebrate cosmopolitanism uncritically because it may serve as a means for individuals in a socially dominant position to exercise symbolic violence against foreign others and cultures.

The above critiques point out that cosmopolitanism is not only a benevolent orientation or attitude but also a source of valuable cultural capital. Some of these critical voices have—explicitly or implicitly—engaged in Bourdieu’s notions to argue that access to cosmopolitanism is not equally distributed, and thus may be deeply entangled in wider economic inequalities and dominant positions in the global knowledge economy (Igarashi & Saito, 2014; Kim, 2011; Weenink, 2007, 2008). Extending these ideas to the present study, I review Pierre Bourdieu’s key concepts of fields and forms of capital in the following section.

## Bourdieuian Perspective: Fields and Forms of Capital

French anthropologist and sociologist Pierre Bourdieu’s (1930–2002) writings on capital, habitus, field, and doxa (Bourdieu, 1984, 1986; Bourdieu and Passeron, 1990; Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992) have explored theoretical guidance on the link between social reproduction and inequality, as well as education systems as a mediator of that link. One of the theoretical cornerstones of Bourdieu’s sociology is the idea of society as consisting of multiple social fields. Bourdieu defines ‘field’ as a location, domain or arena wherein individuals are positioned in a relationship with others according to its own ‘rules of game’ informing its structure (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992). Each social field has a considerable degree of autonomy such as its own structures, interests and preference, agents, and power struggles.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> The relevance and limits of the Bourdieu’s notion of field is explored in the literature. For instance, Naidoo (2004) focuses on the concept of field to analyse distinction in South African higher education. Regardless of the

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Each actor within any field possesses different amount and forms of capital, and the amount and composition of forms of capital are central to determining the social position of actors and increasing an actor's capacities in society.

Defining the various actors' positions and possibilities within a field, Bourdieu (1986) distinguished between possession of economic, cultural, social and symbolic capital. In his framework, forms of capital can be and are frequently converted into other kinds of capital. Economic capital consists of capital that is directly convertible into economic possessions (i.e., money). According to Bourdieu (1986), economic capital is at the root of other types of capital, and other types of capital can be derived from it. Cultural Capital refers to familiarity with the dominant culture in society, including possession of the ability to understand and utilise 'educated' language (Sullivan, 2001). Cultural capital exists in three states: *Institutionalised* cultural capital is created through institutionalised in cultural institutions and exists in the form of academic qualification and institutional affiliation. *Embodied* cultural capital is long-lasting, inherited dispositions in the attributes and characteristics of the person, such as knowledge, competence, preferences, and practical actions. *Objectified* cultural capital exists in the form of material artefacts such as books and instruments.

Social capital is a form of capital linked to social networks, group membership, and relationships. The volume of social capital possessed by any individual is measured by the

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limitation of the context-specific quality of the concept, the author concurs with Bourdieu's view on the field of higher education not as the product of consensus, but the product of permanent conflict (p.468-469).

aggregate of the “size of the network of connections that he can effectively mobilize” (Bourdieu, 1986, p.249). Finally, symbolic capital is a form of capital that becomes symbolic when perceived as legitimate and powerful, and thus different fields have different symbolic capital. Symbolic capital only arises from “the internalization (embodiment) of the structure of its distribution, i.e. when it is known and recognized as self-evident” (Bourdieu, 1985, p.204). While economic and cultural capital has their own modes of existence—for example, economic capital in the form of money or shares; cultural capital in the form of diplomas, symbolic capital exists only in the “eyes of the others” (Siisiainen, 2003, p.196).

Bourdieu’s notion of cultural capital is often criticised for its apparent conceptual elusiveness (Sullivan, 2001), even though some argue that it was most certainly a deliberate choice by Bourdieu to give flexibility to the concept (Prieur & Savage, 2013). Indeed, Bourdieu (Bourdieu, 1998; Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992) recognises the effect of social change and argues that the concept of cultural capital needs to be placed in the wider context of a field, which is always in motion. For example, in line of this, Prieur and Savage (2013) reflect on the nature of cultural capital several decades after Bourdieu’s initial deployment of the idea and call for redefining the theorisation. Bourdieu based his original formulation on his empirical observations of French culture during the 1960s. However, with new technological and social changes in the last decades, the authors argue—at least in the context of Europe—the traditional highbrow culture that Bourdieu observed is no longer a characteristic of the well-educated, elite group today. Instead, they highlight *cosmopolitan* cultural capital, “the capacity to stand outside one’s own national frame of reference” (p.259), as an important emerging marker for the elite culture. Therefore, the authors argue, while preserving the relational and exclusionary

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qualities of cultural capital as defined in *Distinction*, this emergent form of capital should not simply be understood through the contours of traditional high culture.

Furthermore, Brown and Hesketh (2004) point that the concept of cultural capital is a “blunt instrument” (p.38) when attempting to explaining *within*-group differences rather than *between*-group differences. With reference to the increasingly competitive labour market wherein individuals often share similar cultural resources, the authors highlight the concept of *personal* capital in order to understand how some successfully win their ways into tough-entry jobs, while others credential holders lose out; and *vice versa*, how individuals from similar backgrounds manage their employability differently.

While I find Bourdieusian thinking useful to cultivate understandings of Western-situated transnational students’ motivations and evaluations of their experience of studying abroad in China, I argue there is a need for an alternative lens to shed light on transnational students’ voices that are seemingly not ‘goal-oriented’. Indeed, there is growing research showing that international student mobility is *not* necessarily a result of rational consideration of economic returns on education and social distinction, thus it needs to be theorised through alternative approaches (see, for example, Mulvey, 2020; Yang, 2018). These contributions are of fundamental importance in sensitising us to the limitations of taken-for-granted theorisation of international student mobility as strategic pursuit of capital accumulation. Thus, in an effort to extend this scholarship and developing alternative conceptual frameworks, albeit exploratory, in the following section, I outline the Deleuzio-Guattarian conceptualisation of desire and its analytical potential: the notion of desire captures various social dynamics underlying international student mobility beyond the economic perspective.

## The Notion of Desire as Social Force

While ‘desire’ and ‘aspiration’ have been interchangeably used to describe the sentiment of various types of prospective migrants, researchers have rarely brought desire into a theoretical dialogue and tested the analytical possibility of the notion (Carling & Collins, 2018). I was first acquainted with desire as a conceptual lens through Yang’s (2016) ethnographic work, which examines the shaping and transformation of educational desire and subjectivity of Chinese ‘foreign talent’ students in Singapore. In his study, Yang highlights intriguing and important characteristics of desires: while desire is a product of power and governmentality, it nevertheless brings ungovernable and unpredictable consequences that outstrip the power. Later, I was drawn more to the analytical potential of desire through Collins’ (2018) study of Southeast Asian migrants in South Korea, which investigates how desire drives mobility, channel migrants in particular directions, and engender unexpected transformations and individual and collective migrant lives. The migrants’ narratives in his study demonstrate some important aspects of migration: first, migration desire unravels across multiple spatial and temporal horizons of migratory processes rather than generate in a *singular* migration decision-making moment in time. Second, while desire deceptively sounds ‘personal’, migration desire is entangled in *relationships* between multiple people, places, and objects that migrants become part of. Lastly, migration desire necessarily involves ‘*becoming*’, a transformation of migrant subjectivity.

My study looks to build upon this scholarship by operationalising the work of Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari’s (1983, 1986, 1987) conceptualisation of *desire as a social force* and *assemblage* in order to articulate international student mobility as a dynamic process that cannot be detangled from the wider social context. Deleuze and Guattari (1983) describe the

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social world as a dynamic ensemble of *interconnection* between the social and material elements (human or non-human, physical or non-physical) referred to as ‘assemblage’ (*agencement* in French) (Barlott & Turpin, 2021).<sup>13</sup> The concept highlights a way of understanding social formations in terms of the interrelatedness of their social and material elements because they cannot exist separately (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987). The concept of desire refers to an intensive impulse to create, the capacity to create or move within a particular assemblage. Desire connects with other socio-material in an assemblage in continuous processes of social production (Ibid.).

Central to Deleuze and Guattari’s (1984, 1987) conceptualisation is the assertion that desire is not individual and necessarily aligned with simple self-interest. Rather, desire runs through people, and drives people. Conceptualising mobility as an assemblage situate mobility within the social world, yet still a part of the individual. In the context of international student mobility, there is a social force that implicitly, or even unconsciously, makes student desire transnational mobility, in general, or to particular destinations. Furthermore, we desire an assemblage rather than an object itself; as Deleuze (1996) argues, “to desire is to construct an assemblage” (p. 16). Turning once more to the example of international student mobility, when mobile students desire spatial mobility, they do not simply desire an object—such as an overseas degree—in itself, but the desire is generated by the perceived value of an overseas degree in an assemblage of the interrelated social, cultural, and material elements: consumer culture, social position,

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<sup>13</sup> In some of their work, Deleuze and Guattari (1987) refer to assemblages as ‘machines’ or illustrate its ‘machinic’ characteristics. However, I use the term assemblage throughout this thesis.

and status, future trajectory and so on (Collins et al., 2014). In this sense, desire is *affirmative* in that it acts in accordance with an assemblage that we are entangled in.

While desire is shaped by the social world, it also has the potential to disrupt and reshape the social world (Bignall, 2008). What is embedded within the notion is that desire is a *disruptive* and *transformative* capacity. When recognising that “roadblocks designate thresholds” (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987, p.190) in the social world with rigid and oppressive assemblages, then desire can disrupt and reconstruct existing assemblages or create new ones. Therefore, desire, as a social force and relational affect, has the potential to transform assemblages; this is the creative potential of desire. Drawing back to Collins’ (2018) and Yang’s (2016) studies, a focus on desire as a creative and transformative force provides a powerful tool to embrace a more multifaceted view of mobility, taking into account its undisciplined, uncertain characteristics.

In advocating postmodern sensibility, I do not intend to argue that a Deleuzio- Guattarian lens is *more appropriate* than the work of Bourdieu or others. Rather, I suggest that Deleuzio-Guattarian concepts of desire and assemblage provide a unique perspective that has seen limited use in the literature on international student mobility; and their work has the potential to generate a multiplicity of perspectives, tools, and approaches to think critically and pursue transformative scholarship on international student mobility.

While the above three theoretical framings were chosen to unpack transnational students’ verbal narrative claims on their educational mobility, Goffman’s Dramaturgy was chosen specifically to examine how such claims are presented by the transnational student in the

specific context of online social space. In the following, I review how Goffman's dramaturgical perspective can inform the examination of visual and textual narratives on social media.

## Dramaturgical Perspective and Online Social Space

In examining branch campuses and transnational students' social media content, this thesis is informed by Erving Goffman's dramaturgical thinking as articulated in his book *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (1959). The dramaturgical framework is rooted within a sociological perspective of symbolic interactionist tradition, which views individuals to construct meanings by interacting with others. These interactions are facilitated through their words, expressions, and gestures, and the interpretations are subject to a dynamic and ongoing process of revision. Goffman (1959) explores this process of impression management, explicating how an individual "presents himself and his activity to others, the ways in which he guides and controls the impression they form of him, and the kinds of things he may and may not do while sustaining his performance before them" (p. 8). To this end, social interactions are compared to performance on a stage, wherein actors (individuals) perform certain 'characters' for the audience (others).

Put differently, individuals strategically choose what information to reveal or withhold in order to present an idealised version of the self and, in turn, receive maximum social recognition. Such self-presentation is under constant review and therefore subject to change depending on context or audience, as dictated by the feedback individuals receive. Therefore, while individuals have agency and choice which enable them to furnish and monitor their

performances actively, they are simultaneously constrained by the broader social structure that governs what is accepted as appropriate or socially desirable presentations.

Goffman's work resonates across a broad range of academic terrain, such that this thesis—especially findings presented in Chapter Six and Seven—benefits from the research that has previously employed the dramaturgical lens to social media studies (e.g., Bareket-Bojmel et al., 2016; Birnbaum, 2013; Chua & Chang, 2016; Schwarz, 2016; Sin & He, 2019). On a theoretical level, I also attempt to weave Goffman's work with Hogan's (2010) notion of 'exhibition' with respect to the context of online spaces as a form of strategic presentation of the self. Hogan argues that social media is an interactive exhibition space, wherein individuals (users) are not only 'performers' but also 'curators', who carefully and deliberately display images of their choice of subjects as part of a performance of certain 'characters' in order to establish an 'idealised impression'. Following Goffman and Hogan, I argue that individuals' photographic practice and products on social media reflect how individuals endeavour to envision themselves as a particular sort of people to others. By doing so, I attempt to examine the performative function of stories and wider societal norms that govern individual choice in making such stories.

## Conclusion

While each of the above frameworks provides a powerful theoretical tool to pursue a critical exploration of international student mobility from a specific angle, relying on one single theory remains insufficient for gaining empirical and theoretical understandings of various dimensions of transnational students' motivations and experiences. Therefore, where I recognise the limits

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of concepts drawn from one theory in analysing the data, I compliment them with other relevant sources in sociology. I find that this approach provides more freedom in how the data can be interpreted. I discuss the theoretical contribution in more detail in Chapter Eight.

Developed from the literature review and theoretical influences presented above, the broad question that drives this research study is: how do transnational students from Anglophone and European countries make sense of and meaning from their motivations for and experiences of study abroad in China? In the following chapter, I discuss the methodological considerations taken in this thesis.

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# 4 METHODOLOGY

This chapter describes the methodological and ethical foundations underpinning this study. Although each of the three empirical chapters (Chapter Five, Six, and Seven) includes its own methods section, some details of the methodological procedures had to be omitted for the sake of brevity. Therefore, I aim to provide the reader with a more comprehensive overview of methodology in the following sections. This is not merely to comply with the conventions of scholarly writing, but because I find it both inherently interesting and important to discuss how the research findings are constructed and presented.

I begin by reviewing the epistemological principles that guide the methodological approach to this study's empirical investigation. Next, I set out my own experiences and reflections on my positionality and its relatedness to the findings. I then introduce in detail the research process to collect, analyse, and present this study. I also explain why I made certain choices or 'had to' compromise throughout the research process. The chapter then reviews the ethical, methodological challenges, as well as approaches that I undertook to mitigate the limitations and capitalise on its strengths. Finally, the overview of research design and presentation is included at the conclusion of this chapter.

## Research Stance

This study is based on a philosophical framework of critical realism whereby one's knowledge, understandings, experiences, and interpretations are always "historically, socially, and culturally situated" (Archer et al., 2016, n.p.). Acknowledging such a complex nature of social reality, and incompleteness of social knowledge, this study focuses on the subjective meanings that are articulated and ascribed by human actors with various viewpoints and interests. As such, I assume that the 'way of constituting acceptable knowledge' is situation-oriented and constructed through the influence of multiple factors deriving from individual biography and specific contexts (Creswell & Poth, 2016). Recognising studied individuals' various standpoints according to their varied background and experiences, I do not attempt to construct the single truth behind transnational students' narratives and generalise the findings of this qualitative study. Instead, I endeavour to develop a pattern of meanings inductively by analysing Western transnational students' highly detailed narratives on the motivations for and experiences of studying in China, as well as the influence of study abroad on their identity politics.

Transnational students' stories in this study are regarded as encompassing a 'narrative truth', which is "constructed around a core of facts or life events, yet allow a wide periphery for the freedom of individuality and creativity in selection, addition to, emphasis on, and interpretation of these 'remembered facts'" (Lieblich et al., 1998, p.8). In addition, I uphold that narrative accounts are co-constructed by the individual narrators and the social, cultural, and historical contexts to which they belong. As Dillabough and Kennelly (2010) point out, "young people neither represent lone authors of a singular story nor are they floating receptacles for their symbolic expressions of selfhood" (p. 46). Therefore, in this study, I view that when narrating

life stories, individuals make agentic choices in selecting what and how to narrate, and what conclusions to draw from a particular event in life. Concomitantly, these narrative accounts are not created in isolation from the social structure and cultural narratives that preceded them.

### My Positionality

Given my interest in gaining access to the nuanced views that influenced the individual worlds of my participants, I acknowledge that my role as a researcher also plays a central part in this research. In other words, I am conscious of the fact that I am ‘present’ in the research, and my background and worldview substantially influence the “relationship, identifications, and exchanges” (Luttrell, 2000, p.500) with my research participants. Therefore, I understand the act of ‘reciprocation’ is an ethical responsibility requiring the researcher’s attention throughout the research process, rather than a conventional practice to be tick-boxed and placed aside. On the other hand, I also recognise that emphasis on reflexivity may potentially lead to an excessive focus placed on the researcher’s self and the risk of using the research as self-therapy (Glesne, 2016). Therefore, in my attempt to balance this delicacy, in the following, I address my own subjective orientation to the extent that is relevant to the study abroad phenomena in general and the study’s participants in particular.

I am a phenotypically East Asian, heterosexual woman in her mid-thirties. I was raised within a middle-class family in Seoul, South Korea, where I received my entire primary, secondary, and undergraduate education. I do not clearly remember when and how I began to engage with the ideas of transnational mobility—especially to the ‘West’. However, albeit abstract than concrete, I grew up imagining moving to the ‘West’ in pursuit of ‘aspire-to-live’ life conditions

and possibilities (Tran, 2016). My somewhat primitive desire for the ‘West’ became increasingly solid and complex as I grew up experiencing relentless competition for education in Korea—widely known as ‘education fever’.<sup>14</sup> Such fervent desire for education greatly extended to ‘English fever’, and correspondingly, many Korean parents—especially those with economic and social means—began sending their children to English-speaking countries to help them avoid cut-throat domestic competition while obtaining an advantage (e.g., English) over others. Although I did not join such an ‘education exodus’ to the ‘West’, I was fortunate to attend a prestigious university as an undergraduate in Korea. My parents were thrilled that I achieved one of the most important milestones towards living a ‘good life’. In retrospect, I think they intuitively understood, as Bourdieu and Passeron (1990) argue, how education is deeply linked to social mobility and reproduction. Unfortunately, my journey to ‘success’ was only half completed without English fluency and Western credentials.

Unfulfilled, I began to involve myself in transborder mobility: an idea heavily cemented in the notion of ‘success’. I first participated in a short-term English as a Second Language (ESL) programme in the UK. I lived with a local host family, and the primary purpose of study abroad was to acquire English language proficiency. Later, I participated in a more traditional short-term exchange programme at the University of California, Berkeley in the US, taking all classes

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<sup>14</sup> Education Fever refers to “the national obsession with the attainment of education” (Seth, 2002, p.9) in East Asia. Deeply rooted Confucian values, education is valued as a way for achieving high social status and economic prosperity as well as a means of self-cultivation. Despite varying degrees of competitiveness, education in Korea, as in other East Asian countries, has become an integral part of contemporary culture and affects all aspects of social life.

## Chapter 4: Methodology

in English. When I came back to Korea, I enjoyed the feeling of superiority being a ‘rare’ person who speaks fluent English and has studied at a prestigious American university. With the ‘international profile’ I gained through study abroad, I successfully landed a well-paid job after graduating from university, securing a professional career first in Korea then in Hong Kong and Shanghai, China. My strategic engagement in transnational mobility resonates with findings from Waters’ (2006) study on mobility between Hong Kong and Canada, which demonstrates how parents and students make educational choices that are aligned with geographic mobility; and how border-crossing mobility is closely related to class, differentiation, and social reproduction.

Professionally, a significant part of my career was in international higher education, where I worked for an international Master of Business Administration (MBA) programme at a US university’s international branch campus in China. I have nearly four years of experience working with transnational students, faculty, and staff, where I began to think about wider questions of privilege, identity, and transnational experiences. To interrogate such presumed ‘values’ that transnational students and I aspired to produce through transnational mobility and education, I went back to the UK to obtain a master’s degree in Education. From then until now, as an international doctoral student, I have found myself where many of my participants found themselves, as a transnational student studying in a foreign country.

These salient experiences as a transnational student and education professional have given me a personal understanding of the international student experience in general. Indeed, my recollections and experiences are similar, in several aspects, to the stories participants shared with me during the process. Therefore, at the beginning stage of the research interviews, I was

confident that I had mapped my own study abroad experiences as well as professional experience with transnational students onto the markedly diverse realities of the participants. However, once I began to engage more deeply with the participants, the research led me to an unexpected awakening as it dawned on me that many transnational students had not come to China for academic—or at least linguistic—reasons. I eventually realised that it was *my own subjective assumptions* of this particular West-to-East shift in international student mobility that required drastic revision. Thus, in analysing and presenting the data collected, while I use personal pronouns and an active voice to place myself continually within the text, I occasionally turn the lens on myself and include myself in some of the critiques that I offer in this thesis. To prevent such subjective presuppositions on study subjects, I constantly attempted to maintain what Patton (2002) describes as “empathic neutrality” (p.50) and what Frosh and Baraitser (2008) refer to as “critical sympathy” (p.347; as cited in Schwarz, 2016), throughout the data collection, analysis, and presentation. This allowed me to connect with the students I interviewed while remaining critical with regards to examining their experiences. Overall, this process of reflexivity has helped me to be informed of my role as the researcher while I endeavour thoroughly to analyse the subjective dimensions of the study participants’ accounts.

## Research Sites and Participants

While the focal point of this study was the analysis of participants’ individual narrative accounts, participating students’ experiences overseas were, to a certain extent, embedded in and mediated through the institutional setting of the university. Thus, although conducting a thorough and systematic assessment of the degree programme is out of this research’s scope, I provide limited details on the institution that I consider as essential for the background.

## Chapter 4: Methodology

The research took place in the context of undergraduate programmes at a Sino-American university's branch campus in China, which is located in a metropolitan region of more than 20 million people.<sup>15</sup> I intentionally chose to recruit participants from a branch campus and degree programme taught exclusively in English because it is now the most prevalent form of international degree programmes in the context of China.<sup>16</sup>

At the time of data collection, there were approximately 1,500 students enrolled at the studied international branch campus. The branch campus recruited approximately 300 international and domestic students every year, while keeping an equal ratio of international and Chinese students. Admission requirements for Chinese nationals differed from those for international students. For example, Chinese applicants (excluding those from Hong Kong, Macau, and Taiwan) were required to take the Chinese national college entrance examination (*Gaokao*, 高考) in order to study in the Chinese branch campus. On the other hand, international applicants could apply to *any* or *all* of home and branch campuses by submitting *one* application via the Common Application. In other words, there were no differences in terms of admission requirements for the home or branch campuses for international applicants, but they could choose their geographic preference(s) and programme(s) of interest across home and

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<sup>15</sup> Due to the protection of confidentiality of the institution, this thesis has withheld identifying information such as references to the branch campus' location or university name.

<sup>16</sup> The number of degree programmes that accept international students account for the majority of English Taught Programmes (ETPs) at Chinese universities. According to Study Portals (2016), China offers 419 English taught degree programmes at 45 universities. The statistics are based on English taught degrees at the top 1,000 universities in the world.

branch campuses. All classes were taught in English, primarily by Western and Western-educated faculty, except for the Chinese language courses, which were taught primarily in Chinese, for four to six hours per week. Therefore, international and Chinese students whose native language is not English (with the exception of applicants who have spent at least three years in English-taught secondary schools prior to applying) were asked to submit a standardised English test score (i.e., TOEFL) to prove their English proficiency. However, while the Chinese language classes were a compulsory part of the degree requirements, it was not the focus of the degree programme in itself, and perhaps correspondingly, Chinese language proficiency was not required as an admission criterion.

Furthermore, it is important to note that all international students were subject to the Chinese regulatory frameworks. All international students to China who intend to study in China for a period of more than 180 days are required to obtain an X1 student visa. They are also required to apply for a Residence Permit within 30 days of their arrival in China. The Chinese residence permit then serves as a multi-entry visa for the duration of their study. In both home and branch campuses, there were designated student mobility teams that helped students get their visa and provided step-by-step instruction on how to obtain a student visa. Participants were also informed in advance by the institution that holders of X1 visa do not have rights to work in China, although they were able to undertake internships if authorised by their educational institution and other relevant authorities.

To solicit participants for this study, I contacted the international student representative at the university via Facebook. The student representative of the university then posted on the closed student Facebook group to advertise the research project to the international student

community within the university. In the recruitment letter (Appendix 1), I asked interested individuals to contact me with their contact information so that I could send them a web-based pre-interview survey link (Appendix 2a) and an informed consent document (Appendix 3). Therefore, the gatekeeper (e.g., university administrator) did not select whom to contact, but instead, self-selected potential participants voluntarily contacted me. To maintain confidentiality, participants' names have been assigned a pseudonym.

The transnational students in this study were initially selected through purposeful “criterion sampling” (Patton, 2002, p.238) based on some predetermined criterion of importance. For this purposeful sampling, I created simple, nationality-based criteria based on my research questions, which exhibit specific predetermined criterion characteristics as below:

- Inclusion criteria: international students who are *from* very high HDI countries (above 0.895)<sup>17</sup> in Europe or Anglophone countries.

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<sup>17</sup> The Human Development Index (HDI) is a new development measurement introduced by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP). The HDI incorporates variegated indicators, such as life expectancy, educational attainment, and income, into the index. The development of the HDI is meaningful because it is a single statistic providing a reference for both social and economic development of a nation-state. The HDI sets a minimum and a maximum for each dimension (goalpost) between 0 and 1 and to demonstrate where each country stands against these goalposts. In terms of education, the HDI measures 1) mean of years of schooling for adults aged 25 years, and 2) expected years of schooling for children of school entering age. At the research design stage, I saw the HDI as a fit-for-purpose measurement as it provides a reference of the educational infrastructure of each country as well as economic one. Therefore, for this study, I initially planned to recruit samples from European and Anglophone countries where the HDI score is above 0.895 (UNDP, n.d.).

- Exclusion criteria: Chinese citizens/permanent-residents, or Chinese-descent who reside outside of China and have returned to China to pursue education.

However, as I began to recruit participants, I quickly learned that such de-contextualised nationality-based selection criteria were not relevant for this research context (see Amelina & Faist, 2012). Therefore, from an early stage of data collection, I modified the criterion to embody contextual diversity in citizenship and national identity and accommodate the complexity that does not fit neatly into a single nation-state. Therefore, I utilised passport nationality as well as self-reported national identity as selection criteria. This methodological dilemma I encountered has been particularly marked in the studies of sociology and migration studies. Ulrich Beck (2007), for example, problematised the assumption that social processes arose within nation-state boundaries and called for an alternative analytic container of “methodological cosmopolitanism” (p. 286) to understand changes that are prompted by globalisation. Similarly, Robertson and Dale (2008) and Shahjahan and Kezar (2013) suggest that the nation-state has increasingly become ‘porous’ and may not contain complex multidimensional and geopolitical social processes.

20 students initially responded to the recruitment advertisement, and I further located potential participants via a referral system—a sampling method referred to as ‘snowball sampling’ (Patton, 2002). It helped me discover the characteristics of the target population that I was not aware existed. Oftentimes, participants voluntarily recommended their classmates when they tried to elaborate on the uniqueness of each individual case. For example, Maddelena referred to Grace while she was explaining that her experience in China as a white female had been significantly different from Grace’s due to her Asian ethnicity. Although participant referrals

were helpful in terms of convenience and access to many possible sources, I acknowledge that snowball sampling presents weak representativeness. In consequence, once a new source was referred, I again used criterion-sampling techniques as a complementary strategy to review and converge toward a few cases that were likely to be information rich.

Overall, this study recruited 33 international students (24 females and 9 males) between the ages of 18 and 22, who were full-time students taking a four-year undergraduate programme in China during my data collection (October 2016–June 2017). They are predominantly American and secondarily European (France, the Netherlands, and Spain)<sup>18</sup> based on passport nationality. I also included one student with a permanent residency in the US as she was born in Columbia but grew up in the US from five years old. Participants represent various racial and ethnic groups. Acknowledging the intersectional nature of identities, I did not have particular focus on any single social marker but collected information on gender, race, rural/suburban/urban classifications, and socio-economic class as a matter of context. While participants' gender, race, and rural/suburban/urban classifications were directly asked, by choosing from pre-coded response options or by filling in the space provided in the questionnaire, information on participants' self-assessed socio-economic class was collected over the course of interviews. Although I did not intend explicitly to collect participants' socio-economic classification, during the interview, almost all students discussed their perceived

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<sup>18</sup> There was one student who holds a dual citizenship of the US and France.

social-economic backgrounds with ease as part of their transnational journey or larger life stories. A summary of each participant's biographical information is presented in *Table 4.1*.

Table 4.1 Participant demographics

	Pseudonym	Gender	Nationality	Year of Study	First Language	Ethnicity
1	Tom	M	USA	4	English	Caucasian/ White
2	Maddelena	F	USA	1	English	Caucasian/ White
3	Rose	F	USA	3	English	Multiracial
4	Soraya	F	USA	1	English	Arabic
5	Stefany	F	USA	4	English	Caucasian/ White
6	Susan	F	USA	4	English	Black
7	Fleur	F	Netherlands	4	Dutch	Caucasian/ White
8	Yolanda	F	Columbia (US)	3	English	Hispanic
9	Amber	F	USA	4	English	Asian/ Pacific islander
10	Neil	M	USA	3	English	Caucasian/ White
11	Grace	F	USA	2	English	Asian/ Pacific islander
12	Aurélie	F	France	2	French	Caucasian/ White
13	Caroline	F	USA	1	English	Caucasian/ White
14	Elias	M	USA	2	English	Multiracial
15	Crystal	F	USA	4	English	Hispanic/ White
16	Sophie	F	USA	1	English	Caucasian/ White
17	Heather	F	USA	1	English	Asian/ Pacific islander
18	Sohin	F	USA	4	English/ Korean	Asian/Pacific islander
19	Patrick	M	USA	4	English	Caucasian/White
20	Valérie	F	France/ USA	2	English/ French	Caucasian/White
21	Gabriel	M	USA	4	English	Black
22	Joseph	M	USA	4	English	Black
23	Megan	F	USA	4	English	Caucasian/White
24	Felipe	M	USA	4	English	Hispanic
25	Karlijn	F	Netherlands	3	Dutch	Caucasian/White
26	Jasmin	F	USA	4	English	Black
27	Louise	F	USA	4	English	Black
28	Hannah	F	USA	2	English	Asian/ Pacific islander
29	Maria	F	USA	2	English	Hispanic
30	Maggie	F	USA	2	English	Multiracial
31	Bruno	M	Spain	4	Spanish	Hispanic/ White
32	Shirin	F	USA	2	English/Farsi	Persian
33	Scott	M	USA	4	English	Caucasian/ White

## Data Collection

The research draws on participants' verbal, visual and textual narratives on their educational choices and experiences. To summarise, the research data were collected over 10 months and consisted of pre-interview survey results, 33 semi-structured interview transcripts, visual and textual social media content from 22 participants, and personal field notes. In what follows, I detail four research methods I utilised in a chronological ordering of the research process.

### Pre-interview Survey

Once the participants contacted me with an interest in participating in the study, I sent them an email with a link for the pre-interview online survey (Appendix 2a) and informed consent letter (Appendix 3). The survey consisted of two parts. In the first part, I collected a range of participants' demographic information, including age, gender, country of citizenship and 'perceived' home country, primary language, and ethnicity. The second section of the survey focused on participants' decision making with regards to study abroad. In this section, I asked participants about other destination countries and institutions that participants had considered, information sources and (un)important choice factors; and if any, specific league tables of university rankings they had referred to. When I received the pre-interview survey and consent form, I sent another email to participants to confirm the time and venue for the face-to-face

interview. <sup>19</sup> Because almost all participants completed the survey relatively shortly after they received the link and a lot earlier than their interview dates, I was able to analyse the survey results prior to the interviews, and thus used the analysis to narrow down some areas and topics during face-to-face interviews (Appendix 2b).

While the pre-determined themes identified through the survey were helpful to guide the interviews, they also revealed a methodological limitation that follows from the nature of temporality. The data in this study were collected at one point in time and based on participants' retrospective framing of their motivations and experiences. This can limit its explanatory power and even be problematic because participants' narratives include mixed and/or altered perspectives of the past and the present (including post hoc rationalisation with regards to their decisions). Some motivating factors that were ranked high in the survey turned out to reflect the participants' priorities at the point of data collection, rather than those at the point of university decision-making. From my perspective, this discrepancy does not necessarily undermine the value of participants' narrative accounts as a research tool; but rather, highlights the aspect of human experience that is inherently temporal and involves a constant sense-making process. In other words, participants' narratives are "constructed around a core of facts or life events, yet allow a wide periphery for the freedom of individuality and creativity in selection, addition to, emphasis on, and interpretation of these 'remembered facts'" (Lieblich et al., 1998, p.8). Besides, to a certain extent, it allowed me to attend to participants' 'multiple

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<sup>19</sup> The informed consent form was provided in hard copy before the interview to double-confirm that participants' consent. For Skype interviews, the informed consent form is only offered in soft copy, yet the content of the form was re-informed and agreed to before proceeding to the interview.

stories’, illustrating “the recursive, shifting and uneven ways in which identities ‘take shape’, and in which we come to recognise and represent ourselves as certain kinds of people” (McLeod, 2003, p.206).

## Interviews

This study involves participants’ narratives as a pivotal means through which they construct and express meaning. Thus, it primarily utilises semi-structured interviews, enabling the interviewees to voice their perspectives and stories regarding their experience in a particular context (Yin, 2017). Semi-structured interviews—also known as non-standardised or qualitative interviews—offered the benefit of using a list of pre-determined themes and questions from the analysis of the pre-interview survey as in a structured interview; while retaining ample flexibility to allow participants to talk openly about broad issues, as well as for me to ask questions and enhance my grasp of emerging topics.

I conducted 33 face-to-face and video interviews between October 2016 and January 2017. While 28 in-person interviews took place in a café close to the university located in a business district in the centre of the city, the remaining five interviews were conducted using Skype software from my temporary office space in China. I also completed four follow-up interviews in early February 2017 through Skype. In-person interviews were conducted individually to maintain participants’ confidentiality. I arranged interviews in a busy public setting, which was fairly free from distractions, and at times that were mutually suitable. All interviews were conducted in English and audio recorded. Each interview lasted from 60 to 100 minutes. I followed the interview protocol and wrote field notes. My natural tendency was to converse

dialogically, thus at first, I found it challenging to perform the role of a listener and let participants' stories arrive at a natural conclusion (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2014). However, when I listened to the first five interviews to review my performance as an interviewer and to conduct an initial analysis of themes, I came to realise that my interruptions often led to tangential yet irrelevant contributions. With practice and conscious adjustment in interviewing style, I managed to allow participants to respond in full and interjected only to clarify rather than to spur additional line of conversation.

While I came to the study with some fundamental questions, I also remained open to other topics and themes that my participants found most pressing within my field of inquiry. The participants, in general, were able to respond well to an informal, conversational style, but few needed more prompting than others. Some would naturally weave elaborate stories, while others wanted to make sure that they answered the question asked. As the researcher and interviewer, I had to work with each participant's personality and adjust the ways in which I performed the interviews. Although I used my interview guide with pre-determined topic areas, the interviews were generally informal, and I rarely posed any of my prepared questions directly. My topic control was more subtle, with the various topics seemingly just 'emerging' over the course of the conversation, and my only obvious recourse to the guide typically occurred toward the very end of the interview when I wanted to verify that the interview had 'covered' all the topics I had intended to discuss. At the end of each interview, I arranged a short follow-up contact to share and review the transcription and to allow interviewees to clarify their answers if they wished.

## Field Notes

As part of data collection, I carried out three-and-a-half-months of fieldwork in China. The field visit was advantageous in several ways. First and foremost, it permitted me a deeper understanding of the research context—the university and the wider host community—in which participants’ narratives were situated. Such understanding enabled me to write rich and detailed descriptions of participants’ study abroad experience. Second, the fieldwork had a logistical advantage to conduct face-to-face interviews because most of the participants were accommodated as a single group.

In the first half of fieldwork, I stayed close to the studied branch campus, where most participants were staying in a student residence hall. I met some of the participants and their friends each morning at the bus stop or café next to the branch campus. I arranged interviews with individual participants at their convenience and met them either near their accommodation or the university, taking care not to encroach on their classes and other commitments. These interviews were enriched by informal interactions during the second half of the fieldwork, particularly after I moved to the city’s central nightlife district, where many participants hung out during the weekend. I accepted some invitations to social events, including lunch and dinner, as well as drinks. I also extended invitations to participants occasionally, for instance, to join me for lunch or coffee.

Procedurally, I tried to maintain a practice of writing field notes after each interview to document how the research process unfolded and to reflect on some of my initial analyses. In addition, these field notes include descriptive summaries of the contexts and interactions that took place each day. In congruence with this research project’s interpretive nature, I also wrote

autobiographical notes on my own intimate thoughts and emotional reactions while staying in China. Undoubtedly, the field visit served as an important reminder of my own experiences as an international student—though not in China, which allowed me to revisit the ways I have understood, embedded, and communicated my own study abroad experiences. Indeed, fieldwork allowed me to have my own bodily experience in China. While I had lived in China previously as an expatriate, this was my first time travelling to China without any professional facilitation from a multi-national company. My naïve positioning as a ‘former expat’, I believe, enabled me to build rapport between myself and participants quickly and easily. For example, during early ice breaking phases, I shared the difficulties in travelling via local public transportation, language barriers, and cultural misunderstandings. In my view, disclosing some of my own vulnerabilities helped our research relationship feel less like a site of unequal power between the researcher and participants.

### Observation of Social Media Content

My initial research design was intended to explore participants’ narratives primarily through qualitative interviews. However, as the study evolved and I interacted more with the participating students, I was increasingly drawn to participants’ online social spaces as their ‘natural habitat’. Indeed, all participants seemed to utilise social media as the primary communication tool to interact with friends, family and even the public beyond the limitations of geographical boundaries. Therefore, when I became acquainted with the work of Schwarz (2016), who drew on participants’ Facebook photos and captions as part of her research data, in combination with semi-structured interviews and participant observations to understand young people’s narratives on international volunteer experience in Kenya, I became inspired

to incorporate social media into this research project and to explore the wider possibilities of qualitative research.

In my justification for conjoining participants' online and offline narratives, I consider social media platforms as highly relevant sites "to examine the hybridity between physical spaces and cyberspace" (Paris, 2012, p.18) in contemporary digital youth culture. This methodological choice upholds the perspective that the boundary between the online and offline social world is increasingly blurring, and thus digital mediums has become central to the understanding of how young people communicate meaning (Zhao, Grasmuck, & Martin, 2008). Similarly, Hallett and Barber (2014) highlight that online social spaces have become an imperative site to fully understand the ways in which people create meaningful experiences and interactions, navigate through the social world, and interpret relevant social context. I posit the nature of inquiry in this study inherently elucidates the entangled relational events and contexts in which they occur, albeit through the researcher's reflexive interpretation (Linderson, 2010).

Furthermore, I chose this strategy because I wanted to merge the strengths of both established and newly emerging methods. Combining methods raise complexity to the inquiry by diversifying the angles to better understand transnational students' experiences of studying abroad in China. Put differently, I view the approach as beneficial because it is likely to establish nuanced research accounts which offer "more scope for presenting complex, ambiguous and contradictory version of the self" (Croghan et al., 2008, p.355). Incorporating data derived from social media enabled me to accompany participants in multi-dimensional aspects of their everyday life, beyond just words. Thus, participants' social media was a valuable site because it provided not only standalone visual data but also an integral mnemonic

for unarticulated aspects of their experiences. This practice sits well within an ethnographic approach, which typically uses several methods to flesh out the multi-dimensional aspects of a research subject rather than only depending on verbal text (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2019).

Employing visual and textual content on social media was also beneficial in scrutinising participants' everyday social practices. While participants were able to share stories around memorable incidents within the broader realms of their lives, when talking about taken-for-granted, mundane social practices, they often had to relinquish a full narrative story because they could not find the matching words. Indeed, many participants often failed to translate their experiences into articulated narratives, as DeVault (1990) called 'linguistic incongruence', and filled the gap between phrases by "you know" or "you know what I mean" (Power, 2003; Wills, Dickinson, Meah, & Short, 2016).

I posit that the traditional ethnographic research methods to understand the social lives of globally mobile young people is not only increasingly inadequate but also difficult to apply. Many participants in this study often engaged in regional and international travel, thus it was difficult to conduct participant observations in one geographical location throughout the entire period of data collection. In this context, social media content helped me access their "stream of experiences and practices as they move through, and interact with, their physical and social environment" (Kusenbach, 2003, p.463) across geographical boundaries. Further, this data collection strategy enabled me to facilitate an investigation beyond pre-defined boundaries (e.g., campus or dormitory) to consider a wider range of social entanglement that international students' lives in China entail.

Finally, exploring participants' social media allowed me to mitigate one of the methodological limitations: what was said—or unsaid—in the relational circumstances between participants and the researcher during the interview. In other words, the answers given to me by European and North American transnational students could also be affected by the fact that I am an East Asian researcher seeking insights from Western subjects through a face-to-face interview. While I acknowledge that participants may have performed a particular construction of themselves in online space, I felt that the observation of their social media content permitted me to explore participants' perspectives that did reflect significantly less of a desire to impress (or not to offend) the researcher during the face-to-face interview.

As digital content posted on social media has not been a long-standing tool for empirical research in the field of social sciences, I first browsed through participants' postings across Facebook, Instagram, and WeChat. I shortlisted these platforms because of the widespread popularity with approximately 2.7 billion (Facebook) and 1.16 billion (Instagram) unique active users. WeChat—in the particular context of China and its 'Great Firewall' internet censorship policy<sup>20</sup>—is a fundamental social media platform with 1.2 billion active users, of which the majority are based in China. This digital space offered by these social media platforms consists of a main profile and public/private 'wall' in which individuals can post photographs and write a commentary to narrate them. All of the chosen social media platforms

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<sup>20</sup> Over the past decade, China has blocked thousands of foreign—primarily Western—and domestic websites. The studied social media (i.e., Facebook and Instagram) platforms except WeChat are officially blocked within China. Therefore, they are only accessible through Virtual Private Network (VPN) service as a circumvention tool that bypasses geo-restrictions (see Li, 2016; Yang, 2017).

## Chapter 4: Methodology

provide a virtual social space in which users create various content and share it with the public, or expansive and interactive ‘friend’ or ‘follower’ network. Castells (2010) refers to such emerging form of digitally mediated communication as ‘mass self-communication’. Here, the technology is an apparatus for constructing and sharing life experiences with other individuals on a large or public scale.

In researching transnational students’ experiences overseas, I became drawn to how and to what extent these experiences were situated within and mediated through the university’s institutional setting. Therefore, I additionally conducted an analysis of textual and visual materials on the chosen social media platform created by two Sino-Western branch campuses, including the branch campus at which the study participants are enrolled at. I chose to include my analysis of two institutions’ social media postings to provide detailed accounts and make explicit characteristics of the studied context. From a research ethics point of view, it was a desirable choice to further ensure participants’ anonymity.

The collection of digital visual data was limited to the participants who opted to share their social media accounts. I first included a section in the pre-interview survey where participants were able to state whether they were comfortable with the fact that my research *might* collect photographs posted online. Only those who agreed to give permission to the researcher’s access to social media provided their account details in the survey. Later, based on personal rapport with participants through the formal and informal interactions, I contacted participants one more time via email (Appendix 4) to ask for permission to collect data from their social media content and explore their narratives in the online space. Overall, among 33 interview participants, 22 participants approved access to their social media postings, sent me their

account information, and accepted my ‘follow’ request on Instagram, Facebook, and/or WeChat.

To access participants’ profiles, I opened temporary a ‘researcher account’ on each social media platform and sent a request to each participant who agreed to partake in this digital data collection. I created this researcher account—separate from my own personal account—in order to protect mine and participants’ confidentiality and to serve a practical function of browsing participants’ postings through isolated space rather than mixing them with my personal social media connections. After checking all social media platforms, I chose to focus only on one platform (Instagram) because I thought the idea of delving deep into participants’ photo-based self-presentation was intriguing. Besides, Instagram was the most widely and frequently used among participants. I accessed participants’ social media accounts periodically, making notes about the visual data presented on participants’ social media: the subject matter, composition, and thematic patterns. Institutions were not formally informed of my access; however, I only analysed postings that were open to the public. I set a point in time (October 2016) when I met participants in person for interviews and started making my field notes, then started retrospectively collecting images and captions posted from that point. Most of the participants as well as two studied institutions frequently posted on their social media accounts during and beyond the research time frame. However, I stopped collecting social media data when I felt that the point of redundancy in emerging themes was reached (June 2017). In total, I collected 1,063 postings from participants’ accounts and 509 postings from two Sino-American branch campuses’ official accounts.

## Data Analysis, Interpretation, and Presentation

In this study, I adopted the qualitative data analysis approaches outlined by Miles and Huberman (1994). Specifically, the authors stated that the central steps of qualitative analysis should involve 1) *gathering an overall sense of data*, 2) *coding the data*, reducing the abundant amount of collected data into a workable and coherent form, 3) *combining the codes* into the broader categories or themes, and 4) *displaying the data*, producing ‘a point of view’. They also listed several other phases in data analysis, which I employed to extract meaning from qualitative data, including: counting frequency of codes, summarising field notes, working with words, and relating categories among the categories. Three empirical chapters (Chapter Five, Six, and Seven) in this thesis have been written thematically rather than chronologically. While presenting findings in a chronological way would have been fit-for-purpose if my research questions had focused on transnational students’ individual progression over time, my aim for this study was to investigate common patterns of meaning that ran across and throughout participants’ narratives.

The verbal data from the 33 interviews were stored in separate digital audio files. After the interviews were concluded, the audio files were transcribed in full. I read the transcripts and field notes to “get a sense of the whole” (Patton, 2002, p.440), develop a general sense of the narrative data, and identify patterns within them. Then, I organised the data by participant, read the transcripts again line-by-line, highlighted key sentences with significant quotes, and conducted coding. I divided the transcripts into two parts by the pre-departure and post-arrival phases according to interview sections and research questions. Although I had full transcriptions of interviews, I kept going back to the interview audio-recordings. I found that even the same text might illuminate different aspects of the interview participants’ stories

depending on the type of medium. Therefore, I concentrated on word choices and repetitions within phrases from the written textual data, and I paid attention to tones and emotional sentiments from the spoken data.

Similarly, for the visual and textual narratives, content that was not related to their overseas experiences itself during the data collection was available to me because participants' Facebook profiles were their 'real' accounts. While I did not directly draw upon such content in the analysis, it assisted me in a broader understanding of their narratives and past experiences. From this holistic browsing of the images and reading of the captions, I created content categories, then coded different themes and sub-themes that had arisen from the participants' social media. Some of these themes were determined prior to conducting analysis of the visual dataset based on my analysis of interviews (e.g., participants' desire for becoming cosmopolitan), while others were emergent. Once I had established a set of content categories, I screenshotted image files and sorted them into separate folders by the topic of the image. Postings created by branch campuses were analysed and categorised into seven sub-groups: diverse student body; Chinese and international cultural experiences; campus facilities; landscapes and architecture; university branding and identity; admission related information or promotions for prospective students; and announcements for current students. Participants' postings were also sorted and analysed by the main objects in the images (e.g., landscape/architecture, food, portrait, travel). To analyse textual narratives, in a separate Microsoft Excel spreadsheet, I extracted sentences from the captions and organised them under the sub-themes I had assigned. Once I had established the themes and sub-themes I wanted to present within the thesis, I went through each participant's photos one more time to focus specifically on the editorial element of social media, which photographs participants shared

online and how they described them. References to Twitter, YouTube videos, and viral blog posts were excluded from my data collection, but nevertheless coded for the analysis when specifically mentioned by participants. In doing so, this thesis offers a highly personalised account of the ‘third-party knowledges’ (Scarles, 2013) that transnational students found relevant and instructive in the time leading up to their studies in China as well as during their stay in China.

### Limitations

This study, like all research, has certain limitations in its design or execution, and I made certain choices and compromises; and I, as a researcher, constantly sought ways to get as close to the ‘truth’ as possible throughout the process. Oftentimes, I asked myself, “were there better way of answering my research questions?” or “why did I not ask this question during the interview?” While I believe that foresight, as well as hindsight, has provided me with opportunities to grow into a better researcher, it is important to address the limitations of the research design. Therefore, in this section, I reflect on those limitations, how they might be overcome or ameliorated, and other opportunities that could take my research aims further.

Most importantly, this research relies on the responses of this particular group of transnational students. Although the participants are representative of transnational students studying in a large, urban, metropolitan, and cosmopolitan area with multiple kinds of higher education institutions, this study cannot be generalised to all transnational students who come to China for higher education. In a similar vein, the students who participated in this research were all enrolled at the same university. These students, and this university, may not represent students,

colleges, and universities nation- and region-wide. However, this limitation was chosen consciously to control varied academic reputations between institutions or varied levels of cultural and symbolic capital held by different cities as the primary motivation for destination choice. Nevertheless, the research site represents a currently predominant model of English-taught undergraduate programme in Asia. Therefore, while I recognise the many limitations of this chosen research site, I believe it is fair to assume that some of the discernible commonalities and presented themes may have been shared by the larger population.

The selection of participants of the study, while allowing for more comprehensive insights into this particular group of international students, did not allow for more diverse perspectives of international students in China. An ideal sample would have included transnational students studying in diverse regions of China, representing different host universities, and studying for different levels of degree (e.g., master's and doctoral degrees). It would also have been lucrative to recruit students who had left the studied university because their experiences had not lived up to, or match, the motivations to study abroad in China. Their perspectives may be different from those of the study participants. Therefore, they would permit more voices and experiences to be heard, allowing for a more comprehensive picture to be drawn about Western transnational students' study abroad experiences in China. However, time and budget constraints made data collection from more individuals difficult.

It is also important to acknowledge that the participants were not all in the same year, and hence the length of stay in China at the time of data collection varied from three months to three years. Therefore, some participants' perceptions of their pre-departure motivations may have been altered over time. This time frame represented an investigational compromise as the research

attempted to balance memory and perception of the participants' educational experience, while at the same time allowing the research to cover both participants' pre-departure motivations for and actual post-arrival experiences of study abroad. This concession admits that, while narratives serve to memorialise a *particular* story in time and space, these renderings exist within an evolving and fluid life story; and the narrator may always reinterpret the story based on new experiences and changing context (McAdams, Josselson, & Lieblich, 2006).

In qualitative research, the researcher is the primary research instrument for collecting and analysing the data. I am neither from Anglophone nor European countries, and I sometimes felt that understanding another's cultural experience was extremely challenging. Furthermore, as I mentioned above, since participants' verbal texts were generated through the conversations with myself as the researcher, what was shared (and not shared) in the interview was unique to the relational circumstances between the participants and me. For example, as I mentioned earlier, participants' answers could also include their own bias because participants may have positioned me as an 'audience' and performed in a particular way in response to whom I seemed to them to be (i.e., East Asian researcher) and what I had asked them to tell me about (i.e., participants' experiences in China). Conversely, the research proceeded based on my own interpretation and understanding of the data collected, such that another researcher working with the same dataset might have emphasised alternative themes or reached different conclusions.

In a similar vein, there is a strong chance that participants consciously modified their behaviour on social media, being conscious that a researcher was lurking in their online spaces. Hallett and Barber (2014) recognise that participants may display different facets of self when

engaging in digital social space, and hence, researchers require to be aware of the ways in which online social spaces are constructed and utilised by participants. While I did not tell participants in any way about the type, amount, or extent of the social media postings they might share, I assume that any visual compositions made available to me were part of their impression management strategy—an attempt to paint their experiences in line with the ‘character’ they believed so that the audience might judge in a positive light. In this sense, Instagram is fundamentally an ‘exhibition space’ (Hogan, 2010), and I was precisely interested in participants’ active engagement with this notion of ‘idealised impression’ (Goffman, 1959) and how they create one. With this in mind, I contend that “neither the private musings nor the public manoeuvring is any more ‘real’ or ‘authentic’ than the other” (McAdams, 1997, p.64). In other words, the issue of authenticity remains both in face-to-face and online methods (Hine, 2008).

Finally, participants who checked preliminary findings and helped validate my interpretations told me that being a participant in this research and reading my interpretation helped them look more closely at who they were, and what are behind the choices they made and experiences they shared online. Obviously, some individuals may see this as a limitation of this study, as I had my participants deeply reflecting on their experiences, and eventually on how they viewed themselves. By having mobile young people think about the various aspects of their identities, was I influencing on how they viewed them? While this might have been the case, I do not believe this is a negative limitation to the research. Rather, I believe the research allowed these young people to see themselves from a critical point. As I suggested before, having these sorts of conversations with students might help them garner more about themselves from their cross-border education experiences.

## Quality Dimensions: Rigour and Credibility

For academic rigour, Yin (2009) suggests that researchers need “to make as many steps as operational as possible” (p. 45); thus, individuals external to the study cannot doubt the structure of the research and its findings. One strategy for establishing rigour and credibility is maintaining a transparent chain of evidence throughout the study, having the ability to demonstrate directly from where statements, incidents, and ideas are pulled to substantiate the findings. While I attempted to offer as much detail as I could in the research methods section of each paper (Chapter Five, Six, and Seven), some of the details of the research process were eventually compromised due to the strict word limit for scholarly journal articles. Therefore, I attended to this matter throughout this chapter again and documented the research process thoroughly.

In addition, the credibility of this study has been upheld by the use of multiple data collection methods on and offline. While the goal of merging multiple methods was not to triangulate the collected data per se, it nevertheless served the role of triangulation by providing “disconfirming or negative evidence” (Cresswell & Miller, 2000, p.127). Similarly, Yin (2009) supported the employment of multiple sources of evidence to triangulate data and safeguard that the conclusions drawn from the data collected are more convincing and robust. In this study, I first formulated initial themes and sub-themes through coding of the pre-interview survey, interviews, and online content separately, then returned to the dataset later to search for inconsistencies or contrasts within and among the datasets. As Cresswell and Miller (2000) argue, disconfirming evidence I encountered did not raise a threat to my analysis, as it allowed me to assemble a nuanced picture by presenting variation within participants’ experiences in China. In all empirical chapters to follow, I document themes that were articulated strongly

and repeatedly by participants, but I also state voiced disagreements or exceptions. I provided in detail which participant voiced about a particular theme so that it is not mistakenly ascribed to all participants, thereby implying a larger consensus than actually existed. In short, my decision to collect multiple data from multiple methods serves to enhance credibility by offering a more robust account of the participants' experiences.

Finally, I conducted two rounds of member checking—a method to countercheck preliminary interpretation for the purpose of data triangulation—to allow participants to review information written about them to inspect for accuracy (Cho & Trent, 2006). First, each participant reviewed and verified their interview transcripts. I additionally asked four participants for informant feedback to validate my analysis. They found my findings insightful and accurate when put into the Western context. If discrepancies were arisen between my interpretation and their intentions, steps were taken to ensure that the meanings are re-articulated.

## Ethical Considerations

I endeavoured to ensure that I adopted an “ethical attitude” (Josselson, 2007, p.539) towards the research and did justice to the participants within the chosen framework of analysis. In her approach to narrative research, Josselson (2007) emphasises both ‘explicit’ and ‘implicit’ contracts to yield meaningful data from deeply human, genuine, empathic, and respectful relationships between the researcher and the participants. The explicit contract contains a brief introduction of myself as well as the research project, collection, handling, and storage of the collected data, the right not to participate or withdraw from the study any time, and respect for confidentiality of participants (see Appendix 1,3, and 4).

## Chapter 4: Methodology

All participants in this study reached the age of consent. Although some of students shared deeply personal stories, none voiced that any aspect of our interaction had caused distress or concern. Finally, no one chose to withdraw before, during, or after the interview. However, as I employed a research method involving the participants' social media content, I realised that it demanded much attention to the researcher and participants' interpersonal expectations, which Josselson (2007) called 'implicit' contract. While the epistemological benefits of venturing participants' online social space were obvious and significant, online research brought unique ethical dilemmas which call for consideration (Hallett & Barber, 2014; Hine, 2008; Madge, 2007).

As scholars increasingly utilise the Internet as a tool for research, theorising and research guidelines on internet-mediated data collection have increased considerably in recent years, raising a variety of unique issues in online research ethics (Hallett & Barber, 2014; Madge, 2007). In consequence, there has also been increased formal regulation and research governance concerning digital research. While such 'explicit' guidelines—in my case, the *Digital Research Ethics Annexe* (British Sociological Association, 2017)—provided a baseline from which to rely on when designing the research and reflecting on the procedures, I often experienced a gap between the guidelines and the dynamic and layered 'micro ethics' that arise in the actual research context. On this note, Madge (2007) aptly recognises,

procedural ethical guidelines can act no more than as part of a process of ongoing critical debate about internet-mediated research, a debate that will go well beyond formal institutional boundaries. Moreover, since there is no one, fixed, normative set of ethics for online research, it will be impossible to develop a universally applicable set of formalised codes that can be applied as a simplistic template or imprint for research governance purposes (p.666).

Indeed, I faced many ethical challenges that I did not foresee when initially designing the study and constantly had to make my own ethically informed judgments over the course of collecting, analysing, and presenting data. For example, although I drafted the informed consent form to my best knowledge at that moment, I had to check several times whether I informed the participants of the full extent of what to expect from the digital data collection. Then, during the data collection phase, I constantly had to struggle with the feeling that I was peeping on their lives. Although participants agreed that I could use their postings on social media, it sometimes concerned me that they might have not been aware that how often or closely I was observing their online spaces.

Furthermore, I had to define what could be and could not be considered participants' postings. In this study, chosen social media platforms have a function to cater to cross-postings ('tag') and communications among users. The users can 'tag' other users when they post photos, such that the tagged user's name displays when the cursor hovers over their image. That is, while participants did not necessarily create online content themselves, they were nevertheless 'tagged in' and represented by others or vice versa. Similarly, participants' friends or followers could comment on shared photographs. In my study, any such 'tagged' images or comments have not been included in the analysis because I did not have consent from the friend or follower group to be part of this project.

Finally, once all the data were gathered, it became apparent that the data and its interpretations represented substantial insights into participants' lives. However, this visual data collected from participants' online spaces led to a concern about the issues of privacy in semi-private online spaces and anonymity when data are connected to personal profiles (Hallett & Barber,

2014). For example, when presenting the photographic data, I had to choose carefully what does or does not identify a person, their institution, or its geographical location. My intention was clear at the beginning of the research, and I gave assurance to participants about maintaining participants' confidentiality when publishing or presenting the findings from the study. However, I recognised that presenting an image that is accompanied by a textual narrative or excerpt of interviews (even with pseudonyms) may increase the likelihood of the individual to be identified. Therefore, before I presented any participant's photographs, I double-checked whether they were comfortable with the potential risk of compromised privacy and confidentiality. Additionally, in light of safeguarding participants' identities, I reproduced photos and blurred the faces of all individuals captured in the photos throughout this thesis, even though I recognise that visual materials posted by participants could be extremely useful to help illustrate many of the claims I make in the research.

In sum, I followed contextual and reflexive research ethics when employing online methods because different online research contexts produce particular research relationships (Bailey, 2001). In other words, while such an emerging concept of online social spaces entails building robust ethical guidelines for collecting, analysing, and presenting data, I considered ethical guidelines as a flexible framework rather than a prescriptive set of regulations, and attempted to integrate reflexivity within the research as an integral part of professional self-regulation.

## Conclusion

In this chapter, I have described the overall research design and justified methodological choices made throughout the research project. I chose interviews as the primary method

because they are particularly appropriate to clarify the empirical requirements of answering the research questions. In addition to a traditional qualitative method of interviews, I deliberately choose to explore an emerging qualitative method of social media to formulate robust and complex perspectives which may corroborate, or challenge potentially narrow interpretation drawn from a single method. However, at the same time, digital data collection is a particularly intensive form of research method that requires dedicated and reflexive ethical guidelines outlined by the researcher. Therefore, while I believe that I thoroughly reported my approach to digital methods, it also alerts the reader to the possibility for continued critical engagement with them. I will return to my reflections on this in the final chapter when discussing the methodological contribution.

In the chapters that follow, I present three empirical papers interspersed with participants' visual and verbal excerpts, my analysis and interpretations as the researcher, and references to the relevant empirical and theoretical literature. The order of these chapters roughly corresponds to each of the research questions and answers in turn. In Chapter Five, I unpack participants' motivations and consideration for study abroad and the destination choice. In Chapter Six, I investigate how they make sense of their experiences in China. Finally, in Chapter Seven, I specifically focus on visual narratives of transnational mobility and education created by transnational students and international branch campuses on social media. In Chapter Eight, I provide a summary of key findings and some concluding thoughts; review the contributions and limitations of the research project; and indicate the avenues for future research.

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# 5 IN PURSUIT OF *MORE THAN JUST* ACHIEVEMENTS: MOTIVATIONS AND ASPIRATIONS OF TRANSNATIONAL STUDENTS IN CHINA

**Abstract:** A significant body of qualitative scholarship on international student mobility to date has focused on migration flows from the ‘non-West’ to the ‘West’ or from the Global South to the Global North, undertaken by relatively privileged individuals. In contrast, drawing on semi-structured interviews with degree-seeking transnational undergraduate students from Anglophone and European countries to China, this paper makes a case for the importance of addressing this alternative ‘flow’. Through the conceptual lens of desire, it opens up an analytical space for understanding multi-faceted motivations and aspirations for this ‘reversed’ international student mobility. The findings presented in this paper highlight how personal, emotional, and intangible considerations equally come into play in individuals’ intention to study abroad. In doing so, the paper critiques the tendency to reify international student mobility as the strategic pursuit of cultural capital.

**Keywords:** international student mobility; educational migration; study abroad; motivations; desire.

## Introduction

In November 2016, I met Tom for an informal interview in China. He, a fourth-year international undergraduate student from the US, and I, an international student and researcher from South Korea to England, shared many common stories, including ebb and flow in life overseas and how much we missed home. Then I asked my long-held question, “if I were a native English speaker, and there were universities like Harvard or Oxford in Korea, I would have never had to leave home. So, what made you leave home and come all the way here?” He nodded and smiled, “true, I would have stayed home if I wanted to go to Harvard. But I guess I was looking for something *different*”.

This paper is part of a larger qualitative study I conducted in China between 2016 and 2017. My fieldwork in China provided numerous accounts similar to Tom’s, of North American and European transnational students for whom the burgeoning international higher education landscape represented an opportunity to pursue unique experience in an unconventional study abroad destination. As the vignette above illustrates, both Tom and I chose to leave our home countries to pursue what we would otherwise not have obtained at home, and yet it was dissimilar aspirations that drove our transnational moves.

My data presented in this paper raise some critical limitations in prevailing assumptions about ‘who’ cross borders and ‘why’ within the international student mobility literature. First, this paper sheds light on a niche group of transnational students emanating from the ‘West’ to the ‘non-West’. To date, scholarship on international student mobility has been predominantly centred on the transnational movement of students from the ‘non-West’ to the ‘West’; which is widely understood as the pursuit of cultural capital (Brown et al., 2016; Kim, 2011; Lehmann

& Trower, 2018; Sin, 2013; Waters, 2006). However, this prevailing focus within the international student mobility literature does not provide a comparably robust explanation of international student mobility *in the other direction*: from countries in the ‘West’ to destinations in the ‘non-West’. In an attempt to bridge this gap, this paper investigates this seemingly straightforward question: why are transnational students from popular ‘destination countries’ seeking their undergraduate degree in ‘less traditional’ student-receiving countries? In doing so, the findings presented herein contribute to an emerging body of work that diversifies empirical and geographical focus beyond the Western hemisphere.

Secondly, findings in this paper reveal that the motivations and aspirations of transnational students to study abroad consist of a dynamic and complex set of factors: on the one hand, economic and rational factors; on the other there are also impulsive, intuitive, illogical, and emotional considerations. Despite growing scholarship on international student mobility, existing literature focuses overwhelmingly on the economic-related drivers for mobility (Lipura & Collins, 2020; Yang, 2018). Contrarily, it falls short of explicating the emotional drivers for mobility and its unintended consequences. While these driving factors are seemingly contradictory, they can co-exist and shape transnational students’ decisions around study abroad. Therefore, drawing on the work of Carling and Collins (2018) and Collins (2018a) on the notion of ‘desire’, this paper provides empirical support to embrace complexity and uncertainty associated to mobility-related decisions and move beyond a presumption that considers educational migration principally as economic behaviour.

In what follows, I first introduce the context of ‘reversed’ international student mobility. I then review relevant literature on the motivating factors for educational migration, critiquing an

implicit (and sometimes explicit) emphasis on the strategic and conscious pursuit of various forms of capital by mobile individuals. The third section discusses the potential for an alternative theorisation of transnational students' motivations through the notion of desire. Then I present findings that challenge prevailing 'one-size-fits-all' approaches within international student mobility scholarship by highlighting the multi-faceted and, on occasion, ostensibly irrational and emotional aspects of motives and aspirations of educational mobility. Lastly, the conclusion summarises the contributions and avenues for further research.

## Context: 'Reversed' International Student Mobility to China

With exponential growth in the volume of transnational students in the past decades, the geography of international higher education underwent a sharp polarisation between student -*sending* and -*receiving* countries. A significant portion of transnational students choose to study in English-speaking (US, UK, Australia, and Canada) and European (France and Germany) countries, whereas Asian countries (notably, China and India) remain as the biggest source of these students (OECD, 2020). Conceivably, reflecting such a geographical divide between sending and receiving countries, a substantial research on educational migration has primarily concerned the transnational students flows from the 'non-West' to the 'West' (Lipura and Collins, 2020; Sidhu et al., 2019; Yang, 2018). This student flow, particularly involving elite forms of education (Yang, 2018), has typically been theorised as the strategic pursuit of cultural capital associated with Western education and English (see, for example, Waters, 2006). However, as the patterns of international student flows have increasingly become diverse and complex, there is a growing recognition of the need to diversify empirical and theoretical perspectives to understand changing landscape of international higher education and the 'new

players' within it. Despite such emerging research agenda examining diverse educational migration streams in recent years (e.g., Prazeres, 2019; Xu, 2017; Yang, 2018), the geographical imbalance in our knowledge on international student mobility appears to remain.

China, among other new players, has been significantly under-represented within international student mobility scholarship. Through an array of intentionally developed initiatives and policies; including the *Belt and Road Initiative* (BRI) and *China's National Plan for Medium and Long-term Education Reform and Development* (2010-2020), China has created spaces for international education and broadened its sway as a student-receiving country. Consequently, China is now the world's top host for international branch campuses, hosting 37 out of 305 worldwide (Cross-Border Education Research Team, 2020). Also, the number of institutions accepting transnational students rose from 363 in 2001 to 829 in 2016 (Tian & Liu, 2020). Correspondingly, the number of international students increased roughly tenfold between 2001 and 2017, from 52,150 to 489,200 (Ibid.).

While being the top destination for transnational students in the same region, China has also increasingly become a popular destination for transnational students from the West. According to the Institute of International Education (IIE) (2019), China was one of the most popular study abroad destinations for students in Germany (6<sup>th</sup>), Australia (2<sup>nd</sup>), and the US (6<sup>th</sup>) in the academic year of 2016/17. In the same year, students from the US constitute the second largest group of international students in China, only followed by South Korean students (*How China Shapes Global Educational Mobility Trends*, 2019). Despite such a growing trend of inbound mobility from the West, there is a significant gap in our knowledge in this 'reversed' flow of

transnational students. In particular, the case of degree-seeking international student flows from the West to China is rarely discussed.

Consequently, the motivating factors that inform Western transnational students' decisions to *eschew* educational opportunities at home or in other Western countries for those in an unorthodox destination remain under-explored. While our knowledge of the link between transnational mobility and the pursuit of cultural capital—notably, Western education and English—seems explicable in the case of 'Westward' mobility, it is more difficult to apply this prevailing analysis to understand student flows *from* countries that already have these sought-after advantages. Perhaps making sense of this reversed mobility requires us to expand our analytical perspective.

## Toward a Multi-Faceted Understanding of International Student Mobility

As international student mobility has increasingly become a significant global phenomenon over recent decades, there has been burgeoning literature concerning various causes and effects from a range of empirical and theoretical perspectives. A substantial body of international student mobility scholarship has advocated an economic perspective, which largely views educational migration as a result of a combination of 'push and pull' factors (Altbach, 1998; De Wit, 2008; Li & Bray, 2007; Mazzarol & Soutar, 2002). Another sizable body of work has focused on addressing the link among spatial mobility, strategic accumulation of various forms of 'capital', and reproduction of social difference (Bourdieu, 1986), predominantly exercised by middle-class families (Findlay et al., 2012; Waters, 2008). Regardless of the conceptual lens

employed, the general tenor of these key theorisations suggests that transnational students have a relatively clear understanding of the close association between credentials from their international education and its consequences (e.g., higher wages and increased employability), and therefore, they engage in the *strategic* and *conscious* pursuit of specific ‘advantages’ through cross-border mobility (Waters & Brooks, 2010).

Although these analytical perspectives have made insightful contributions to our understanding of international student mobility, a fundamental premise that undergirds them is that a transnational student is a rational, utility-maximising decision-maker (De Haas, 2011), and hence, the reasons for mobility can be ‘known’ and, albeit to a different extent, ‘measured’ (Collins, 2018a; Raghuram, 2013; Yang, 2018). However, increasing evidence has suggested that there are *other considerations*, along with the accumulation of capital, that shape individuals’ intention to study abroad (Waters, Brooks, & Pimlott-Wilson, 2011). Indeed, a small number of studies have examined these non-economic motivating factors of international student mobility, including excitement and adventure (Waters & Brooks, 2010), social networks (Beech, 2015) and self-discovery (Prazeres, 2017). Nevertheless, there remains a significant imbalance between widely accepted knowledge of economic and non-economic drivers of international student mobility.

This persistent gap within the literature largely defines transnational students as individuals equipped with information and (social and economic) resources to make a rational, informed decision about educational mobility. However, different socially located people construct varied—even competing—ideas from a particular vantage point that are equally valid in their own right. Indeed, Phan’s (2018) and Yang’s (2018) studies on South-South mobilities show

how international student mobility operates through a different configuration of driving factors from economic rationality. This paper lends empirical support for the premise that transnational students' motivations are more condition-specific and entangled in a wider set of social contexts. In doing so, I view transnational students as complex individuals (Raghuram, 2013) and international student mobility as a multi-layered, multi-faceted, and multi-directional phenomenon.

It is important to note that the intention of this paper is not dichotomously to frame and compare international student mobilities from the East and the West, as well as economic and non-economic drivers. Instead, I seek to extend existing empirical and theoretical terrain of international student mobility scholarship by exploring under-theorised motivations and aspirations of an under-represented group of transnational students. This paper, therefore, makes an explicit attempt to illuminate some of the “intersecting, sometimes competing, forces and processes” (Silvey, 2004, p.499) of education mobility beyond a well-documented, deterministic way of framing international student mobility. I discuss my choice of approach in the next section.

## Understanding International Student Mobility through the Lens of Desire

This paper draws upon the conceptual lens of desire to highlight the complex nature of transnational students' motivations for mobility. While ‘desire’ (Collins et al., 2014; Phan, 2018; Yang, 2016), and ‘aspiration’ (Gomes, 2015; Jackling, 2007; Kim, 2011; Packwood et al., 2015; Sin, 2013) have been interchangeably used to describe the sentiment of prospective

migrants, the analytical possibility of desire has been under-explored in the literature (Carling & Collins, 2018). Drawing on Deleuze and Guattari (1983), Collins (2018a) and) operationalise the notion of ‘desire’ to argue that desire emerges in and through the migrant lives and subjectivities, instigated by a range of drivers that involve in particular ‘assemblage’ of social, cultural, and economic elements as well as others. Deleuze and Guattari (1983) consider the social world constitutes dynamic webs of *interconnection* of socio-material elements referred to as ‘assemblage’. The concept of ‘desire’ refers to a capacity to create or act within an assemblage. Phan (2018) eloquently captures such a socially-embedded yet transformative nature of desire in the context of international higher education:

Desires are seen as being many things, including being socially (co)-constructed, institutionally shaped, relational, collective, personal, self-initiated, self-determined, market-and-politics driven, culture-specific, value-informed, and identification-bound. Desires, hence, are manifested in aspirations and promises of, dreams and fantasies about, and associations with a certain future and quality of life and experiences enabled by English, HE, and international higher education...desires can be condition-specific, detached, work-in-progress, involving, and adjusted, as individuals’ experiences, exposures, and circumstances change and are transformed and/or do not resemble one’s initial imaginations (p.783).

According to Deleuze and Guattari, desire is not for an object per se, but for an assemblage of socio-material elements. For example, existing research on international student mobility has frequently emphasised the two dominant motivating factors: English as “the imperial tongue” (Altbach, 2016, p.140) and degrees from the Western countries, particularly in Anglophone countries (Phan, 2016). Here, English and Western degree are not desired in itself but rather pursued for their social, cultural, and other values into consideration. From this perspective,

transnational students' desires can be understood as "combinations of strategic planning, optimism and fancies that manifest in the movement to take individuals into other worlds, to achieve or avoid (un)desirable futures" (Collins, 2018a, p.966).

A focus on desire has the potential to bridge the gap in our understandings of international student mobility. First, the notion of desire as an umbrella category includes not only rational and goal-oriented dimensions but also emotional and ambiguous valences of migration. I concur that how migration is imagined, experienced, and narrated encompass all these facets with substantial complexity (Carling & Collins, 2018). Second, in exploring how transnational students' desire in cross-border mobility entangles people, places, ideas, and objects, the notion draws our attention to particular social formations wherein young people's desires are situated. Third, by recognising that desires emanate from variable and distinct assemblages within migrants' specific social context, it is possible to move beyond well-documented middle-class transnational students and help our understanding of complex and divergent mobility aspirations across social groups. Finally, the notion of desire views migration not as a linear movement from the originated country to the destination country, thus focusing on multiple temporalities that tie migrants' past, present, and future. In doing so, desire enables us to explore transformative dimensions of mobility, such as transnational students' ongoing transformation of subjectivities and always evolving desires throughout their migration trajectories.

## Methods and Data Collection

The research examined a bachelor's programme at the Chinese branch campus of a US university. In my research site, all classes were conducted in English mostly by international faculty, except for the Chinese language courses for four to six hours per week, which were taught primarily in Chinese. While Chinese language classes were a requirement for the completion of the degree programme, it was not the focus of the degree programme per se.

The project recruited 33 international undergraduate students—24 female and 9 male; between age 18 and 22—across various academic disciplines. During the data collection (October 2016–January 2017), they were enrolled in a four-year undergraduate programme at a Sino-American international branch campus located in a metropolitan region of China. While participants were predominantly American, five participants were European (France, the Netherlands, and Spain). Furthermore, the characteristics of the overall sample were reasonably diverse in the aspects of racial/ethnic and socio-economic background and the length of time spent in China (between four months and three-and-a-half years). To maintain anonymity, participants are described using pseudonyms throughout this paper.

Participants was asked to fill out a web-based pre-interview survey about demographic and social information, including gender, race, and rural/suburban/urban classifications. The survey also asked them to rate the 16 potential motivating factors and 15 influential sources of information from 1 (very unimportant) to 5 (very important) or non-applicable. Before the interviews, I conducted an initial analysis of the survey result and prepared a set of questions for semi-structured interviews. Each interview lasted from 60 to 100 minutes exploring the

motivations and consideration for study abroad and the destination choice, experiences, and future aspirations. Interviews were transcribed and thematically analysed.

In what follows, I present how transnational students' migratory desires are generated by a particular assemblage of different—even, at times, contradictory—drivers. The findings also demonstrate how the desires of transnational students disrupt and transform the rigid assemblages they are entangled in.

## The Quest for Better Opportunities

What I initially found striking was that most transnational students in this study claimed they had engaged in spatial mobility *without* a well-articulated plan. Nevertheless, some key motivating factors vis-à-vis cultural capital—that would make them “look good on paper”—were observed in their narratives, revealing how these factors were similarly or differently valued by transnational students in the context of the West-to-East mobility.

### Western Education in the ‘Non-West’

Doherty and Singh (2007) argue that transnational students' narratives on English and Western education were analytically inseparable. In this study, perhaps unsurprisingly, English itself was not perceived as a motivating factor to study in China for both native and non-native English-speaking participants. Nevertheless, English was an important enabler for participants to enrol in a particular degree programme in China because it was specifically English-taught.

In this sense, Phan (2016) points out that English is no longer anglophone countries' exclusive property or ultimate asset to attract transnational students.

Nonetheless, a Western degree appeared to be an important consideration in choosing a degree programme in China. This seems to present a paradox because participants were seeking their undergraduate degree particularly in a non-Western context. Among 31 participants<sup>21</sup>, only three students responded that they had considered applying to non-Western, local universities in Asia. Furthermore, when asked why they had not considered applying for English-taught degree programmes offered by Chinese institutions that are comparably competitive in the world university rankings, Patrick hesitantly replied:

If I had more confidence in me, I would have applied to University A or B [top-tier Chinese university], but the US diploma means more. It is like a template, so wherever you go, I do not have to explain what University C [top-tier US university] is to people, but if I were to apply for a job and say, "okay, I graduated from a Chinese university", it's going to confuse people and the amount of time that it would take me to explain why I went to school there and what I'm doing...(Patrick, Male, USA).

Similarly, Felipe's statement suggested prestige and superiority undertones of American degree:

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<sup>21</sup> Two out of 33 participants did not disclose this information.

Something that really helped convince me was the fact that I knew that it was an American degree. I knew that education would be of the highest calibre, but it would still be in a totally different country and a totally different environment...I mean, if I were an employer, I would definitely buy that logic because this university is already...the branding is already good enough wherever you...like you would open doors with the degree, I would say, then what matters is that you actually have more than the degree... (Felipe, male, USA).

Here, participants considered their educational choice as an acceptable alternative to education at home mainly because the international branch campus in this study follows the American curriculum and confers a degree from an elite US university (see Phan, 2016).

Behind this paradox to study in China were their desires to pursue Western education in a ‘non-Western’ context. The narrative of desires presented here shows that while participants’ choice of destination makes them seemingly different from the mainstream transnational students to and within the ‘West’, their desires are nevertheless shaped in accordance with the interrelated considerations of cultural capital, social prestige, and future career trajectory. As I argue elsewhere (Lee, 2020), such a narrative is in line with international branch campuses’ recruitment messages, which promote study abroad as an opportunity to gain a *unique experience* in China without sacrificing the degree from a *prestigious Western university*. Furthermore, participants often described China as a “great ice breaker”, while their degree from a reputable American university seen as a “safety net”. In this sense, participants seemed to have embraced the discursively produced narrative of educational mobility into their own narratives of mobility and future possibilities.

In addition, while the Western dominance within international higher education has been often discussed in relation to the world university rankings and league tables (see, for example, Jöns & Hoyler, 2013; Lo, 2014; Pusser & Marginson, 2013; Shahjahan et al., 2017), the above statements reveal that desirability of the ‘West’ is based on, not only such ‘objective’ measures of institutional performances but also the transnational students’ shared idea of superiority of Western education (Phan, 2018). This ultimately leads us to question if the emergence of ‘non-West’ study abroad destinations will open up the possibilities for a dramatic shift in the current geographies of international higher education, which challenges the Western dominance rooted in international higher education.

### Cosmopolitan Self-fashioning

Study abroad has widely been admitted as a pathway to gain ‘world-mindedness’, and it has been used as a narrative to promote the benefits of study abroad universally. In the context of international student mobility from the ‘non-West’ to the ‘West’, the ways in which transnational students seek cosmopolitan understanding and identity has been often associated with successful social and cultural adjustment to the host culture (see Fong, 2011; Gu et al., 2010; Oikonomidou & Williams, 2013; see also, Ho, 2011).

While becoming a global citizen and increasing intercultural understandings were mentioned as a significant motivating factor for studying abroad in China, Western transnational students’ ways to engage in cosmopolitanism was qualitatively different from the existing evidence on those in East-to-West international student mobility. In this study, almost all participants (28) shared that their destination choice was primarily enticed by the ‘imagined distance’ of

China—both physical and cultural—from their home countries. Work by Waters and Brooks (2011) has similarly demonstrated that British transnational students predominantly perceived the notion of difference as positive, inextricably attached to a sense of ‘excitement’ and ‘adventure’.

For these students, however, while they actively sought out ‘unique’, ‘different’, and sometimes ‘crazy’, ‘scary’ experiences in China, they were generally indolent when it came to unlearning some of their Western values and behaviours to acquire social and cultural membership to the Chinese community. Perhaps relatedly, while almost all participants, except five students, self-assessed their level of Chinese proficiency as basic to low intermediate, it did not seem to pose a significant challenge to them in claiming their cosmopolitan engagement with China and its culture.

Contrarily, participants in this study showed a strong desire for social and cultural membership in a cosmopolitan club, as what Farrer (2010, 2016) referred to as “cosmopolitan urban citizenship” (see also, Sander, 2016):

Honestly, there has not been as much interaction with the greater Chinese society. In the beginning, we enjoyed having the street food at night and so on. But then I got tired. Now I like local stuff once in a while, but if I had a choice, I would prefer living in an expat area (Neil, male, USA).

Definitely more in the expat, like I go to a lot of the expat areas because that is where American culture and European culture kind of sustains itself, and that is what I am used to, but I have

tried to go to local areas and go eat local Chinese food and things like that (Aurélie, female, France).

While not the motivating factor participants had in mind at the point of deciding where to study, aspirations to belong to the exclusive community of the “denationalised elite” (Fong, 2011, p.8) corresponded with participants’ *adjusted* desire for subsequent mobility and an extended stay in China. Several participants mentioned that they ‘would not mind staying longer’ given that they become ‘expats’ and stay constant in the privileged status of cosmopolitans. Therefore, cosmopolitan sensibilities reproducing exclusive mobile elites has salience for understanding the social and cultural aspect of ‘West-to-non-West’ international student mobility as well as long-term mobility objectives.

Taken together, regardless of the directionality of international student mobility, the merits of being a cosmopolitan was an important driver for international mobility. However, the finding of this study also highlights that the ways in which mobile young people engage in cosmopolitanism are different in relation to diverse dynamics between transnational students and study abroad destinations. In the following section, I will present more personal, emotional, and intangible desires, beyond just the economic, to study in China.

### In Pursuit of *More Than Just* Achievements

As mentioned in the earlier section, although the current literature on education migration largely focuses on strategic choice by privileged individuals, findings presented in this section

reveals how personal, emotional, and intangible considerations are equally as salient in individuals' intention to study abroad.

### “It was just a coincidence”: Acting on Impulse

What I initially found striking during the interviews was that many participants did not or could *not* articulate their goals and aspirations to study in China. What was also notable was that 13 participants talked about the ostensible *absence* of a strategy, or planning, in their study abroad decision-making process in a rather light-hearted, jovial manner:

I still remember I said the night before I was travelling, “they probably...do not speak English in China” (laughing)...I got on another plane from San Francisco to China, and that is the first time I really heard Chinese. I was like, “Oh, god, what I have done?” And in the middle of a 13-14-hour flight, I remember there was a moment where, for some reasons, I just broke down crying on that flight (Tom, male, USA).

On the day that all college decisions were due, I had to pick between going to China or staying at an American equivalent. And, my best friend says, “whichever web browser (university webpage) loads fastest, go to that one”. So, I opened both websites up in separate tabs, and the first website that finished loading was for the Chinese one (Maria, female, USA).

Here though, the researcher was typically looking for a ‘good story’, and as a result, it is possible that participants felt obliged to downplay the serious aspects and exaggerated their casual decision on study abroad. Or, their carefree attitude may have been construed as ‘cool’.

Nevertheless, they stressed that they had neither viewed international education as a long-term investment nor made reference to a potential link between their study abroad and the subsequent employment or other forms of economic gain. Instead, ‘curiosity’, ‘excitement’, and ‘impulse’ were prominent amongst their narratives (see Waters et al., 2011).

In some cases, participants’ indifference towards the pragmatic concerns seemed to represent their privileged position, which many transnational or stay-at-home students might not have been able to afford. This finding corresponds with those of Waters and Brooks (2010) in their work on how British transnational students from privileged backgrounds ‘accidentally’ accrued valuable cultural capital through spatial mobility. Drawing on Bourdieu’s (1984) notion of *habitus*, the authors explicate that, for the most privileged members of society, the ability to take an un-instrumental view of education—as a part of “aesthetic disposition” (p.222) rather than practices of capital accumulation—allows such privileged individuals to be seen as ‘disinterested’ and ‘withdrawn’ from material concerns. Furthermore, regardless of the lack of apparent strategies in choosing to study abroad, their pursuit of pleasure and experience itself from international education would still result in the reproduction of privilege.

However, to my surprise, seven participants<sup>22</sup> from non-privileged backgrounds also responded the same way; they had acted on impulse rather than weighing the outcomes when deciding to move to China. This finding does not align with the literature suggesting less privileged

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<sup>22</sup> These participants received a substantial amount of scholarship and living stipend from the university; therefore, they were relatively free from economic concerns when choosing between studying overseas or domestically for their undergraduate degree.

students tend to make university-related decisions in a far more strategic and pragmatic, risk-averse manner (see Snee & Devine, 2014). Recognising that it seems commonsensical that working-class transnational students with limited financial resources would choose ‘safer’ options, it was striking that these students made such casual decision that they seemingly could not afford. Although speculative, participants who self-identified themselves as working-class shared several potential factors that may have influenced their spontaneous, casual decisions to study abroad. First, secondary schools they had attended did not have enough resources to guide their students and/or did not specifically focus on sending their students to universities with global prospects. Secondly, most of them were ‘first-generation’ college students. In other words, their parents did not have ample information on university application or study abroad than students themselves did, which made it difficult for those parents to support and guide children through the college decision-making process. Thirdly, they did not have the financial resources to visit most of the (both domestic and overseas) universities they had applied to. Taken together, their and their family’s lack of cultural and economic capital potentially led them to an impulsive decision to study abroad, based on a feeling of hope, opportunity, and fancy.

### “I just had to do it”: Youthful Pilgrimage

Related to non-strategic motivations to study abroad, several students—across socio-economic class—reflected their motivation to study abroad in China concerning a desire for life transition from adolescence to adulthood, resulting from the experience of transnational mobility. Transnational mobility, as a ‘rite of passage’, has been increasingly seen as an important opportunity for self-transformation (Grabowski et al., 2017; Marginson, 2014; Robertson et al.,

2018)—significant points Giddens (1991) referred to as “fateful moments” (p.112-114). Similarly, Desforges (2000) argues that transnational mobility is “imagined as providing for the accumulation of experience, which is used to re-narrate and represent self-identity” (p.942). Interestingly, this finding differs from Waters, Brooks, and Pimlott-Wilson’s (2011) study of 85 British transnational students who chose to study abroad in an attempt to escape from transition to adulthood and extend their freedom associated with youth. However, regardless of this difference in sentiment, what becomes evident is that young people link transnational mobility with excitement as well as adventure and engage in transnational mobility with a desire to accelerate or delay the transition to adulthood.

In light of these concerns, China—as a destination seemingly untouched by mainstream transnational students from the West—was imagined in relation to new and unorthodox experiences among participants, which conferred an exciting sense of ‘dislocation’ that prompted a kind of ‘self-transformation’ in the process of navigating life outside of their comfort zone (Prazeres, 2017; see also Schwarz, 2016). When I asked why they had chosen China, many participants reflected that they had been primarily enticed by the prospect of entering a context they perceived to be dissimilar from home. Fleur reflected:

I thought that it had to be somewhere completely different from home; otherwise, I am not going to grow up (Fleur, female, the Netherlands).

Joseph described his urge to travel to China despite his parents’ concerns about leaving the comfort zone:

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It was basically just pure curiosity in the beginning...When I decided, my parents kept on looking at China, they were showing me articles about dead pigs in the river, swine flu, alien flu and all these things, and they said, “you really want to go here where all these things are happening?” And I said, “yes, I think so, because I can read these things happen, but I do really want to see it happen” (Joseph, male, USA).

Throughout these narratives, I observed a particular romanticisation of China among participants. Oftentimes, impoverished, underdeveloped conditions they had encountered were viewed as emblematic of self-growth. Here, the experience of hardship outside of their comfort zone was considered to bring about the resulting narrative attesting to a self that is “growing, moving forward, making progress over time” (McAdams & Bowman, 2001, p.5).

For some participants, travelling and living overseas was a normative expectation; therefore, they did not need any reasons for choosing to travel abroad other than travelling itself (see Petzold & Peter, 2015). With increasing numbers of youth now participating in international education, it was apparent that study abroad was assumed more of a matter of ‘missing out’ than ‘differentiating’ among participants, a sentiment which was reiterated by Grace:

I do not know...I just had to do it. Maybe I just wanted to look worldly, or maybe I just did not want to get left behind (Grace, female, USA).

Participants’ accounts were explicitly or implicitly reminiscent of ‘the Grand Tour’ narratives, suggesting that structural and historical legacies construct young educational migrants’ desires of cross-border movement. In addition, their desires were linked to the social relations of

friends and peers that circulate the ideas about transnational mobility and its prospect (see Beech, 2015).

Surprisingly, despite their naïve, non-strategic decisions to study in China, almost all participants seemed to have grappled the rational narrative of transnational mobility—acquiring the ‘right’ credentials and other embodied traits—over the course of their study abroad, and they appeared to be fairly clear about their post-graduate goals. For example, many of them mentioned that they would seek career opportunities in the international public and private sectors and emphasised that their experience in China would be a valuable asset in differentiating themselves in the labour market. For example, Caroline reflected:

That was not part of the plan, but it became part of the plan, and it coincided quickly (Caroline, female, USA).

Similarly, Valérie, who emphasised living independently from her family was the biggest motivation to study abroad, displayed how ‘employable’ she has become through international education:

I can highlight things that are relevant to leadership skills—being independent, being willing to make a strong choice, and being a survivor...these are the things I can highlight to my employers (Valérie, female, USA and France).

Participants’ descriptions of self-transformation alerted me to the possibility that young people might use stories of educational migration to produce a narrative and to showcase their ‘newfound’ self to others. Because their stories are often shared, such collective narratives of

self-transformation and transnational mobility may be transmitted to prospective transnational students and shape a hope for future possibilities through mobility. Finally, changing narratives of transnational students highlights that migration is not a strategically oriented linear progression from one country to the other; but rather reflects how migration is an ongoing process (Collins, 2018a).

### Escape Route

As previously detailed, many participants described their motivation to study abroad as an escape from their comfort zone to ‘challenge’ themselves. Contrarily, other students chose to study abroad to escape from their ‘challenging’ circumstances back home to start a new life elsewhere, both in the short and long term. For example, Stefany shared that she had grown up moving from one parent home to the other because one of her parents had been incarcerated, then the other had been in and out of hospitals due to drug abuse. She was exposed to poverty, drugs, and various types of crime for her entire life in the US, which she described as ‘unstable home, lots of half-siblings, and domestic violence’. She was always afraid that she would conform to that lifestyle, thus wanted to move far away for university, both physically and emotionally. The university offered her a full-tuition scholarship and a living stipend, without which she wouldn’t have been able to support her studies.

As for Gabriel, a black student from a Southern state of the US, it was simultaneously an escape and disproof of discriminative social norms against black people in the US. He extensively talked about various barriers and discriminations he had faced throughout his life in the US. When I let him voice the story of his journey to China, he began by, “this was never given to

me as an option”. For example, he detailed how he had been discouraged by his school counsellors and teachers:

Growing up as a black person in an area where there is a lot of white people, you are going to constantly be told that you are not as able as the rest of my classmates. So, my teachers wanted me to apply to state schools...and a lot of them did not want me to go to those top universities because not all people, but a lot of people in America get upset when they see a black man succeeding...My white classmates, they got a different experience. Their teachers were urging them to apply to the top schools and telling them to do all the things so that they could get into Harvard and Columbia. ...I am sure if I were a white student, they would be happy that I was going to the other side of the world for my education...Instead, they said I should be happy that I got accepted at University F [state university in the US] and I should. So, it just shows how they try to push certain people (Gabriel, Male, USA).

Without much help from the school counsellor and teachers, he was accepted by all nine elite universities. He chose ‘the most unlikely path’ for a black student, which was to study abroad. Although his story cannot be generalised to the overall population in the US, Gabriel’s story was compelling and illustrated the experience of a marginalised student within outgoing student mobility from the US. As shown in the works of Sol (2014) and Gallo et al. (2018), students of colour, first-generation students, and students from low socio-economic backgrounds have been greatly underrepresented in study abroad programmes. In 2016/17, 70 per cent of US study abroad students were white, whereas only 6.1 per cent of African American or black students participated in study abroad programmes (*Trends in US Study Abroad*, n.d.).

When I asked whether they were satisfied with their decisions to study in China, they shared some experiences that might have not even been possible at home or in another study abroad destination. Specifically, they both emphasised social privileges that Western people enjoy at various levels. For example, although Patrick observed prevalent white racial privilege in China, he also had a similar experience of preferential treatment:

I walked in, and I put in whatever I wanted and the lady, she doesn't say anything to me, she just takes my food, and she takes it over, and she cuts the line, and she gives my food before everyone else, and the Chinese people, they were complaining, "How could you cut the line and let this foreigner pay first? We have been waiting here all along". She says, "Because he is a *waiyuoren* (外國人, foreigner)... *waiyuoren*". In the States, no one is ever going to serve me before white people (Gabriel, Male, USA).

In a similar vein, Stefany reiterated that being a white, native English speaker, American nationality automatically conferred her considerable cultural capital (Lan, 2011), thus allowing her to navigate between cosmopolitan and local communities with considerable ease: "I am a second citizen in the US, but it does not matter as much in China".

Stefany and Gabriel's accounts show that their decisions to study abroad emerged from their desire to escape from certain oppressive and inadequate life conditions at home and to create better ones. Instead of rationally calculating their future trajectories, they *took chances* to avoid undesirable futures and transform their position in the world. As Collins et al., (2014) argue, "[d]esire is about *becoming* much more than being—our desires focus on the future and motivations to escape natural, cultural, or governmental limitations on the body" (p.665, emphasis added). Furthermore, this highlights that precarity is the driver of cross-border

mobility and belies the assumption that international student mobility is the exclusive property of the privileged and calls for attention to precarity framing international student mobility.

### Genealogical Endeavours: Stories of Multi-racial, Adopted Students

During my fieldwork in China, I met several transnational students and professionals who primarily chose China for study abroad or work in pursuit of exploration of cultural heritage and identity. While there is a small body of scholarship on genealogical endeavours which exists in diaspora/ migration studies (King & Christou, 2010; Potter, 2005; Sreberny-Mohammadi, 2013; Wessendorf, 2007), and on legacy tourism in tourism studies (McCain & Ray, 2003), few empirical studies have explored the case of international students seeking cultural heritage and identity through study abroad. In my research, three students stated that their primary motivation to study in China was to explore these two factors. Two students had one parent from China and one from the US, and one student was born in China then adopted by American parents. While they partly shared the sentiment that mentioned travelling outside of their comfort zone and discovering a new culture, they still identified their primary reason for studying in China was a desire to learn Chinese language and culture and to reconnect with their extended family and familial histories.

For example, Heather communicated that she chose to study in China for an extended exploration of her ethnic legacy. Heather was born in China but adopted by an American family when she was two years old. In the US, she grew up in a mono-ethnic white community in a Midwest state, where almost everyone in the town was phenotypical white. Growing up, Heather often imagined what it would be like if she had been raised in China. In 2015, she

eventually went on a heritage trip to ‘rediscover’ part of her ethnic and cultural heritage. When she came back from the trip, she decided to apply for university in China so that she could expose herself even more to Chinese culture:

...because I guess the area where I come from is really not diverse, and it doesn’t have many Asian people there...I just wanted to experience more people who were like myself (Heather, Female, USA).

Here, Heather’s reflection reveals, as Collins (2018b) argues, that desires and hopes that lead to migration decisions “cannot be captured in singular moments of decisions or indecision but rather involves the negotiation of the pasts, present occupations and future yearnings of migrants” (p.629).

Although varying, the negotiation of ethnic identity was central to their narratives of experiences. Mixed social acceptance of their ethnicity in China and the home country was primarily discussed. For instance, Maggie, an Asian-white biracial participant, shared contrasting perceptions of her ethnicity:

What I learned, instead, is that people see differences more than similarities. I was called Asian American back in the States, but now I am called white in China (Maggie, Female, USA).

Similarly, during her heritage trip to China, Heather was shocked and annoyed when Chinese people started talking to her only in Chinese and would not understand that she is neither Chinese nor Chinese American. Also, she found it confusing and frustrating that she became aware of her ‘new’ identity and sometimes had to fight for her ‘(white) Americanness’.

Even though they struggled to renegotiate their ethnic and cultural identities in China in multiple ways, a common sentiment was that their ‘foreignness’ allows them to explore and (re)learn Chinese culture with ease and to stand out. In particular, they highlighted their somewhat elevated social status in China. Unlike how it would have been in their home country, where their relative ‘otherness’ sometimes appeared to be disadvantageous, the fact that they are from overseas yet (half-)Chinese—“exotic” and “intriguing”—was favourably perceived.

These participants repeatedly referred to China as ‘home’, ‘second home’, ‘another home’. They emphasised how living in China enabled them to feel, understand, and connect to China. Although living in China did not always offer material comfort or the same lifestyle as back home in the West, they all revealed that they had learned to adapt. This reflects in Sreberny-Mohammadi’s (2013) study in which dual-national diasporic Iranian returnees in Tehran actively sought to explore their roots and reconfigure the boundaries of the comfort zone and convert endlessly imagined site into an extended ‘home’.

## Conclusion

In the context of diversification in the directionality and characteristics of educational migration, this paper endeavours to bring visibility to an emerging migration pattern that has often been neglected within international student mobility: degree-seeking transnational students from Anglophone and European countries to China. With the shift in geographical focus, I highlighted parallels as well as some qualitative differences in Western transnational students’ motivations and aspirations to study in China.

The paper also explores the multi-faceted and, at times, ostensibly irrational and emotional aspects of motivations and aspirations for educational mobility, highlighting how students' privilege and precarity continuously shape and negotiate their motivations and experiences in China. This picture denies any simplified picture of characteristics of transnational students but instead requires more nuanced, alternative understandings of them as dynamic entities. And yet, the paper has also argued, although personal and emotional aspirations were initially a strong driver for transnational mobility, transnational students nevertheless engaged with the idea of 'cosmopolitan cultural capital' and production of inequality and privilege over the course of their education overseas. Therefore, non-strategic motivations may not translate into non-strategic outputs.

Finally, my intervention in this paper addresses the analytical imbalance between measurable and non-measurable desires of international student mobility and explore the ways in which international student mobility is, in fact, driven by multi-faceted desires. Although preliminary, this paper explored the emerging notion of desire to investigate how personal, structural, emotional, and rational aspects of motivations for mobility are continuously renegotiated to create new configurations of educational migration. By doing so, I have shown that transnational students' "undisciplined mobility" (Collins, 2018a, p.966) calls for theorisation beyond the rational approach, presupposed by essentialism within the existing literature on international student mobility. This line of inquiry invites critical examination of taken-for-granted benefits of international higher education and reveal a more decentred understanding of international student mobility.

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# 6 BECOMING A *BONA FIDE* COSMOPOLITAN: UNPACKING THE NARRATIVES OF WESTERN- SITUATED DEGREE-SEEKING TRANSNATIONAL STUDENTS IN CHINA

**Abstract:** This qualitative study offers an exploration of the ways in which transnational, degree-seeking, undergraduate students from Anglophone and European countries make sense of their experiences of studying in China. Through an analysis of participants’ verbal, visual, and textual narratives recounted in interviews and participants’ social media postings, the paper examines how Western-situated transnational students attempt to differentiate themselves from various ‘Others’ — other types of international students, as well as immobile Others in both home and host countries. Findings point out that there is a dominant image of the *bona fide* cosmopolitan, which study participants aspired to be, and hence tried continuously to (re)produce through mobility. In critically reflecting on the transnational students’ performance of *bona fide* cosmopolitanism, this paper addresses issues related to how Western-situated international students create various Others and simultaneously consume difference.

**Keywords:** international student mobility; cosmopolitanism; China; Bourdieu; Otherness

## Introduction

A considerable body of research suggests that international student mobility is a way to accrue different forms of capital. Drawing on Bourdieu and Passeron (1990), researchers argue that possession of economic capital provides opportunities to acquire exclusive competence, dispositions and qualifications through participation in international education. Such accumulation of cultural capital can ultimately increase employability in both domestic and international labour markets, as well as subsequent transnational mobility, thereby, reproducing economic and social advantages for the mobile individual. Much of the existing research, however, has predominantly focused on cultural capital and distinction making acquired through Westward mobility.

This paper moves beyond the prevailing geographical and empirical focus of the current discussion on international student mobility by exploring the narratives of transnational students from the West to China. Through a thematic analysis of ethnographic interviews and observation of participants' social media content, the study examines how transnational students from European and Anglophone countries engaged in (re)producing distinction through cultural capital accumulation across different geographical and socio-relational contexts. In particular, this paper discusses how transnational students draw on cosmopolitan attributes to legitimise their educational choices and experiences, including the unorthodoxy of their study abroad destination, their engagement in 'real-life' in China, and their everyday interactions with various Others.

The paper begins with a review of a key approach to international student mobility. I then discuss how cosmopolitanism and consumption of Otherness have been understood in relation

to cultural capital and distinction within international student mobility before presenting the methodology and findings. Lastly, this paper concludes with some reflections on the contributions and limits of the study.

## Uneven Geographies of International Student Mobility

Bourdieu's (1984) notion of capital has been widely deployed to understand the close association between transnational student mobility, strategic and rational pursuit of 'positional advantage', and its influence on subsequent life trajectories (Brown, Hesketh, & Williams, 2004; Waters, 2006). As such, there has been an array of studies that critically investigate motivating factors, as well as experiences and outcomes of mobility through a Bourdieusian analytical lens (Blackmore, Gribble, and Rahimi, 2017; Findlay, King, Smith, Geddes, & Skeldon, 2012; Kim, 2011; Pham & Tran, 2015; Prazeres, 2019; Sin, 2013; Tran, 2016; Waters, 2012). Although contributing to our understanding of how the accumulation of capital is inextricably linked to cross-border mobility and education, existing research on international student mobility revolves largely around cultural capital earned through the transnational movement of students from the 'non-West' to the 'West', particularly involving elite education in English-speaking countries. For example, several studies posit that international student mobility is a way to accrue cultural capital attached to Western degrees and English (Kim, 2011; Waters, 2006). Conversely, despite the growing diversity and complexity in the patterns of international student flows, international student flows to newly emerging study abroad destinations are unequally represented in the extant literature (Lipura & Collins, 2020). While such geographical imbalance in the current international student mobility scholarship itself reflects uneven and differentiated geographies of international higher education and

international student mobility, it also gives rise to certain limitations in the knowledge of these areas.

Among many other emerging study abroad destinations, the under-representation of China within the literature is notable particularly inasmuch as China is the third-ranked study abroad destination after only the US and the UK. In 2018, China hosted 492,185<sup>23</sup> transnational students from 196 countries, among which 52.44 per cent (258,122) were enrolled in degree programmes. It is also worth noting that the ratio of degree-seeking students has been increasing, over 10 per cent growth consecutively in 2016 and 2017, and 6.86 per cent between 2017 and 2018 (Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China [MoE], n.d.). Reflecting this rapid development, the British Council (2015) predicts China will increasingly compete with the US and the UK as one of the world's leading destinations for globally mobile students. It is also notable that, among the most popular study abroad destinations, China is the only non-English speaking, non-Western European country represented. Although the role of China in the landscape of international higher education has rapidly shifted from being the biggest *source of* transnational students to an increasingly popular *destination for* such students, exceptionally little attention has been given to China as a major study-abroad destination.

A modicum of recent studies is an evident exception to this criticism. In the case of transnational students in China, the most exemplary contribution is a recent edited volume by

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<sup>23</sup> International students in Hong Kong, Macau and Taiwan are not included in the number.

Dervin, Du, and Härkönen (2018), which covers varied experiences of transnational students in China, yet focuses on, to a greater extent, interculturality. Additionally, there are recent studies elucidating transnational students' motivations for studying in China (Ahmad and Shah, 2018; Wen and Hu, 2019), as well as their experiences (Ding, 2016; Wen, Hu, & Hao, 2018) and cultural adaptation (An & Chiang, 2015; Chiang, 2015; Li, 2015). Nevertheless, transnational student mobility to China is still an under-investigated area, and much work is still needed to represent a range of theoretical perspectives and empirical foci on international student mobility (Xu and Montgomery, 2018; Yang, 2018).

Secondly and relatedly, because a persistent focus of the current literature is on Westward mobility for non-Western transnational students, Western-situated transnational students' motivations for, and experiences of, study abroad have often been overlooked in international student mobility discourse (Prazeres, 2017). Where the existing literature does concern students from Anglophone and/or European countries studying abroad, it usually does so within the context of short-term, non-degree mobility (Prazeres, 2017; Waters, 2005, 2006) and/or 'horizontal' mobilities between countries with a quantitatively and/or qualitatively comparable higher education systems (e.g., Erasmus programme) (Wächter, 2008). Consequently, while emerging destinations in the Global South are increasingly seen as an attractive study abroad destination option among students from the Global North (Prazeres, 2017), what remains largely unexplored are the motivating factors and considerations that inform Western-situated transnational students' decisions to *eschew* educational opportunities at home or in other Western countries for those in an unorthodox destination, as well as their 'outcomes' from studying abroad in the Global South.

Some studies suggest that as much as volumes of economic, cultural, and social capital are unevenly distributed among different groups of students, capital can be pursued and accrued differently. For example, Waters and Brooks' (2010, 2011) studies of British transnational students found that British students *unintentionally* gained cultural capital accrued from transnational mobility, which counters previous findings arguing that transnational students deliberately engage in transnational mobility to acquire various forms of capital. In addition, findings from Prazeres' (2017, 2019) studies on short-term transnational student mobility from the Global North to the South suggest that transnational students emanating from the West seek different types of cultural and symbolic capital than from mainstream transnational student flows to the West. The author further suggests that cultural, social, and symbolic capital can be (intentionally or unintentionally) gained depending on the different geographic contexts of transnational student mobility. In this vein, Prazeres (2019) argues that the concept of distinction in relation to international student mobility should diversify conceptually from a singular notion to one that is multi-layered and complex.

### In Pursuit of *Greater* Distinction: Performing Cosmopolitanism, and Consuming the Other

International travel as a 'rite of passage' and its capacity to develop a cosmopolitan orientation—namely “a willingness to engage with the Other” (Hannerz, 1990, p.239)—have been widely documented in studies of tourism, travel, gap year, international volunteering, and migration. Within the international student mobility literature, there are two major streams of research on cosmopolitanism: one on the importance of study abroad experiences contributing to developing a deeper self-understanding, intercultural competence or global citizenry

(Grabowski, Wearing, Lyons, Tarrant, and Landon, 2017; Oikonomidou, 2018), whilst a secondary stream draws on cosmopolitanism as a new source of distinction in the age of globalisation (Igarashi and Saito, 2014; Weenink, 2007). For example, Igarashi and Saito (2014) argue that, with the emergence of human rights education as well as neoliberal education, education systems legitimise cosmopolitanism as a desirable quality by highlighting the importance of *openness* to foreign others and *competencies* to succeed in a global economy (p.226-227). Unfortunately, such cosmopolitan attributes are typically acquired through significant time and experiences overseas, which inevitably sets limits on young people's transnational educational trajectory depending on the families' economic resources. In this way, cosmopolitanism simultaneously serves as "a marker of inclusiveness" and as "a basis of exclusion" between the mobile and the immobile (Igarashi & Saito, 2014, p.223).

Such emphasis on cosmopolitanism across the higher education landscape can be better understood by taking account of the context of increasingly intense competition in the global labour market and academic credential inflation. Brown, Power, Tholen, and Allouch (2016) critically examine Bourdieu's (1974, 2006) account of academic qualifications as the dominant source of institutionalised cultural capital and suggest a subtle yet powerful shift in the role of non-institutionalised qualifications. They observe, "the struggle for distinction in education and the labour market is no longer limited to competition for credentials". Instead, "a range of behavioural competencies including 'soft' currencies of employment" that conform to the competence profiles of employability, has to be "packaged in a *narrative* of productive potential" alongside 'hard' currencies as a means of differentiating among equally well-qualified competitors (p.193-4, italics in original). As such, young people have increasingly engaged in transnational mobility through various stratagems that may not be immediately

associated with *institutionalised* cultural capital—such as taking a gap year, volunteering, enrolling in short-term language and cultural programmes, and backpacking among many others. Transnational young people consequently ‘seek out *newer and rarer experiences abroad* in order to increase their social standing and ultimately outshine and outclass others in the ongoing symbolic battle for *greater distinction*’ (Prazeres, 2019; emphasis added).

Although the field of international student mobility has matured considerably, and while there remains a dearth of literature on the issue of the reproduction of social privilege, substantial attention has been paid to the question of who travels and who does not. Far less work has critically considered the ways in which various Others are simultaneously created and devalued over the course of the (re)production of cultural capital. Therefore, this paper engages with debates on international student mobility, cosmopolitanism, and social reproduction through discussing differences *within* mobile populations as well as raising issues of the construction and consumption of Otherness. To this end, despite the difference in the primary locus, I draw on studies of gap years, youth tourism and backpacking because this work is nonetheless relevant to a critical investigation of transnational students’ narratives on distinction-making and Othering.

Finally, and more importantly, beyond documenting participants’ explicit claims, this paper examines the ways in which transnational students establish particular categories of group membership and exclude Others to produce distinction (Brown, 2000). To shed light on such politics of identity and belonging, I pay particular attention to narrative discourse markers that were utilised by participants in an effort to make sense of their experiences and changing subjectivity.

## Methods and Data Collection

Findings featured in this paper are a part of a wider research project investigating motivations for, and experiences of, degree-seeking international students moving from the ‘West’ to China. Although each study abroad destination or programme has its own uniqueness, I chose an English-taught undergraduate programme at a US university’s branch campus in China because it is the most prevalent form of internationalised academic programmes in a non-Western context (Altbach & Knight, 2007).

The data were primarily collected through pre-interview questionnaires and semi-structured interviews with 33 North American and European transnational undergraduate students (24 female and 9 male). The participants in this research were international students from Anglophone and/or European countries between the ages of 18 and 22, who were enrolled full-time in a four-year Sino-Foreign cooperative joint undergraduate degree programme in a metropolitan region of China. Participants are referred to only by their pseudonyms in order to maintain anonymity of the informants. They were from North America and Europe (France, the Netherlands, and Spain)<sup>24</sup> based on passport nationality. The study participants of this research were initially selected based on simple, nationality-based criteria: transnational students *from* European or Anglophone countries, except Chinese citizens/permanent-

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<sup>24</sup> One student held dual citizenship of the US and France.

residents, or Chinese-descent who reside outside of China and have returned to China to pursue a full-time academic degree.

However, as I began to engage in recruitment of participants, I quickly grasped that such de-contextualised selection criteria based on country of birth and/or passport nationality were not relevant for my research context, or by and large in an increasingly mixed, mobile, and globalised world (see Faist, 2012).<sup>25</sup> As such at an early stage of participant recruitment, I modified the above criteria and solicited for contextual diversity in citizenship and national identity to accommodate the complexity of national identifications that do not map neatly onto a single nation-state. Therefore, I employed not only passport nationality but also self-reported national identity as a selection criterion.

I further complemented interview accounts with discourse analysis of participants' visual/textual narratives on their social media accounts. Out of 33 participants, 22 agreed to give me a permission to access their social media postings. I chose this approach because I wanted to combine the strengths of both well-established and newly emerging research methods to diversify the perspectives from which international students' study overseas experiences in China might be understood. While I understand that combining multiple methods may bring increased complexity to the inquiry, I found the strategy beneficial because it establishes a nuanced account of the participants' experiences, one that "allows individuals

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<sup>25</sup> For instance, I encountered several multiracial Chinese American participants and a Chinese adoptee who was raised American. I also included one student with a permanent residency in the US as she was born in Colombia, but grew up in the US since she was five years old and never returned to Colombia.

more scope for presenting a complex, ambiguous and contradictory version of the self” (Croghan, Griffin, Hunter, & Phoenix, 2008, p.335). In addition, I posit that the application of traditional ethnographic research methods to understand the social life of globally mobile young people is increasingly inadequate and difficult to apply. For example, many of the participants of this research travelled internationally during the data collection period and hence, it was difficult to conduct participant observations in one geographical location. Social media content allowed me to access their “stream of experiences and practices” (Kusenbach, 2003, p.463) across geographical boundaries.

Finally, observation of participants’ social media postings was a strategic attempt to mitigate one of this study’s methodological limitations in face-to-face interviews. I recognised that the answers given to me during the interviews with European and North American students could carry bias and reflect a desire to impress (or not to offend), because I am ethnically an East Asian researcher seeking insight from them.

The remainder of the paper is structured around three interrelated themes. I first discuss how participants performed their *bona fide* cosmopolitan identity, in juxtaposition to short-term travellers, by presenting their authentic experiences in China. Secondly, I examine how geographic and sociocultural distance is utilised to construct their study abroad experience as a pioneering and daring adventure, thus gaining a greater symbolic distinction. Finally, in reference to their declarations of *bona fide* cosmopolitan experiences, I highlight the process of distinction-making between transnational students and the local community within and outside of the university. This discussion also demonstrates how transnational student identities

are constructed and performed in relation to (re)producing cosmopolitan cultural capital and simultaneously consuming the cultures of Others.

### Performing a *Bona Fide* Cosmopolitan Identity

In this section, I present the ways in which transnational students strategically narrated their collective identity of *bona fide* cosmopolitans and valorised their greater cultural capital and superior position by constructing particular boundaries of belonging. During the interviews, what I initially found salient about participants' stories was that almost all claimed that they had not engaged in the strategic and conscious pursuit of "positional advantage" (Waters and Brooks, 2010, p.218) when making decisions to study abroad in China. Even more notable, although many participants made claims about their 'impulsive' and 'naïve' decisions, there was an evident similarity in their description of 'the cosmopolitan' they aspired to become and were investing in becoming.

In other words, there was a dominant, almost identical, image of what they wanted to achieve through international education. For instance, many participants strongly and repeatedly claimed a cosmopolitan identity based on having had an *authentic* experience in an *unorthodox* and *unique* place over a relatively long period of time. International students I interviewed repeatedly claimed to have had a '*real* cosmopolitan experience', by simultaneously emphasising how their experiences were aligned with being a 'citizen of the globalised world' and an 'authentic adventurer'. Indeed, describing their experiences in China, most participants used descriptive prefixes such as 'real', 'genuine', 'unique', and 'authentic' as a distinguisher. For example, Neil stated:

## Chapter 6: Becoming a *bona fide* Cosmopolitan

I can get the *real* Chinese experience, but I also get part of the expat experience... I was excited about the chance to get to *experience the culture properly*, not *just as a tourist in that kind of detached way*...you kind of see it, but you do not actually get involved with it. It may be true for other Western international students, you have come to this far, and then you are just seeing something *superficial* then recreating the same thing. I realise *they have no idea what real China is like*, and this is an advantage of *living* with Chinese people because you get to know how *real* life in China is. That is a really good exposure because I have to do all of it myself, I have to understand it, I have to make sure that I get what is going on... (Neil, male, USA; emphasis added).

As evidenced within the above excerpt, it was apparent that most participants had adopted a sceptical stance toward ‘educational tourists’, which broadly describes short-term cultural exchange/language-learning students. Many tended negatively to frame educational tourists and repeated the phrase, ‘*just* a language student/ exchange student’ with some level of disdain. This depiction of short-term students creates a hierarchy by highlighting the apparently limited vantage point available to the short-term students.

To strengthen this point, participants repeatedly underlined that they had been ‘living’ in China, in stark contrast to narrating short-term study abroad experience with a transitory term of ‘visiting’ or ‘travelling’. Some participants strongly articulated these different identity labels by the type of travel, thereby inferring a hierarchy that the rest—indeed, all types of short-term visiting students—have ‘no idea’ about China, nor presumably could they. Put differently, interviewees tended to deploy a discursive strategy to set themselves apart from short-term educational tourists. Perhaps, in doing so, they sought to demonstrate that their own educational, cultural, and social experiences in China are more serious or special. Here, purpose

(degree-seeking or non-degree seeking) and length (short or long term) of mobility seem to symbolically validate a high level of commitment. Therefore, *why* and *how long* one travels serve as the primary marker of legitimacy of transnational students' study abroad experience, thereby evincing their greater distinction of *bona fide* cosmopolitan identity.

Similarly, when Yolanda related how she had perceived any differences in perspectives with her friends who chose to pursue an undergraduate degree in the country of their origin, she stated:

It can range from like a small difference to like a big difference...in terms of like how they view the world or, you know, just like stereotypes of the world. I have had, I have gotten into conversations where I have had to be like, '*Listen, that is not how it actually is*', maybe inform them of a bit broader perspective. I have a friend whom I grew up with for like 11 years...by the way, this is his words, not mine, 'culture' in terms of like different cuisines, customs, and stuff like that because he is a white male who has grown up in a white society. He goes to the University of B [a state university in the US], which is like predominantly white school...So, he is always like coming to me and wanting to like to learn more in terms of like, "Teach me how to be more *cultured*" (Yolanda, Female, Colombia/USA permanent residency; emphasis added).

Such comment endows distinction—'good taste'—between culturally sophisticated cosmopolitans and less mobile peers through assumed cosmopolitan sensibilities. In what follows, I elaborate on how this marker of local experiences unfolds in participants' narratives and draws a line between 'us' and 'them'.

In particular, engaging in Chinese life was central to participants' claims to their newly acquired cosmopolitan identity. With the intention of challenging their comfort zones, participants voiced their desire to mimic certain aspects of local Chinese people's everyday life as closely as possible and to manifest genuine localness by engaging with the mundane, ordinary practices in an exotic context (Prazeres, 2017). Indeed, many interviewees often emphasised the crux of their study abroad experience in China would be "deeply soaking themselves in the very essence of these native cultures" (Muzaini, 2006. p.145).

Notably, participants tended to describe partaking in two aspects of their 'local' life as signifiers of authentic experiences: eating local food and taking public transportation. As such, transnational students' study abroad experiences involving hardship in China would never place them (or their socially dominant positions) at actual risk. First, international branch campuses—with considerable professional expertise—organise and assist participants' study abroad in a seemingly unorthodox location as their custodian. Second, participants in this study travelled in a safer group setting alongside other transnational students from similar cultural backgrounds. Such 'safety net' for transnational students was reassured through the institution-organised pre-departure events and student-led groups on the social media platform (i.e., Facebook groups). Third, through such various information collection and sharing activities, participants were well aware that they could leave China whenever they wanted without severely disadvantageous consequences in their academic pathways. Thus, international branch campuses provide transnational students confidence to "immerse themselves in a strange and bizarre element... on the condition, though, that it will not stick to the skin and thus can be shaken off whenever they wish" (Bauman, 1996, p.29). Finally, perhaps for this reason, both international branch campuses constantly posted photographs emphasising the home

institutions' branding and its close link to the home campus. In doing so, international branch campuses further presented themselves as a safe choice. Participants shared that they had made an informed choice that they would—"at the minimum" or "even in the worst-case scenario"—get a prestigious US degree when they graduate from the school. Patrick's (Male, USA) insertion of "This is still a US college" suggests that having "safety cushions and well-marked escape routes" (Bauman, 1996, p.29) was an expectation from the beginning, and therefore, being put at serious risk during their time in China would be improbable.

### Eating Local foods

Participants primarily exhibited a strong sense of in-group ties on social media. Among 1,063 photos collected from participants' social media, 214 photographs presented classmates en masse, highlighting the social nature of studying abroad in China and the strong, lasting friendships they had established through such an "adventure". In most photographs, participants tended to display strong bonding in a light and affable manner: smiling and laughing while tilting their bodies towards one another or playfully embracing. Larsen (2005) argues that "the body is brought into play as a culturally coded sign" and hence travellers' photographic performances of physical proximity is a way to render "their desired togetherness, wholeness, and intimacy" (p. 424). Indeed, participants were repeatedly shown engaged in various activities in groups such as travelling to other cities and countries, clubbing, or eating local foods. Likewise, I was initially struck that almost every participant detailed a story about eating unfamiliar food as a way of encountering China and its culture. Participants recalled such culinary experience, with amusement, as one of the most prominent themes of their "expedition into the unknown, a pursuit of strange" (Heldke, 2003, p.xxi). Even more notable,

many students posted several images on their social media chronicling in detail their practices of eating local food. For example, Susan posted an image of cafeteria food (see *Figure 6.1*) at her university on Instagram with the caption: ‘I still can’t believe this is cafeteria food’.



*Figure 6.1* Cafeteria food at the university (participant photograph, available for public view)

In Schwarz’s (2016) study of 27 British undergraduate students’ experiences of a 10-week international volunteer excursion in Kenya, he/she aptly argues that local culinary experiences were central to participants’ narratives of ‘authentic’ African experience because such experiences were considered a privileged insight into a different place, which was ‘off-limits’ to strangers (p.107). Germann Molz (2007) refers to these food encounters as ‘eating the Other’. Through her research of culinary tourism among round-the-world travellers, she argues that eating ‘different’, ‘exotic’, or ‘novel’ food is not necessarily a way of encountering and knowing the Other. Rather, she considers the symbolic qualities of food that are used to *perform*

cosmopolitan characteristics of adventure, curiosity, adaptability, and openness towards difference.

### Local transportation

Using public transportation was another way that participants attempted to ‘go local’. Although there was a free shuttle bus service between the student accommodation and the campus, almost every participant reported that they frequently used local transportation: the underground, electric bikes/scooters, or taxis. The local transportation experience represents the mundane aspects of Chinese life, which, in turn, affords participants *bona fide* cosmopolitan sensibility. Also, getting used to different types of local transportation in China was an opportunity to display their knowledge of, and confidence in different cultural settings.

For example, eleven participants illustrated in detail how convenient they found DiDi (Didi Chuxing, 滴滴出行), China’s widespread car-sharing and taxi ordering smartphone application. They explained that using the local application to book a taxi helped them avoid being ripped off by taxi drivers. Similar to posting local food photos and captioning them in Chinese on social media, the access to the application is restricted only to Chinese-speakers or locals because the user interface was only in the local language at the time of data collection. Therefore, the ability to use this application, served as an emblem of *real* cosmopolitanism for transnational students in this study, and consequently, as an informal tool to distinguish themselves from other short-term tourists or international students.

In addition, while the vast majority of photos related local transportation captured the crowdedness in the underground platforms or a stream of scooters on the street, only six photos (out of 75 photos) represented the ‘unexpected’ modernity in China. Correspondingly, most of the participants shared ‘good stories’ (which may appear to an outsider puzzling or endangering) about their local transportation experiences during the interview. For other participants who posted, it was simultaneously surprising and disappointing that they have had uneventful experience with local transportation in China. For instance, Patrick (Male, USA) stated, ‘I am somewhat disappointed that nothing crazy has happened to me so far. Actually, this city has so much better public transportation than the town I come from’. This expression of disappointment implies that there had been certain expectations of what China *should* be like—‘backward’ and ‘under-developed’. These findings resemble those of Mathers’ (2011) study on American undergraduate students in Cape Town, South Africa. The author similarly discovered that *not* being able to experience South Africa as primitive prevented participants from “fulfilling their expectations for a genuine encounter with their imagined Africa”, and thus, Cape Town was described as a disappointment because “it is not Africa” (p.76).

## The Quest in ‘The Other Side of the World’ and Consumption of Otherness

Transnational students drew on the geographic and sociocultural distance between China and home to construct their study abroad experience as pioneering and daring, thus producing a greater symbolic distinction. Regardless of participants’ previous overseas travel experience, study abroad in China was deemed particularly fit-for-the purpose of cultivating a strong character and/or pioneer identity as informal, yet necessary cultural capital (see Mowforth and

Munt, 2008). China's value was highly regarded because it is an unfrequented study abroad destination and the participants' peers had not had a similar experience of travelling, living, or studying in such a unique place. During the interview, Caroline elaborated on the desirability of study abroad in China:

I would have been in the same school, the same people, the same thing for all my life and so I think it was also part of a rejection of being like, I just do not want to be another one of you or rather one of us, I want to be remembered with something *different*... I do not know. I think the main idea was to get out of the *comfort zone*, like start my life somewhere else, become an adult somewhere else so that my experience is *different*...I can live anywhere else (Caroline, Female, USA; emphasis added).

Furthermore, China seemed to be much appreciated because the country is physically distant from their home countries in Europe or North America. In response to the same question, Aurélie replied:

...so when I applied to University A [university she was enrolled at], I applied like with a sense of *adventure*, like you are going to go *the opposite side of the world*, and so I applied not really thinking I would get in and then I got the invitation to have the interview, and when that went down, I got the acceptance letter, and you know, it kind of just solidified in my mind that I had an opportunity to go to *the other side of the world* and that kind of is what drew me to make my decision (Aurélie, Female, USA; emphasis added).

Here, participants reflected that they had been enticed by the prospect of moving to 'the opposite' or 'the other side' of the World—in fact, of the Western world—suggesting that

dissimilarity and remoteness from Westernised nations are highly valued orientalisising features. Indeed, participants used descriptors such as ‘remote’, ‘far away’, ‘opposite’, ‘distant’, and ‘obscure’. Conversely, some suggested that other study abroad destinations in the Global North were not as appealing because they represented a conventional, well-worn direction. For instance, when asked whether it would have been different if she had gone to study in one of the popular study abroad countries in the West (e.g., Germany), Maggie answered,

I do, I also think that it is how you frame it and what you get out of it, so I think that if you publicised it about yourself the right way and you really articulated what out of a German college education experience was so different and ground-breaking, like maybe they will be perceived similarly, but I think like the first glance, like all you’re going to see is like this person studied in China, this person studied in Germany, China would be a bigger *distinguisher* (Maggie, female, USA; emphasis added).

Nevertheless, the desire to study abroad in an ‘unpaved’ destination is not always the overriding factor in the destination choices that these students had to make. Some participants marked their study abroad experience as ‘favourable’ or ‘beneficial’ to their future employability, especially in relation to China’s rapid emergence as an antipode to the West. Here, while China was set on a pedestal based on its perceived distance and dissimilarity, paradoxically, “such difference must not be so radical that the location’s value and desirability are not recognised” (Simpson, 2005, p.162). Indeed, when I asked participants if they had considered other study

abroad destinations, China turned out to be the only developing country<sup>26</sup> as well as the only country in the Global South, suggesting that China's position as a political and economic powerhouse contributed significantly to their destination choice. Therefore, the dissimilar context of China was appreciated because the destination is an uncommon yet, to some extent, socially desirable such that participants can obtain social approval and acknowledgement.

As observed from Caroline and Maggie's narrative, although almost all participants claimed that studying in China was not a strategic decision, most of them still thought study abroad in China is a 'distinguisher' (Murphy-Lejeune, 2003) both in short and long terms. In the short term, transnational students made an adventurous and unique choice that set them apart from their peers. On this note, similar to the short-term Canadian sojourners in the Global South in Prazeres' (2017) study, my participants appeared to intuitively understand that leaving the imaginative and geographical 'comfort zone' itself endows cultural capital. Then, cultural capital earned through their unique experience in China would eventually help them get ahead in the labour market in the long term.

Lastly, participants expressed a sense of pride and accomplishment based on their ability to overcome various challenges they had encountered in China. While there was a wide range of source of discomfort, the lack of Western-style facilities and language and cultural barriers were frequently mentioned as the key challenges of their time in China. To highlight this point,

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<sup>26</sup> Participants mentioned that they had also considered the US and Canada in North America; Belgium, France, Germany, Italy, Norway, Spain, Switzerland, and the Netherlands in Europe; and Hong Kong, Japan, Singapore, South Korea in Asia. The US (12), France (6), and the UK (6) were the most popular destinations.

participants adopted negative adjectives describing China to emphasise discomfort that they had ‘survived’. In describing challenging aspects, many participants characterised China as ‘confusing’, ‘terrifying’, ‘chaotic’, ‘crazy’, and ‘scary’. In particular, when I asked participants about their first few months in China, almost all participants shared their own and their friends’ stories of initial frustrations in trying to adapt to the new environment. Many of them also mentioned their ongoing struggle, and Patrick talked about ‘China burnout’ as follows:

China is driving you crazy. So, I got here at first and, you know, it took me a while to get my bearings, I think. And after two years, I still find it challenging and have my ups and downs... you know...those days when you just want to pack your stuff and call it an end...(laughs)  
(Patrick, male, USA).

What initially struck me is that most participants narrated their frustrations in China humorously rather than seriously, although they might have been negotiating the struggle more seriously in private. In addition, participants often recounted stories of displeasure or irritation to emphasise positive outcomes they yielded. Similar to the international volunteers and students in Schwarz’s (2016) and Prazeres’ (2017) studies, my participants interpreted navigating a degree of discomfort in China as an integral part of obtaining strong character (Goffman, 1967, as cited in Schwarz, 2016) or self-development (Prazeres, 2017). In this way, participants’ choice of degree-seeking, long-term study abroad was retrospectively presented as a choice to ‘kill two birds with one stone’: upon the completion of the degree programme, they would acquire not only institutionalised cultural capital (academic credential) from a globally reputable university, but also cosmopolitan “personality package” (Brown et al., 2003, p.121). While such an extra competitive edge is informal merit, it is nonetheless considered valuable in a labour market with intensified competition.

Extending this point, participants frequently used the word ‘know’ to highlight their subject position as an authentic cosmopolitan and their intimate understanding of China and Chinese. Many participants tended to use definitive statements as a rhetorical apparatus, affirming unique merits that they had ‘mastered’ an essential core of China and, by consequence, became a sophisticated cosmopolitan (Prins and Webster, 2010). Again, participants implied that there is a clear-cut hierarchical division between ‘us’ (who ‘know’) and ‘them’ (who have ‘no idea’). While it is expected that interviewees would have achieved a deeper understanding of China and Chinese culture through their study abroad, what I found, nevertheless, problematic is that participants repeatedly made definitive statements when describing their study abroad experience in China. From a postcolonial perspective, participants’ narrative claims—that China had been, and *can* be fully ‘lived’ and ‘known’—appealed to the notion of ‘collecting places’ (Desforges, 1997).

This paper has thus far shown how participants created binary categorisations to claim distinction from various Others: first, short-term exchange or immobile students based on the symbolic markers of *bona fide* cosmopolitanism produced through mobility; second, mainstream transnational students to and within the West using the exoticness and remoteness of their study abroad destination as a highly valued distinguishing feature; third, local people and place through framing the differences of Others by the reference of home (See *Table 6.1*). Binary oppositions, as Currie (1998) argues, were imperative in the process of construction of identities because binary oppositions play a significant role in excluding the differences. Furthermore, the dichotomous oppositions used in the transnational students’ narrative claims reflect “imagined lives” (Appadurai, 1996, p.35) of the host country, produced by dominant discourses, as a site of production of individual and collective identities.

Table 6.1 Examples of binary oppositions used in the participants' narratives

	<b>Us</b>	<b>Them</b>
<b>Descriptions of subject positions</b>	international/ well-travelled	local
	cosmopolitan	unsophisticated/ monocultural
<b>Descriptions of experiences/ modes of study</b>	living (long-term)	visiting (short-term)
	authentic	superficial
	serious	leisurely
	unique, special	ordinary, undistinguished
<b>Descriptions of home/host countries</b>	developed	developing
	rational	disorderly
	modern	traditional

As shown in the table, binary oppositions manifested throughout the participants' narratives created particular boundaries of *bona fide* cosmopolitans as a basis for intergroup exclusion between mobile cosmopolitans and the local/immobile, as well as intragroup distinction among mobile travellers themselves. Taken together, there are contradictory, parallel streams of cosmopolitanism in the transnational students' narratives. On one hand, participants enthusiastically claimed a genuine and authentic cosmopolitanism, as opposed to widespread "aesthetic cosmopolitanism" (Urry, 1995, p.167) or "banal cosmopolitanism" (Beck, 2003, p.21), and expressed their keen desire to learn about *real* China and Chinese people. On the other hand, participants explicitly utilised well-established cultural references from home to articulate their experiences, which Savage, Bagnall, and Longhurst (2004) referred to as "self-referential cosmopolitanism" (p.194), thereby sustaining their engagement with a broader comparative frame for reflexive judgements.

## Deploying a White-Western Cosmopolitan Identity

The previous sections focused on how transnational students highlighted their cosmopolitan subject position and simultaneously constructed China as fundamentally different from, and often inferior to their own culture (Caton & Santos, 2009). Although the relative merits of cosmopolitan experiences were declared based on the acclimation to, and immersion in an unfamiliar cultural context over a relatively long period of time, this section will elucidate that they are nevertheless just as eager to embrace the difference between their own white, Western identity and the local Chinese Others, thereby legitimatising and perpetuating implicit and explicit cultural superiority over the host community.

While participants were sharing their experience in China (and broadly in East Asia), they talked about uncomfortable yet convenient experiences. While participants attempt to mimic the Chinese lifestyle as similarly as possible, their dominant social positioning is never completely relinquished.

I think that there definitely is a Western privilege in a lot of circumstances. You can get away with so much more stuff, ...but you know, I think that I somewhat enjoy the privileges...they are really subtle, they are really subtle, and you can...It is easy for a lot of people to not really notice them, but I think it is beneficial (Karlijn, Female, the Netherlands).

Way, way, way better off...like first Chinese people tend to like lighter coloured people immediately better, like they judge them less, they think like, okay, they're white, they think that they're more beautiful, they think that they have more money, and they just like making all these assumptions about white people (Patrick, male, USA).

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Of course, we are treated differently. I mean...[hesitating] white people, or internationals in general, somehow treated better. This sounds very provocative, but it is true (Tom, male, USA).

In the above excerpts, participants articulated the feeling that in China, they were socially advantaged in daily life. Some of the participants strongly inferred that receiving differential treatments was an expectation.

While receiving favourable treatment appeared to be related to a broader privilege of mobility largely associated with “Western passports, disposable income and white complexion” (Vrasti, 2012, p.83), participants dominantly talked about it explicitly in relation to white racial privilege:

Ironically even though I am ‘American’, I do not receive the privilege as my other American friends because I do not resemble the stereotypical image of an American...So, with my friend from the Netherlands...and it is often that she is viewed, for some reason even though we are both foreigners, she is viewed as ‘*THE foreigner*’, so people will come up to us and they will always be like, ‘Can I take a picture with her?’ and like so I am the one taking the picture..., it is that even though there could be three foreigners if only one looked like a *natural* foreigner, she is the one that is going to get the attention (Soraya, female, USA; emphasis added).

Similarly, in some cases, participants reported that they felt uncomfortable that they were ‘judged’ by the colour of their skin, but many reported they were only irritated when they were targeted for rip-offs because they were assumed to be financially privileged. However, again, none of the participants critically reflected on this ‘invisible package of unearned assets’

(McIntosh, 1995, as cited in Schwarz, 2016) or referred to structural aspects of their white privilege or to power. For example, Patrick stated,

But it is not a privilege that puts you somewhere; it is a privilege that maybe affects the people surrounding you in how they look at you or how much they like you, I do not think...I do not think it places you at any higher, you know, stage (Patrick, male, USA).

Further, such privilege is not only displayed by white individuals. In this study, only less than half (15) reported their ethnicity as Caucasian/White. Nevertheless, other participants who reported their ethnicity as black, multiracial, or Asian/Pacific islander, although in different degree, also shared a similar experience of being treated advantageously. This finding suggests non-white participants also had successfully 'acquired' a white-Western cosmopolitan status through their affluence, association with Western culture, and institutional membership within an elite US school. Additionally, one of the distinct tools to acquire such identity was mastery of English; however, it was a secondary rather than primary tool.

Participants' claims to white-Western cosmopolitan identity as a 'privileged minority' became particularly evident when they narrated meaningful social interactions outside of the university community in China. While participants claim to have 'real', 'authentic' experience in China, only three talked about the relationships they had cultivated with the local Chinese community. Paradoxically, many articulated their engagement in (or aspiration to be part of) Western expatriate community in China instead, which is widely known for being a 'bubble' of privileged mobile professionals. In this sense, participants expressed their aspirations to position themselves at the top of a global hierarchy in the framework of the 'transnational capitalist class' (Sklair, 2012) or 'transnational elite' (Friedman, 2000). Indeed, such aspiration

to engage in the ‘expat’ community was often expressed by several participants, particularly in their long-term international career plans, in association with a higher standard of living—‘expat package’, ‘jet setter’ lifestyle, and higher social standing in China. These findings resemble those of Kunz (2018) and Cranston (2017), who similarly point out from that the term ‘expatriates’ is discursively linked to the West, and confers social privilege in the non-West host country.

## Conclusion

This paper proffers a critique of the normative discourse promoting cosmopolitanism within higher education: that study abroad is beneficial to young people’s cosmopolitan understanding of the world. The findings of this study teased out the ways in which transnational students draw on cosmopolitanism as a self-serving narrative and dominant rule of exclusion to encounter differences, create a hierarchy of achievement or subject position, and legitimate themselves within the positional competition at home and away. While scholars have previously documented international student mobility in relation to the pursuit of differentiation, what is novel in this paper is that I address issues related to the performance of cosmopolitanism, through which Western-situated international students depicted various Others—mainstream international students from the Global South to the Global North, educational tourists, international students within their ‘comfort zone’ of the Global North, immobile peers in their home countries, and the local community in the destination country.

The analysis of transnational students’ narratives of place provided in this paper suggests that differences are simultaneously consumed through international student mobility. Within the

context of contemporary cultural economy, transnational students in this study represent an example through which to explore what is *(re)produced* as well as *consumed* in the course of international student mobility as student journeys involve imagining, gazing upon a travel destination, making sense of their encounters with differences in a host culture, and utilising cross-cultural experiences as the source of cosmopolitan distinction. In addition, this paper contributes uniquely to the current discussion on international student mobility by exploring an atypical yet emerging mobility pattern in the changing landscape of international education. While Western-situated international students seek to be ‘different’ from mainstream transnational students and travellers, the findings of this study suggest that they ironically reinforce the popular imagination of the destination country, through which they simultaneously transgress a singular, Western-centric perspective. If this relatively new mobility of transnational students tends to reproduce established frames of distinction and consume difference of Others, we can question the structural factors that inform the practice. In turn, we can critically reflect on the implications for cosmopolitan sensibilities that are employed in proclaiming the benefits of study abroad.

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# 7 “I POST, THEREFORE I BECOME *#COSMOPOLITAN*”: THE MATERIALITY OF ONLINE- PRESENTATIONS OF STUDY ABROAD IN CHINA

**Abstract:** Drawing on social media content created by Western-situated transnational students as well as two international branch campuses in China, this article scrutinises the textual and visual rhetoric made available by transnational students and international branch campuses for public consumption. Particularly, it describes the ways in which intranational branch campuses and transnational students co-produce, perform, and curate cosmopolitan sensibilities through social media. Theoretically, this paper proposes the analytical lens of materiality as one way to understand the narrative strategies employed by international branch campuses to construct China as a unique and desirable destination for international education, and by transnational students from North America and European countries to exhibit cosmopolitan practices within domains of their everyday life in China.

**Keywords:** cosmopolitanism, international branch campus, international student mobility, materiality, online self-presentation

## Introduction

In the context of increasing transnational mobility as well as associated interconnectedness and diversity, cosmopolitanism has received considerable scholarly attention in the field of international student mobility and international higher education. Cosmopolitanism is a complex, multi-faceted concept. Therefore, cosmopolitanism is used to highlight a range of aspects, including but not limited to, individual cultural identity (Gunesch, 2004); cultural capital (Igarashi & Saito, 2014; Matthews & Sidhu, 2005); and global citizenship (Caruana, 2014). Regardless of separate areas of emphasis, cosmopolitanism has been broadly associated with mobility of people, things, ideas, and capital, and cultures across “physical” and “corporeal” borders.

With the emergence of digitally mediated communications and the availability of mobile smart devices in the last decades, however, people have increasingly developed the habit of being connected with others in ‘virtual’ social spaces, which are not geographically ‘bordered’ and ‘rooted’. Perhaps most importantly, social media platforms, such as Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram, have brought about the possibility of a newly emerging social sphere, in which people experience, perceive, create, and navigate the social world (Hallett & Barber, 2014). In this vein, McEwan and Sobre-Denton (2011) discuss “virtual cosmopolitanism” (p. 252) and “the construction of virtual third culture” in technology-mediated social and cultural environments. Drawing on a multicultural group utilising a social media forum, the authors explore how cultural and social capital may be transmitted through social media networks irrespective of geographical boundaries and how virtual cultural spaces allow for a greater transnational spread of cosmopolitanism than the corporeal world. Nevertheless, despite a growing body of literature on cosmopolitanism vis-à-vis the digital age in various academic

fields, it has been rarely discussed in the context of international student mobility and international higher education.

Taking this desideratum as a point of departure, I explore the textual, pictorial, and cinematic artefacts of mobility, transnational education, and cosmopolitanism on social media. To this end, I propose the notion of materiality as one useful way of understanding how international branch campuses’ and transnational students’ online articulations of cosmopolitanism are intricately interwoven with their physical embeddings as well as the new technology-mediated social spaces they actively occupy to create and communicate personally meaningful life narratives. In particular, I investigate the ways in which transnational students’ perceived materiality conjure a myriad of emotions, meanings, through their embeddedness in wider frameworks of discourse and experience.<sup>27</sup>

This discursive approach to materiality underscores an important shift in international student mobility research—a move away from a prevalent perspective that treats transnational students and their physical environment of education as two separate and distinct entities towards a perspective that acknowledges how people, spaces, and objects are coming together as a whole, forming our experiences in and of the world (Brooks & Waters, 2017). Therefore, through this paper, I attempt to illuminate the overlapping and blurred boundaries as well as emerging complexities among mobile young people, their physical and digital environments. To this end,

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<sup>27</sup> While I acknowledge that there is a body of ‘new materialisms’ scholarship that concerns the performative role of materials in the constitution of social life as well as ‘agency’ of the material, my approach to materiality in this thesis is rather humanistic, which prioritises human perceptions, experiences, and discourse; and focuses on how the material influences human bodies and senses.

this paper situates Western-situated transnational students' online articulations of everyday engagements at and beyond a Sino-American international branch campus within a larger neoliberal discourse of international higher education. Furthermore, it explores how and to what extent individual narratives of transnational education in China resemble or differ from online narratives produced by transnational educational providers.

It is also important to note that this paper specifically draws on postings on Instagram, among social media platforms (e.g., Facebook, Twitter, WeChat, etc.). Instagram was consciously chosen to investigate international branch campuses' and transnational students' tailored narratives for 'global' social media users. Postings on Instagram, thus, may not be representative of postings on other social media sites targeting 'local' social media users, such as WeChat. I will further justify my choice in a later section with reference to the dramaturgical concept of 'the audience'.

In what follows, I first contextualise and situate my study by discussing China's education reforms highlighting the recent development of international branch campuses. The subsequent section discusses the methodology of the research, including theoretical inferences. The findings and discussions are organised around two sections: The first section reveals the visual and textual discourses adopted and generated by the international branch campuses, and the second section focuses on how such institutional discourses are echoed or questioned by the participants. I conclude the paper by suggesting some potential avenues for further research in the area.

## International Branch Campus as a Site of Strategic Cosmopolitanism: The Case of China

Since the 1980s, China has engaged in a series of profound educational reforms to cultivate its higher education institutions and ‘catch up’ with what are perceived to be the top universities in the world (Zhang, Zhao, & Lei, 2012).<sup>28</sup> One facet of the reforms is to participate in, and create spaces for, transnational education. As illustrated in the following excerpt, *The Outline of China’s National Plan for Medium and Long-term Education Reform and Development (2010–2020)* explicitly constructs universities as “geopolitical sites” (Dimpfl & Smith, 2018, p. 3), where institutional actors are expected to produce “strategic cosmopolitans”, who are “oriented to excel in ever transforming situations of global competitions” (Mitchell, 2003, p. 387-8):

It is essential to reform and develop education by *opening it to the outside world, carrying out education exchanges and collaboration at multiple levels and in a broad scope, and raising education’s internationalization level*. Advanced concepts and experience in education in the world shall be assimilated to boost education reform and development at home, and to *enhance the nation’s global position, influence, and competitiveness in the field of education*. To meet the requirement of opening up the Chinese economy and society to the world, large numbers of talents shall be cultivated that are *imbued with global vision, well-versed in international rules, and capable of participating in international affairs and competition... It is necessary to seek the cooperation of renowned schools, education institutions, research institutes and companies*

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<sup>28</sup> For education policy development in China, see also Li (2017), Ngok (2008) and Zhang, Zhao, & Lei (2012).

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*outside this nation to establish education, teaching, training and research organizations or undertake such projects. Schools at all levels and of all varieties should be encouraged to engage in diverse forms of international exchanges and cooperation, and a good job should be done in running demonstrative joint schools or joint projects in cooperation with foreign partners. Multiple approaches to utilizing quality education resources from abroad shall be searched for* (Ministry of Education[MoE], 2010, p.34; emphasis added).

Among a range of transnational academic programmes in partnership with prestigious overseas universities, this paper specifically focuses on the rapid development of international branch campuses in China vis-à-vis the production of the ‘strategic cosmopolitan’. China has become the leading host country of international branch campuses, hosting 32 of 243 worldwide (Cross-Border Education Research Team, 2017).<sup>29</sup> Here, the strong dominance of certain countries is notable: 90 per cent (28 out of 32) of international branch campuses in China are operated by higher education providers from Anglophone and Western European countries.<sup>30</sup> The United States is the top provider, with 12 international branch campuses (including two under development), followed by the United Kingdom (8) and Australia (2). That is, although the

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<sup>29</sup> These numbers do not include joint academic programmes operated by Chinese universities and five international branch campuses in Hong Kong. In this paper, the term international branch campus is used as “an entity that is owned, at least in part, by a specific foreign higher education institution, which has some degree of responsibility for the overall strategy and quality assurance of the branch campus. The branch campus operates under the name of the foreign institution and offers programming and/or credentials that bear the name of the foreign institution. The branch has basic infrastructure such as a library, an open access computer lab and dining facilities, and, overall, students at the branch have a similar student experience to students at the home campus” (Wilkins & Rumbley, 2018, p.14).

<sup>30</sup> Other provider countries include Canada (1), France (2), Germany (1), Ireland (1), and the Netherlands (1).

above policy statement does not explicitly prioritise specific nations or educational systems to assimilate, it is evident that China has accepted the ‘international’ norms of privileging English-taught, Western education. Yang (2011, 2014) points out that such a fervent desire to catch up with the West reflects the broader changes in Chinese economy and society, as China increasingly engages with neoliberal globalisation and accordingly reforms its society to embrace market principles.

Another noteworthy aspect is that half of the international branch campuses in China opened only in the past decade, and there are six international branch campuses currently under development. Although such rapid growth of international branch campuses encompasses a wide range of factors, I propose two possible explanations. First, China has been known as the biggest source of outward international students for the past decades. From an economic perspective, Chinese students studying at U.S. universities and colleges contributed 12.55 billion dollars to the U.S. economy in 2016 (Institute of International Education, 2018, as cited in “China—Education and Training”, 2019). In this regard, it seems plausible that the Chinese government realised that if institutions located in China delivered international academic programmes through partnership agreements with sought-after foreign universities, then globally competitive universities would be fostered within China. In turn, the massive currency outflow caused by Chinese students studying abroad would be decreased. Further, international branch campuses contribute to strategic capacity building of China’s higher education as the nation aims to host half a million inbound transnational students by the end of 2020 (see Parr, 2018; ‘Why China is lavishing money on foreign students’, 2019).

Second, from a provider perspective, the export of academic programmes, including international branch campuses, is also seen as an attractive venture because of its profitability from fee-paying transnational students (Marginson, 2009), increase in global visibility, and ranking of institutions (Shams & Huisman, 2012). Pan (2013) indicates that universities around the world have become “entrepreneurial” and adopted a commercial approach to international student recruitment, mainly due to widely spread neoliberal ideology and decreased government funding for higher education in many countries (p. 251).

Taken together, I argue that international branch campuses act as unique institutional sites, where the interests of provider institutions from the West and the Chinese government align. International branch campuses potentially provide institutional spaces whereby both domestic and transnational students internalise state hegemonies and university expectations to become “the new model of strategically cosmopolitan citizen” (Mitchell, 2003, p.389; see also Cheng, 2018). Within this framing of strategic cosmopolitanism, international branch campuses serve a role of legitimatising and institutionalising cosmopolitanism as a desirable disposition in the age of neoliberal globalisation (Igarashi & Saito, 2014). In the context of this study, Sino-Western international branch campuses allow their students to access to cosmopolitan cultural capital through various routes: transnational mobility, Chinese, and exposure to a different culture for transnational students, and vice versa, Western education, English, and a degree from a foreign institution for local students (see Waters & Leung, 2013).

In the next section, I turn to online social spaces, where transnational students and international branch campuses strategically navigate different representational choices of digital artefacts to present their experiences of study abroad in China to a public audience.

## Social Media, Exhibition of the Self, and Material Traces

As a large part of the global population is now connected to social media, it has become an integral part of the way people interact with others, build communities, and fabricate identities (Ibrahim, 2015). Correspondingly, Goffman’s (1959) dramaturgical perspective on social interaction and presentation of the self has been increasingly popular, and much research draws on his theory of self-presentation as a framework to investigate how social media users endeavour to strategically construct their profiles and identities online in a favourable way (Bareket-Bojmel, Moran, & Shahar, 2016; Birnbaum, 2013; Chua & Chang, 2016; Schwarz, 2016). Particularly, Birnbaum’s (2013) eight-month ethnographic observation of 30 American undergraduate students’ Facebook profiles exemplifies this approach in the context of higher education. Drawing on Goffman’s (1959) dramaturgical concepts of ‘fronts’, the study explores how university students employ impression management techniques in managing the materials they place on social media. The author argues that participants engaged in strategic presentations of the self on their Facebook pages to communicate self-enhancing (or deliberately self-derogating) impressions to others. Further, he identifies six types of standardised performances within the participants’ Facebook profiles: the partier, the socialite, the risk-taker, the comic, the institutional citizen, and the eccentric. In doing so, the author argues that undergraduate students stage themselves on social media as particular sorts of people in order to conform to their normative understanding of undergraduate culture and to give their peers the impression that they are fully engaging in the university experience.

On a theoretical level, Hogan (2010) expands on Goffman’s (1959) dramaturgical notion of ‘performance’ and further introduces the concept of ‘exhibition’ in online spaces as a form of presentation of the self. He argues that social media presents a new interactive platform where

the users not only perform as an ‘actor’ but also as a ‘curator’. Building on this concept of exhibition, I view the social media platform in this study as an interactive exhibition space where transnational students and international branch campuses deliberately take images of their choice of artefacts to display their understanding of what constitutes living and studying in China and share them with the audience. Here, the photograph itself (e.g., its choice of subjects, genres, and compositions) as well as associated captions reveal the curator’s particular perspective upon the physical and digital environments. I contend, as Bourdieu and Whiteside (1996) argue, that photographic practice and its product express “the ontological choice of an object which is perceived as worthy of being photographed, which is captured, stored, communicated, shown and admired” (p.6). Therefore, when analysing the data, I focused on the material and curatorial elements of social media postings: which photographs participants post online, how those are ordered, and how they carry embedded meanings and symbols. By doing so, I attempt to provide “a powerful critique of the role of objects in symbolic systems and social structures” (Buchli, 2002, p.10-11) and how such taken-for-granted social structures inevitably come to frame everyday experiences (Giddens, 2009; Schwarz, 2016).

In this paper, I further highlight the concept of the audience concerning the specific context of China’s internet media policy, widely known as “the Great Firewall”. Over the past decade, China has blocked thousands of foreign -primarily Western- and domestic websites and the studied social media (Instagram) is one of the proscribed websites that are officially blocked within China. Therefore, it was only accessible via Virtual Private Network (VPN) service as a circumvention tool that bypasses geo-restrictions (see Li, 2016; Yang, 2017). Correspondingly, a range of homegrown social media platforms and applications, such as WeChat and Weibo, serve similar or hybrid functions as Facebook, Twitter, or Instagram.

While many internet users in China tend to be loyal to such homegrown services, 20 percent of Chinese internet users are estimated to engage in the practice of “wall-crossing” (Li, 2016, p.110). Therefore, in this context, VPN has a unique function of dividing social media users and audiences inside or outside the Great Firewall.

During my fieldwork in China, I found it intriguing that both international branch campuses and transnational students seemed to use different social media platforms to reach out to specific groups of “imagined audience” (Marwick & Boyd, 2011, p.114). For example, whereas international branch campuses and participating students used WeChat as a primary tool to communicate with the (geographically and/or culturally) local audiences than global ones, Instagram was employed to communicate their visual narratives with wider global audiences (e.g., families and friends back home, prospect transnational students and a global audience of followers). That is to say, in the context of this study, the Chinese government’s control of online social spaces may play an even more powerful motivator for curators (social media users) carefully to choose a particular exhibition space (social media platform) as well as what are appropriate artefacts to display and what are not, while having a specific audience group in mind.

## Methods and Data Collection

The research participants were recruited from an internationally and locally accredited English-taught undergraduate programme at a Sino-American branch campus in a metropolitan region of China. This particular type of institution and programme was chosen because it is now at the forefront of international academic programmes in Asia, and China is the world’s leading

host for Western universities' international branch campuses. In my research site, the entire degree programme was exclusively delivered in English mostly by Western and Western-educated faculty.<sup>31</sup> Although Chinese language was a mandatory part of the programme curriculum, it was not the focus of the degree programme per se. Also, the institution encouraged students to spend at least one or two terms overseas during their studies. Hence, students enrolled at the studied branch campus could opt into study at the home institution in the United States. Upon successful completion of the degree programme, the institution confers two diplomas: one from the home institution in the United States and another Chinese-accredited one from the branch campus.

Although the international branch campus recruits both international students as well as Chinese nationals, the participants in this study comprise only international students because the focal purpose of the study is to explore how Sino-Western international branch campuses and transnational students emanating from North American and European countries narrate their stories of international education in China. At the time of my data collection (October 2016–June 2017), all participants (24 females and 9 males, aged between 18 and 22) were undergraduate students who were enrolled in a four-year, full degree programme.<sup>32</sup> Whereas

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<sup>31</sup> It is, though, with the exception of Chinese language courses as a second language for non-native Chinese speakers. These courses were scheduled for four to six hours per week throughout transnational students' degree programme, and the language of instruction was Chinese. Non-native English speakers in this branch campus took equal hours of English for Academic Purposes classes.

<sup>32</sup> Given such global nature of the programme, I was approached by exchange students from the home campus to the Chinese branch campus who expressed their interest to participate in the research. Although I had informal

28 out of 33 participants were from the United States, five participants were identified themselves as European: citizens of France, the Netherlands, and Spain. Participants represent various racial and ethnic groups. I limited the study participants to the single context of an English-taught undergraduate programme in China in order to focus on long-term, degree-seeking inbound mobility to China. My assumption was that the ways in which short-term, non-degree-seeking transnational students (e.g., year-abroad, language, cultural programmes, or gap year) perceive and make meanings of their daily encounters and experiences in China could differ from those of this study’s participants.

My initial research design was primarily based on verbal narratives from semi-structured interviews. However, as the study unfolded, I was drawn more to participants’ online social spaces because that was where my participants were ‘living’ (see Hallett & Barber, 2014). Indeed, many participants in this research travelled both internationally and domestically during the data collection period and utilised social media as the primary communication tool to interact with friends, family, and the public beyond geographical boundaries. Therefore, I was intrigued to investigate visual and textual content on participants’ social media in combination with narrative analysis of the interviews. I contend that a combination of traditional and digital data collection enabled me to scrutinise mobile young people and phenomena that transcend a singular bounded space (Fitzgerald, 2006) and to reflect post-modern, global context of life (Hannerz, 2003). Social media content played a critical role and

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conversations with them to gain insights into the dynamics among transnational students, they were not recruited as study participants.

enabled me to access participants' "stream of experiences and practices as they move through, and interact with, their physical and social environment" (Kusenbach, 2003, p.463) across geographical boundaries.

In addition, although the focus of this study is participants' individual narrative accounts, I was interested in exploring how and to what extent participating students' experiences overseas were situated within and mediated through the institutional setting provided by the university. Therefore, I additionally conducted a discourse analysis of textual and visual materials on the chosen social media platform created by two Sino-Western branch campuses in China, including the branch campus at which the study participants are enrolled. I chose to present two institutions to provide detailed accounts that make explicit the characteristics of the studied context. I also believe this was an ethically desirable choice to additionally safeguard participants' anonymity.

Procedurally, based on a certain level of personal rapport with participants through the face-to-face interview, I contacted participants one more time via email to get approval to collect data from their social media content and investigate participants' narratives in online space. 22 participants (out of 33 interview participants) agreed to give me permission to access their social media, sent me their account information, and accepted my "follow" request on Instagram, Facebook, and/or WeChat. Institutions are not formally informed of my access, however I only collected public postings. To delve deeper into participants' photo-based self-presentation, I narrowed the studied social media to Instagram, which was one of the most widely used photo-sharing platforms among the participants. I set a point in time from when I retrospectively tracked participants' and institutions' postings. I chose to collect images and

captions posted from October 2016 because that is when I met participants in person for interviews and I started making my field notes. Most of the participants and chosen institutions actively posted on their social media accounts during and beyond the research time frame. However, I stopped collecting data in June 2017 because I felt that the point of redundancy in emerging themes was reached. Overall, I collected 1,063 postings from participants’ accounts and 509 postings from two Sino-American branch campuses’ official accounts. Based on themes that emerged from the interview data analysis, I thematically coded students’ postings. Further, I grouped postings by types of photography (landscape/architecture, food, portrait, travel) to investigate any patterns and commonalities across them.

## Best of Both Worlds: Promoting Cosmopolitan Dream and Safe Risk

The use of social media has become more deeply embedded in the lives of young people. International Student Survey (QS, 2019), among over 75,000 respondents and 71 universities across the globe, highlights the growing pervasiveness of social media and its importance for higher education marketing. The survey reveals 84 percent of the respondents answered that they utilised social media when making decisions study destination. Correspondingly, institutions also have adapted to prospective students’ changing communications preferences and engagement with a multitude of social media platforms has rapidly become significant in university marketing and communication strategies. Similarly, Wilkins and Huisman (2013) argue that higher education institutions, just like many other types of organisations, are increasingly investing in developing their reputation and competitiveness in order to influence prospective students’ choice of institution. Therefore, based on the review of literature and interviews I conducted, I was unsurprised when I found that the studied international branch

campuses seemingly utilised social media as a strategic communication tool to increase university attractiveness by posting content that expresses university personality, external prestige, and university reputation (Sung & Yang, 2008) to increase student recruitment, retention, visibility, and to build trust (Peruta & Helm, 2018).

What was evident is that almost all postings on WeChat were captioned in Chinese, suggesting that they were carefully tailored to the needs of a local or Chinese-speaking audience. In the same way, most photo captions were written only in English on Instagram. In this study, 509 photos posted on Instagram by two institutions were analysed and categorised into seven sub-groups: diverse student body; Chinese and international cultural experiences; campus facilities; landscapes and architecture; university branding and identity; admission related information or promotions for prospect students; and announcements for current students. In the following section, I will describe how visual discourse utilised by international branch campuses propagates ideas, values, and expectations of the strategic cosmopolitan, and how the various sets of objects were used to present China as a unique study abroad destination to gain cosmopolitan attributes.

### Visual Hybridity and Cultural Adaptation

Both branch campuses repeatedly posted photographic content highlighting the global outlook of their academic programmes and international student body as key components of their institutional identities (see *Figure 7.1*).



*Figure 7.1* Example images categorised as visible ‘hybridity’ (photos shared by institutions, available for public view)

To this end, they prominently featured the visual presentation of racial and ethnic diversity by posting images with compositional balance between transnational students and domestic students. The transnational students appeared to be in groups with varying skin tones or paired with a member of the host culture (i.e., Chinese/East Asian). In doing so, the universities led the audience to envision international branch campuses as culturally de-territorialised “third space” (Bhabha, 1994, p.38). Further, it was notable that the disparities in skin colour were used to promote the institutional rhetoric of “diversity premium”<sup>33</sup> as a form of cultural capital, which only globally known universities that attract students from all over the world can afford.

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<sup>33</sup> While this term has not been documented in the literature, I was acquainted with this term from Fazal Rizvi’s comment during the workshop on Diaspora and Internationalisation in Higher Education in London in May 2019.

These postings were usually accompanied by current transnational students or alumni of the branch campuses testifying to have undergone a profound personal transformation as a result of their study abroad experience. This rhetoric echoed in branch campuses' social media postings reinforces the underlying assumption that offering international exposure “may help universities to form not just good future employees, but citizens of character” (O’Shea, 2011, p.576). Similarly, in Brooks and Waters’ (2015) study of the internationalisation of British schools, the authors find that overseas programmes are foregrounded on the homepages, school newsletters, and Twitter feeds communicated by the sample schools. They argue that “mobility is deemed to be an important attribute of the middle-class subject, and often constitutes a key component of how elite schools present themselves to others” (p. 224).

Another notable category of imagery that is frequently displayed by transnational students was their experiences of well-known aspects of Chinese culture, such as calligraphy and dumpling making (see *Figure 7.2*).



*Figure 7.2* Example images categorised as visible cultural adaptation (photos shared by institutions, available for public view)

Of the 34 photographs I examined in this category, 27 portrayed a variety of outdoor activities, perhaps to highlight transnational students’ first-hand experience of the host community. Conversely, although transnational students’ participation in various cultural activities were repeatedly featured in the institutional online narratives, these aspects were not much displayed by students, which resonates with participants’ sceptical views towards “educational tourists” and their shallow and passive understanding of the host culture during the interviews. Assuming that these postings were purposefully chosen to impress prospective students, cosmopolitan experiences seem to be imagined differently depending on individual’s stage of mobility (e.g., prior to, during, and possibly after the transnational experience). Put differently, whereas cultural activities that the institutions posted online may be appreciated as “authentic” by those without a cosmopolitan vantage point, such widely known cultural experiences seemed to be considered regarded as a ‘superficial’ presentation of culture by those who had experienced the *real* local culture.

### Promotion of Safe Risk

Both international branch campuses tended to curate a series of photographs for public display in order to promote the ideal image of “the best of both worlds”: Western education in the ‘oriental’ setting of China. For instance, both institutions frequently posted bustling Chinese cityscapes as well as state-of-the-art school facilities—that are comparable (if not better) to those in the West—to emphasise the developed side of the destination. In contrast, picturesque oriental—or “backwards in time”—scenes, such as Chinese landscapes, historical architectures, traditions, and customs of Chinese people, were posted as a marker of exclusive offerings and

a means of maintaining competitive advantage of the international branch campuses' 'exotic' locale (see *Figure 7.3*).



*Figure 7.3* Example images categorised as contrasting images of the 'oriental' sceneries and 'futuristic' cityscapes (photos shared by institutions, available for public view)

Taking the above representational dynamics together, I observed a powerful narrative of 'safe risk' evoked through the social media marketing of international branch campuses. Contradictory representations of the host nation hint towards international branch campuses' seemingly paradoxical dual role in the other side of the world: while they *facilitate* and *commodify* uncertainty and inherent risks for Western-situated transnational students, they simultaneously *safeguard* these transnational students from actual jeopardy. Similarly, through their studies of Gap Year, Ansell (2008) and Simpson (2005) argue that Gap Year providers advertise their gap year programme as simultaneously dangerous and safe, making it acceptable both to prospect participants and their parents.

As such, transnational students’ study abroad experiences involving hardship in China would never place them (or their socially dominant positions) at actual risk. First, international branch campuses—with considerable professional expertise—organise and assist participants’ study abroad in a seemingly unorthodox location as their custodian. Second, participants in this study travelled in a relatively safe group setting alongside other transnational students from similar cultural backgrounds. Such a ‘safety net’ for transnational students was reassured through the institution-organised pre-departure events and student-led groups on the social media platform (i.e., Facebook groups). Third, through such various information collection and sharing activities, participants were well aware that they could leave China whenever they wanted without severely disadvantageous consequences for their academic pathways. Thus, international branch campuses provide transnational students with the confidence to “immerse themselves in a strange and bizarre element...on the condition, though, that it will not stick to the skin and thus can be shaken off whenever they wish” (Bauman, 1996, p.29). Finally, perhaps for this reason, both international branch campuses constantly posted photographs emphasising the home institutions’ branding and its close link to the home campus. In doing so, international branch campuses further presented themselves as a safe choice. Participants shared that they had made an informed choice that they would—“at the minimum” or “even in the worst-case scenario”—get a prestigious US degree when they graduate from the school. Patrick’s (Male, USA) insertion of “This is still a US college” suggests that having “safety cushions and well-marked escape routes” (Bauman, 1996, p.29) was an expectation from the beginning, and therefore, being put at serious risk during their time in China would be improbable.

## Transnational Students' Construction of Cosmopolitan Selves

This part of the paper concerns itself with an exploration of mobility discourse at the everyday subjective level and its interaction with the institutional discourse outlined above. It specifically details the ways in which Western-situated transnational students invalidate institutional narratives of international branch campuses as a “culturally hybrid space”, but capitalise on their study abroad experience and present themselves as part of an “exclusive cosmopolitan club”. Through such performance of cosmopolitanism online, they seemed to broadcast back home and to the wider world their discursive understanding of China as well as a referential understanding of the self (Oh & Oh, 2017).

### “We Are All on the Same Boat”

Participants primarily exhibited a strong sense of in-group ties on social media. Among 1,063 photos collected from participants' social media, 214 photographs presented classmates *en masse*, highlighting the social nature of studying abroad in China and the strong, lasting friendships they had established through such an “adventure”. In most photographs, participants tended to display strong bonding in a light and affable manner: smiling and laughing while tilting their bodies towards one another or playfully embracing. Larsen (2005) argues that “the body is brought into play as a culturally coded sign” and hence travellers' photographic performances of physical proximity is a way to render “their desired togetherness, wholeness, and intimacy” (p. 424). Indeed, participants were repeatedly shown engaged in various activities in groups such as travelling to other cities and countries, clubbing, or eating local foods. Likewise, participants repeatedly expressed the importance they placed on strong

peer relationships with like-minded fellow students during the interviews. 21 students (out of 33) stated that one of the most important factors determining study abroad in China and at the particular institution was the impression of other admitted students at the pre-departure event hosted by the institution. In addition, several participants spoke about the hardship that they had encountered while trying to adjust to China and how it would not have been possible to push through without their fellow transnational students.

Here, what I found intriguing is that in the predominant use of the collective pronoun “we”, both in the interviews and online posting captions, almost all participants were referring to other Western-situated transnational students and the expatriate community, rather than domestic students and the local community. By doing so, they seemed to declare themselves as part of a cosmopolitan club and ultimately define themselves as different from the host culture. Further, they often self-identified as internationals rather than with their nationalities (e.g., American), perhaps discursively to display the esteem afforded to the larger white, Western expatriate community in China. Through the interviews, I observed a strong sense of mutual support and caring amongst Western-situated transnational students and expatriates, a sentiment that was reiterated metaphorically by Aurélie: “We are all on the same boat”.<sup>34</sup> Strengthening this point, while 13 participants referred to a genuine and deep bond among the cosmopolitans themselves during the interviews, only one participant mentioned it in reference

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<sup>34</sup> Although I could not detect any specific content that shows a sceptical stance toward educational tourists in participating students’ narratives online, many tended negatively to frame short-term cultural exchange or language learning students during the interviews. Therefore, I suggest that the pronoun “we” is exclusively used when referring to long staying transnational students or expatriates.

to fellow Chinese fellow students. Contrarily, almost all students detailed ongoing problems with the limited interaction between Chinese and transnational students both inside and outside the classroom, regardless of such friendships at an individual level. However, both participants and international branch campuses largely omitted such division between international (“we”) and domestic students within the international branch campus, perhaps to avoid self-presentation which may be seen as unpalatable.

Perhaps more importantly, what is paradoxical is that while transnational students’ motivations to study in China are supposedly about encountering difference and immersing in the local their experiences are nevertheless carried out in the company of similar others and the extended familiarity of home. On this note, within the tourism literature, a number of scholars highlighted the notion of enclaves, the social and information support structure established when (predominantly Western-situated) travellers are situated in a group setting with similar others (see Cohen, 2018; Schwarz, 2016). These studies point out that enclaves are facilitated by a “homogenous background...common knowledge, [and] common interests and forms of communication” (Binder, 2004, p.98-99), and provide young travellers “a sense of togetherness or communality” (Cohen, 2018, p.108) and “a cultural home away from home” (Westerhausen, 2002, p.69). Furthermore, Wilson and Richards (2008) critically examine the dual role of such enclaves: they not only “create the gap between ideology and practice in travel... but also reconciled for (and by) the participants of the scene” (p.188). In other words, even though young travellers are supposedly driven by submersion in the local culture, they often end up experiencing primarily the cultures of international travellers, what the authors refer to as “suspended experience” (p.187).

Next, I turn to the representations of participants’ collective identity as “immigrants of privilege”: the ways in which they produce differences as cultural outsiders and simultaneously consume the host culture and how they are exhibited in online social space.

### Cosmopolitan as Privileged Cultural Outsiders

It was also evident that popular media images of the “globe trotter” have permeated social media and influenced transnational students’ projection of an idealised image of cosmopolitan they exhibited online. Participants frequently posted photographic content emphasising their international travel experiences and cosmopolitan aspirations. Collectively, participants posted 411 photos about their around-the-world travels (including China) during the data collection period, including 213 photos that particularly portray participants’ ‘encounters with difference’ in China.

Around-the-world travel photos were one of the most dominant content that participants posted to Instagram. Nineteen participants posted about their travel experiences to other cities in China or relatively close countries within the East-Asian region. Among them, six participants seemed to have further embraced opportunities for travel and travelled beyond Asia. Regardless of their level of engagement in travel, they all posted their explorations of new and different places. As Bauman (1996) describes, the mobile young people in this study presented themselves online as “a conscious and systematic seeker of experiences, of a new and different experience, of the experience of difference and novelty—as the joys of the familiar wear off and cease to allure” (p. 29).

Oftentimes, participants further elaborated their travel photos with hashtags (#) and captions. For example, Elias posted a photo of himself standing with both arms widely outstretched, facing away from the camera and looking towards an iconic statue of Sejong the Great in Seoul, South Korea, and captioned the image as follows:

It takes a lot of courage to release the familiar and seemingly secure, to embrace the new. But there is no real security in what is no longer meaningful. There is more security in the adventurous and exciting, for in movement there is life, and in change there is power. (Elias, male, USA).

Here, I find it intriguing that Elias' caption for the image neither explains nor matches with the heritage's actual meaning and significance to local people.<sup>35</sup> Instead, he described the simple exoticness of his travel destination to “construct their own sense of historic places to create their individual journeys of self-discovery” (Nuryanti, 1996, p.250).

Elias was not alone in illustrating his newfound cosmopolitan subject position in markedly positive terms. Indeed, through curating particular experiences of different cultures and exhibiting a cosmopolitan subject position on social media, participants seemed to (re)produce distinction accrued from mobility and attempt to garner the highest degree of personal gain of cultural capital (Prins & Webster, 2010). Indeed, during the interviews, most participants

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<sup>35</sup> As the one of the most iconic landmarks in Seoul, the statue was installed in 2009 to celebrate the invention of the Korean alphabet (Hangeul) by Sejong the Great.

emphasised how different they had grown through their experiences of living “outside of geographic and cultural comfort zone” (Prazeres, 2017, p.912). I further suggest that this ideal of cosmopolitan as distinction impacts and interacts with peer influence when transnational students socialise on social media, present themselves, and have access to a plethora of comments from their followers and the public.

As such, beyond providing proof that the participants had ‘been there’, such travel content online also implies that transnational students fully obtain what travel experiences can offer—a sense of adventure, curiosity, adaptability, and openness toward other culture as a form of cultural capital (Germann Molz, 2007). Mowforth and Munt (2015) aptly describe this form of cultural capital through mobility as “an important informal qualification, with the number and range of stamps in a passport acting, so to speak, as a professional certificate; a record of achievement and experience” and ultimately, “an important attribute in many new professions” (p.126). In this way, overseas experiences act not only as a strategic endeavour to undergo a profound personal transformation, but also as a source of prestige (Prazeres, 2017; Schwarz, 2016).

In doing so, however, transnational students in the study intentionally and unintentionally challenged the international branch campuses’ narratives that romanticise China as an exotic place in a positive light. Instead, participants often constructed China as essentially different, “confusing”, or “bizarre”. Through such a cultural “Othering” of the host culture, participants underline their successful navigation of a degree of inconvenience and discomfort. In this study, there were 87 postings directly expressing their frustration in China. I found, both from the interviews and online content, that participants re-storied their experiences of hardship or

suffering in China in a somewhat light-hearted manner, although perhaps in actuality they had taken it seriously. Likewise, some of the more serious concerns participants had expressed to me during the interviews did not feature on (and perhaps were intentionally omitted from) their social media profiles. On this note, Elsrud (2004) draws on Goffman's (1967) concept of 'character' and argues that travellers achieve this symbolic badge of 'strong character'. Such a character is achieved not only from the content of the hardship itself, but also from how they perform their endurance, resilience and versatility: "The risk has to be mastered in the proper way. A strong character is not generated through facing the risk with whining, shivering, and crying. It is demonstrated through displaying 'courage', 'gameness', 'integrity' and 'composure.'" (Goffman, 1967, p.229; as cited in Elsrud, 2004, p.98).

Perhaps in a similar vein, many participants, albeit to varying degrees, posted online content that mocked and disparaged China and the Chinese when showcasing their experiences of hardship and discomfort in a comical and sarcastic manner, often with a hashtag *#onlyinchina*. I was initially surprised that this hashtag was widely used, and at the time of writing, there were more than 35,000 postings on Instagram with the hashtag, including a variation on the same theme. In this study, 82 images contained disdainful descriptions of the host culture (and 38 with the *#onlyinchina* hashtag), from which I identified two dominant *#onlyinchina* content within participants' narratives: crowdedness and mistranslated public signs and menus.

Lydia, for instance, was enthusiastically posting photographs on her Instagram and Facebook to chronicle her experiences in China almost on a daily basis, and a series of postings with *#onlyinchina* appeared on her social media. For instance, she posted her experience of spending Chinese New Year in a place where many local people go and celebrate the new year with their

family. To capture this event, she posted a photo of a crowded street with an endless stream of people and captioned: “immerse celebrating *#cny*...along with 10,000 other people” (see *Figure 7.4*).



*Figure 7.4* Example images categorised as crowdedness (left only) and exotic Chinese cultural traditions and practices (photos shared by participants, available for public view)

She also repeatedly posted grammatically awkward mistranslations of public signs and restaurant menus into English. For example, she posted an image of “carefully slide” (地滑) sign when the translation should have been “wet/slippery floor”. She sarcastically captioned the image, “I will carefully slide down the stairs :p”. However, none of the participants, by contrast, posted their own linguistic mistakes when speaking Chinese as a second-language learner in the same manner, thereby suggesting that such condescending postings were not entirely about the awkward use of a second language in general. Instead, it was more to imply a cultural hierarchy of primacy and superiority. In this context, participants occupy a position of privilege as a native or fluent English speaker from the West (Demont-Heinrich, 2007), and perhaps, the irony is either invisible or unacceptable (Oh & Oh, 2017).

Further, I found it striking when participants criticised Chinese society largely as racist, with specific reference to their embodied experience of white racial privilege. For example, Tom shared his experience of nightlife in China during the interview:

Before I came here, I heard China preferred foreigners at clubs, but I did not understand the racism until I came here. It is also normal to get free drinks the whole night if you are white. For my birthday party this year, we went to a club, and we were like ten people, six or seven of us were white. We got two bottles of Grey Goose—worth about \$300 in that club—all for free. I felt like a king at first, but it was also really weird that we did not pay a thing. We got in free to all of the clubs; all the alcohol was free, and we got VIP tables. And there are always big lines of Chinese people waiting to get in as we just walk past this huge line, get VIP cards, and also free alcohol the whole night. Just because we are *Waiguoren* (foreigner, 外国人)...(Tom, male, the USA).

Although these participants to a certain extent criticised such a “ridiculous” act of discrimination or racism by the local community during the interviews, their criticism or exasperation with such preferential treatment towards white, Western people was largely excluded from participants’ online exhibits. Paradoxically, participants mostly highlighted the by-product of such racism, their luxurious nightlife, on their social media for public display. By doing so, participants seem concurrently to construct the definition of cosmopolitan as “transnational elite” (Friedman, 2000), privileged by citizenship, economic and cultural capital, and race.

## Conclusion

In exploring transnational students’ and international branch campuses’ self-presentations in a social media context, this paper reveals the ways in which transnational students’ narratives intersect with and are situated within larger narratives in order to validate their everyday experience of transnational education. Drawing on social media content created by Western-situated transnational students as well as two international branch campuses in China, this paper seeks to advance a nuanced and critical understanding of performed and curated cosmopolitanism in the context of social media; the role of materiality in the form of online postings displaying the host country’s landscape, the institutions’ physical environments; student bodies as consumers and producers of discursive images of privileged and racialised cosmopolitanism; and finally, the role of social media in mediating the everyday production of cosmopolitan encounters within and beyond transnational students.

My analysis of online content reveals how international branch campuses utilised the social media postings as ‘a potent storytelling tool’ to construct cosmopolitanism as a desirable disposition and consequently displayed a capacity for the constitutive power of imagining and representing China as a compelling destination of international education. At the same time, however, the findings of this empirical research also illustrate that institutionalised norms of cosmopolitanism promoted by international branch campuses are both echoed and challenged by transnational students as active storytellers. Indeed, transnational students in this paper co-create narratives concerning their subject position as an exclusive group of privileged individuals, valued for their white, Western, and cosmopolitan advantages. In this regard, although I recognise that cosmopolitanism is a contested concept that includes divergent facets (see Cheng, 2016; Dimpfl & Smith, 2018; Reddy, 2019), findings from this study suggest that,

in the context of newly emerging student mobility from the West to China, transnational students as well as international branch campuses still prevalently draw on strategic global citizen subject position and cosmopolitanism as cultural capital.

In articulating digitally material artefacts as one particular type of presentation of the self, this paper contributes to the extant knowledge of international student mobility and internationalisation of higher education in two areas. First, this study offers a critical analysis of transnational students emanating from the West and their experiences at an international branch campus in China, which has not been adequately addressed in the field. Second, conceptually and methodologically, this study examines materiality in transnational students' narratives of mobility in the context of the digital environment, which to date has been only rarely used.

Finally, the exploratory nature and limited scope of this paper dictates that further research is needed to corroborate and extend the work here. In particular, this paper calls for more attention to digitally mediated social spaces in order to cultivate a thorough understanding of international student mobility and cosmopolitanism. Also, it could be of value to explore different sets of theoretical frameworks in order critically to elucidate such complex convergence of educational mobilities.

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## 8 CONCLUSION

While the number of Western students who choose to study for the whole of an undergraduate degree in a less conventional destination outside the Western context is still relatively small, it constitutes an interesting group, worthy of further study. Drawing on interviews and observations of social media content, my account of this group of transnational students draws attention to recurring and contradictory themes that surfaced in their motivations for study abroad, reasons for their destination choices, performances of cosmopolitan subjectivities, and production and communication of cosmopolitan narratives online. I further scrutinised the role of international branch campuses in legitimating and promoting alternative forms of distinction through mobility.

In this chapter, I conclude the thesis by reviewing the aims and synthesising the key findings of the research. I also summarise the contributions and limitations of this research, as well as suggesting ways forward for scholarship on international student mobility.

## Summary of Research Questions and Findings

At its core, this thesis has sought to elicit an answer to the broad research question: how do transnational students from Anglophone and European countries make sense of and meaning from their motivations for and experiences of study abroad in China? This inquiry then involves four sub-questions:

1. What are the motivating factors and considerations that inform the decision to study for a degree programme in China? What factors enable transnational students from European and Anglophone countries to *eschew* Western education in favour of education in an unorthodox destination?
2. How do transnational students make sense of and represent their study abroad experiences, both in the online (i.e., social media) and offline (i.e., interviews) social spheres?
3. What are the perceived roles of the international branch campus in legitimating and/or enabling such motivations and experiences?

To answer these sub-questions in a robust manner, I have woven the narratives of 33 transnational undergraduate students from Anglophone and European countries to China, as well as the textual and visual accounts created by transnational students and international branch campuses. Through three academic papers (Chapter Five, Six, and Seven), I have presented the findings of this qualitative study, which sought to provide new empirical insights into a niche yet growing pattern of international student mobility. In combination, the result presented across the above three chapters of this thesis provided a contextually grounded engagement with international student mobility from the ‘West’ to China.

## Chapter 8: Conclusion

Chapter Five, *In Pursuit of More Than Just Achievements: Exploring Transnational Students' Motivations to Study Abroad in China*, tackled the research question concerning motivating factors and considerations (Research Question 1). The paper explored transnational students' differentiated motivations and aspirations for cross-border mobility, highlighting the complex entanglement between personal and structural, emotional, and rational aspects of students' motivations for cross-border mobility, as well as the specific choice of destination. While almost all transnational students in this study emphasised the absence of strategy in their study-abroad decision-making process, the analysis of participants' narratives illuminated two apparent paradoxes in their motivations to study in China: first, despite a lack of strategic plans, participants *did* go ahead and take the risk in an unorthodox study destination. Second, and more importantly, although they chose to study in a non-Western destination, receiving a Western degree was an important consideration.

The paradoxes manifested in West-to-China educational mobility are, in fact, evidence that the desire to pursue Western education and a unique cosmopolitan experience overseas remains compelling for Western transnational students. In relation to this, I revealed the analogy between transnational students' ostensibly contradictory narratives and international branch campuses' recruitment strategies of presenting themselves as 'the best of both worlds', which promotes unique opportunities to gain a unique experience in China without sacrificing the degree from a prestigious Western university.

Moreover, the findings suggested that the excitement and curiosity associated with mobility, besides the accumulation of cultural capital, is equally significant to the transnational students' decisions to study in China (see Waters et al., 2011). Behind such seemingly personal and

emotional decisions, there were participants' "imaginative geography of the location" (Beech, 2019, p.175) and "imagined lives" (Appadurai, 1996, p.35), reflecting dominant discourses around the host country. Therefore, a feeling of excitement and fancy associated with imaginative geographies about both place and the unfamiliar other was imperative to the production of transnational students' desire for a unique adventure through mobility (Beech, 2014).

Quite contrary to destination-oriented motives, the findings revealed that precarious situations at home, albeit rare, also served as a driver for mobility. Through this, I critiqued the empirical and theoretical gaps in prevailing assumptions within international student mobility scholarship, which largely define the characteristics of international student mobility as *strategic* and *privileged*. Finally, I documented the case of transnational students seeking cultural, ethnic heritage and identity through study abroad. Their stories revealed that desires for mobility are shaped through the negotiations of transnational students' past, present, and future, rather than generate in a singular moment of university decision (Collins, 2018). In highlighting under-researched empirical understanding of motivations for mobility, the chapter illuminated the complex assemblage of rational and emotional aspects of motivations for mobility. By doing so, the chapter called for a more integrative approach to theorising complex, condition dependant, and evolving aspirations for the emerging pattern of international student mobility and its entanglement in a wider set of social contexts.

The findings presented in Chapter Six of this thesis, *Becoming a Bona Fide Cosmopolitan: Unpacking the Narratives of Western-situated Degree-seeking Transnational Students in China*, delved into the ways in which transnational students' construct their narratives of

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meaningful experiences in China, on and off the international branch campus (Research Question 2). Drawing on interviews and analysis of participants' social media postings, the paper revealed how transnational students from European and Anglophone countries legitimised the choices they had made to study in China and the outcomes of those choices. The findings revealed that Western transnational students in this study largely drew on distinctive cosmopolitan subjectivities and sensibilities to make sense of their experiences: their engagement in the authentic, real-life experience of China, including their everyday interactions with various Others.

In describing their experiences in China, I used the term, *bona fide* cosmopolitanism, to illustrate transnational students' narrative strategy based on hierarchical clustering that frames themselves as different from (and 'better' than) short-term international students and travellers, as well as immobile Others in both home and host countries. One notable way in which participants conferred symbolic distinction on their own experience overseas was to create particular boundaries of *bona fide* cosmopolitans, thereby claiming *greater* distinction from various Others. To support this argument, I demonstrated how participants had created binary categorisations of 'us' and 'them' as a basis of inter- and intra- group exclusions: short-term exchange or immobile students, mainstream transnational students to and within the West, and local people. To make claims about such exclusive cosmopolitanism, they strongly and repeatedly authenticated their immersion in *local* life in an *unorthodox* destination over a relatively *long* period of time.

In particular, participants evidenced their deep engagement in local life by partaking in two aspects: eating local food and taking public transportation. These signifiers of *real* Chinese

experiences, highlighting the exoticness and remoteness of their study abroad destination, as well as participants' immersion in local life, were used to perform the cosmopolitan characteristics of adventure, curiosity, adaptability, and openness towards difference. I argued that participants utilised these exotic and *real* China experiences to justify the symbolic distinction of their own practices, assumedly to "increase the valuation placed on the particular forms of capital they happen to possess" (Urry & Larsen, 2011, p.102). Contrary to participants' distinction-making based on their deep engagement in the host community, the findings further revealed that symbolic consumption of the destination through constructing the differences of Others by the reference to home (the 'West') was simultaneously manifested within participants' narratives.

Furthermore, even though the Western-situated transnational students in this study voiced that they engaged in mobility without a fairly clear understanding of social and cultural reproduction, they did (intentionally and unintentionally) reproduce neoliberal discourses of cosmopolitanism distinction by establishing particular categories of group membership and excluding Others. Such irony highlights that while transnational students chose China to be *different* from the mainstream international students to and within the Western nations, their pursuit of 'difference' reinforces—rather than critiques or challenges—the circuits of cultural capital within international higher education, in which mobile young people attempt to score points "at the expense of the character of the other participants" (Goffman, 1967, p. 240).

Finally, findings presented in Chapter Seven, *'I Post, therefore I Become #cosmopolitan': The Materiality of Online-Presentations of Study Abroad in China*, broadly answer Research Questions 2, 3 and, 4. The chapter investigated the textual, pictorial, and cinematic artefacts of

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cross-border mobility and education that were made available for public consumption on social media by transnational students and international branch campuses. This study presented how Sino-Western international branch campuses in this study adopted various curatorial strategies that have served the production of cosmopolitan milieu and positioned the international branch campuses as a culturally de-territorialised “third space” (Bhabha, 1994, p.38). To this end, the findings of this research revealed the ways in which participants’ race and ethnicity were materialised and thus inscribed a specific meaning within the discourse of globalisation. Similarly, students’ participation in various cultural activities, such as calligraphy and dumpling-making, were also utilised as cultural objects to present symbolic qualities that are generically linked to the ideal of cosmopolitanism—a sense of adventure, curiosity, adaptability, and openness toward other culture (Germann Molz, 2007). This finding suggested that international branch campuses played a role of producing and promoting particular narratives about the ideal image of ‘strategic cosmopolitan’ through international and intercultural education in the digital context.

In addition, international branch campuses curated a series of contrasting images fancifully to evoke the image of ‘the best of both worlds’: *Western education* in the *oriental destination* of China. For example, bustling blocks of cityscapes and cutting-edge school facilities were simultaneously featured with picturesque oriental scenes, Chinese traditions, and customs to promote the symbolic marker of exclusive offerings of the *international* branch campuses’ *exotic* locale. I argued that such contradictory representations of the host nation signal towards international branch campuses’ seemingly dual and paradoxical role; while they *facilitate* and *commodify* uncertainty and inherent risks of studying in an unorthodox destination for Western transnational students, they simultaneously *safeguard* these students from actual trouble. In a

similar vein, international branch campuses emphasised the home institutions' branding and its identical educational offerings to those at the home campus, thereby promoting unique opportunities to gain a unique experience in China without sacrificing the degree from a prestigious Western university.

The study also detailed, in response to the above institutional discourses, how transnational students exhibited similar or conflicting representations of their experience overseas. Specifically, the findings revealed that transnational students invalidated the institution's narrative that promoted international branch campuses as a 'culturally hybrid space'. Instead, they presented the community as an 'exclusive cosmopolitan club' by capitalising on their cross-border mobility. This was evident in participants' social media postings of around-the-world travel that illustrated their international travel experiences and cosmopolitan aspirations. I further suggested that this ideal of cosmopolitan as distinction influence the ways in which transnational students socialised on social media, presented themselves, thus attracted a plethora of positive comments from their followers and the public.

Furthermore, when underlining their successful navigation of a degree of inconvenience and discomfort in China, transnational students in this study intentionally and unintentionally challenged the international branch campuses' narratives that romanticise China as an exotic place. It was evident in their social media content, often with a hashtag *#onlyinchina*, to describe their experiences of hardship and discomfort from the lack of Western-style facilities, and language and cultural barriers in a comical and sarcastic manner. I interpreted this use of the hashtag *#onlyinchina* as a depiction of what Bauman (2013) refers to as 'double freedom': the privilege "to *move everywhere* and to *ignore selectively* is its baseline condition" (p.90,

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italics in original). All in all, this study reveals that transnational students play an important role as consumers and co-producers of privileged and West-centric sensibilities of cosmopolitanism within and beyond social media.

### Summation

On a closer inspection of Western transnational students' motivations, experiences, and shifts in subjectivities, this thesis has shed critical light on participants' entanglement in excitement, display of cosmopolitan characteristics, and pursuit of distinction through mobility. My investigation of transnational students' motivations has led to a suggestion that educational mobilities are driven not only by the purpose of social reproduction but also by non-strategic and emotional desires, as well as genuine curiosity about 'the other side of the world'. This indicates that unorthodoxy in participants' mobility-related decisions (e.g., participants' non-strategic engagement in mobility or unique destination choice) may present a potential for a shift in transnational students' considerations and alternatives in educational mobility and, by extension, the reconfiguration of uneven geographies of international higher education.

Paradoxically though, despite the purist of such 'uniqueness' that sets them apart from the masses, the accumulation of evidence in this thesis simultaneously exhibits that after all, transnational students largely drew on the neoliberal logic of cultural capital and distinction when evaluating and reflecting their transnational education experiences. Such logic emphasises "a broader range of 'hard' and 'soft' currencies of employability" (Brown et al., 2016, p.207)—transnational students' possession of an ideal character for the globalising economy alongside traditionally valued cultural capital. Indeed, while it is expected that

Western transnational students would have developed a deeper insight into various aspects of China during their study abroad, this form of evaluation is nevertheless problematic from a post-colonial perspective because it reinforces the script that the Other can be simplified and consumed. Consequently, to a large extent, transnational students' pursuit of differentiation through education in the East ironically reinforces the unequal geographies and asymmetries of West-East.

In light of the findings from the above three empirical chapters, at this point, I would resist the assertion that this 'reversed' mobility is essentially different from the mainstream Westward international student mobility. Rather, I would argue that the pursuit of distinction reviewed in this thesis is *context-specific*, with the potential to contribute to the dynamic development and practice of international student mobility. I would even argue that this emerging development of international education and mobility pattern reinforces the existing Western dominance of knowledge production and flows.

## Scholarly Contribution

Embarking on this DPhil research project, my aims were threefold: 1) to fill the gap in the international student mobility literature by providing new empirical evidence; 2) to explore new ways of conceptualising and theorising international student mobility; and 3) to open up novel methodological opportunities. In what follows, I will review and reflect on my engagement with each of these goals.

### Empirical (Thematic)

This research project has investigated a mobility pattern that has rarely been discussed in the current discussion of international student mobility. I have broadened the spatial frame away from ‘South-to-North’ and/or ‘East-to-West’ routes to focus on an emerging student mobility flow: the case of transnational students from Anglophone and European countries to China. The shift in geographical focus has highlighted parallel commonalities, but also a significant degree of spatial and cultural specificity in transnational students’ motivations and experiences. In addition, this study expanded the scope of analysis to virtual social space. In investigating transnational students’ accounts on their motivations and experiences in China, I am not the first scholar to address the embeddedness of ‘distinction’ and ‘cosmopolitanism’ within transnational students’ narratives, and therefore, the findings presented in this thesis lend support to the tenacity of these notions within international student mobility discourse. Indeed, once I identified ‘distinction’ and ‘cosmopolitanism’ as the dominant themes from the reading of my transcripts and returned to the literature, empirical and theoretical work on the topic was already well-established (Beck, 2003; Cheng, 2018; Cui, 2015; Igarashi & Saito, 2014; Matthews & Sidhu, 2005; Prazeres, 2019; Waters & Brooks, 2011; Waters, 2009).

Therefore, in an effort to build upon existing scholarship, I ventured to document transnational students’ narrative strategies (binary opposition and hierarchical categorisation) and curatorial strategies (material object and its embedded and symbolic meanings). In doing so, I have advanced a multi-layered understanding of international student mobility and cosmopolitanism. While transnational students’ attempts to differentiate themselves from immobile peers at home have been previously documented, what is novel in this study is that I have identified various ‘Others’ that participants also sought to distance themselves from:

mainstream transnational students within the Western hemisphere, short-staying transnational students and travellers in China and the local community. Furthermore, this study contributes uniquely to an exploration of transnational students' narratives online. The study investigates how transnational students serve simultaneously both as a producer and consumer of the dominant narratives on international education and China within the online social space that transcends the geographical borders. This aspect of the study is particularly meaningful because scholarly work investigating the representational choices made by transnational students in the context of social media remains an underexplored area within the international student mobility literature.

## Theoretical

I deliberately chose to explore emerging theoretical frameworks rather than to situate my findings within one established theory and a set of hypotheses deduced from it. This decision also reflects my ethical decision to follow the lead of my data. For instance, during the pilot study, which I conducted with ten Master of Business Administration (MBA) transnational students from the West to China, I had theorised participants motivations and experiences within Bourdieu's concepts of field, habitus, capital and doxa. At the time, participants in the pilot study pronouncedly articulated their strategic pursuit of economic, cultural, and social capital through transnational mobility. None of the participants referred to their cross-border journey or destination choice as 'irrational' or 'naïve'. Rather, they cited their strategic pursuit of uniqueness and the growing importance of China within the global economy. I, therefore, presumed the similar narratives from the participants in the current study, especially based on my methodological choice of retrospective interviews. However, when the participants'

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accounts in the current study diverged from the findings from my pilot study, I did not feel the urge to ‘fit’ the data into a Bourdieusian theoretical framework. In fact, I was rather intrigued by the opportunity to explore a new line of inquiry.

More importantly, in this thesis, I made an explicit attempt to expand theorisations of international student mobility. I have drawn on several theoretical influences, including Bourdieusian concepts of *capital* and *distinction*, notions of *desire*, *cosmopolitanism*, *materiality*, and Goffman’s *dramaturgical perspective*, to investigate distinct angles, which, in turn, ultimately deepen our understanding of the complexity in transnational student mobility from the West to China. Furthermore, when possible, I utilised these theoretical influences in combination. For instance, I maintain that the materiality in transnational students’ narratives of mobility is strengthened by the inclusion of the dramaturgical perspective by generating insights relative to the role of objects in symbolic systems and social structures. I believe my attempt to combine, reapply, and develop traditional and new theories contributes to the unrealised potential for the theorisation of international student mobility. Therefore, while combining multiple theories and concepts could at times feel daunting when trying to understand the inherent complexities, I argue that such discomfort should not discourage researchers from attempting an integrative approach to data analysis.

### Methodological

I had to make changes in my initial research design and methods (ethnographic observation) to integrate participants’ and institutions’ narratives of mobility in the context of the digital environment, which to date has been only rarely employed. Although it posed unique

challenges for collecting and analysing data, I believe that it has important ontological, epistemological, ethical, and theoretical consequences, representing an opportunity for the expansion of knowledge. For example, despite the unconventionality of the approach, it helped me search for “disconfirming evidence” (Creswell & Miller, 2000, p.127) to prevent potential confirmation bias, which unconsciously “cherry-pick evidence or argumentative points that favor the prior belief” (Henley, 2014, p.220).

This thesis discussed the growing importance and relevance of online spaces in social life and calls for re-conceptualisation of online spaces as a valuable research avenue in an increasingly digitalised, complex, transnational, and hybrid world. In addition, by articulating various methodological challenges in conducting digitally mediated research methods, this thesis argued that formal regulation or procedural research governance continues to be an important principle in the online research ethics, while necessary, is insufficient to ensure ethically sound research practice in the variety of research context, methodology, and ethical positions. Therefore, while continued research and theorising are needed, this research proposes a more relational and contextual approach when researching participants’ digital spaces in order to ensure that the researcher’s ethical responsibilities are realised. While visual methods have been well-incorporated within qualitative research, transnational students’ self-representations on social media have not been previously documented and is not well understood, and in redress, I hoped to forge a new path for such methodological exploration. As such, this study heralds the possibilities of social media for expanding methodological and theoretical toolkits.

In this study, I chose to categorise and code images and captions on my own in line with my interest in strategic impression management and materiality, which looks at a broad question

of participants' curatorial and representational choices. However, having participants engage in the selection of photos and asking them to walk me through each chosen images would have offered additional insights to the participants' intended symbolism in the image and thus contributed to the interpretive nature of this research project. For example, participants tended to adopt stylised gestures and specifically choreograph the backgrounds, camera angles, and crowds. For these images, participants' interpretations of the intended symbolism would not discredit the analysis I had offered. However, it would be, nevertheless, a reminder of the interpretive nature of the findings.

### Limitations and Future Directions

Although I have attempted to illuminate my participants' voices fulsomely, I recognise that this study, as any study, has some limitations in its ability to portray my participants' realities. While I have endeavoured to offer a synthesised and coherent account of participants' cross-border experiences, as readers may have noticed, there was substantial overlap within participants' accounts documented in this process. However, I recognise that my inclination to present neatly the findings may risk projecting a simple and straightforward reading of the multi-faceted, and at times dissenting stories of study overseas. In light of this, as I stated earlier regarding the study's methodological contribution, I tried to emphasise counterevidence across narratives on and offline, highlighting majority viewpoints as well as contradicting positions.

As I mentioned in an earlier chapter, this study operates through a retrospective lens that may limit my understanding of the 'imaginative' drivers of mobility. I examined one particular account in time and place, among the stories and reflections that they could have told. Therefore,

although my study helps our understanding of multi-faceted and various motivations beyond rational, calculative considerations regarding mobility, this research does not explicate how transnational students' narratives shifted from ostensibly non-strategic motivations towards a different configuration of economic rationality. Perhaps, research over a longer period (e.g., from pre-departure to study-to-work transition) would be able to shed light on the transition of subjectivities and narratives.

In addition, as this pattern of transnational student mobility has not been thoroughly examined, I have not exhausted the rich intellectual avenues within participants' accounts, nor the theoretical perspectives that I could draw on to theorise the findings. Therefore, here I look at the limitations of this research and the potential areas for further inquiry. Adjoining the methodological limitations that I also addressed in Chapter Four, there are potentially important social markers that I collected but did not include in the coding of data for analysis. However, perhaps because my own scholarly interest was grounded in social reproduction associated with mobility, I may have not seen these identity markers within the verbal and visual accounts I gathered.

For example, gender has not specifically been addressed within the analysis. The ratio of male (9) and female (24) participants in this study did not allow for a gendered analysis and comparison of motivations and experiences. For example, five female students mentioned marriage and family making as an important reason for considering a return to their home country. However, King and Sondhi's (2016) comparative study of British and Indian transnational students' motivations and experiences of studying overseas has shown that gendered differences were prominently featured only in the narratives of Indian students;

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leading the authors to conclude that the ways in which gender may play a role in shaping and organising decisions around mobility, as well as transnational students' experiences in a specific migration context. This hints that the invisibility of gender within this thesis may provide important topics for further exploration.

Similarly, religion was largely missing in my analysis of international students' narratives on their motivations and experiences. I did not analyse the potential impact of religion on motivations as well as experiences of international education. During my fieldwork, I met one female Muslim student from the US who covered her face completely with a niqab. During our interview in the café, almost everyone stared at her. Although she shared several common stories, there were also unique 'niqab experiences' that she had had during her studies in China. She not only highlighted how her dress was stigmatised and marked, but also emphasised that niqab holds different meanings to her that does not necessarily entail the oppression of women. Her experience was salient that religious objects and symbols whose materiality reflects complex meanings often mediated in (on and offline) transnational spaces. Listening to her stories, I too critically reflected on my own presumption of differences (rather than similarities) in Muslim females' motivations and experiences of studying overseas. Again, while this intriguing story was missing in this thesis, it points towards a future research agenda (both empirical and theoretical), which has been featured in few academic sources within international student mobility.

After my fieldwork in China, China's post-study regulatory frameworks for international graduates have been changed. Until 2016, China required all international graduates to demonstrate at least two year's work experience upon graduating with a bachelor's degree or

a master's degree in order to obtain a work permit in China. However, the Chinese government eased such work permit requirements for international graduates who demonstrate good grades (80% and at least a B average), both from Chinese institutions and 'well-known' international higher education institutions. While the ease of these requirements is still limited to specific regions such as Shanghai, Beijing, and Zhejiang, such changes and their effects offer interesting avenues to explore as an influencing factor for prospective students' decisions to study in China as well as international students' future trajectory to remain in China post-study.

Lastly, and conceptually, in viewing transnational students' online presentation as a particular construction of the self, this thesis predominantly engaged with Goffman's concept of 'performance'. However, I became cognisant that a related concept of 'performativity' (Butler, 1990) may be more adequate in relation to the role of social media as a site of discursive construction of identity. I would be interested to see how the idea of performativity would serve to understand how individuals repeated stylisation of the body, or a set of performances on social media congeal over time, defining and maintaining a purported 'natural sort of being' within a highly rigid regulatory frame of the society.

## Researcher Reflections

This study has led me to grow, both academically and personally. Throughout this thesis, I have explored the motivations and experiences of 33 transnational students from the West to China, and the ways in which their journeys are represented and communicated. As the researcher, I have undertaken the task of creating a coherent analysis of the narratives shared by this group of mobile young people. This analysis represented my own perception as a

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transnational student pursuing my doctorate degree in the UK. While it was an obvious strength in several ways, it also challenged my commitment to embracing an ‘ethical attitude’; in that I had tried not to presume participants’ experiences, or to consider how my participants might expect themselves to be narrated in this thesis. On the other hand, I also had to pay particular attention to how my own accumulated negative experiences—of being marginalised and feeling like a victim of racism and orientalism—might influence the way I represented my participants. All in all, as a result of being inside and outside of the research, I came to assume my dual role as meta-critic, turning a critical lens on critiques I made throughout this thesis.

As I began to present my findings at various scholarly conferences and workshops, I have received questions and feedback that helped me reflect on my own interpretations and viewpoints. For example, I was once questioned why I hesitated to call the transnational students’ practices of Otherisation ‘racism’. Looking back at this question now, I admit that my positionality of being an East Asian researcher conducting inter-racial/inter-cultural research somewhat overwhelmed me and I became afraid of being extra critical of the participants’ practices and unjustly assuming them racist. However, I later became acquainted with the work of Pon (2009), who has argued that the depoliticised discourse of cultural competency is a form of ‘new racism’ by overlooking how knowledge and perspective relating to cultural Others are produced. While not having to resort to explicit racist language, new racism promotes an obsolete view of culture that essentialises the culture of Others. While I continue to wrestle with the ethical quandaries of whether Western transnational students’ practices draw on racism, I recognise that I may have left some room to scrutinise further on this point.

Similarly, I was also asked to take a definitive stance on Western-situated students' mobility to the 'non-West' pursuing a cosmopolitan agenda as a 'good' or 'bad' practice within international higher education. Put differently, should Western transnational students continue with or cease their participation in these types of mobilities to the Global South? On this point, I remain genuinely unsettled because—rather than evaluating what study abroad *should* look like—I focused on a richer line of inquiry to delve into the dynamics of social reproduction as well as the performative function of cosmopolitanism.

Although I came to this research without any hypothesis, I may have secretly hoped that my research would offer empirical support to the assumption that the new players are shifting the landscape of international higher education, eventually disturbing Western dominance within it. Therefore, when my findings revealed the Western transnational students' engagement with, and discursive construction of simplified, romanticised, and imagined Asia than complex Asia from their narratives, I felt a tinge of disappointment because the findings I confronted were different from what I had hoped. More importantly, such disappointment led me to reflect on a fundamental dilemma wherein the dichotomous framing between the East and the West seemed simultaneously impossible to dispose of, or to utilise. That the very act of using the East-West binary to combat the hegemonic construction of structural and symbolic geography inversely serves to reinforce and perpetuate the epistemology of domination that I wished to diminish. On this note, in her book on education across the 'East' and the 'West', Phan (2016) aptly questions of such dilemma that I couldn't fully divest throughout the research project:

...there is no need to accuse something, someone, or some idea of being 'Western' or 'Westernised', while at the same time, such an accusation is performed in the exact 'Western' framework of self-criticism and reflexivity. In the same manner, why is it the case that anything

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Western is bad? And why is it that anything ‘non-Western’ is celebrated, romanticised, and welcomed? Are they so mutually exclusive that a binary emphasis is needed? If anything, then perhaps the most hegemonic idea circulated and reinforced in academic scholarship for decades is this taken-for-granted claim: the hegemonic West imposes its will on the victimized Asia. This widespread, seldom-questioned hegemonic idea has indeed informed and pre-determined scholarship and knowledge production as well as research analyses in many fields (p.223).

Lastly, I refer to the transnational students in this study as ‘educational pathfinders’ in the title, even though the findings of this thesis focus primarily on transnational students’ narratives on their subject-in-the-making through mobility. Given the questions raised by the research findings, some readers might question whether these mobile young people are necessarily ‘educational’ migrants. However, instead of dealing exhaustively with the question, I left some questions open for further reflection, as indicated by the question mark. While I am open for further reflection, at this point, I argue that ‘educational pathfinders’ is one of the possible ways of looking at them, which highlights these young people’s initial intention to navigate unorthodox geographies in pursuit of their undergraduate education. This raises the question of whether it is possible or even adequate to divide transnational students’ experiences into education and non-educational experiences.

Despite the aforementioned hindsight, such reflection suggests this thesis is a living document offering additional launch points for later exploration within international student mobility scholarship. Furthermore, the knowledge gained from this research project can help us make sense of an emerging pattern of international student mobility and provide us with meaningful indications of areas that need further research.

## Concluding Remarks

Over the course of this research project, the landscape of international higher education has changed significantly as a consequence of political turbulence and a global public health crisis. In terms of political development, waves of nationalism—which is marked by populist anti-immigrant, anti-globalisation sentiments—have gained momentum around the world and in turn, brought challenging consequences for international student mobility. Particularly, the top three host nations of transnational students—namely, the US, the UK, and China—have developed such political discourses, which have directly and indirectly affected transnational students' perceptions of safety, stability, and future possibility (e.g., post-graduation work and long-term immigration opportunities).

In the US, since the election of Donald Trump as president in 2017, the political climate has transformed its migration regime towards a more restrictive stance. The restrictive migration regime has made the US appear less welcoming, with fewer long-term opportunities. This presented new concerns for transnational students, as well as the universities that are dependent on their tuition fees. On the contrary, at the regional (sub-national) scale, a competing migration regime frames transnational students, particularly those who are in the fields of Science, Technology, Engineering, and Math (STEM) as ideal future migrants.

Similarly, in the June 2016 'Brexit' referendum, the UK voted to leave the European Union (EU). As a result of UK's exit from the EU, students from EU/EEA and Switzerland will be subject to higher 'overseas' tuition fees and no longer eligible for British tuition fee loans from

## Chapter 8: Conclusion

the autumn of 2021 (UKCISA, 2021).<sup>36</sup> In light of this change, transnational flows from the EU/EEA and Switzerland to the UK will be likely to decrease (O'Malley, 2020). However, in response to the foreseeable shortfall of inbound international students, the UK government announced plans for a new UK points-based immigration system that transnational graduates will be able to apply for a graduate route, starting from July 2021 (Home Office, 2021). This may positively affect the UK's attractiveness as a study destination—especially, to non-EU/EEA students—significantly because of increased opportunities for post-study work, and perhaps even long-term migration.<sup>37</sup> Taken together, the political pendulum swings in the two traditional student-receiving countries have brought substantial domestic and global implications for international student mobility.

Most recently and importantly, in the broadest sense, the COVID-19 pandemic has affected every aspect of our lives, and international student mobility and international higher education are no exception. The social, political, economic, and educational impact of this public health crisis is unprecedented and has dictated a fundamental transformation in the ways teaching and learning take place: physical classrooms, libraries, accommodations, and cafeterias were ordered to be evacuated and closed in an effort to contain further spread of the virus. Amidst the extended uncertainty, transnational students faced an increased restriction on movement,

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<sup>36</sup> Irish citizens, or those already living in the UK and registered with the EU Settlement Scheme will be exempt from this change.

<sup>37</sup> The new graduate route will allow incoming international students as well as their dependants stay for two (undergraduate and master's degree graduates) and three (doctoral degree graduates) years after the graduation and have near full access to the UK labour market under the route.

due to closed borders and increasingly stringent international flights, not all transnational students could return to their home immediately, or at all.

It has further increased intensity and uncertainty, which presents a novel and unpredictable threat to future international student mobility across the world. Due to the travel health risk, border closures, students' *ability* as well as *willingness* to travel are likely to decrease. Another important question is who will still be able to afford to study abroad, given the expected shrinkage of the middle classes globally. The scarring effects of COVID-19 on the global economy will make it even more challenging for students with less-privileged backgrounds to access universities and, more so, to participate in cross-border mobility. Further, the unprecedented recession will cause enormous disruption to the post-study labour market around the world, potentially curtailing opportunities after graduation. While the full scale of disruption will present itself over time, the return to the pre-COVID normality of international higher education may be a matter of years or even unattainable (Marginson, 2020). International student mobility, therefore, is evolving phenomena that remains shifting and contested, and the landscape of international student mobility has been and will be further disrupted by the outbreak of COVID-19.

All in all, this ongoing changeability in the landscape of international student mobility is testament to the fact that international student mobility remains salient and contingent politically, socially and well as economically. As the field of global education continues to transform, it brings new aspirations for, and experiences of transnational mobility which I—just as my participants and many others engaged in international education—try to make sense of. Therefore, despite the depth of our current understanding of international student mobility

and international higher education, the challenge of chronicling development in the fields continues. In light of this, it is crucial that we develop robust theoretical frameworks, methodological approaches, and empirical basis that are responsive to the diversifying and changing contexts; and the potential impacts these have on opportunities and risks for international students.

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## 9 APPENDICES

## APPENDIX 1 Inquiry for Recruitment of Participants (E-mail)

Greetings [Name],

I am writing concerning recruiting international students at [Institution name] as research participants for my research. I am currently a DPhil candidate at Oxford University, where I am researching geographies of international higher education, international student mobility, and qualitative research methods. My DPhil dissertation is tentatively titled: “Educational pathfinders? A study of international student mobility to China”.

If possible, I would like to recruit international students from North America and Europe at [Institution name] as research participants to conduct my DPhil research on international student mobility to China. This research follows on similar research I have completed at the university of Cambridge in 2014, and it focuses on the rapid change in the role of China and international students to China in reconfiguring the landscape of international higher education.

Could you kindly help advertise my research to the eligible student population at your institution? Your institution and participants’ personal information will remain anonymous. Participants will take part in a 60-90 min interview, and they will be compensated for their time. Please do let me know if this is a possibility. I am more than happy to meet you in person for further discussion about my research. I look forward to hearing from you. Thank you.

## APPENDIX 2A Pre-Interview Online Survey

### Section 1. About You

What is Your name? (Disclaimer: your identity [and specific information that could identify you] will remain confidential. Your name will be replaced with pseudonyms. Throughout the entire duration of the research your identity will remain anonymous.)

What is your email address?

What is your age?

What is your gender?

What is your country of citizenship? (Please elaborate if your passport nationality and your perceived 'home country' are not the same)

Please describe the town/ city you come from (choose one):

Urban

Suburban

Rural

What is your primary language?

Would you describe your self as:

Arab

Hispanic

Asian/ Pacific Islander

Multiracial

Black

Other \_\_\_\_\_

Caucasian/White

## **Section 2. Accessing your social media profiles**

I will ask you your social media accounts (e.g. Wechat, Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, etc.) for the purpose of research. Please identify here whether or not you are comfortable with the fact that this research will collect any public postings you have posted (I will not be able to access private accounts or direct messages without your permission). You may decline to participate in this part without it affecting the rest part of your participation in this research. Again, your identity (and specific information that could identify you) will remain confidential. Your name will be replaced with pseudonyms.

Which social media do you use the most frequently?

[For WeChat users] Please add me on your WeChat using the QR code if you AGREE to give permission to social media research.

[For other social media users] Please specify social media and your handle if you AGREE to grant me access to your public social media postings. If you need further information about this, please comment it below.

## **Section 3. About your decision making to study abroad**

If you considered studying in other countries, which countries did you consider?

If you considered studying at other institutions, which institutions did you consider?

Please tell me,if any, which league table of rankings helped you decide where to study.

**(continued on next page)**

## A Study of International Student Mobility in China

Which of the following HELPED your decision to CHOOSE the university you are studying at?	Very unimportant	Unimportant	Neither important nor unimportant	Important	Very important	N/A
Alumni of university						
Educational agent/consultant						
Current student(s) studying at the university						
Friend(s)						
Family						
Home country government advisory service						
Host country government advisory service (e.g., Confucius Institute)						
A visit to the university						
League tables or rankings						
Social media websites (e.g., Facebook, Twitter, etc.)						
Staff of this university)						
Educational exhibition/fair						
Teacher/tutor/lecturer, where you studied previously						
Prospectus of the university						
An advert for this university (e.g., poster, radio, etc.)						

Educational Pathfinders? A Study of International Student Mobility in China

How important were the following factors when deciding where to study?	Very unimportant	Unimportant	Neither important nor unimportant	Important	Very important	N/A
Proximity to your home country						
Personal safety and security						
Quality of research						
Scholarship/bursary/fee waiver from this university						
Social life						
City/location						
Opportunities to work while studying						
Opportunities for further study in the country following my studies						
Opportunities for full-time work in this country following my studies						
Opportunities for permanent residence in this country						
Reputation of this university (i.e., working university ranking)						
Ease of getting a visa to study in this country						
Earning potential of my chosen degree from this university						
Earning potential of my chosen country of study abroad						
(non-native English speakers) achieving a higher level of English proficiency						
Achieving a higher level of proficiency in Chinese						

APPENDIX 2B Pre-Interview Online Survey (Results and Analysis)

Table 9.1 Analysis of participants' responses to the question on influential information sources for university-related decision

Q: Which of the following HELPED your decision to CHOOSE the university you are studying at?	Mean	Standard deviation	mean without 'not applicable'
A visit to the university	3.765	1.776	4.267
League tables or rankings	2.529	1.846	3.583
Family	3.500	1.052	3.500
Staff of this university	3.118	1.387	3.419
Prospectus of the university	3.088	1.505	3.281
Educational exhibition/ fair	2.559	1.727	3.222
Current student(s) studying at the university	2.235	1.793	3.040
Social media websites (e.g., Facebook, Twitter, etc.)	2.618	1.349	2.967
An advert for this university (e.g., poster, radio, etc.)	2.382	1.477	2.793
Friend(s)	2.618	1.303	2.697
Educational agent/consultant	2.294	1.488	2.690
Teacher/tutor/lecturer, where you studied previously	2.353	1.515	2.667
Alumni of university	1.441	1.460	2.227
Home country government advisory service	1.588	1.328	2.160
Host country government advisory service (e.g., Confucius Institute)	1.647	1.203	2.074

# Educational Pathfinders? A Study of International Student Mobility in China

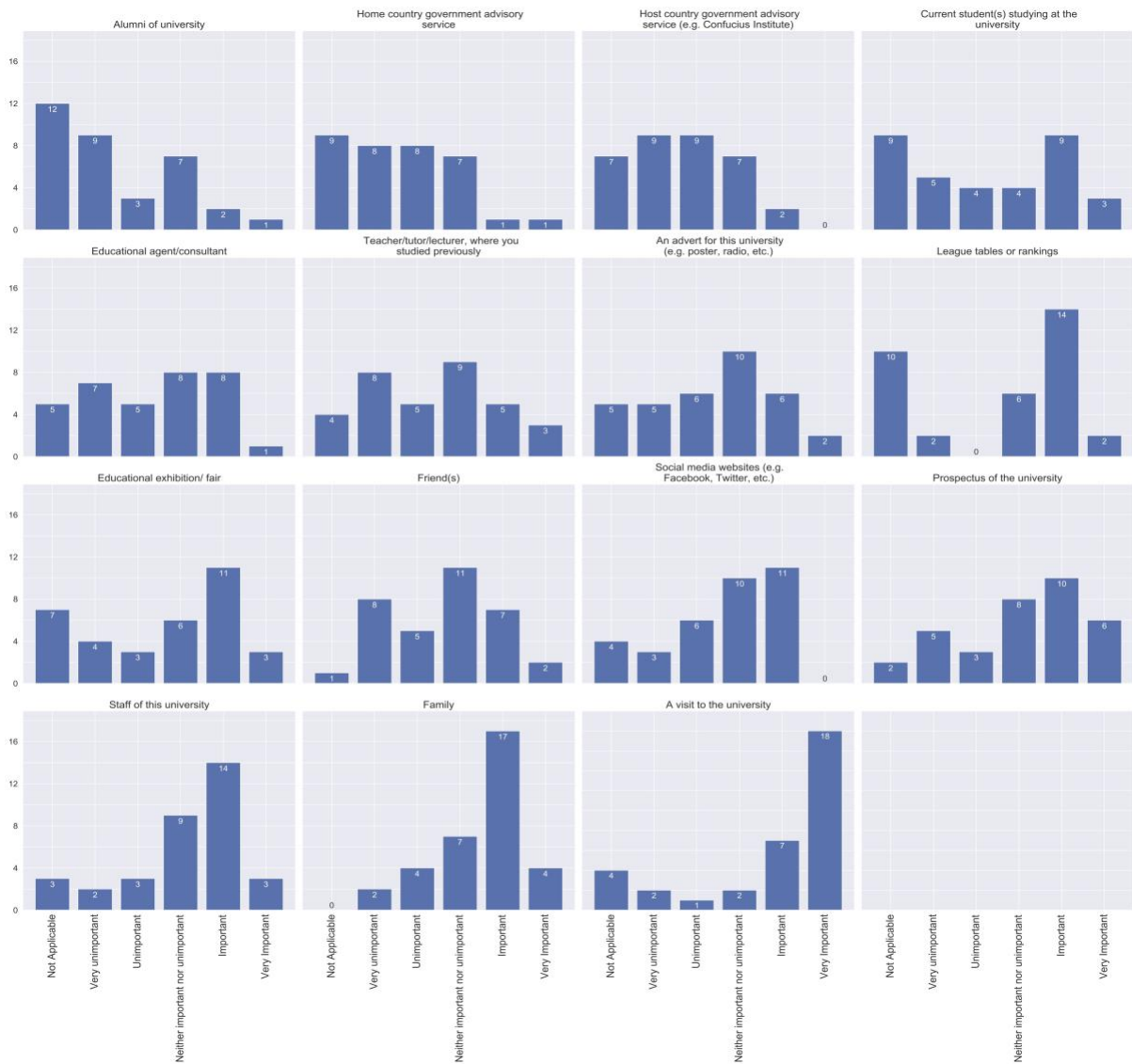


Figure 9.1 Participants' responses to the question on influential information sources for university-related

## A Study of International Student Mobility in China

*Table 9.2* Analysis of participants' responses to the question on important factors for university-related decision

Q: How important were the following factors when deciding where to study?	Mean	Standard deviation	Mean without 'not applicable'
City/location	4.265	1.214	4.531
Achieving a higher level of proficiency in Chinese	4.235	1.304	4.500
Scholarship/bursary/ fee waiver from this university	4.382	0.922	4.382
Reputation of this university (i.e., working university ranking)	4.088	1.190	4.212
Social life	3.824	1.086	3.939
Earning potential of my chosen degree from this university	3.765	1.075	3.765
Earning potential of my chosen country of study abroad	3.588	0.892	3.588
Opportunities to work while studying	3.471	1.187	3.576
Personal safety and security	3.235	0.923	3.235
Quality of research	3.206	1.175	3.206
Opportunities for further study in the country following my studies	3.088	1.240	3.182
Opportunities for full-time work in this country following my studies	2.971	1.403	3.156
(non-native English speakers) achieving a higher level of English proficiency	1.265	1.746	3.071
Opportunities for permanent residence in this country	2.794	1.122	2.794
Ease of getting a visa to study in this country	2.500	1.080	2.500
Proximity to your home country	1.912	1.111	1.970

# Educational Pathfinders? A Study of International Student Mobility in China

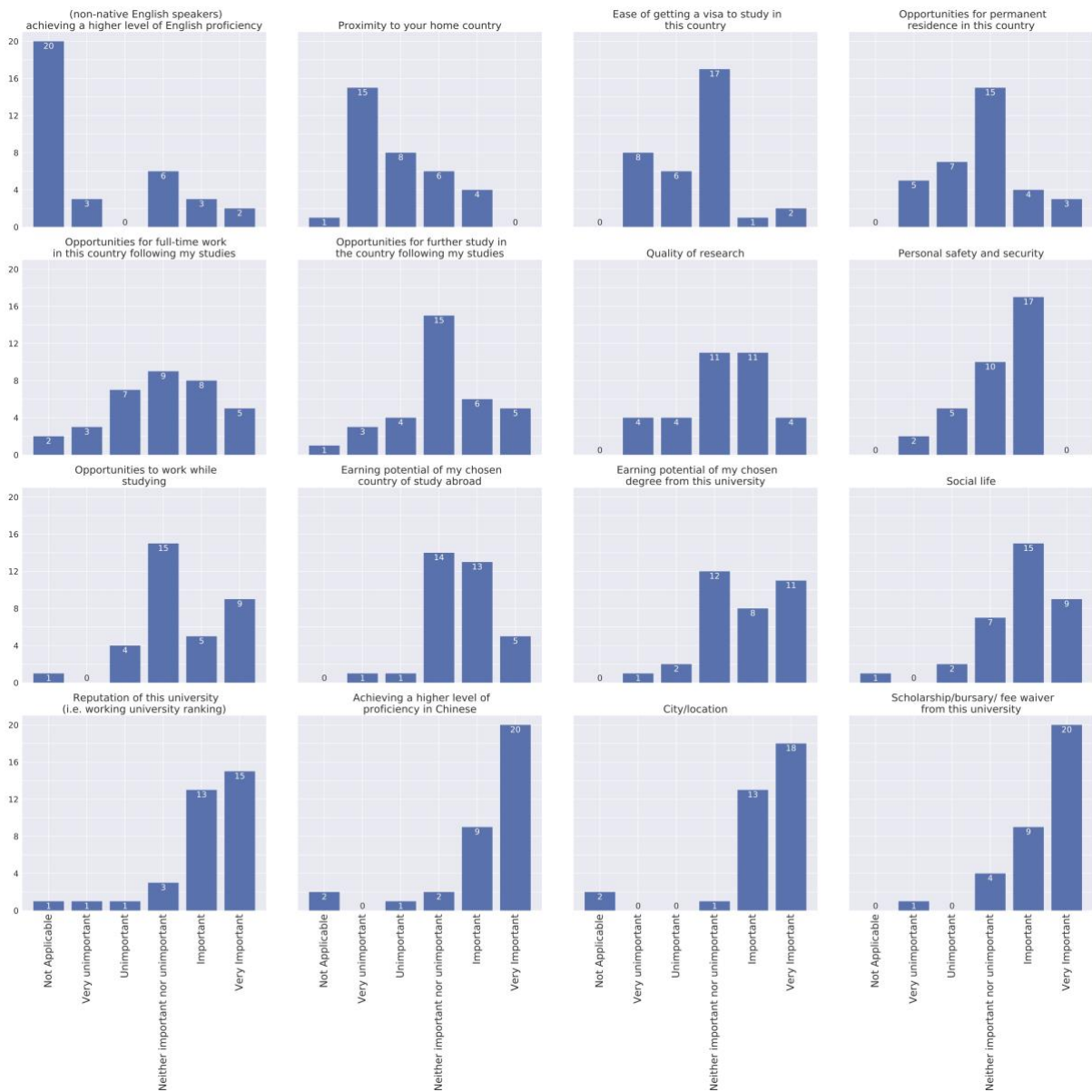


Figure 9.2 Participants' responses to the question on important factors for university-related decision

## APPENDIX 3 Informed Consent Letter

I am a Doctor of Philosophy (DPhil) student in the School of Geography and the Environment at the University of Oxford. I am interested in learning your motivations to study in China and experiences in your degree programme. You have been invited to take part in this study because of your current involvement with a degree programme in China.

### **The Title of the Study:**

Educational Pathfinders? A Study of International Student Mobility China

### **Data Collection Process:**

1) The study consists of one narrative interview during which I will ask you to share stories about yourself and your experiences of study abroad. The interview will take approximately one hour to one and a half hours of your time and will focus on your thoughts on your academic experience and perceptions of the experience. The interview will be audio-recorded for transcription purposes.

2) I will also ask you your social media accounts (e.g., WeChat, Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, etc.), if you have one, and I will use this information to collect any public postings you have posted (I will not be able to access private accounts or direct messages).

### **Right to Withdrawal:**

Participation in this study is entirely voluntary. You are free to withdraw at any time without it affecting your relationship with myself or the University of Oxford. Furthermore, you may decline to answer any questions I ask during the interview.

**Confidentiality:**

It is my intention to publish the results of this study. However, your identity (and specific information that could identify you) will remain confidential. Your name will be replaced with pseudonyms in my notes and interview transcriptions, and social media postings. Throughout the entire duration of the research your identity will remain anonymous. The result of this study may be published or presented at professional/academic meetings. However, the identities of all research participants will remain anonymous. Once analyses are complete, the data from the project may be released publicly for other researchers to analyse. If the data are released in this way, all information that could be used to identify individual participants will be removed.

**Data Storage:**

Interview will be recorded, transcribed and saved as MS Word/Excel documents. Electronic files will be password protected on my personal computer and/or third-party Cloud storage (e.g., Google Drive) and will be destroyed following the completion of the study.

**Known Risks:**

Participation in this study poses no known risks or harms. The interview is not intended to be overly probing, and I encourage you to share only what you wish to share. In the unlikely event that a risk should arise, you are welcome to withdraw if and when you wish. You are encouraged to ask questions about the study at any time before, during or after its completion.

**Remuneration:**

You will receive a CNY 100 Starbucks gift card for your participation.

## A Study of International Student Mobility in China

### **Expected Benefits:**

By participating in this study, you will be helping researchers and academicians learn more about perceptions on transnational higher education from the students who are one of the most important stakeholders in the field.

If you are interested in participating in this study, please sign the consent form below. I will check the contents of the informed consent form before commencing data collection.

Kris Hyesoo Lee,

DPhil Candidate, University of Oxford

kris.lee@chch.ox.ac.uk

### **Statement of Consent:**

I, [participant name], understand that this research study has been reviewed and approved by the Central University Research Ethics Committee (CUREC) for Studies Involving Human Subjects: Social Sciences Committee at the University of Oxford. I have read and understand the explanation provided to me. I have had all my questions answered to my satisfaction, and I voluntarily agree to participate in this study.

Your name (printed):

Signature:

Date:

## APPENDIX 4 Request for access to social media postings Letter (E-mail)

Dear [Participant name],

Hope this email finds you well and I wish you a very well-deserved summer vacation! I am writing this to give you some updates on the progress of the research and ask you for a permission to connect on social media.

Thanks to your invaluable story, the research has moved a lot. It is supposed to be a 4-year research project and there is still a lot more to be done (which means that you will need to wait a bit more until you see some publications out of it), but I already got lots of positive feedback from the researchers in the field and was invited to different conferences. The methodology chapter of this research was presented at BAICE (British Association of International and Comparative Education) conference earlier this month, and first bit of analysis will be presented at one of the most prestigious conferences in the field, RGS (Royal Geographical Society), in coming August. and many more to come!

With that said, it will be very beneficial for robustness of the research that I have access to your postings on social media, especially photos. Do you mind letting me know your Facebook/Instagram IDs? You will receive a friend request from my research Facebook/Instagram account that I created only for the purpose of this research. Please kindly add me if you are willing to share your stories in China. I will make sure to protect your confidentiality and privacy that your postings will NOT be shared/or used in analysis without your consent. I will definitely contact you again for your permission if I happen to use your content in any of my future publications/presentations/thesis. This research accounts will be immediately deleted upon the completion of my research. Alternatively, you can just send me a couple of photos that captures your experience in China.

## A Study of International Student Mobility in China

I look forward to connecting with you online :) If you have any questions, please do feel free contact me. Thank you!