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China in the global field of international student mobility: an analysis of economic, human and symbolic capitals

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Abstract

The global landscape of higher education is an uneven field where players like nation-states are placed in hierarchical and centre-periphery relations. This paper focuses on the global field of international student mobility (ISM) and investigates China's place in the field using an analytical framework consisting of three key categories of 'capital': *economic*, *human*, and *symbolic*. Drawing on existing scholarship and author's first-hand ethnographic research, the paper examines the case of China as both a source and a destination of ISM, and analyses the flows and accrual of these three forms of capital as consequences of outbound and inbound student mobilities. Analyses show that in a global ISM field characterised by asymmetries and inequalities, China's place is arguably *semi-peripheral* economically and symbolically. It is argued that this country-focused macro perspective complements existing ISM scholarship's emphasis on social reproduction at individual and private levels.

Keywords: international student mobility; educational mobility; higher education; international students; China

Introduction

The global landscape of higher education (HE) is an uneven and hierarchically structured field (Clayton, 1998; Gerhards, Hans, & Drewski, 2018; Marginson, 2008). Scholars have used various theoretical perspectives to analyse such a state of unevenness and stratification. For instance, drawing on Bourdieu's notion of 'field of power' and Gramscian theory of hegemony, Marginson (2008) characterises the global HE system as resting upon the hegemony of British-American—especially American—HE institutions (HEIs). Others have borrowed Immanuel Wallerstein's seminal World Systems theory to see the global HE sphere as stratified into 'core' and 'periphery' regions which are entangled in unequal relations of economic and symbolic (i.e. knowledge, ideology, legitimacy and prestige) exchanges (e.g. Chen & Barnett, 2000; Clayton, 1998; Gerhards et al., 2018). Suffice it to say, the uneven global educational landscape has been depicted against a broader backdrop of unequal geopolitical and geo-economic relations prevailing in the world.

One of the most significant developments in higher education worldwide in the past few decades has been the rise of international student mobility (ISM). The number of 'internationally mobile students'—defined as people who pursue tertiary/higher education outside their countries of citizenship (Migration Data Portal, 2018)—increased from 1.3 million in 1993 (OECD, 2013) to more than 4.85 million in 2016 (UNESCO, cited in Migration Data Portal, 2018). The flows and patterns of ISM also closely reflect the uneven global HE landscape. A handful of developed countries from the English-speaking world and Europe host a majority (62%) of the global stock of international students: US (24%), UK (11%), Australia (7%), France (7%), Canada (7%), Germany (7%); on the other hand, as senders, North America and Western Europe are estimated to contribute no more than 20% of such students (Institute of International Education, 2017). Researchers who have analysed international student flows and networks longitudinally corroborate such observations. For example, Shields's (2013) analysis of worldwide networks of student mobility from 1998 to 2008 shows that 'flows of international students have become more unequal and centralized' (p. 609), and that student mobility networks share 'strong structural similarities with the networks of world trade and the world polity' (p. 628). Chen and Barnett's (2000) study of international student exchange networks in 1985, 1989, and 1995 similarly confirms 'an academic hegemony consistent with world economic and political performance' (p. 435).

One uniquely interesting country in the global field of ISM is China. In addition to being by far the world's largest source country of postsecondary international students, the country has also risen rapidly to prominence as a host country, currently claiming the spot as the world's *third largest* receiver of mobile students (Institute of International Education, 2017). While there is by now a vast and wide-ranging literature on the internationalisation of Chinese higher education (see Xu & Montgomery, 2018; Zha, Wu, & Hayhoe, 2019), accounts that look specifically at China's place in the field of international student mobility are still lacking. This

paper addresses this research gap by juxtaposing China's role as the world's top source country *alongside* its role as an emerging leading receiver of international students.

Along with China's indisputable rise on the world stage in economic and geopolitical terms, the country has also been seeking to project its influence, or 'soft power', through state-initiated projects in the realm of culture and education, such as the Confucius Institutes (R. Yang, 2010). Indeed, as Li Wang (2014) has argued, enhancing China's international status has been an important motive behind the country's efforts to internationalise its higher education sector. Despite such strategic intentions, it remains unclear to what extent China's putative 'rise' has materially shifted the global educational landscape under a Western hegemony. Suspitsyna's (2015) study, for instance, found that China continues to be portrayed as a culturally inferior *Other* in Western discourse on higher education. Thus, a broader significance of this study is that it offers an opportunity to evaluate—though by no means conclusively or comprehensively—China's 'rise' as an educational power and its current place within the global HE landscape from the perspective of student mobility.

For the purpose of theorising the uneven global education field, Marginson (2008, p. 304) instructively suggests that analysis could focus on *flows* and *patterns of differences*. Accordingly, in this paper, inbound and outbound flows of mobile students in relation to China will be described in quantitative terms, followed by qualitative analyses that tease out the significant patterns that characterise such flows. To organise these analyses, the paper constructs an analytical framework comprising three key forms of capital—*economic, human, and symbolic*. The next section is devoted to developing this framework, by first critiquing existing ISM scholarship's emphasis on social reproduction in what may be called the 'private-individual' sphere, and then introducing a macro perspective that sees ISM as a 'public-political' reproductive mechanism. The next section provides an overview of China's engagement in contemporary ISM, both as a sender and as a receiver. Then, critically drawing on available data and existing literature—supplemented by empirical insights from the author's own ethnographic research—the fourth section analyses the transfer, accumulation, and accrual of economic, human, and symbolic capitals with respect to China as a result of outbound and inbound student mobilities respectively. The final section sums up the paper's arguments and concludes by highlighting how such an analysis of a country's structural positioning in the world enriches our understanding of the complex relationships between international student mobility and the (re)production of social inequalities and injustices on various scales.

Towards an analytical framework: economic, human, and symbolic capitals

To date, much of the sociologically-framed scholarship on ISM has favoured an analytical lens of social reproduction. Specifically, the Bourdieusian approach (Bourdieu, 1986) is arguably the most prevalent theoretical perspective. Simply put, this perspective sees moving abroad for education as a strategy of accumulating prized cultural capital—often associated with the

prestigious ‘West’ or the ‘developed world’—that subsequently feeds into the reproduction of class advantage, and ultimately social stratification (e.g. Baláž & Williams, 2004; Brooks & Waters, 2011; King, Findlay, Ahrens, & Dunne, 2011; Waters, 2012; Xiang & Shen, 2009). To stress the *reproductive* nature of student mobility, some researchers emphasise that educational mobility tends to be pursued by those *already* privileged (Lorz, Netz, & Quast, 2016; Waters, 2012), or that mobility in general favours the middle class (Forsey, 2017, p. 67). Some recent studies (e.g. Sancho, 2017; Yang, 2018) have emerged to challenge this view, showing that not all mobile students are necessarily ‘privileged’—some in fact originate from modest socioeconomic backgrounds. For the latter, it would be more accurate to state that educational mobility is pursued in an attempt to *produce* certain forms of capital, so as to attain social mobility as a result. In view of this, the expression ‘(re)production’ will be used throughout this paper instead of ‘reproduction’, to signify that ISM also *produces* certain social structures and experiences.

Notwithstanding this point of contention, arguably one key characteristic of the dominant Bourdieusian perspective is that ‘capital’ is implicitly understood as a *private* resource—owned, invested, and harvested competitively by individuals and their families, who are often defined and categorised in terms of class (for example, ‘middle-class families’). In most empirical studies in the literature, the cost of study abroad is borne privately by the mobile students themselves or, more accurately, their families. Investing in the younger generation’s study abroad is a household’s private (re)productive project (Waters, 2002, 2005), with the implicit aim of enhancing the overall socioeconomic status of the household. The mobile student, with supposedly enhanced cultural capital as a result of studying abroad, is normally expected to contribute back to the private household economically and/or to enhance the family’s social status through cultural distinction. In this process of social (re)production, the existence of *private* social actors, such as individuals and households with self-interests defined along class lines, is more or less an ontological assumption. It is in this sense that much of the extant sociological writings on ISM can be characterised as having espoused a ‘private-individual’ logic of (re)production.

This paper suggests that, when the analytical focus shifts from micro-level individual-private actors to macro-level actors such as the nation-states, an alternative conceptualisation is possible and more useful to serve as an analytical framework. To be called a ‘public-political’ logic of (re)production, this perspective emphasises how nation-states engage in the global field of ISM in order to (re)produce, extract, or accrue certain desirable ‘capitals’ that have *public* and *political* significances. Arguably, the three most relevant forms of ‘capital’ that countries transfer between one another or accumulate as a result of engaging in ISM are: *economic* capital in terms of financial resources, *human* capital in terms of educated/skilled labour, and *symbolic* capital in the form of international ‘goodwill’, global prestige/status, and perhaps, by extension, ‘soft power’.

Firstly, regarding economic capital, over the past three decades, education has evolved into a lucrative tradable service (Komljenovic & Lee Robertson, 2017; Susan L. Robertson, Xavier Bonal, & Roger Dale, 2002). The entire global education market was estimated to be worth 4.4 trillion dollars in 2013 and has been touted as ‘the great growth industry of the 21st century’ (Pearson 2013, cited in Komljenovic & Lee Robertson, 2017, p. 281). The higher education (HE) segment of this market was said to be worth 1.9 trillion dollars (Kim, 2017), of which international student mobility no doubt accounts for a sizable subset. Many developed countries, especially in the English-speaking world, have taken an explicitly commercial approach to the education of tertiary-level foreign students (Cantwell, 2015; Stein & Andreotti, 2016). Although not all countries have turned their HE sectors into profit-making engines (nor are all in a position to do so), those which do stand to gain significant surplus economic capital through engaging in the global marketplace of student mobility. Considering that many Western HE systems have been under the threat of decreasing public funding as a result of neoliberalisation and financial turmoil (Eggins & West, 2010; Olssen & Peters, 2005), the economic capital to be gained from hosting international students could well be critical to the survival and regeneration of the HE systems in these countries.

Secondly, countries in the world are tapping into ISM as an important way to (re)produce and enhance national ‘human capital’. The ‘human capital’ theory argues that in the age of knowledge economy, a given country’s economic growth and wealth creation increasingly depends on the quantity and quality of human resources that the country possesses (Becker, 1994). In addition to investing in education domestically to (re)produce indigenous human capital, in view of the rise of ISM, now nation-states in the world also have access to a space of transnational human capital flows, amidst which a country can in theory both gain and lose human capital. Indeed, this has been the premise to notions such as ‘brain drain’, ‘brain gain’ (e.g. Boeri, Brücker, Docquier, & Rapoport, 2012), and ‘global war for talent’ (Brown & Tannock, 2009) that frequently appear in scholarly literature.

Brown and Tannock (2009) argue that such a neoliberal view about the transnational mobility of skilled labour has re-shaped many developed countries’ policies pertaining to immigration and education. Since the 1990s, international student mobility became integral to many OECD countries’ effort to enhance national human capital, usually realised through subsuming ISM policies under broader policies and strategies governing skilled immigration (Baas, 2019; Geddie, 2015; She & Wotherspoon, 2013; Tremblay, 2005; Ziguras & Law, 2006). In short, higher education is used as a pipeline to channel in talent from around the world, and immigration policy tools (such as various ‘post-study work’ schemes and calibrated immigration mechanisms such as ‘point systems’) are used to retain talented/highly-skilled graduates, thus appropriating them as the receiving state’s human capital (Geddie, 2015). In countries faced with demographic challenges such as low birth rates and/or population ageing, recruiting international students and migrants also serves a more fundamental function of (re)producing a sustainable national population.

Thirdly, countries also gain and accumulate ‘symbolic capital’ in the process of engaging in ISM, especially through *hosting* international students. In contradistinction to the conventional Bourdieusian usage of the term which is micro-sociological, ‘symbolic capital’ in this paper is defined from the nation-state’s perspective, referring to intangible assets of *symbolic value*, such as international image, ‘goodwill’, global ‘prestige’ and status/standing, which may ultimately translate into cultural and political ‘influence’, or ‘soft power’. Educating students from other countries gives the host country an opportunity to cultivate in foreign students cultural familiarity, positive feelings, and possibly even *political/ideological* identification with the host country. This is the reason why past research has linked higher education internationalisation with nation-states’ ‘soft power’ agendas (e.g. Lo, 2011; R. Yang, 2010). In the historical contexts of colonialism and Cold War, ISM used to be overtly politicised, and student mobility programmes had been created with specific politico-ideological objectives (for a brief review see Baas, 2019, pp. 224-225). Today, the political intent behind countries’ engagement in ISM may not be as explicit, nor is there any guarantee that such engagements would be effective in accomplishing political objectives. As such, instead of using terms such as ‘soft power’ or ‘political capital’, this paper prefers the term ‘symbolic capital’, which refers generally to intangible assets in the sense of ‘reputation’, ‘prestige’, ‘goodwill’, ‘attractiveness’, etc., that are typically sought after by nation-states in the global arena, both as an end in itself and also for its consequent political and economic benefits. The relationship between ISM and symbolic capital accrued by countries, however, should be understood as *mutually (re)productive*: countries engage in ISM to accrue symbolic capital; at the same time, symbolic capital—manifested in the desirability of certain countries and their HEIs—also shapes ISM flows.

To sum up, with a departure from the extant scholarship’s tendency to analyse ISM as a social (re)productive mechanism on individual-private levels, the preceding paragraphs sought to establish a more *macro-oriented* analytical framework that focuses on how nation-states (re)produce *economic, human, and symbolic* capitals through ISM engagements. The paper now turns to the empirical case of China and investigates how the country is situated in the global field of ISM, and the corresponding flows and accruals of capitals.

International student mobility *from and to* China

ISM from China

According to the Chinese Ministry of Education (2019a), in 2018, as many as 662,100 Chinese students went abroad to study at tertiary and higher levels. This represented a more than three-fold increase from merely a decade ago (179,800 in 2008, according to People.cn, 2012), and almost 17 times the level of 2000 (*ibid.*). Cumulatively, as many as 5.86 million Chinese have studied abroad over the four decades since China’s Reform and Opening-up in 1978 (Ministry of Education China, 2019a). As of 2019, with 1.53 million of its citizens studying in

overseas HEIs (ibid.), China is by far the world's largest source country of internationally mobile students. It can be estimated about half of all Chinese mobile students are concentrated in a handful of English-speaking developed countries (Institute of International Education, 2017).

Three key trends characterised outbound Chinese student mobility over time. First, there has been a shift from the initial phase (late 1970s to mid-1980s) of state-sponsored mobility for postgraduate-level academic elites, to subsequent phases in which mass-based self-funded study-abroad became the mainstream (Xiang & Shen, 2009). As Xiang and Shen (2009) pointed out, in the initial stage, aiming to 'catch up' with the developed world in terms of human capital, the Chinese state sent politically and professionally qualified personnel abroad to study and required them to return subsequently to serve in important positions in state bureaucracy (see also Hansen & Thøgersen, 2015; H. Wang, 2004). In other words, this brief initial phase of post-Reform Chinese student mobility exemplified the *public-political* logic of using student mobility as an intervention in (re)producing national human capital. However, this logic was soon overtaken by the *private-individual* logic, which manifested in commodified overseas studies that increasing numbers of Chinese citizens were able to afford privately since the late 1990s (S. Lan, 2018). Today, although the Chinese state continues to sponsor a modestly growing number of graduate students and scholars, 90% of internationally mobile students from China are self-funded (Ministry of Education China, 2019a).

A second trend has been the lowering age of Chinese international students, resulting from growing numbers and shares of students pursuing undergraduate and pre-tertiary education abroad as opposed to postgraduate studies. According to a research report published by China Education Online (www.eol.cn, 2018), between 2005/6 and 2015/16, the percentage of undergraduates among Chinese international students in the US increased from 14.87% to 41.28%, whereas that of postgraduates declined from 76.09% to 37.51%. In the same period, the numbers of Chinese students enrolled in K-12 education in the US, UK, and New Zealand also grew continuously. Through a Bourdieusian lens, Xiang and Shen (2009) astutely pointed out that sending children to study abroad at younger ages (for example, to attend 'prep schools') required significant financial investments—often beyond the means of ordinary middle-class families—but enabled the embodied acquisition of cultural capital which could only be accomplished over longer stretches of time. The lowering of age of Chinese student migrants thus represented the deepening of social stratification and elite formation in contemporary China through ISM.

A third trend concerning outbound Chinese student mobility has been the rapidly rising numbers and shares of students who return to China after studying abroad. Between 1978 and 2006, those who returned to China on a long-term basis accounted for less than 26% of all those who went aboard (Ministry of Education China, 2007). By 2018, however, this cumulative return rate had climbed to 84.49% (Ministry of Education China, 2019a). Such a dramatic upward trend of Chinese students returning after studying abroad partly reflected China's

enhanced attractiveness, but was also due to the rapidly rising numbers of graduates who cannot all be absorbed by the destination country labour markets (Choudaha & Hu, 2016).

ISM to China

The total number of foreign students in China was said to be a modest 14,000 in 1992 (Kuroda, 2014). By 2017, China had become the world's third most significant receiver of international students following the US and the UK (Institute of International Education, 2017). According to the latest release from the Chinese Ministry of Education (2019b), 'in 2018 there were a total of 492,185 international students from 196 countries/areas pursuing their studies in 1,004 higher education institutions in China's 31 provinces/autonomous regions/provincial-level municipalities, marking an increase of 3,013 students or 0.62% compared to 2017.'

However, it is important to note that international students in China come predominantly from Asia and less developed parts of the world. The same official source (Ministry of Education China, 2019b) reveals that among all foreign students in the country, close to 60% hail from Asia; and Asia and Africa together account for more than 76%. There is also evidence that it is mainly these students from Asia and other less-developed countries who choose to pursue *full degree* credentials in Chinese HEIs, whereas most students from developed/Western nations are in China for *non-degree* courses such as exchange and short-term language/culture immersion programmes. For instance, although the US and Japan routinely appeared among the top 10 source countries of foreign students in China, when only degree-seeking students were considered, both countries disappeared from the top-10 list (zuihaodaxue.com, 2013, link now defunct). Currently, non-degree-seeking students account for nearly half (47.56%) of all international students in China (Ministry of Education China, 2019b).

China in the global field of ISM: analyses of the flows and accrual of economic, human and symbolic capitals

This section considers China's place in the global field of ISM by analysing China-related student mobilities using the three-pronged framework developed previously, comprising economic, human, and symbolic capitals. The transferal and accrual of capitals resulting from outbound student mobilities from China will be examined first, before a similar analysis is performed on capital transferal and accrual associated with inbound student mobilities.

In addition to relying on data gleaned from existing literature, the following account also weaves in relevant empirical insights from the author's two ethnographic studies of student mobility involving China: (1) Chinese students recruited by the government of city-state Singapore through scholarship schemes, and (2) self-funded Indian students pursuing English-medium medical education in a second-tier Chinese university.

Capital transferal/accrual arising from outbound student mobility

Economic capital

As of 2017, China stood as the top supplier of tertiary international students to nearly *all* leading nations in the developed world: US, Canada, UK, France, Germany, Australia, New Zealand and Japan (Institute of International Education, 2017). Among these countries can be found some of the world's most extensively commodified HE systems, with some of the highest tuition fees. While no precise data can be obtained on the financial contributions made specifically by Chinese students, the magnitude of such economic benefit can be inferred from the overall incomes generated for these countries by international students. For instance, according to the US Department of Commerce, in 2016, international students contributed US\$39.4 billion to the American economy (iie.org, 2018). In the UK, it was estimated that in 2015-16, 'first-year international students brought to the UK economy a total of £22.6 billion', of which non-EU students generated £17.5 billion (Studying-in-UK.org, 2018). In 2017, 'foreign students generated a record AU\$32 billion (US\$24.7 billion) for the Australian economy', a 22% increase from merely a year before (Maslen, 2018). In Canada, although the income from international students was comparatively modest at CND2.75 billion in 2015-16, the rate of increase had been rapid (Usher, 2018). Given China's leading role in sending students to these destinations, it is clear that economic capital measuring billions of USD yearly are transferred from China to Western developed nations via ISM.

Human capital

Through student mobility, China also transfers some of its top-notch human capital to Western developed nations. While difficult to quantify, the significance of this transfer of human capital from China to the wealthy West is evidenced in the concern with 'brain drain' in existing scholarship (e.g. Xiang, 2011; Zweig & Wang, 2013). With respect to the US context, research has noted that international graduate students contribute significantly to the research and innovation output of their institutions (Chellaraj, Maskus, & Mattoo, 2005). International students are also found to have played disproportionately important roles in (co-)founding some of the most valuable tech start-up companies in the US (Anderson, 2016). The theory of 'immigrant hyper-selectivity' (J. Lee & Zhou, 2015) can at least partially explain such concentration of human capital in internationally mobile students: these students are usually among the most talented and well-educated from their countries of origin.

Evidence suggests this is likely the case for China. In China, it has been—and continues to be—a norm for academically outstanding students to aspire towards further studies in developed countries in the West (especially the US), which often leads to permanent immigration. In fact, the vast majority of Chinese students who left China based on academic merit seem to have chosen to remain abroad: between 1978 and early 2000s, the cumulative rate of return was only about 25%. The recent surge in the rate of returning can be interpreted as primarily a result of the commercialised massification of self-funded study abroad post-2000s, and thus

does not necessarily negate the exodus of China's top-notch talent to the West. Indeed, Zweig and Wang's (2013, p. 613) research on the Chinese government's various efforts to lure back such top-notch talent concludes: '[d]espite active intervention from the CCP [Chinese Communist Party] in the policy, the return of large numbers of the *very best* and *very brightest* is still *not happening*' (emphases added).

The author's ethnographic research on a unique case of outbound Chinese student mobility—Chinese students recruited by Singapore government as 'foreign talent' scholars (Yang, 2016)—provides some empirical insights to further illustrate the above analyses. Since the mid-1990s, Singapore—an economically advanced city-state in Southeast Asia with a multi-ethnic population formed around an ethnic Chinese majority—had established official agreements with the Chinese government to recruit Chinese students as 'foreign talent'. Students aged between 15 and 18 from various provinces in China were selected by Singaporean authorities based on academic merit, and subsequently offered scholarships to further their education in Singaporean schools and universities. At the peak of recruitment, up to a thousand Chinese students per year were recruited (Yang, 2014). The majority of these 'PRC scholars' were given full scholarships to pursue undergraduate degrees in engineering and science, on the condition that they would be legally obliged to work for six years in Singapore upon graduation.

There is a clear intention on the part of the Singaporean state to appropriate these Chinese students as the city-state's future human capital. This not only manifested in the six-year 'bond' period, but was also evidenced in the fact that these scholars were *invited* to apply for Permanent Residency (PR) and were favoured for naturalisation. Yet, perhaps what most clearly reveals the *public-political* nature of Singapore's recruitment of Chinese students is the fact that recruiting Chinese migrants helped to reproduce Singapore's *status quo* multi-ethnic demographic profile, which has been severely threatened by Chinese-Singaporeans' lower birth rate in comparison to other local ethnic groups (Yeoh & Lin, 2013). In other words, as well as being an economic-reproductive strategy to secure human capital, recruiting Chinese students also fits into the Singapore state's highly engineered reproduction of a national population of specific ethno-cultural characteristics.¹

Symbolic capital

Beyond illustrating the outflow of human capital from China, the Singapore case also offers some commentaries on how Chinese students continue to subscribe to a global hierarchy of educational destinations, wherein symbolic capital is primarily accrued to the 'West'. Examining the lived experiences and aspirations of these Chinese 'scholars' in Singapore, the author found that the more ambitious and academically capable among them tended to view the city-state as a stepping-stone to Western destinations—again, the US primarily. For instance, in the case of one category of these scholars who are not required to serve a 'bond' in Singapore, going to universities in the US or UK is a common aspiration, whereas ending up in local Singaporean universities would be seen as a regrettable compromise or a step-down. Even for scholars legally bound by the bond, it is not uncommon for some to seek postgraduate studies in the US,

and there have been cases of scholars willing to pay hefty financial penalties to the Singapore government in order to do so. Despite already having access to Singapore's globally competitive educational institutions and vibrant labour market, for many academically ambitious Chinese youth, the West, in particular the US, remains the ultimate aspiration.

Taken together, then, it can be argued that accompanying outbound ISM from China are significant outflows of economic and human capitals to wealthy developed nations in the West. Alongside these processes are these wealthy developed countries' firm hold onto, and further accrual of, symbolic capital—manifested in their ability to continue to uphold perceived prestige and desirability of their HEIs in relation to Chinese students. Such one-sided symbolic capital accrual in turn further reinforces the economic and human capital flows.

The extensiveness of the above capital transferal and accrual resulting from outbound Chinese student mobility is to be brought into sharp relief when one shifts to examine the limited extent of capital transfers and accrual accompanying inbound ISM to China.

Capital transferal/accrual arising from inbound student mobility

Economic capital

Inbound student mobility brings to China relatively insignificant amount of economic capital. Despite the impressive-looking numbers of international students China currently hosts, approximately half are non-degree-seeking students, amongst whom many may be characterised as short-term 'educational tourists' from the West, such as exchange students and/or cultural/language immersion programme participants (Ma, 2017). When it comes to fee-paying degree-seeking foreign students, the vast majority comes from Asia and other parts of the world that are less economically developed than China. For these students, the significantly lower tuition fees in China is often the main attraction in the first place (ethnographic details to follow). Given these two characteristics, although nearly 88% of foreign students in China are reportedly self-funded (Ministry of Education China, 2019b), the financial income generated by these students for China can be expected to be rather modest. When compared with the massive outflows of money accompanying Chinese students studying overseas, inward transfer of economic capital accompanying inbound ISM is arguably negligible.

Human capital

Neither does China stand to receive significant human capital through ISM. As argued previously, the current global ISM order already channels high-calibre student-migrants worldwide predominantly towards developed countries in the West where the most highly regarded HEIs are located. China, with its universities scarcely appearing in global ranking tables (Jöns & Hoyler, 2013), has yet to emerge as a major magnet for students with high academic potentials. At the same time, to date China has also shown little intention to capitalise on foreign students as a way of developing its national human capital. In fact, as scholars have

argued (e.g. Bork-Hüffer & Yuan-Ihle, 2014; Leonard & Lehmann, 2019), overall China has maintained a 'highly cautious and restrictive' (Leonard & Lehmann, 2019, p. 9) stance towards the inflow of foreigners, and immigration/settlement. Indeed, pointing out various 'uncertainties', 'contradictions' and 'confusions' surrounding the country's im/migration governance, Leonard and Lehmann (2019) argue that 'China is still undecided about the influx of foreigners in its midst' (p. 3). While China today does host an increasing number of migrants of diverse profiles, especially in its cosmopolitan megacities (e.g. Farrer, 2019), most migrants of high human capital and skill levels in China are temporary residents who have no intention to settle long-term (Cheuk, 2020).

Symbolic capital

Examining the Chinese government's rising spending on sponsoring foreign students and the underlying official policies and discourses, Pan (2013) has argued that China's approach to inbound ISM is guided not so much by the neoliberal rationale of seeking economic or human capital gains, but rather by a political objective of enhancing the country's global standing. To use the conceptual language developed in this paper, *symbolic capital* seems the main objective underlying China's rising interest in attracting foreign students. Researchers who have looked into China's efforts at engaging mobile students from Africa (Haugen, 2013) and Taiwan (P.-C. Lan & Wu, 2016) have echoed this analysis.

Despite the intention, however, existing evidence seems to suggest that China has not been successful in accruing symbolic capital through hosting international students. For example, Haugen's (2013) study on African students in Guangdong province concludes that the Chinese state's policy objective 'failed' because the students were disappointed with the quality of education. A number of studies from Beijing (Wen, Chen, Bai, & Cao, 2013) and Shanghai (Ding, 2010) similarly found international students' satisfaction levels to be significantly lower than those found in major ISM destinations in developed countries. Ding's (2016) more recent study, involving 1,892 survey responses from international students in 28 HEIs in Shanghai, revealed 'considerably and consistently low levels of international students' satisfaction with their study and living experiences' (p. 319). Specifically, it was found that while students were more satisfied with Chinese language/cultural learning, when it comes to fields of study unrelated to Chinese language or culture, 'the percentage of students who were satisfied was below 70% and sometimes even below 40%' (p. 329). This seems to suggest that while China may be more successful at attracting 'educational tourists' on account of language and culture, for students who seek academic credentials in other disciplines, the country does not offer a high-quality experience. Considering that Guangdong, Beijing and Shanghai are already the most developed regions/cities in China with the most well-resourced institutions, the experiences of international students in other Chinese cities and institutions (such as in the author's ethnographic case) could be even more problematic.

Ethnographic insights

The author's study (Yang, 2018) on a group of Indian students pursuing Bachelor's Degrees in Medicine and Surgery (MBBS) in an English-medium programme offered by a second-tier Chinese university located in a provincial capital city serves well to illustrate the above points ethnographically. Since medicine is one of top disciplines in which fee-paying foreign students are concentrated in China (Kuroda, 2014), Indian students pursuing MBBS—estimated to be 10,000-15,000 in number (Yang, 2018)—constitute a suitable case for analysing self-funded degree-seeking ISM from developing nations to China.

In India, admission to public medical education is highly competitive whereas private provision is often prohibitively expensive. Thus, Indian students from less affluent backgrounds with not-so-strong academic performance who nevertheless wish to pursue medicine have traditionally looked to affordable overseas alternatives in countries such as Russia and Ukraine. Since early 2000s, China emerged as a player in this market, and by 2012 it had become the most popular destination for Indian students reading medicine overseas. In the peak year of 2013, 52 second-/third-tier Chinese universities offered 6,020 places in English-medium MBBS for international students. A majority of these seats were believed to have been taken by students from India, followed by students from other developing countries in Asia, Middle East, and Africa.

Contrary to current literature's gesturing towards the 'rise' of China as an explanation for international students' interest in the country (e.g. C. S. Lee, 2019), the author's study found that Indian MBBS students were drawn to China primarily because of the cheaper tuition fees and living costs, and otherwise had little interest in or knowledge about the country. The research site Chinese university charged an annual tuition fee of RMB 24,000 (or USD 3,480) as of 2014, which was about one quarter of the prevailing fee level at a private medical college in India. In spite of the relatively inexpensive fees, according to an official from the university, some Indian students still defaulted on payment. The author's fieldwork found that many such Indian medical students came from lower- or emerging- middle class backgrounds. With limited financial means, their families often had to take out loans.

Since Chinese host institutions have few means of reaching out to or evaluating the candidates, India-based commercial intermediaries usually play a pivotal role in the recruitment of students for MBBS programmes in China. In the author's ethnographic study, the academic screening for admission was found to be lax, essentially done by the commercial agent on a 'first-pay-first-serve' basis. As a result, when students arrived, the Chinese university was somewhat shocked by their lack of basic academic preparedness. On the other hand, the Chinese host university was also evidently ill-prepared to run the MBBS programme in English-medium instruction. Most serious were issues to do with the qualifications of the teaching faculty (oftentimes hired in a haphazard fashion) and their English communication competencies (especially the Chinese faculty), resulting in poor classroom experiences, which was aggravated by the students' own poor English proficiency. Other aspects of the students' experience such as accommodation and support services were also found to be wanting due to the host university's lack of experience and, in some cases, lack of effort. Indian students, as with other developing-country students,

also had limited interaction with local Chinese students and society, and some reported experiences of discrimination and racism. In all, thus, the Indian medical students are generally dissatisfied with studying and living in China; barring some exceptions, they tend not to develop very positive feelings or regard for the country. Nevertheless, keenly aware of their own lack of choice, these students are willing to compromise (Yang, 2018).

Lastly, the Indian medical students (and other international MBBS students in China for that matter) typically return to their home country to seek to qualify for practice as soon as they graduate, as a medical career in China is out of the question due to language and institutional barriers. It is also clear from the outset that such recruitment of self-funded international students to lower-tier Chinese universities was not a precursor to skilled migration, neither in the eyes of the Chinese state nor in that of the Indian students and their families. For the latter, China's role is essentially that of a less costly alternative—a 'second chance' (Brooks & Waters, 2009)—to the domestic medical education that they could ill afford.

Viewed from the standpoint of China, the above ethnographic details support the analyses presented earlier: relatively little by way of economic, human, and symbolic capitals are accrued by China despite its rapidly rising profile as one of the top receivers of ISM in the world.

Discussions and conclusion

Juxtaposing the flows and accrual of economic, human and symbolic capitals accompanying outbound and inbound international student mobilities (ISM) in the case of China, the above account presents at least two tentative conclusions. First, the global order of student mobility is evidently one characterised by asymmetries and inequalities between countries and regions—benefiting some more than others—which ultimately reflect the uneven and hierarchical global higher education landscape. Secondly, China's engagement in this global field of ISM is also clearly asymmetrical: while significant amounts of economic, human and symbolic capitals are accrued to more developed countries which receive Chinese students, China's accrual of these same capitals through inward ISM flows are much more modest, and are derived mainly from less developed countries and regions. As such, China can be thought of as an economically and symbolically *semi-peripheral* country in as far as the global HE sector is concerned, despite its already imposing stature as an economic powerhouse and strategic heavyweight in the world.

China's structural semi-peripherality helps to highlight some of the inequitable and arguably unjust ways in which social actors and groups are configured in international education. For instance, given the unwavering Chinese desire for study-abroad in the West and consequently the enormous transfers of economic capital to Western developed countries where higher education is increasingly under-funded (Yu, 2017), it is not farfetched to say that Chinese middle class families are effectively subsidising the education of domestic students of much wealthier nations. At the same time, however, Chinese mobile students and their families are now confronted with the reality of diminishing advantage conferred by overseas educational

credentials in China's job market (Hao, Wen, & Welch, 2016; Hu & Cairns, 2017; Ma & Pan, 2015). Put bluntly, the 'return on investment' for the Chinese's educational mobility endeavours appears increasingly uncertain.

China's semi-peripheral global positioning also means that for students from the Western/developed world, the country often chiefly serves as a destination of 'educational tourism', which allows these students to accumulate 'cosmopolitan' (in an orientalist sense) cultural capital usually without needing to surrender their sense of cultural superiority (see C. S. Lee, 2019; K. H. Lee, 2020). In stark contrast, young people from less-developed countries tend to come to China to seek full academic credentials, but are left to contend with lower-quality educational experiences and, as end result, academic qualifications with limited value and global recognition. In fact, in the case of MBBS students from India, there is increasing public suspicion, if not stigma already, associated with degrees earned in China (Banerjee, 2015; Bharti, 2015).

Comparative insights into inequality and injustice such as these are ones which past sociological research on ISM has largely sidestepped due to its tendency to focus on inequalities between mobile students of different class backgrounds from the *same country*. Thus, developing this country-focused analytical account in this paper serves to sensitise us to the ways in which the structural positioning of countries/regions in the hierarchical global field of student mobility can *differentiate* and *stratify* the lived experiences of students and social groups in ways that have *ethical* and *political* implications (see Yang, 2019).

Lastly, it should be acknowledged that adopting such a country-based macro analysis is not without its limitations, conceptually and theoretically. In focusing on a specific country's structural position as a sender and receiver of ISM, a relatively simplistic image of unidirectional 'in' and 'out' flows is liable to being created. In reality, much like migration flows in general, student mobilities are seldom one-off or unidirectional, but often exhibit non-linear and/or circular characteristics (see: Xu & Montgomery, 2019; Tu & Nehring, 2019; Robertson, Harris, & Baldassar, 2018). Such complexities and nuances, while not undermining the overall analysis presented here, are important aspects of ISM that the this paper cannot address sufficiently given its limited scope.

Nor is this paper's country-focused analytical narrative meant to be a nod to the much critiqued methodological nationalism (Wimmer & Glick Schiller, 2002); 'country', 'region', 'inflow' and 'outflow' remain analytical constructs and tools. The purpose of using these conceptual constructs, rather, has been to explore an alternative analytical narrative to the dominant perspective in ISM scholarship so far, which has stressed a *private-individual* logic of (re)production seen through a Bourdieusian lens that prioritises individuals and social groups as the implicit units of analysis. By taking the macro category of the nation-state as the main container of analysis and using a more macroscopic interpretation of 'capital', the account developed in this paper shows that multiple logics and processes of social (re)production are overlaid in ISM. Making sense of how these logics and processes intersect and interact across

different geographical scales and social/cultural/political boundaries continues to be a challenge for future scholars of international student mobility.

Notes

1. It would be interesting to ask why in this case the Chinese government would engage in a state-to-state student mobility programme that seemingly leads to brain drain. Other than the relatively small scale of this programme in the broader scheme of things, it is important to note that since the 1990s, the Chinese state has liberalised its attitude towards the outbound student mobility, seeking not to restrict mobility to curtail brain drain. Encapsulated in the slogan 'support study overseas, encourage returns, guarantee freedom of movement' (*zhi chi liu xue, gu li hui guo, lai qu zi you*) (see Xiang, 2011, p. 827), this liberalised attitude arguably signifies a transnational approach that views emigrated Chinese as contributing to China indirectly or as diasporic human capital who remain loyal, and can potentially be mobilised and even re-nationalised through potential return migration or overseas engagement (Xiang, Yeoh, & Toyota, 2013). However, there is no systematic evidence regarding the effectiveness of this transnational human capital approach.

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