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Building Halos: how do Chinese elites seek distinction through (mis)recognising studying abroad?

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OUTLINE OF THE PRESENTATION

1. Research Rationale and the Chinese Context

2. Existing literature on studying abroad & elite distinction;
Gaps in our knowledge on China

3. Data collection, methodology, research ethics

4. Findings and Concluding remarks

From Media-Chinese Students Are Coming/(Leaving)!!!



'friendly' place to study



for all. I certainly don't believe it anymore," she wrote in her school newspaper in June, criticising America's "Sinophobia".

In February, she penned an online petition, protesting against her university hosting a panel with Hong Kong democracy activists.



Canada at the end of 2019

Douglas Todd

Jun 12, 2020 • June 12, 2020 • 4 minute read • [10 Comments](#)





- **Gaps in literature**

- Study abroad & mobility capital**

- (Brooks and Waters 2010; King et al. 2011)

- Elite students & prestige** (Binder et al. 2016; Brown et al. 2016; Power et al. 2013)

But....

- 1. Why do Chinese elite graduates choose to study abroad?**
- 2. How do elites construct distinction?**

Theoretical/Conceptual Frameworks informed by

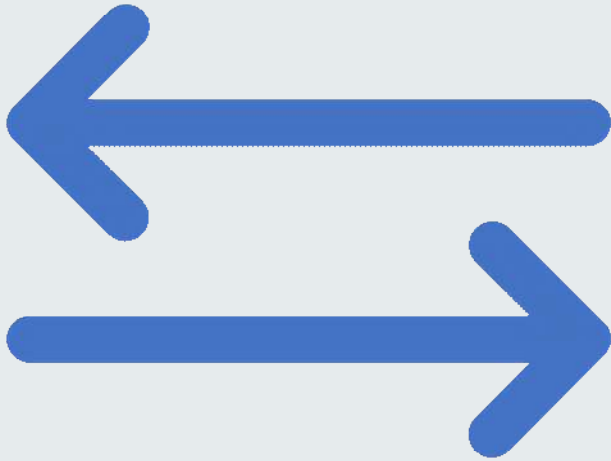
- Bourdieu's Forms and Convertibility of Capital (Bourdieu 1986; Bourdieu and Passeron 1977 [1990]);
- Sociology of distinction-making: emulation and (mis-)recognition (Friedman and Reeves 2020; Savage and Williams 2008; Lamont 1992):
 - Emulation-a process of continuously upping the spending game by developing expensive and elaborate tastes that are out of the reach of others (Veblen 1899);
 - Recognition/misrecognition- the process of legitimising the value and prestige of certain cultural habits and denying recognition to others (Bourdieu 1984);
- Feminist Philosopher Sally Haslanger's three sequential approaches (2012) to develop a holistic conceptualisation of distinction.

Why Is Cultural Capital so Attractive?

- Bourdieu's Forms and Convertibility of Capital

Forms: material vs symbolic
Transactions between economic, social and cultural capital

(Bourdieu 1986; Bourdieu and Passeron 1977 [1990]).



The Attractions of Cultural Capital in the Chinese

Context

Elite Opportunity Pathways and the Making of the Chinese Elites:

The market transitions:

the Communist *Party elites* premium access to new economic opportunities and that political capital allowed some of them to transform into *corporational elites* (Walder 2014, 2003; Goodman 2014);

a 'bottom-up' formation of *entrepreneurs* decoupled from the Party members and suppliers of state-owned enterprises & self-organised industry clusters with well-functioning networks of suppliers and distributors (Nee and Opper, 2012).

The Ed-based Meritocracy Phase:

The CCP elites/screening- seeking credentials through the Party school systems and/or academic degrees (Shambaug 2008; Bian et al. 2001)

Elite entrepreneurs are predominantly graduates of universities in urban coastal regions in China, especially at the Bachelor's level (Klingler-Vidra et al. 2021).

The 19th NCCCP-Politburo Standing Committee-Level of Education



Why Cultural Capital? Why Educational Credentials?

Conversions from political capital & economic capital to cultural capital

- Partly explained by Bourdieu:
 - the complexity of the conversions between different types of capital and fluid conversions into cultural capital obscure social reproduction processes, which not only conceal but also legitimise the power and privilege of the elites (Bourdieu 1986; Bourdieu and Passeron 1977 [1990]).
- Partly related to the rooted ideology of meritocracy (Liu 2016; Howlett 2021).

Research Design and Data Collection

Part 1: A Questionnaire Survey Involving 1,417 graduates from PKU in 2017.

This survey designed to find out who intends to study abroad after PKU;

- Ethics approval on 17 April 2017;
- Recruitment Processes:
 - Questionnaires were sent via PKU's official email addresses to all the graduating classes with a total number of 3,074 students between June 8 and July 30, 2017;
 - Promoted via popular social media applications, such as WeChat and Weibo, as well as via the official PKU website.
- Response Rate:
 - The final number of valid questionnaires was 1,417 after excluding questionnaires with missing values for key variables.
 - The final response rate was 46.10%. By using population data provided by PKU-a bias analysis undertaken to consider the representation of sample.

Overview: Comparison between the surveyed population and the corresponding composition in the general population

| Lu's SES | Example occupations | Percentage in the surveyed population with study abroad offers | Percentage in the survey | Percentage in population |
|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------|--------------------------|
| 01 Leading cadres, governmental officials in managerial roles and executive personnel | Senior carders; senior executives of public and private companies | 54.1 | 42.8 | 6.2 |
| 03 Professionals | Technicians, teachers and doctors | 32.4 | 26.9 | 15.8 |
| 04 Urban working class | Secretaries, <i>wenshu</i> , cashiers, waiters/waitresses, business workers and manual workers | 5.9 | 11.6 | 31.8 |
| 05 Agricultural workers | Peasants and farmers | 1.4 | 7 | 40.3 |
| 06 Unspecified | Jobless | 6.2 | 11.7 | 5.9 |

Sources: The data on socioeconomic participation in higher education are generated from a previous empirical work; the data on the composition of the corresponding population come from Lu (2010).

Note: *The first two socioeconomic groups are combined together, that is, the leading cadres/governmental officials and executive personnel.

Odds ratios from logit regression of the patterns of study abroad by the 2017 graduates from PKU

| | Model 1 | Model 2 | Model 3 | Model 4 | Model 5 |
|--------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------|---------------------|---------------------|--------------------------|--------------------------|
| Economic capital | 1.662*** (0.235) | 1.657*** (0.235) | 1.673*** (0.238) | 1.719*** (0.249) | 1.755*** (0.271) |
| Father's educational level | 1.380*** (0.161) | 1.335*** (0.157) | 1.352** (1.160) | 1.347** (0.162) | 1.343** (0.169) |
| Mother's educational level | 1.797*** (0.197) | 1.742*** (0.193) | 1.759*** (1.196) | 1.715*** (0.193) | 1.661*** (0.194) |
| <u>Socioeconomic status</u> (Ref: agricultural and peasants families) | | | | | |
| Leading cadres and managerial class | 1.569* (0.388) | 1.545* (.383) | 1.535* (0.383) | 1.587* (0.404) | 1.450 (0.384) |
| Professionals | 1.417 (0.367) | 1.406 (0.364) | | 1.380 (0.360) | 1.352 (0.358) (0.319) |
| Working class | 1.318 (0.429) | 1.344 (0.440) | 1.361 (0.447) | 1.342 (0.450) (0.501) | |
| Geographic origin of birth (Ref: the rural areas) | | 1.797* (0.603) | 1.821* (0.610) | 1.906* (0.643) | 1.695 (0.583) |
| <u>Gender</u> (Ref: female) | | | 1.169 (0.150) | 0.857 (0.124) | 1.004 (0.154) |
| <u>GPA</u> | | | | 5.410*** (1.397) | 4.014*** (1.052) |
| Prior experiences | | | | | 2.174*** (0.322) |
| Constant | 0.00408**** | 0.00408**** | 0.00349*** | 0.00235*** | 1.38e-05*** |
| Df | 6 | 7 | 8 | 9 | 10 |
| N | 1,367 | 1,367 | 1,367 | 1,367 | 1,367 |

Robust Standard errors in parentheses.

*** $p < 0.01$, ** $p < 0.05$, * $p < 0.1$

Part 2: Qualitative Data-Three Components- uncover the processes and mechanisms shaping the phenomenon of distinction-making on the PKU campus.

- 36 in-depth individual interviews:
 - interviewed each respondent at least twice.
 - semi-structured & lasted approximately 1.5-2 hours each digitally recorded with the permission of the respondents & subsequently transcribed in Chinese.
 - The students' identities and institutions were anonymized, and pseudonyms were coded instead.

- One-month documentation of a poster culture in a student accommodation hall between March 18 and April 18, 2018:
 - All residents undergraduates; recorded all the posters across six floors of this building via a digital camera-a total of 192 photos over the course of 32 days.
 - The 192 photos captured a total of 578 posters; 507 study-abroad seminars or networking events.

- Observational data from 11 study-abroad events: 2 seminars advertised on the posters and further 9 events relating to study-abroad.

Findings: 1. Educational Emulation

- ‘pre-recorded’ in elite students aspirations prior to their study at PKU-at the schooling level-elite schools;
- a way to increase their advantages and competitiveness relative to other PKU graduates through authenticating merit, establishing unique elite networks, and/or by achieving unique cultural capital that constitutes ‘broader geju’ (格局).

Fend off the Challengers!

Menggang Xu, a 22-year old undergraduate from information technology, shared his '*uneasiness*' with those who were not PKU undergraduates but obtained postgraduate positions in his department:

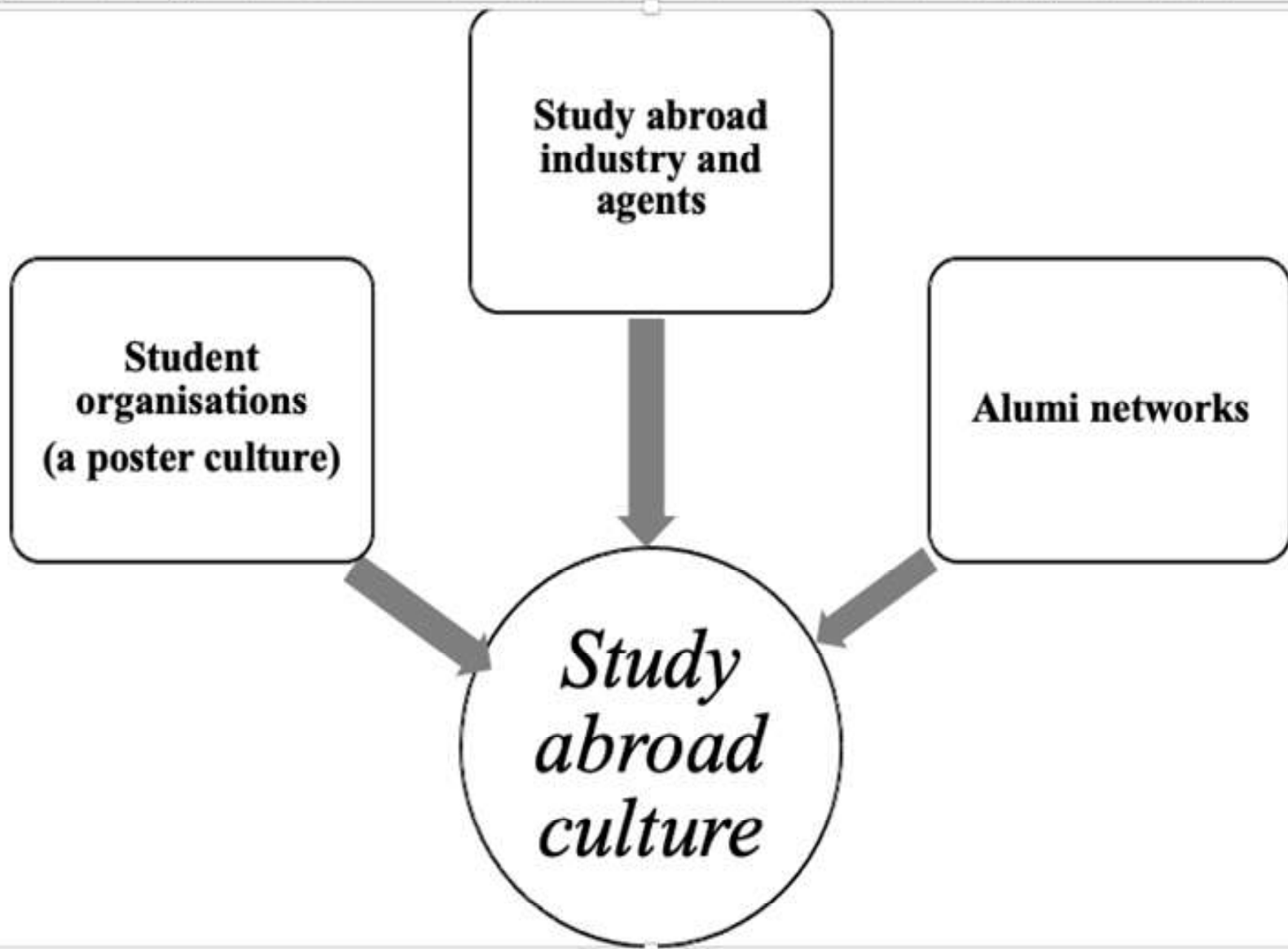
'They are inferior. They failed the gaokao, but they could find their way to the graduate school which is not as competitive as the gaokao. What an insult to us.'

True Talent Goes to the Ivy League

Zimeng Li, a 19-year old undergraduate and a recipient of a full scholarship from an Ivy League university, purposefully distinguished himself from non-scholarship students by emphasizing his scholarship status:

‘So many mediocres going to study abroad in reputable universities. Their rich daddies buy their degrees. Only Ivy Leagues search for real talents, so they offer scholarships. I would say elites only come from the gaokaos or the Ivy Leagues.’

2. Co-Authors of Distinction Making-organisational 'intermediaries'



The Poster Culture on Campus-A sample of the posters displayed in the student residential hall A on 13th April 2019



PKU alumni as double agents!

- *aspirational role models for undergraduates who desire to pursue study abroad,
& business partners with study-abroad agents;*
- *The PKU alumni identity gives them unique advantages and legitimacy to be ‘event speakers’, “paid consultant’ as most interviewees acknowledge that PKU alumni signal elite status and are ‘trustworthy’.*

Study-abroad agents

- Half of the interviewees used or partly used the package services;
 - including a personalised selection of fields of study, suitable universities chosen according to the applicants' GPA, sample personal statements, recommendation letters and application form preparations;
- The fees from RMB60,000 to RMB80,000—more than twice as much as the average household disposable income across China (NBSC 2020).
- Only a few agents were able to establish their client base in PKU;
 - The 'secret weapon' -personalised consultation with PKU or Tsinghua alumni enrolled in Ivy League PhD programmes;
 - The consultation covers an analysis of employability in particular fields of study, university rankings and reputation, identifying matching fields and universities, and preparing for and sometimes ghostwriting personal statements.

Agents to the Rescue by Offering Second-Best Pathways to Distinction!

- Further exploit the acceptance of misrecognition of non-Ivy League degrees among PKU students;
- Transform it into a business strategy that targets a specific pool of PKU students by aggressively advertising UK universities as a Second-Best pathway to elite distinction.
- This ‘client base’ -students with lower-than-average GPA performance or those studying non-STEM.
- Luman Shi, a 22-year-old undergraduate who applied for a Humanities degree at a UK university, shared her application experiences with the agent:
- *I didn't prepare for the exams properly. My English is also poor. The agent advised me to go to the UK as it's much easier [than the US]. So I tried and got accepted to xxx University. It's not Oxbridge, but it's prestigious enough.*
- By authenticating UK universities as a ‘second-best’ pathway, the agents and students further consolidate a tiered system of study-abroad destinations, leading to misrecognition of the universities outside the US and the UK.

Conclusions: Building Triple Halos

- The elites signal superiority by building three “halos” (elite schools, PKU and the Ivy League scholarship-holders)-a process gradually narrowing the circle of “us” and excluding aspirational “others”.
- This individual level of distinction-making is coordinated with collective consensus, and organisational intermediaries in seeking, justifying, and (mis-)recognising studying abroad as a pathway to distinction.
- We further reveal the complexity of the identities of the PKU elites as both possessors and challengers of distinction.
- Yet, the main beneficiaries are the agents of the study-abroad industry, who not only consolidate their client base in PKU but also pursue a new business route of accommodating the challengers.
- Also threatened by the recent crack down of study abroad industry (Shen 2021).

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