

# ETHICAL INTERVENTION VERSUS CAPITAL IMAGINARIES: A CLASS ANALYSIS OF THE OVERSEAS SCHOOLING CHOICE OF THE CHINESE 'NEW RICH'

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## Abstract

*The overseas schooling choice as a spatial strategy of capital accumulation has recently attracted scholarly attention (Findlay et al 2012; Ong 1999; Waters 2005, 2006; Brooks and Waters 2011). This paper follows an exploration of the links between geographical mobilities incurred by educational choices, capital accumulation, and class identities by looking at the overseas educational choice of the Chinese 'new rich'. It situates this examination in the schooling choices of Chinese families in both China and Australia, particularly drawing attention to the Chinese students' educational experiences in China, to better understand their overseas educational imperatives and imaginations at the moment of their overseas study decision-making.*

*Theoretically, it engages with debates of flexible accumulation of cultural capital in geographically transnational mobility (Ong 1999; Waters 2006), cosmopolitan capital (Weenink 2007; 2008), and class-making (Bourdieu 1986; Ball 2003). In these debates, schools are approached as a regime of capital where students can be possibly inculcated in certain cultural traits and accumulate targeted forms of cultural capital that constitutes their class-to-be identities. The paper seeks to contribute to this academic endeavour by focusing on the overseas educational choice-making of Chinese international students and their families. It is also a break that sees schools as an ethical regime. Drawing on the notion of ethical problematization in the situated global assemblages (Ong and Collier 2005), it is an attempt to explore the ethical rationalities associated with overseas school choices.*

*It is revealed in this empirical research that ethical rationalities centring round 'how one should live' and neoliberal rationalities of capital imaginaries are mediated paralleled or single-handedly in the construction of the Chinese new rich's overseas study imperatives. By bringing attention to their ethical rationalities and emotional landscapes, this paper argues that ethical rationalities cannot be neglected as motivations and a valence of reasoning in the school choice making by an over-emphasis on a neoliberal logic embedded in a classed strategy.*

## Introduction

In neoliberal times, education is increasingly differentiated by quality and distinction. It is more narrated as a 'choice', and children's academic success remains wedded to different access to education (Ball 2003). Research (eg. Bourdieu 1986a; Ball 2003) that examines the role of formal education and class reproduction has been a long-established topic of sociology of education. Under the impact of globalization the focus has been recently shifted to familial choice of 'overseas'/'foreign' or 'international' schools. More works examine how this new educational choice fulfils the role of class reproduction in both local and international students (Ball 2010; Reay 2008; Waters 2005, 2006, 2009; Waters and Brooks 2011; Weenink 2008, 2009) and their class or social identity construction within the new educational setting (Findlay et al 2012; Waters and Brooks 2011; Weenink 2008). In this paper, I single out literature that focuses on international students and examines how and why they make the choice of overseas/international education.

Existent literature approaches the question of educational choice using a political-economic framework embedded in the configuration of neoliberalism and global capitalism. School is thus

analysed as a regime of capital, where students can be possibly inculcated in certain cultural traits and therefore accumulate certain forms of cultural capital in their class-making. This chapter seeks to contribute to this academic endeavour addressing the links between educational choices, capital accumulation, and class identity formation of Chinese international students in the transnational field of education. It is also a break that sees schools as ethical regimes. It is an attempt to explore the ethical rationalities associated with school choice. This paper also examines the students' class identity formation in their choice making.

It is organized as follows. Section one introduces the theoretical frameworks I employ, namely, flexible accumulation, and ethical problematization. Section two focuses on educational choices made by Chinese students and families and their construction of overseas education imperatives.

### **I. Theoretical pondering: overseas education, non-native cultural capital, flexible accumulation, ethical problematization**

The deployment of my theoretical frameworks is informed by the literature that views overseas educational choice and experience under the frames of global and transnational imperatives. Engaged with Ong's (2006) argument that globalization and transnationalism problematize 'questions of morals and status', I approach the education choice of the Chinese international students in this paper as one site of such problematization. It is a theoretical attempt to combine morals or ethics with class.

Broadly speaking, my theoretical frameworks draw on two lines of theoretical engagement to understand Chinese international students' educational choice, experiences and classed identities in the making. One is Ong's (1999) capital approach to education in transnational space. The other line of theoretical focus I employ is an ethics approach to identity in global assemblages (Collier and Lakoff 2005; Collier and Ong 2005; Ong and Zhang 2008). These two lines of argument work together to implement Ong's (1999) attempt to combine Bourdieu and Foucault in her theorization of classed transnational subject, but I intervene with a special attention to 'ethics'.

I'll elaborate the capital approach to overseas education first. Ong (1999) draws on Bourdieu (1986a, 1986b) to link culture with capital and class. Bourdieu (1986b) argues that educational or academic qualifications are a complicated form of cultural capital. They exist in three states: an objectified state, an institutionalized state from the perspective of the society, and an embodied state or as 'embodied properties' for the bearer of an educational qualification.

With the notion of 'flexible cultural capital accumulation', Ong (1999) enhances Bourdieu's nationed cultural capital embedded in educational institutions from the confines of one society to accumulation beyond national borders. 'Flexible cultural capital accumulation' is characterized by mobility in agents' accumulation strategies and practices that cross 'cultural and geopolitical spaces' (Ong 1999:90). It refers to the 'purposeful incorporation' of other nation-state cultural elements materially and symbolically. Ong suggests that transnational accumulation strategies deliberately 'propel' subjects beyond the cultural and geopolitical lines of the nation-state and are actively geared towards cultural capitals of another nation-state (1999:91). Sending children overseas for education is such a spatial strategy, especially

'When the world is the arena of strategies of accumulation, subjects coming from less privileged sites must be flexible in terms of the cultural symbols they wish to acquire. Euroamerican cultural hegemony determines and judges the signs and forms of metropolitan status and glamour (Ong 1999:90).

The value of cultural capital is assessed from a global cultural hegemony perspective. Ong argues that Euroamerican cultural capital is a form of symbolic capital that is de-territorialized and claims global or universal values for people positioned poorly in the global cultural hierarchy. The logic of such cultural flexibility is a neoliberal cultural rationality towards Euroamerican cultural hegemony. Therefore for Ong, overseas education can provide people the right cultural capital with 'foreign

language, academic knowledge, and social behaviors' that rank high in the Euroamerican dominated global cultural hierarchy and global cultural economy. Such forms of cultural capital are symbolic capital indeed.

Other empirical inquiries building on Ong (1999) and Bourdieu (1986a, 1986b) look at what 'foreign' cultural capital has been accumulated through overseas education. There is a trend to equate education as a capital regime and to divide the potential capital it can provide into a range of components. On the one hand, 'overseas education' manifests symbolic or cultural capital and embodies global/universal value (Ong 1999). In particular, high-status overseas educational qualifications are culturally de-contextualized and reduced simply to a globally recognized credential (Findlay et al 2012; Waters and Brooks 2011).

On the other hand, the inherent values of overseas education become a regime of non-native cultural capital. Waters identifies that 'an overseas educational experience is believed to indicate (in its bearer) fluency in the English language as well as less obvious qualities, such as confidence, sociability, cosmopolitanism and possession of valuable social capital' (2005: 363). In a slightly different vein, Weenink (2008:1092) argues that 'international schools' can help inculcate in their students a form of 'cosmopolitan capital', which he defines as a form of cultural capital that 'comprises bodily and mental predispositions and competence which help to engage confidently in globalizing social arenas'. But he doesn't theorize cosmopolitan capital according to the global cultural hierarchy put forward by Ong (1999). Cosmopolitan capital can refer to any nationed form of cultural capital as long as that geographical cultural capital facilitates job market opportunities.

Based on these theoretical discussions, this paper examines what capital Chinese international students expect to accumulate from their education on the whole. Here I use what I call *capital imaginary* to refer to students' orientation to and desires for capital.

Overall, this capital approach employed by existent literature to overseas education emphasizes a neoliberal ethics of educational choice. The neoliberal logic, it seems, is taken for granted, or assumed to be a universal motivation for people's school choice. This approach firstly leaves the question unanswered: what are the situated socio-cultural imperatives and regimes of global assemblages that shape a transnational education choice for the Chinese students and their families?

Secondly, this approach analyses the link between school choice and capital imaginaries through a focus on the calculation that centres round 'what capital I want' but neglects the question of 'what I do not want'. Waters (2006) also points out that in some cases for children of Hong Kong immigrants in Canada, their choice of an overseas education is not an active embrace of it but a passive reaction to their former educational systems as failures. I try to develop this line of investigation and ask: if capital imaginaries stand for the desired, what constitutes the opposite?

Lastly, this capital approach demonstrates a way theorizing classed identity in terms of subjects' capital imaginaries as class orientations. As Skeggs (2005) argues, all identities are classed in nature. People's perspectives, capital imaginaries, strategies, choices, and practices of accumulation are geared towards class orientations and desires and are limited by their present class positions but at the same time constitute the very ongoing process of their class-making. However, this active capital accumulation approach to working on the classed and class-to-be self fails to see educational institutions as an ethical regime that not only allows one to take what one wants but disciplines as well. Overseas educational institutions, like other disciplining structures 'condition, shape, divert, and transform its subjects and their practice and produce the moral-political dilemmas' (Ong 1999:14). The capital approach leaves moral-political dilemmas untouched.

The notion of ethical problematization is a useful lens to look at the questions posed above. 'Ethics' refer to the question of 'how one should live' and ethical questions are framed and posed in terms of techniques, practices, and rationality (Collier and Lakoff 2005: 22). It is worth noting that this notion of 'ethics' has been related to domains such as nation-state but not confined to such regimes. Rather,

ethics is conceptualized as the product of global assemblages of imperatives and forces technically, politically, and economically that implicate nation-states (Collier and Ong 2005).

The question of ethics has been raised mostly in the form of problematization rather than in endorsement as what I call ethical endorsement tends to be taken for granted and go unnoticed in our everyday life. Ethical problems 'involve a certain idea of practice, a notion of the subject of ethical reflection, and questions of norms or values related to a certain form of life in a given domain of living' (Collier and Lakoff 2005: 22).

Ethical problematization is a concept that captures the moment when ethical problems arise. It refers to an ethical state that 'how one should live' is rendered as a problem in uncertain situations (Collier and Lakoff 2005; Collier and Ong 2005; Ong and Zhang 2008). A site of ethical problematization is linked to problems of ordinary life or specific problematic or uncertain situations which are 'characterised by a perspective gap between the real and the ideal', in which subjects are 'in search of norms and forms to guide action' (Collier and Lakoff 2005: 32).

This line of argument and these above mentioned tools are particularly useful for me to understand the Chinese international students as subjects of ethical reflections as they and their families make the transnational educational choice in China. I use what I call *node of ethical problematization* to add to a nuanced analysis of subjects' ethical rationalities 'from below' in an attempt to capture the specific moral themes and foci at work in their uncertain or problematic living situations. In addition, 'ethical problematization' is only the beginning of the ongoing process of ethical constitution of subjects, the 'what then' questions need further conceptualizations. I offer some conceptualizations that can better capture the constitutional process of subjects of ethical reflections: *ethical abstraction*—an act translating the life phenomenon into ethical terms, *ethical mediation*—an act linking the new ethics to the current ethical systems of a particular individual, and the end results of this mediation, namely, *ethical negation or endorsement*.

This paper aims to unpack its investigation of schools as ethical regimes in Chinese students' school choice and their subject formation. It asks, what is the link between ethical problematization and capital imaginaries in relation to their educational choice and schooling experience in the constitutions of their classed and class-to-be identities in the transnational choice of education?

## II. Constructing the overseas education imperatives

Since the 1990s in China, schooling as involving strategic choices has been a widely accepted notion by urban Chinese (Wang 2009; Yang 2005, 2011; Ye 2007; Zhang 2004). Compared to the choices students and parents have in primary schools and junior high schools, the options for senior school choices are highly reduced. Students have to go through selective procedures to secure a seat in academically outstanding senior high schools where affluent educational resources are allocated (Wang 2009; Zhang 2004). As prestigious universities are sought after since the massification of higher education in the 1990s in China, students strive to get into such senior highs to ensure a higher probability of entry into a prestigious university (Wang 2009).

China is the largest export country of international students to Australia. Compared to tertiary sector enrolment, the percentage of Chinese international students aged between 14 and 19 years old at schooling level is increasing. In 2010, 43.9 percent of overseas students studying in schooling sectors are from China (AEI). This paper, drawing on interviews with a group of Chinese international students in an independent school in Melbourne, investigates how they and their families construct their overseas study imperatives.

The school where I carry out my interviews is an independent school which is located in a middle-class suburb and charges a tuition fee of around A\$28000 per international student per year. With the permission and assistance of the school, I recruited 12 Chinese international students. I interviewed the students one on one and by twos, depending on students' preference. Interview is understood to be a

data collection method that constructs a presentation under the dynamics between the interviewer and interviewee (Fontana and Frey 1994).

Considering the similarity of participants' cases, I present the data of 10 students in my analysis in this paper. The ten Chinese international students aged 17-18 were at the end of their studying in Year 10 and Year 11 at the time of participation in my research, with four girl students and six boy students. All students are city-dwellers, coming from medium-size (with a population of 4 millions) to metropolitan scale (with a population of 20 millions) cities located in well-off regions of China.

The commonality among the 10 participants is that all their parents (either mum or dad, or both) own a business, and can be labelled as private entrepreneurs or self-employed business persons in China. One family engages with transnational businesses. Given their naked money power, all students as the children of the 'new rich' (Goodman 2008) are categorized as from middle-class families. Drawing on Bourdieu's (1986a, 1986b) capital-based class theory, I broadly classify these students into three sub-groups depending on their parents' educational background. Phil, Frank, and Tracy belong to the high cultural capital group with both of their parents holding university degrees or Master's degrees. The medium cultural capital group includes Jane, Natalie, Tim, and Bob with one parent holding tertiary qualifications. Tom, Erik, and Cindy are from low cultural capital families where no parent has university education.

The focus is on how Chinese students and their parents construct the imperatives for overseas education. Themes of their schooling experience in China, motivations and their capital imaginaries emerge when the students talk about how and why their overseas study decision has been made. In particular they talk about the gap they imagine between Chinese and Australian educational systems. The themes are unpacked in three sub-categories of class mentioned above.

#### The high cultural capital group

**Phil**, 18, is from Dalian, a well-known coastal city in North-Eastern China. Phil studied in a well-famed senior high school in Dalian. He was always academically ranked the first place in his year level. He mentions the pressure of maintaining his academic standing in his former school, but obviously coping with it very well. Being ambitious, confident, well-planned, hardworking, and eager to prove himself, Phil's attitude to school work is positive. He sets clear goals in education and equates academic success to a successful future.

School is the place where he wants to achieve academic success and accumulate capital he needs for further success in the society. It can be said that his educational choice is based on a capital approach to schools. He begins overseas study on his parents' request. The purpose of his overseas mission is revealed in his remarks about his school transfer in Australia,

'As I wasn't satisfied with my former school... because I want to go abroad and talk to foreigners and learn about their opinion and their ways to think. But that school (the international school Phil attended first in Melbourne) is very similar to the school in China, [with] lots of Chinese students. And it is an international school, students from Asian countries are there. There are no locals there.'

By emphasizing that he wants to be immersed by the Australian 'locals' rather than other 'Chinese and Asians', Phil betrays his cultural endorsement and cultural capital orientation in his overseas journey. He shows great interest in knowing the highly *selective* others, and sets out to accumulate Australia-embedded cultural capital deliberately. Coming from a mega-business family, Phil aspires to set up a business of his own in Australia. Obviously, he doesn't need an international school for such 'global orientation' as Weenink (2007, 2008) shows in his case of the Netherland students. Rather, by differentiating international schools and overseas *localized* schools, Phil seeks after what Weenink (2008) terms as a 'cosmopolitan capital' in his capital imaginaries. However, this 'cosmopolitanism' is not an open attitude to all cultures but is geographically selective and targeted. He has calculated an instrumentalist application of this capital to his later career life.

**Frank**, 17, is from Zhejiang Province. Frank has been a high-achiever. He was from a selective class in a state junior high school. It was not unusual for him to finish all his homework up until 1 or 2 am. Besides, he was used to endless tutoring as well. He says,

'Our teachers say that if good students [students good at academics] do not go to tutoring classes, they will be caught up by others [who do the tutoring] and fall behind. Therefore, for us high-achievers, we have to attend more tutoring classes than others. There are only two or three days in summer or winter holidays that we don't have any tutoring. For the rest of such holidays, we have to do tutoring either in the morning, or in the afternoon.'

Frank's case reveals how selective measures drive students in China into intense academic competitions. The pressure builds up and reaches his limit when he prepares for entrance examination for senior high school. He's finally got the entry notice for the prestigious high school he's been working so hard for, but sees the future three years as a dire thing. He has been pushed and has pushed himself too hard.

Frank's ethical problematization of his school life in China is triggered by the entrance examination. This makes him question the legitimacy and rationality of the increasing pressures and psychological cost of schoolwork and tutoring. He begins to ask himself whether all these years of investment and efforts at the price of himself in return for a university degree are worthwhile. He weighs his moral sacrifice against the capital in return.

Reluctant as he is about the idea of study overseas, Frank desperately hopes to stop a life like this and reassert himself as should be. Overseas school is constructed as a way out of his problematic schooling life. This construction of the overseas alternative is also informed by the hearsay of friends and family about overseas education's lenient learning environment, focus on individual development, and the versatility of overseas education in terms of curricula design, practicality and 'more scientific and advanced' pedagogies.

Overseas education is obviously not approached as a process of non-native cultural accumulation by Frank. Admitting that he wants to learn the knowledge and technology from schooling and tertiary education, Frank clearly sees them as de-territorialized. Contrary to Ong's (1999) argument that elite university degrees and the 'right' foreign language are cultural capital of global values, Frank is reluctant to learn English, which is considered largely as a medium that education in Australia is delivered in. In this case, 'overseas education' is equated to a global/universal form of education. An education is simply an education, irrespective of the question of where he has it. This instrumentalist approach to an overseas education by Frank has some resemblance with the results of overseas British students by the works of Findlay et al (2012) and Waters and Brooks (2011). This is a tendency among overseas students to culturally de-contextualize education and educational credentials. It includes a separation of linguistic knowledge from the socio-cultural knowledge or legitimate culture of the overseas destination, an emphasis on the instrumental function of overseas credentials, a narrowing down of textbook knowledge to formal knowledge obtained from overseas education and training that comes clean of any socio-cultural embeddedness (Findlay et al 2012; Waters and Brooks 2011). They constitute a tendency to contra cosmopolitanization in overseas educational journeys, by highlighting an extreme version of neoliberal instrumentalism, running against the discourses of the 'cosmopolitanization' nature or potential of overseas/international education.

For Frank, overseas educational choice is a joint product of his ethical problematization of his pressured life in China, a strong desire to reclaim his self and stark contrast drawn between the dire reality of his schooling in China and utopian imagination of overseas education. In particular, this school choice is constructed as an alternative potential for developing 'techniques of the self'. Frank considers pedagogy and curricula from the perspective of self-development. Overseas schooling is imagined as an ethical sanctuary where he can develop himself at his own will and pace. Frank's case indicates a spatial strategy not of 'flexible accumulation' (Ong 1999) but of *ethical intervention* in the sense that 'techniques of the self configure a life worth living, putting into practices values that define a particular moral order' (Ong and Zhang 2008:16).

**Tracy**, 18, is from Jiangsu Province. Tracy's happy school life turns out to be a nightmare when she upgrades to an academically well-reputed senior high school. The huge amount of homework, tutoring, and authoritarian teacher-student relationship of the new school trouble her. She talks about her junior high school which is a great contrast to it,

'... our [junior] school is very relaxed, we don't have that amount of homework, and are given free time to read our favourite books in the school library or jump online and surf around. And we could still do well in our subjects and get good marks.'

This description of school life has some resemblance to that of Frank's. But unlike Frank, Tracy hasn't been in such a situation for long. Her previous strategic school choices favour quality education. These schools shape her study habits as well as her views about what a right education and learning should be like. The changed life brought about by school upgrade triggers Tracy's ethical problematization. Her nodes of ethical problematization do not focus on the wretched life of academic oppressions, rather, she translates this phenomenon in ethical terms, negates it and critiques it in terms of the legitimacy of an educational system, rationality of work ethic, equality in student-teacher relationship, and the worthiness of her psychological cost. To end a life like that, she decides on her own to study abroad.

For high cultural capital group members, the similarity is that they are all high-achievers. But their educational strategies, trajectories, pressures, work ethics and coping capabilities differ. Therefore their motivations for overseas schooling vary. For this group, students have varied orientation to accumulate 'cosmopolitan capital' (Weenink 2007, 2008). Phil's cosmopolitan capital is highly selective as he instrumentally targets geographically embedded Australian cultural capital, while Tracy and Frank show a neoliberal instrumentalism towards overseas education per se, instead of any interest in the foreign cultural capital embedded in it.

In addition, Tracy and Frank find moral sanctuary in overseas education as they both challenge their former schools ethically but with different foci and ethical depth. Their accumulation flexibility is geared towards an instrumentalist approach of the ethics of overseas education which they imagine to be lenient and able to rectify their life circumstances relating to the technologies of the self, self-worth and self-wellbeing. They demonstrate the capability of ethical challenge, reflection and mediation.

The three cases indicate that the moment overseas education is resorted to by the students, and it is approached as varied regimes either of capital or of ethics. What instrumental roles schools are endowed with depends on how the students fare at their schooling setting and whether their pressure mounts to a point of ethical problematization.

#### The medium cultural capital group

**Natalie**, 18, studious, confident, high-achieving, is from Shenzhen, China's first special economic zone. Natalie's overseas study is the result of the 'side effect' of her parents' application for business migration to Australia. By this spatial strategy, they wish to offer Natalie a new domain of living in Australia, where the rich-poor gap is mild and therefore she doesn't have to work too hard to achieve social distinction in the status race. But they themselves want to continue their hard-won wealthy and upper class life in Shenzhen. This instrumental approach to migration and parents' sacrifice and reluctance to stay in Australia are captured by her comment on her dad's 'sitting in migration jail'. They plan that with residency status Natalie can get a job and obtain a couple of years of working experience in Australia if she chooses to go back to China afterwards.

Waters' (2006) research reveals that Hong Kong Chinese uses migration as 'spatial strategy' to facilitate their children's acquisition of foreign cultural capital and overseas qualifications. Natalie's case illustrates more than that. It is not overseas qualifications that Natalie's parents are after. Rather, it is a totally new domain of life with alternative geographical ethics embedded that is on offer. Natalie's case is a spatial strategy of ethical intervention in the extremes. Overseas education is simply the beginning of such ethical intervention.

**Jane**, 18, top-achiever, confident, is also from Shenzhen. Like Natalie, she is displaced in Australia to study because her family applies for business migration here. As a top-achiever ambitious for prestigious universities in China, she understands that if she is going back to China after several years of education, she has to obtain the university qualification of the most prestigious one in Melbourne. Therefore, she is after a university degree as what Ong (1999) calls symbolic capital on her capital list.

**Bob**, 18, comes from Shanghai. His choice of overseas education is both capital and ethical intrigued. Bob doesn't want to sacrifice his lifestyle and relies on overseas education to achieve his capital ends with the minimum effort. His easy life up to the end of his junior high school has been disturbed after he upgraded into a senior high. His nodes of ethical problematization are personal needs such as happy school life with friendship, average academic ranking and less effort in schoolwork. These constitute a moral understanding of a good life. He doesn't bother to go deep in his problematization as he thinks intense academic competition is the way it is in China about which he 'cannot do anything'.

His capital list of this overseas foray includes a not-too-bad university degree and spoken English enough for business communication and hopefully a couple of years of working experience in Australian business circles. His 'cosmopolitan' range of cultural accumulation is targeted to a future career in 'World City' (Ball 2010) Shanghai's financial circles, which need English as a 'global business language' (eg. Weenink 2007) and transnational business thoughts. Therefore, his instrumentalist, highly selective 'cosmopolitan capital' is global in globalized business world.

**Tim**, 17, is from Fuzhou, the capital city of Fujian Province in Southern China. His family enterprises have business dealings with customers in Japan, Europe and the US. Tim is required to be conversant in English and Japanese. Therefore, overseas education is a must for him to inculcate in well-targeted 'foreign' cultural capital, in particular, linguistic capital.

As a boss-to-be, Tim is not pressured to build up a CV and try his luck on the job market. His capital imaginaries of the overseas journey are geared towards capital that can be useful in his future businesses, namely English and Japanese (his first foreign language in Australia). As the only exception who doesn't want to pursue a university degree in Australia, Tim sets his next stop of accumulation in Japan, where he is going to obtain a degree as a badge of 'face' and facilitate his Japanese language study.

All members of this group habitually search the horizons for capital that they identify will benefit them most in the future. They hope to take the shortest and most-straightforward route via the means of education so as to achieve their status goals in the social world. Jane and Natalie want to make the best of overseas education and set their goals on symbolic capital—the educational qualifications of the first ranking university in Melbourne. Tim and Bob's cosmopolitan capital list is future career targeted and geographically oriented. Neoliberal rationalities weigh more than ethical considerations in their overseas schooling choice.

#### Low cultural capital group

**Cindy**, 17, extremely hardworking, is from Jiangsu Province. The ultimate goal of overseas education is to get a bachelor degree here. Witnessing what Cindy has been through but with undesirable academic result, Cindy's parents decide that her 'eating bitterness' is not worthwhile and agree to send her overseas in the hope that a more relaxed education may improve her academic performance.

Cindy is quite determined to go to university, although she plans to be a housewife. Actually, the casual family talk about whose children go to the best university in China and parental exchange of such information among friends impress Cindy in the way that her failure to go to university will bring shame to her family and to herself. She says,

'You will be despised by the society if you don't go to university. You will be labelled as low quality (suzhi) and dull... The idea of being a housewife should be after my university graduation and a few years of work at a particular job. In so doing I can show others that I



have the education and work experience, and can also “repay” my dad’s couple of millions RMB (Chinese dollar) spent on my education’.

**Tom**, 17, is from Jiangsu Province. The major reason for Tom to study overseas is that his academic ranking falls after he upgrades to the senior high. As a student who studies smart he finds it hard to cope with the heavy workload there. Seeing through the educational system that rewards those who work unreasonably hard, he loses interest in study but experiences great difficulty coming to terms with the fact that he falls from the highly acclaimed and now is reduced to an academic mediocrity. Therefore, on the one hand Tom’s ethical problematization is against the educational system in his assertion to ‘be himself’. On the other hand, his self-prescription and self-image as outstanding is the very product his school shapes. To save him from failing school and moral struggles, his parents send him overseas.

**Erik**, 18, is from Shanghai. Academically excellent in his primary school, Erik gradually has trouble maintaining his academic standing. Feeling dismayed by his son’s worsening school performance and pressured by friends who compare their children’s academic rankings, his mum sends him overseas hoping that he will obtain a not-too-bad university degree.

Like it or not, all members of this group want to get from overseas education is a university degree out of familial or their own expectations. An overseas university degree is not taken as a symbolic cultural capital as Ong (1999) claims to be, rather, it is treated as an easier-to-obtain education qualification if parents send their children overseas for two or three years of secondary schooling. Overseas education is constructed to be able to offer an alternative, easier, and safer route to reach this university goal.

Students from this group see themselves as academic mediocrities, though not failures (Waters 2006), in the intense academic competitions in China. All except Tom are victims of the competitive educational system in China, accepting their student life as it is, rather than uttering any form of questioning. They do what they are required to, staying focused on study, doing their best to finish homework, and attending after-class tutoring. They remain silent and focused on their schoolwork where they demonstrate little prospects to excel.

All of them have their situated constellations of fears, struggles, worries, frustrations and endurances. Cindy’s fear is being ridiculed, labelled as an academic failure, failed person and daughter. Tom is frustrated by the failure to live up to his school-shaped self-prescription. Erik endures everything with silence.

Compared with the previous two groups from high and medium cultural capital families who also have emotional constellations of their own, this group differs in the ubiquitous feelings of guilt they are made to have for not excelling academically and for being labelled as school mediocrities. They don’t hold the moral ground and legitimacy to challenge the system that makes them that way, like students from high cultural capital families do. When their parents prioritize university degrees, they don’t answer back like students of medium cultural family background who righteously critique the impracticality educational credentials bring. If there are any ethical problematizations by this low cultural capital group, they are tentatively voiced, laced with self-doubt, guilt and helplessness. Ironically enough, this group is made to believe that these fears, worries, struggles, frustrations and endurances will be able to be ironed away by a magic university degree. They choose to study in Australia as an educational intervention in literal education sense in the hope of improving their academic performance and boosting their chances of university entry.

### *Conclusion*

This paper investigated the motivations and reasons behind Chinese students and their families’ choice of an overseas education in Australia from a class perspective. These students construct their overseas imperatives relating to their schooling experiences in China, ethical problematization based on these experiences, capital imaginaries, and their imaginative and sometimes utopian construction of an overseas education. It revealed the moral world of the classed students regarding their educational

experiences and choices. Emotions, ethical problematizations, desires and dreams were unpacked.

It is revealed in this research that overseas education qualifications as a specific form of foreign cultural capital are sought after to fulfil various goals and achieve varied ends without necessarily being a form of symbolic capital in the global cultural economy. My study reveals a more nuanced attitude towards 'foreign credentials' that goes beyond Ong's (1999) meta-narrative of Western-dominated sphere of university education. Chinese students demonstrate a 'neoliberal instrumentalism' (Ong 2006) of an overseas education, making the most of the transnational education gap. The calculation lies in minimizing input and maximizing output culturally, economically and morally.

Students from all cultural capital backgrounds aim for a university education in their overseas foray. Given their varied academic performances, schooling trajectories, expectations, and ethical mediation, overseas university credentials are endowed with varied significance and values. Students from high cultural capital families take university education for granted so much so that it is not necessarily cited as a reason for overseas schooling. They demonstrate a priority of learning over qualifications per se. For students of medium cultural capital background, they hold an instrumentalist approach to university education. They wish to obtain degrees of prestigious or decent universities enough to ensure a future conversion into symbolic capital or facilitator of their future careers. Members from low cultural capital families wish to get entry into one university and end their educational journey with a degree there. The degree is not only imagined as a form of cultural capital that can facilitate their future life in the social or career world, but is also constructed as a solution to all their present-tense life problems.

In addition, students from high cultural and medium cultural backgrounds show varied interests in accumulating 'cosmopolitan capital' and localized Australian cultural capital. These cases suggest that firstly, students demonstrate an instrumentalist approach to non-native cultural capital. Secondly, their scope of 'cosmopolitan' or open attitude to other cultures is highly limited, geographically and career targeted. These cases support Weenink's (2008) neoliberal instrumentalist logic of being 'cosmopolitan', adding that the neoliberal instrumentalism is geographically, market and career oriented.

Contrary to what Ong (1999) claims that subjects from less dominant cultural geographies tamper their nation-state cultural moorings and flexibly accumulate advanced cultural capital as symbolic capital, the Chinese students adopt an instrumentalist, specific market oriented strategy, accumulating geographically embedded non-native cultural capital. That is, their strategic accumulation of non-native cultural knowledge and language is geared towards a neoliberal rationality of cultural equals without belittling their own cultural ground. Simply put, this result teases out Ong's cultural hegemony calculation but consolidates the neoliberal cultural rationality of market-oriented transnational accumulation practices.

Speaking back to Ong (1999) and Waters (2005, 2006) who see overseas education choice as a practice of flexible accumulation in the transnational social field, I argue that a narrow neoliberal economic rationality is only part of the picture unpacking the motivations of transnational educational choices. Furthermore, ethical problematization and the emotional imperatives constitute the major motivation, reasoning and rationalities rather than a simple narrow neoliberal rationality espoused by these scholars.

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