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Finding a *Chulu* (Way Out): Rural-origin Chinese Students Studying Abroad in South Korea

Shanshan Lan

ABSTRACT

Based on multi-site research in China and South Korea, this paper examines the motivations for rural-origin Chinese students to study abroad in South Korea and how their overseas experiences are mediated by both internal and international educational hierarchies. Existing literature on transnational student mobility from Asia mainly focuses on students from urban middle-class backgrounds, while little attention has been paid to students from less advantaged backgrounds. Scholars have noted that China's seemingly meritocratic *gaokao* (national college entrance exam) policy in reality functions to perpetuate the structural marginalization of rural students in its educational system. This research moves beyond the internal migration paradigm by examining how social inequalities associated with the rural/urban divide are reproduced and re-articulated by the intersection of class, gender, place of origin, and time management at the transnational scale.

Keywords: transnational student mobility, China, South Korea, rural/urban divide, class, gender

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Miao is a 21-year-old business major at a public university near Seoul, South Korea. She comes from a rural family in Liaoning Province, northeastern China. Both her parents work for a private enterprise, earning a monthly income around RMB3000 (around USD442). Miao told me that the main reason for her to study abroad was because she did not achieve a high score in the *gaokao*, the national college entrance exam in China: "My score was too low and I could not even enter a third-tier university in China. Studying abroad thus provides a *chulu* (way out) for me. I learned that I

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could work in South Korea to pay for my own tuition and living expenses. That helped me make a quick decision.”¹ Miao found her study-abroad agent in Dalian via a friend who wanted to study in Japan.² She interacted with the agent all by herself since her parents live far from the city and know very little about overseas education. Miao picked a public university in South Korea because the tuition is cheap. She reflected, “Studying abroad is a big expense for my family. My university asked for a security deposit of RMB100,000 [around USD15,000]. We did not have the money, but my agent helped us solve the problem. We only needed to deposit RMB20,000 [around USD3000] into his bank account.”³ Although Miao was aware that her agent might be involved in unethical practices such as forging a bank statement for her, she was still grateful that a rural student like her could manage to study in South Korea.

With the liberalization of state policy concerning the self-funded study-abroad market and the proliferation of commercialized educational intermediaries, student migration from China reveals new trends in terms of a diversification of student backgrounds, motivations for studying abroad, and choice of destination countries. Miao represents an increasing number of Chinese students from rural backgrounds who possess a less competitive academic profile, yet who are keen to join the study-abroad trend. Scholars have noted that overseas education may function as an important strategy for social reproduction among the middle class and the elites in Hong Kong and Mainland China.⁴ However, there is a lack of attention to the study-abroad experiences of students from less privileged backgrounds. While the rural/urban divide constitutes a major reason for regional disparities and social inequalities inside China,⁵ little is known about whether social inequalities associated with the rural/urban divide can be expanded to the transnational scale through the differential study-abroad experiences of students from diverse family backgrounds. It is well known that China’s apparently

Chinese- and English-language literature. Special thanks go to Professor Hyung-Gu Lynn and two anonymous reviewers, whose insightful comments have made this article much better.

¹ Miao, interview by author, suburban Seoul, 10 August 2018.

² Dalian is a major port city in China’s Liaoning Province.

³ Miao, interview, 10 August 2018.

⁴ J.L. Waters, “Geographies of cultural capital: education, international migration and family strategies between Hong Kong and Canada,” *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers New Series* 31, no. 2 (2006): 179–192; B. Xiang and W. Shen, “International Student Migration and Social Stratification in China,” *International Journal of Educational Development* 29, no. 5 (2009): 513–522.

⁵ K.W. Chan, “The Chinese Hukou system at 50,” *Eurasian Geography and Economics* 50, no. 2 (2009): 197–221; Bret Crane et al., “China’s special economic zones: an analysis of policy to reduce regional disparities,” *Regional Studies, Regional Science* 5, no. 1 (2018): 98–107; R. Kanbur and X. Zhang, “Which regional inequality? The evolution of rural-urban and inland-coastal inequality in China from 1983 to 1995,” *Journal of Comparative Economics* 27, no. 4 (1999): 686–701; X. Qian and R. Smyth, “Measuring regional inequality of education in China: Widening coast-inland gap or widening rural-urban gap?” *Journal of International Development* 20, no. 2 (2008): 132–144; X.B. Zhao and S.P. Tong, “Unequal economic development in China: spatial disparities and regional policy reconsideration, 1985–1995,” *Regional Studies* 34, no. 6 (2000): 549–561.

meritocratic *gaokao* policy functions to perpetuate the structural marginalization of rural students in its educational system.⁶ For rural students like Miao who failed the *gaokao*, will overseas education provide an alternative path to social mobility? To what extent will they continue facing structural disadvantages in an international educational system?

Existing literature on Chinese students in South Korea often treats them as a homogeneous group, rather than making distinctions based on class, gender, and place of origin.⁷ My research attends to the heterogeneity within the Chinese student population by focusing on a relatively invisible group of students from rural backgrounds. In 2018 when this research was conducted, there were 68,184 Chinese students enrolled in universities in South Korea, constituting almost half of the total foreign student population.⁸ Although the majority of them are from urban middle-class or lower middle-class backgrounds, there is a small group of rural-origin students who identify themselves as coming from wage-earning or low-income families. They remain invisible in the Chinese student community for several reasons. First, social stigmatization associated with a rural background often makes them hesitant to identify their hometown. Second, rural students usually do not share the conspicuous consumption behaviours of more affluent Chinese students and are thus marginalized in the social circle of Chinese students. Last but not least, they are usually busy working at multiple part-time jobs to cover their tuition and living expenses. Although most Chinese students in South Korea engage in some type of part-time employment, those from rural backgrounds face more pressure to work hard to support themselves due to their family's lack of financial resources. This research investigates the following questions: What motivates rural students to study in South Korea? How do class, gender, and place of origin mediate their overseas educational experiences and future mobility trajectories?

The primary data for this paper was collected through semi-structured interviews with 29 Chinese students aged between 19 and 34 in Seoul, South Korea in summer 2018. I recruited research participants via three networks: my academic network in South Korea; my personal network in China; and a Christian church network in Seoul. After identifying some initial student contacts, I followed the snowball sampling method to recruit more

⁶ Chris Hamnett, Shen Hua, and Liang Bingjie, "The reproduction of regional inequality through university access: the *Gaokao* in China," *Area Development and Policy* 4, no. 3 (2019): 252–270; Y. Liu, *Higher education, meritocracy and inequality in China* (Singapore: Springer, 2016).

⁷ S.W. Lee, "Circulating East to East: Understanding the Push-Pull Factors of Chinese Students Studying in Korea," *Journal of Studies in International Education* 21, no. 2 (2017): 170–190; M.K. Lee, "Why Chinese students choose Korea as their study destination in the global hierarchy of higher education?" *KEDI Journal of Educational Policy* 10, no. 2 (2013): 315–338; So Jin Park, "The Globalization of Korean Universities and Chinese Students: A Comparative Analysis between Universities in Seoul and a Provincial City," *Korean Anthropology Review* 3 (2019): 253–291.

⁸ Aimee Chung, "Foreign student numbers grow a record 19% in a year," *University World News*, 11 October 2018.

participants, making no distinction between rural and urban origins. Among the 29 students, 8 self-identified as having a rural background, and 21 claimed to be from urban families. I originally expected more rural participants because when I was doing ethnographic fieldwork in Jinan, Shandong Province in 2015, I learned that there is a tradition of rural or low-income families sending their children to study in South Korea. Part of the reason for this small rural sample can be attributed to the social stigmatization associated with rural origins.⁹ Another reason may be that most rural participants have to juggle their time between multiple jobs and do not have time for an interview. However, this may also reflect the low proportion of rural students among overseas Chinese students in general. For example, a quantitative study in Beijing shows that the ratio of studying abroad between students from urban Beijing backgrounds and those from rural backgrounds is 34.7 to 1.¹⁰

Although eight students constitutes a relatively small sample, they represent a good combination of regional diversity and levels of education. Four are from Shandong Province, and the other four are from Liaoning, Anhui, Hubei, and Guangdong. Three students are studying for their bachelor's degree,¹¹ three for their master's degree, and two are doctoral students. Five are female and three are male. In-depth interviews enabled me to gain a nuanced knowledge of the tensions, dilemmas, and emotional struggles faced by rural students in daily life settings. I met five of the rural participants in person, either on their university campus or in a public place like a café or a restaurant. Phone interviews were conducted with the other three participants due to their busy work schedules. Each interview lasted from forty minutes to two hours. Participants were asked questions about their family background, motivations for studying in South Korea, interactions with educational intermediaries, challenges they faced in studying and working in South Korea, and future career plans and aspirations. Depending on the participants' schedule, sometimes we would share a meal together after the interview and engage in more informal conversation. In addition to interviews, I did participant observation fieldwork in church services and social events. I visited three Korean churches and regularly attended the Chinese-language service of one of them for two months. I also spent time with some participants on university campuses, observing their interactions with Korean students and teaching staff.

While the voices of rural students are privileged in this paper, I also made use of interview data with urban students for comparative analysis. The urban

⁹ I suspect that a few of the self-identified urban students might have rural origins which they choose not to disclose.

¹⁰ Li Ding, "Guocheng duoweixing yu chulu jiecenghua: zhongguo daxue jiaoyu guocheng de gongpingxing yanjiu" [Multi-process and outcome stratification: On the equality of the Chinese university schooling process], *Shehui* 38, no. 3 (2018): 79–104.

¹¹ One of them already finished studying in South Korea and was working in China.

sample consists of twelve males and nine females. Six are from Henan, three from Shandong, three from Guangdong, two from Jilin, and the rest from Liaoning, Ningxia, Shanxi, Sichuan, Yunnan, Zhejiang, and Tianjin city. Most participants are from second- and third-tier cities in inland China; only three of them are from smaller cities in coastal areas. One participant identified himself as being from a working-class background, while the rest reported that they came from middle or lower-middle-class families. Most of their parents work in the private sector as entrepreneurs or business owners. Only one student's parents are employed by the public education sector. To contextualize the Chinese students' perspective, I also interviewed a Chinese pastor whose ministry has been serving Chinese students in Seoul for ten years and who is familiar with the problems and challenges faced by Chinese students. Due to my inability to speak Korean, I was unsuccessful in recruiting Korean students. But I managed to interview three Korean university lecturers who had frequent interactions with Chinese students. All interviews with Chinese participants were conducted in Mandarin Chinese, and those with Korean participants were conducted in English.

Transnational Student Mobility and Social/Spatial Inequalities

Existing literature on the rural/urban divide in China has shown that there is a spatial dimension to social inequalities, with the rural being subordinated to the urban in terms of income, living standards, access to education, and social welfare.¹² Since the majority of China's universities are located in urban areas, rural students' access to higher education often involves a strenuous process of internal educational migration.¹³ Accordingly, social mobility for rural students is closely tied to geographical mobility.¹⁴ However, geographical mobility inside China does not always bring social mobility. Scholars have noted that rural students are structurally disadvantaged in China's *gaokao* system and are often channelled to provincial universities or colleges with less competitive teaching resources.¹⁵ Those who have managed to attend elite universities report facing social exclusion and stigmatization.¹⁶ Research

¹² Crane et al., "China's special economic zones"; Kanbur and Zhang, "Which regional inequality"; J.T. Wu, *Fabricating an Educational Miracle: Compulsory Schooling Meets Ethnic Rural Development in Southwest China* (Albany: SUNY Press, 2016); Hairong Yan, "Spectralization of the rural: Reinterpreting the labor mobility of rural young women in post Mao China," *American Ethnologist* 30, no. 4 (2003): 578–596.

¹³ Susanne Bregnbæk, "The Chinese Race to the Bottom: The Precarious Lives of Unemployed University Graduates in Beijing's 'Ant Tribe,'" *Critical Sociology* 42, nos. 7–8 (2016): 989–1002; H. Li, "Rural Students' Experiences in a Chinese Elite University: Capital, Habitus and Practices," *British Journal of Sociology of Education* 34, nos. 5–6 (2013): 829–847.

¹⁴ Cora L. Xu, "Tackling rural-urban inequalities through educational mobilities: Rural-origin Chinese academics from impoverished backgrounds navigating higher education," *Policy Reviews in Higher Education* 4, no. 2 (2020): 179–202.

¹⁵ Hamnett, Shen, and Liang, "The reproduction"; Liu, *Higher education*.

¹⁶ Li, "Rural Students."

shows that compared to their urban counterparts, college students from rural backgrounds are far less likely to study abroad due to their parents' relative lack of financial and cultural resources.¹⁷ However, rural students can also be more motivated to study abroad due to their blocked mobility opportunities in urban China's job market.¹⁸ This research moves beyond the internal migration paradigm in studying rural students' higher educational experiences. It examines whether the urban/rural divide continues to matter outside China's social, cultural, and educational systems and how it impacts the overseas educational experiences of rural-origin Chinese students in South Korea.

Existing literature on class and social stratification in China cannot adequately explain social inequalities associated with the urban/rural divide, which also has its legal, spatial, cultural, and gendered dimensions.¹⁹ While acknowledging the fluid yet stratified nature of China's new class system,²⁰ scholars cannot reach an agreement on the structural position of the rural population in this system. Li and Chen identify peasants as belonging to China's lower class, while Lu includes peasants in the middle stratum of Chinese society, which he dubs as *xiaokang* (moderately well off).²¹ A more recent study on social stratification in rural China identifies three social tiers. The upper tier consists of rural cadres and business owners, the middle tier consists of small entrepreneurs, wage earners, and part-time workers, and the lower tier consists of peasants and jobless people. The authors note that while internal mobility within the rural population occurs frequently, very few can overcome the rural/urban divide and enter an urban social stratum.²²

¹⁷ Quan Xiaojuan and Bian Yanjie, "Chengxiang daxuesheng zaixiao biaoqian bijiao yanjiu" [A comparative study of urban/rural students' performance at university], *Daxuesheng yanjiu*, no. 3 (2017): 88–109; Li, "Guocheng duoweixing."

¹⁸ Bregnbæk, "The Chinese race"; Xu, "Tackling rural-urban inequalities"; Willy Sier, "Keep on moving: rural university graduates as sales workers in South and Central China," *Pacific Affairs* 94, no. 2 (2021): 265–283.

¹⁹ L. Johnson, "Bordering Shanghai: China's *hukou* system and processes of urban bordering," *Geoforum* 80 (2017): 93–102; D.J. Solinger, *Contesting Citizenship in Urban China: Peasant Migrants, The State, and the Logic of the Market* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999); Hairong Yan, *New Masters, New Servants: Migration, Development, and Women Workers in China* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2008).

²⁰ David Goodman and Xiaomei Zhang, "Introduction: The new rich in China: The dimensions of social change," in *The New Rich in China: Future rulers, Present Lives*, ed. David Goodman (London: Routledge, 2008), 1–20; B. Tang and J. Unger, "The Socioeconomic Status, Co-optation and Political Conservatism of the Educated Middle-class: A Case Study of University Teachers," in *Middle-Class China: Identity and Behavior*, eds. M. Chen and D. Goodman (Cheltenham: Edward Elgar, 2013), 90–109; J. Wang and D. Davis, "China's New Upper Middle-classes: The Importance of Occupational Disaggregation," in *China's Emerging Middle-class: Beyond Economic Transformation*, ed. Li Cheng (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution Press, 2010), 157–176.

²¹ C.L. Li and G.J. Chen, "Classification of ten social strata," in *Social mobility in contemporary China*, ed. X.Y. Lu (Beijing: Social Sciences Documentation, 2004), 1–3; H. Lu, "The Chinese Middle-class and *Xiaokang* Society," in *China's Emerging Middle-class: Beyond Economic Transformation*, ed. Li Cheng (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution Press, 2010), 104–131.

²² C. Wang, Y. Zhao, and Y. Wang, "New trends in contemporary Chinese rural society stratification" [Dangdai zhongguo nongmin shehui fenceng de xindongxiang], *Sociological Studies*, no. 1 (2018): 63–88.

In her study of China's new generation born in the 1980s and 1990s, Li argues that although these youth have developed a shared value system and behavioural patterns that are distinct from those of previous generations, the rural/urban division still plays an important role in social stratification among the new generation. Compared to their urban counterparts, rural youth suffer notable disadvantages in the fields of higher education, employment and income, consumption, civic participation, and ownership of urban housing, mainly due to their lower chances of benefitting from an intergenerational transfer of wealth and social resources from their parents.²³

This research adopts an intersectional analytical framework by examining how social inequalities associated with the rural/urban divide get reproduced and re-articulated by the intersection of class, gender, and place of origin at the transnational scale. Following scholarly calls to locate intersectionality in dynamic social space and time, this paper also examines the temporal dimension of different groups of Chinese students' overseas study and work experiences and career planning strategies.²⁴ Various scholars have noted that transnational student mobility can be initiated by social spatial inequalities at the local and global scales and contribute to these inequalities as well.²⁵ However, overseas education may also provide opportunities for youth from less privileged backgrounds to bypass the internal barriers to achieving social and spatial mobility in China. Xu finds that the rural origin of some Chinese academics gets re-evaluated in the Western context as an asset rather than a deficit. She further argues that rural-origin scholars have cultivated "a productive habitus that is characterized by hard work, perseverance and self-discipline," which plays a key role in facilitating their career success and upward mobility.²⁶ This research advances Xu's argument by adding a gendered and temporal dimension to rural students' transnational habitus in the making. Unlike their urban peers, who are often only children, students from rural backgrounds tend to have multiple siblings back home, which may cause financial constraints and gender inequalities in accessing overseas education. Such gender pressure often contributes to class-differentiated time management strategies in rural participants' efforts to balance time spent on study, work, and the cultivation of cross-cultural communication skills and social networks.

²³ Chunling Li, "Children of the reform and opening up: China's new generation and new era of development," *The Journal of Chinese Sociology* 7, no. 18 (2020): 1–22.

²⁴ Sumi Cho, Kimberlé Williams Crenshaw, and Leslie McCall, "Toward a field of intersectionality studies: Theory, applications, and praxis," *Signs* 38, no. 4 (2013): 785–810.

²⁵ Rachel Brooks and Johanna Waters, *Student Mobilities, Migration and the Internationalization of Higher Education* (Basingstoke: Palgrave MacMillan, 2011); Xiang and Shen, "International student"; Cora L. Xu and C. Montgomery, "Educating China on the Move: A Typology of Contemporary Chinese Higher Education Mobilities," *Review of Education* 7, no. 3 (2019): 598–627.

²⁶ Xu, "Tackling rural-urban inequalities," 188, 180.

Motivations for Studying Abroad

China's study-abroad trend has been gaining momentum, making it the largest sending country for international students in the world. In 2018 the number of Chinese students studying abroad reached 662,100, and 90 percent of them were self-funded.²⁷ One major reason for this massive educational exodus is the unequal distribution of educational resources and the highly competitive *gaokao* system.²⁸ The expansion of higher education since the late 1990s has enabled the majority of youth in China to attend universities, especially those from rural backgrounds. However, it also created more educational inequalities since students from advantaged social groups generally have a higher chance of attending elite universities.²⁹ Since university ranking in China is directly related to employment opportunities in the urban job market,³⁰ students who did not do well in the *gaokao* or who failed to enter an elite Chinese university often have to make alternative plans for overseas education. Deregulation in China's self-funded study-abroad market constitutes another major reason for the popularization of overseas education. In January 2017, the state abolished the accreditation requirement for private educational intermediaries and transformed them into commercialized service providers. This new policy helped promote the commodification of overseas education and the rise of consumerism in China's self-funded study-abroad market.³¹

The spread of private educational brokerage services from coastal areas to smaller cities in inland China not only made overseas education more accessible to ordinary Chinese families, but facilitated stratification in the self-funded study-abroad market. Li, a private agent in Guangzhou, explained to me, "Between 2000 and 2010, study abroad was for rich people. But after 2010, it became mass consumption. Today even ordinary Chinese family can afford to study abroad. If parents do not have enough money to send their kids to an elite university in the U.S., they can still send them to Russia, Thailand, or South Korea. It's like a buffet. There is always a university for your child."³² The profit-driven nature of educational brokerage services contributes to the hierarchical ranking of study-abroad destinations, often

²⁷ Shuo Zou, "Chinese students studying abroad up 8.83%," *China Daily*, 28 March 2019.

²⁸ K. Mohrman, "Are Chinese Universities Globally Competitive?" *The China Quarterly* 215 (2013): 727–743; R. Yang and M. Xie, "Leaning Toward the Centers: International Networking at China's Five C9 League Universities," *Frontiers of Education in China* 10, no. 1 (2015): 66–90.

²⁹ Changjun Yue, "Expansion and equality in Chinese higher education," *International Journal of Educational Development* 40 (2015): 50–58; Yan Luo, Fei Guo, and Jinghuan Shi, "Expansion and inequality of higher education in China: How likely would Chinese poor students get to success?" *Higher Education Research & Development* 37, no. 5 (2018): 1015–1034.

³⁰ D. Liu, "Graduate Employment in China: Current Trends and Issues," *Chinese Education & Society* 47, no. 6 (2014): 3–11.

³¹ Shanshan Lan, "State-mediated Brokerage System in China's Self-funded Study Abroad Market," *International Migration* 57, no. 3 (2019): 266–279.

³² Mr. Li, interview by author, Guangzhou, 10 June 2015.

based on an international ranking of universities, tuition, and living expenses.³³ This international education hierarchy not only structures parents' and children's aspirations for overseas education, but facilitates the expansion of social inequalities to the transnational scale. In other words, who can aspire to study abroad, and where, is largely determined by a family's structural position in the social spatial power matrix in contemporary Chinese society.

Compared to popular study-abroad destinations in North America, Europe, and Australia, South Korea attracts Chinese students mainly because of its geographical proximity, lenient admission policies, affordable tuition and living expenses, and ample part-time job opportunities. Some respondents also mentioned the influence of Korean popular culture as an additional incentive.³⁴ Since the earthquake in Japan in 2011, the number of Chinese students in the country has been declining, also due to growing tensions in Sino-Japan relations.³⁵ This made South Korea a more popular choice. Park finds that Chinese students who choose to study in South Korea are generally from a less competitive academic background.³⁶ This is largely due to the lax admission requirements of some Korean universities, which do not require a *gaokao* score in the application materials. Most South Korean universities have a language institute which issues a TOPIK (Test of Proficiency in Korean) certificate to international students in preparation for their application for university-level education. This has enabled some wealthy Chinese students to enroll directly in the language institute of prestigious universities in Seoul before starting their undergraduate education. Due to the decline in enrollment of domestic students, provincial universities in South Korea have adopted aggressive marketing strategies to attract more international students.³⁷ This phenomenon is not unique to South Korea. Scholars have noted that international students are becoming cash cows for universities in Australia, the UK, and Japan.³⁸ What makes the South Korean case interesting is that some agents in China's Shandong

³³ Anders S. Hansen and S. Thøgersen, "Introduction: Chinese Transnational Students and the Global Education Hierarchy," *Learning and Teaching* 8, no. 3 (2015): 1–12; S. Marginson, "Global Field and Global Imagining: Bourdieu and Worldwide Higher Education," *British Journal of Sociology of Education* 29, no. 3 (2008): 303–315.

³⁴ Lee, "Circulating East to East"; Lee, "Why Chinese students."

³⁵ Herby Lai, "Engagement and Reflexivity: Approaches to Chinese–Japanese Political Relations by Chinese Students in Japan," *Journal of Current Chinese Affairs* 44, no. 3 (2015): 183–212; Gracia Liu-Farrer and A.H. Tran, "Bridging the Institutional Gaps: International Education as a Migration Industry," *International Migration* 57, no. 3 (2019): 235–249.

³⁶ Park, "The globalization of Korean universities."

³⁷ Chung Hyun-cha, "Universities hit for compromising quality education for money," *The Korean Times*, 21 May 2016.

³⁸ Shanthi Robertson, "Cash cows, backdoor migrants, or activist citizens? International students, citizenship, and rights in Australia," *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 34, no. 12 (2011): 2192–2211; A. Findlay, D. McCollum, and H. Packwood, "Marketization, marketing and the production of international student migration," *International Migration* 55, no. 3 (2017): 139–155; Liu-Farrer and Tran, "Bridging the Institutional Gaps."

Province (mainly due to its geographical proximity to South Korea) specifically target students from less privileged backgrounds by charging low service fees, since the bulk of their income is generated by commissions from provincial Korean universities.³⁹

My rural respondents' decision to study abroad is motivated by a clear understanding of their blocked social mobility opportunities in China. Echoing Miao's comment in the beginning of this paper, studying abroad is perceived as an alternative *chulu* (way out) for rural-origin students, who either failed to enter an elite university or faced limited job opportunities in urban China. Johnson argues that China's *hukou* system represents a subnational bordering process that is identical to international borders since it denies urban citizenship to rural migrants and thus illegalizes their presence in big cities.⁴⁰ Building on this bordering concept, this research suggests that the proliferation of private educational intermediaries has made it relatively easier for some rural students to cross international borders than internal borders. All the rural students in this research come from families in the middle tier of the rural population, with parents working as migrant workers or petty entrepreneurs. Such families usually do not have adequate financial resources to cover the overall expense of their children's study-abroad period, but they can afford the agent fee and sometimes the tuition for the first semester. All my rural participants left China with the desire to finance their overseas education by engaging in part-time jobs in South Korea.

My rural respondents reported three major ways for studying abroad: through joint programs between Chinese and Korean universities; through private educational agents; and by filing the application by themselves. Ying was attending a regional university in Qingdao, Shandong Province. She applied for the 2+2 program at her university, which allowed her to study for two years in South Korea before obtaining her bachelor's degree in China. Ying told me she applied for the program because it offered a scholarship for studying in South Korea, and she was not happy with the educational system in her home university. Ming was attending a third-tier *zhuanke* university in Jinan, Shandong Province. He studied in South Korea with the 3+2 model, which enabled him to study for two years at a university in South Korea and upgrade his *zhuanke* diploma to a bachelor's degree.⁴¹ The three participants who used the service of private agents were all undergraduate students. All three reported making the decision to study in South Korea by

³⁹ Study-abroad agents in China usually provide multiple service packages with different price tags, which caters to the needs of students and parents from different class and regional backgrounds.

⁴⁰ *Hukou* literally means household registration. It's the primary means to sustain the urban/rural divide in China. Also see L. Johnson, "Bordering Shanghai: China's *hukou* system and processes of urban bordering," *Geoforum* 80 (2017): 93–102.

⁴¹ A *Zhuanke* university usually provides three years' higher education without offering a bachelor's degree, but it is possible to upgrade a *Zhuanke* diploma to a bachelor's degree with one or two more years' academic study in a degree-granting university.

themselves and there was minimum parental involvement in their interactions with agents. The three master's degree respondents chose to prepare their application by themselves, motivated either by an interest in Korean language or by a future career in international trade.

Although rural participants harbour a similar desire for change and transformation to their middle-class urban peers,⁴² economic constraints have significantly limited the type of brokerage services they can afford and the type of university they can attend in South Korea. Students from urban middle-class families generally can afford more expensive package services, often with the promise of enrollment in a prestigious university in Seoul. For rural participants from wage-earning or low-income families, tuition (rather than university ranking) is often the most important concern. Xiang, a 21-year-old student from a small city in Henan Province, attended the "Study in Korea Program" hosted by an elite university in Beijing. Her parents are both private business owners, who compared similar programs at several universities in Beijing before picking the most reputable one. Xiang studied Korean for one year in Beijing, then spent another four months at a prestigious university in Seoul before obtaining her level four TOPIK certificate. She then received support from her agent in Beijing when applying for the bachelor's program at the same university. Her parents paid RMB40,000 (around USD6084) for the agent fee. While Xiang's parents invested a lot in their daughter's pre-migration language training to make sure she could get admitted to an elite university in Seoul, Jian's parents, who are both migrant workers from rural Shandong, could only afford the most basic brokerage service. Jian studied Korean for only three months in Weihai before entering the bachelor's program of a provincial college in rural Korea.⁴³ His parents paid RMB25,000 (about USD3802) for the agent fee. The contrast between Xiang and Jian shows that financial concerns still loom large in rural students' choice of universities in South Korea. Like Miao, Jian picked his university in rural Korea not because of its academic ranking, but due to its low tuition cost.

Overseas Study and Work Experiences

Based on research at an elite university in Beijing, Li finds that rural Chinese students experience a considerable degree of stigmatization and alienation in participating in social activities on campus.⁴⁴ In a transnational context, students' rural origin becomes less visible since linguistic and ethnic differences between Chinese and Korean students become the primary means

⁴² Anders S. Hansen and S. Thøgersen, "The Anthropology of Chinese Transnational Educational Migration," *Journal of Current Chinese Affairs* 44, no. 3 (2015): 3–14.

⁴³ Weihai is a coastal city in Shandong Province.

⁴⁴ Li, "Rural Students' Experiences."

of boundary making. However, rural-origin students are still marginalized within the overseas Chinese student community due to their lack of financial capital to engage in conspicuous consumption and extravagant lifestyles. Moreover, the pressure to pay tuition and living expenses on their own also kept them busy with all kinds of part-time jobs in the service sector. The intertwined nature of work and study in rural participants' overseas experiences has left little time for entertainment and leisure activities. Instead it gives rise to a narrative of an ethic of hard work, which is marked by the intersection of class, gender, and place of origin. For my rural participants, class differences are often articulated in terms of different family backgrounds (rich family vs. modest family) and time management strategies. While investing one's time in studying and working is celebrated as mature and responsible behaviour, overindulgence in eating, drinking, and leisure activities is often denounced as "decadent" behaviour for the "rich kids." Martin finds that middle-class Chinese parents send their daughters to study in Australia as a strategy to manage gendered risks in China's competitive job market.⁴⁵ In comparison, the rural daughters in this research generally receive little support from their parents. Oftentimes they have to strive by themselves to overcome gender inequalities in both China and South Korea.

Ying, whose parents are petty entrepreneurs in rural Shandong, started her overseas education as an exchange student in a "small university in the south of Korea." Ying was reluctant to mention the name of the university because it is not well known among Chinese students.⁴⁶ Originally expecting the location to be in a big city like Seoul, she was disappointed to see all the rice fields around her. To improve her Korean proficiency, and also to earn money to cover her living expenses, Ying started working part-time in a Korean restaurant shortly after her arrival. At the end of two years, she was the only one among her classmates to have obtained a level-three TOPIK certificate. While the majority of her cohorts returned to China, Ying decided to stay and pursue her master's degree. Ying was admitted to the Korean-language education program at a private university in Seoul, but she had to finance her own studies due to gender bias from her parents. Ying reflected, "My parents had me as a second child when they are old. My brother is eleven years older than me. So they did not pay a lot of attention to me. My mom is unwilling to invest in a girl's education, and I had to work really hard in graduate school to support myself. The first year I received fifty percent scholarship. The second year I was on full scholarship."⁴⁷ According to Fong, China's one child policy has led to the empowerment of urban daughters.⁴⁸

⁴⁵ Fran Martin, "Rethinking Network Capital: Hospitality Work and Parallel Trading among Chinese Students in Melbourne," *Mobilities* 12, no. 6 (2017): 890–907.

⁴⁶ Chinese students generally get their information about university ranking from their study-abroad agent, or from the Chinese-language website of some Korean universities.

⁴⁷ Ying, interview by author, Seoul, 5 July 2018.

⁴⁸ Vanessa L. Fong, "China's One-Child Policy and the Empowerment of Urban Daughters," *American Anthropologist* 104, no. 4 (2002): 1098–1109.

Ying's case shows that some rural young women, especially those with male siblings, continue to face gender discrimination in the family context and this may well impact their study-abroad experiences.

There are generally two ways for rural students to relieve their financial burdens: by obtaining a scholarship, which usually includes a partial tuition waiver, and by engaging in part-time jobs. Although the two often complement each other, it is hard to strike a balance between study and work. The popularity of Korean music, movies, and fashion in China not only enhances cross-border trade activities and cultural flows, but generates ample part-time job opportunities for Chinese students, who usually work in fashion shops, restaurants, and beauty clinics in busy tourist areas. However, there is a major class distinction in Chinese students' engagement in part-time jobs. My urban middle-class respondents often reported that their motivation to work is to earn pocket money for leisure activities such as shopping, travelling, eating, and drinking. In contrast, rural respondents from wage-earning or low-income families resort to working as a primary means to pay tuition and living expenses. Since their universities are usually located in rural or suburban areas, rural respondents have to take whatever jobs they can find. It is also fairly common for them to engage in illegal employment, such as working without a permit or working more than 20 hours per week, thus exceeding the maximum workload prescribed by the South Korean government.

Rural Chinese students' involvement in illegal employment sometimes blurs the boundary between knowledge migration and labour migration. Although Korean laws only allow international students to work in the service sector, several of my rural respondents reported working illegally in factories and sweatshops, where labour migrants from China and Vietnam also worked. Jian once worked in a Samsung sweatshop side by side with non-Korean-speaking migrant labourers. Lei, a 26-year-old female bachelor's student from rural Shandong, who studies at a provincial university on the outskirts of Seoul, used to work in a factory. She recalled, "I had to take the subway at 6 pm to get to the company. Then the company van would transport us to the factory by 8:30 pm. We worked from 8:30 pm to 8:30 am. It was hard physical labour. We had to put goods in boxes and clean all kind of bottles that hold cosmetics. I did the night shift because the pay was higher."⁴⁹ The intersection between knowledge and labour migration is largely due to the geographical proximity between South Korea and China, and the relative ease of entering South Korea with a student or tourist visa. However, some rural students work so much that it negatively affects their studies. According to Jian, some eventually drop out of school and become undocumented workers.

⁴⁹ Lei, interview by author, Seoul, 12 July 2018.

In her examination of the study-to-work transition of Chinese students in the UK, Xu conceptualizes time as a form of cultural capital that both structures and enhances the career imagination of urban middle-class students.⁵⁰ In the South Korean case, the intersection of time, class, and privilege is manifested by different groups of Chinese students' time management strategies. Miao, who is from a wage-earning family in rural Liaoning Province, explained to me that during school season she usually spends about 60 percent of her time studying, 20 percent working, and 20 percent resting. During summer holidays she spends 60 to 70 percent of her time working. Vivian, whose parents are private business owners in a small city in Zhejiang Province, reported that she generally spends 50 percent of her time studying, 20 percent working, and 30 percent on leisure activities and resting. Andrew, who is from Weihai, Shandong Province, was sent by his parents (his father is a private business owner) to study in South Korea. He told me that he spends 30 percent of his time studying, 30 percent on leisure activities, 30 percent working, and 10 percent sleeping. A comparison between the three students' time management shows an absence of leisure time in Miao's schedule. To a certain extent, leisure time has become a middle-class privilege that is sustained by some urban respondents' affluent financial status. Being a big fan of the beauty culture in South Korea, Vivian would spend one hour doing makeup before going out for dinner with friends. She confessed, "All those pictures you saw on my WeChat moments, those are the products of hours of beautification. I now use my spare time to work because if I stay idle I would go out and spend money on shopping, eating and playing. I take part-time jobs as a way to discipline myself."⁵¹

In contrast to Vivian's obsession with beauty culture and shopping sprees, Miao attributes her preoccupation with study and work to her modest family background and ethic of hard work. She said, "In South Korea we have lots of personal time at our disposal. Kids from wealthy families have no pressure to work hard here. For us who are from modest family background, we usually work hard and study hard because we have no rich parents to depend on." Such a narrative of an ethic of hard work is common among my rural participants. It not only distinguishes them from the negative stereotypes of Chinese students being wealthy, spoiled, and good-for-nothing, but transforms their rural origins into an asset because it helps build positive qualities such as independence and perseverance. Miao told me that she had grown a lot within one year of studying and working in South Korea. She reflected, "I have tasted the hardship of life here and have become more independent. Now I can boldly say that no matter which country I go, I can easily survive."

⁵⁰ C.L. Xu, "Time, class and privilege in career imagination: Exploring study-to-work transition of Chinese international students in UK universities through a Bourdieusian lens," *Time & Society* 30, no. 1 (2021): 5–29, doi:10.1177/0961463x20951333.

⁵¹ Vivian, interview by author, Seoul, 26 July 2018.

I have learned how to persevere.” Miao’s coming-of-age story formed a contrast with the “decadent” behaviours of some rich Chinese students attending an expensive university in Seoul, whom Miao derogatorily addressed as “kids.” She opined, “Those rich kids play around a lot. They are just wasting time and money here. They do not need to study hard because they can hire someone to do their homework. Money is not a problem.”⁵² Instead of being a source of stigmatization, Miao’s rural background adds credibility to her narrative of an ethic of hard work. The lack of leisure and entertainment in rural participants’ time management does not mean that they have no social life. The next section will discuss how they pro-actively engage in cross-cultural socialization as a career planning strategy.

Future Mobility Plans and Aspirations

For the majority of my rural respondents, their future mobility trajectory is often closely related to job prospects in China. However, none of them are enthusiastic about returning to China immediately after graduation. Scholars have noted that the job market for overseas returnees in China is heavily influenced by a global educational hierarchy, with graduates from elite universities in English-speaking countries being viewed as the most desirable.⁵³ Many of my respondents are aware that a degree from a non-English-speaking country cannot guarantee a stable and well-paid job in China. Nevertheless, their diverse career planning strategies are still heavily mediated by the intersection of class, time, gender, and regional differences. Few of my urban middle-class undergraduate respondents expressed a desire to remain in South Korea to pursue a master’s or doctoral degree. Vivian, who majored in business management at a research university in Seoul, told me that there was too much pressure in Korean society and the life pace was also too fast for her. She planned to find a job in Shanghai because some of her friends who graduated from universities in South Korea already found jobs in coastal cities such as Shanghai and Hangzhou. Unlike Vivian, most of my rural participants decided to prolong their study in South Korea by enrolling in a master’s or doctoral program at a more prestigious university in Seoul. To compensate for their lack of familial and social capital in big Chinese cities, my rural respondents felt the need to accumulate more overseas educational capital. In addition, they were also keen on cross-cultural socialization in the hopes of cultivating regional-specific capital such as advanced Korean-language skills, knowledge of Korean business culture, and professional networks in South Korea’s media and entertainment industry.

Xu finds that rural-origin Chinese students from impoverished

⁵² Miao, interview by author, suburban Seoul, 10 August 2018.

⁵³ Y.D. Huang and K.E. Kuah-Pearce, “‘Talent circulators’ in Shanghai: return migrants and their strategies for success,” *Globalization, Societies and Education* 13, no. 2 (2015): 276–294.

backgrounds often resort to institutional mobility to more prestigious universities either in China or abroad to enhance their accumulation of academic and social capital.⁵⁴ This is also true for my rural respondents in South Korea. Since tuition concerns outweighed university rankings in many rural participants' decision to study in South Korea, they were usually channelled to less well-known universities outside the Seoul metropolitan area or in suburban Seoul. As manifested by Ying's example, institutional mobility (and spatial mobility) becomes an important strategy for some of them to navigate South Korea's hierarchical educational system. My rural participants reported that after studying in South Korea for a few years and gaining sufficient Korean-language proficiency, they could make a more informed choice regarding upward institutional mobility. Jian, who is also from rural Shandong, followed a similar trajectory to Ying. He started as a bachelor's student at a small private university in rural South Korea. Jian compared it to a third-tier university in China. At the end of his undergraduate study, Jian followed the advice of one of his professors to continue his master's (and later doctoral) study at a research university in Seoul. Although university rankings in South Korea are complicated and not determined by location alone, Seoul accommodates about one-fourth of South Korea's population and some of the most prestigious universities in the nation.⁵⁵ To a certain extent, Jian and Ying's institutional mobility from rural South Korea to metropolitan Seoul reproduces the rural to urban education migration pattern in China. In reality, only a small number of rural students can achieve upward institutional mobility like Jian and Ying. The majority of them have to struggle to obtain their bachelor's degree since the relatively poor-quality pre-college education they received in China did not adequately prepare them to meet academic challenges in South Korea.

From her first arrival in 2008 as a 21-year-old exchange student to finishing up her doctoral studies in 2018, Ying already spent ten years in South Korea. Her choice to pursue a PhD degree was actually preceded by some business adventures. After obtaining her master's degree in Korean-language education in 2012, Ying started a company with the support of a Korean businessman, trying to export Korean cosmetics to China. Ying told me that business was good at that time but she could not find competent staff. The Chinese students she hired either did not speak Korean well or lacked business experience and they made all kinds of mistakes. Ying had to work so much that she developed health issues. Another problem was sexual harassment. She reflected, "It was unusual for a young woman to go into

⁵⁴ Xu, "Tackling rural-urban inequalities."

⁵⁵ Nancy Abelmann, So Jin Park, and Hyunhee Kim, "College Rank and Neoliberal Subjectivity in South Korea: The Burden of Self-Development," *Inter-Asia Cultural Studies* 10, no. 2 (2009): 229–247; Sunhwa Lee and Mary C. Brinton, "Elite Education and Social Capital: The Case of South Korea," *Sociology of Education* 69, no. 3 (1996): 177–192.

business in South Korea. I was only twenty-five-years old and I had to negotiate business deals with middle-aged Korean men, who generally showed more interest in me than in our business. They would harass me verbally and I felt really uncomfortable with it.” After being briefly hospitalized and warned by the doctor to take a break, Ying found herself at a crossroads, where she had to look for a new life direction. She recalled, “One day I walked into a bookstore and started reading a book. Suddenly I realized that this is the thing I want to do. I felt peace in my heart when reading books.”⁵⁶ Ying quit her business and returned to her previous university to study for a PhD degree in Korean-language education. She told me her dream now is to become a Korean-language teacher in China.

Ying’s story is a highly gendered one if we recall her mother’s earlier reluctance to invest in her overseas education. To a certain extent, Ying’s decision to stay in South Korea and to experiment with transnational business was also a coping strategy due to gender discrimination in the Chinese job market.⁵⁷ However, her lack of social capital in South Korea and her structural vulnerability as a young woman in a masculine Korean business culture also made it difficult for Ying to achieve success as a self-made entrepreneur. Ying’s decision to pursue her PhD not only reflects a compromise of her ambition to venture into the male-dominated business world, but also her desire to postpone returning to China. Ying’s choice of being a Korean-language teacher in China, which is a highly gendered occupation, also speaks to the limited social mobility a doctoral degree from a South Korean university can offer. In addition to Ying, two other female respondents, Daisy and Miao, were also considering a future career path as a Korean-language teacher. Both noted that there is growing demand for Korean-language teachers due to the influence of the Korean Wave in China. When asked about her future plans, Daisy said she would either continue studying for a PhD, or return to China to establish her own Korean-language training centre. While considering the possibility of being a language teacher, Miao was also open to the idea of working at a Korean company in northeastern China. For this reason, she planned to stay in South Korea after obtaining her bachelor’s degree to accumulate some work experience to strengthen her curriculum vitae.

Leung identifies geographic mobility as a type of capital that can enhance the career opportunities of Chinese academics.⁵⁸ However, geographical mobility can also reflect the transnationalization of social inequality due to the hierarchical ranking of overseas degrees in China’s globalized job

⁵⁶ Ying, interview by author, Seoul, 5 July 2018.

⁵⁷ Martin, “Rethinking network capital”; Harriet Zurndorfer, “Men, Women, Money, and Morality: the Development of China’s Sexual Economy,” *Feminist Economics* 22, no. 2 (2016): 1–23.

⁵⁸ M.W.H. Leung, “Read Ten Thousand Books, Walk Ten Thousand Miles’: Geographical Mobility and Capital Accumulation among Chinese Scholars,” *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers* 38, no. 2 (2013): 311–324.

market.⁵⁹ Compared to their urban peers, rural students often have more concrete goals for career planning. Many of them try to carve out a niche in China's job market by developing regional-specific capital, which caters to increasing trade relations, tourism, and cultural flows between China and South Korea. Unlike middle-class Chinese students in the US and France who tend to form close-knit co-ethnic communities,⁶⁰ my rural participants are proactive in cultivating social networks with Korean students, professors, and local residents. Such cross-cultural socialization not only enhances their Korean-language skills, but helps them accumulate transnational social and cultural capital. Both Miao and Lei reported that their social circles are predominantly Korean and they have few Chinese friends. Joseph, whose future plan is to engage in transnational business, visited a Korean church regularly. He told me, "I learned a lot about Korean culture, for example, business culture, and how to use honorifics. I accumulated lots of experiences interacting with people from a different cultural background. This will definitely help my career in the future." While Joseph's motivation for attending church might sound instrumental, it nevertheless reflects rural students' strategic accumulation of cross-cultural capital as part of their career planning endeavour.

Xu notes that the accumulation of academic capital among rural students often goes hand in hand with the accumulation of institutional capital.⁶¹ Due to the influence of South Korea's media and creative industry in China, students who major in related fields can still benefit from their institutional capital. Ming, who majored in cartoon design, managed to find a job with a Korean company in Qingdao, Shandong, shortly after obtaining his bachelor's degree in South Korea. Lei, a public administration major, benefitted from her institutional capital in a different way. Lei started as a volunteer for the international office of her university and later became a paid student assistant. She told me proudly, "I am happy that my ability got recognized by the university. Now they asked me to be the interpreter for visiting delegations from China, who are here to attend K-pop or model contests. These are students from elite universities in China." Lei's proficiency in Korean and her affiliation with the international office has provided her with confidence when interacting with visiting students from China. In the contexts of cross-cultural exchange and socialization, Lei felt that her identity is defined primarily by her academic and institutional capital rather than her rural background. Lei's part-time job as an interpreter for international

⁵⁹ Anja Weiss, "The Transnationalization of Social Inequality: Conceptualizing Social Positions on a World Scale," *Current Sociology* 53, no. 4 (2005): 707–728.

⁶⁰ Yajing Chen and Heidi Ross, "Creating a Home away from Home": Chinese Undergraduate Student Enclaves in US Higher Education," *Journal of Current Chinese Affairs* 44, no. 3 (2015): 155–181; Julia Carmine, "The Social networks of Chinese students studying in France," *Journal of Chinese Overseas* 12, no.1 (2016): 68–95.

⁶¹ Xu, "Tackling rural-urban inequalities."

cultural and beauty contests helped her establish some professional networks in South Korea's media and entertainment industry, which facilitated her desire to become a transnational agent. To realize her dream, Lei planned to enroll in a master's program in media and entertainment after obtaining her bachelor's degree. The contrast between Ming and Lei's career choices also reflects gender inequalities in China's job market: female graduates have to accumulate more academic capital than males in order to find desirable employment.

Conclusion

Yang suggests that rural-origin Indian medical students' pursuit of English-medium education in provincial Chinese universities is driven by their desire to emulate more elite forms of educational mobility and human subjectivities.⁶² Findings from my research seem to deviate from the emulation thesis. While studying abroad has become a rite of passage for urban middle-class Chinese students who desire transnational lifestyles and cross-cultural experiences,⁶³ it is considered a practical solution for some rural-origin students who aspire to work part-time to support their overseas education in nearby East Asian countries. The major motivation for rural Chinese students' educational migration is neither social reproduction nor the cultivation of cosmopolitan identities, but to escape internal mobility regimes such as the *hukou* system and the *gaokao* policy. However, only a small number of them manage to find a *chulu* via studying abroad, often through intensive engagement in part-time jobs, perseverance in academic studies, and substantial extension of the study-abroad period. For those rural students who failed to get an overseas degree and were reduced to undocumented workers in South Korea, studying abroad may prove to be an impasse, which contributes to their temporal and spatial suspension between hope and disillusionment, between returning to the status quo in China and enduring labour exploitation in South Korea.⁶⁴ Due to the small sample here, the findings of this research may not be applicable to other destination countries such as Australia, Italy, and Japan. Future research on rural Chinese students in these countries may generate more useful data for comparative analysis.

Scholars have noted that the expansion of China's higher educational system has become the main engine for the production of a new generation of educated middle-class citizens. Yet they also note that this new educated

⁶² Peidong Yang, "Compromise and Complicity in International Student Mobility: the Ethnographic case of Indian Medical Students at a Chinese University," *Discourse: Studies in the Cultural Politics of Education* 39, no. 5 (2018): 694–708.

⁶³ Shanshan Lan, "Youth, mobility, and the emotional burdens of *youxue* (travel and study): A case study of Chinese students in Italy," *International Migration* 58, no. 3 (2020): 163–176.

⁶⁴ Biao Xiang, "Introduction—Suspension: Seeking Agency for Change in the Hypermobile World," *Pacific Affairs* 94, no. 2 (2020): 233–250.

middle class is internally stratified due to university ranking in China.⁶⁵ This research contributes a transnational dimension to the formation of the educated middle class by examining social stratifications among overseas Chinese students. Due to the hierarchical ranking of study-abroad destinations and the prevalence of a global educational hierarchy, rural-origin graduates from South Korea will most likely occupy the lower stratum of the educated middle class compared to their urban peers. Tang and Unger further divide the educated middle class into those who hold jobs “within the system,” i.e., the public sector, and those who work “outside the system,” i.e., the private sector. The two argue that jobs within the system are not only secure (in terms of welfare benefits) and financially sustainable, but provide privileged access to “within-the-system” resources that may generate significant grey income outside the system.⁶⁶ Due to their less privileged educational credentials and rural family background, and lack of localized social networks in big cities, my respondents usually turn to the transnational realm or the private sector for job opportunities. Despite their overseas degrees and transnational experiences, they are still marginalized within the Chinese social system.

Robertson et al. have developed a “mobile transitions” framework to examine the intertwinement of youth’s aspirations for transnational mobility and their transition to adulthood.⁶⁷ The popularization of overseas education in China means that an increasing number of Chinese youth are transitioning to adulthood during their time studying abroad. However, such mobile transitions are marked by stratifications along the lines of class, gender, and place of origin. The marginalization of rural students in China’s educational system has pushed some of them to become new consumers of overseas education. However, the rural/urban divide continues to shape rural students’ study and work experiences in South Korea in important ways. This research finds a notable tension in my rural participants’ narratives of educational mobility. On the one hand, they are highly aware of structural inequalities in both the Chinese and the transnational educational systems; on the other hand, they also embrace the neoliberal ideology of self-responsibility and self-entrepreneurship.⁶⁸ While appealing to the desire for transnational mobility among youth from different social backgrounds, China’s liberalization of policy in the self-funded study-abroad market also

⁶⁵ J. Lin and X.Y. Sun, “Higher Education Expansion and China’s Middle-class,” in *China’s Emerging Middle-class: Beyond Economic Transformation*, ed. Cheng Li (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution Press, 2010), 217–242.

⁶⁶ Tang and Unger, “The Socioeconomic Status.”

⁶⁷ S. Robertson, A. Harris, and L. Baldassar, “Mobile transitions: a conceptual framework for researching a generation on the move,” *Journal of Youth Studies* 21, no. 2 (2018): 203–217.

⁶⁸ Ann Anagnost, “Introduction: Life-Making in Neoliberal Times,” in *Global Futures in East Asia: Youth, Nation, and the New Economy in Uncertain Times*, eds. A. Anagnost, Andrea Arai, and Hai Ren (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2013), 1–27.

functions to hide structural inequalities in its social and educational system. Although overseas education offers some rural students opportunities to negotiate their structural marginalization in Chinese society, it also reflects the expansion of internal social spatial inequalities to the international realm. The rural/urban divide and the regional scale of their transnational capital conversion have largely pre-determined rural youth's disadvantaged position in a stratified Chinese society.

The University of Amsterdam, Amsterdam, Netherlands, June 2021



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