The Mobility, Technology and Wellbeing Lab MoLab MAX PLANCK INSTITUTE FOR SOCIAL ANTHROPOLOGY

MoLab Inventory of Mobilities and Socioeconomic Changes, January 2022

Educational mobility and "human nature": Changes in student migration from China since 2000

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Abstract

Since the turn of the century, increasing numbers of middle- and upper-class Chinese parents have been sending children, including pre-school children, overseas for education that is hoped to offer happy, free, and well-round development, which suits "human nature" as the parents put it. The parents are less concerned with children's future incomes, as compared to the 1990s. This educational mobility constitutes part of "reproduction migration": population movements specifically to maintain and improve life directly. Such mobility reinforces existing educational hierarchies and the cultural hegemony of the West.

Theme

Reproduction Migration

Keywords

Education, family, reputation, hierarchy, pressure, human nature

To be quoted as:

Xiang, Biao. 2022. Educational mobility and "human nature": Changes in student migration from China since 2000. *MoLab Inventory of Mobilities and Socioeconomic Changes*. Department 'Anthropology of Economic Experimentation'. Halle/Saale: Max Planck Institute for Social Anthropology.

Doi: 10.48509/MoLab.1101

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"I don't want her to become outstanding or anything like that", Ying says, tears in her eyes. "This is just about saving [her as] a human being!"

Ying, a telecommunications technician and single mother in her mid-forties in Hangzhou, Southeast China, was telling me about her plans to send her 12-year-old daughter, Tie, to Europe to study.[2] Tie, is doing well at middle school and has been assigned to the priority class. Students in the priority class learn faster and are expected to "win glory for the school" by outperforming others in the city-wide entry examinations for senior high schools. The pressure is intense.

Every day is a struggle for Ying and Tie. Tie gets up at 6:30 a.m., and Ying turns on a smartphone app for her. The app reads out words and sentences in English which Tie is to memorize. Ying follows Tie to the bathroom and the kitchen so Tie can listen to the app while washing herself and eating breakfast. The evening struggle is even more painful. Ying has set 10:00 p.m. as bedtime, but it isn't possible for Tie to finish her homework even by 11:00 p.m., sometimes later. When Ying urges her to go to bed, Tie often reacts angrily. Sometimes both end up crying.

"I feel that I myself don't sleep enough, so how can kids endure this? Education in China is literally ruining humans!" Ying's sentiments are common. Other parents I have spoken to describe the education system as "inhumane" or "missing human nature". Seemingly endless social media posts reiterate these discourses.

In this context, sending a child to study overseas is about "saving" human life itself. This perception explains a number of recent changes in educational migration from China. Why do students, who as the only child are little emperors at home, leave home for foreign lands at ever younger ages? Why do families spend ever more for overseas education? And it is a lot, as Ying said: "Don't even think about [sending a child overseas] unless you have 5 million RMB (784,000 USD) at hand".

This entry first situates the latest developments in the history of educational outmigration from China after the 1978, when the market-oriented reform begun. I then unpack why parents feel that education in China fails to nurture "human nature". I finally summarize how the global pursuit of humane education is practically guided by established international educational hierarchies, therefore is likely to reinforce existing inequalities.

I have been following education mobility from China since 2003, and draw on a diverse range of texts in this entry. I also draw on interviews and personal conversations with parents and students over the past two decades. Having worked at the University of Oxford from 2004 to 2020, I was frequently approached for "advice" about education decisions.

Four stages of educational migration from post-reform China

Educational migration from post-reform China began at the end of the 1970s, when the Ministry of Education sent researchers to the West to study.[3] When the Chinese government sent the first 55 students to the US in 1978, "good health" was one of the three criteria (the other two being academic qualifications and proficiency in English). Studying overseas was regarded as hard work. Who would have thought that studying overseas would one day become a means of protecting one's health?
Educational migration after 1978 can be divided into the following four stages:

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[2] Ying and Tie are pseudonyms. Personal communication, multiple occasions in January and February 2019, Hangzhou, China.

[3] Zweig, David and Chen Changgui. 1995. China's Brain Drain to the United States: Views of Overseas Chinese Students and Scholars in the 1990s. *China Research Monograph*. Institute of East Asian Studies, University of California.

Stage I: In the 1980s, most students were sponsored by the government and were expected to return to China on completing of their studies. Most had already procured undergraduate degrees in China, and were enrolled in post-graduate or short-term training courses overseas. They were tasked with learning about advanced technologies and experiences from the West and Japan to contribute to China's modernization.

Stage II: In the 1990s, education migration morphed from a state programme into private investment projects, and has stayed this way ever since. Most students were "self-financing"—supported either by their families or through overseas scholarships. The majority did a Masters or Ph.D. course overseas. Few had prior work experience, and their average age was lower than the group in the first phase. Many students stayed on in the destination countries after graduation, since settlement was their goal of studying overseas in the first place. Meritocracy was the guiding ideology: It was believed that academically outstanding students received more advanced education in the West and then settled down to a good life there.

Stage III: The 2000s witnessed the massification of international educational mobility. The number of student migrants increased. They came from more diverse socioeconomic backgrounds, but nevertheless share the goal of pursuing individual material rewards. Elite families sent children overseas at an early stage, hoping this would pave the way to top universities and rewarding careers later on. Older students from ordinary universities and from families without strong connections hope that overseas postgraduate degrees would bring about additional cultural credentials and would thereby to help to secure a better job in China.

Stage IV: In the 2010s, new thinking about education migration emerged. Instead of seeking future material rewards, parents prioritize children's happiness, social relations, morality, and physical and mental health as the goal of pursuing education overseas.

What is "human nature"?

For parents, excessive academic pressure has a number of negative implications for children's wellbeing. For several years, Cheng and her husband had considered sending their daughter to Europe, but the daughter's dilemma with the high school dormitory brought with it a new urgency. Most senior high schools (pupils are 15 to 18-years-old) in China have been turned into boarding schools, partly to maximize students' study time. In Cheng's daughter's school, however, the majority of the students move out from the dorms in the second and third (final) year, typically because of noise or conflicts with roommates. Families then have to rent apartments next to the school to minimize commuting time. This creates stress for the whole family. Students are under so much pressure that some study late into the night, using electric torches under the blankets after the lights have been turned off. This disturbs others. Cheng's daughter complained about the noise, yet was reluctant to move out. Cheng and her husband also disagreed with each other. Cheng's husband said: "She was really excited about living on campus with classmates in the beginning. She told me that there was little 'human feeling' among her classmates. Everyone only focuses on studying. But she got along well with her roommates. She will feel sad if she moves out." But Cheng said: "This is not time to think of human feeling. She must rest well."

Cheng explained to me how the situation had ended in a taxing deadlock: "Parents complain about [conditions in the] dorm. But if the students don't do well in the college admissions exams, the parents make a fuss and ask the Education Bureau to sack the school principal." Thus, the school is

also in an impossible position. Teachers ask the students to sleep on time and turn off all the lights at 10:00 p.m., but at the same time assign homework that cannot realistically be completed by that time. Everyone is caught up in a dilemma. For Cheng and her husband, then, sending their daughter overseas appeared to be the only solution to ensure her physical and mental health.[4]

In contrast, education in western countries is considered humane and balanced. Parents commonly describe western education using terms and concepts like "broad", "creative", "happy", "suiting human's original/authentic nature" (*benxing*), "letting children develop their original/authentic nature", and "containing no falsehoods" (literally containing "no fake things", as opposed to propaganda education).

A mother who consulted me about her 16-year-old daughter's application to British universities decided to send her daughter overseas after she had seen her tearing up a history textbook two years earlier: "She said that the textbooks are entirely wrong!" The pride in the mother's voice was palpable. "She is *that* kind of child, you know. She carries [books by] Yuval Harari and Stephen Hawking with her all the time. These books are history for *her*. I encourage her independent thinking, of course, but I have to worry what the teacher thinks. She needs someone to *think with*, not someone who simply teaches. In China this kind of environment doesn't exist".[5]

How do parents seek "humane" education?

"Human nature" is by definition elusive. So, without being able to define it, how do parents know how to look for it? How do parents and students select destination countries and schools where students' human nature can flourish? Typically, they follow established reputations and school performance. Mrs Peng, who runs a number of profitable businesses in China but spends increasing amounts of time in the UK, hired two educational consultants in the UK to advise her about choices of schools in Oxford for her eight-year-old son. She hired them separately in order to have two independent opinions. Between the two most prestigious private schools in Oxford, the Dragon School and Magdalen College School, Peng chose Dragon, even though Magdalen College School had the best academic reputation. Peng explained: "Dragon has a longer history. Quite a lot of artists and academics have studied here. Magdalen produces more lawyers and accountants; it is more practical. I'm not interested." She stressed that she wanted a profound "humanist" (*renwen*) education. (Another concern was that Magdalen College School is located in east Oxford, where the residents were "too mixed" in terms of ethnicity and class, while School D is the most exclusive white area of the city.)

When it comes to choosing the university, global rankings serve as the central reference. Parents and students are well aware of the most important university rankings—QS, the *Times Higher Education Supplement*, the *Financial Times,* the *Economist,* and Shanghai Jiaotong University.[6] Parents commonly attach more emphasis to the name of the university than to the subject of study. A medical doctor, introduced to me by my parents' neighbour, asked me to persuade her daughter to choose a master's degree in economics in Oxford, instead of a master's in computer science in

[4] Personal communication. 3 and 4 February 2019. Wenzhou, China.
[5] Online conversations. 9 and 11 October, 2021.
[6] Cebolla-Boado et al. documented the importance of the ranking system for Chinese students overseas. Cebolla-Boado, Héctor, Hu Yang, and Yasemin Nuhoḡlu Soysal. 2018. Why study abroad? Sorting of Chinese students across British universities. *British Journal of Sociology of Education*, 39(3): 365–380.

University of Pennsylvania, both of which had accepted the daughter. I said the latter would certainly have better employment prospects. And the daughter chose the latter. “But Oxford is a golden plate [a globally valued brand], anyone in the world has to recognize it”, the mother explained. “The family’s opinion is that, as long as she is accepted by Oxford, she should go for it unconditionally.”

Another woman in northeast China consulted me about her son’s application to undergraduate courses in Oxford. Her divorced husband promised that, if the son was admitted to Oxford or Cambridge, he would pay all the costs for three years and possibly for future studies too. Otherwise, he advised the son to stay in China. I was surprised that the father could be so categorical in judging what education is worthwhile and what is useless, but the mother seemed to agree with him in this regard: “He is not necessarily mean. He asked, what’s the value of going to unheard of universities overseas?”[7]

As many parents stressed the importance of balanced and well-rounded education, I often mentioned liberal arts colleges in the US as an option. Few parents responded enthusiastically. “Somehow, we have never heard of them”, one parent mumbled thoughtfully, revealing what seemed to be a common sentiment. However, I do not believe that the parents are after well-known brands in order to impress others as such, but rather, they are seeking established and familiar names to assure themselves about their decisions.

The pursuit of “humane” education worldwide is likely to reinforce, instead of undermine, existing inequalities in education. Western education was previously regarded as “useful”, because it teaches advanced knowledge, carries more cultural capital, and most importantly, promises higher incomes. But today, the ultimate value of exclusive elite education in the West is its transcendence of technological and economic utility—that it makes one “truly human”. And as it can never be clearly defined what true “human nature” is, established reputation and hierarchy become the authoritative basis for decision-making.

[7] Interview. Shenyang, China. 12 November 2017.