Chinese Students at Uppsala University: “Yesterday, Today and Tomorrow”

A sociological analysis of ten students’ trajectories

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Abstract

The idea of knowledge economy initiated by the World Bank, the increasing importance of English proficiency in the global labour market, and the expansion of Chinese higher education, all leads to the phenomenon of Chinese student migration to western countries for getting advantageous educational experiences and credentials.

Through a qualitative, interview-based method and Bourdieusian sociological perspective focusing on species of capital (cultural, economic, social and symbolic capital), habitus and mode of reproduction, this study focuses on the analysis of the relation between social background of Chinese students and their adoption of a western education system and perception of future career through the trajectories of ten Chinese students at Uppsala University, one of the most renowned universities in Sweden.

The study examines the role of various assets in the family of origin, as well as the importance of the students’ long journey in the Chinese education system. The findings indicate that the students came from a fairly well off Chinese middle class that had established itself in the parent generation through an upward mobility. Both inherited and acquired assets through family origin and the educational trajectory were important factors that affected the Chinese students’ decision of studying abroad. Among the three species of assets originated from the family, the economic asset played a particularly significant role in the Chinese students’ educational trajectory, irrespective of the composition of families’ capital resources. Family economic assets became increasingly crucial while students moved up to higher educational levels.

It also investigates the students’ encounter with the “Western” world represented by an academic and international student environment. While most of the students said they appreciated what Uppsala University had offered in terms of academic life and cultural experiences, they somewhat contradictory kept a distance to both the new forms of academic culture they met and students from other countries. The habitus valued in their previous educational trajectory in China did not fit the criteria for academic performance in the western higher educational institution. It was instead partly contested.

With regard to the future, the interviewed students expressed concerns as to the value of their experience and diploma on the Chinese academic and job markets due to the absence from Chinese contact and the culture rooted in social connection. A hypothesis emerging from the interview data is that the family-based social reproduction strategy expressed in the strong family investments in education leading up to the studies abroad potentially has as effect that the offspring, the students, become less dependent on this family-based reproduction. Instead, they regarded themselves as being entitled, by merit, to decide on their own future.

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Introduction

Chinese students of tertiary level studying abroad occupied around 17% of all of the mobile students of different nationalities in 2017, followed by Indian students of 6%, which indicates the largest body of Chinese students abroad compared with the rest of the world.¹ The US, Australia and the UK were the most chosen destination countries in 2016, and Sweden, as a newly established higher education market, was in the top 15 of all the destination countries for Chinese students.² The phenomenon above has been increasingly studied on both macro and micro levels. From the macro point of view, patterns and features of Chinese students’ educational migration, interaction between globalization of education and Chinese overseas study have been heavily explored, and on the micro level, various dimensions including personal and structural factors that motivate Chinese students to study abroad, particularly the most frequently chosen countries, Chinese students’ socio-cultural and psychological adaptation to a new culture abroad, employability in both international and domestic labour market after graduation stand in focus.

However, it seems that most studies focus on the most selected host countries while neglecting newly established higher educational market and the diversity of characteristics of Chinese students choosing different host countries. There is a vast body of research on conscious and strategic motivations to study in certain countries, however, key literature in this field offers little insight into the unconscious factors for doing so. This study argues that the decision of studying abroad is not limited to rational strategies, instead, it’s also an outcome of unconscious and natural social and educational trajectories. This study aims to find out the correlation between Chinese students’ social and educational background and Swedish educational system adopted by Chinese students as well as their perceptions on future career through the individualized life trajectories.

Using data from a qualitative, interview-based method and Bourdieuian sociological perspective focusing on species of capital (cultural, economic, social and symbolic capital), habitus and mode of reproduction, this study focuses on the analysis of the relation between social background of Chinese students and their adoption of a western education system and perception of future career through the trajectories of ten Chinese students at Uppsala University, one of the most renowned universities in Sweden.

This study commences by displaying both international and domestic background, namely, structural factors, that boost Chinese students’ overseas study. It is then followed by reviewing the previous literature on key characteristics of Chinese students studying abroad, which are highly relevant to the research questions presented in Section 4. The sociological method and theoretical framework are placed in the context of this research in Section 3 and 5 respectively. Findings and analysis of the empirical data as well as the connections with the background and previous research are illustrated in Section 6. The last section provides a conclusion of the current study.

² Ibid.
1 Background

1.1 The Globalization of Higher Education

It is widely recognized that globalization has had great impact on higher education. Many studies show that especially higher education is becoming increasingly globalized. Marginson points to conditions favouring this process such as worldwide “instantaneous messaging, complex data transfer and cheapening air travel”, as well as universities’ cross-border cooperation and governmental bilateral connections in the field of higher education.\(^3\)

English, as the worldwide spoken language, is a prominent feature and drive for globalization of higher education. As the global language, English is the main language of instruction in most international higher education as well as the working language in most multi-national workplaces.\(^4\) English-speaking countries are the most-chosen destination countries for internationally mobile students in higher education. The US, the UK and Australia are the three countries receiving the largest numbers of international students in 2015 with the US at the top according to UIS Statistics.\(^5\) English-speaking institutions also dominate the business of international education services.\(^6\) Furthermore, English is the most studied foreign language at all levels of education worldwide and a “global language” as well as “lingua franca of the modern era”, as Runde puts it.\(^7\)

Global organizations are important factors that boost the globalization of higher education and influence national higher education reformation. The World Bank initiated the concept of “knowledge economy”, stating that economic growth is knowledge-based and that the key for global, national and individual economic growth is knowledge.\(^8\) Human capital investment becomes crucial for the process of strengthening and adapting to the global knowledge-based economy.\(^9\)

1.2 International Student Migration

A dimension of a more general globalization of higher education, international student migration has likewise become a global phenomenon. UNESCO statistics show that the number of international tertiary-level students rose from 2.8 million to 4.1 million between 2005 and 2013.\(^10\) Shields claims that the “flows of

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\(^9\) Ibid. p. 38.

international students have become immense”. Quite a few studies address various characteristics and patterns of international student flows, such as the global relationships between countries of origin and destination.

Factors influencing international student migration are usually discussed in terms of a “push and pull” model. On the “push” side, elements such as the national economic level of development, the individual economic condition and educational opportunities, and the degree of involvement of the country of origin in the global arena, are important factors. On the “pull” side, reasons that attract students from other countries to study in the host countries need to be taken into consideration. These include cultural, economic and political links between the two types of countries. On one hand, whether the tie is close or not to a large extent decides an international student’s decision to study in particular host countries or not. Such ties may be a common or similar cultural background, financial support from host countries, or others. On the other hand, the higher a country’s social and economic position is in the world system, the more international students it is likely to attract. Countries with more advanced economies and high levels of technological development occupy the centre of the world system and attract most students from other parts of the world, while less advanced countries remain in the periphery. The latter rarely become an option for international students who migrate.

It has been suggested that, in the perspective of a push and pull explanatory model, there are at least three stages in the process of deciding where to study. In stage one, the student must decide to study internationally, rather than locally. In this stage, “push” factors play a more important role than “pull” factors. In the next stage, a host country is selected. Here, “pull” factors become more important, i.e. host countries attract international students by means of the unique and competitive advantages they offer compared to other host countries. In stage three, the student chooses an institution. A variety of additional “pull” factors make a particular institution more attractive than its competitors.

1.3 The Expansion of Chinese Higher Education

The expansion of international student migration from China should be seen against the background of the very rapid growth of higher education in the country starting in the 1990s. Beginning in 1998, the Chinese Ministry of Education initiated a policy of expansion of higher education enrolment. Higher education institutions, campuses, areas for majors, etc. amplified.

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13 Ibid. pp. 82-3.
15 Ibid. p. 437.
16 Ibid. p. 83.
in 1998 to 48% in 2016.\textsuperscript{18} The purpose was to strengthen China’s economic competitiveness in the global world through education, and provide highly skilled labour for the domestic labour market. This in turn would stimulate mass consumption, increase social equity and politically consolidate the role of the communist party\textsuperscript{19} though the overall goal of boosting economic growth.\textsuperscript{20}

However, the expansion of higher education was too much of a burden for the State itself to carry through. A large number of private higher education institutions were set up in major urban regions in China. Standards, educational quality and tuition fees came to vary among different institutions, due to economic constraints, an unbalanced distribution of national funding, as well as a shortage of qualified teachers and teaching resources. These differences within the higher education system went along with differences related to social inequality among students, favouring those with advantageous socio-economic backgrounds. Moreover, the increase of job opportunities in the labour market couldn’t catch up with the expansion of higher education. While students graduating from prestigious universities were more likely to find satisfying jobs than the ones graduating from less prestigious ones, the competition for jobs generally sharpened.\textsuperscript{21} The rapid expansion of tertiary education enrolment has confronted with tremendous challenges that need to be tackled on both organizational and personal levels.

1.4 Chinese Students’ International Mobility and “Identity Negotiation”

With the Communist Party’s so-called ‘opening-up policy’ leading to the country joining the World Trade Organization, China became increasingly active in the global economic arena.\textsuperscript{22} Policies attached great importance to English language skills and the acquisition of Western advanced technologies. Part of this programme was efforts to invest in academic research ability, believed to be the key to Chinese modernization.\textsuperscript{23} International business became an integral part of Chinese economic development. In a growing knowledge economy, high English proficiency and overseas study experiences became highly valued by employers in different sectors, especially sectors where exchanges with other countries were crucial.\textsuperscript{24} Due to the increasing educational competition and the varying quality of Chinese higher education institutions brought about by the rapid expansion of Chinese higher education, Chinese students increasingly


\textsuperscript{21} Ibid. pp. 24-5.


\textsuperscript{23} Ibid. p. 7.

turned their attention to foreign universities. The choice of a foreign university became an alternative to obtaining credentials and competencies by studying in the Chinese higher education system. Overseas diplomas and experiences also became a way of distinguishing oneself from domestic competitors.\(^{25}\)

However, during the overseas study, studies show that Chinese students are likely to encounter issues related to their adaptation in host countries on different levels and dimensions, such as “academic concerns, linguistic barriers, homesickness, loneliness, and cultural adjustment difficulties” indicated by Ng, Tsang and Lian.\(^{26}\) Li, Chen and Duanmu put forward the factors that cause difficulties in academic learning. Chinese students are more likely to adopt the belief in self-perseverance and closely following instructors’ supervision that Chinese culture values the most instead of active participation in group discussion and independent learning favoured by western culture.\(^{27}\) More profoundly, Chinese culture advocates the hierarchical relationship and absolute obedience from students to teachers; it promotes commonality and uniformity among people, which suppresses difference in order to protect the unification; it stresses that the purpose of getting educated is to pass the examination and own power in the political field.\(^{28}\) Instead of treating the meeting with a new learning and living culture as difficulties, Gargano understands it as a process of identity negotiation and reconstruction among “the past, present and future”.\(^{29}\)

To summarise, both domestic and global factors pushed the increase of Chinese international student mobility, and the overseas study was a process of “identity negotiation”. Globally, the consolidation of the knowledge-based economy motivated students to get the “best” education and acquire international cultural experiences in the world with a view to be competitive.\(^{30}\) Parallel to this new demand for international education, in part pushing it, international educational services grew, especially in major, well-developed English-speaking countries. Domestically, a fierce competition among students for limited entry into top domestic universities and the pursuit of positional advantages, not the least through acquiring proficiency in English, directed students’ interest towards studies abroad.\(^{31}\) The inflation of higher education credentials caused by the expansion of the Chinese higher education system endangered the value of Chinese diplomas.\(^{32}\)

By giving an image of Chinese international students mobility on a macro level, this study aim at finding out the various factors on a micro level that lie


\(^{28}\) Zhengang Li and Jingyi Xing. ‘Relationship Between Confucian Thoughts and Modern Education’. *Journal of Hebei Normal University (Educational Science Edition)*, 8:5, 2006, p.29.


\(^{30}\) Brooks and Waters. *Student Mobilities, Migration and the Internationalization of Higher Education*, pp. 52-3.

\(^{31}\) Ibid. p. 46.

\(^{32}\) Ibid. pp. 51-2, 60-2.
behind the choice by Chinese students at Uppsala University for obtaining a master’s degree, as well as the relations between those factors and Chinese students’ adoption of a western education system and the perception of future career stand in focus. In a qualitative, interview-based approach, the individual trajectories leading to the studies in Uppsala are analysed, as well as the students’ encounter with the “western” world represented by an academic and international student environment experienced as very different from the Chinese one where they came from and where their choice of studying abroad initially emerged. Finally, the study addresses the students’ expectancies for the future connected to the diploma they came to Uppsala to acquire. The inner relationships are incorporated in the analysis of the above questions.
2 Literature Review

There is a growing literature on international migration among Chinese students in higher education. In this literature review some important themes in the literature will be discussed that are relevant to the research questions for the study.

2.1 The Status of English

Acquiring English proficiency has become one of the most important motives for Chinese students to study abroad, as research indicates.\(^\text{33}\) English skills occupy an important role in Chinese policies related to education and economic development. As Hu points out, English is an integral part of national educational policy-making and reforms.\(^\text{34}\) During the reform of English education in the 1990s, English proficiency, especially the cultivation of communicative English ability, was taken as a standard of quality education.\(^\text{35}\)

English proficiency is also increasingly demanded in the Chinese labour market. Hao concludes that “foreign language ability” is one the top competences that both public and private employers value.\(^\text{36}\) A similar conclusion is made by Pang who states that a good command of English is “a passport to better-paid employment”.\(^\text{37}\) While English is becoming increasingly rewarded in the domestic job market, foreign companies particularly need people who are truly proficient in English.\(^\text{38}\)

The crucial role given to English skills in Chinese national policies and the parallel growing demand for English in domestic labour market, should also be seen in the light of the small number of people in the labour market with advanced English skills.\(^\text{39}\) Chinese students learning English are likely to show lower proficiency than students from other countries, due to a less participatory teaching and learning strategy.\(^\text{40}\) Due to national traditions shaping teaching and learning, Chinese students are less likely to improve especially the communicative English skills.\(^\text{41}\)

In studies on Chinese students’ English language learning, the benefits or effects of English proficiency are often put forward as linked to many other, broader skills and values. English skills are connected to general abilities in the

\(^{33}\) Ibid. pp. 61-2.
\(^{35}\) Ibid. p. 10.
\(^{36}\) Hao, Wen and Welch. ‘When sojourners return: Employment opportunities and challenges facing high-skilled Chinese returnees’, p. 37.
\(^{39}\) Ibid.
\(^{41}\) Ibid.
globalized world, such as “intercultural competence”\textsuperscript{42}, being able to understand a different culture, adopt valuable “civic mindedness”\textsuperscript{43}. They are also difficult to separate from “transnationalism”\textsuperscript{44} in the sense of transnational political and socio-cultural ties and identities\textsuperscript{45}. Gu brings up the same idea, stressing “negotiation and adjustment of identities and value systems” that students adopt during their educational mobility and English language acquisition.\textsuperscript{46} The “transnational experience” leads to capabilities of “intercultural flexibility”, “openness to learning” and the building and development of “self-confidence”.\textsuperscript{47} However, some of these studies limit themselves to mentioning just “communicative skills” that shape self-confidence, an outward personality and an ability to actively participate in practices of different kinds.\textsuperscript{48}

2.2 Family Influence on the Educational Trajectory

The desire for fluency in English cannot be limited to the personal motives of Chinese students studying overseas. Many studies address the factors that go beyond the individual motives. It is pointed out that the family of origin plays an equally significant role in the decision-making process. Research studies show that this role varies with types of families, financial conditions, geographical location, parents’ educational level and occupation, and the assets available in the wider family social network.

Research emphasize that family financial condition, required for facing tuition fees, living expenses and other related costs, is a crucial factor influencing the choice of host country, the university and major in tertiary education.\textsuperscript{49} Students from low-income families are more likely to choose science, medicine, engineering or social sciences, while students from economically well off families more often to choose business related majors rather than others.\textsuperscript{50}

Studies also show that geographical family location affects students’ choice of major. Students from less developed areas prefer to do science or engineering majors, while students from developed areas prefer business related majors.\textsuperscript{51} Students from developed areas are more likely to have prior experience of higher

\textsuperscript{43} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{44} Qing Gu. ‘An emotional journey of identity change and transformation-The impact of study-abroad experience on the lives and careers of Chinese students and returnees’. \textit{Learning and Teaching}, 8:3, 2015, p. 63.
\textsuperscript{45} Brooks and Waters. \textit{Student Mobilities, Migration and the Internationalization of Higher Education}, p. 55.
\textsuperscript{46} Gu. ‘An emotional journey of identity change and transformation-The impact of study-abroad experience on the lives and careers of Chinese students and returnees’, p. 65.
\textsuperscript{47} Brooks and Waters. \textit{Student Mobilities, Migration and the Internationalization of Higher Education}, p. 63.
\textsuperscript{48} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{51} Ibid. p. 109.
competition from social networks than the ones from less developed areas, a difference that also affects the choice of major.52

The professional occupations of parents also influence students’ choice of major. Both male and female students are inclined to choose engineering or sciences as the major when their fathers are working in professional or executive occupations.53 Mothers as role models have a great influence on daughters’ choice of major. Female students whose mothers are in professional or executive occupations are less likely to study education than other female students.54 The opposite is true for male students.55 The socioeconomic status plays a more important role in choosing majors of humanities and social sciences or science and engineering over business for women than men.56 When the socioeconomic status increases, women become less likely to choose business as major, while men become more likely to do so.57

Studies also indicate that families with international education experiences have higher expectation for their children in international education than the ones without the experiences.58 The family not only plays the role of motivating students to study abroad, it is also a factor that attract them back to China. Studies show that family is one of the top reasons why students choose to return to home country because of close family ties.59

As regards to students’ reasons to study abroad and decision-making of future profession, family influence is a central explanation in studies on Asian students. Brooks and Waters emphasise the central position of the family factor in students’ educational mobilities in Asian countries by calling students’ education a “family project”.60 Instead of studying out of “personal interests”, Chinese students are obliged to choose “vocational subjects” in choosing higher education institutions. The choice of majors is based on parents’ will since they are the sponsors of students’ education. More fundamentally, due to Chinese culture and its roots in Confucianism, there is a moral obligation to be obedient and respectful to senior people. The collective goal is prior to the individual objective.61

2.3 The Quest for Cultural Experiences

52 Pimpa. ‘A family affair: The effect of family on Thai students’ choices of international education’, p. 446.
54 Ibid. p. 390.
55 Ibid.
56 Ibid.
57 Ibid.
61 Ibid.
According to studies of the reasons why Chinese students study abroad, culture and experience are important reasons frequently brought up, along with the purpose of increasing employability. Huang demonstrates that Chinese students studying abroad not only aim at obtaining educational qualifications, but also at experiencing a different “culture”. This is particularly common among middle-class families and understood as giving students advantages through increasing intercultural understanding and personal and professional development. Similar to Huang, Yang finds that “enriching life experiences” and “self-cultivation” are prioritized by students from Chinese middle-class families whose basic material needs already are met due to the vast economic growth benefiting these social strata. They pursue spiritual satisfaction by enriching life experiences, prioritizing personal and moral growth over academic knowledge acquisition. Cellabo claims that Chinese student international mobility is also motivated by non-career concerns, not only by looking at international experience merely from an instrumental perspective. The social and cultural offerings from foreign universities are important, making studying abroad more like a process of “self-realization” than an “investment strategy”. Mazzarol finds that one of the most important motivations for Asian students to study abroad is to gain a better understanding of “western culture” which is experienced as different in character from Asian culture. Hu emphasises both aspects, by looking at Chinese students in Norway. He points out that Chinese students understand and benefit from certain traits of Norwegian culture in their future life, such as the sense for environmental protection, a capacity to manage their lives autonomously, appreciating equality, trust and respect among individuals, but also make instrumental gains such as language proficiency, interpersonal skills, value of the academic credential, et cetera all benefit their career development.

2.4 Educational Competition

The “consolidation of knowledge-based economies” and the acquisition of “academic credentials” as the representation of knowledge nowadays make studying overseas an attractive option, Brooks and Waters state. Studying abroad is usually understood also as a strategy to avoid fierce competition for higher education opportunities in China and to invest in distinction in the future career in the labour market due to the inflation of academic credentials. Xiang

65 Mazzarol and Soutar. “Push-pull” factors influencing international student destination choice’, p. 84.
67 Brooks and Waters. Student Mobilities, Migration and the Internationalization of Higher Education, p. 47.
and Shen argue that studying abroad provides an extra advantage for Chinese students in competing for scarce resources and opportunities under the circumstances of the exacerbating stratification in China. They maintain that the expansion of higher education in China leads to the inflation of degree certificates. This inflation devalues the local higher education diplomas and, at the same time, it exacerbates the competition for the limited opportunities offered by top higher education institutes. In this context, studying overseas becomes an alternative. Brooks and Waters make a similar argument. In spite of the expansion of higher education in some regions in East Asia, the admission rate is still relatively low compared to the other developed countries or regions in the world even if the admission rate is high, thus the students who can’t get in choose to study overseas. In order to differentiate themselves from others, some students choose foreign prestigious universities to become more competitive compared to the graduates from local prestigious universities.

Some studies point to a common belief that obtaining “better” educational resource leads to “better” employability. The anticipated preferences of employers to a large extent determine Chinese students’ decision to study overseas. For example, Gu and Schweisfurth find that “employability” is highly valued by Chinese students studying overseas irrespective of demographies and backgrounds and employers. The skills and assets that are valued by employers, pointed out by the authors include “embeddedness/social networks”, “cosmopolitan competence” including “broadened worldview”, “international awareness”, “self-efficacy and positive attitudes in the workplace”, “communication skills and intercultural empathy”, all of which are supposedly achieved by international study experiences through overcoming challenges and gaining knowledge while studying abroad. Brooks and Waters hold a similar point of view. They describe the representation of overseas academic credential as “embodied competences” and “embodied transnationalism”, and by emphasizing the perceived “positional advantage” brought by proficiency in English. They stress that proficiency in English is far more than being able to “get by”. What is valued is confidently displaying western manners.

2.5 Employment after Studies Abroad

In the most recent decade, as Zweig and Wang suggest, an increasing number of Chinese graduates of foreign universities choose to return to China for

69 Ibid. p. 517, 520.
70 Brooks and Waters. *Student Mobilities, Migration and the Internationalization of Higher Education*, p. 47.
72 Ibid. pp. 960-4.
73 Brooks and Waters. *Student Mobilities, Migration and the Internationalization of Higher Education*, pp. 61-3.
74 Ibid. p. 63.
employment, a “brain gain” or “reverse brain drain”\textsuperscript{75}. Hao et al. suggest that the major challenges encountered by student returnees are the re-adaptation to Chinese culture caused by lacking a deep understanding of the fast changing Chinese environment and local market. Returning students are challenged by an inappropriate application of their acquired new knowledge to the domestic situation, ignoring local needs and rules and sometimes being over-confident. They face a fierce competition between overseas and domestic graduates with a dramatic increase of both overseas and domestic graduates.\textsuperscript{76} Hao and Welch also point to other aspects. They suggest that the issue of “Hai Dai\textsuperscript{77}”, a group of returnees who do short-term overseas studies developing limited professional skills, have too high expectations on incomes.\textsuperscript{78} Furthermore, returning students often are expected by employers to have higher productivity than the domestic graduates, which put them in a disadvantageous position.\textsuperscript{79} Missing out on the experience of local Chinese culture, returnees are also often being unable to build up helpful social connections.\textsuperscript{80} This disadvantage reinforces the difficulties that returnees have to re-integrate into Chinese society, since China is characterized by a deep-rooted and distinctive culture of its own, in spite of striving to become integrated into a knowledge-based world economy.\textsuperscript{81}

To sum up, the literature review focuses on factors that motivate Chinese students to study abroad, experiences while studying abroad and situations of future career after graduation by covering themes such as the pursuit of high level of English proficiency, dramatic competition in both domestic and global higher education market, family influence in terms of social background, the quest of cultural experiences during overseas study, and the employment after graduation. All of the themes are referred and discussed by making comparisons in this empirical study regarding Chinese students at Uppsala University.

\textsuperscript{76} Hao, Wen and Welch. ‘When sojourners return: Employment opportunities and challenges facing high-skilled Chinese returnees’, pp. 32-4.
\textsuperscript{77} Note: \textit{Hai Dai} refers to returnees who can’t find a secure job opposed to \textit{Hai Gui} who achieve career success.
\textsuperscript{79} Ibid. p. 253.
\textsuperscript{80} Ibid. p. 254.
\textsuperscript{81} Ibid. p. 255.
3 The Sociological Perspective

This study focuses on Chinese students’ life and educational trajectories. It considers the importance of various assets for accessing higher education and further studies at Uppsala University. Given its focus, Pierre Bourdieu’s sociology was chosen as a theoretical framework, meaning that some of his key concepts were employed in both the design of the study and in the analysis. The concepts are first of all habitus and capital. These were particularly important in the design of the study as well as in the analysis of the collected data. These key concepts will here be explained with an emphasis on their usefulness for the purposes of the empirical study.

3.1 Habitus

The student trajectories that make up the object of the study are understood in the light of the history of their family of origin as well as the interviewees’ history. Both their families and their own careers involved change. Their parents had normally come from modest circumstances in rural areas, but during their life course they had become members of an urban Chinese middle class with relatively good incomes. They had also reached educational levels unknown to the parent generation. The interviewees had themselves succeeded well in the education system. In a competitive process of educational selection they had managed to enter into highly ranked Chinese universities and then continue their studies in the west. Both for their parents and themselves, these transformations had affected their way of seeing themselves and the world, including education itself.

For understanding the significance of these transformations for the relation to education, Pierre Bourdieu’s concept habitus is well fit. Habitus, according to Bourdieu, is internalized dispositions for experiencing, thinking and acting in the social world. These dispositions are the product of the previous life experiences. After a long time of being exposed to a certain living environment, socially accepted norms of behaviour, values and ways of seeing become embodied. This is a partly unconscious training and adaption. Although habitus can change when conditions of life change, it is above all shaped early in life, i.e. in the family of origin. It also changes slowly. In my analysis, the concept is particularly useful for understanding how the interviewed Chinese students adapted to the new academic environment at Uppsala University. For Bourdieu, the habitus is an “embodied history” that meets another history which is that of the social world, in this case a western university with its traditions and culture.

The habitus concept evolved gradually in Bourdieu’s work. In the study of French students in Paris in the 1960s in the The Inheritors, the concepts is still not used but implied in the analysis of how students related to a dominant

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culture. In *Reproduction*, the concept is well established and applied for example in the analysis of language use as an expression of an embodied relation language.\textsuperscript{85} Later, Bourdieu applied the concept of habitus also in the analysis of the concept of “social field”. For example in *Pascalian Meditations* Bourdieu analyses what he calls “scholastic disposition” as a habitus shaped by belonging to an academic social world for a long time.\textsuperscript{86} He also introduces the concept of “doxa”. This refers to fundamental beliefs about something that is at stake in the social world.\textsuperscript{87} In academic social fields studied in *Homo Academicus* and *Pascalian Meditations*, for example, there is an often unquestioned, deep belief that scientific knowledge gives an accurate picture of the real world. Doxa is carried by people in a social group or social field without being entirely conscious.\textsuperscript{88} An example related to this study is that, in the Chinese social space of higher education, in spite of the household registration restriction and inequality of admission for students from different provinces, students and families still believe that *gaokao* (the national college entrance examination) is the a fair way of giving a possibility for social mobility.

In *The State Nobility*, Bourdieu points out that the sociologist needs to look at the social world from two angles simultaneously, from the point of view of the objective social structure and representation of this structure in people’s minds.\textsuperscript{89} The subjective cognitive representation or structure exists is not chosen freely but emerges from the social world and its structure. Habitus is the intermediary link between the objectively existing social world and thinking, experiences and action.

Habitus is fundamental for social groups’ strategies to keep or improve their position in society, i.e. in their reproduction strategies. The reproduction strategies may change the social world but tend to reproduce its hierarchies.\textsuperscript{90} In the current study, the habitus is for example used for analysing the importance that the families of the interviewees gave to education, and also how the educational trajectory of the interviewees affected their dispositions and expectancies.

### 3.2 Species of Capital

*Capital*, according to Bourdieu, can be understood as assets or resources that are valued in a given society and the foundation of power. Capital is acquired and accumulated through a long time, and which, produces profits and reproduces itself in similar or sometimes different forms.\textsuperscript{91} During the process of production and reproduction, the form and amount of capital is not distributed or acquired in an equal manner among individuals or groups. Therefore, the differences of

\textsuperscript{87} Ibid., pp. 10-1.
\textsuperscript{88} Ibid., p. 11.
\textsuperscript{90} Ibid., pp. 1-3.
power related to the distribution of capital decide what are accessible strategies for individuals and social groups.\textsuperscript{92}

Bourdieu opposes \textit{symbolic capital} to material or economic capital. \textit{Symbolic capital} is assets founded on social recognition, i.e. the belief in the social world that something is valuable, honourable and legitimate. This belief is “imposed” on individuals by the social world and the culture that dominates in this world.\textsuperscript{93} For example, the education system transmits a dominating culture through the knowledge, skills and type of language skills that it recognises.\textsuperscript{94} This kind of symbolic capital, related to a dominating culture and to the education system, Bourdieu calls cultural capital\textsuperscript{95}. Educational capital is an important component of this cultural capital, but cultural capital also comprises other types of knowledge and skills connected to dominating culture. In this study, educational capital is crucial to the analysis, both of the parent generation and in that of the interviewees. The study also touches on a wider cultural capital such as “cultural experiences” from other countries.

According to Bourdieu, capital exists in three fundamental species, economic, cultural and social capital.\textsuperscript{96} The three species are convertible to each other under certain conditions. Economic capital, material resources, is at the root.\textsuperscript{97} Economic capital can exist in the form of money or institutionalized property rights. Cultural capital, including as a component educational capital, is often convertible into economic capital, like when educational diplomas give access to jobs with high salaries. It can exist as educational qualifications or knowledge or skills. Also social capital is convertible to economic capital as well as cultural capital. It can exist in the forms of social connections, obligations or social titles, such as those for the nobility. \textsuperscript{98} Social capital can be defined as an asset that provides access to other species of capital, for example through contacts, “(u)seful relationships can secure material or symbolic profits”.\textsuperscript{99} Social capital can be inherited or acquired. The inheritance of social capital can be expressed through the family name, kinship, or names connected to a politically powerful group. A Chinese example would be \textit{Hongerدائ}, the “red second generation”, meaning the offspring of Chinese leaders who contributed to the liberation of China. Social capital can also be acquired through the life and educational trajectory.

### 3.3 “States” of capital

Symbolic and therefore also cultural capital can exist in the “states”, in English often translated as “forms”: the “embodied” state, the “institutionalized” state and the “objectified” state.\textsuperscript{100} The embodied state is habitus when habitus is recognised (i.e. it represents important symbolic values). It is embodied history

\textsuperscript{92} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{94} Ibid. pp. 13-4.
\textsuperscript{95} Ibid. pp. 10-11.
\textsuperscript{96} Ibid. p. 16.
\textsuperscript{97} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{98} Ibid. p. 21.
\textsuperscript{99} Ibid. p. 22.
\textsuperscript{100} Ibid. p. 17.
and consists of dispositions and attitudes formed after a series of influences and inculcations. These are often unconscious. 101 The institutionalised state is symbolic capital guaranteed by institutions, such as the university systems or particular institutions. An example is the diploma. The diploma is institutionalised capital and not exactly the same as embodied symbolic capital in the form of habitus. A person may have embodied skills but not a diploma. Or a he or she may have a diploma but not the corresponding embodied skills and knowledge. Finally, symbolic and cultural capital can exist in an “objectified” state. 102 This is when it exists in the form of for example legitimate, recognised objects, such as books or pieces of art.

The transmission of symbolic and cultural capital is often less visible than that of economic capital. However, it still plays a pivotal role in social reproduction and even for the reproduction of economic capital. These conversions of capital play an important role in the study, most visibly in the reconversion of economic capital in the family into cultural or educational capital.

3.4 Modes of Reproduction

A major point in Bourdieu’s sociology is that access to dominating culture or cultural capital is crucial for success in the education system. 103 In his late work The State Nobility he differentiates between two “modes” of reproduction strategies for social groups. 104 One is to reproduce the social assets and position of the groups or family depending primarily on family resources, such as social capital and economic resources available in the family network. This is the family mode of reproduction. But in modern society social groups and especially those with strong cultural capital rely as much on the education system in their reproduction strategies. Their cultural advantage gives them success in the education system. Then they strengthen their inherited cultural capital further. They also get diplomas that make their positions legitimate. This is the educational mode of reproduction. The difference Bourdieu makes between two types of reproduction sheds light on the family and student trajectories that will be analysed in this study.

101 Ibid.
102 Ibid.
4 Research Questions

In the context of globalization of higher education, domestic expansion of higher education and the trend of Chinese students' international mobility displayed in the background section, research has been increasingly conducted with regard to the motivation of studying abroad, the adaptation to a new learning culture, and the perceptions of future career after graduation. Themes such as the importance of English, family influence on educational trajectory, cultural experiences, educational and employment competition are selected and discussed in the literature review. Related to the background and literature review, this study aims at finding out factors that lie behind the choice by Chinese students at Uppsala University for obtaining a master's degree, and how the individual social background and educational trajectory relate to the choice of a western education system and the perception of future career. In order to reach the goal, the individual social origin and trajectories leading to the studies in Uppsala are analysed, the students’ encounter with the “western” education system represented by Uppsala University, the students’ expectancies for the future career connected to the diploma are addressed, finally, the correlations among the above dimensions are illustrated. The following research questions cover and go beyond the themes discussed in the background and literature review sections.

1. What role does different species of inherited and acquired capital play in the trajectory of Chinese students?
   a. What was the importance of the economic, cultural, educational and social capital of the family of origin?
   b. What is the importance of student’s own educational and professional trajectory? What does the Chinese students’ meeting with the western university look like in the perspective of the habitus concept?
      a. How do Chinese master students experience academic teaching and learning?
      b. How do Chinese master students relate to other cultural dimensions of student life?

2. What significance do Chinese master students attribute to their studies abroad with regard to their future careers?
   a. How do Chinese master students perceive the importance of the cultural experience of having studied at a western university?
   b. How do Chinese master students see the significance of their diploma in their future social life as well as study and professional career?

3. How do Chinese students’ social origin and educational trajectory correlate with the adoption of a western education system and a perceived future career?
   a. How does Chinese students’ social origin relate to their educational trajectory?
   b. How do Chinese students’ academic merits relate to their choice of Uppsala University and perception of future career?
5 Method

This study is entirely based on semi-structured interviews with Chinese students studying at Uppsala University.

Initially, I planned to collect various kinds of data related to Chinese free-moving students to ensure both the richness of information that interviews can provide and a quantitative picture of patterns and fluctuations over time of the numbers, gender, regional origin, sources of funding and study choices of Chinese students coming to Uppsala after the reform initiated in 2011 requiring tuitions fees from non-EU students. However, the attempts to collect such data were unsuccessful, despite several attempts. The main reason was that regulations prevented the Uppsala University administration from giving access even to aggregated data of this kind as long as national origin was included.

I also considered collecting information from Chinese free-movers at the university through a questionnaire, in order to catch broader patterns, parallel to the insights interviews could provide. However, the time investment involved, the risks of getting too many no-answers and doubts about the quality of data collected this way made this option less trustworthy. I therefore opted for a purely qualitative method, using life-trajectory interviews.

The analysis is founded on ten in-depth, semi-structured interviews\textsuperscript{105} with Chinese students in Uppsala. The interviews were conducted from the end of March to the middle of June of 2018. They took between one to two hours.

5.1 Sampling

Originally, I had wished to make a criterion-based sampling\textsuperscript{106} reflecting various faculties and disciplines. However, it turned out to be difficult to contact Chinese students through the academic institutions, partly for the same reason that made it difficult for the university administration to provide information. Finally, I opted for a variant of what is commonly called a snowball principle\textsuperscript{107}. I asked contacts I already had to suggest names of students and I asked the interviewees if they knew of other possible interviewees. This approach meant that I directly or indirectly knew most of the interviewees personally and that I socialized frequently with some of them. It also meant that I had to give up attempts to make a strictly criteria-based sample of interviewees. Instead I tried to see to that at least the difference between sciences and social sciences would be covered by the sample. Moreover, I could not select interviewees on the basis of any systematic order, prior, information on them, for example their regional origin. The distribution of interviewees on disciplinary areas is given in Table 2. As will be discussed below, this information is for ethical reasons not so detailed as it could have been. In terms of gender, the balance in the sample was 7 female students and 3 male students. Although I planned to make the samples even in terms of


\textsuperscript{107} Ibid. p. 237.
gender and discipline, it was not easy to get access to the targeted interviewees, for some of the times I got refused to conduct the interview.

There are obvious disadvantages but also some advantages with this sampling method. As mentioned, one obvious disadvantage was that it made it difficult to select interviewees that corresponded to certain criteria, such as discipline, origin, gender or the like. Further, the limited number of interviewees makes it impossible to generalise the findings. I have tried to handle this limitation by keeping as close as possible to the data on the individual trajectory provided by each interview, meaning I have avoided making generalisation.

5.2 Interview guide

The interviews can be characterised as semi-structured. All were conducted with an interview guide, covering topics related to Chinese students’ social origin (presentations of inherited and acquired capitals), education and life trajectory (before, during and after studying at Uppsala University), career goal after graduation, and the perceptions of educational, social-cultural and employment situation of their place of origin and in Sweden. In order to achieve a deep understanding of each interviewee’s social origin, I for example asked questions about the generation of their grandparents, such as on their living conditions, occupation and life trajectory. Instead of a list of specified interview questions that is risky to make an in-depth interview rigid, a topic-led-interview was preferred. This is logically and structurally easier to handle and interview questions can be constructed flexibly according to topics when an alternative way of questioning is needed.

They followed a set of ordered topics, at a superior level, which largely correspond to the order in the analysis of the interviews below. At first such general topic concerned the family of origin and its trajectory, from the generation of the grandparents onwards. A following topic addressed the educational careers of the interviewees. A fourth topic focused on the process leading to getting accepted as a foreign student abroad. A fifth general topic dealt with the meeting with, the studies and social life in Uppsala. Finally, a fifth general topic centered on the expectations for the future. All these major topics included a number of sub-topics that were common for all interviews. However, the exact wording of questions could vary.

Making the interviews

Interviews were as far as possible made in calm circumstance. One of the advantages of knowing many of the interviewees beforehand was that I normally was trusted as an interviewer and that the informant felt relaxed, and in principle “open-minded”. Probably, some of the themes touched by in the interview would have been more difficult to explore if I had been a total stranger to the interviewee. A successfully conducted interview is one that makes interviewee feel comfortable to talk. This depends to a large extent on the interviewer’s flexibility in questioning and his or her attentiveness to the interviewee’s answers, giving the interviewee space and time to talk, asking follow-up/deeper questions when necessary. Another factor taken into consideration is the usage of language and

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terminology. Usually the interviewee’s native language and ordinary language should be applied to make sure the questions come across. This also means giving the interviewee a sense of equality to the interviewer. As learners of studying English as second language, most of the Chinese interviewees found it difficult to fully express themselves in English, thus Chinese was taken as the main language during the interviews. Besides having the chance to fully expressing themselves, speaking Chinese, the choice of language was helpful to build trust between interviewees and me as interviewer. Using a shared language represents the same social and cultural identity, a context in which the interviewees are more likely to tell the truth and speak out their heart. But this is not the only path to build trust. It was also important for me to know the subtle and invisible characteristics of the field that was covered by the interview topics and questions. As a Chinese international student, I had good conditions for understanding what the interviewees were talking about, including when they consciously or unconsciously tried to hide or embellish certain aspects of their experiences. Some topics were nevertheless more sensitive than others. A particular difficult issue was the question of to what extent political connections had played a role for the family of origin and how. Some of the interviewees also reluctantly answered questions on the economic conditions of the family. Another difficulty turned out to be that the students sometimes did not know exactly about the details of their family’s condition.

Each interview lasted from one and a half hours to two hours. I checked before the interview with every interviewee which language he or she would be comfortable to use. All interviews were conducted in Chinese except one (interviewee 9) that was made in English. Two interviews had to be conducted through WeChat voice-call, because of distance issues, while the rest were face-to-face.

5.3 Validity
The validity that my analysis can claim is that typical for qualitative studies. I keep close to the information given by the interviewees on rather complex topics such as the relevance of the family of origin for their trajectory or their reaction to the university culture in Uppsala. It is unlikely that the pattern of relations (between for example social origin and educational trajectory or between the educational trajectory and the meeting with Uppsala University), as this pattern appears in the interviews, is totally accidental. The rather rich information from the interviews is likely to point to social mechanisms that “exist” in the real world that the students were talking about. This does not exclude that the interviews at the same time can be seen as a narrative that the interviewees produced. Under such difficult situation, I paid close attention to the interviewees’ coherence and consistency in their narratives to ensure the “internal validity.” However, the contradictory aspects of interviewees’ narratives do exist, such as the motive of cultural experiences behind studying abroad contradicts with their reluctance of different social-cultural exposure, which is also illustrated in the Analysis. The

limited sample is a real limitation. Additional interviews would probably not make the patterns invalid that the existing interviews unveil, but they would add additional dimensions and complexity to them.

5.4 Ethical considerations

In order to protect the interviewee’s privacy and show conscientiousness about the ethical issues involved in the research, a consent form was signed by both interviewer and interviewee before each interview. I also excluded from the thesis all information at individual that could serve as a means to identify the interviewees. Therefore some information found for example in the Table 2 is less precise than what my data allow it to be.

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6 Analysis

This section addresses the research questions previously formulated. They are approached based on the empirical data collected from ten interviews and in the light of Bourdieu’s conceptual framework.

6.1 The role of inherited assets in the educational trajectory

The interviews shed light on the importance of various inherited assets in the educational trajectory of the interviewed students which led them to study at Uppsala University, i.e. species of capital, in Bourdieu’s sense, that originated from their family of origin. In order to facilitate the analysis of these assets, their distribution in two generations in the families of origin is made visible in Table 1. For the grandparents, the socio-geographical position (rural, urban) as well as professions and educational level are indicated. However, the information is not systematic because of the informants not always knowing. For both parents, the sector of employment (public or private), the type of employer, the profession and the achieved educational level are used as indicators, along with information on additional sources of income.
Table 1. The Interviewee’s Social Origin

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Interviewee</th>
<th>Grandparents (Father’s side: place of origin; grandfather’s profession &amp; grandmother’s profession)</th>
<th>Father</th>
<th>Mother</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Grandfather’s profession &amp; Mother’s side: place of origin; grandfather’s profession &amp; grandmother’s profession</td>
<td>Sector</td>
<td>Professional position</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>rural; principal of a primary school/accountant &amp; rural; peasant/peasant</td>
<td>Private</td>
<td>Air conditioning company; Engineer; Bachelor in Engineering</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>rural; peasant/peasant &amp; rural; peasant/peasant</td>
<td>Public</td>
<td>Federation of Social Science; Head; Bachelor in History</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>rural; peasant/peasant &amp; rural; peasant/peasant</td>
<td>Public</td>
<td>local technical college; secretary of communist party(Administrator); bachelor degree (Economics)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>not sure about the place of origin; cadre in a party school in the urban area/housewife &amp; rural; migrant worker &amp; peasant</td>
<td>Private</td>
<td>accountant firm; deputy head; bachelor</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>urban; president of Wanyuan Court(cadre); housewife &amp; urban; local public high school principal/kindergarten teacher</td>
<td>public-private business; owner of restaurant and accommodation local traveling resort and used to work at local Bureau of Forestry; owner; high school</td>
<td>Public; local public high school and investment; school office; continue education</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>urban; professor at Beijing top language university/unknown &amp; urban; China Petroleum and educator/unknown</td>
<td>Private</td>
<td>Senior executive manager in bigger corporation in Singapore Bachelor in English (elite university)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>small town; shopkeepers &amp; small town; vendor/housewife</td>
<td>Public</td>
<td>local transportation and safety board; director; high school</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>rural; peasant/peasant &amp; rural; peasant/peasant</td>
<td>Private</td>
<td>private business; architecture material company(4-Speople); owner; high school</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>rural; peasant/peasant &amp; rural; peasant/peasant</td>
<td>Private; private real estate and interior installation company; head of 10-20 staff; vocational college-Electricity</td>
<td>Private; private real estate and interior installation company; storekeeper; high school</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>rural; peasant/peasant &amp; small town; shopkeepers</td>
<td>Public</td>
<td>police station; Head of a branch; Police Academy</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

6.1.1 Inherited Economic Capital
In the trajectories of the families of origin, there is a striking difference between the generation of the grandparents and that of the parents, testifying of the social transformations that China underwent starting at the end of 1970s. Almost all
interviewees had rural origin if one goes back to the generation of the grandparents. In the parental generation, though, all parents lived and worked in urban areas. However, they differed in terms of educational and economic resources. A clear difference is notable between families primarily choosing a path in the public sector as teachers or public civil servants, on the one hand, and those opting for the private sector as small entrepreneurs or executive managers in private companies, on the other. For the first career path in the parental generation, education was usually more decisive, even though also parents following a path into the private sector had invested considerably more into education than the generation of the grandparents.

The balance between the mothers and the fathers should be briefly commented upon. Normally the fathers’ educational and professional level was decisive in the family trajectory, in the sense that it had more impact on income or on where families lived and worked. However, the mothers’ activities contributed substantially both in terms of education and as regards the economic income available to the family.

Differences can be found among the ten families in terms of the volume of economic capital. Parents who worked as small entrepreneurs were economically wealthier when the main occupation is considered than the ones who worked in the public sector. Several parents had started off in the public sector but then transferred to running businesses, which is an expression of the more lucrative profits they could get here. The parents who originated from urban area and possessed larger volumes of educational capital also tended to have stronger economic assets than the ones who originated from rural areas and had less educational capital.

The sources of economic capital varied. Generally, the family income of families where the parents worked in the public sector came from salaries, while the income of parents who were self-employed stemmed from the businesses they were running. Parents who worked as employees in private corporations had a basic salary and also performance-based payments. In addition, almost all families had extra income from for example renting out an extra apartment they had been able to invest in. Some parents working in the public sector also had income from investments they had made in friends’ businesses. However, no interviewees perceived their families of origin as being wealthy:

Both of my parents are civil servants. My father is the head of a branch police station. My mother is the director of Chinese People’s Political Consultative Conference. My family is not rich, just a common family. (Interviewee 10)

My father is running his own business with about 4 or 5 employees. My mother is a housewife. He started to be a migrant worker very young. It’s been hard for him to reach the level of today. (Interviewee 8)

My father works in local transportation and safety bureau and my mother used to have a clothes shop. Now she is doing some small financial management. The main income of my family is from rent [an apartment the family had invested in]. (Interviewee 7)

Even if it is likely that the interviewees didn’t have full insight into the economic conditions of their parents and even if it is probable that they deliberately chose to understate the family’s economic resources, these interview quotes testify that
most families pertained to a broadly defined Chinese middle class with rather similar economic conditions. Family income is a very sensitive topic during the interviews and most of the interviewees are either not aware of the family income or reluctant to share. In order to make their social class visible, statistics/studies of economic distribution in China are referred. Studies show the inequality of economic distribution in China is getting higher in terms of the following dimensions, rural-urban areas, tiered cities, employment status and education level. In general, urban area has much higher GDP share than the rural area; within the urban area, households with bachelor degree or above enjoy the highest earnings, two times higher than the average line, while the households with primary education or lower are the poorest, occupying around 40% of the average line; the self-employed households have the largest income compared with the employed and the retired ones; along with the industrial reform and wage system reform in both public and private sectors, “downsizing for efficiency” and privatization of state-owned enterprises change the employment structure, i.e. high skilled employees are in a large demand for high-tech industries, downsizing for efficiency force lots of urban employees to become unemployed, and wage system transformed from small difference to “principle of efficiency first”, consisting of fixed salary and performance determinant, thus “the employees in the state-owned enterprises who were not laid off benefited from the efficiency with rapid growth in their wages”; instead of the households in first tier cities, households in the lower tier cities are more likely to have more purchase power/disposable income based on the ratio between income and the cost of living.

In summary, the households from urban area, with higher education level, from lower-tier cities, employed or self-employed are positioning in an advantageous social-economic status. If we look at the ten interviewed students, all of their families belong to the advantageous social group illustrated above.

One exception was an interviewee whose parents had the strongest inherited resources from the generation of the grandparents and where the father worked in a senior position in a bigger company. The family had because of the father’s position lived abroad and possessed considerably stronger economic resources than others. This family history was expressed also in the interviewee’s lifestyle and hobbies.

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114 Ibid. p. 15.
115 Ibid. p. 17.
116 Li. ‘Income Inequality and Economic Growth in China in the Last Three Decades’, pp. 658-9
My father works in a transnational company in Singapore. My mother used to work in the local office of foreign affairs and now she is running her own educational travel agency...After they decided to migrate to another country, they were comparing the US and Sweden, finally they chose Sweden because the safety is an issue in the US and it’s too competitive for me. (Interviewee 6)

While the other families of origin were economically well off, considering Chinese society as a whole, this family stood out in terms of all economic, cultural and social assets.

**Family economic resources and the educational trajectory**

Family economic resources played a fundamental role in the interviewees’ educational and life trajectory, from primary school to the studies abroad. During the years of primary school, the expenditure of all families included costs for English training centres, as well as training centres for the so-called National Mathematical Olympiad tests. Among the economically slightly more abundant families, extracurricular activities and hobbies such as playing instruments, dance, art, calligraphy, sports activities, etc., were common. For most families, domestic traveling with the family represented an economic cost that would have been difficult in the grandparents’ generation. All of the interviewees had travelled with parents regularly. However, a female interviewee (interviewee 9) couldn’t recall spending on hobbies or leisure time, since she spent her entire childhood with her grandparents who were not aware of the importance of leisure activities; her parents were busy with their work.

During the years following primary school, family investments related to education focused less on extracurricular activities and more on pure academic activities. Parents often paid for activities deemed necessary for having success at school:

I went to the main course at a tutorial centre during secondary school so that I could get better score for better upper-secondary school. (Interviewee 4)

I went to secondary school in another city. I could live on campus, but both of my parents moved to the city with me. They rented an apartment close to the school and commuted from here to work in my county by company bus. (Interviewee 1)

I missed my dream upper-secondary school by one point. And my Dad spent much more tuition so that I could go to my dream school. (Interviewee 9)

Generally, economic resources were mobilized and reconverted into educational capital from the early grades onwards. The interviews testify to the crucial role of economic resources for the educational careers of the interviewees throughout basic and secondary education.

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*Note: it’s national mathematical ability competition organized by Chinese mathematical association. Students of different years are selected from levels of school, city, province and nation in order. The ones who win a prize on certain level have more access to elite upper-secondary school and university by adding certain number of points in their total score of the examination. Note: Main courses during middle school covers both humanities and sciences. Usually students get extra tutorial on physics, chemistry out of regular school days.*
Families’ economic capital was crucial also in higher education. In order to get into a good university, two paths can be taken, the national college entrance examination (the *gaokao*) or each university’s independent recruitment. 120 Five out of the ten interviewees, whose parents worked in managerial positions in both public and private sectors, opted for the independent recruitment. Some interviewees recalled:

My parents drove me to different universities to take the exams. (Interviewee 1)

My mother went to different universities in Beijing with me for the entrance exams... We stayed in a hotel in Beijing. (Interviewee 4)

As the quotes indicate, family economic resources were crucial for getting admitted to a university, for example owning a car, visiting various cities for making entry tests, paying for accommodation, being free for accompanying the child, etc.

Economic resources were also required during the interviewees’ whole undergraduate education. During these years, no interviewee made any financial contribution to his or her family or had the ability to make a living themselves. Moreover, family economic resources were required for the interviewees to afford the tuition and living costs. Economically more wealthy families (Interviewees 2, 7, 8, 10) could go beyond the basic costs for undergraduate education, spending extra money on exchange programs in western universities, including the US, Sweden and Finland.

As for the studies abroad at master’s level, the current situation of the interviewees, all had gone through an almost identical preparation and application process that consumed considerable time and money, such as fees for English training, global language test fees, transportation to different cities for the tests, university application fees, visa application fees, fees for the university application service agency, etc. However, no interviewee made any comment on the amount of money spent on it. While they didn’t see their families as wealthy, they were at the same time inclined to take the covering of these economic costs for granted.

All of the interviewees also claimed to have sufficient economic resources from home for prolonging their studies if necessary, instead of getting into the labour market. During their study at Uppsala University, seven of the ten interviewees were financially supported by their parents as regards tuition fees and all sorts of living expenses (food, transportation, traveling, etc.) The other interviewees had got scholarships from Uppsala University. None of the interviewees had any extra income besides the money from their parents.

In conclusion, family economic capital had been a very important asset since the very beginning of the interviewees’ educational career. Moreover, it had become increasingly important as interviewees academically moved up to tertiary educational level. Since the interviews were few, it is difficult to make meaningful comparisons between families where parents worked in the public sector and those engaged in businesses. The interviews show, however, that public sector

120 Note: *Gaokao* is the mainstream path and takes place simultaneously among all of the provinces in June; independent recruitment gives certain universities authority to recruit students themselves including written exam and interview, taking placing in February.
families often carefully planned extra income from other sources than their salary in order to cope with the economic costs for the education of their offspring.

### 6.1.2 Inherited Educational and Cultural Capital

Similar to the intergenerational transformation of family economic resources, the parental generation had acquired much more educational resources than the generation of the grandparents, most of whom were little educated. As shown in Table 1, while most grandparents were illiterate, almost all of the parents had above upper-secondary education, with a large proportion holding college education degrees. In the highly educated families, parents were more likely to engage professionally in the public sector. Interestingly enough, however, the few parents originating from more educated families often made careers in the private sector as senior managers or independent entrepreneurs.

When it comes to the balance between the educational level of the father and mother, the father most often had reached a higher educational diploma than the mother. This was also true for professional careers, the father more often holding higher, sometimes executive positions.

Parents’ influence on the formal education of the interviewees varied between different families, but was generally stronger before the tertiary level and weaker when the interviewees had reached university level and got older. This influence was also heavily shaped by the parents’ occupation.

> Both of my parents are civil servants. When I was young, every meal talk was about politics and current affairs. At first, I thought it was what every family did, then I found it was not the case. I was not into politics and history at school, but somehow I was still good at it. (Interviewee 2)

The parents’ educational level and experiences in the form of dispositions and attitudes also heavily influence the interviewees’ educational trajectories, which correlation resonates with Leppel et al.’s argument brought up in the literature review of the close connection between parents’ occupation and children’s choice of major.

> The reason that I chose Architecture as my undergraduate major is because of my parents. My father majored in engineering and my mother is a person with strong sense of beauty and she is passionate about art. Architecture was the perfect combination of engineering and art, so I chose it. (Interviewee 1)

> Both of my parents are civil servants. It’s a very stable job for them. Influenced by my parents, I also want to have a stable job. I want to work at a university to be an administrative officer. I feel it suits me better. (Interviewee 2)

As Table 1 shows, the generation of the parents had undergone a substantial upward social mobility in which education played an important role. Hence, they all strongly believed in education and they hoped their children could reproduce or improve their social status through education. They had supported every aspect of their children's education all the way, making use of quite a lot of economic resources. Benefiting from education on individual level was closely related to the national policy and preference towards education. Therefore, the increasingly heavy family investment on children’s overall education was also a reflection and outcome of the national policy and agenda. As the data manifested
in the background section on the expansion of Chinese higher education, China had attached a great deal of importance to education that was believed to be the key to boost the economic growth, increase social equity and consolidate the communist party’s power of leadership. On the other hand, when the interviewees’ families had invested in their education as much as possible, they implied their effort to distinguish themselves from the other students in the context of the expansion of Chinese higher education due to the imbalanced quality of higher education institutions and the fact of “better” employment graduating from “better” universities.

However, the generation of the interviewees had grown up being inculcated by the belief of the importance of education. Education had become sanctified through the upward mobility of the families and turned into a “doxa”, to use Bourdieu’s concept, for the Chinese middle class from which the interviewees emerged.

Although there is no clear pattern as regards family investment in extracurricular activities, there is one related to academic related training. Parents with college degrees were more likely to invest in academic related training than the other type of families. One exception is a family with lower educational level and a father running a private business, who invested more in academic training of the child than in extracurricular activities, believing that a life with higher education and “knowledge” was easier to live than running a private business having low education.

Neither of my parents nor my other family members is educationally cultivated. Even though my father is running a small business himself and makes a little bit money out of it, he still wants me to do well at school. I didn’t do any extracurricular activity when I was young, instead, I just went to all kinds of study and tutorial centres. My family still wants me to get educated, because they think that life and career are easier equipped with knowledge. (Interviewee 8)

In the interviews, it is difficult to make a clear distinction between “cultural capital” in a broad sense, i.e. general information and knowledge of legitimate culture, and “educational capital”, meaning higher educational diplomas as one particular component of this general cultural capital. In a few cases, especially the interviewee who aspired to become an architect (interviewee 1) and the interviewee pertaining to the family having the highest volume of capital (interviewee 6), it seems clear that the family of origin possessed and transmitted a general cultural capital to the interviewee. In other cases, cultural capital had above all an educational component. It had been achieved in the parents’ generation through education.

### 6.1.3 Inherited Social Capital

Interviewees were generally reluctant to talk about the role of social connections for their family of origin and in their own trajectory. This, as such, testifies of the importance of assets related to social connections and ties in Chinese society. While they more generally admitted the importance of social connections for the position of their family, they emphasized the competence of their parents for current career achievement.

My mother was not good at schoolwork, but she is very smart and good at administrative work. After graduation from upper-secondary school, arrangements were made for her for entering the governmental system, with the help of my grandfather’s social connections. So my grandfather offered a very suitable opportunity for her. (Interviewee 10)

After my father graduated from the vocational college, with the help of his classmate, he started working at the classmate’s father’s company, and does so until today. But it is my father’s capability that kept him there. And now he’s in charge of about 20 people and their company is expanding their business. (Interviewee 9)

However, the interviews sometimes also reveal the importance of social assets. Parents working in the public sector were more likely to find a position in a more promising office, department or branch of government and at a better geographical location, if they had the right social connections, for examples among members of the extended family or if they had contacts among other, more influential government officials.

My mother was offered work in a small town after graduation. And then my grandfather used his social connections to help my mother to transfer to an upper-secondary school in the city. (Interviewee 5)

My mother found work in a county after graduation from college. And then with the help of my uncle, she transferred to a primary school in the city. (Interviewee 4)

After graduating from high school, my father started working at the local transportation and safety office with the help of his friend. (Interviewee 7)

However, not all of the parents were satisfied with the income by working in the public sectors. Some parents chose to work there for several years and then transferred to private entrepreneurship. However, working in the public sector offered a large amount of social resources:

My mother worked in foreign affairs office in Xi’an for a couple of years, and then she started her own business by making use of the social resources accumulated while she was working there. (Interviewee 6)

Compared to the picture they gave of their parents’ educational careers, the interviewees more often seemed to benefit from social resources connected to their own kinship relations in their educational trajectories:

After I took the exam through the independent recruitment of Soochow University, my father contacted his friend in the university to arrange a position at the department for me. I passed the examination (Independent Recruitment), so I didn’t use his connection. (Interviewee 1)
I didn’t know what major to choose for my undergraduate education. Then my father’s friend who’s working at a bank advised that ACCA\textsuperscript{124} is going to be a hot major and will have a promising prospect in Chinese labor market. So I took his advice. (Interviewee 10)

It should be added that the social assets of the family of origin could exist and even be string without not necessarily becoming manifest in particular events in the educational trajectory of the interviewees. This was the case of interviewees 1 and 10 for whom these kinds of family resources could potentially become important in the later career.

The last but not the least point should be made here is the importance of social title of the interviewees’ parents as communist party members, especially the ones who are working in the public sector. Although it was not brought up by the interviewees, it’s an unspoken rule that being a communist party member is the prerequisite to enter the public sector in China. This in turn implies the social connection of the parents with the other governmental officials in the political system.

6.1.4 Capital Conversions

All the interviewees came from a broadly defined middle class except one interviewee from the upper-middle class. These middle class families had in common that the generation of the parents had originated from rural areas and that the generation of parents had had an upward social mobility in which education played a crucial role. This had led them to live and work in urban areas, either in the public sector, in managerial positions in private corporations, or running their own businesses. In either case, education played an important role in the trajectory of the family, but it had been more decisive for the families making careers in public sector, simply for the reason that educational credentials here were relatively more important. The exception to the middle class background is a family pertaining to the upper-middle class, with the father occupying a high position in an international company. Interestingly enough, this is also the only family where the grandparents had already accumulated strong volumes of capital, especially educational but also economic and social (interviewee 6).

Family economic investments into the interviewees’ educational trajectory show the significance of economic resources. Through basic, secondary and tertiary education until the studies abroad, the economic investment had been crucial. It had also become increasingly important while the interviewees moved up to higher educational level. However, the patterns of the investment among the families were slightly different. Parents investing the hardest into the interviewees’ academic activities tended to be the ones holding college degrees and holding managerial jobs in the public and private sectors. One exception was a family where the father has been running a small company and mother a housewife (Interviewee 8).

To judge from the interviews, then, the focus on academic investments deemed crucial for the educational success of the child were strongest among families where parents had college degrees. It is likely, that these families were

\textsuperscript{124} ACCA (Association of Chartered Certified Accountants)
more aware of the demands of the educational competition and of the necessity to take measures for preparing their offspring for this competition.

In spite of this difference, however, the upward social mobility in the generation of the parents, achieved through or parallel to the attainment of far higher educational levels than in the grandparent generation, seemed to have produced a general belief in education as part of their children’s future. A bit surprisingly, none of interviewees said that their families of origin had very particular, high expectations for their future in terms of professional career and economic income. Rather, they believed that their parents wanted them to live “a safe and happy life” (interviewees 1, 10). Consciously or unconsciously education had become part of the definition of this life, and a ‘natural component of the social reproduction strategy understood to be “natural”.

Looking at the ten families having shifting compositions of economic, cultural and social capital, we find that although all the families pertained to a broadly defined “middle class”, the proportion of each species of capital among the families varied. Among families with parents running independent small businesses, economic capital dominated. However, it is telling that even in the latter case the role of educational capital was acknowledged:

My father is running a private small business. My father only had upper-secondary school education and my mother didn’t even finish primary school. It’s difficult to run a business without any educational background. So they want me to study hard and choose a skill/knowledge-based major (higher education), so that I can have easier life in the future. Therefore I chose Bioinformatics, instead of business which my parents think is too little value. (Interviewee 8)

Along with the previously described systematic economic investments in education, this is an example of a reconversion, in Bourdieu’s sense, of economic capital into educational capital. The quote illustrates that this conversion may include a belief in education as such, not merely a goal to get diplomas or a narrow expectancy that education should “pay off”.

Social assets were also converted into educational ones. As previously observed in the section on social capital, family and other contacts had played an active role in the trajectories of the parents. This was also the case for the interviewees. As discussed above, interviewees 1 and 10 are great examples of the conversion. Interviewee 1 could have benefited from the father’s friend working at Soochow University by saving her a study position and Interviewee 10 benefited from the father’s friend working in a bank by giving the advice on major choice.

Educational capital was also converted into social and economic assets. With higher educational diplomas in the parent generation also often followed social contacts in the administration. These could in turn be beneficial in terms of getting information and advice or be considered for promotion. They could also bring economic advantages, as when parents invested money in businesses of friends they had made through their professional careers or benefit their own business for the parents who transferred from public sector to private entrepreneurship.

My mother used to work in public sector and then she started running her own educational travel agency. She has influenced me a lot on how to do business in China. She showed me how important social connections are. In order to recruit
enough students for the agency, she needs to keep a good relationship and partnership with primary school principals by giving gifts (money) from time to time. Also she gets resources and information from her previous colleagues. (Interviewee 6)

To sum up, economic, social and educational assets went along with and conditioned each other in the trajectories of the family of origin and of the interviewees themselves, although the families of origin varied as regards the balance between assets of various types. When economic, social and educational capital were all strong, as in the case of the family where the father held a managerial position in a Singapore-based international corporation, these combined resources represented a strong advantage in the educational career of the interviewee (Interview 6). When they were all relatively modest, the families depended above all on the capital that was the most vital one for them.

6.2 The Role of Acquired Capital in the Educational Trajectory

This section focuses on the correlations between Chinese students’ educational trajectories and the choice of studying at Uppsala University, in other words, the importance of assets accumulated through the interviewed students’ educational and professional trajectories that led them to study at Uppsala University, i.e. acquired capital, in Bourdieu’s sense, that accumulated through their trajectories.

6.2.1 A Transformative Educational Trajectory

The interviewees’ trajectories had been transformative. In the interviews, a few dimensions of this transformation appear as particularly important and can be seen not only as aspects of the formation of acquired institutionalized educational capital, but as a formation of embodied capital. In order to enrich the analysis, Table 2 is displayed below categorized by indicators of interviewees’ age, gender, tier of place of origin, university tier and its city tier, postgraduate discipline, basic and secondary education trajectory and professional experiences.
Table 2. Interviewees’ Educational and Professional Trajectories.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Interviewee</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Rank of place of origin(^{125})</th>
<th>Rank of Undergraduate University(^{126}) and city tier</th>
<th>Postgraduate major</th>
<th>Basic Education (Primary; Secondary; Upper-secondary)</th>
<th>Extra-curricular activities</th>
<th>Working experience (yes/no)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>County(^{125}) of Tier 2</td>
<td>Tier 2</td>
<td>Humanities</td>
<td>local public; EP; EP</td>
<td>international olympiad test training; english test</td>
<td>no</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Tier 4</td>
<td>94; Tier 1</td>
<td>Social Science</td>
<td>public; private; EP</td>
<td>piano, swimming</td>
<td>no</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>Tier 2</td>
<td>34; Tier 1</td>
<td>Natural Science</td>
<td>public; public; public</td>
<td>ping-pong, chess, international olympiad test training; course training center; sketch</td>
<td>no</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>Tier 3</td>
<td>89; Tier 1</td>
<td>Natural Science</td>
<td>public; public; EP</td>
<td>olympiad test training; course training center; sketch</td>
<td>no</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Tier 4</td>
<td>NA; Tier 1</td>
<td>Social Science</td>
<td>public; public; public</td>
<td>calligraphy, piano, reading</td>
<td>no</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Tier 2</td>
<td>Uppsala University</td>
<td>NA</td>
<td>private; private; private; EP in Uppsala</td>
<td>dance, violin, some small instrument</td>
<td>no</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>County of Tier 2</td>
<td>20; Tier 1</td>
<td>Humanities</td>
<td>public; EP; EP</td>
<td>Chinese paint, piano</td>
<td>no</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>Tier 2</td>
<td>91; Tier 2</td>
<td>Natural Science</td>
<td>public; public; public</td>
<td>English training; course training</td>
<td>no</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Tier 1</td>
<td>34; Tier 1</td>
<td>Business</td>
<td>public; public; public</td>
<td>Nothing</td>
<td>8 month internship</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Tier 4</td>
<td>235; Tier 2</td>
<td>Social Science</td>
<td>public; public; public</td>
<td>piano, reading</td>
<td>no</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: EP=Elite Public; F=Female; M=Male

All interviewees with the exception of the one with the richest inherited assets (Interview 6) had attended public Chinese schools and educational institutions from the primary to the tertiary level. Their educational trajectory had passed through a gradual selection process for which their inherited assets had been important. However, it is equally important that this selection process also has had effects on themselves as persons and on their view of themselves.

The fact that all but one student often by far surpassed their parents in terms of achieved educational level seemed to be the foundation of a sense of entitlement. They now belonged to a group for which basic university education was a minimum level that no longer distinguished them from others:

Isn’t it normal to have a master degree? I think it’s a basic educational level for us to have. I had never thought of looking for jobs before I get a master degree, or even

\(^{125}\) Note: Rank of Place of Origin defined by China’s tiered city system (hierarchical classification) in Table 2 refers to South China Morning Post, which divides cities into four tiers following the categories of Gross Domestic Product, administrative function and population size. Tier 1 is the highest and Tier 4 is the lowest. The official source from the government couldn’t be found or doesn’t exist, but this South China Moring Post is highly recognized and widely read English-language newspaper. The tiered system is used here aimed at making sense of the place of origin and geographical mobility among the interviewed students. http://multimedia.scmp.com/2016/cities/.

\(^{126}\) Note: the source of undergraduate university ranking system is from Academic Ranking of World Universities in 2018. The current ranking is among 1243 universities in China, including public universities, private universities and independent colleges. The ranking is indicated by dimensions of teaching and learning, i.e. quality of incoming students, education outcome and reputation. http://www.shanghairanking.com/Chinese_Universities_Rankings/Overall-Ranking-2018.html (accessed on 2018-09-05).

\(^{127}\) Note: County is between municipality and town in terms of administrative hierarchy in China.
PhD. All of my classmates were also furthering their master program without taking any break. It’s such a natural action to take, just like going to university after upper-secondary school. (Interviewee 7)

If I didn’t succeed in getting to a first tier university, I would have prepared for one more year. A good university is too important for the future career and life. (Interviewee 2)

6.2.2 Subordinating personal interests to the demands of the educational competition

Further, this feeling of naturally belonging to a group of university educated people, can be seen in the light of sacrifices that the interviewees had done on the way. As Table 2 shows, almost all of the interviewees had practiced some sort of extra-curricular activities besides schoolwork during the years of primary school. However, except for interviewee 6, they all gave up their hobbies when entering secondary school:

I learned piano when I was young, but I gave up when I was about to go to secondary school. (Interviewee 10)

I was learning chess and ping-pong, and then somehow I gave up learning later. My parents didn’t force me to continue. (Interviewee 3)

The interviewees experienced other “interests” and extra-curricular activities as inferior and as taking valuable time from schoolwork. Much in the same vein, many interviewees described how they had turned their back on courses deemed not to be sufficiently profitable in the academic competition:

I was not very good at science courses, but I still chose it over humanity courses. Because it’s said that the ones who choose science branch are more intelligent than the ones who choose humanity branch. But later, I transferred back to humanity branch. (Interviewee 5)

I chose sciences branch, coz everybody was choosing it. And it was said that there were more places of science majors in university than the humanity branch. Also, it’s easier to find a job after graduation from university. However, I chose a social science as my undergraduate major. (Interviewee 10)

I love dancing and I still keep it as my hobby. However I didn’t take it as a major to study because my parents think that it’s a profession for young people only and not for when I’m getting old. (Interviewee 6)

In an existing hierarchy of disciplinary areas, science was at the top and humanities and art at the bottom. With one exception, the choices of the interviewees had been steered by the exclusion of what was perceived as less profitable personal interests.

During the second year of upper-secondary school, classes are divided into science class (including courses of mathematics, physics, chemistry, etc.) and humanity class (including courses of Chinese, history, politics, etc.). Students need to choose one branch based on their interest. Art courses are seldom set as another main branch in public upper-secondary schools.
6.2.3 Passing from the periphery to the centre

Yet another dimension of the selective educational careers the students has passed through was socio-geographic. These careers had brought the interviewees from less developed regions to the most developed ones in China, especially Beijing, the centre of politics, culture and education, and Shanghai, the economic centre. This mobility towards the centre had happened gradually during the transfers from upper-secondary school to undergraduate education. Many students originated from small counties, then got selected to elite secondary school and further to upper-secondary school in the capital city of the province, and then got selected as a few of the “luckiest” ones to elite universities in key metropolitan cities. (Interviewee 7)

In the journey through a selective education system, the most important geographical transformation took place after the gaokao or independent recruitment, since most of the interviewees then had to travel beyond their provinces for higher education. The interviewees saw these exams as one of the most significant steps to take and being successful contributed to their feeling of entitlement:

(I think) the Chinese gaokao is the most equal system and policy in China and a significant step to take to be successful, even compared to western countries. Because you just need to be good at studying and acquiring knowledge from school. It doesn’t require other resources. Therefore it is accessible and equal for students from poor families; they can reach and succeed in the system. (Interviewee 2)

Independent recruitment was less common and prestigious than gaokao, and some interviewees were not even aware of this option. The ones who utilized this option got accepted by elite universities in Beijing (interviewee 1,4,7). However, they did not see this as a big success, since compared to their upper-secondary classmates they were all from elite upper-secondary schools in their own provinces. It was a “natural” and “ought-to-be result” for them to get into a good university.

Actually compared to my classmates’ universities, mine is not that good. It’s ok. (Interviewee 4)

All of my classmates went to elite universities in Beijing. I’m just one of them. (Interviewee 7)

To sum up, the educational trajectory of all but one of the interviewees can be characterised as a journey through a very selective education system where good school results were a condition for success. This had imposed on students to leave less profitable interests and leisure activities aside, as well as academically less useful courses and disciplinary areas. The journey had also taken them from less developed geographical areas to “big cities” and universities. They had attended prestigious secondary schools and achieved very well on the existing entry tests for higher education. This experience has created a sense of entitlement: they now belonged to the group of well-educated people and above all because of their own merit and achievements, through hard work, discipline and intelligence.

There was one interesting exception to this perspective on one’s own personal trajectory, tellingly coming from the interviewee who came from by far the family with the richest resources.
I was so bad at schoolwork. I was disobedient to my teacher. I spent most of my time hanging out with my friends instead of studying. (Interviewee 6)

It’s also worthwhile to touch upon how the interviewees perceive and position themselves compared with other Chinese peers. Although almost all of them underplayed their effort and their hard work along the educational trajectory, fierce competition can be sensed through their narratives.

It was so competitive to get into a good university in China, even 0.5 points could make such a big difference, because there are thousands of students having the same score and fighting for the same position. (Interviewee 5)

It once again vividly displays one of the most prominent challenges in this highly selective education system faced by Chinese students and parents, intense competition for limited prestigious educational spots unintentionally brought about by the expansion of Chinese higher education.

Based on the hierarchies of the interviewees’ undergraduate universities in Table 2, we find that most of them went to top 100 universities in China, however, nobody went to elite ones. They don’t perceive themselves as elite students either especially the ones who originated from elite public upper-secondary schools.

I was not the best one. Some of my classmates went to much better universities than me. (Interviewee 4)

6.2.4 Motives for studying abroad

Both the interviewed students’ family origin and educational trajectories have gradually and equally strengthened their sense of entitlement in education that in turn motivates them to study abroad in the context of globalization of higher education and the expansion of domestic higher education. Therefore, the overseas study can be understood as the continuity of the sense of educational entitlement, meanwhile, parallel to the pragmatic view. What should be emphasized here is that the motives are neither fully out of rational strategy nor arbitrary, but the outcome of both conscious and unconscious trajectories and activities.

The entry into well-reputed and often universities rich in resources in China implied the opportunities for participating in exchange programs and in short-term studies abroad as well as attainment of the knowledge of international education mobility. For some of them this had played an important role in their educational trajectory. They had confirmed their decision to study abroad:

I decided to further my study in Sweden after the exchange program in Umeå. I appreciated their academic quality and “buddy program”. I feel I should go abroad to experience as long as I have the chance. (Interviewee 8)

After the exchange program in the US, I felt that I really should further my study in another country to experience an extremely different learning culture from Chinese one. However, I decided to choose Europe over the US to further my study, because The American culture is too causal and aggressive for me. (Interviewee 7)

I got to know the MIEX (Master in International Management) Program through my university. I remember there were delegates from this program giving an open
promotion at my university. It was a business management related program that is kind of related to my undergraduate major. After all sorts of consideration, I decided to go to this program. (Interviewee 9)

While nine out of the ten interviewed students chose Uppsala University out of “belief”, one was taking it as last resort after he failed in all kinds of trials in China.

I tried twice for master program in China, but I failed both of the times. The master program in the US requires GRE that is too demanding. Applying for Uppsala University was not easy, but it’s easier than domestic universities and the American ones. (Interviewee 3)

On some level, it’s less competitive for Chinese students to apply for Uppsala University than the domestic ones and the overseas ones requiring more comprehensive ability tests.

A similar point of view from another interviewee to treat studying abroad as an alternative:

If you (a person) couldn’t get into a top university in China, it’s pointless to go to any lower level university. The alternative is going to a counterpart in another country. (Interviewee 6)

The nine interviewees who chose Uppsala University out of “belief” have explained various reasons, but several as key motives and considerations have been frequently brought up by the interviewed students, e.g. English-taught programs on the idiomatic level, not famous but positive reputation in the academic world, decent world ranking, conscientious academic attitude and the longest history among all of the Scandinavian higher education institutions, culture and lifestyle featured by “equality and freedom”, convenient geographical location and well-reputed welfare system.

When I was an exchange student at Umeå University, I was amazed by its rigorous academic attitude and I fell in love with the beautiful nature view. Afterwards, I decided to further my study in Sweden, and then a professor from Umeå University recommended Uppsala University when I’ve never heard about it...I checked the university website and took his recommendation. I was quite happy when I knew that I got accepted by Uppsala University! (Interviewee 10)

Instead of the US or Canada which are usually the hottest host countries for Chinese students, I was considering about Nordic countries as the destination which I was so curious about since my childhood because of Norse Mythology. When I was checking the potential universities of my major, Uppsala University was the perfect option for me. The good academic reputation, long history, lifestyle featured by “freedom” and a good location were all factors taken into consideration. (Interviewee 5)

Several interviewees chose Uppsala University after all sorts of comparisons among Chinese and the other overseas higher education institutions in terms of duration of a program, tuition fees and the cost of living, overall socio-cultural environment, number of Chinese students, etc.
It takes three years to complete a master program in China, which is too long for me. The master program in the US was also an option for me, but the language and comprehensive ability tests were too rigorous for me. The master program in the UK is too short and costly. The MIEX (Master in International Management) Program covers different European countries and various types of culture. That’s very exciting for me. (Interviewee 9)

I also applied for master program in Singapore and some PhD positions in Australia and Canada besides Uppsala University. The offer from Singapore was too late and I didn’t get accepted by the PhD programs in Australia and Canada. Finally I chose Uppsala University, because it conforms to my academic interest and the tuition fees are less market-oriented compared with the other mainstream higher education host countries. (Interviewee 4)

According to Table 2, three out of the ten interviewees had working experiences in different fields in China. The reasons why they chose to study in Sweden instead of continuing with the job can be summarized in two aspects, to strengthen the employability and to experience a different culture and life.

I have worked for 4 years, during which time I was doing repetitive job every day. I used to work almost 11 hours per day and sometimes I needed to work during the weekend. But I got poorly paid. I was thinking about changing my job, but I thought the job situation would be the same with just a bachelor degree. In order to change the repetitive life style and strengthen my employability, I decided to study abroad. After checking with an educational agency, I got to know that Uppsala University has the major that I would like to choose and its admission requirement is not as challenging as the American ones. (Interviewee 3)

I was not very used to the office political game, and that’s why I quit the first job. The second job was ok, during which period I experienced an unsuccessful relationship. I just want to further my study abroad and change my lifestyle. (Interviewee 5)

Compared with the ones with working experiences, the interviewees without working experience endow education with more idealistic meaning.

I chose to further my study all because of my passion, it has nothing to do with how much I’m going to make after graduation. (Interviewee 1)

What is also worth to touch upon here is that the decision to study abroad and the choice of majors were all made by students themselves except the interviewee 6 whose parents were involved in the university decision-making based on their rich knowledge of Sweden thanks to their broad overseas social connection. On some extent, it testifies that the social origin is getting less involved in Chinese students’ education decision while moving up especially up to the point of overseas study compared with their academic merit and knowledge of the world acquired through their educational trajectories.

To summarize, the educational careers of the interviewees were a transformative process. The interviewed students had been successful in a competitive education system. This meant giving absolute priority to their academic studies, leaving other interests aside. They had had reached top schools at secondary level, passed university entry tests successfully and achieved entry into highly ranked Chinese universities. This journey also represented a “socio-
geographical” one from less developed regions to highly developed ones. These transformations of their lives had notably given students a sense of entitlement. They had arrived so far not only because of the support from their families, but because of their personal merit. These transformations and the personal merits had reinforced each other, and had led to various motives to study at Uppsala University that was treated as the first priority, last resort, instrument for future employability, chance to experience a different life style. To explain the motives with “push and pull” model introduced in the background section, expansion of Chinese higher education, fierce competition for limited prestigious university spots and employment opportunities, and repetitive working and life style can be taken as discernible “push” factors; the advantages of Uppsala University which was perceived by the interviewed students with “belief” can be taken as “pull” factors. However, different from the original model, “close ties” and “common or similar cultural background” are not perceived as a decisive factor in this empirical study.

6.3 Habitus and the Meeting with the Western University

This section discusses the interviewed students’ experiences of coming to Uppsala University and how the experiences are correlated with the habitus shaped through family origin and Chinese education system. In focus stand both the meeting with the teaching and learning “culture” and with the wider social environment.

6.3.1 Academic teaching and learning

Nine out of the ten interviewees had experienced the Chinese public education system from primary school to undergraduate education. Their academic habitus had been shaped through almost 20-year experiences. Since habitus is the bodily and cognitive reflection of a structure, the social world within which the individual has lived, their perception of academic studies and of themselves as students had been formed during these years. As the previous analysis of these students’ academic trajectory testifies, Chinese school and university culture is in many respects very different from the one found in Western countries. It took time for Chinese students to adapt their habitus to Swedish higher education when arriving at Uppsala University. The interviews show that the meeting with the western university represented a process of acquisition of new ways of understanding oneself as student, a challenge to the previously formed habitus that the interviewees had to handle, which resonates with the concept of identity negotiation and reconstruction initiated by Gargano.

The Language Barrier

English, as a feature and drive for globalization of higher education, as well as “global language” and “lingua franca of the modern era” as pointed out in the background section, occupied a great part of the interviewed students’ life in

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129 Gargano. ‘(Re)conceptualizing International Student Mobility The Potential of Transnational Social Fields’, p. 341.
Uppsala. The language barrier was a common issue that the ten interviewees had to face. After almost 20-year education fully in Chinese, making use of English as a teaching and learning language in a full English-speaking environment was experienced as a big challenge for almost all of the interviewees. Generally, the interviewees faced difficulties in fully expressing themselves in English, as well as with a lack of listening skills, properly academic language skills and terminology, and an ability of reading and understanding literature.

I didn’t understand a word in lectures in the beginning. I didn’t want to ask my classmates either, coz it would be so embarrassing if I don’t understand them after their explanation. So I would rather take the audio recording of the lectures and listen to them myself afterwards. (Interviewee 3)

In the beginning, I couldn’t get used to the literature reading. There were so many literatures to read. I was so worried that I might fail my courses of the first period. I started preparing more than one month in advance. (Interviewee 10)

I seldom talk in seminars. Although I’m ok with having casual conversation in English, I’m lack of academic language skills. And I’m not very familiar with the topics of the seminars, so I usually keep silent. (Interviewee 1)

In order to tackle the challenge, my interviewees spend their after-class time learning English themselves or through the Chinese language training centre, as well as through listening to recorded lectures and doing reviews afterwards. The quotes and the subsequent actions taken by the interviewed students partially answer the question of why Chinese students opt for inactive participation in group discussion and debate brought up in the background section.

The terminologies in my major are very difficult. I still spend lots of time learning English myself after class. (Interviewee 8)

**A New Educational Culture**

With regard to key components of the educational culture students met with, the ten interviewees all pointed out the difference between China and Sweden, and they expressed difficulties in adapting to the new learning environment. Some of these components or aspects of the new educational culture stood out. The first one is related to the ways exams were made:

Instead of taking sitting-down exams, we have take-home exams and giving presentation. I’m more used to Chinese way. The take-home exam and presentation are more challenging for me because I was unfamiliar with the English academic paper writing and giving presentations in public in my non-native language. (Interviewee 10)

The difficulties in handling previously unknown forms of exams also extended to the evaluation process. The less discriminating grade system could be experienced as a relief compared to the Chinese one:

My undergraduate university evaluate by specific score, my current program uses only three levels. Not much competition, I feel so relaxed. (Interviewee 5)

However, it was difficult for interviewees to handle the “fail” level.
I failed one course during the first period. It was such a shock, since I have never failed any course in my life before. I was so upset and then I flew back home. (Interviewee 2)

A new experience that represented a challenge of previous habits from China came from the new variety of teaching forms:

In my undergraduate program, there was only one form of teaching, which is lecture, no interaction with my professor. But in my current program, there are lecture, seminar and group work. It’s challenging to share opinions in seminars and to communicate with other international students in group work. I’m more used to study and think deep myself. (Interviewee 4)

Differences of this kind were challenging for students accustomed to Confucian educational thoughts echoed with learning strategy and value system elaborated in the background section. Two recurring themes in the interviews were the relationship between professors and students and expectancies on students’ performance in class.

Interviewees said they were used to an absolute obedience to and respect for the professors and for professor’s authority generally over students. They were amazed by the implicit demand in teaching at Uppsala University that students should communicate openly with teachers and relate to professors as if they were “equal”. The “codes of behaviour” were experienced as unclear and the balance between respect for authority and “equality” is difficult to discern.

I was educated to fully respect my teachers under any conditions, teachers are always behaving superior to students in my experiences (in China). However, it’s different here. Teachers seem to be more friendly and equal to students, under which circumstance, I’m still being careful with how to make use of the equality. (Interviewee 4)

Another crucial aspect of the adaptation process described by the interviewees related to their performance in class. They were used to classes dominated entirely by the professor. Teachers could never be challenged in public, and it was thought impolite to interrupt a professor for example by asking questions. The interviewees described a meeting with Swedish classes that were different, where open and active discussions were encouraged and interruption with questions or comments during lectures were accepted and common. This was difficult to understand and often met by suspicion by the interviewees, some of whom preferred what they called “deep self-thinking and reflection” to active participation in class discussions which resonates with the findings of Li, Chen and Duanmu:

I’m more used to the class where teachers do the most talking, but after coming here (Uppsala), active participation and discussion is encouraged. I wanted to, but I don’t know how to join the discussion. So I usually keep silent in seminars. (Interviewee 3)

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131 Li, Chen and Duanmu. ‘Determinants of International Students’ Academic Performance A Comparison Between Chinese and Other International Students’, p. 393.
While the interviewees were amazed by what they saw as academic “equality” in western education, they most often continued to apply the standards of Chinese teaching. With one exception, all interviewees were top students graduating from top universities in China. However, they all confronted challenges and experienced a mismatch on different levels in the western university. Clearly, the dispositions or habitus valued in their previous educational trajectory did not fit to criteria for academic performance in the western higher educational institution. The habitus shaped by their successful educational career in China which had up till now functioned as a valuable symbolic capital in the academic context, suddenly was challenged and contested as symbolic capital.

The interviewees generally felt stress during the first period of the first semester due to the unfamiliarity with the new teaching and learning mode and the lack of understanding of how relations to the professor and classmates in class should be handled. They also feared failing in exams. Every interviewee made efforts to adapt to the new education environment by self-learning English and investing a large amount of time on assignments. However, no one had tried to be active in seminars or group work, in spite of often expressing their appreciation for the new mode of education. It seemed that the Chinese academic habitus prevailed. Very few interviewees showed much motivation to acquire the ways of relating to teaching and learning that they found challenging in Uppsala as a western university. A likely interpretation is that they trusted and relied upon the academic habitus of hard individual work, respect for teachers and little communication on content and forms with student colleagues that had brought them this far in their academic careers. The recognition of the differences and the process of tackling with them is the starting point of the identity negotiation and reconstruction.

6.3.2 Other cultural dimensions of students’ life
Apart from the academic life, the interviewees also faced challenges as regards other experiences in Uppsala of “cultural” nature. These challenges touched on several dimensions, such as interactions with both Chinese students and other international students, the natural environment and weather, preferences as regards food and cooking, dress style, interest in traveling, etc.

The interaction with other international students often came up in the interviews:

With the other international students, I mainly interact with my corridor mates and classmates. At the beginning of the semester, we sometimes went to nation pubs or clubs, sometimes we had fika at corridor together, but gradually, I lost the interest. I’m not a fan of drinking but it’s an important part of student life here. And I find it’s getting boring to have casual conversation with them, it’s always about the same topics. (Interviewee 9)

I know I should interact with the other international students, but I couldn’t come up with topics and sometimes I don’t understand their logic in their saying. (Interviewee 3)

We have so much in difference. And I think it’s normal and good to keep the diversity. I don’t want to become one of them, and observation is enough. I came here to study and experience, I think I’ve experienced enough by observation. (Interviewee 10)
I find that we have strongly different modes of thinking. For example, Chinese political issues and condition of human rights (the interviewee only used 'human rights' in English in her whole narratives) based on different social media platforms would be discussed in class. Sometimes I feel very uncomfortable to their strong questioning, I mean you (the other international students) haven’t been to China before, how can you be so sure about what you read through the social media since every social media platform reports from their own perspectives. (Interviewee 5)

As these examples testify, the interviewees normally found it difficult to establish durable contacts with other international students, for a variety of reasons, one being different related to topics and preferences. This lack of proximity with others was often expressed in the idea of “observing” other students, as opposed to engage with them as colleague students.

Most of these distances did not exist in relation to fellow Chinese students:

I still prefer staying with Chinese students, because we speak the same language and have the same culture. It’s easier and more comfortable to communicate with Chinese students. (Interviewee 6)

We are all faced with the same issues of study and life. I feel better after we talk about it. (Interviewee 5)

The interviewees’ preference for interacting with Chinese students over the other international students indicates their shared embodied life trajectory. Compared to what they saw as a “western culture” that they knew little about, the interviewees felt more “natural”, close and comfortable to the habitus shaped through family origin and educational trajectory in China. The dispositions valued in their previous life trajectory did not match the social world that they now found themselves in.

The reaction of the embodied habitus to social relations also extended to environment, weather conditions and to food:

The air is clean and the nature is beautiful. But the daytime during the winter time is too short. It definitely affects my mood. Sometimes I don’t feel well (psychologically), I need to take vitamin D. (Interviewee 8)

I don’t like western food and I don’t know how to cook western food. I usually cook Chinese food myself, but I still miss the real Chinese food. (Interviewee 4)

If we look at the interviewees’ place of origin, they are all cities of various tiers; even previously county areas are now becoming highly urbanized with a large part of the population flocked in from villages. Nature can be barely seen except far out of town. Therefore, the appreciation for the nature in Uppsala from Chinese students is understandable.

The interviewed students could appreciate the lack of competition that they experienced as part of the Uppsala University academic culture, recognising that this was something new to them:

Life here is so relaxing. It seems like there is no competition between people at all. Everyone is living life in his or her own way. I’m enjoying my free time here. (Interviewee 4)
However, it is significant that they, as we will return to, at the same time expressed their worries that they might lose the morale and competence to compete, after returning to the competitive Chinese society.

The picture that emerges from the interviewed Chinese students’ involvement with different “cultures” in terms of social relations with foreigners and daily activities comes into conflict with the motivation they themselves expressed for studying abroad. While experiencing western culture was a major motive behind the choice of studying abroad, none of them was more than temporarily involved in this “culture”. In this sense, the foreign university diploma and the studies lying behind it represented technical knowledge and skills, above all increased English skills, but little else that would normally be associated with holding a certain diploma. The diploma serves less well as an indicator of life styles, attitudes and values. However, in spite of the very small sample in the study, the interviews indicate small differences between students in social sciences as opposed to science, the latter focusing purely on academic achievement while the former were more open to experiencing other “western” culture.

6.3.3 The Hysteresis Effect and the Homogenisation Force of the Chinese Education System

The dimensions mentioned above of the interviewees’ experience of the encounter with the western university, represented by Uppsala, were commonly shared, even if nuances existed. The differences that existed as regards their social origin and the composition of capital in the parent generation were little reflected in this meeting. One exception was the only interviewee (Interview 6) who had considerably stronger both cultural and educational assets to draw on and who had lived outside China. In spite of being more able to communicate in English and relate to people of other nationalities with greater ease, also this student kept the distances to other foreign students and had difficulties adapting to the negotiating character of teaching. The interviewee sample is small and it is difficult to claim that keeping distances of this kind would be a general phenomenon among Chinese students. With this reservation in mind, a hypothesis is that the Chinese education system has had a strong effect of homogenisation on the interviewed students, independently of their social origin.

This homogenisation of especially the academic habitus can be related to Pierre Bourdieu’s notion of “hysteresis effect”, a mismatch between the embodied dispositions, including cognitive ones, and the objective social structure in which these dispositions operate. In this study, the interviewed students’ academic and other experiences in China, embodied as a structure in habitus, faced another social structure represented by the academic environment in Uppsala Even if habitus is changing so as to adjust to new experiences and environment, these changes are slow and gradual, operating between “constancy” and “variation”. If it’s difficult for the bearer of the habitus deriving from previous actual conditions to sort and reorganize the structured dispositions to adapt to the new social order. The structured habitus might become dysfunctional in the

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133 Ibid.
new situation and the effort of maintaining the previous dispositions might cause more discordance. This dynamic is the “hysteresis of habitus”. This concept also reflects how Chinese students’ adoption of a western education system is correlated with the habitus structured by Chinese education system.

6.4 The Perceived Significance of the Studies Abroad for the Future Career in Relation to Social Origin and Educational Trajectory

This research question addresses the significance of the cultural experiences and of the diploma in terms of the future professional career and social life in relation to their social origin and educational trajectories for the interviewees. While most of the interviewees had a positive view of both aspects, there were also other voices. The interviewees’ prospects for the future will now be discussed with reference to the conceptual perspective used previously in the analysis.

6.4.1 The Perceived Value of Acquired Capital

To facilitate the analysis, we will here focus on acquired capital that can be categorized into three types: academic knowledge and skills acquired by the interviewees, a broader cultural competence of cultural capital, the embodied state of cultural capital acquired from the study experiences, such as ability of solving practical issues in a different country and independent life, ability of multi-cultural understanding as well as feeling comfortable and behaving natural when speaking English and to international people; the diploma of Uppsala University as the institutionalized cultural capital meanwhile the symbolic capital; the English language skills as symbolic capital. All of the gains can be understood as the results of a process of conversion of habitus, from structured dispositions to structuring dispositions.

As regards acquired educational assets, all interviewees held a positive view of their academic knowledge acquisition. The most positive evaluation in this respect was made by students who majored in sciences, compared to those taking a major in social sciences. This difference had partly to do with the pragmatic view of knowledge expressed by the science students for whom the acquired knowledge and skills represented a concrete utility for their future careers:

> I would like to apply for PhD. If it doesn’t work, I want to work in a biomedicine company in China, engaging in both scientific research and marketing. (Interviewee 4)

This relationship to the acquired skills and diploma stood in contrast to that of students in social sciences:

> I don’t think I’m able to find any job related to history. I might start from the newspaper industry. (Interviewee 7)

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With respect to more general cultural experiences, social science interviewees expressed more confidence in their utility than those in natural science:

I’m studying International Humanitarian Action, but I feel I learned more of different cultures than my major knowledge. (Interviewee 1)

This contrasted to students in natural sciences:

Is it (international cultural identity) important? I don’t think so, plus, I don’t think there is such an “international culture”, because everyone is from a different part of the world and everyone has incorporated a different culture, I don’t think there is anything wrong to keep the original local culture. (Interviewee 4)

In spite of these differences, all interviewees claimed they learned something that would benefit them in their future life trajectory. However, these gains had as much to do with their state of independency or autonomy while studying abroad as with the experience of other cultures:

When I was in China, I had my parents to help me with everything. But now I’m here by myself, I need to depend on myself. I think I improved a lot in solving practical issue myself and the ability to live independently. (Interviewee 10)

For some students, however, the “cultural” experience had been an important element:

It’s amazing to meet people with different personality, from different culture, of different nationalities. It’s interesting when the different thoughts spark on certain issues. I’m becoming more tolerant and understanding for different cultures and thoughts. (Interviewee 5)

A third aspect of the acquisitions made when studying in Uppsala was the diploma as such. The interviewees evaluated the diploma in terms of its expected market value for further studies or in professional careers and they related this value to the status of the university as well as to future employers:

It’s a prestigious university with top 100 global ranking, and I think it will definitely be valued by Chinese labour market. (Interviewee 3)

It’s not a mainstream western university, so I’m a little bit worried about the power of the diploma (in Chinese labour market). (Interviewee 2)

As I know, some public sectors treat foreign diploma returnees as lower class than the ones with domestic diploma by offering them worse welfare. (Interviewee 7)

Generally, second year students expressed more doubts about the value of the future diploma for their continued career than first year students, which may depend on this perspective having more immediate relevance to them.

Improving English language skills had been another major motive for studying abroad. All interviewees claimed that they have hugely improved their English skills while studying in Uppsala and that the proficiency in English would benefit their future study and professional careers regarding the status of English in China’s policy making and labour market. However, some of them doubted the
value of English skills in their future career, while others expressed concerns about their proficiency being competitive compared to the peers who acquired English skills in China:

I want to work as an administrator at a Chinese university, but I don’t think English is highly demanded or required there. So I don’t think English can be counted as an advantage for me. (Interviewee 2)

China is becoming more and more internationalized and more and more outstanding students might have better English skills than us (who acquired English skills abroad). (Interviewee 9)

In spite of keeping away from students of other nationalities, interviewees did build some friendships both with other Chinese students and other international students. However, it was difficult for them to foresee to what extent such contacts would ever prove to be useful as social capital, in Bourdieu’s sense.

Similarly, none of the interviewees ventured to estimate the future economic gains coming from the diploma they would hold. This would entirely depend on the competition for careers.

6.4.2 An (Un)certain Future
Finally, as for future careers, the interviewees expressed concerns as to the risks connected to being absent from China during the study time and, as seen in the previous quote, returning with a foreign diploma. These worries were also related to the possibility of missing making proper Chinese contacts and networks considering that China is characterized by a deep-rooted and distinctive culture of social connections and ties that were benefited by their family of origin. But above all, they were concerned about a possible mismatch between dispositions formed in Uppsala and those demanded for manoeuvring in the social space of China:

Life here (in Uppsala) is so relaxing, it’s impossible not to become peaceful and friendly in this kind of environment. I’m afraid that I won’t be able to be aggressive and turn on the competition mode when I get back to China. (Interviewee 4)

Similar perspectives were expressed by other interviewees.

What was certain for the interviewees was that they eventually would choose to return to China largely because of family ties, which echoes with Brooks and Waters’ argument that family bonds are a crucial factor that affects Chinese students studying abroad. However, what differs from their argument is my interviewees chose to study abroad is out of interest and passion, meaning more individualist motives, instead of fulfilling family obligations, the so-called “family project” pointed to by Brooks and Waters.

6.5 The Adoption of Educational Mode of Reproduction
With regard to the importance of the family of origin for the educational career, many studies emphasise this importance. Although the findings here do not contradict this view, it adds that this dependency on the family should also mean that the effects of the students’ educational career as such are equally important. A major finding is that the experiences from this career had a transformative effect.

With regard to the educational career, seen in the context of the dramatic expansion of Chinese higher education and the fierce competition this has created for limited higher education positions, most of the interviewed students saw studies abroad as a strategy to avoid the competition or as an alternative to acquire a competitive diploma. This finding is in accordance with the findings from Brooks and Waters, and Xiang and Shen. However, the current study also finds that the choice of studying abroad was not only driven by this purpose. It is also an expression of a feeling of “entitlement” that the successful educational career had shaped. The choice of studying abroad was not only strategic, but seen as a “natural” in a process where the individual turned him/herself into a highly educated person.

This sense of entitlement connects to the role of education in the reproduction strategies of the middle class families from where the students emerged. Brooks and Waters, along with others, emphasise the investments in education as a family enterprise. The continuous support from the family of origin is part of solidarity ties that connect the student to the family of origin. The interviews support this perspective, but add another dimension. Going back to Bourdieu’s distinction between a family mode of reproduction and an educational one, the close dependency of the family of origin can be seen as an expression of a family mode of reproduction. All steps in the educational career are influenced by the family. The interviewees also expressed the future obligations that followed and many wanted to return to China partly for being close to their family. But at the same time, to focus only on the family aspect of the successful educational careers of the interviewees misses an important point. Bourdieu’s idea about the educational mode of reproduction also is that the family becomes dependent on the education system for its reproduction. The offspring needs to be competitive in an education system that is not controlled by the family. This works, because the culturally rich families possess the cultural capital needed for success in the education system.

In the light of the Chinese context and the recent upwards mobility of the middle classes that the interviewees came from, an aspect of this tendency towards an educational mode of reproduction stands out. The dependency of the

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338 Bourdieu sums up two modes of reproduction, “family” and “school” mode of reproduction. Family mode of reproduction can be understood as strategy of reproduction through inheritance of different species of capital from the previous generation in a family; school-mediated mode of reproduction is the strategy of reproduction through education in terms of conferment of credentials and academic knowledge transfer which is regarded as entry pass of labor market. Cf. Pierre Bourdieu, The State Nobility Elite Schools in the Field of Power, Engl. trans. C. Lauretta Clough, Polity Press, 1996, pp. 286-7).
education system also introduced a new distance to the family of origin that is visible in the interviews. The habitus and the acquired embodied capital of the interviewees had been shaped as much of the education system and its institutions as by the family. Thus, the interviewees very much saw their current position and their choices of disciplinary area or jobs as their own. The educational trajectory they had gone through had entitled them, by their own merits, to act autonomously. In this sense, the interviews testify of a shift from a family mode of reproduction to an educational mode.

6.6 Discussion

The findings of the study will now be related to some of the previous research discussed in the literature review. It should be remembered that the limited number of interviews does not allow any general conclusion. The findings relate to the patterns in the trajectories of the ten interviewees. However, as pointed out in the chapter on methods, the qualitative approach provides rich information on these trajectories. Therefore it is likely that analytic points made above are not arbitrary. They point to mechanisms that exist more generally, but to a lesser or larger degree. Further studies of the same mechanism may also add other insights and identify other patterns.

As regards the crucial role of family economic support, this study comes up with a similar conclusion to the one made among others by Liu, i.e. that the family financial condition plays a crucial role for promoting students’ educational career and to some extent also students’ choice of major. However, many other studies educational career is compared only to the economic level of the family. Even if a very clear pattern appears in the interviews in the study, they show that it is important to look not only on income but also on other dimensions or assets of the family of origin. The educational level as well as the sector in which parents work also are important, along with the grandparents’ capital.

Some studies put forward that the learning experience from a western university is likely to strengthen Chinese students’ communicative skills and “openness”. The interviews give a less positive picture of this change in terms of communicative ability and adaption to teaching and learning with stronger emphasis on negotiation on content with teachers and peers. As pointed out, most interviewees’ existing academic habitus, acquired during the long and successful educational career in China, revolted against what they saw as an unknown teaching culture at the university they had arrive to.

The studies of Yang and Cebolla-Boado find that Chinese students are looking for cultural and spiritual cultivation, without specifying exactly what this means. This study suggests that Chinese students’ cultural motives in fact might be contradictory. While the interviewees declare that they appreciate learning about “other cultures”, they described their encounter with Uppsala University in another way. Instead of engaging in the different “culture” of other

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140 Ibid. p. 63.
foreign or Swedish students, they most often avoided them. They choose to position themselves in an observation angle. This points to an important potential difference between declared or imagined practices and real ones.

Many studies indicate that English skills go beyond the pure language skills acquired by Chinese international students and extend to a broader ability and to manners related to English language skills, such as “transnationalism”, “intercultural competence”, etc.\(^{142}\) The empirical data collected in this study do not confirm these claims in an explicit way. The interviewed Chinese students showed reluctance to build broader English skills. They focused primarily on academic and communicative skills.

Many studies find that Chinese overseas students are confident in the value of a western diploma and in learning experiences from a western country on the Chinese labour or academic market. The interviews indicate, however, that the Chinese students had various concerns in this regard. They were worried about not being able to readapt to Chinese culture, about losing the social connections, and about being unable to compete with their local peers, etc. These findings conform to the conclusion made by Hao et al.\(^ {143}\)


\(^{143}\) Hao, Wen and Welch. ‘When sojourners return: Employment opportunities and challenges facing high-skilled Chinese returnees’, p. 37.
7 Conclusion

The idea of a knowledge economy initiated by the World Bank, the increasing importance of English proficiency in the global labour market, and the expansion of Chinese higher education, all lead to the phenomenon of Chinese student migration to western countries for seeking advantageous experiences and credentials. The marketization of global higher education makes institutions in the world expand their recruitment of international students. Swedish higher education offers an increasing number of international programs that attract Chinese students seeking for globally recognized degrees.

Using a qualitative, interview-based method and applying a Bourdieusian sociological perspective, this study examines the trajectories of ten Chinese students at Uppsala University, one of the most renowned universities in Sweden. Although limited by the small interviews sample the study gives valuable insights into factors that shaped the Chinese students’ trajectory and their inner interrelations. Many studies on factors determining Chinese students’ international mobility point to one single factor, such as expected educational advantages, future economic benefits or a wish to experience other cultures. In contrast, the findings of the study indicate that a variety of factors simultaneously influenced the choice of studying abroad. The students belonged to a Chinese fairly well off middle class that had attained its social status in one generation through an upward social mobility. For both families having primarily economic capital and those having above all educational or cultural capital, investment in their offspring’s educational career was a priority. In this investment, the family economic support from primary education up to tertiary education was crucial. However, it was always reinforced by the contribution of cultural, educational and social assets.

Students did see the studies abroad as an investment in an advantage in the competition on the academic and job market, but also as a natural part of having become highly educated individuals who are entitled to pursue their interests. They did also understand the stay abroad as a challenging encounter with an international or western “culture”. However, in practice they were little interested in engaging in this culture through socialising with other international students. Similarly, they emphasised the value of learning English skills for wider social communication, but most often limited their investment in English to purely academic uses. An interesting finding was that their academic habitus, shaped by their long and successful experience of the competitive Chinese education system, made them badly equipped for appreciating and accustoming to the more communicative teaching offered at Uppsala University. With regard to the future, students were concerned that their diploma and experiences from abroad would not prove to be an advantage in the competition for future careers in China.

The findings illustrate that both the factors driving the Chinese students’ studies abroad and the outcomes were complex. They had many and sometimes contradictory dimensions. However, the intergenerational perspective taken in the study, considering the three generations of the grandparents, the parents and the students themselves, point to a possible and interesting shift in the social reproduction strategies of the rather recently established Chinese middle class. The students’ successful educational careers that had led them to highly ranked national universities and further to studies abroad had not been possible without
a very strong support from the family of origin. Most crucially this involved economic assets, but also educational, cultural and social ones. The educational investment could hence be seen as entirely dependent on a family logic with a strong component of solidarity ties. However, since this reproduction strategy involved heavy investments in education it also implied a dependence on the education system and its institutions. The interviews indicate that the student view of themselves and their future to a large extent had been shaped by their educational success in a competitive system. They felt educated and entitled, not merely as representatives of their families. This indicates a shift from a family based mode of reproduction to what Pierre Bourdieu named an educational mode of reproduction.
8 References


