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International student migration and social stratification in China

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ABSTRACT

During the late 1990s China moved from a period of "wealth creation" that benefited the majority of the population to a period of "wealth concentration" that benefited a minority. This essay focuses on the role of international student migration from China to other countries in this process. In particular the authors delineate how different types of capital – the human, social, political and cultural (specifically foreign degrees) – transform into each other. In the process the analysis considers how the conversions among these different types of capital have intensified and have become concentrated in the top stratum of society. The essay links the international education to general patterns of social transformation currently occurring in China. Specifically the discussion brings in a transnational dimension to the examination of social stratification in contemporary China.

1. Introduction

China's economic reforms which commenced at the end of the 1970s reached a watershed in the late 1990s. According to the Chinese sociologist Sun Liping, during the 1990s the reforms turned from being a period of "wealth creation" that benefited the majority to being a period in which wealth became concentrated among a few. The cleavage between the haves and have-nots has become unprecedentedly wide (see also Wu and Perloff, 2004), with all forms of resources – economic, social, political and cultural – increasingly converging and concentrating in the hands of an emerging elite group. Government officials are now among the best educated and economically most privileged; elite education paves the way to wealth and status (Beijing University, known for its anti-establishment tradition and eccentric intellectualism, is now dubbed the "Cradle of Tycoons." [China's University Alumni Association 2008, cited in Xinhua News Agency, 9 January 2008]), and it is common for the rich to possess high degrees and close connections with the state.

This is in stark contrast to the situation in the 1980s when the rich were mostly household entrepreneurs with low social status. By the 2000s it had become nearly impossible for ordinary people to enter the top circle of the society. Li (2005b) aptly portrays the structure of the Chinese society as an inverted "T" that consists of a massive low-income population and a tiny minority who possess disproportionately large amounts of wealth on the top. Class formation and class closure are underway.

What is the underlying logic of this process of social closure? Based on our historical and ethnographic study of international student migration from China throughout the reform era, we address this question by focusing on the conversions among different types of capital. The 1980s can be seen as a time of limited triumph of financial capital over political capital, when state-based redistributive inequalities gave way to social stratification based on individuals and groups' performance in the growing market-oriented economy (Bian, 2002). But state-controlled areas (e.g. education and research) and market-based spheres were initially separate, and the convertibility between different types of capital was low.[1] This contributed to the well-known phenomenon that "nuclear scientists were worse off than street peddlers" in the 1980s, a circumstance described by Chinese sociologists at that time as the "distintegration of resources" (e.g. economic and symbolic resources scattered among different groups). The situation in the new millennium is dramatically different. Different types of capital – the social, cultural financial and political, – became actively convertible to each other, and furthermore the exchange and convergence between them became increasingly intensified and concentrated in a top stratum of the society. We regard the conversion to be the central dynamic underpinning the process of social stratification. As Bourdieu (1986) powerfully pointed out, it is convertibility that determines the value of capital. Social and cultural capital will mean little if they cannot be

[1] An important exception is the so-called "princelings" who capitalized on the parents' political power to seek commercial profit. This type of capital conversion was confined to a very small group of population and is regarded as outright corruption. This essay is concerned with more routinized, socially acceptable, and institutionalized capital conversion.

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converted to other types of capital, especially economic capital. Similarly, economic capital acquires its sociological significance only when it is converted to social and cultural capital, thus translating economic inequalities to particular social relations and cultural representations. The international student migration from China that emerged in the late 1980s constitutes an important link for the Chinese new rich to convert economic capital to internationally recognized cultural capital, which is in turn converted into political capital that legitimates their newly acquired status.

The conversion between forms of capital, however, never occurs automatically; nor is the process of conversion free of internal contradictions. It is always conditioned and mediated by social institutions, and there are always struggles that present new dilemmas and demand new strategies. We must examine the specific patterns of capital conversion in order to discern the underlying logic of social stratification. Three dimensions emerge from our historical and ethnographic data. First, the population who possesses some forms of capital desire for smooth exchange between different types of capital and at the same time desire for the autonomy of each type. This tension defines to a large extent the specific mode of convertibility. Different types of capital must maintain relative autonomy from each other for the exchange to be sustainable. Otherwise, for example, if educational degrees were for sale, they would lose their intrinsic value and would subsequently have no market value. They would also be deprived of their symbolic power for legitimating the privileges of the degree holders. In the present case, a symbolically constructed hierarchy among education institutions serves as a main means to keep the balance. Initially, all foreign degrees were highly valued and were hardly differentiated in China. By the early 2000s, when many more Chinese students joined the international education market and increasing numbers of foreign degree holders returned every year, special attention was given to the international ranking of universities. Degrees from prestigious universities became regarded as qualitatively different from those from colleges that are said to "sell" seats. In response to this, ambitious parents would send their children to elite schools abroad as early as possible, hoping the children would accumulate enough human and cultural capital over the years to get into top universities in the destination country. Thus, the route of conversion between financial and cultural capital becomes longer, and becomes more institutionalized.

Second, spatial scale – an emergent, provisional fix of territorial scope of social actions or relations – is crucial for capital convertibility. A group of human geographers have recently highlighted the importance of scale in social changes. For example, it is crucial for labor movement to re-scale shopfloor solidarity up to national alliance (see Smith, 2002; Swyngedouw, 1996; Brenner, 1999, 2001). The spatial scale at which one converts one type of capital to another determines the efficiency of the conversion and subsequently the total value of the capital. For instance many socially disadvantaged groups – children, women, ethnic minorities, and the poor – often have high "stocks" of social capital (e.g. trust among peer groups). But their social capital has low value because their scale of convertibility is limited; they may acquire locally recognized symbolic capital, but have difficulties in accumulating nationally or internationally valued social assets (see Leonard, 2005). Similarly, the authority of an elderly person with ample cultural capital in a village can easily be undermined by a young migrant returned from the city because the latter is able to accumulate and convert capital on a much larger scale. Appadurai (1986) pointed out that "things" (objects, signals, currencies) acquire their value through circulation, and thus the remit and mode of circulation constitute an integral part of the "politics of value". Education is intrinsically related to social stratification not only because it enables people to accumulate various types of capital, but more importantly it "lifts" people to a higher scale of capital conversion. The upper-middle-class population in Hong Kong, for example, has actively engaged in international education in order to transform the spatial scales of social reproduction. Facing unprecedented extension of higher education and rapid increase of university degree holders among those from the working class backgrounds since the 1960s, upper-middle-class populations secure their social status through the acquisition of a Western education (Waters, 2006). This is the similar logic that the new rich in the mainland are following, as we will detail below.

But mainland China is also different from Hong Kong in that international education is primarily part of the *production*, rather than reproduction, of social inequality. What concerns us is the not how an established structure perpetuates itself, but the question of how a structure of stratification emerges anew. This leads to the third specific feature of the process of capital convertibility in China, namely the role of the state. The Chinese state not only initiated international education migration, but also facilitates the convertibility of different forms of capital. The state remains a major provider of symbolic capital. By appropriating particular discourses of human capital, meritocracy, globalization and competitiveness, the state adds political value to internationally acquired degrees in the national context, encourages and assist foreign degree holders to "cash in" their human capital, and at the same time projects itself to be progressive, pragmatic and capable, thus reinforcing its legitimacy in the era global competition and mass communication.

The internationalization of education has attracted considerable academic interest because international student migration has become a prominent aspect of social change in China over the last 30 years. Most of the literature, however, examines the phenomenon as a form of education exchange and human resource development (e.g. Cheng, 2002; Chen et al., 2003), and often situates it within the debate on brain drain, brain gain and brain circulation (Iredale et al., 2003, chapter 4; Cao, 2004; Zweig et al., 2006; Chen, 2008). While drawing on this literature, this essay adopts a broader perspective and takes student migration as a critical lens through which to examine larger social changes. In what follows, we will first review the history of the migration of Chinese students that began at the end of the 1970s, and has been directly influenced by both domestic politics and the international relations of China. Initiated as a government programme imbued with heavy symbolic capital, student migration is now largely a matter of private choice and is often facilitated by professional and commercial agents. We will then probe why people invest disproportionately large amounts of resources in overseas education. We argue that the dramatic social stratification within China makes people regard overseas education as a means of providing extra advantage in the fierce competition for scarce resources and opportunities. This however does not mean that education is completely commodificated. The third section of the paper describes how international education, as a relatively autonomous "field" in Bourdieu's word, reacted to the trend of commodification, and how people adopted new strategies to balance convertibility and autonomy. The fourth section of the paper calls attention to the role of the Chinese state. As leaving China for study has become a private activity, the Chinese government has put in place numerous policies and programmes to encourage the students' return. These policies provide the new elite with symbolic and political capital, and at the same time incorporate them into the establishment.

The paper is based on both authors' long-term research on student migration and social change. Xiang has worked on skilled migration and student migration in and from Asia from 2000. From 2005, he has been working on emigration dynamics and social transformation in northeast China, particularly Liaoning province, which is also a major sending place of student migrants. Shen has worked on student migration from China to Europe, return migration and circular migration between the two continents.