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Understanding international postgraduate students' educational mobility to China: an ecological systematic perspective

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This document is the Accepted Version [AM]

Citation:

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- Yu, Y., Cheng, M., & Xu, Y. W. (2021). Understanding International Postgraduate Students' Educational Mobility to China: An Ecological Systematic Perspective. *Higher Education Research and Development. Retrieved from*: https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/07294360.2021.1973383

Understanding International Postgraduate Students' Educational Mobility to China: An Ecological Systematic Perspective

Abstract

International educational mobility is often perceived as westward mobility for non-English speaking learners. This study explores an increasing trend of mobility from developed countries to mainland China from ecological systematic perspectives. Drawing on interviews with fourteen students from developed countries, the study explores the factors key to their choice to study postgraduate programmes in China and subsequent experiences. It reveals that students' choice of mobility can be complex, diverse, and socially and culturally embedded. The process of choosing where to study becomes a journey: individual students rationalise their choice through self-negotiation and integrative consideration of personal aspirations, family influence, social environment, finance, and cultural differences. The study proposes a multi-layered ecological systematic approach to comprehensively understand why and how various factors affect their choice-making. The findings challenge the stereotyped privilege and elitism of western education, as studying in China has empowered students from disadvantaged backgrounds to access further education beyond their national borders. The implications for achieving equality via international educational mobility are discussed in this paper.

Keywords: international students, educational mobility, postgraduate programmes, educational equality, China

Introduction

The number of international students moving globally for overseas education has increased significantly in the recent decades (Ahmad and Shah 2018). According to UNESCO (2018), over five million students had studied degree programmes outside their home countries by 2017. Extant studies have concentrated largely on student mobility from east to west, i.e. from the developing to the developed world (Brooks and Waters 2010). In this trend, the US, UK, and Canada are regarded as the top destinations for international students from developing countries (Kondakci et al 2017; Sin 2013).

Despite this perception that the volume of international educational mobility is almost equal to westward mobility for non-English speaking learners (Kondakci et al 2017; Yu and Moskal 2019), China has become the world's third largest receiving destination for international students since 2016 (UNESCO 2018), with 492,185 international students in 2019.

The rapidly increasing number of international students can be linked to the Chinese government's call for its higher education institutions to expand the scale of their international education delivery and enhance the attractiveness of their degree programmes for international students (Ma 2017; Wen 2018). Free tuition and generous scholarships are now used as key approaches to encourage international students to study in Chinese universities (Ma 2017; Ahmad and Shah 2018). This is based on the Government rationale that the benefits of delivering international education in China are not assessed in terms of immediate financial benefit, but as a form of cultural diplomacy. For example, to share knowledge about China and to encourage interest and positive attitudes to the country (Liu and Lin 2016). Specifically, the Chinese government funds international education and has increased scholarships for undergraduate and postgraduate degrees, especially for students from the 64 countries along the One Belt One Road (OBOR)[1] landscape (Yang 2010). According to the Ministry of Education (MoE), 12.81% of international students received a full scholarship from the Chinese government in 2019 (MoE 2019).

Whilst China has become the world's third largest international education hub, there is limited research on international students studying in this non-English-speaking and developing country. A small number of studies have focused on international students from developing countries studying in China, exploring intercultural learning experiences (Moufahim and Lim 2015), government policies and management (Mulvey and Lo 2020; Wen 2018), and factors shaping students' mobility to China (Ma 2017; Ahmad and Shah 2018). There is lack of research on international students from developed countries coming to study in China. This study addresses the research gap and explores how an ecological system comprising individual students' micro, meso and macro social contexts shapes their decision making and experiences in pursuing international education. It examines the multi-layered factors underpinning educational mobility from developed countries to China. The identification of these factors and their interrelations are useful in understanding how individual's decision making is discursively situated. In the rest of this paper, we start with critically reviewing three dominant approaches used to interpret student mobility: push-pull model, social capital reproduction, and social networks. We then propose the ecological systematic approach as an under-used theoretical framework in this field, followed by methodology, key findings and discussions.

International Educational Mobility

Empirical studies on educational mobility have largely focused on why and where students from developing countries go for overseas study (Lai et al 2019). The push-pull model (Eder et al 2010), social capital reproduction (Brooks and Waters 2010), and social networks (Thompson 2017) have been widely used as key approaches in examining the causes and patterns of international educational mobility. These frameworks have been useful in identifying a wide range of features of the mobility.

Push-pull Model

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[1] OBOR is a global infrastructure development strategy adopted by the Chinese government in 2013 to invest in nearly 70 countries and international organizations. (Du and Zhang 2018)

As the most popular model commonly used across migration studies, the push-pull model has been used to explain international students' mobility decisions, directions, and destinations (Eder et al 2010). Students are described as being 'pushed' out of their home countries due to inadequate educational resources, lack of employment opportunities, and political instability; and are 'pulled' outside their borders to access better education and economic and social dynamics elsewhere (Altbach 2004). The push-pull model explains the rationale behind student mobility by considering the resources in their home and host countries (Lee 2017). For instance, Dimmock and Ong Soon Leong (2010) found that the three main 'pull' factors that attract Chinese students to study in Singapore were cost, quality, and culture.

Whilst pull-and-push theories offer insights into factors that encourage international education mobility, it remains unknown how those factors shape individual students' experiences in discursive and dynamic ways. Some factors may be more prominent than others when individuals make their own decisions of study abroad, in the light of interactions with their micro, meso, and macro contexts (Kudo et al. 2017).

Social Capital Reproduction and Social Networks

Another two popular approaches derive from theories of social capital and of social networks. The concept of social capital reproduction, informed by Bourdieu's theory of capitals (1986), has been used widely to interpret educational mobility as a project 'overwhelmingly pursued by privileged individuals' (Waters et al 2011, p10). For example, international student mobility from this perspective is interpreted as 'a strategy used by relatively privileged social actors in rationalistic and calculative ways to convert different capitals across borders for the ultimate purpose of maintaining and maximizing social advantages' (Yang 2018, p.698). It further portrays western education as 'representing cultural capital' (Waters 2006) with automatic transferability across the world, where international students could access better education and economic and social dynamics (Altbach 2004).

However, this approach ignores the value of non-western education and reproduces the privilege and dominance of western higher education systems and societies. Although undertaking international education can be a specific attempt to invest in human capital and accrue economic benefits (Findlay et al. 2012), such an economistic underpinning fails to acknowledge the force of students' emotionally linked hopes, aspirations, and desires (Collins 2017). This approach also contradicts socio-cultural perspectives that suggest instead that educational mobility should include intercultural understanding and global citizenship beyond social capital reproduction (Pais and Costa 2017). Given this, it is argued here an ecological systematic approach is needed to understand international educational mobility from Western countries to China and the implications of this mobility for widening participation in higher education.

It is clear that social networks shape students' decisions on mobility, as they provide the support for students' direction and information of overseas education (Thompson 2017). Interpersonal networks, including kinship, friendship, and romantic networks, influence students' decisions to go overseas for education (Brooks and Waters 2010). For example, parents can play a decisive role, especially in Confucian societies where education is a 'family

project' and subject to parental authority (Tan 2013). However, few studies have explored the impact of these beliefs on international students from west to east.

To understand those dynamics, the present study proposes a new approach to examine how different factors interplay with each other and affect students' decision-making process. This approach could reveal individual's negotiations and agency in navigating personal development in and/or beyond the identified patterns of international educational mobility (Elliot et al 2016).

The Ecological Systematic Approach

Based on Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory (1979) (Figure.1), this study proposes a multi-layered ecological systematic approach to explore the drivers of international educational mobility. It focuses on the dynamic interactions between multi-layered environment and the individual. The individual here includes his/her agency, e.g. personal reflections, motives and abilities to make choices (Bennett et al. 2013). The environment is student's perceived space or opportunities and potential constrains in a given context. Each system contains roles and factors that may shape individual student's choice of international educational mobility. These factors could influence individual students in different ways. There are four key dimensions of the environment, adapted according to the ecological framework (Bronfenbrenner 1979):

1. Interpersonal dimension (microsystem) refers to family members and peers that can affect individual student's consideration and choice of international educational mobility.
2. Institutional dimension (mesosystem) is individual students' institution or school that provides opportunities and activities of international educational mobilities.
3. Sociocultural dimension (exosystem) involves the social setting and overarching culture at home country that influences students. The microsystem and mesosystem are embedded in this dimension, and
4. Global dimension (macrosystem) is the global context of international education. It involves the perceived opportunities and constrains of education mobility and the global discourses that shape the national and international policies of both home and destination countries.

This approach also consists of a chronosystem related to individual experiences and development.

This ecological approach has significant conceptual and practical implications for education studies due to its holistic understanding of students' behaviours in various settings. In particular, it explores the interplay or interconnectedness between a person and their immediate systemic environment during a particular experience, and how other systems that encompass such a situation may co-contribute to the occurrence of the phenomenon under study (Bennett et al. 2013). A number of education studies have applied this model, for instance, to search for the "third space" for the academic acculturation for PhD students (Elliot et al. 2016), and to identify the value of conceptualising multiple layers of influence on intercultural interaction among international and domestic students (Kudo et al. 2017). However, few studies have examined the intentions of education mobility using the ecological perspective.

This ecological systematic approach provides a unique conceptual lens to explore individual students' educational mobility from developed countries to China through generating rich and in-depth analyses of their experiences in diversified social and cultural contexts. To understand the reasons behind these factors relies on the ecological systematic perspective to understand the intersectional roles among different systems and contexts, to see how time (individual experiences at different stages) and space (physical and mental; direct or indirect) shape their choices (Bronfenbrenner 1994). This perspective is useful in clarifying how a change in one aspect of experience may or may not associate with changes in other aspects, which may co-contribute to individuals' final decisions educational mobility. Unlike Bronfenbrenner (1979) which regards environmental factors as most central to human development, this study focuses on how individuals use their agency in a given context. It postulates the dynamic interface of the environment and individual agency, which paves the way to comprehensively uncover how individual students negotiate with different factors and make choices about studying in China.

Methodology

This is a qualitative study that adopted phenomenological design to understand how international postgraduates make sense of their experiences of studying in China, as situated in their ecological systematic contexts. Interview is the main method of data collection. Semi-structured interview was conducted as it contains open-ended and non-directive questions and it could encourage free narrative and detailed responses (Smith 2003). Fourteen international students from developed countries (the US, France, Sweden, Germany, New Zealand, and South Korea) were recruited for the study. These countries are high income economies (World Bank 2020). These 14 interviews were part of a larger qualitative study which investigated international students' educational mobility to China and the intercultural experiences of 25 international students compared to 15 domestic students in China.

A snowball sampling strategy was used to select these 14 students from two universities in Shanghai. The snowball sampling approach led to connections with international students from a wider range of disciplines (Salganik and Heckathorn 2004). The two universities are internationally well-known and have a large population of international students. The number of years of studying in China, gender, and countries of origin were considered in the selection of participants. All had studied in China for more than six months by the time of interviews. Their subject areas included linguistics in education, Chinese, business, computer science, and international Chinese language education. Eleven participants were pursing master degrees, and the other three were PhD students. (see Table 1).

Informed by the literature on international education mobility, interview questions were developed to explore in-depth each research participant's experiences and choice to study in China. A pilot study with 3 students was conducted to test and refine the interview questions. 14 interviews were conducted in Chinese or English depending on the participant's preference, and each lasted approximately 60 minutes. All interviews were audiotaped and professionally transcribed by paid professional services. Interview transcripts in Chinese were translated into English by the first author and were checked by the second author. Both authors are familiar

with the research topic and Chinese cultures, minimising the impact of cross-language translation on data analysis and presentation (Twinn 1997).

The interview transcripts were analysed using a thematic approach and coded with the NVIVO software. Following the generation of emergent themes, a complete round of analysis was carried out, where a hierarchical structure of superordinate themes and subthemes was identified (Smith and Osborn 2008). The key themes that emerged from students' experiences reflected the process of their decision making in terms of educational mobility to China. An inter-researcher check was conducted within the research team. This process enhanced the data analysis by bringing in our own diverse backgrounds and subjectivities in the interpretations of participants' sense-making of their experiences (Xu et al. 2020).

The data analysis suggests how participants reflected on and made sense of their experiences of educational mobility to China, both on a personal and social level. It shed light on the ways in which research participants navigated major life events, as well as the social worlds in which they found themselves (Larkin et al. 2011). The analysis also highlighted the nuances and complexities embedded in participants' decision-making process. Although each individual had their own experience of choosing to study in China, the analysis explored the convergences and divergences within this cohort of participants, so as to move towards more general claims. In so doing, it adds new understanding of education mobility from developed countries to China.

Findings

Research participants described their decision making as a complex self-negotiation process, affected by a range of factors. These factors interplayed and affected individual students differently, due to their different social and cultural backgrounds. Through the on-going reflection based on individual experiences related to China, research participants critically negotiated with factors from different levels, consciously and unconsciously. Such a process is not linear or easy, as the research participants needed to actively navigate back-and-forth, connecting their past and present with their future. All factors are negotiated with and through others (peers, families, universities, and international relations) to contribute to the students' cross-border educational journey. The factors are presented below according to their link with the four dimensions of the ecological framework: interpersonal, institutional, sociocultural and global.

Interest in the Chinese Language and Culture (Institutional and Global Dimensions)

Exposure to Chinese language and culture, together with international education development worldwide, China's booming economy and global trade with their home countries, has significantly increased the research participants' curiosity in getting to know about China. A personal interest in Chinese language and culture was a main reason for all research participants to study in China. School and university were the main channels for this. Other participants[2] accessed courses provided by schools/universities in their home countries and short visits to

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[2] Three participants of Chinese descent learned about Chinese language and culture directly from their parents and families.

China organised as national or university exchange programmes. This suggests that institutional factors interrelated with global elements contribute to students' interests in Chinese language and culture.

Chinese-related Courses

Encountering the Chinese language and culture on campus was described as significant and like sowing the seeds for potential further education in China. For example, Mitchell from Canada had taken Chinese-related courses in Canada as mastering the Chinese language could benefit his career:

> I thought business is an international thing, so [it] kind of help[s] if I can speak another language. … I decided on Chinese finally because I felt it was probably useful, because twenty percent of the world is Chinese. I took a Chinese class in xxx University in Montreal. (Mitchell, Canada)

Mitchell's interest in the Chinese language was clearly influenced by his aspiration for an international business career. He felt that fluency in Chinese and the cultural capital gained from studying in China would benefit his future career in the global market. Cole from the US shared similar views and showed a strong interest in Asia and the opportunities for international trade. In other words, these participants' language experiences and the opportunities of benefitting from developing international trade links with China clearly inspired their choices to study in China and increased their interest in Chinese language and culture to achieve self-transformation.

Exchange Programmes and Short Visits

Exchange programmes and short visits organised by universities were perceived as another key factor that increased research participants' interest in China. Over three quarters of the participants in this study had made short visits to China prior to applying for a place in Chinese universities. For example, Emma from New Zealand described a school trip to China that helped to build strong connections and interest in China and Chinese culture. Similarly, Mathi from Germany saw his participation in an exchange programmes as useful preparation:

> When I did my exchange programme, from the academic view I learned a lot about China. And from a personal view, I learned a lot about Chinese people. (Mathi, Germany)

Enabled by institutional networks, these exchange programmes and short visits increased research participants' encounters with the Chinese language and culture. Participants described how these trips also motivate them to learn Chinese after they returned and further to pursue postgraduate programmes in China. This suggests that both institutional and global factors along with time elements shaped students' international experiences and inspired their desire of learning in China.

The influence of Chinese culture and language on individual participants' choices to study in China varied significantly. For example, personal interest in Chinese culture and language appeared to be the main drive for participants from privileged social and economic backgrounds, such as Jenny from Sweden:

I came to China one year ago to study Chinese. I used to live in China when I was younger for six years. China is always felt like home to me, which is the reason why I decided to come back and get my Chinese to be fluent. Throughout my life I've moved around a lot, but China is the place I like the most really…I just I love it. I feel at home here. (Jenny, Sweden)

Jenny emphasised her love of China and Chinese language, without mentioning financial issues or a lack of education opportunities in Sweden. She felt that learning Chinese gave her advantages in intercultural competency, as not many Swedes could speak Chinese. Such pure love and emotional force of aspirations contrasts with an economistic understanding of educational mobility (Collins 2017). In contrast, research participants from less privileged backgrounds were less likely to stress their interest in the Chinese language and culture as motivating factors. Their primary focus was in terms of concerns about social and financial issues, which had restricted their opportunities to pursue postgraduate education in their home countries.

Friendship with Chinese Students (Interpersonal and Global Dimensions)

About half of the participants had experiences of making friends with Chinese international students in their home countries. This increased their interest in learning the Chinese language and studying in China. For example, Nana from South Korea said that her interest in the Chinese language was due to the influence of her Chinese friend in junior high school:

In Korea, we have to choose the second foreign language at Junior High School. I had a Chinese friend who sometimes felt uncomfortable to speak Korean, so I learned Chinese from him and got more fun actually. Then I chose Chinese lessons in my Senior High School. (Nana, South Korea)

Nana's Chinese friend not only increased her knowledge of the Chinese language but also motivated her to pursue a masters' degree in China. This friendship 'fundamentally and unexpectedly encouraged her journey to China'. For our participants, Chinese international students were perceived as playing an important role in reversing educational mobility from the west to China through introducing Chinese culture and life to their peers from non-Chinese backgrounds. For example, Cole's Chinese friends in the US prepared him for Chinese culture and life, which helped him to decide to study in China.

I would say my friendship with Chinese students in my university in Colorado really influenced me to come here (China). My friends told me a lot about Chinese culture. I had a lot of background information about China before I came here, which definitely helped make my decision. (Cole, US)

The value and importance of friendship with Chinese students is rarely mentioned in existing literature. Most studies focused on Chinese students' transitional experiences in western universities such as learning, social, and intercultural experiences in host countries, reflecting a deficit model of Chinese students (Yu and Moskal 2019). In contrast, our interviewees highlighted that Chinese students made recommendations, gave advice, and sometimes cleared up misunderstandings about China. This suggests that friendships with Chinese students studying abroad increased the research participants' exposure to Chinese language and culture

and their 'social networks' for studying in China. In other words, the outflow of Chinese students supports the inflow of international students to China.

Lack of Education Opportunities (Institutional, Social Cultural Dimensions)

Fierce competition to get into a good university and high tuitions in home countries were common motivating factors for research participants to study in China, especially for those from disadvantaged backgrounds. This can be understood in the context of high levels of student debt especially for countries with cost-sharing policies such as United States and UK. It also reflects the continuing socioeconomic inequalities that shape access to higher education. These changes have altered students' planning for higher education (Callender and Mason 2017). Over half of the participants in this study complained that high tuition fees had prevented them from pursuing postgraduate education in their home countries and they doubted its quality and equality. For example, Eric a US student described high levels of student debt due to the level of his undergraduate tuition fees. He chose to study in China to avoid more debt:

> Back to US, it's too expensive to pursue a masters or PhD. My undergraduate program was too expensive. We got government assistance, but you have to pay back a lot. … Right now I'm in student debt. … I was thinking it would most likely be a different country, maybe China, … because I don't want to build my loans up even more. (Eric, US)

Heavy student debt has clearly driven Eric to study in China. He mentioned that he could study and live in China for a few years because of lower costs, even without the scholarship from the Chinese government and regardless of his parents' negative attitudes to studying in China. Eric's pragmatic financial motivation was shared by the rest of research participants from disadvantaged social background. For example, Dezu from South Korea was a MA student in Chinese Language Studies and he wanted to become a Chinese teacher in South Korea after his graduation. Financial considerations and better opportunities for postgraduate education were the key reasons for his study in China:

> I have considered studying in Korea. However, there was no full-time master's degree for Chinese education at that time. My family has no money. If I came to China with the scholarship, I would have less financial burden. Personally, it is about financial consideration, yet it is more about a chance of further education here (China). (Dezu, South Korea)

The affordability of quality programmes and educational opportunities offered by Chinese universities were emphasised by other participants. Mikael from France noted:

> Tuition in China is really cheap. There are a lot of universities in Europe, which make a lot of money just like a company. It's good in China. They maintain a quality education, and the system is also very good, so many scholarships. (Mikael, France)

According to Mikael, expensive tuition fees and significant student debts had driven students like him away from their home countries (developed countries) to study postgraduate programmes in China. Although debt aversion among low-class students has deferred their applying to university at home countries (Callender and Mason 2017), it has motivated their

moving to developing countries where living and learning are much cheaper. Studying in China has reactivated their social capital accumulation and given them opportunities to pursue their personal and academic interests as well as international experiences. This suggests that personal and economic situations, opportunities for quality education, and education system in home countries could work together to disadvantage students from low social and economic backgrounds and deprive them of learning opportunities in developed countries.

Influence of Peers and Family (Interpersonal, Social Cultural, Global Dimensions)

The importance of social relationships to individuals' choice to study China varied widely reflecting different levels of connections with China. Family members and close friends could also influence research participants' choice to study in China to some extent. For the participants (n=3) who were of Chinese descent, parental support and family inherited Chinese culture had significantly motivated them to study in China. Apart from the opportunity to enrich academic and social experiences, exploring family roots and personal identity were also factors that attracted them to China.

The research participants without these family links to China found that friends and family members with international experience, whether for tourism or work, especially visits to China or connections with China, were more supportive of their choices to study in China than those without. Approximately one third of the participants had their family and friends' support to study in China. For example, Emma from New Zealand had her parents' full support:

> I think my parents were very happy. They went to university and have spent time overseas, so they both thought it was a great opportunity to live in a different country and learn a different language and a different culture. My parents did not worry about me in China. My father had been to China, so he knew how it was there. (Emma, NZ)

Similarly, Emma's friends with previous overseas experiences were more supportive towards her study in China than friends who had never travelled outside New Zealand and even had bias towards China and Asia.

For the other participants, their parents and friends were less supportive and doubted their academic ambition and questioned their choice to study in China. For example, Mathi from Germany shared his observation that his parents and friends who knew little about China were suspicious about the country:

> My parents still have different views about China. I think it's because they didn't visit China. They agreed with my choice, but still preferred me to go to America or UK.

> My friends in Germany couldn't imagine why I go to China. For me, China is a great country, but in their mind, China is still very foreign. They don't know anything about China. They are still suspicious about the country. (Mathi, Germany)

Both bias and a lack of knowledge about China had clearly affected some parents and peers' attitudes towards studying abroad. One explanation is that China is often perceived as different and less developed by people from developed countries, especially by those with limited international experiences. However, for some participants' families in the US studying in China

was seen as a political choice, with individual learning experiences related to their political affiliations. For example, Eric's parents and grandfather were Trump supporters, living in a small village with limited education opportunities, and they were not happy with his choice to study in China:

> My parents are very conservative. Whenever I talk to my dad or my grandpa, they tell me that "things aren't the best between China and the US. If things start to get too crazy or too out of hand, you should really come back". They are Trump supporters, so they weren't happy with me choosing to come to China out of all the countries, because you know the whole political situation going on, but I'm pursuing my dream. So at least I'm not stuck where I grew up, working a factory job. I'm doing what I wanna do and bettering myself. (Eric, US).

Although Mathi's and Eric's families had concerns due to political and global affairs, they finally accepted the students' decisions to pursue postgraduate programmes in China. This suggests that parents' negative attitudes didn't play a decisive role in influencing research participants' decisions. Instead, it is the research participants' disadvantaged backgrounds in their home countries that invisibly drove them to China for better opportunities.

Discussion

This study reveals that research participants' choice to study in China is a journey where factors at different levels comprehensively and discursively exert influence. Those multi-layered factors are closely related to the four dimensions of the ecological systematic framework. They work closely together and influence international students' choice of studying in China. Based on the findings, this paper has extended and refined the ecological framework to an international context of individual development (See Figure 2).

It is worth noting that individual participants rationalise their choice through self-negotiation and integrative consideration. This can be related to the choice by universities in developed countries to increase students' exposure to Chinese language and Chinese culture through relevant courses, friendship with Chinese international students, short visits and exchange programmes with Chinese universities. Existing social network approach has confirmed their significant support in enabling education mobility (Thompson 2017), and family and close peers are located at the core of the ecological system indicating their fundamental significance to individual development (Bronfenbrenner 1994). However, previous institutional and international experiences were regarded as key influence in this study, including interest in Chinese language and culture due to optional undergraduate courses, Chinese friends at universities, short visits to China, and lack of postgraduate education opportunities in home countries.

Furthermore, different from the decisive role that parents often play when Chinese students study abroad (Yang 2007), parents' attitudes are not decisive for research participants in this study, if compared with other factors such as limited education access (institutional level), Chinese opportunities (global level). In particular, participants' accounts suggest that low education levels and a lack of international experiences of family members and close friends explained their biases and negative attitudes. This does not mean that familial social

and economic situation does not play a role in students' choice to learn abroad. Instead, it still influences students' choices, though invisibly rather than an overt process to shape their attitudes towards international study. These factors associate with different levels of the ecological system, and they demonstrate the variant and interplay dynamics that contribute to educational mobility to China. This is different from interpretations reliant on push pull factors that are patchy and lack systematic analysis in terms of the co-contributions or interplay roles among factors in different dimensions (Bennett et al. 2013).

Studies have extensively examined the role of debt aversion on access to higher education for prospective students from less privileged social background in developed countries (Callender and Mason 2017). It remains unclear to what extent it may influence their choice to access global education markets. This study responds to this point from the perspective of students from developed countries. Our participants clearly felt that high tuition fees had reduced their opportunities for postgraduate study at their home countries, where more and more students than ever before are studying postgraduate courses. This explains why some students from disadvantaged background chose to study in China, despite their family and friends' bias against China. In other words, international education in China increases their equal access to education in that students from all social cultural backgrounds have the right to pursue their educational experiences within or beyond their national borders. Learning in China also empowers them to overcome the potential career barriers they could face if without postgraduate qualifications. This suggests that pursuing opportunities in China reactivate the research participants' personal 'becomings' (Tran and Vu 2018). This finding contrasts the view that international educational mobility is mainly for privileged students to gain social capitals and to become more privileged on their return to home countries (Yang 2018).

The study further noted that students from privileged family backgrounds were clearly driven by personal interests for example in Chinese culture and language. The pure interest in the host country's culture and a sense of cultural adventure for degree students have not been covered by existing research. This finding challenges the social capital reproduction theory in that research participants clearly demonstrated their hopes and aspirations in terms of intercultural understanding and global citizenship (Pais and Costa 2017), instead of embarking on study with an expectation of a rational investment-return for social capital gains (Findlay et al. 2012).

Conclusion and Implications

This study captures a trend of international educational mobility from developed countries to China, revealing that students' choice of mobility can be complex, diverse, and socially and culturally embedded, and individually rationalised. Factors at different levels based on ecological systematic theory, such as students' social economic background, social network with Chinese students, institutional connections with China, as well as the attitudes of families and peers, interplay with each other and co-contribute to students' choice of international education mobility to China.

The study proposes a new multi-layered ecological systematic approach to understand international educational mobility in international contexts. It provides diverse perspectives to understand in depth the dynamic interaction of the environment and individual agency in the

decision making of educational mobility. It proposes that universities in China need to better understand their international students especially those from less privileged social background, and improve the intercultural communication skills of Chinese students who plan to study abroad, in order to promote Chinese culture abroad and attract international students to study in China. In addition, western universities tend to focus on supporting the cultural adaption of Chinese international students; whereas our study suggests that a reciprocal cultural exchange between international and home students benefits both groups in curriculum internationalisation, global engagement, and student mobility in Western universities.

This study has provided a snapshot of international student mobility to China, in a broader context of non-traditional student mobility from developed to developing countries. However, as our samples only included postgraduate international students, it is recommended that the experiences of undergraduate international students in China can be explored; so as to understand the potentially different dynamics of the ecological systems situating different groups. Future research could also increase the understanding of international educational mobility through conducting larger scale empirical research to refine the ecological systematic approach. This includes the influence of invisible factors and their interconnections on students' mobility from west to east, for instance, socioeconomic background, family culture, etc.

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