

The Making of Transnational Distinction:

An Embodied Cultural Capital Perspective on Chinese Women

Students' Mobility

Introduction

The rapid rise of international education worldwide and China's dramatic economic development have led to a boost in Chinese students' pursuit of transnational higher education (HE hereafter) in the UK. Statistics from the Centre for China and Globalization (CCG 2015) reports that more than 60% of the international Chinese students in Britain were female Chinese students in 2015. The phenomenon of young women pursuing advanced degrees is part of a trend described as the 'feminisation of migration' (Piper 2008, 1291). With the implementation of one-child policy, women's improved position in Chinese society and family is the driving force for urban Chinese middle-class young women's drastically rising transnational education mobility (Kajanus 2015a). The Chinese Ministry of Education report (ICEF Monitor 2016) shows that in more recent years, shifting global geo-social, economic and political scenes have pushed overseas Chinese students back to their home job market in greater numbers, with around 70-80% of students abroad returning to China, and more than half of them are women.

Traditionally, Chinese student migrants abroad are considered to be a distinctive group: a transnational elite 'grounded in globalised circuits of accumulation' (Robinson 2012, 349) who are unencumbered by nationally-oriented local processes

of privilege reproduction upon their return to China (Gu and Schweisfurth 2015b; Kajanus 2015a). As the offspring of the social groups of elites—the socio-economic elite and the educated elite in China (Wang and Miao 2013), young women students are often perceived as possessing a competitive edge in the job market in China (Bamber 2014), not least because their overseas degree and study experiences offer them a way of self-realization to seek unusual feminine life trajectories (Cebolla-Boado, Hu and Soysal 2018) .

Indeed, research on Asian middle-class students' educational mobility to the UK has often applied Bourdieu's (1984) conceptualisation to explain how transnational mobility provides students with different degrees of 'distinction' (Brooks, Waters and Pimlott-Wilson 2013; Sin 2013; Waters 2012). Individuals' distinction distinguishes them from others who do not possess the same amount of superiorly valued cultural capital (Bourdieu 1984). The distinction attached to student educational mobility is commonly discussed on the basis of the translation from western degrees — institutionalised cultural capital to their job competitiveness. However, it is noteworthy that institutionalised cultural capital is only one form of cultural capital; the less visible embodied cultural capital, which manifests through a set of acquired socialised bodies, tastes and mental dispositions (Bourdieu 1986), has been somewhat neglected in the literature of international students' distinction. Also, distinction can be problematic as mobility sometimes disrupts the advantages that are usually assumed to be linked with cross-border student mobility (Xu 2015; Xu 2017; Xu 2018a; Xu 2018b), especially considering the recent 'western degree inflation'

phenomenon in China (Tu and Nehring 2019). As significantly more Chinese students with western degrees have populated the Chinese labour market (Chinese Ministry of Education Report 2019), pursuing a western degree may even hinder career development of young people in certain industries such as architecture (Tu and Nehring 2019). Against such a backdrop, it appears crucial to investigate how Chinese women students studying in the UK negotiate their positioning, especially in relation to how they construct their own distinction to justify their transnational education moves.

Gender, Distinction and Embodied Cultural Capital

Bourdieu's (1984) conceptualisation of distinction has been criticised for neglecting the gender dimensions of distinction and cultural capital in women's life as he takes women as 'capital-bearing objects' rather than 'capital-bearing subjects' (Lovell 2000, 21). From this point of view, Bourdieu is believed to ignore that women can accumulate gendered cultural capitals of their own (Lovell 2000). However, there are contradictions in Bourdieu's research on this matter. In places within *Distinction*, it seems that Bourdieu regards women as capital accumulating subjects (Huppatz, 2009).

Bourdieu (1984: 152) suggests that:

'certain women derive occupational profit from their charm(s), and that beauty thus acquires a value on the labour market, has doubtlessly helped to produce not only a number of changes in the norms of clothing and cosmetics, but also a whole set of changes in ethics and a redefinition of the legitimate image of femininity.'

Feminist Bourdieusian scholar McCall (1992, 843) taking the lead in linking gender with cultural capital argues that ‘gendered dispositions are a type of embodied cultural capital’. Some feminists also argue that women possess their own embodied cultural capitals (see for example, Skeggs 2004), which is a kind of cultural resources operating as a special form of cultural capital. Skeggs (1997, 10) states that femininity as a kind of cultural capital:

‘... is the discursive position available through gender relations that women are encouraged to inhabit and use.’

Skeggs’ (2004) identification of femininity as cultural resources suggests that women from different class backgrounds might possess different forms of cultural capital especially feminine capital. Inspired by feminist Bourdieusian scholars, Huppatz’s (2009) research reconceptualises Bourdieu’s theory of cultural capital and explores gendered practices of distinction and female agency, and she suggests that gender capital can be seen as a significant tool for understanding gender dynamics. Huppatz (2009, 50) draws on femininity as an asset and argues that females’ cultural capital can be seen as the gender advantage. She claims, ‘feminine capital is the gender advantage that is derived from a disposition...or from simply being hailed as feminine (this occurs when one’s body is recognised as feminine)’. Huppatz (2009) argues that gendered distinction of being feminine enables women to obtain a reasonable income and to enhance their competitive power. However, while these feminist researchers have provided useful conceptualisation and operationalisation of various aspects of gendered distinction, such existing understanding has not revealed

how gendered distinction may be complicated across different fields during women students' transnational educational mobility, a major aspect that this paper seeks to contribute to.

In considering the relationships between gender and Chinese international student mobility, extant literature emphasises that mobility enables young women to positively accumulate cultural capital for their self-development, challenge Chinese gender norms and go against patriarchy in their home country (Bamber 2014). These studies again tend to concentrate on the positive symbolic value of institutionalised cultural capital accrued through transnational education. As Kajanus (2015a) cautions: during transnational mobility, Chinese women students' (mostly middle-class) competitiveness tends to be highly enhanced in the job market but to be greatly devalued in Chinese matrimonial markets. This was referring to the state-engineered discourse of 'leftover women' which deems women over the age of 27 who are highly educated and earning a high income as undesirable and un-marriable (To 2013; Fincher 2014). Existing research suggests that women students often further acquire new cultural disposition to develop their female individuality as they engage with Western feminism abroad, with some choosing to escape the traditional feminine path of marriage in a new transnational context (Martin 2016; Kajanus 2015a).

In terms of other embodied mental disposition during mobility, research mostly discussed student migrants' increasing global awareness. Fong (2011) suggests that transnational mobility offers flexible developed global citizenship. However, Kim (2013) argues that female Asian student migrants cannot be regarded as cosmopolitan

individuals during mobility because they remain confined in their narrow co-ethnic social circles. Meanwhile, travelling alone to the UK does not mean that they are totally disconnected from their home society. Their family closeness may still be maintained and so are the (gendered) expectations of family through using Chinese digital media (Zhao 2019). Little research to date clearly examines distinction from the perspective of relatively invisible acquisitions of embodied cultural capital and explores women student migrants' distinction based on the analysis of gendered disposition and embodied acquisition. Gendered dispositions act as an important kind of cultural capital—embodied cultural capital (McCall, 1992: 843), we will thus include the gender dimension of distinction in our conceptualisation of transnational distinction in this research. Since their cultural identity are both women and student migrants during transnational mobility, the focus of this study is to examine Chinese women students' distinction related to gender and migration, which we will use 'perceived transnational distinction' to explain later to show these female Chinese students constructed their distinctive status across two different fields.

Field-Specific Distinction

Tindal et al. (2015) argue that 'distinction' achieved through educational mobility can be complex. In particular, studying in the global city London fulfils some students' ambition of 'lifetime mobilities' through the development of a cosmopolitan identity (ibid., 98). However, in these researchers' discussion of students' positively achieved 'distinction' during cross-border mobility, they seem to neglect the function of field in

shaping the perceived value of cultural capital and its complexity. As Xu (2018a, 1129) notes: ‘cross-border movements that [these students] facilitate, demand a conceptual tool’ to identify students’ mobility as ‘fluid, rather than homogeneous’ through considering the field of origin. Although students’ perceived distinction during trans-border/transnational mobility has been occasionally discussed in existing empirical studies, few attempts have been made to offer in-depth theoretical accounts for ‘field-specific distinction’ during mobility. We will address this gap by demonstrating that distinction is achieved depending on features of specific fields that these students are embedded in.

In view of the above, we aim to address these research questions: How does transnational student mobility from China to the UK still bestow these women students ‘distinction’ against the backdrop of ‘Western degree inflation’ in China’s labour market? More explicitly, when Chinese women students claim distinction from gaining a UK degree, what is the significance of such transnational student flows that result from such a search for distinction? In this article, we argue that the distinction achieved during transnational student mobility is field-specific and educational mobility can both relegate their social status as well as elevate their middle-class distinction under certain circumstances. In what follows our conception of the theoretical tools and research methods will be introduced. Then, based on analysis of embodied cultural capital in the forms of global cultural taste and transformed dispositions of the mind, we will show the diverse making of ‘transnational distinction’ by examining how Chinese women students strategically identify which

fields they were physically/emotionally embedded in. This theorisation articulates with and builds on previous works on distinction (Bourdieu 1984; Tindal et al. 2015; Waters and Leung 2013) and contributes to a more comprehensive tool for understanding international student mobility.

Conceptualising Distinction and Field

Building upon Bourdieu's (1984) definition of 'distinction' and Tindal et al.'s (2015) interpretation of 'distinction' in student mobility, we conceptualise disposition of mind and global cultural taste as two kinds of embodied cultural capital (such as: changing values and behaviour), which we unify as a global identity and these act as distinction markers (Bourdieu 1986). 'Transnational distinction' is a term we will use to identify how these female Chinese students become distinctive in regarding their socialised bodies, tastes, and mental dispositions when compared with peers in different specific fields. The transnational borders are not only about their physical forms, but also pertain to perceived social borders (Donnan and Wilson 1999) or 'mental boundaries' (Breitung 2009, 104). As such, the embodied aspects of transformation that border-crossing students achieve should warrant a closer investigation and constitute our theorisation regarding how 'transnational distinction' is constructed. Based on our data, we critically suggest that such 'transnational distinction' has its own limitations in our findings section.

'Liminal Space': Two Existing but Contesting Fields

Bourdieu (1993, 73) suggests that: ‘the structure of the field is ...a state of the distribution of the specific capital which has been accumulated in the course of struggles.’ Within a certain field, individuals can maximise resources and capital to monopolise privileged positions (Bourdieu 1984). Kelly and Lusic (2006, 113) suggest that Filipino migrant students in Canada sustain ‘a process of valuation and exchange of capital’ across the home country and of host country, and their distinction can be lost in a new transnational site. Therefore, it is important to identify the specific field that enables participants’ accumulation of embodied cultural capital.

As our Chinese women students were transnationally mobile, we conceptualise two fields in this research: the first field is the ‘Chinese cultural field’—a large field where their privileged social status and resources were positively recognised and legitimated in China. Most of them considered they will compete with their peers in China’s job and matrimonial markets upon their return to China. Although most of the students were from privileged middle-class Chinese families in this study, their presence in the UK (which constitutes the second field) became mediated by the social and cultural landscape of the host country.

However, these students also had notable positive exposure to different cultural/gender norms/values during mobility inside/outside the UK’s HE system. Transnational mobility thus is understood as a space to keep migrants far away from home norms (Kirk et al. 2017) and to develop their cosmopolitan identity (Tindal et al. 2015). In this sense, we conceptualise the second field as a large ‘transnational HE field’ with ‘a high degree of autonomy in that it generates its own values and

behavioural imperatives' (Naidoo 2004, 458), which might help students to acquire embodied disposition of mind and liberate them to some extent. The case-study of a British university's on-campus and off-campus site can be understood to represent a microcosm of this transnational HE field. This field stands for a broader field which includes all possible cultural practices both on campus and off campus because the embodied new cultural practices of clothing, embracing cultural tastes and new dispositions of the mind in the UK can also be shown when students were off class outside universities.

These two fields, which appeared fluid and contested in our participants' narration, played important roles in constructing these women students' transnational lives through their comparisons with different social groups situated within them. As Kirk et al. (2017, 45) notes, such liminal space is 'a double-edged sword: with freedom comes loneliness', thus rendering it 'liberating and isolating' for these transnational students. Therefore, it is imperative to see how these students' distinction can be achieved within these two specific fields.

The Study

This study is based on first author's PhD project which examined the role of embodied cultural capital acquired through Chinese women students' (mostly middle-class) transnational educational mobility to the UK. It also sought to understand how class backgrounds and the transnational cultural context facilitate these women students' transnational aspirations and influence their transnational lived

experiences. In order to address the research questions, the first author selected a British university as a site of investigation because this university can be assumed to offer a typical example of UK university which attracts high numbers of students from China¹. The name of the university is anonymised as this study does not engage with the institutional dimension of distinction strategies. The first author assumed that students who actively established Chinese social circles might rely more on their Chinese social network so they might be of a certain type of students who might be less cosmopolitan oriented (Kim 2013; Gomes 2015). Consequently, efforts were made to purposely recruit those who were not interested in the Chinese Students Association. Participant observations and informal chats (see section on ‘embodied gender disposition’) were conducted by the first author in many social activities, such as private parties and reunion dinners in the student dormitories and daily casual conversations on/off campus between November 2015 and November 2016.

Meanwhile, semi-structured interviews (data used throughout the analysis of this paper) were conducted with 25 participants during the fieldwork. Among the interview participants, 5 students were undergraduates, 11 were taught masters, and the other 9 students were doing PhD degrees. While not all Chinese female students in the UK are from ‘middle class’ backgrounds, the data collected in the small sample of this study suggests that most of the women students were from middle-class families. In this study, some of these women students’ parents were *inside* the system,

occupying jobs such as governmental officials, public school/university teachers, and doctors while some other students' parents were *outside* the system, working as businessmen and foreign enterprise managers (Lu 2002). All undergraduates and Master's students in this research were self-funded, relying on economic support from families; four of the PhD students were self-funded while the remaining five were funded by full-cost or half-cost scholarships. Among these five PhD students, four of them could be argued to be from 'working class' backgrounds as their parents were either industrial/service workers, laid-off workers or rural migrants (Chen 2013). This article will focus only on the data from the middle-class women students.

The participants were all women from mainland China in the age group of 18-35 years old. Participants were informed that they could either speak English or Mandarin Chinese in daily conversations or formal interviews in advance; however, all participants preferred to use Mandarin Chinese, with the occasional insertion of an English phrase to capture an exact meaning. In order to ensure the coherence of the conversation and sort out the useful data, all the data taken down in fieldwork was in Chinese. All the participants were interviewed during their study in the UK. During the fieldwork, the first author repeatedly read the field notes, the interview summaries she wrote immediately after each interview, and the full transcripts of certain interviews. Thematic analysis was applied to analyse the data. All names used in this article are pseudonyms.

Being ‘Chinese Migrants’: Peer Comparison Acts as a Negotiated Remedy for Regaining Social Recognition

During the transnational migration process, our Chinese middle-class women participants’ experiences were characterised by their changing position in a variety of power hierarchies (Kajanus 2015b). Upon entering a new transnational HE field, most participants expressed a strong disappointment and even depression when their middle-class social status was overridden by their status as ‘racialised migrants’ (Cui 2015). Most participants felt that their middle-class social status, social network and family resources in China were cut off due to transnational mobility. The transnational education mobility, therefore, seems to diminish the likelihood of converting their possessed capitals into a desired distinctive status in this new transnational HE field (Xu 2017).

More importantly, the unequal race and ethnic tensions brought along by their transnational education mobility was most keenly experienced through social exclusion exerted from the local society in the UK. For instance, Lucy confided:

One day a local elderly stranger crazily yelled at us that we Chinese migrants have occupied so many job opportunities so we should go back to our country...Local people hold strong stereotypes of us.

Such racialised verbal abuse became symptomatic of an unfriendly social milieu in which the legitimacy of Chinese students like Lucy should be struggled for (Phan 2019): a marker of the boundary of a new transnational field, according to Bourdieu

and Wacquant (1992). For Lucy, such an overt form of social exclusion also symbolically shattered her dream of achieving a wide cosmopolitan social mix through her social activities. When asked what stereotypes she faced, she explicated:

They asked us strange questions like: ‘Can you play *Gongfu*?’ ‘Do you ride bikes to work all day?’ These questions assumed we were backward in their eyes. I quite often feel I am confident when comparing with Chinese peers because my social class is higher.

When students are physically mobile, stereotypes, prejudice, or discrimination pertaining to their ethnic and racial identities can become accentuated (Xu and Yang 2019; Kim 2013). As a transnational student migrant to the UK, Lucy understood the ignorant questions about her Chineseness (e.g. the assumption of knowing Gongfu) to signify her lowly position within a racial order of power in Britain (Wallace, 2018).

It was as if her middle-class social privileges became, suddenly, invisible and insignificant to ‘the local people’ in the UK. Intriguingly, while Lucy’s middle-class position was downplayed and/or ignored because of her transnational move, her own scheme of understanding also revealed her oblivion to the complex class and racial make-up of the British society (Bhopal 2018). This was evidenced through her reference to ‘the local people’ and her equating the ‘British people’ to being ‘white’. Such a ‘partial recognition’ (Lan 2018, 8), in turn, intensified her feeling of marginalisation and engendered an urge to seek recognition elsewhere: her immobile / less mobile peers back in China. Lucy’s

tactic was shared by most participants in this research and Lin Li's account below is representative:

I find that comparing with peers in China gives me a stronger sense of recognition and acceptance.

Selecting peers back home as a reference group thus became a negotiated remedy for regaining social recognition for these otherwise racially alienated Chinese women students. This strategy finds resonance with the Scottish students in Tindal et al.'s (2015) study who were reported to achieve distinction through chastising their immobile or locally-mobile peers back home. Comparing with their peers back in China, in this case, also constitutes one of the 'multistranded connections with their places of origin' (Kelly and Lusic 2006, 832) and plays a significant role in influencing their sense of self. Through referring to peers in China, our participants thus consciously positioned themselves back to the Chinese cultural field. Exactly how did these Chinese women students achieve distinction when comparing with their immobile/less mobile peers back in China in the Chinese cultural field? This is what we shall now turn to discuss.

Perceived Transnational Distinction as Offering a 'Superior' Global Identity

Different from Tindal et al. (2015)'s research which emphasises the cosmopolitan credentials and distinction can be obtained through students' study destination, our respondents highlighted their (perceived) cultural advantages of mental disposition

and tastes as a distinctive global identity, which serves as a marker to distinguish our participants from peers in China or those who have also studied in the US (a second reference group, the selection of which will be discussed later).

New Embodied Gendered Disposition of the Mind

It was shared by most participants that distinction can be achieved through accumulating embodied cultural capital, namely, the absorption of a gendered ‘western style’ of practice. Jennifer’s case is a typical example:

I think absorbing *yang qi* is the greatest acquisition... Seeing the world made me more open to differences than my peers in China. Their ideas are a bit rustic (*tu qi*) as they tend to be restricted to what they learned in just one country.

This assumed lack of exposure to and understanding of the wider world on the part of the ‘peers back in China’ became a crucial signifier of Jennifer’s distinction. Having the opportunities to be open to differences culturally can be regarded as a form of global engagement. Snee (2016) suggests that when a social individual travels to a transnational geographical place, the exposure to cultural differences makes the individual’s status distinctive.

When asked what exact kind of differences she became open to, Jennifer responded:

Now I am open to different patterns of women’s lives. My peers in China think women should marry early and have babies, if not, her life is not complete. But I see that people here in the UK get married quite late, some of them do not marry.

In fact, it is ironic that she considered herself as tolerant of differences, but she was not tolerant enough of the differences borne by her peers back home. Chinese young women's attitudes towards marriage actually are quite diverse, particularly for the highly educated women in metropolitan cities (Gaetano 2016). However, to these Chinese students in our research, such attitudinal changes were seemingly the most tangible and qualitative differences that they had experienced when attempting to distinguish themselves. Once again, their 'partial recognition' (Lan 2018, 8) of what 'openness to differences' means allowed them to achieve a sense of distinction in the Chinese cultural field. More specifically, regarding their new gendered understanding about the diverse life paths that women can tread also, to some extent, freed them from getting trapped by the 'leftover women' discourse and allowed them to combat the sense of powerlessness faced by Kajanus' (2015a) educated Chinese women participants. In this sense, the perceived gendered transnational distinction became more important because it challenged the 'success' criteria of what a modern, educated woman can be like. However, such a form of distinction was not always secured, as we will also show, when some participants got emotionally close to the Chinese cultural field in a later section.

Meanwhile, their changing gender views are also reflected by the way they performed femininity. Apart from pursuing tolerance of going against socially accepted gender norms, the transnational gendered distinction seems to be flexible and diverse. In the participant observation, it is noted that Liya, an engineering student, particularly curled her hair and wore make-up when attending conferences to

expand her social connections which might be helpful for her future career. Applying make-up and looking attractive were also believed to help her to break the stigmatised stereotype of the ‘female Ph.D. student’ with the image of ‘unpolished nerd’ in Chinese media. While in China, Liya deliberately acted non/un-feminine in her attempt to protest societal gender imposition, in the UK she was exposed to female role models who were both good at science and could act feminine. Such a greater array of gender possibilities within her field of studies could be considered as a form of gender liberation for her, thanks to her transnational education move.

Like her, every time Coco, who is a master’s student, went to job interviews, she would wear make-up because, in her opinion, managing a good appearance might offer her more job opportunities. She believed that if the abilities of her competitors were the same as hers, good looks would definitely help her to get an offer in both job markets in China and UK. For international students to look for jobs in the UK, they face much more fierce competitions, not least due to the stringent visa requirements (Tu and Nehring 2019). Her case shows that she was consciously aware that performing femininity may create more job opportunities for her.

This shows our respondents’ agency when negotiating gender norms and femininity in a transnational HE field. Our finding suggests that Liya’s and Coco’s engagement in femininity—affirming practices like applying make-up—for the purpose of building social networks and better career development means that they consciously and selectively complied with cultural norms of femininity and made use of such norms to achieve their desired end goals (such as: obtaining more social

connections, and finding a job). Their polished appearance should not merely be understood as pleasing to others, but to achieve their own goals in order to live a better life. It can also be regarded as transnational gendered distinction, which helps to enhance their competitive power in either job markets or workplaces. This finding is supported by Huppatz's (2009) and Skegg's (2004) findings which suggest that femininity can be regarded as a form of gender advantage, as is focally shown through how women cultivate their bodies.

Therefore, their new gendered mental dispositions all served as valuable transnational cultural resources which are the distinctive assets for forming their global identity and gender identity. During this process, they have obviously absorbed new gendered disposition, which also served as a form of gendered distinction. It also seems to these participants that their benefits of the broadening of horizons can be seen as the key to the acquisition of a global competency (Vertovec and Cohen 2002).

Embodied Global Cultural Taste

Another source of distinction, i.e. embodied acquisition of global cultural taste obtained from the cultural opportunities/consumption that transnational mobility offered, has again been achieved through comparisons with peers in China and peers who studied in the US.

In participant observation, Jiahui's impression of the 'local women's' clothing style was primarily linked with what she termed the 'British style' (*ying lun fan*), which was conceived of as elegant, well-manufactured and high-quality clothing. She

purposely purchased from what she called typical local 'British styled brands' such as Hobbs and Reiss. However, Jiahui's identification of 'middle-class' brands might not accurately reflect the reality as 'Hobbs' and 'Reiss' are high street fashion brands in Britain and may not necessarily be 'middle-class'.

Similar to Lucy in the previous section, Jiahui again identified all local people as wearing 'British style' clothing. However, what she considered as 'British style' clothing may only reflect the clothing preference of a fraction of the British middle-class. The fact that she automatically equated such a clothing style to 'the local people' again underlines her 'partial recognition' of the class differences in clothing preferences in British society.

As a Chinese middle-class woman, she perceived that performing locally accepted middle-class British made her feel more recognised in this transnational HE field. Compared with her peers in the US, she indicated:

The UK and the US are the top two study destinations for my peers. In the US, my friends often wear casual jackets, that's American style. But British people care more about what they wear, this is their culture... so we are also better at dressing ourselves.

In Jiahui's contrasting comparison, it seems to her that perceived different local fashion cultures played a key role in shaping their transnational distinction. Jiahui's identification of 'British style' as more refined than the US style resonates with Lan's (2018, 56) elite Taiwanese parents participants who regarded exposure to European culture as more distinctive than to the American culture. The sense of superiority thus

became an important element in shaping her constructed transnational distinction. In this comparison exercise, Jiahui was no longer making reference to her Chinese peers, but she brought her peers studying in arguably the world's most coveted study destination (i.e. the US) into the picture and was still able to demonstrate her distinctiveness.

Furthermore, most of the participants embodied increasing global cultural tastes through frequenting exhibitions, museums and galleries in their spare time. This resonates with Bourdieu (1984) who indicated that exposure to highbrow culture helps a social individual to accumulate embodied cultural capital. For instance, Feifei confided:

I felt proud to share with curious friends at home my increasing knowledge about British/Western societies. But it is strange that when facing the local people, such feelings disappear, maybe because they are here they can also attend these events.

Feifei often went to visit local galleries and see operas such as *Carmen*. Notably, her resultant 'increased knowledge' obtained from expensive highbrow cultural events itself acted as a marker of distinction. Her home peers' eagerness to learn about Feifei's transnational cultural exposure, therefore, legitimated and accentuated her perceived superior transnational distinctive status in the Chinese cultural field. However, believing that the 'local people' can also achieve such distinction just because they are physically in the UK again demonstrates her oblivion to the exclusive nature of such cultural events to certain fractions of the British society.

Meanwhile, Feifei also enjoyed a range of popular mass musicals and American jazz music other than classical music. In fact, Jiahui and Feifei's interpretation of 'British local middle class' or 'embodied higher taste' was restricted to their perception because of the mixture of their middle-class taste and their taste for popular mass culture. Their mixed cultural conception finds resonance in the notion of cultural 'omnivorousness' (Chan and Goldthorpe 2007). This means that our participants 'no longer consume only legitimate culture but are better characterised as omnivores, happy to graze on both high and low culture' (Friedman et al. 2015, 2). What remained constant was the exclusivity of such an assortment of cultural events, which were made available to them through their transnational education mobility, thanks to their middle-class cultural taste and economic capital. Therefore, in distinguishing themselves through such a set of acquired and displayed global cultural taste, these Chinese women students inadvertently underlined the central importance of their middle-class privileges that enabled them to savour a global cultural feast.

Future Career Orientation and Destination: Tacit Transnational Rule-Cognisance as Distinction

Our participants' future career orientation also reveals the reasons why they cared about distinction to be achieved in the Chinese cultural field and the dynamics of the transnational distinction to be recognised in this field.

Recent data shows that 97% of international students leave the UK after their

studies because of strict immigration rules (Office of National Statistics 2017). These Chinese women students' choices of returning to their home country after graduation were also strongly affected by the Chinese gender norms. For instance, our PhD participants faced even stronger social and familial pressure of settling down. Yilian explained:

My parents were strongly against my decision of continuing to do post-doctoral research abroad because women with very high degrees might not be an advantage in the Chinese marriage market. They warned me to settle down by the age of 30. I have to come back home.

To's (2013) data point out that middle-class women with advanced degrees suffer from men's discrimination of accomplished women in China. Although educational mobility encourages Chinese women students to go against the beaten path of the Chinese feminine life (Martin 2016), our research reflected that apart from some students who liberated themselves from Chinese gender norms as we discussed above, other students remained deeply influenced by such gender norms through their use of Chinese media within transnational ties. As Monica suggested:

I contacted my family everyday...As the only daughter, I need to contact them for enough mutual emotional care...So I always use Chinese media to get information, I just don't want to be disconnected from home.

In most cases, participants' self-perception of the 'leftover women discourses' was complicated when taking their personal backgrounds and plans (such as their

establishment of transnational ties/decisions of returning to China) into consideration. As a result, this adds more complexity to their realisation of gendered transnational distinction.

Furthermore, some participants had set clear boundaries in what they can/cannot do in a specific field. This can be shown from how they dealt with their new cultural encounters in this new transnational field. For example, Liyu, a single 29-year-old participant, narrated:

Every society has its rules. Some of the theories/actions only work here... for Western women. If Chinese women are determined not to permanently return to China, not getting married is a wise choice. But I will be back to China, so I still care about my age and future marriage.

Being abundantly exposed to gender norms in the transnational field, Liyu strongly recognised that her absorption of western gendered disposition of mind was restricted when taking her final destination into consideration. She attached greater importance to the 'social rules' of her home cultural field (such as women's age matter in selecting partners) that she should conform to. Such intricate and yet pragmatic understanding of the rules across different fields, we argue, manifests her transnational distinction.

Since most participants were prepared to come back to China for job-hunting, they understandably identified 'peers in China' as their potential 'competitors' in the job market. According to Wangqi:

My peers who studied in China will be my competitors in the job market. As for my peers who studied in countries of immigrants such as the US, they tend to stay there after studies.

When comparing with immobile/less mobile peers in China, Wangqi could easily derive her sense of distinctiveness given the exclusivity of access to transnational education mobility (Gu and Schweisfurth 2015a) and the concomitant acquisition of embodied cultural capital and global identity. While her accounts may not reflect the true picture as research has shown the high number of overseas student returnees (including students who studied in the US) in recent years (CCG 2015), Wangqi and other participants in this study had already constructed their distinction over these peers through their global cultural taste (as discussed above).

Discussion and Conclusion

Set against the backdrop of western degree inflation and the paradoxical positioning of female returnees with overseas degrees in the labour and marriage markets in China, in this article we explored how our women students constructed transnational distinction through their education mobility from an embodied cultural capital perspective. We argue that these students' transnational distinction can be contingent upon the fields where they perceived they were/would be in, the mixture of what embodied cultural capital they have actually obtained and which peer groups they compared themselves with.

In these students' attempts to mark their transnational distinction, they displayed

notably uninformed understanding of the complex racial/ethnic and class fabrics of the British society. Such a partial frame of understanding in relation to the host society had induced a mixture of results, including their heightened sense of marginalisation when facing verbal abuse by certain ‘local people’, and their romanticised ascription of cultural superiority over peers studying in other popular destinations such as the US, thanks to their embodied adherence to the elegant ‘British style’. Arguably, these women students’ lack of appreciation of the complexity of the host society cannot mark their transnational distinction. However, the consequences of their partial understanding had impelled them to become creative in constructing their distinction, such as seeking peer reference groups that could allow them to mark their own distinctiveness. This phenomenon resonates with Coe’s (2014) research on Ghanaian immigrants in the US whose sense of uncertainty and ambiguity had led to partial recognition and creative adaptation.

This field-specific nature of their transnational distinction making was further enriched by their demonstrated tacit and intricate understanding of the field rules (Bourdieu 1993; Naidoo 2004). These Chinese women students’ future orientation of returning to China pushed them to maintain durable embodied cultural capital, particularly, gender disposition of mind. It still took time for students to ascertain what to maintain if they decided to return to their home country. ‘Going against the gender norm of marrying at certain ages’ was considered a positive distinction of ‘being a modern woman’ by some participants in the transnational HE field. However, other students remained strategically aware that such distinction could disadvantage

or even punish them in the Chinese cultural field. The newly acquired embodied gendered cultural capital might be viewed as temporary acquisition and it is still a question as to whether it can truly convert to distinction or not. However, their cognisance of the non-convertible nature of such embodied gendered cultural capital from one field to another precisely demonstrates their transnational distinction. Therefore, considering the issue of how two fields legitimate students' embodied cultural capital adds more complexity to their realisation of distinction. This way, our theorisation of distinction points to both field-specific distinction and distinction achieved through cognisance with field-specific rules.

To summarise, this article contributes to the literature in three important ways. First, building on Tindal et al.'s (2015) work on the complex nature of distinction, we theorise distinction achieved through transnational education mobility as both field-specific and as manifested through cognisance of transnational field-specific rules. Our theorisation was made possible through our second contribution, i.e. the adoption of an embodied cultural capital perspective, which builds on and expands from previous scholarly work's focus on institutionalised cultural and social capital (Brooks, Waters and Pimlott-Wilson 2013; Waters and Leung 2013) in transnational student mobility. This perspective allowed us to investigate closely how newly acquired gendered disposition of the mind, of cultural taste and of a global identity contributed to the construction of distinction. Our third contribution relates closely to the first two through identifying how various strategic or less strategic referencing peer groups were selected for comparison for these women students to achieve a

distinctive status. This adds to the existing literature which tends to focus on migrant students' social network connections in either the home or the host countries (Gomes 2015; Zhao 2019), through demonstrating that strategic and purposeful comparison and connections can be made across home, host and other destinations, in their quest for transnational distinction. Transnational distinction remains highly relevant in an age when western degree inflation intersects with harsh gender expectation for Chinese young women, a significant group in the UK higher education. This article thus facilitates an understanding of transnational distinction in a theoretically-informed manner as supported by rich empirical details.

Word Counts

7954 Words inclusive of References

Notes

1. According to the Annual Review 2017/18 Report of this British university, the data show that the number of Chinese women international students was much larger than that of men students.

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