

# Network for Research into Chinese Education Mobilities 中国教育流动研究网络

## Newsletter

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Dear NRCEM members,

We are delighted to share with you our first [Research Highlights](#) report, written by [Kris Lee](#), a doctoral candidate at Christ Church College, University of Oxford. Kris [reports](#) on her fascinating research into the experiences and motivations of Anglophone and European students studying in an international branch campus of a US university in China. We hope you will enjoy this [report](#)!

Merry Christmas and Happy New Year!

Yours sincerely,

Network for Research into Chinese Education Mobilities (NRCEM)

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**Educational Pathfinders? Unpacking Narrative Claims of North American and European Transnational Undergraduate Students in China**



University of Oxford

**Abstract:** To date, research on International Student Mobility (ISM) has predominantly been concerned with movements from Asia to English-speaking and/or European nations. Consequently, there has been a marked imbalance in the current literature on ISM, which primarily defines Asian countries as the dominant actor for outbound student mobility. In contrast, educational migration from English-speaking and/or Western countries to China, as a newly emerging study abroad destination, is a relatively recent phenomenon, and consequently has been eminently under researched. Therefore, this qualitative study brings

critical examination to bear on how transnational students from North America and Europe experience studying for a bachelor's degree delivered by an offshore campus in China.

The data is collected through questionnaires, semi-structured interviews, which complement with (digital) ethnographic observations of participants' visual/textual narratives on their social media accounts. Sociological concepts and theories drawn from Michel Foucault and critical race theory/critical Whiteness studies are primarily used to theoretically frame a critical exploration of the narrative claims of international students on their educational experiences and choices.

The study sets forth commonalities as well as differences between transnational student flow to China and mainstream mobility. It highlights often personal and multi-layered ways in which transnational students make sense of their motivations for, and experiences of study abroad. Furthermore, place, space and materiality of international branch campus are analysed to explore the ways in which transnational students create meanings of their institutionally staged space of education, interact with others within and outside of it, and materially create power relations.

## **中文摘要**

目前关于国际学生流动的研究主要关注从亚洲到讲英语和欧洲国家的移动，这导致目前国际学生流动文献中明显的不平衡，尤其是对亚洲国家作为外向学生流动主要输出者的定义。相比而言，从讲英语和西方国家到中国这个新发展的留学目的地的教育移民相对地是比较新的现象，所以相关研究也十分匮乏。有见及此，本项质性研究针对从北美和欧洲到中国的中外合作办学国际分校上本科的跨国学生的经历做出批判性的研究。

研究数据主要由问卷和半结构性访谈组成，再加上（电子）民族志性质的对于参与者在社交媒体上视觉/文字叙述的观察。理论方面，本项目采用福柯的，以及批判种族理论，批判白人研究等的社会学概念和理论来对这些国际学生的教育经历和选择方面的叙述进行批判地研究。

研究指出向中国的和主流的跨国学生流动的共同点和不同之处，尤其是关于此类跨国学生如何理解他们的留学动机和经历的个人性和复杂多层性。另外，通过对国际分校校园的地域，空间和实质进行分析，探讨跨国学生如何建构他们的制度化的教育空间，如何在此空间内外与他人互动，以及如何实质性地建立权力关系。

My doctoral research aims to offer, within the context of international branch campuses in China, a critical exploration of narrative claims of transnational students from Anglophone and European countries to study for English-taught undergraduate degrees in an unorthodox study abroad destination. In particular, it highlights often personal and multi-layered ways in which transnational students in China make sense of their motivations, decisions around their study abroad destination, and educational and non-educational experiences.

To date, research on International Student Mobility (ISM) has predominantly been concerned with movements from the Global South to major destination countries, particularly English-speaking and/or Western nations in the Global North. As such, ISM is often associated with the pursuit of English language and a Western education. In contrast, educational migration from English-speaking and/or Western countries to newly emerging study abroad destinations (e.g. China) is a relatively recent phenomenon, and consequently has never been thoroughly examined. In other words, there has been a marked imbalance in the current literature on ISM, which primarily defines Asian countries, China in particular, as a source *of* international students rather than a destination *for* such students. The purpose of this research, therefore, is to examine the motivations and experiences of these internationally mobile students from the Global North, who are important agents in reinforcing or reconfiguring current geographies of international higher education.

A cross-disciplinary review of current scholarship on ‘international student mobility’ and ‘internationalisation of higher education’ led me to an overarching question: how do international students from Anglophone and/or European countries define the field of international higher education and position themselves within it? This inquiry then involves three sub questions that guide my understanding of the overarching question:

1. What are the motivating factors and considerations that inform the decision to study for a degree programme in China? In other words, what factors enable international students from European and Anglophone countries to ‘eschew’ education from their home country or other English speaking/European countries for education in an unconventional destination?
2. What educational and non-educational experiences do international students from European and Anglophone countries (intentionally or unintentionally) obtain by studying in China?
3. What are the perceived roles of international branch campuses as a social space in legitimating and/or enabling such motivations and experiences?

To answer the above questions, sociological concepts and theories drawn from Michel Foucault are primarily used to frame this inquiry theoretically, and to offer a critical exploration of the often complex narrative claims of international students on their educational experiences and choices. Particularly, I found the notion of subjectivity useful to look at the stories that are constructed for international students, and how power produces

a particular subjectivity that is internalised and constitutes the 'true story' for them. This subject position is also observed from the ways that international students talk about their experience, because they talk about what they actively invest in the subject position during their stay in China. Places, spaces and materiality are also significant in the ways in which transnational students from the West shape the everyday life at an international branch campus in China. The physical context creates possibilities for meaning making that can be vital for these mobile young people's experiences in an unorthodox study abroad destination. On the other hand, place, space, and materiality are embedded within 'social norms' that also open up possibilities for power relations, and exclusion.

The study draws on ethnographic data collected at an US university's branch campus in China. The data is collected through questionnaires and semi-structured interviews with 32 North American and European transnational students. I complement semi-structured interview accounts with (digital) ethnographic observations of participants' visual/textual narratives on their social media accounts.

Findings point out that although the group of international students in my research do not fit in to the stereotype of 'international students', they develop subjectivities based on sameness and difference. While many students reported that the decisions to come to China were impulsive, my analysis shows that there is a dominant image of the cosmopolitan international student, which my participants tried to 'become'. In addition, Whiteness was a major theme residing under the surface of the North American and European international students' experiences in China. Although participants dominantly talked about racial privilege in China, it is similarly related to a broader privilege of mobility associated with Western nationality, English proficiency, and disposable income. Such privilege is not necessarily based on white complexion. Other international students, although in different degree, 'acquire' whiteness through their affluence, association with western culture, and institutional membership within an elite US school. In addition, analysis of the physical environment of participants' transnational education, such as the international branch campus and urban space in China, describes how transnational students create meaning and conduct themselves within and outside of institutionally staged spaces, and how they materially create power relations and interplay with other actors involved.

By positioning the participants' narrative accounts within the powerful discourse of neo-liberal globalisation and the internationalisation of higher education, this study demonstrates how these globally mobile students reinforce and/or undermine some of the taken-for-granted assumptions and dominant representation of international students in existing literature. The study concludes with a discussion of implications concerning commonalities and differences between Southward and Northward international student mobility, as well as a call for further research into the role of transnational student flow to newly emerging study abroad destinations.

**Bio:**

[Kris Hyesoo Lee](#) is a doctoral candidate at the University of Oxford, where she conducts a sociological study of the transnational mobility through education, particularly contemporary migration from the West to China. She uses a range of disciplinary lenses including human geography, sociology, and education to deepen an understanding on the meaning of globalisation, international and transnational mobility, and identity and belonging. Prior to undertaking her doctoral studies, she served various roles in the higher education sector. She holds a master's degree in Education from the University of Cambridge, where she was a member of Wolfson college.