

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,

Further on Chinese students' experiences in the UK, in our latest research report, [Jie Zhang](#) from the University of Glasgow tells us her [findings](#) about changes that Chinese postgraduate taught students have experienced during their transition processes in the UK. She particularly elaborates on her innovative photo-elicitation technique and social network diagrams in this research. This will serve as an interesting comparison with Zhe Wang's [report](#) published in early January 2018, on 'non-traditional' Chinese students' decision making about studying in the UK.

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Yours sincerely,

Network for Research into Chinese Education Mobilities (NRCEM)

A longitudinal study of Chinese postgraduate taught students' experience in the UK: how Chinese students have changed during the transition process?



[Jie Zhang](#)

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Abstract

UK, as one of the most desired destinations for studying abroad, has attracted a large number of international students. Chinese international students are the largest group of all international students in the UK and China is the only country that presents a significant increase in student numbers. Chinese international students have made important financial, academic and cultural contributions to the UK. Given the large number of Chinese international students and their potential contributions, it is crucial to enhance their experiences and strengthen benefits for both Chinese international students and host countries. Compared with undergraduate and PhD students, postgraduate taught students in the UK are usually enrolled in one-year programmes, which may face more challenges and gain more benefits from their experiences in the UK. The aim of this research is to explore Chinese international postgraduate taught students' transitional experiences and, in particular, the role of their social networks on such experiences in the UK. This two-phase longitudinal study conducted semi-structured interviews across the whole academic year. The photo-elicitation technique and social network diagrams were used as innovative methods to facilitate in-depth interviews. Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) was employed as an inductive data analysis approach. Emergent findings include how students have changed when facing challenges on academic study, live away from families, and loneliness and homesickness, how they have changed their understandings of critical thinking, and how they deal with relationship with Chinese and non-Chinese, which is all beneficial for enhancement of their confidence, independence and maturity.

摘要

英国作为最受欢迎的留学目的地之一，吸引了大批国际学生。中国留学生是英国留学生中人数最多的，而且中国是唯一一个在英国大幅增加留学人数的国家。中国留学生为英国做出了重要的财政、学术和文化贡献。鉴于中国留学生数量众多，潜在贡献巨大，提高中国留学生在英国的体验和促进双方的利益至关重要。与本科生和博士生相比，英国的研究生课程只有一年的时间，这可能会让他们从在英国的经历中，面临更多的挑战，学到更多的东西。本研究的目的是探讨中国国际研究生的经历与体验和他们的社交关系在英国的经历与体验中发挥的作用。这项研究采取了半结构化访谈，用于以学年为单位的两期纵向追踪研究。使用照片启发技术和社交网络图作为创新方法来促进深入访谈。解释性现象学分析（IPA）被用作归纳数据分析方法。目前出现的成果包括：学生在应对学习、远离家庭，孤独与思乡之情的挑战时是如何改变的，他们对批判性思维的理解有何不同，他们是如何处理与中国人和非中国人的关系的，这些对中国学生提高信心，独立意识和成熟度都大有裨益。

UK has been the second most popular destination for international students. Chinese international students are the dominant group, accounting for one fifth of the total number

of international students in the UK (HESA, 2017). Chinese international students have made contributions such as making investment in economy by tuition fees and living costs, and bringing new ways of thinking and culture to enhance competition and diversity in the UK. Compared with undergraduate and PhD counterparts, Chinese international students at Master's level may have different experience due to the nature of short-term Master's programmes in the UK. Yet, there are limited studies focusing on this student cohort. This research aims to explore Chinese international postgraduate taught (PgT) students' transitional experiences and the role of their social networks in the UK. More specifically, research questions are:

- how Chinese international postgraduate taught (PgT) students adapt to a new academic and social culture during the transition process, and
- how their social networks influence their transitional experiences in the UK.

A qualitative research method utilising photo-elicitation interviews was employed as part of a longitudinal study. Semi-structured interviews were conducted in two phases: at the beginning of and near the end of the study programme. The employed photo-elicitation technique facilitates participants to reflect on their phenomenological experiences by providing more specific and in-depth accounts (Denzin and Lincoln, 2012). In this study, participants were asked to provide photographs based on given topics, which was followed by individual semi-structured interviews with maximum of an hour each. Additionally, social network diagrams were helpful to prompt students' reflection and detailed description of networks and their relationships with different networks (Golden, 1992). In this research, participants were asked to draw different sizes of circles to represent how they value their current social networks. I have completed data collection with totally 35 participants for both phases, all interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed and I am currently doing data analysis. The Interpretative Phenomenological Approach (IPA) was undertaken using NVivo software to identify superordinate and subordinate themes.

As the literature indicates, Chinese international students could face some academic, social and life challenges when studying in the UK. From this study, Chinese postgraduate taught students also face academic challenges, including doing presentations, writing assignments and taking exams. It is noted that at the beginning of the study programme, Chinese students tend to seek help from Chinese classmates when having doubts rather than lecturers and tutors, and they prefer asking questions after the class rather than raising hands up in class. But interestingly, my research shows that some Chinese students turn not to ask questions with Chinese classmates, but directly seek help from lecturers and tutors, and have the courage and feel natural to ask questions in class near the end of the study programme.

Apart from the finding of challenge on academic study, living away from families is regarded as another challenge for Chinese international students. For Chinese students who live abroad for the first time, cooking and having a good relationship with roommates could be difficult. Chinese students reported that they didn't have much cooking experience when they were in China and they find cooking as an unexpected challenge living in the UK. Additionally, some Chinese students talked about issues with their roommates, for example,

some roommates make kitchen dirty and they would not like to clean it even after pointing out the problem. When near the end of the study programme, some Chinese students mentioned they have greatly improved their cooking skills and have a better relationship with their roommates.

Moreover, loneliness and homesickness are common challenges that Chinese international students would face. In my research, the reasons Chinese students frequently mention are that Chinese students spend too much time in study and have less time with friends, and some Chinese students live alone. Chinese students feel anxious and stressful when facing loneliness and homesickness from the beginning of the study programme, but it clearly shows that they have changed to a more positive attitude to cope with loneliness and homesickness. Some Chinese students realise that they should take the initiative to build friendship, develop some hobbies and even learn to enjoy loneliness and homesickness.

In addition, critical thinking has always been argued as a big challenge for international students, especially for Asian international students. In my study, it is not necessarily the case. Some students showed their clear understanding of critical thinking. Possible reason could be that they have studied in the UK or Europe before and some lecturers encouraged them to think critically in their undergraduate's study in China. For students who never know critical thinking, as in study, some Chinese are not familiar with critical thinking from the beginning of the study programme, but they have gained a clearer understanding of what critical thinking means and how to use critical thinking in study and life.

Besides, Chinese students generally have good relationship with Chinese and they provide mutual help on academic study, life troubles and emotional support. It is argued that Chinese students face challenges such as language barrier, cultural differences, shyness when in interaction with non-Chinese. Although most Chinese students reported that there have difficulties in making friends with non-Chinese, there are some students having good friendships with non-Chinese through church, group work and social activities and have gained great encouragement and support from them. Some Chinese students also mentioned that they feel very nervous and shy to talk to non-Chinese from the beginning, but they have gradually improved their confidence and feel natural when interacting with non-Chinese.

This research addresses the gap in the literature on Chinese postgraduate taught (PgT) students' experience and the role of social networks during the transition process in the UK. Chinese students have largely improved their confidence, independence and maturity by facing challenges during the year. Apart from presented emergent findings, further results are on the way to see a bigger picture of Chinese international students' experience in the UK. As a large and growing number of Chinese international students, it is significant to see possibly changed and unchanged experience in more depth. This research is likely to contribute to theoretical and practical understanding that could facilitate Chinese international postgraduate taught (PgT) students' successful completion and enjoy their transition process in the UK. It is also the hope that this research as well as other research

on Chinese education mobility could make contributions to a more comprehensive picture overall.

Author Bio

[Jie Zhang](#) is a doctoral researcher from School of Education, University of Glasgow. Her research interests include international students, higher education, transitional experience, social networks and creative methods. Her current research focuses on Chinese international students in the UK and she uses creative methods such as the photo-elicitation technique and social network diagrams to facilitate research. Prior to taking her doctoral studies, she holds a master's degree from Human Resources Management, University of Sheffield. All comments and suggestions are very welcomed. Please contact her by J.ZHANG.3@research.gla.ac.uk

'Non-traditional' International Mainland Chinese Students in the UK: An Exploratory Study of Factors Influencing Their Choice of International Higher Education



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Abstract

Nowadays, there is an emerging group of self-funded Chinese international students from non-elite families in mainland China. Their emergence breaks the traditional concepts about Chinese (mainland) international students. This study aims to understand the factors that influence the choice of postgraduate education in the UK. Through a narrative analysis of eight 'non-traditional' Chinese international postgraduates in the UK, this study suggests Bourdieu's theory can help understand the educational choices of this group. Through this

qualitative study of the emerging group at a UK university, this study provides a critical perspective, suggesting these students are comprised of individuals from different social backgrounds. For some of them, their choice of international higher education (IHE) can be regarded as a result of their habitus, while for others, their choice of IHE is a result of their agency to accumulate certain forms of capital in the field of IHE. Both choices in turn reproduce social inequalities.

随着越来越多的自费中国（大陆）留学生来自于非精英阶层，他们的出现打破了对于中国留学生的传统印象。本研究致力于了解影响非传统留学生选择英国研究生教育的因素。通过对八名在英就读研究生课程的中国留学生的语篇分析，本研究发现布迪厄的理论有效地帮助研究者研究学生的留学选择。通过定性研究，本研究发现非传统的中国留学生来自于不同的社会背景。他们中的一部分的留学选择受到他们阶级惯习地影响，另为一部分将留学视作不同资本积累的途径；两者共同复制了社会的阶级不平等。

This report is based on my Master's thesis, aiming to understand the choice of international higher education in the UK by the 'non-traditional' Chinese International students. As the significant contributors, the emerging groups of 'non-traditional' attracts the attention of many circles. The Wall Street Journal stated that: "as the number of foreign students surges ... up more than 40% ... are coming from middle-class backgrounds" (Chen, 2016)^[1], and the investment of high-cost IHE is not an easy decision for them. Apart from the term 'middle class', other terms such as 'middle income' or 'wage-earning class' are used to characterise this group. The idea of 'middle class', however, is a controversial concept in the literature of China's class studies. Then, instead of arbitrarily define participants as students from middle-class or middle-income families, I chose the term 'non-traditional' students to describe my participants. So, the research questions in my study are who 'non-traditional students' are and why there are more and more 'non-traditional' students going abroad to study. More specifically, this study aims to explore the factors influencing 'non-traditional' Chinese international students who choose postgraduate in the UK.

This study invites Bourdieu's practice theory as the theoretical framework to understand educational choices of international students. It is found that the choice of IHE as practices structured by habitus, and practices generated from agency illustrates the dialectical relationship between structure and agency. From eight participants' narratives, it was found that influencing factors vary according to social background.

A qualitative method was employed to answer the research question and address a gap in the knowledge. By using semi-structured interviews, rich data were found in the narratives. Narrative analysis was used as the data-analysis method to help analyse participants' stories and understand how they make sense of stories.

There are five major findings in this study. Firstly, participants come from different middle classes, including old middle class, new middle class and first generation of middle class. Secondly, there are divergences in attitudes towards international higher education and 'highly secure' jobs. Thirdly, the choice of international higher education as practices is structured by habitus, and this choice in turn structures the field and intensifies a new rule of game as collective practices. Fourthly, social actors can actively accumulate forms of capital to gain social positions in the field with their choice of international higher education. Finally, Chinese postgraduate education is an abandoned field by participants in the new games. When these findings are related to the existing literature, it can be found that international cultural capital is regarded as a collectively accepted mode of convertibility among forms of capital. Meanwhile, as more students choose IHE, this cultural capital is conditioned by social institutions. This further explains the ambiguous attitudes towards IHE. Moreover, the fact that Chinese postgraduate education is replaced by international postgraduate education as a way to reproduce and produce social inequalities is a global phenomenon. Middle- classes' choice of cross-national social reproduction confirms their social positions in the field. Based on cross-nationally reproduced inequalities, intra-national inequalities are more difficult to reduce. Another implication is that, although today's scholars think China's middle classes haven't formed a class consciousness, this study suggests that they have. By practicing collectively believed rules, their identity as being from the middle- classes are forming with status prestige, even though great intra-class differences and conflicts exist.

[1]Chen, T.-P.J., Miriam 2016. *Why So Many Chinese Students Come to the U.S.*[Online]. WSJ. Available from: <http://www.wsj.com/articles/why-so-many-chinese-students-come-to-the-u-s-1462123552> [Accessed 29 August 2016].

Author Bio

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