

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

Newsletter

Issue 3 February 2018

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Dear members of NRCEM,

This week we are delighted to share a newly published [article](#) in *Discourse* by [Dr Peidong Yang](#) who reveals intriguing insights into the Compromise and Complicity of Indian medical students at a Chinese university. How are these 'unlikely' mobile subjects and their families navigate their education mobilities to and from China? Read the report [here](#). For the Chinese abstract, please click [here](#). If you have recently published any works on Chinese education mobilities and would like to introduce your works to a wider audience, please do get in touch. We have more than 200 members on this list and our Network website attracts considerable hits on a daily basis.

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Yours sincerely,
Network for Research into Chinese Education Mobilities (NRCEM)

Compromise and complicity in international student mobility: the ethnographic case of Indian medical students at a Chinese university

Yang, P. (2018). Compromise and complicity in international student mobility: the ethnographic case of Indian medical students at a Chinese university. *Discourse: Studies in the Cultural Politics of Education*. <http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/01596306.2018.1435600>



Author during field trip in India, January 2016

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Abstract ([中文摘要](#))

Existing scholarship on international student mobility (ISM) often draws on Bourdieu to interpret such mobility as a strategy of capital conversion used by privileged classes to reproduce their social advantage. This perspective stems from and also reinforces a rationalistic interpretation of student mobility. A shift of focus to interAsian educational mobilities involving non-elite individuals and institutions can reveal logics of behavior and of social interaction that are at discrepancy with the dominant perspective, thereby advancing the theorization of educational mobilities. This paper examines a case of Indian youths of less affluent backgrounds pursuing English-medium medical degrees (MBBS) at a provincial university in China. Through ethnography, the paper illustrates how various parties – individual, organizational and institutional – to this somewhat ‘unlikely’ project of knowledge mobility follow the discrepant logics of compromise and complicity to seek to realize their educational desires, social aspirations, and organizational objectives amidst realities of class disadvantage and resource inadequacy.

摘要

目前关于国际学生流动的学术文献通常透过社会学家布迪厄的理论视角，将流动阐释为社会优势阶层通过资本转化从而达到优势再生的一种手段。这个分析视角既是基于对学生流动的一种理性化阐释，同时也强化了这种理性阐释的主流地位。然而，若将视线转移至当前亚洲区域内的非“精英”学生流动趋势，主流分析视角所不能解释的一些教育相关的社会行为逻辑则被凸显了出来，从而成为推动国际学生流动理论的契机。本文对家境并非优越的印度学生在中国某高校攻读英文授课临床医学的案例进行观察。通过民族志方法，本文描述并分析此案例中不同角色——一个人、机构、制度——是如何在社会劣势与资源不足的情况下，通过“妥协”与“共识”两种行为逻辑来尽可能实现他们各自的个人以及机构目的。

This article examines a thus-far little-known and arguably ‘unlikely’ case of international student mobility (ISM): Indian youths of less affluent backgrounds pursuing English-medium

undergraduate medical education (Bachelor of Medicine and Bachelor of Surgery, or MBBS) in China.

Indian students started heading to China for MBBS in their 'hundreds' since early 2000s (Aiyar, 2006). As of 2015, the majority of the 16,694 Indian students in China (CAFSA, 2016) can be assumed to be on MBBS programmes, although no precise statistics seems available. Students from India are very likely the largest single-nationality group among foreign students pursuing English-medium MBBS in China. In recent years, China has also become the top destination for Indian students seeking medical training abroad (Mishra, 2012).

Prevailing theorization of ISM tends to employ a Bourdieusian theoretical framework and assumes mobility to be 'overwhelmingly pursued by privileged individuals' (Waters, Brooks, & Pimlott-Wilson, 2011, p. 460). The underlying logic of ISM, according to this dominant perspective, is about using study-abroad as a 'social alchemy' to realize the conversion between economic, social and cultural capitals, thus ultimately to reproduce class advantage.

The case of Indian MBBS students in China raises numerous points of discrepancy with this prevailing narrative. Most Indian students I encountered during my fieldwork at a provincial university (pseudonym 'CNU') in southeastern China came from non-affluent families in small-town or rural India. They belong to the emergent lower middle classes in India, with little true class advantage or 'eliteness' to speak of. Their destination – Chinese provincial capital city 'CN' – lies outside the coveted global spheres of elite knowledge production and circulation. There was also limited evidence that their India-to-China mobility would eventually generate any meaningful 'cultural capital' for them.

Thus, my paper sets out to understand and articulate the logics or rationalities underpinning such a 'discrepant' case of ISM. In a nutshell, I argue that the mundane thought processes, decision making, behavioral patterns, and social interactions of the various parties to this case can be understood in terms of what I call the logics of *compromise* and *complicity*.

The study is based on three short but intensive ethnographic fieldtrips conducted in China and Indian over 2014-2016.

Compromise

The term 'compromise' captures the very preconditions of this case of ISM, which in turn underpin various actors' behaviours.

With government-subsidized public medical schools being extremely competitive while the private alternative extremely expensive, coming to CNU, China for MBBS could be understood primarily as a *compromise* made by a group of Indian doctor-aspirants who are academically as well as financially excluded from medical education in India.

One manifestation of this state of compromise was the manner in which my Indian informants and their parents settled upon the destination country and institution for study.

Contrary to an informed, calculative and careful decision-making process that a rationalistic interpretation of ISM tends to portray, my informants' choices were often made in a haphazard way, shaped by elements of chance and contingency. Many of them admitted to having, to greater or lesser extent, made 'blind choices' when deciding upon coming to China for MBBS, and in choosing institutions.

On the other hand, it was found that CNU's international MBBS programme suffered from serious issues with regard to admission screening and programme quality. In my ethnographic field trips and interactions with the Indian students, I encountered multiple instances – some of which rather unsettling – that indicate this provincial Chinese university's own compromised situation as an educational provider.

In short, for tuition fee revenue and supposed prestige of 'internationalization', CNU compromised its admission standards to accept Indian students (among other nationalities) who were themselves operating on a logic of compromise due to their own lack of choice. Meanwhile, owing to resource inadequacy and lack of preparedness, CNU was only able to offer an education of clearly compromised quality.

Complicity

In his work on rural China, social anthropologist Steinmüller's (2010) defines a 'community of complicity' as one characterized by *shared embarrassing (self-)knowledge*. He argues that the sharing of embarrassing (self-)knowledge reaffirms a sense of community membership and sociality amidst contradictions and social tensions.

Borrowing this anthropological notion of complicity, I argue that the various parties to the India-to-China MBBS project at CNU can be regarded as forming a community of complicity of sorts. Here, complicity entails embarrassment that is mutually known, but unspoken to preserve the veneer of normalcy and respectability. Its ultimate aim is mutual accommodation and conflict avoidance.

Ethnographically, I show how complicity exists between the Indian students and CNU; between the students and their parents; and between the students and the educational intermediaries that facilitated their mobility.

Between the Indian MBBS students and CNU, complicity manifests in a mutual silence about each other's compromises, which serves to sustain this otherwise precarious educational project. Put bluntly, the Indian students refrain from complaining about CNU's problematic programme because they are acutely aware of their own lack of choice. On the other hand, equally conscious of their mediocre institutional standing and resources and the lack of readiness in running medical education in English, CNU sometimes uses measures such as leaking exam questions to help students progress in their studies instead of insisting on academic rigour. Maintaining this mutual complicitous silence helped both parties avoid situations of awkwardness and potential conflict where both parties could be greatly embarrassed or indeed provoked should their respective compromises be exposed.

Between the students and their parents, complicity manifests in a mutual silence and a lack of communication about the problematic realities of their MBBS programme in CNU China. Such a silence or lack of communication is difficult to comprehend considering that parents have invested heavily into the students' education despite humble family socioeconomic circumstances. Drawing on Jakimow (2016), my interpretation in this paper is that the Indian students and their parents are locked in a complicitous relationship vis-à-vis each other so as to preserve the *appearance* that each is fulfilling their moral obligations to the other. This precarious mutual performances of moral duties – for parents to give their children a chance at social mobility by sponsoring their education and for children to study hard to realize that social mobility by becoming doctors – could only be preserved in this case through a complicitous silence about what actual went on in the programmes at CNU.

Finally, between the students and the educational intermediaries, complicity manifests in the otherwise surprising ways in which the problematic reality of the India-to-China MBBS programme never seemed to affect a cordial – sometimes even familial – relationship between the two parties. Their relationship seems far from a legalistic one between the customer and the service provider where the paying customer supposedly has the upper hand. It is argued, the students (and their parents) can be regarded as somewhat complicitous in their weak position vis-à-vis the intermediaries, thus allowing the latter to profit from their compromises.

Conclusion

The paper does not suggest that compromise and complicity are logics unique or exclusive to this case study. Arguably, elements of compromise and complicity are present in all forms of educational choices. In this account, however, they are so central as to warrant theorization on their own. Compromise and complicity may seem nothing more than matters of pragmatism. However, in this paper, I have chosen to interpret them as ingenious solutions devised by social actors who try to materialize their educational desires, social aspirations and organizational objectives amidst realities of class disadvantage and resource inadequacy.

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Bio

Peidong Yang (DPhil, Oxford) is a Lecturer in Humanities and Social Studies Education at the National Institute of Education (NIE), Singapore. His research interests are located at the intersections between education, migration/mobility, and media. Past and present research projects include Singapore's "foreign talent" policy in relation to Chinese students' international mobility; immigration tensions and immigrant integration in Singapore; Indian medical students in China; and cultural analysis of (online) media memes in contemporary China. He is the author of *International Mobility and Educational Desire: Chinese Foreign Talent Students in Singapore* (Palgrave, 2016) and more than a dozen international peer-reviewed journal articles and book chapters. At NIE Singapore, he teaches courses on identity, globalization, and sociology of education to student teachers.
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