

Chinese Students as Mobile Subjects: A Case Study of Thai Universities

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Abstract

The last two decades have been the golden times of Chinese students' mobility in pursuing college education in western countries. After the twentieth century, the number of Chinese students in Asian universities is on a rapid rise, especially Thai universities. This phenomenon indicates that their demands for higher education in Asia have significantly increased. This paper aims to study the history of Chinese educational migration and state policies which influence overseas Chinese students, to explore the mobility tendency of Chinese students studying abroad, to survey and to analyze the structural factors and students' desires that affect their decision making to take higher education. By studying the case of Chinese students in Thai universities, this research employs the concept of mobility and power-geometry and argues that Chinese students as mobile subjects are tied to state policies and family's expectations. The findings review that the intense competition in education, class, family background, and the family's expectations in China are the critical structural factors feeding their decision process. On the other hand, university prestige and image, education opportunities, safe campuses, and global experiences are their desires to study abroad, and studying at a Thai university is one of their choices.

Keywords: Chinese students, Mobile subjects, Thai universities

1. Introduction

A fast-growing phenomenon of Chinese students studying abroad in global higher education is one of the main interests in global education perspectives. Chinese students are the largest group of international students in the world. Over 4 million Chinese students are taking courses and studying in higher education around the world. With the long history of the Chinese diaspora and overseas Chinese, the tendency of Chinese students' mobility has increased rapidly. Some countries surprisingly face the flow of student mobility and encounter unexpected changes in global attention.

In recent years, the previous Chinese student mobility's studies have been focused on the flows of students to Europe based on internationalization and globalization process. Mostly scholars study as such internationalization in higher education, adjustment at the foreign university, academic cultural, learning strategy and teaching styles in the home and the host country, learning and living experiences, language, difficulties, including Chinese students abroad problems (Brandenburg and Zhu 2007; Henze and Zhu 2012; Hansen and Thøgersen 2015; Zhu 2016; Thøgersen and Wu 2016). Meanwhile, some scholars studied the motivations, experiences, identities, and perspectives of transnational Chinese students, who studied in developed countries as called Paradise (Fong, 2011), looked at their access to social and cultural citizenship in the developed world and also maintain their social, cultural, and legal citizenship in China.

The reason mentioned above arouses my interests to focus on the new critical thinking about Chinese student's mobility by studying the history of Chinese educational migration and mobility, especially the educational migration of Chinese students who studied abroad. I also would like to point out the development of government policies and its influence on the student mobility of higher education since the 19th century, more concerning, the role of government and state policies which controlled the mobile students. Overarching research questions have guided the analysis: how are Chinese education migration and state policies affecting the overseas Chinese students in higher education? What are the main factors affecting the Chinese students' decision to take higher education in Southeast Asia, especially in Thailand? How do these reflect their mobility?

In China, the affective attachments in the family are presented and enacted through the exchange of emotional, authentic, material, and valid care from the parents. So, I choose to emphasize overseas Chinese students in higher education, specifically full-time students studying for a bachelor's degree. They are not overseas Chinese youths. With the different ages between Chinese youths and teenagers, young Chinese students' mobility is as part of family mobility while teenagers and adults might be more mobile and more dependent without parental pressure. Also, the child as a subject of mobility is difficult to govern by parents' expectations. They are shaped through relationships and dependencies with others, while more mutual students can bring hope and reproduce the family's tension. Overseas Chinese students in higher education are also viewed as part of social, state, and family's expectations. So, these students were actively making plans and arrangements to study abroad since they studied in China.

Moreover, the conceptual framework of my study draws upon the concept of mobility and power-geometry in order to study the mobility tendency of overseas Chinese students studying abroad, motivations,

experiences, expectations, and perspectives of Chinese students. This paper links to the research on the current Chinese students studying abroad and applied a few government reports and other sources as background data. In addition, my research site is in Chiang Mai city, in the northern of Thailand. I have chosen only Chinese students who study in the top-three universities in Chiang Mai city. I became interested in and interviewed Chinese students I know at Chiang Mai University, Payap University, and Chiang Mai Rajabhat University. This Chinese students' group can be represented by the new Chinese generation who study abroad. They also chose Southeast Asian countries as the destination. Besides interviewing the students, I also met their friends, classmates, and partners when accompanying them for off-campus activities. My research method is a life story analysis to understand these Chinese students deeply.

3. Theoretical Len: Mobility and Power-geometry

Mobility becomes part of everyday life, it involves every movement, and is seen in meaningful social practices. A mobility lens brings more attention to the empirical facts, the journey, as well as the movement from one place to another. In addition, a new paradigm of mobilities is framed in the social sciences research, including the study of interdisciplinary social sciences and movement of studies. Thus society was reconfigured as the mobility of social life and society under the new mobilities' paradigm (Urry 2000; Sheller and Urry 2006; Adey, Bissell, Hannam, Merriman, & Sheller 2014). New mobility approach also focuses on the relation between local and global power-geometries (Massey, 1991; 1993; 1999), and the meaning of everyday life. From this new mobility lens, I have observed the growing discussion of Chinese students that the increasing number of Chinese students studying abroad is outstanding since China's reform and the influence of China's economic growth. Additionally, the complex flows of Chinese students' mobility are a new global perspective that we should pay more attention to.

I consider the mobility approach with three aspects of mobility: physical movement, representations of movement, and practice of movement (Cresswell 2010). Mobility is everywhere, and in every part of our daily life, such as walking or even sleeping, that is an embodied practice and experience. All forms of mobility are implicated in the production of power and relations of domination. They are encoded socially, culturally, politically, and economically (Cresswell 2006). Also, the complex pattern of people and the change of social activities lead to paying attention to global network and fluids (Urry 2000). The complexities of them are becoming the center-stage of mobilities, immobilities, and moorings (Hannam,

Sheller, & Urry 2006). Thus, social life and social space entail with mobility nodes, the places are dynamic, both human and non-human agents are seen as the vision in motion (Cresswell 2006).

From new mobility perspectives, the more important approach that could be applied to the mobility of Chinese students research, I emphasize that social mobility might be implied as some kind of movement up and down socio-economic hierarchies of wealth, class and status which account for displacement both geographically and socially, specifically social progress and categorical advancement within power geometries of Chinese students. They are composed through class, race, ethnicity, and gender. Linkage, the variety of courses the Chinese students take in higher education is tied with the discourse and cultural authority in China. The state policies advocate students by proclaiming they 'support studying abroad, promote return and freedom of movement' to 'serve the country,' many of them are government-sponsored, and some are self-funding (Nyiri 2010).

Some scholars studied three significant aspects of Chinese students' international mobility concerning Chinese educational culture that are the education-first culture, the saving culture, and the extended-family culture, in order to understand Chinese behavioral patterns (Liu 2016). While some students point out that the essential dimensions of difference in the experiences and their position are gender, socio-economic background, family expectations, and a future job which shapes their transnational environment and experiences. The main themes are transforming lives and integration and segregation abroad (Hansen & Thøgersen 2015). The model of geography of power studied a variety of experiences at the individual level to generating the dynamic of Chinese student migration. The hierarchies of power reflected the motivations and multiple geographical scales (Kajanus 2015). Some studies also examined the Chinese discourse in the Western values; freedom, individual rights, equality, and creativity (Thøgersen 2015).

Identically, Massey's notion of power-geometry (1991) introduces social relations and power are viewed as geographic and networked at various scales, from household to the international arena. The power-geometry broadly demonstrates a different kind of complexity of social struggle and highly complex social differentiation. Besides, the degree of individuals' power relies on how they are variously embedded in networks of relations that are found at these various levels (Massey 1991: 1993).

From this argument above, I argue that Chinese students as mobile subjects who tie with the discourse of nationalism, state policies, and family expectations. Thus, mobility and power-geometry of the time-space compression concept can be applied to the case of Chinese students. These Chinese students are also identified as essential talents that they attempt to attract and retain by the nation-state.

3. Overseas Chinese Students Studying Abroad: Chinese Educational Migration and State Policies

Overseas Chinese students represent the most significant international student group who study and take various courses in many countries. Over two decades, the number of them studying abroad has remarkably increased from 860 in 1978 to 608,400 in 2017 (Figure 1). They enrolled in several higher education institutions (China Statistics Press 2017). On the other hand, demographic data between the number of Chinese students studying abroad and the returning students are not balancing. In some years, the population of Chinese students has decreased and increased in different periods. Besides that, the influences on state and governmental policies have controlled the flow of Chinese overseas students in higher education in each period since the 19th century.

Chinese students started studying abroad during the late Qing dynasty. The first group of overseas Chinese students was sent to America in 1847, to learn useful skills and bring back the knowledge to the country, especially the sciences and more advancing technologies. After that, the Qing dynasty sent more 120 Chinese students to the US for the Chinese Educational Mission project. More than sixty students attended colleges, universities, and standard technical schools in different courses. The aim was to make sure that some young Chinese would major in western learning. Later, this plan was abandoned in 1881, and Chinese students in the US were called back. The Qing government feared that they were becoming Americanized. After that, these students played important roles in China's modern transformation and administration (Salmela 2008; THøgersen, 2016; Zhu 2016). This period was the beginning that the imperial state selected a carefully limited number of students to go abroad and sent the students overseas.

During the Republican period (1912–1949), because of China's weakness and vulnerability, military officers, young Chinese officials, and students began to overthrow the Qing dynasty. They created the Republic of China (RC). There were many vital situations in this period, such as the anti-Confucian new culture movement, the rise of the Communist Party of China (CPC), the Second Sino-Japanese War, and World War II. From these social changes, political movements, and economic problems, intellectuals and students wanted to study abroad for upward social mobility and escaped from the bitter struggles in the country. After the significant combat in the Chinese Civil War in 1949 had ended, Chairman Mao Zedong proclaimed and established the People's Republic of China (PRC). The state was shaped by the economic and social plan to carry out the mass and launched the Cultural Revolution. In this period, the Communist Party of China (CPC) started sending around 10,000 Chinese students to the Soviet Union and Eastern

Europe to train to be scientists, engineers, and technical experts in socialist China. With the attention of the state, they would help restructure higher education according to the Soviet model. This plan was broken in 1960 when the conflict between China and the Soviet Union escalated.

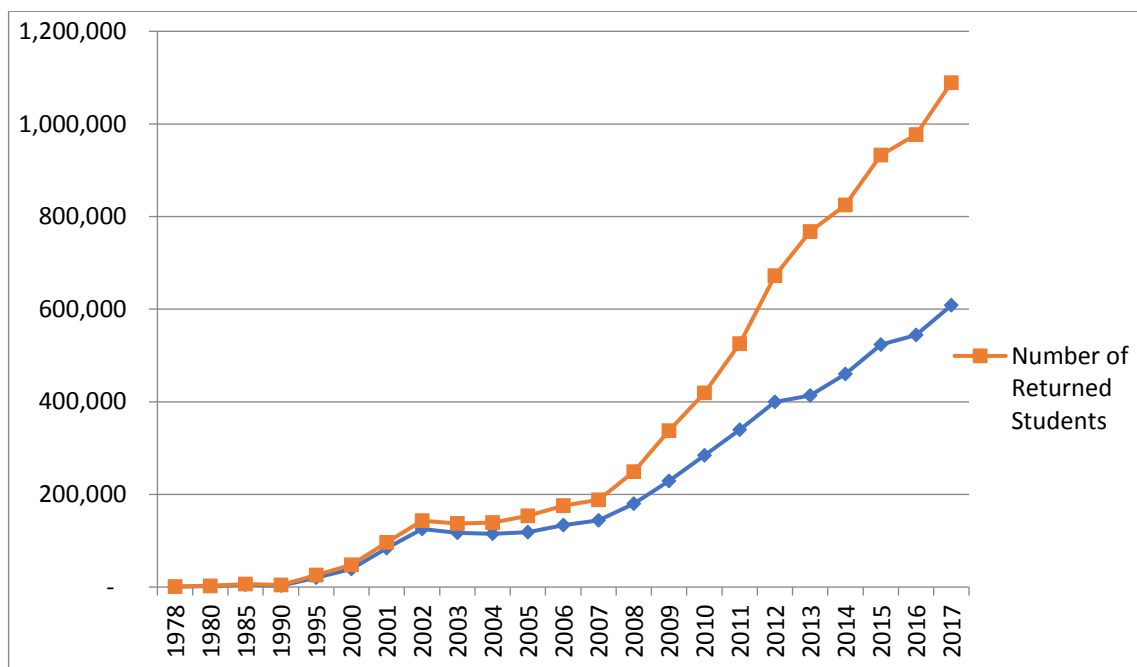


Figure1: Statistics on Chinese students studying abroad and returning students (1978-2017)

(Source: China Statistics Press, 2017)

During the Cultural Revolution period (1966–1976), educational migration did not play a practical role in China’s development strategy. Mao Zedong had strict control on internal and international migration around the world. The Chinese government also restricted sponsoring the students who studied abroad. Additionally, the internal mobility became masses, while social agenda and political aims of migrations and education were changed. The mighty threat of the student authorities led them to avoid any misdeeds. From the communist-ruled country, international mobility was restricted and allowed only under the surveillance of the government. Many educated nationalist officials and professionals emigrated to other countries such as Hong Kong, at the same time, many overseas students were not willing to return.

In 1978, the communist official Deng Xiaoping became the paramount leader of China. It was a fruitful time for the Chinese economic reform. He started many projects to modernize China by firstly advocating

for the four modernizations of agriculture, industry, national defense, and science and technology. The government established the special economic zones of China to encourage foreign inventors and entrepreneurs. It seemed that the government began to relax restrictions. From that, the state focused on education as the key to economic development by supporting Chinese students to travel overseas. They started sending the selected groups of Chinese students to Western countries. Interestingly, many overseas students decided to remain in the West because of the weakness of the country and state conservatism in the past. These became a major problem later.

On the other hand, the reform of China created new opportunities for socioeconomic mobility for a new life had emerged, but people do not have equal access to them. The state is still limited and has cultivated effective ties with the people. Notably, Chinese students whose ties are through nationalist education (Kajanus 2015). Fong mentioned that Chinese overseas were key contributors to the targets of the new discourse of nationalism that was promoted by the Chinese state based on admiration of China's culture, government policies, geographical beauty, and successful modernization. The contemporary Chinese youth were actively prone to feeling a strong emotional attachment and filial duty to the state. They professed a deep love for their country, just as they felt for their parents and family, so they had to repay the motherland. Moreover, it demonstrated that they were still patriotic and love the country (Fong 2004; 2011).

During the 1980s, the Chinese government announced a one-child policy to control China's overpopulation while Chinese students increasingly went to study abroad because of the inequality control of the government that made exceptions in the case of local officials. Importantly, when the one-child policy in 1979 was promulgated, the Chinese youths were facing parental pressure and expectation, competition in the educational system, and the job market. Singletons were also highly expected to become a winner in a pyramidal socioeconomic system. Having only one child encouraged parents to seriously concentrate all their resources on providing that child with the best, especially when giving their children the best education (Fong 2011; Kajanus 2015; Lin 2014; Liu 2016; Zhu 2016). Then, the State Council issued temporary provisions for self-funded students to go abroad in 1984. The provincial and local governments were required to promote self-funded students who could easily apply for overseas study. They allowed self-funded students to study abroad with the same status and privileges as government-funded students.

In 1989, Tiananmen Square protests were raised. The Chinese government was condemned for their violent response to the protests, and a lot of Chinese were murdered brutally. From that suppression of the

Chinese student movement, Chinese students did not migrate to return to their home country. Furthermore, they perceived the state as a lower living standard country. In this period, the study abroad fever was high (Nyiri 2010). Then, the CPC faced a considerable brain drain problem. The state put more pressure on the students to come back through an intensive ideological campaign for their patriotic feelings.

In 1992, the State Education Commission announced a new official mantra, which promised that the government would support studying abroad, encourage returning, and grant them the freedom to come and go. This strategy was a more optimistic and flexible policy than what was made in the past. These changes in official policies shifted from the government strategy to individual families' management. The state maintained a discourse about studying for the nation and sent out patriotic appeals to these overseas students. It also emphasized that graduates could serve the nation without necessarily returning to the nation. After that, the Ministry of Education issued the notification of simplifying the examination and approval procedures of studying abroad for self-funded students with a junior-bachelor degree or above in 2003. It seemed that the process of application was simplified. This strategy encouraged increasing numbers of Chinese students from the middle class's family to be overseas applicants. However, the government changed the proposed strategy from 'made in China' to 'create in China' and announced it publicly. At the end of 2011, the total number of students who had gone overseas since 1978 had reached 2,244,100 while only 818,400, or about 36%, had returned (Zhu 2016).

Following these reforms in policy, the number of Chinese students studying abroad has increased at a dramatic rate. Chinese students have become the most important international student group in many popular international host countries, such as the USA, UK, Australia, Germany, France, Japan, and Korea (Zhu 2016). Recently, the Chinese state has actively encouraged foreign-trained talents to return to the motherland. The government aims to have highly qualified Chinese with foreign credentials facilitating China's transition to a knowledge economy through their participation in international science and technology networks (Thøgersen & Wu 2016).

According to the reports, the top five destinations for transnational Chinese students are United States, Australia, the United Kingdom, Japan, and Canada (UNESCO Institute of Statistics 2018). Interestingly, between 2012-2017, the number of Transnational Chinese students who applied in the US decreased by two percent while the number of Transnational Chinese students who applied in East Asian and Southeast Asian countries increased. Also, the top three destinations in Southeast Asian countries are Singapore, Malaysia, and Thailand (UNESCO Institute of Statistics 2018).

4. Chinese students in Thai Universities

Thailand, as an emerging overseas study destination, is becoming a favorite target of Chinese students to study abroad in Asia. Many Chinese students select Thai universities as their choice of destination (Jareonsubphayanont 2014). According to the data from the Higher Education Commission office, the Ministry of Education in Thailand shows that Chinese students studied in Thai universities for over ten years (Figure 2). The report reviews that the top three destination's University of Chinese students is Dhurakij Pundit University (1,785), Assumption University (985), and Chiang Mai University (549). Most Chinese students are studying the bachelor's degree (72%), and the favorable fields of study are business, Thai language, and tourism (Higher Education Commission 2017).

Essentially, Chiang Mai province is very popular and the second-largest city in Thailand, as well as the hub of higher education in the northern region. Chiang Mai is becoming a famous destination to Chinese students and later will become a hotspot to crowds of people, capital, images, and information. There are seven universities, both state universities (Chiang Mai University, Chiang Mai Rajabhat University, Maejo University, and Rajamangala University of Technology Lanna) and private universities (Payap University, North-Chiang Mai University, and The Far Eastern University) in Chiang Mai province. The top-three University with the highest Chinese enrollment is Chiang Mai University (549), Payap University (140), and Chiang Mai Rajabhat University (75) respectively.

Recent researches on studying the main factors are influencing and affecting Chinese students' decision making toward Thai Universities review that national matriculation exam, language skills, and self-knowledge are the primary students' internal factors. On the other hand, the external factors are acceptance of the degree from the Chinese Ministry of Education and family affiliation (Yin, Ruangkanjanases, and Chen 2015). Furthermore, the significant favorable influence on Chinese students' satisfaction toward Thai higher education is education that students receive from lecturers, class environment, safe campuses and positive country images, prestige and image of the institution, and the student's preparation before going abroad (Songsathaphorn, Chen, and Ruangkanjanases 2014). In addition, the process of studying at Thai universities depends on their family background. Chinese students from different classes in China have different overseas experiences and education (Lin 2014).

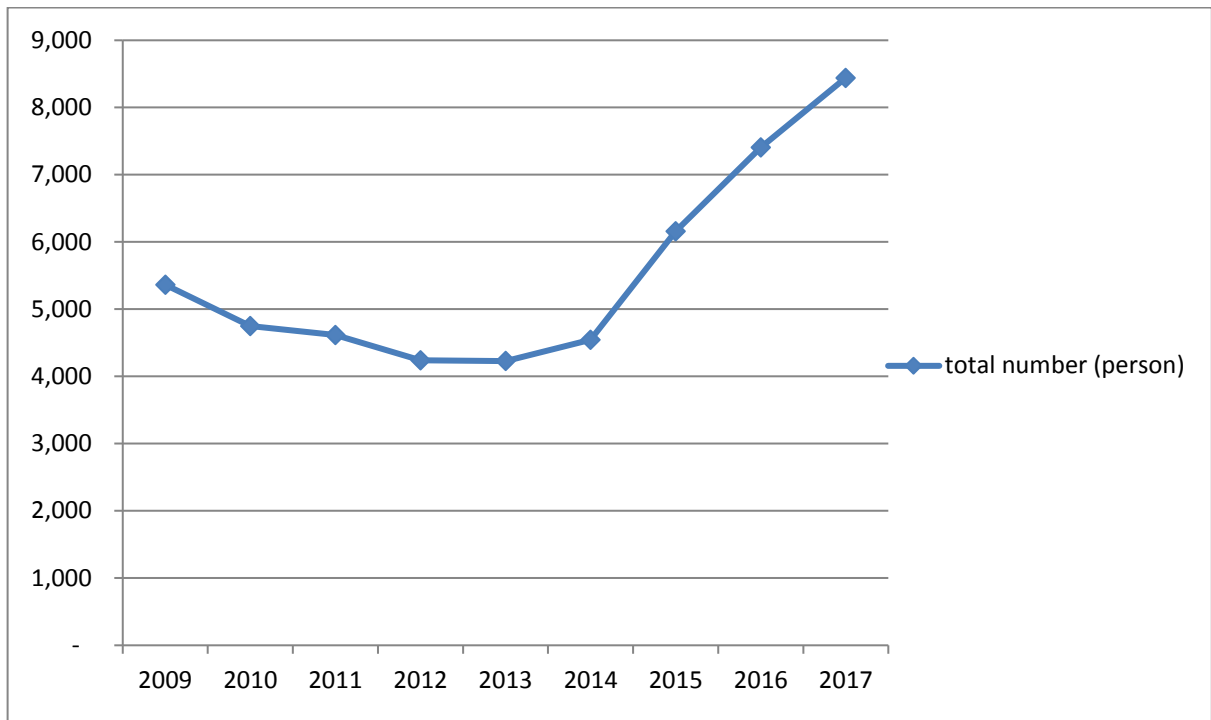


Figure 2: Number of Chinese students in Higher education in Thai Universities (2009-2017)

(Source: Higher Education Commission, 2017)

5. Mobile Subjects

The mobile subject is one of the new mobility paradigm's main objects of inquiry. Some history of mobile subjects has drawn upon the powerful ideologies of national progress and nation-state building while different subjects are often placed in different ways concerning mobility. Thus, their mobility is always multiple and differentiated (Adey, Bissell, Hannam, Merriman, and Sheller 2014).

Massey claimed that the world is increasingly dominated by the movement of people, images, and information (Massey 1991). In this part, I treat Chinese students' mobility as mobile subjects. By employing the concept of power-geometry of time-space compression (Massey 1991; 1993; 1999), the different individuals and different social groups are placed in a very distinct way to the flows and interconnections. Thus, flows and the movement of people are highly complex and socially differentiated. How people are inserted into their livelihoods and placed within time-space compression (Harvey 1989) are complicated

and varied. However, the politics of mobility and access are more considered under the power of others. It is also involved in producing and reproducing the daily lives of society (Massey 1991; 1993).

In the case of overseas Chinese students' mobility, I question how power-geometry work and how social relations work on the move. It is known that people are moving all the time, but not all movements are equal (Massey 1993). From this concept, I found that the multiple relationships between parents and their children have complexities. They support and care for each other. Besides, through their embeddedness within societies, politics, and culture, Chinese overseas students' mobility involves the issues of class, gender, age, ethnicity, nationality, language, religion, lifestyle, and ability that become the critical differences between mobile and immobile person (Salazar 2014). Based upon the statistical analysis and interviews, I found that the critical structural factors feeding their decision process to study in Thai Universities are the competition in education, the hierarchy of class, and the family's expectations in China.

Gaokao: intense competition in the education system

Most Chinese students agree that they choose to study abroad because of the intense competition in the education system in China, called *Gaokao* (the National College Entrance Examination, NCEE), Chinese students take Gaokao after they finish the third or final year of high school. Gaokao is set from June 7 to June 8 or 9 every year. It has no official age limit; Chinese students can re-test whenever they want. Their parents seriously prepare their children and keep an eye on the examination, which is a prerequisite for entering all higher education institutions at the undergraduate level (Brandenburg & Zhu 2007; Salmela 2008). Parents and families expect them to get high-test scores from ranked schools in order for them to study in the top universities in China. The Gaokao system also has an impact on students' future career opportunities. With limited seats for the highest scoring examinees, students study hard and concentrate only on the examination. Parents also provide them with the best conditions and expect them to do well in education. One of my key informants claims that Gaokao is everything in their life. Every student waits for this important moment and concentrates on the scores. Some of the Chinese students told me that when they were a teenager in China, they wanted to study abroad and did not want to take the entrance examination in their country. In addition, after graduation, they expect to be proud of themselves and get the best job in China. Also, some degrees at foreign universities are higher ranking than the universities in China.

Subjective Desires and Educational Opportunities

Overseas Chinese students agree that university prestige and image, education opportunities, safe campuses, and global experiences are the reasons they desire to study abroad. The primary concern of Chinese students is the prestige and image of the university, including the international ranking of universities. To create better career opportunities both in China and abroad, prestige and image of the university are most important. One of my key informants confirms that attractive universities rely on their quality, international ranking, reputation, and cultural background. Chinese students have good ideas on how to select a high-quality University before making their decision.

Furthermore, many Chinese students can apply for majors that they are interested in, such as Thai language, management, marketing, and business. They have more educational opportunities than they do in China according to their test scores or their Chinese high school educational background. Most of the Chinese students I interviewed, especially those with a bachelor's degree, were just average academic students. They said that they were not the top students in China. It is challenging for them to study at the top universities. So, their best choice is to study abroad. Moreover, their families continually support them throughout their overseas education.

Besides, Thailand is a safe place, especially in Chiang Mai. It is less dangerous and violent. Most Chinese students and families confirm that Chiang Mai is the best choice because of their feelings of being safe and having similar cultures as in their home country. In China, nowadays, there is a lot of industrial pollution, which causes more health problems. Chinese students claim that they want to stay in suitable environments with convenient transportation and less air pollution. Additionally, some students had positive previous experiences in Thailand, so they are less worried about living and staying in Chiang Mai, Thailand.

Class, Family Background, and Family's Expectations

Before applying for the program of study, most of my informants basically would search for the information and consult with their parents about foreign universities. Their parents support their children and need them to be global talents. Class and family background are critical factors to study abroad. In the past, only students from elite families were able to study abroad because of the high expenses and the limited regulation of state policies. However, after the state promoted the self-funded student policy, more students could apply for overseas studies. The number of Chinese students from the middle-class family increased.

The intention was to increase mobility, so that parents from a middle-class family could support overseas education, while focusing on the limited family resources and on their only child. Thus, the position of families involves the flow of students. In the case of Thai universities; tuition fees, academic expenses and living costs are all equal to Chinese universities fees. Also, the family's expectations in China is an important external factor that mobilizes students abroad. Within the social context, most of the Chinese students studying abroad are the only child in their family. Children receive more attention and care from their parents than previous generations. Parents and families try to create a pleasant learning environment for their children. They set high expectations for their child's talents and academic achievements. It can be said that children may be regarded as the only hope for a family to move to a higher social class. In their new lives abroad, Chinese students never forget the high expectations of their family. They need to be proud when returning to their home country. Besides that, parents advise and manage their children when they study abroad in order to have upward mobility with global experiences.

6. Conclusion

The tendency of Chinese students' mobility is more attractive to the higher education institutions, educational agencies, and international universities. Most Chinese students concentrate on the university internationalization. Considering the implications of educational systems, universities, and global perspectives, these preliminary findings demonstrate the Chinese students' trend of studying abroad and the unprecedented changes of the fast-growing phenomenon of the overseas Chinese who are much more intensely interested in global competition. Some universities provide welcoming campaigns for international students and prepare the international curriculums for international students, especially Chinese students.

Finally, student migration flow consists of global connections and disconnections between people, money, technologies, and ideas. Exactly, Chinese students' mobility is one of the important parts of global trends. For the Chinese state, the training of student's talents overseas is an integral part of the national development plan. It reflects in the policy and strategy to support overseas study. However, this policy encompasses the various skills, abilities, identities, dispositions, and desires that stem from the international connections of the student migration flow. In the case of Chinese overseas students, they are engaged in the

power systems of other cultures and societies. So, they are tied with the hierarchies of class, gender, generation, regional and economic, stratification, and the political system's issues (Kajanus 2015). From my preliminary study, there are many issues worth exploring further such as Chinese students' experiences and their financial situations while living and staying in Thailand.

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