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Compelled to Compete: Chinese graduates on employment and social mobility after international and domestic study

Abstract

The article offers unique insights into international and domestic graduates' career progression and social mobility experiences in China. Drawing on in-depth interview data with master-level graduates, the analytical results reveal that the majority of the participants (both domestic and international) perceive that international graduates have more opportunities and better career progression, but the analytical results show that both domestic and international graduates secured positive employment outcomes. Significant gender disparities exist, as women, both international and domestic graduates, are still disadvantaged in terms of occupational attainment and career prospects and report lower employment satisfaction. All domestic graduates reported not only positive employment outcomes in the labour market but upward social mobility. In contrast, the majority of international graduates reported not having achieved the same level of social status as their parents. Graduates' differentiated relations to China's state institutions of *Bianzhi*, *Danwei* and *Hukou* and social connections (*Guanxi*) heavily influenced their employment trajectories and social mobility. We argue that the participants' conflicting perceptions are linked to the intense labour market competition encouraged by the sustained expansion of domestic higher education enrolment and amplified by the increasing number of international graduates. The societal institutions defuse to some extent conflicts over economic interests arising from the marketisation of social life.

Keywords: career progression, social mobility, China, international graduates, gender gap

1. Introduction

Asian economies such as China have witnessed a rapid expansion of higher education. This expansion increases absolute enrolment rates but does not bring more occupational opportunities for young people. Instead, the expansion of higher education in China intensifies competition and inequality in education (Mok & Jiang, 2018). Chinese university graduates have been experiencing difficulty in finding jobs matching their knowledge and skills (Wang, 2003; Bai, 2006), which leads to 'over-qualification' problems in the labour market (Mok & Wu, 2016; Chan & Lin, 2016). In line with the dramatic expansion of higher education and the devaluing of domestic degrees in China (Mok, 2016), young people are increasingly choosing international universities to secure a good job and achieve upward social mobility or maintain their social position (Tsang, 2013). Middle- and upper-class families have a greater array of options for their offspring and believe that studying abroad may create new

opportunities for differentiation based on the current social reproduction, which is uneven in terms of education options (Perkins & Neumayer, 2014: 248).

International educational mobility patterns reflect the intensifying global flows of knowledge and intertwine with globalisation, increasing neoliberalism and geo-social transformations (Brooks & Waters, 2011; Waters, 2008; Xu & Montgomery, 2019). International student mobility has become a prominent aspect of social change in China (Xiang & Shen, 2009: 514) over the last 40 years. However, whether their international higher education can secure promising positions in the global labour market and make their investments in higher education worthy remains debatable (Mok et al., 2017a).

We contribute to this research by looking at the graduate perspective in a comparative way. We draw on in-depth interview data from international graduates who obtained a master's degree in the UK compared with China's domestic master's level graduates. Comparative analysis of the data focused on graduates' experience of the labour market and perceived social mobility. We investigated whether the career development opportunities of international graduates are seen as similar or different to domestic graduates after their return to China and what factors both groups of graduates identify as affecting their career progression and related social mobility. In this article, we connect Weber's bureaucracy and Bourdieu's social and cultural capital concepts to explore what different forms of capital mean to interview participants and how China's societal institutions of *Bianzhi*, *Danwei* and *Hukou* and social connections (*Guanxi*) impact on their employment trajectories and perceived social mobility.

2. Social institutions, social connections, and social status of graduates

Both Weber's bureaucracy and Bourdieu's social and cultural capital concepts are used in this article as fundamental theories to explain relevant factors affecting the two types of international and domestic graduates' labour market experiences. We are applying these concepts to the Chinese context, which is significantly different from many other countries. We are using these theories to facilitate an understanding of the specifically Chinese social institutions of *Hukou*, *Danwei*, *Bianzhi*, and *Guanxi* to look at the career progression of different types of graduates in this national context.

Weber's understanding of bureaucracy as an ideal type explains the persistent importance of *Guanxi*, despite the aspiration of China's social system to be routinized, rational and bureaucratic. According to Weber, social connections characterise a form of legitimate dominance he labelled 'traditional', where informal agreements, favouritism and mutual favours would proliferate, in contrast to Weber's ideal form of transparent 'rational bureaucracy', which does not confuse structural objectives with

personal interests. Patrimonialism has been frequently ‘linked with or treated as synonymous with patron-client relations’ (Theobald, 1982: 548) and can be defined as an exchange process, in which the political patrons reward their supportive clients with politico-economic benefits. ‘Patrimonial bureaucracy’ is a mixed or in-between state of traditional and rational types of domination, since it contains elements of both patrimonialism and bureaucracy (Lai, 2015), which influence China’s social connections and structure. Bourdieu’s concept of social capital argues that such connections in public institutions can be seen as a form of capital advancing the well-being and social status of more privileged groups. In Chinese practice, the concept was expanded in the socio-political context of post-reform urban China (Sevigny et al., 2009).

The *Hukou* residency permit system is one of the most influential institutions of China’s patrimonial bureaucracy, and changes in *Hukou* status is an important pathway by which one can achieve upward social mobility (Xiang, 2016a). Guo (2018) conducted a political class analysis and found that *Hukou* has a significant effect on an individual’s spatial mobility and social mobility. With reference to Chinese institutions such as *Danwei* (Sevigny et al., 2009; Womack, 1991) and *Hukou* (Xiang, 2016a), Tsang (2013) found the progenies of cadres and skilled professionals are the main beneficiaries of the 1978 economic reforms and opening policies. These second-generation middle classes can achieve their expected social positions as their family’s privileged *Guanxi* helps them with higher education acquisition, future capital conversions and social mobility. Similarly, *Bianzhi* (permanent identity associated with work for the state) defines the process of the production of *Danwei* (work-unit membership or tenure) and relates to welfare and political power. Both concepts are at the core of Chinese bureaucratic structures (Guo, 2018).

Focusing on capital theory, Qiao (2011) looked at Chinese university graduates’ social mobility, including their human, social and cultural capital. Human capital can be defined as the stock of competencies, knowledge, and personality attributes, including creativity, embodied in the ability to perform labour to produce economic value (Mincer 1974). Based on this understanding, Mincer (1974) developed an empirical model to measure human capital through a statistical relationship between market wages, education, and work experience. However, it has been widely questioned whether education provides skills to individuals which they use in their employment, thereby improving the productivity of individuals (Annen 2016). Following Bourdieu (1977), we are critical of the explanatory power of human capital theory. Human capital is found to be a determinant element for employment outcomes and upward social mobility. However, family background and social capital also have significant influence on graduates’ choices of occupation. These factors are closely related to income and social class. In the context of international education, the key question can be, how well Bourdieu’s institutionalised cultural capital (qualifications

in terms of diplomas) and incorporated cultural capital (skills acquired in educational processes or in other learning contexts like in family) can be used by an individual to enter the labour market. Qiao (2011) considered strong and weak ties when discussing the effects of social capital on social mobility. Regardless of the strength of ties, social capital undoubtedly has conspicuous effects on upward social mobility. Li (2009) proposed that we consider a fourth kind of capital in the context of China, adding political capital. Endowed with Chinese characteristics, political capital has a great effect on the social mobility of university graduates. Especially in governmental sectors, political capital can greatly benefit a graduate's upward mobility. Political capital results from family education and so-called *Guanxi*.

In China, social networks are a major focus in the pursuit of individual success (Su & Meng, 2012). Indeed, the *Guanxi* society logic strongly impacts parents' behaviour (Zhai, 2014). *Guanxi* supported by strong family networks play an important role in graduates' employment outcomes. In the era of higher education expansion, middle-class graduates are found to have more access to high-quality job information and better labour market outcomes than their less-privileged peers. Middle-class parents are more involved in graduates' job searches, providing social ties and supervising their offspring's endeavours. However, underprivileged families lack information required for their job searches as well as the necessary social ties. Consequently, graduates from advantaged families have better employment outcomes than their underprivileged counterparts (Liu, 2016a). Therefore, parental involvement represents a large barrier to equal opportunities and individual future career development in China.

3. International education as a strategy for maintaining social advantages

Both Weber and Bourdieu put an emphasis on education's role in promoting social mobility. Weber argues education indicates membership of a status group having access to highly paid occupations (Tsang, 2013). Similarly, Bourdieu's cultural capital perspective emphasises the cultural distinctiveness and instrumental benefits of studying abroad (Cebolla-Boado, Hu & Soysal, 2018). One of Bourdieu's central concerns is the role of culture in the reproduction of social structures (Bourdieu, 1987). A dominant economic class will be able to capture superior cultural capital through education, which is a means of cultural reproduction (Bourdieu, 1977). Rich research evidences Weber's and Bourdieu's theories and reports that intergenerational mobility is higher among individuals holding a university degree than those having lower levels of education; more importantly, higher education is a great equalising tool because it can help towards reducing the gap in terms of the individual advantages/disadvantages granted by birth status (Torche, 2018).

Chinese international students expect their overseas study experience to be able to strengthen their future job prospects and career development. Indeed, Mok et al.,

(2017b) insist overseas higher education's provision of 'hard' knowledge, 'soft' skills and cross-cultural understandings is still valued by Chinese students because these abilities are perceived to contribute to employability in general. Looking at the employability accounts of Chinese international postgraduates, Li (2013) found that there was a decline in the labour market value of the 'hard currencies' of overseas qualifications such as knowledge, while the 'soft currencies' obtained from their UK education, such as problem-solving skills, are seen as more important. Another advantage of obtaining a formal qualification overseas is associated with the greater global competence that confers on international graduates compared to those without international academic mobility (Gu & Schweisfurth, 2015). International higher education provides opportunities for extensive interactions with people of multiple nationalities (Igarashi & Saito, 2014). Moskal and Schweisfurth (2018: 103) investigated the global competence learning and capital conversions of non-Western graduates and found that they play positive roles in graduates' employment outcomes upon their return. Although international students have greater chances to obtain global competency, it is not easy to acquire. Moreover, it cannot automatically be converted into capital/benefits in regional and national labour markets: a potential explanation for the differing levels of global competency among international postgraduate students.

A few studies analyse international graduates from a gender perspective, but empirical evidence based on large-scale data is scarce (Hao et al., 2017). Gender was found to be particularly important amongst our participants in relation to their post-study transitions and career development. China has witnessed continuous changes in the positions of women in society. Nevertheless, men graduates have always enjoyed greater scope within which to develop professional careers, while women graduates meet greater challenges due to family pressures and social conventions (Moskal 2020:421). Additionally, although women returnees hold international qualifications and overseas study experience, women returnees in East Asia still face discrimination in their job-search strategies in the labour market. Huppertz and Goodwin (2013) expand the work of feminist Bourdieusian scholars, arguing that gender as well as class may be a central form of stratification in the social order. As men are not expected to do unpaid family care work, women are often discriminated against in work allocation due to ideas about women inferiority, and the impact of factors such as perceptions that women may take time off for maternity leave, that their work may be impacted by the responsibility of childcare, and perceptions that women may take more time off than men for household matters (Pimentel, 2006).

Finally, while analysing returnees' employment outcomes and social mobility, Feng and Fan (2017) found the role of international higher education in social stratification has weakened. That is shown in the low rate of returnees' employment levels, their low salaries, and employers' unclear understandings of these returnees. The

challenges met by the returnees result from the massification of international higher education and the decreased gap in the education offered by different countries or regions. The increased number of returnees reduces the value of international higher education degrees, resulting in a weakened role in promoting returnees' social mobility.

Therefore, the analysis below is driven by the main question: what is the perceived career development and social mobility of international graduates compared with that of domestic graduates in China?

4. Data and method

Drawing on interview data, this article illustrates how international and domestic graduates in China perceive their career development and social mobility through higher education. The study recruited 20 interview participants (international graduates=10; domestic graduates=10; men=10; women=10). Academic and administration staff as well as alumni centres in several Chinese universities helped in recruiting domestic graduates. International graduates who had returned to China were approached through a WeChat group (most Chinese students studying abroad join such groups). Moreover, the human resources departments of public administration /private/foreign companies of 27 cities in China were also contacted to help with the recruitment.

The international graduates studied their undergraduate subjects in China and undertook a master's programme in the UK. All the participants were offered a choice of language for the interview (English or Mandarin Chinese); they all preferred Mandarin Chinese. They felt more comfortable sharing their personal experiences and felt that they were able to discuss issues in greater depth in their first language. As the researcher was also Chinese, using this language helped to avoid misunderstandings between the researcher and the participants, and facilitated the sequential transcription process and data coding. The interviews, lasting from 1 hour 15 minutes to 1 hour and 49 minutes, were carried out face-to-face from January 2018 to March 2018 in China.

The in-depth, open-ended, and semi-structured interview technique used in the study allows for the emergence of, and emphasis on, topic areas and ideas that were not necessarily anticipated by the researchers beforehand and allows for better comparisons between participants. The interview questions were designed to speak to the main research questions, as well as addressing topics highlighted as important and appropriate in the existing literature. The existing literature extensively discusses questions such as returning /post-return status and impact (Hao et al., 2017), career outcomes (Mok et al., 2017b), and educational attainments (Bourdieu, 1977; Cebolla-Boado, Hu & Soysal, 2018; Gu & Schweisfurth, 2015). Considering these topics in combination with the project research questions, attention was paid to international

and domestic graduate opinions about their university choice, master's study experience and outcomes, future expectations, current occupation situation, factors relating to occupational outcomes, family situation.

After the interview data was collected, we translated all interviews into English for sequential coding. All the translation texts were reviewed by two independent translators to ensure reliability of translation and confirm that all transcribed information accurately represented the participants' original meanings. In the process of transcription, we encountered many specific Chinese terms that cannot be translated, such as *Hukou*, *Bianzhi*, *Danwei* or *Guanxi*. These terms were kept in Chinese in the coding process and contextualised in the existing literature to ensure that all texts were close to their original meanings. Thematic analysis, with support of qualitative analysis Quirkos software, was applied to the qualitative research data to investigate the relationship between labour market success, social mobility, and international higher education.

To achieve a balanced distribution regarding gender, university, GPA residence of origin, current residence, and subject, a purposive sampling method was employed to recruit participants to ensure the selection was as diverse as possible (Seidman, 2006). The sample shows good diversity: participants had very different residences of origin, current residences, undergraduate universities, master's universities, study results (measured by GPA), and study subjects. All twenty participants were relatively young, aged between 23 and 30. All participants graduated and worked for between 1.5 and 4 years. The following Table 1 shows the demographic information of the 20 participants:

Table 1 Demographic information of participants

Table 1 Demographic information of the 20 participants

No.	Pseudonym	Age	Gender	Current position	Working place	Father's & mother's occupation category
International graduates (1-10)						
1	Li	26	F	Medical doctor	Public hospital	State & society administrator, Manager
2	Hu	25	F	Teacher	Private school	Private enterprise owner; Private enterprise owner
3	Tian	26	F	Teacher	University	State & society administrator; Technological specialist
4	Wang	25	F	Teacher	University	Technological specialist; Clerk & office worker
5	Zhou	25	F	Office worker	Joint venture	Clerk & office worker; Clerk & office worker
6	Lai	26	M	Office worker	Private sector	Private enterprise owner; Private enterprise owner
7	Jun	23	M	Office worker	Joint venture	Manager; Technological specialist
8	Zhong	24	M	Office worker	State sector	Private enterprise owner; State & society administrator
9	Zheng	25	M	Middle manager	State sector	State & society administrator; State & society administrator
10	Fan	24	M	Middle manager	Foreign venture	State & society administrator; Technological specialist
Home graduates (11-20)						
11	Sha	27	F	Civil servant	Government	Industrial worker; Industrial worker
12	Luo	29	F	Teacher	University	Manager; Clerk & office worker
13	Qian	26	F	Teacher	Public school	Industrial worker; Industrial worker
14	Wei	28	F	Office worker	Private sector	Industrial worker; Unemployed
15	Dong	28	F	Admin staff	University	Individual entrepreneur; Individual entrepreneur
16	Tang	28	M	Engineer	State sector	Farmer; Farmer
17	Hou	28	M	Office worker	State sector	Technological specialist; Clerk & office worker
18	Huang	30	M	Engineer	State sector	Industrial worker; Industrial worker
19	Cao	26	M	Research staff	University	Industrial worker; Industrial worker
20	Sheng	28	M	Office worker	Private sector	Industrial worker; Unemployed

Note: F refers to female; M means male. No. 1-10 are international graduates; No. 11-20 are home graduates.

There are a range of levels of master-level programs and differences between universities in terms of their ranking and reputation, length of study, and disciplines, in both the UK and China. Table 2 therefore presents information on participants' master university and programme studied, place of origin and place of residence, as this could affect their career opportunities. In general, a master's degree from a university in the UK takes one year in comparison to a two- or three-year master-level programme in China. China's universities are divided into five tiers placed on a continuum from Sanben and Erben¹ (the lowest tiers), Yiben², the 211 project³, the

¹ Sanben refers to the third tier of bachelor's degrees, while Erben refers to the second tier. Now many Sanben Universities are incorporated into Erben Universities. The boundary between Erben and Sanben universities is disappearing.

² Yiben refers to the first tier of bachelor's degrees.

³ It refers to the top 100 universities in the 21st century. The 211 project was launched by the State Council in 1995 to establish 100 world-class universities.

985 project⁴, to C 9⁵ (the highest tier). In contrast with China's official university division, the UK has only one official university ranking system: The Research Excellence Framework (REF). To assess the university tiers, this study divided all of the universities listed in the REF ranking into five tiers: 1 to 10, 11 to 30, 31 to 50, 51 to 80, and all other universities. As disciplinary difference could also significantly affect graduates' employment regardless of their study in the UK or in China, these are also included and discussed later in the findings section.

Table 2 Participants' master university and programme, place of origin and place of residence

No.	Pseudonym	Master university	Master programme	Place of origin	Place of Residence
1	Li	REF 11-30	Medicine	Chongqing	Chongqing
2	Hu	REF 50-81	Youth Studies	Inner Mongolia	Beijing
3	Tian	REF 11-30	Economics	Bijie	Guiyang
4	Wang	REF 1-10	Education	Taizhou	Beijing
5	Zhou	REF 31-50	Journalism	Shangrao	Beijing
6	Lai	REF 1-10	Research Methods	Guangzhou	Shanghai
7	Jun	REF 11-30	Engineering	Taian	Changzhou
8	Zhong	REF 1-10	Business	Beijing	Beijing
9	Zheng	REF 50-81	Engineering	Chengdu	Beijing
10	Fan	REF 11-30	Engineering	Shanghai	Shanghai
11	Sha	211 project	Translation	Huaian	Beijing
12	Luo	Yiben	English	Tianjin	Nanning
13	Qian	Yiben	Education	Wuhu	Wuhu
14	Wei	211 Project	Engineering	Lishui	Ningbo
15	Dong	Yiben	Planning	Panzhuhua	Nanjing
16	Tang	985 project	Engineering	Bozhou	Suzhou
17	Hou	211 project	Administration	Xuzhou	Nanjing
18	Huang	C9	Engineering	Baiji	Hangzhou
19	Cao	Yiben	Engineering	Linyi	Qingdao
20	Sheng	211 project	Education	Siping	Xian

Since the mid-1990s, the Chinese labour market has witnessed frequent shifts in employment patterns (Li, 2013). However, all the participants indicated their

⁴ It usually refers to the top-39 universities. The *985 project* was proposed in 1998 by the Ministry of Education in the 'Action Plan for Education Revitalisation for the 21st Century' to provide generous funding and resources for selected higher education institutions that had the potential to deliver world-class research excellence.

⁵ The C9 league includes the 9 universities at the top university league.

reluctance to switch between jobs, preferring a stable and ‘decent’ job. Most of them (N=18) were in their first jobs at the time of the interview, working in both the private and state sectors, in education, business, as office workers, middle-rank managers, and medical doctors (Table 1). The only exceptions were Wei (28, woman, office worker) and Li (26, woman, medical doctor), who were in their second jobs. All participants had graduated and worked for between one and four years. The two groups of master-level graduates had very different preferences regarding their working place: a large proportion of the domestic graduates worked in the state sector, while only a few international graduates worked in this sector. Demographic characteristics of the sample also indicate that the international graduates were, on average, younger than their peers.

To establish a baseline for comparing the master-level graduates’ labour market outcomes, we compared the perceptions of the employment situation of the two groups of master’s graduates and the structural factors they perceived to benefit or hinder their career progression in China.

5. Results

5.1 Graduates’ perceptions of employment outcomes

The participants in the study talked about their occupations and labour market situation mainly from the perspectives of social status, income, and the working environment that is often available only in major cities. For instance, Hu (25 years old, woman, graduate of a UK REF 50-81 university), like many international graduates, benefited from accessing the Beijing *Houku* (residence permit). As she explained: *‘International returnees can get Beijing Hukou while domestic graduates are usually not given it. The policy is aimed at attracting returnee talents. Many returnees work in Beijing to attain local Hukou.’* Hu was not originally from Beijing, proving that the household registration policy, to some degree, determined the employment place and spatial mobility of the master-level graduates. Hu believed a good job was defined by a high salary and comfortable working environment:

‘I am working in an international school, not a public school, because I like the comfortable working environment. Working in a work-unit [Danwei] would kill me. You will certainly get power with the authorities [Bianzhi] if you work in a public school and have a seemingly higher social status, but I do not like the complicated social connections in these public institutions.’

Hu’s comments link well to Bourdieu’s concept of social capital, where such connections in public institutions can be seen as a form of capital advancing the well-being and social status of more privileged groups. In Chinese practice, the concept was expanded in the socio-political context of post-reform urban China (Sevigny et

al., 2009). After joining a *Danwei*, individuals would have little to do with other forms of governmental or social life (Li & Atteslander, 1995; Chen, 1996). To achieve this capital accumulation, they need to deal with the slight favouritism of this form of bureaucracy and the need to do favours for others.

The unique Chinese social institution of *Danwei* was important for participants in this study and was mentioned by the majority of the domestic graduates who preferred to work in a state enterprise. *Danwei* was an important concept in pre-1978 urban China because it was related to an individual's income, housing, health care and education opportunities (Sevigny, Chen & Shen, 2009). *Danwei* was particularly connected to the concepts of neo-traditionalism and work unit socialism (Womack, 1991), the organisation of work and leader-member exchange, material rewards, such as income and housing (Adamchak et al., 1999), power and dependence in Chinese workplaces and personal *Guanxi* (social connections). Similarly, *Bianzhi* (identity associated with the work for the state) defines the process of the production of *Danwei* and relates to welfare and political power. Both concepts are at the core of Chinese bureaucratic structures (Brodsgaard, 2002). *Danwei* still plays an active role in the post-reform era. However, greater choices for finding a suitable job in different sectors are now available to Chinese people outside of *Danwei*, and people are increasingly reluctant to seek out *Bianzhi*.

Several international graduates declared that they had not had any job expectations or plans when deciding to study in the UK. Thus, after their return, they had no clear vision of what success would mean to them. When asked about their current working situations, they replied: 'Not bad, not good'; 'I just think the current situation is fine'; 'It is not perfect, nor terrible'; 'At least, I have a well-paid job'. Unlike the international returnees, the domestic graduate participants were all satisfied with their current working situations. Interestingly, all of them already had a clear career plan when they decided to study their master's programmes. For example, Hou described his career plan as follows:

'I studied my master's programme [public administration] due to my career plan. I hoped to be a civil servant or have stable job. A master's-level degree holder would have more opportunities and better chances in the civil servant examination and interview.' (Hou, 28 years old, man, a domestic graduate of a 211 project university, working in a state company)

According to the excerpts from the domestic graduate participants, they appeared to have a clear understanding of their motivations for studying master's courses and of China's labour market requirements. Nevertheless, all the international graduates held the view that they had an advantage in China's labour market compared with the domestic graduates. They felt that this would endow them with better prospects in job

interviews and in their future career development. For example, Li (26 years old, woman, UK, a university REF 11-30 graduate, a medical doctor in a public hospital) was very satisfied with the job she secured after she studied abroad and returned to China. Li's first job before her master's studies in the UK was as a doctor in another hospital. Noticing that Li's two jobs were the same, we asked her why she had quit the first job and had chosen to study in the UK. She said: 'I disliked my first job as a junior doctor due to the low salary. I was an undergraduate at that time, so I really needed a master's degree if I wanted to have a better job.' Li was happy with her second job and its pay, and she felt that she had a better chance of promotion because of her international degree.

5.2. Employers' needs through the graduates' eyes

Both international and domestic graduates perceive that Chinese employers are more willing to recruit international graduates, and international graduates enjoy substantial advantages when being interviewed and in their future development compared with domestic graduates. For example, Hu (25 years old, woman, a UK university REF 50-81 graduate, a teacher in an international school) stated: 'Job interviewers showed great interest in my international study experience, and I could see they like recruiting returnees'. According to Hu's experience, studying abroad can be regarded as a process of pursuing and accumulating international cultural capital (Cebolla-Boado, Hu, & Soysal, 2018; Authors 2018). Being able to distinguish oneself as having acquired this capital is usually seen as beneficial to international graduates' labour market outcomes, because it can be symbolic of self-growth in relation to experiencing and learning from a diversity of cultures. This then increases the likelihood of a candidate demonstrating a positive attribute to employers in an increasingly competitive globalised context. More importantly, international study experience also potentially provides other life-course outcomes such as self-development (Cebolla-Boado, Hu, & Soysal, 2018: 368): as Hu stated: 'the global ways of thinking are an important factor' and as a result 'international graduates are given priority of career development'. The majority of international graduates noticed that employers in China prefer interviewing and recruiting returnees. For example, Lai (26 years old, man, a UK graduate of REF 1-10 university, private company office worker) said:

'Chinese employers are more willing to recruit international graduates to promote their company's international image. As a result, returnees could enjoy substantial advantages when being interviewed and in their future development compared with domestic graduates.'

Similarly, Tian (26 years old, woman, a UK graduate of a REF 11-30 university and a university teacher) describes favourable treatment she received during her job interview:

'At that time, when I was told about my exemption from the written examination, I realised the value of an international degree. During my job interview, I was also asked about my overseas study experience and English language skills. I can see that China's labour market still sees returnees as talents.'

Domestic graduates also believed that employers in China prefer to recruit international graduates. As noted above, international degrees and overseas study experience are positively associated with employers' favourable impressions and evaluations, what Bourdieu would describe as symbolic capital. The symbolic capital of studying abroad represents 'a student's nature and international horizon and education quality', Tang said (28 years old, man, a China's graduate of a 985 project university, working in a state sector as an engineer). The phenomenon is interesting to note and seems to be strongly influenced by the discourse of human capital theory. From a human capital perspective, an overseas study experience emerges as an instrumental pathway to send positive and distinctive signals to employers (Fong, 2011). Bourdieu sees the diploma/other formal qualifications as a manifestation of institutional cultural capital. From a Bourdieuan perspective, then, international graduates can maintain their class advantage by acquiring 'cultural capital' in the form of overseas experience. Institutional cultural capital always attracts employer's attention in China, because 'international graduates are seen as some rare resource', as Tang explained, who can distinguish themselves from the 'millions of master-level graduates completing Chinese universities every year'. As a result, Chinese students increasingly invest in international higher education to gain globally recognised academic degrees and then increase their monetary return from their investment in international higher education (Cebolla-Boado, Hu & Soysal, 2018). Tang also reported more attention, more favourable experiences, and more training opportunities available to international graduates in his current workplace:

'For example, my boss takes some employees with international diplomas with him to meet business guests. In his words, international graduates can represent a good corporate image and understand the implied meanings of what foreigners are saying. Although my working place is a state company, it focuses on technological research and product sales. Communicating with foreign countries is necessary and common; so international graduates are regarded as valuable talents. Even though some domestic graduates can speak English fluently, these opportunities are, without any doubt, given to international graduates.'

Like Tang, several other participants used the phrase 'rare resources' to describe international graduates, which again seems to be very much influenced by neoliberal discourse. There is a difference between participants' own individualised perceptions influenced by human capital theory and the social structural dynamics having a role in

their outcomes. Despite being educated in a high tier 985 project university, Tang perceived that international graduates have advantages in China's labour market. Nevertheless, domestic graduates still have satisfying labour market outcomes due to their accumulated domestic cultural capital. Domestic graduates tend to work in state companies and government institutions, where domestic cultural capital is sufficient to secure employment and career prospects. Tang's experiences illustrate complex and contradictory perceptions of the hugely competitive and restrictive labour market for highly skilled workers. Having worked in a state company for over three years, as a locally graduated engineer, Tang observed that his colleagues who were international graduates had received more training opportunities and had developed stronger social networks. Tang felt that these colleagues would have more opportunities to gain promotion than he would, even though he perceived his performance at work to be better than that of the international returnees. Tang remained satisfied with his current position at time of interview. However, in terms of his income and social status, Tang realised at this point that he was in a disadvantaged position when it came to developing his career compared with international graduates.

Tang's perceptions can also be analysed through the lens of Bourdieu's cultural capital theory. Tang compared the different kinds of cultural capital between international and domestic graduates and believed international graduates to have more advantages in the labour market and future career development, because of their global cultural capital (such as English language skills). Moreover, the lack of rationality in the assumption that 'international is best' is arguably something Weber would call a flawed form of bureaucracy rather than ideal rational bureaucracy.

Sha (27 years old, man, a Chinese 211 project university graduate) reported a similar situation. Sha worked as an office worker for the government. She expressed her confusion regarding companies' 'crazy' preference for international graduates: 'I find many companies like recruiting international graduates even if the position does not need English language proficiency and overseas study experience. I think it is the result of employers thinking that international graduates are superior to domestic graduates.' Studying abroad carries more symbolic power than effective knowledge. Bourdieu regards symbolic capital as the prestige and authority that distinguishes certain subjects from others (Bourdieu, 2013). While it is certainly true that many returnees do not have a high-quality degree or extensive knowledge, they have better employment results. The international education degree allows returnees to distinguish themselves from domestically educated graduates, and more importantly, as Sha stated, 'the labour market also claims that the symbols are important regarding their recruitment decision'. The established symbolic capital of an international degree drives Chinese students to study abroad. And the labour market prefers to recruit graduates from universities with high ranking and good reputation. Sha ascribed the behaviour of employers to the blind partiality and unfair bias shown in

favour of international returnees. Likewise, Qian (26 years old, woman, a domestic graduate of a Yiben university, a public-school teacher) said:

'...to be honest, international graduates would have more opportunities to get additional working training and promotion than us. Taking my school as an example, the leaders always assign foreign affairs stuff to international graduates, because the large number of returnee employees can be recognised as a high level of the school's internationalisation.'

The labour market environment and employers' beliefs contribute to the tendency for international graduates to hold an advantage over their peers with domestic diplomas. Compared with local graduates, the international graduates were seen as talents who foster intercultural communication and bring innovative ideas and advanced technology from foreign countries – or, at least, the 'symbolic' capital of their degrees suggests these qualities.

Most of the domestic graduates in the interviews believed that international graduates had an advantage in the labour market and agreed that employers preferred to recruit international graduates. There were only two domestic graduates who disagreed with this view, Hou and Sheng. Hou (28 years old, man, a domestic graduate of a 211 project university, an office worker in the human resources department of a state company) reported:

'...my company does not divide candidates into domestic and international graduates. All candidates consist of undergraduates and master-level graduates. My company is a top 500, but the human resources department does not have the capacity or energy to identify all the international institutions. Frankly, I prefer to interview domestic graduates because I know every Chinese university. For foreign universities, I only know Cambridge and Oxford Universities, and graduates from these universities would never like to work in my company.'

For some Chinese companies, recruiting domestic graduates is a safer strategy if they have limited information and understandings of overseas universities.

Similarly, Sheng (28 years old, man, graduate of a 211 project university, working as a marketing officer in a private company) had a large number of colleagues, none of whom were international graduates. Sheng admitted he had some initial interest in studying abroad, for example, to study a master's programme in the UK, but he had changed his mind as he thought an international study experience would not improve his position in the labour market. Sheng perceived that he had no disadvantages in the labour market, despite not having an international degree. His job only required him to have excellent communication skills and a good social network, not a degree

certificate. Overall, he was very satisfied with his employment. According to Sheng, it could be noticed that an international degree does not work in all industries or companies. Bourdieu's notion of field is helpful to explain this. The value of forms of cultural capital such as qualifications is fluid and depending on the particular 'field' that the person is entering e.g., certain employment 'fields will not place as much value on the degree as others. This is arguably a key reason for international and domestic graduates having different workplace preferences. Foreign/private company fields value international degrees more than China's domestic degrees, while state company/government fields value domestic degrees more than international versions. The social/power dynamics depends on different fields. Therefore, the value of an international graduate was dependent on the industry she or he would enter.

Although Hou and Sheng outright rejected the argument that the labour market prefers international graduates, most of our participants (both domestic graduates and international returnees) perceived international graduates as having more opportunities in the labour market. This was true of graduates from all backgrounds and working fields, whether they were men or women.

In addition to the perception that international graduates were preferred by the labour market, international returnees regarded themselves as more competitive candidates in the employment arena. Although both kinds of graduate perceive that international graduates have more opportunities and better career outcomes, the analytical results show each group is satisfied with their career outcomes. This may be decided by different patterns of labour recruitment in different sectors. The perceived symbolic value of UK and domestic degrees is therefore a key factor influencing employers' choices.

5.3. Perceived social mobility of international and domestic graduates

Almost all the international graduates in our study stated that they had more and better opportunities in the labour market than domestic graduates, which was linked to the future prospects of social mobility. For example, Tian (26 years old, a UK REF 11-30 university graduate, and a university teacher) said: 'International graduates have more opportunities for achieving upward social mobility.' Pointing out the role of family support, Wang (25 years old, woman, UK graduate of a REF 1-10 university, a university teacher) said that 'returnees usually had better family backgrounds, which is useful in their social competition. Social connections really matter in China. Thus, returnees have more capital for achieving upward social mobility than domestic graduates.' From Table 1, it can be observed that there are evident differences between the social origins of the two groups of master-level graduates. This also conforms to Mok et al.'s (2017a) research findings, which indicate that returnees have privileged family backgrounds and more family support than domestic graduates. As for the perceived level of intergenerational mobility, the international graduates in the

study described themselves as having a similar or lower social status than their parents. According to the demographic information for the international graduates, they all possess more advantageous family background than the domestic graduates, so ‘we had little chance of surpassing our social origin,’ said Lai (26 years old, man, UK graduate of a REF 1-10 university, an office worker). The fact that the majority of the international graduates had advantaged family backgrounds made it hard for them to achieve relative social mobility. These international graduates were simply striving to maintain their already achieved social positions through international higher education (Tsang, 2013).

The domestic graduates also believed that China’s labour market still preferred to recruit and give more chances to international graduates. Luo (29 years old, woman, a domestic graduate of a Yiben university, a university teacher) explained the benefits of being an international graduate as follows: *‘In my university, the leaders trust the returnees’ abilities. International graduates get important assignments and better training opportunities.’*

In contrast to the international graduates who did not demonstrate an upward social trajectory, the domestic graduates in the sample had significant upward social mobility. All the domestic graduates perceived their social status as being higher than their parents. For example, Tang (28 years old, man, a domestic graduate of a 985 university, an engineer in the state sector) said:

‘My parents live in a rural area, working as farmers. Now I am working in a large company in an economically developed city and live a “decent white-collar life”. In terms of intergenerational mobility, I am successful, and my parents are very satisfied with my current situation.’

Tang worked as an engineer, earned a good salary, and had a decent life in a third-tier city. He had reached a higher social class relative to his parents. In his village, he was one of the few people who had left and entered a city through higher education. Tang’s case indicates that higher education still facilitated social mobility (Li, 2007). Sha (27 years old, woman, a domestic graduate of a 211 project university, a civil servant in government) shared a similar experience. She worked in the local government and had made evident progress in terms of upward social mobility through her higher education, for her parents were both industrial workers:

‘My parents are not middle class, or upper-middle-class. I am a civil servant, and my situation seems much better than my parents’. Now I live in Beijing and have got a Beijing Hukou. If I had not gone to university, I would be an industrial worker like my parents.’

Finally, the example of Huang (30 years old, man, domestic graduate of a C9 university, an engineer) illustrates that domestic graduates, particularly men, had evident intergenerational mobility, which again indicates that higher education facilitates social mobility (Torche, 2018). Coming from a working-class background (both parents were industrial workers) Huang experienced upward social mobility after achieving his master's degree, and he now enjoyed a decent job (in his perception) and good salary. It's important to note that such mobility is still influenced in a variety of ways by the acquisition and perpetuation of certain forms of capital, gender, and social structures.

5.4. Gender disparities

Gender issues were frequently discussed by all the participants. In China, men still dominate occupations offering more pecuniary rewards and greater authority (He & Zhou, 2018). A 2010 survey reported that China's gender income gap was persistent: the income of rural women is 56% that of their counterparts and urban women's income is 67.3% that of their male counterparts (Kim, 2013). According to the interview participants in this study, several gender issues were tied to disparities in employment attainment, positions, and professional/technical occupations.

Sha (27 years old, woman, a domestic graduate of a 211 project university, working in local government) was an art graduate and experienced gender disparities when looking for a job. As she worked as a civil servant, her position was very different from those working in the enterprises, as she explained the limitations and control in the state sector:

'Governments always want to reduce running costs, so they do not want to see maternity leave. The number of Bianzhi in a department is fixed. In addition, the Government cannot fire employees at random, because of Bianzhi. Thus, all civil servants have a permanent contract. Therefore, due to the limited and competitive positions in government, women are usually not considered if males can meet the requirements.'

Feminist scholars have extended Bourdieu's conception of the dynamics of capital to include the notion of 'gender capital' to explore gender advantage/disadvantage in the workplace and other fields (Skeggs, 1997; Lovell, 2000; Huppatz & Goodwin, 2013). As discussed by Hou (28 years old, man, a domestic graduate of a 211 project university, working in the human resources department in a state company) below, institutional practices can explicitly work towards advantaging those who hold the appropriate 'gender capital', which in this case simply relates to being a 'man candidate':

'Gender was an advantage for me when I was looking for a job. It is easy to understand that the maternity leave of female employees will bring losses. Also, positions such as human resources clerk, manager, assistant, and so on are required to deal with some public relations, so male employers are more suitable. My boss tells me directly that if there are suitable male candidates, women can never be considered unless a female candidate has an impressive resume. I also understand their behaviour because companies do not expect to make a loss.'

According to Hou, men are more suitable in occupations involving public relations. For example, drinking is a necessary part of entertainment in external relations. In traditional cultural discourse, Chinese women are required to be good wives and mothers while men should work outside and take part in a variety of social activities. To avoid family conflicts, women, in contemporary China, are often encouraged to return domestic to do unpaid family household work upon finishing their work in companies. Zhou (25 years old, man, UK graduate of a REF 31-50 university, middle manager in the state sector) asserted this deeply rooted belief about the division of labour between men and women:

'Employers tend to assign important tasks to male employees. Caring for children and older adults is an important issue for every Chinese family. Thus, women need to take more responsibilities for caring for their families. However, employers do not wish to see too many leave applications from women, and the best and most efficient way is to only recruit men.'

It can be noticed that China lacks a notion of equal opportunity rights for women. Due to these gender norms and perceived family duties, women face increasingly complex and unfavourable labour market conditions in the post-reform era (He & Wu, 2017). A disparity in employment attainment is a widely observed phenomenon, and in the field of Science, Technology, Engineering and Maths (STEM), its impact is much stronger (Glass et al., 2013; Sassler et al., 2017). Tang (28 years old, man, a domestic graduate of a 985 university, an engineer in a state company) stated that in his company, recruiting a woman graduate was very rare, and the number of woman employees was small:

'My company is in the state sector and has limited places for women. The human resources manager does not have the right to recruit women. Without the approval of his boss, the human resources department cannot consider women graduates. Only female graduates who are very talented in their area of expertise or have rich social connections [Guanxi] can be recruited.'

Similar to the domestic graduate participants, the international graduates also shared their observations of gender disparities in their employment. None of the women international graduates were satisfied with their current career development, explicitly connecting their dissatisfaction with issues of gender inequality. Two women participants Li (a doctor in a public hospital) and Hu (a teacher in an international school) said they were very lucky, because at the time when they were interviewed, there was no man competing with them for the same position. Li stated: ‘My boss would have rejected my application if a man with a similar resume and working abilities had applied for the same position.’ Likewise, Wang (25 years old, woman, UK graduate of a REF 1-10 university, a university teacher) said:

‘Women meet problems getting promotion and additional benefits. Because Beijing decreased the number of Hukou last year, the assigned number of Hukou to my university became fewer. The university gave the only Hukou to a male teacher, not based on working outcomes, but on gender.’

Residency permit system *Hukou* easily intersects with gender to deprive women of the opportunities more often available to men.

Another interesting point is that while the majority of graduate women discussed age and relationship status, the men participants did not mention these aspects – highlighting how the dynamics of inequality for women often intersect with other facets of identity/ social positioning such as age and marital status (Murphy & Cross, 2016). Li (26 years old, woman, a UK REF 11-30 university graduate, a doctor in a public hospital) explained how her single relationship status was an advantage in her job search:

‘In my job interview, I was asked whether I was single. It was very embarrassing at that time. My boss was reluctant to recruit a woman who was in a stable relationship, as it meant marriage leave and maternity leave was imminent after starting work.’

None of the international graduates reported problems related to age in their employment, perhaps because all the women international graduates in the study were younger in relative terms than the women domestic graduates. However, it seemed that none of the women participants, either domestic or international, could avoid the question of age or relationship status in their job interviews. Gender was seemingly inextricably linked with age and relationship status for women candidates from the viewpoint of employers, combining to exacerbate and amplify the dynamics of gendered inequality in workplace cultures and practices.

5. Conclusion

This article adds to the understanding of how Chinese graduates perceive their career progression and social mobility. Both kinds of graduates perceive that Chinese employers are more willing to recruit international graduates, who enjoy substantial advantages when being interviewed, and in their career development, compared with domestic graduates. However, the analytical results show each group is satisfied with their career outcomes. This may be decided by different patterns of labour recruitment in different fields. Both domestic and international degrees are attractive to employers, and employers arguably select the most suitable employees. The perceived symbolic value of UK and domestic degrees is therefore a key factor influencing employers' choices.

Participants' experiences evidence complex and contradictory perceptions of the competitive labour market and restricted opportunities for social mobility for highly skilled. As we have seen throughout this article, the different views of international and domestic graduates are influenced by neoliberal perceptions and discourse that prove to be highly influential in terms of shaping public thinking. The state institutions such as *Hukou*, *Danwei*, *Bianzhi*, and the social connections defined as *Guanxi* should also be understood in terms of their impact on social stratification. Our analysis demonstrated that the state institutions, which are essential for the state's control over society, to some extent defuse social tensions over economic interests arising from the marketisation of social life in contemporary China (Xiang 2016b).

The influence of cultural gender norms is also pervasive (He & Zhou, 2018). Even though the expansion of higher education has largely contributed to narrowing the gender gap in achievement at higher education level in China (Yeung, 2012), women, both as international and domestic graduates, are still disadvantaged in terms of occupational attainment and career prospects. It seems that international study attainment and a UK degree are not sufficient to be able to reduce the significant gender disparities that still exist for graduate women in the workplace. In addition, a large number of men participants implied that women should take on more responsibility for household affairs, despite acknowledging the effects of gender inequality on women in the workplace. Long-standing sociocultural dynamics of gender inequality in China still negatively affect the lives of women, and higher education has not worked well so far to bridge the gender gap in the labour market and in family households.

Internationalisation has helped to improve higher education in China and joint transnational programmes have enhanced China's domestic programmes. Our research does not show evidence of any effect of the returnees' international qualifications on their upward social mobility. To an increasing extent, Chinese students regard overseas education as an option for ensuring a high-quality education and a tool to maintain the advantaged social status for the privileged, and for the

disadvantaged to achieve upward social mobility (Fan & Cheng, 2018). Supported by their advantaged families, international graduates can obtain international degrees, which in turn allows the continuation of hereditary social reproduction and transmission of capital. This then facilitates social reproduction and highlights the strategies individuals use in the education field to maintain or promote their own social position and those of their children (Xiang & Shen, 2009). Hence, the university operates as a marker of success for the middle classes. Chinese students choose UK universities with good reputations and high rankings (Cebolla-Boado, Hu & Soysal, 2018), as this enables them to be better prepared for the international talent competition (Gu & Schweisfurth, 2015), to maintain their social position (Tsang, 2013), as well as to compete against China's increasing number of domestic university graduates (Qiao, 2011).

The increasing number of international graduates has added to the intense competition in the labour market in China (Mok & Wu 2016). The expansion of employment opportunities is fundamental to address this problem. The gap between the rich and the poor in China has widened during the country's rapid development after its economic reform and opening-up policy. China has one of the world's highest levels of income disparity. As a result of this inequality, the different social classes receive education of markedly different quality (Fang & Feng, 2005). Our data suggest that the creation of a 'fairer' society through social mobility should be placed higher on the political agenda in the People's Republic of China. If equality of education opportunities can be improved, especially the chances of studying abroad, socio-economic disparities can potentially be weakened. Urban policies should focus on developing social security and institutions to support talented domestic graduates, and challenge unequal institutional cultures and practices that affect all.

Authors' contribution statement

Keyu Zhai collected the data, performed the analysis, and introduced some explanatory ideas. Marta Moskal developed the theoretical formalism, supervised the project, and wrote the article. Barbara Read supervised the project. All authors discussed the results and contributed to the final manuscript.

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