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Building Halos: how do Chinese elites seek distinction through (mis) recognising studying abroad?

Introduction

The annual *gaokao* (university entrance examination) results in China are always a showcase for academic elites. Differing from the usual discussions on the codes of meritocracy (Liu 2016), the 2017 *gaokao* 'champion' from Beijing, Xuanang Xiong, attributed his success in the highly competitive examinations to 'growing up in a highly educated and well-travelled family with both parents as diplomats' (Han 2017). He also declared the 'death of meritocracy' and the end of the era for 'hard-working students from the rural areas' who used to dominate as champions in the *gaokaos* (Han 2017). Xiong's interview was widely circulated in the Chinese social media and triggered new rounds of debates on the shift from individual merits to one's family background as the key to educational successes. Moreover, Xiong's own journey, from an elite school and to an elite programme in one of the most prestigious universities in China (Tsing Hua University) signals elite distinction. Has higher education ceased to be a levelling-up field for the poor but aspiring students in China? How have elites had hijacked the narrative of the *gaokao* access to elite universities as their own distinction? Is going to elite universities at home sufficient to mark the distinction boundary given the increasing numbers of Chinese students attending elite universities abroad? Why is it necessary for Chinese elites to mark distinction and what are the nature and processes? This article will make a case on distinction making through studying abroad by Chinese elites.

Despite extensive research on Chinese elites in relation to their origin, pathways and wealth (Yang et al. 2019; Goodman 2014), little attention has been paid to defining distinction-making in the Chinese context and examining systematically how elites seek distinction. This

is problematic, because studies on distinction-seeking often reduce Chinese elite characteristics to measures of materialism such as conspicuous consumption (Jin et al. 2015). This reductive approach is further fuelled by the popular press coverage of Chinese consumers' shopping sprees abroad and luxury brands branching out in China (Economist 2014). Following the consumption logic, research on Chinese international students often links the rise of Chinese middle-class consumption power to the subsequent increasing demand in overseas education opportunities (Cebolla-Boado et al. 2018; Tsang 2013). Further scholarship elaborates that Chinese international students tend to come from affluent urban families and treat study abroad as a way to accumulate cultural and social capital that otherwise unachievable in China (Cebolla-Boado et al. 2018; Wei 2013; Henze and Zhu 2012). However, even research that focuses on Chinese students' distinction-making through study abroad (Zhang and Xu 2020) has largely refrained from interrogating the nature and the processes of distinction seeking.

Our incomplete understanding of distinction-making through study abroad limits our knowledge of Chinese elites and their domination in authoring distinction through education. Two primary dimensions of distinction-making documented in the sociological literature are emulation and (mis-)recognition (Friedman and Reeves, 2020; Savage and Williams 2008; Lamont 1992). The former refers to a process of continuously upping the spending game by developing expensive and elaborate tastes that are out of the reach of others (Veblen 1899), whilst the latter sheds light on the process of legitimising the value and prestige of certain cultural habits and denying recognition to others (Bourdieu 1984). Research combining these two dimensions could reveal an important and under-studied area of Chinese elite distinction through study abroad.

In this article, we use a case study of Peking University (PKU) to contextualise elite distinction at the individual and meso levels. Data include 36 individual interviews with undergraduates at Peking University (PKU) who received unconditional offers from

prestigious universities abroad, one-month observations of a ‘poster culture’ in one of student accommodation halls and observations of eleven study-abroad events on campus. The collection of the variety of data aims to answer two research questions: Why do these elite graduates seek overseas study opportunities as pathways to distinction? How do they develop specific distinction strategies of educational emulation whilst misrecognising challengers?

Conceptual Framework: Distinction-Making Through Education

There has been an enduring interest in researching distinction and its socioeconomic, cultural, political, and historical impacts across different social contexts (Bourdieu 1984; Savage and Williams 2008; Lamont 1992). However, distinction is usually under-theorised. For instance, what do we mean by distinction, and why do we need to talk about distinction? To fill this gap, we adopt Haslanger’s three sequential approaches (2012) to develop a holistic conceptualisation of distinction. We further use research findings on education to elaborate these three different but complementary approaches to distinction-making through education. As an a priori concept, distinction is elaborated by Bourdieu in terms of the symbolic competition between ‘being and seeming’ for ‘manifestations of a sense of appropriateness’, including belief, credit, knowledge and recognition (Bourdieu 1984: 249). Bourdieu uses a range of qualitative and quantitative data to draw a contrast between the elites’ ‘appropriate’ tastes in music, art, interior designs and literature on the one hand and low-brow cultural habits on the other (Bourdieu 1984).

In descriptive terms, distinction is further applied to capture the processes of competitions between possessors of recognised cultural goods, symbols, signs and power and their challengers (Bourdieu 1984: 249). These challengers continuously force possessors of distinctive cultural properties to engage in symbolic competitions ‘to achieve greater quantities or newer qualities’ (Prazeres 2019: 11) to ‘assert their rarity’ (Bourdieu 1984: 249). These competitions are best captured by Friedman and Reeves’s (2020) study of two processes of

distinction—cultural emulation and (mis-)recognition. Cultural emulation highlights that possessors seek materialist distinction by continuously upping the spending game by developing expensive and elaborate tastes out of the reach of others (Veblen 1899), whilst the (mis-)recognition model focuses on legitimising the value and prestige of certain cultural habits and denying recognition to others (Bourdieu 1984). In ameliorative terms, why should we understand distinction? Building upon previous two approaches, conceptualising distinction through dual processes of emulation and (mis-)recognition helps us to understand the complex material and symbolic arrangements which are designated to regulate the ‘being and seeming’, assign social conditions and legitimise authority or lack thereof.

Education systems offer a perfect setup for distinction-making. The stratified nature of education systems functions like a ‘sorting machine’ which assigns symbolic manifestations through the structural hierarchy or signals qualitative significance in status. Scholarship on maximally maintained inequality (MMI) finds that privileged social groups seek distinction by moving up the vertical educational ladder when education becomes gradually democratised and accessible to the unprivileged, such as in the contexts of Ireland, the UK and China (Raftery and Hout 1993; Zimdars 2007; Liu 2016). Relatedly, research from the UK and the US on effectively and/or symbolically maintained inequality (EMI and SMI) shows how advantaged social groups mobilise a variety of financial, cultural and social resources to get access to qualitatively better education (Lucas 2001; Binder et al. 2016). By recognizing certain types of education and assigning certain schools elite status, privileged families help their children to stay ahead in the race against their aspirational counterparts from poor families.

These emulation and (mis-)recognition processes of distinction-making through education systems are effective partly because the seemingly meritocratic façade helps to justify the stratification (Zimdars 2016) and partly because cultural capital reproduces and warrants privilege and wealth (Bourdieu 1986: 255). Educational systems not only legitimise the

conversions from financial and social capital to cultural capital but also regulate the deserving and the undeserving (Littler 2017). Education, as Bourdieu puts it, is an ‘instrument of reproduction’ and unifies ‘the market in social qualifications, which gives rights to occupy rare positions’ (Bourdieu 1986: 255). Different from distinction through cultural tastes or consumptions, education systems have inherent masking mechanisms, whereby domination and power are dressed up in seemingly meritocratic outcomes, thus aspiring the unprivileged to desire for such recognition.

Further studies explore beyond the stratified nature of the system and instead focus on individual agency, such as through analysing how elite students orient their aspirations through the language of distinction (Power et al. 2013; Brown et al. 2016). Power and colleagues’ comparative study between Oxford and Sciences-Po graduates shows that Oxford graduates reflect on the importance of building a ‘global profile’ as a form of distinction-making (2013), which is out of reach for non-elite students. By contrast, elite graduates from Sciences-Po and their perceptions of distinction continue to be shaped by a civic tradition and strong sense of nationhood in the French culture (Power et al. 2013). By assigning distinctive prestige to civil service positions through competitive examinations, French elite graduates from Sciences-Po articulate a particular occupational aspiration (Brown et al. 2016).

Distinction-making is a complex social process which connects individual agency and educational processes with society-wide economic and political players. For instance, recent research highlights the important role of organizational culture in steering occupational prestige towards particular industry sectors. In the US, high-tech companies and investment firms helped to encourage the growth of a particular campus culture at the Ivy League universities, which assigns occupational prestige and creates an aspirational hierarchy favouring these sectors (Binder et al. 2016). Relatedly, Liu and Shen’s research shows that Chinese university students seek a unique distinction marker of Chinese Communist Party membership through

the Youth League on campus in order to be more competitive than non-Party members in the labour market and in postgraduate applications (2020). By recognizing CCP members as trustworthy and employable, these university students form their particular group membership of distinction (Liu and Shen 2020).

These studies make significant contributions to our understanding of distinction-seeking through education within a national education system. However, they are subject to a number of limitations. Research on social stratification often focuses on educational competitions between individual families and their children for scarce educational resources or opportunities; thus, such research is unable to elaborate on individual agency, rationale and strategies in seeking distinction. Meanwhile, scholarship on individual agency among elite graduates limits the research scope to one particular context, as it does not consider the rarity of overseas degrees in the hierarchy of educational qualifications. Moreover, studies on organizational culture provide a unique insight into the ‘coauthorship’ of distinction-making between individuals and society-wide economic and political players but do not extend this model to international education contexts. Therefore, this article will seek to begin to fill the gaps described above by developing a holistic approach and incorporating individual origin, agency and organizational culture into analysing distinction-making processes by PKU graduates prior to their study abroad experiences.

Distinction Through Study Abroad

In the burgeoning field of study abroad, international students and studying abroad as a distinction pathway have gained substantial research attention (Findlay et al, 2012; Holloway et al., 2012; King et al., 2011; Tindal et al, 2015; Brooks and Waters 2010; Waters 2005). Overseas educational qualifications have a symbolic association with international prestige and value systems. Value and prestige are defined and established through symbolic cultural processes of evaluation (Lamont et al. 2014), which underline the functioning of institutions

and assign recognition and misrecognition. The international ranking systems are examples of the cultural process of evaluation. Ranking institutions such as Times Higher Education, the Shanghai Jiaotong Index for institutional ranking and the QS World University for subject ranking have mushroomed since the 2000s (Matthew 2015). They are not only the product of the globalised competition fetish between countries but also, and more importantly, the fruit of an evaluation culture that consolidates the prestige and value of US-/Europe-dominated Western universities, while at the same time misrecognising those from the Global South. In other words, the value of overseas degrees from these prestigious Western universities is authenticated by the international ranking systems, which seem to be the basis of widespread consensus, particularly among Chinese students (Author C).

Therefore, study abroad is a perfect pathway to distinction, first through signalling a unique a mode of educational emulation and, second, through the international higher education prestige system to give authenticity to, and (mis-)recognition of, some overseas degrees. In particular, elite distinction through study abroad in world-leading universities is attractive partly because it allows elites to signal superior educational, cultural and social status and partly because the symbolic association with meritocracy reflects one's individual effort and merits while conveniently disguising one's ascribed social origin, which lends further authenticity and legitimacy to one's elite status.

The great majority of studies on study abroad and distinction-making follow Bourdieu's conceptualisation of distinction in material and symbolic terms as their central theoretical point of departure. These can be divided into three main thematic clusters. The first major subset of this literature investigates international students' motivations to study abroad to achieve materialist distinction. Some studies find that international students are attracted by world-class universities because their prestige in increasingly international ranking systems warrants distinctive qualifications and degrees (Findlay et al. 2012). Tindal and colleagues' study

complements the wide ‘consensus’ on institutional prestige and finds that specialism and subject rarity are also important markers of distinction for international students (2015). Relatedly, research also suggests that international students are motivated by rewards and advantages in earnings, job opportunities and entrepreneurship associated with studying abroad (Holloway et al. 2012; King et al. 2011; Waters 2005). Kenney et al. (2013) find that returnees to mainland China, India and Taiwan have benefitted from mobility capital accumulated abroad, especially through studying and living in the US, and have founded highly successful second-wave technology companies. Similarly, some research highlights how international students envision post-study employment opportunities or international careers through study abroad (Prazeres et al. 2017).

The second strand of literature focuses on the accumulation of distinctive cultural capital, lifestyles and/or experiences, mobility capital, and networks through study abroad (Tindal et al. 2015). Many studies highlight living and studying abroad not only as a distinctive lifestyle among youth but also as an important experience which enhances their linguistic competence and cultural capital (King et al. 2011; Brooks and Waters 2010). The importance of lifestyles and social capital is captured by Prazeres and colleagues’ (2017) research on the ‘place’ for study abroad, such as capital cities and metropolitan or multi-cultural areas. The value of these ‘places’ is crucial to building a distinctive ‘overseas’ metropolitan experiences, which supersedes institutional reputation and prestige (Prazeres et al. 2017).

The third subset of literature sheds light on individual agency in contextualising distinction-making strategies. Prazeres’ original qualitative study with 28 Canadian university students highlights a unique pathway to distinction achieved by attending short-exchange programmes in universities in the Global South, such as South America and the Middle East (2019). Her study sheds light on individual privileges in authoring a new pattern of distinction which pulls ahead of the competition from other international students, who tend to choose

universities in the Global North (Prazeres 2019). Furthermore, this study reveals the complexity of a collective making and maintaining of distinction by recognising the value of this particular type of study abroad experience while misrecognising the other types (Prazeres 2019).

Apart from research on privileged groups and their utilisation of study abroad as a form of mobility capital, many studies further explore a variety of social groups and their strategies of constructing distinction through studying abroad. Zhang and Xu's (2020) research on female Chinese students pursuing degrees in the UK finds a gendered approach to distinction seeking. By framing studying abroad as a validation of a unique 'disposition of the mind, of cultural taste and of a global identity' (Zhang and Xu 2020: 1264), these Chinese female students hope to achieve distinctive advantages in both the job and marriage markets (Zhang and Xu 2020). Prazeres and colleagues' (2017: 121) study of international students in non-prestigious universities in the UK, Austria and Latvia highlights a variety of individual strategies of marking distinction through 'place-based experiential features' in competition with those in world-leading universities of academic distinction.

The existing body of research has enriched our understanding of a variety of rationales for seeking distinction through studying abroad and strategies for developing distinctive markers. However, there are still some significant gaps in our knowledge about using study abroad as distinction making. For example, the majority of these studies only includes students who have already had overseas studying and living experiences. Thus, we have little knowledge about their prior 'circumstances' (e.g., home universities, study subjects, campus culture and peer socialisation), which affect their decision to pursue study abroad as a distinction strategy. Furthermore, there is a lack of systematic examination of the agency of international students as possessors or challengers (or both) of distinction in previous studies. The present research involves the collection of new data on Chinese college graduates from Peking University

(PKU), which is highly ranked in the world—prior to their overseas study experiences. It asks a number of questions: 1) Why do these elite graduates seek overseas study opportunities as pathways to distinction? 2) How are their distinction aspirations shaped by their experiences at PKU? 3) Are they possessors or challengers of distinction, or both?

Data and Method

To research distinction through study abroad among elite graduates, we use a case study method to capture processes of distinction-seeking at the meso and individual levels at Peking University. A case study is the most appropriate method for contextualising elite distinction through the way individuals' elite-seeking strategies intersect with the study-abroad industry and agents as well as with organisational characteristics such as the campus culture. Peking University is chosen as the research site for several important reasons. The university is an elite institution in many respects. It is one of the most prestigious universities in China and is consistently ranked in the top quintile in national and international league tables (Zhang 2019). It is also a leading flagship university named in the Chinese government's ambitious university programmes, such as the 985 project and the World-Class project (Marginson 2017). It also has a symbolic association with elitism in Chinese history (Zhang 2019).

Peking University provides an ideal demographic base for researching elites, as it disproportionately enrolls children from political, corporate and cultural elite backgrounds (Liang and Lee 2012). The organisational characteristics of Peking University also make it an attractive site for researching elites. It has a rich formal and informal campus culture, including an assortment of student organisations, cultural events and on-campus residential accommodation. It also boasts extensive alumni networks, seminars and events, particularly associated with those who have pursued postgraduate degrees at Ivy League universities. Peking University also has a high proportion of academic members who obtained their PhD

degrees in elite overseas universities (Li et al. 2018), which is argued to be a unique form of elite signalling at the institutional level (Author C).

The main data for this study consist of three components, 36 in-depth individual interviews, one-month documentation of a poster culture in a student accommodation hall and observational data from eleven study-abroad events. In-depth interviews and observations are the most appropriate methods for this study, as they help to uncover the processes and mechanisms shaping the phenomenon of distinction-making by these elite students on the PKU campus.

Table 1 provides the details of all interviewees, including their socioeconomic status, parental education level, gender, geographical origin, and study-abroad destinations. All respondents (N=36) are all from leading cadres (39%), senior executives (22%) or urban professional families (39%). We could not find any respondents from working-class or agricultural families. The data on the parental education level are limited. Among those who provided answers (13 out of 36), their parents had all achieved postgraduate levels. Also, there were only 14 female students in our sample (compared to 22 male students). This gender imbalance might be related to the fields of study, as 27 respondents are from STEM subjects, while only 9 are from arts, humanities and social sciences; thus, this disparity corresponds to demographic characteristics in fields of study by gender at the institutional level (Author C).

Moreover, while the interviewees are chosen from diverse geographical areas of origin, students from Beijing are still overrepresented (N=8). Two students are from two municipal cities, Tianjin and Chongqing respectively, and the rest are from eastern, central and western provinces such as Hubei, Shandong, Anhui, Fujian, Guangxi, and Sichuan. Social media applications such as WeChat and Beidaren were used to search for the eligible research population. We also used snowball sampling to select respondents from a wide range of fields of study, including STEM fields, arts, humanities and social sciences.

We interviewed each respondent at least twice. All interviews were semi-structured, lasted approximately 1.5-2 hours each, were digitally recorded with the permission of the respondents, and were subsequently transcribed in Chinese. This research was conducted in full compliance with research ethics norms in general and with the codes and practices established in our universities' Research Ethics Policy in particular. Personal identification information was removed, and strict anonymity was secured through pseudonyms and number codes.

Table 1 about here

In addition to interview data, we documented the 'poster culture' in a residential building between March 18 and April 18, 2018. This building was selected as its residents were all undergraduates. We recorded all the posters across six floors of this building via a digital camera, which produced a total of 192 photos over the course of 32 days. The 192 photos captured a total of 578 posters displayed over all floors of the building. Of the 578 posters, 507 were concerned with study-abroad seminars or networking events. In addition, we also attended 2 seminars advertised on the posters and further 9 events relating to study-abroad during the course of this project.

We used the coding method proposed by Strauss and Corbin (1990) to analyse the data. Coding links data with the conceptual framework and involves three stages. In the open coding phase, we read the interview transcripts intensively and wrote a coding memo based on each interviewee, detailing their rationale and reflections on seeking study abroad opportunities. After writing these memos, we developed codes across all memos on the organisational characteristics and on-campus culture. We then mapped the connections between individual-level aspirations and organisational-level characteristics. Following this approach, we draw a relational map of distinction-making by linking organisational players to co-author study-abroad as a pathway to distinction (Figure 1).

Findings

Distinction Aspirations at the Individual Level

The respondents we interviewed were clearly conscious of their existing elite status as PKU undergraduates, as they described what it means to be a *'beidaren 北大人'* (a Peking University student) with a distinctive *'halo'* associated with *'intellectual superiority'*, *'social elite'* and *'talent'*. These *'beidarens'* have exclusive membership primarily among undergraduates who were selected through highly competitive and rigorous *gaokaos* (Liu 2016). Such elite distinction requires active and innovative maintenance because of the perceived 'threats' primarily from two groups of non-elites, postgraduates from outside PKU and outsiders who pursue overseas postgraduate degrees. Menggang Xu, a 22-year old undergraduate from information technology, shared his 'uneasiness' with those who were not PKU undergraduates but obtained postgraduate positions in his department: *'They are inferior. They failed the gaokao, but they could find their way to the graduate school which is not as competitive as the gaokao. What an insult to us.'*

Menggang's sentiment about the 'outsiders' was shared by Xicheng Peng, a 22-year-old undergraduate in chemistry, who described her frustration at what she perceived as *'injustice'*:

'I surpassed all those losers and got to Beida. Yet, those losers managed to buy their way to overseas universities for postgraduate degrees. It's unfair. Do I really want to study abroad? No, but I have no choice but to up my game by applying.'

The threats from the challengers of the students' elite distinction inspired a variety of strategies to fend off the competitors and invent new markers of distinction for PKU undergraduates.

Distinction through Meritocracy

The first strategy to achieve elite distinction is meritocratic authentication marked by scholarships or sponsorships, particularly from US Ivy League universities. By signalling elite

distinction through scholarships, some students are able to form an in-group of scholarship students to fend off the out-group of challengers. Among our respondents, 18 students were offered full or partial scholarships for PhD programmes in Ivy League universities. These 18 scholarship students were concentrated in fields of study including physics, chemistry and information technology. The availability of scholarships from US universities contributed to the widely held ‘consensus’ among PKU students that the Ivy League institutions are more meritocratic than other universities, particularly those in the UK and Australia. Therefore, the Ivy league universities certify ‘*true talents*’. Zimeng Li, a 19-year old undergraduate and a recipient of a full scholarship from an Ivy League university, purposefully distinguished himself from non-scholarship students by emphasizing his scholarship status:

‘So many mediocres going to study abroad in reputable universities. Their rich daddies buy their degrees. Only Ivy Leagues search for real talents, so they offer scholarships. I would say elites only come from the gaokaos or the Ivy Leagues.’

The ‘meritocracy consensus’ requires collective narratives on the superiority of scholarship holders, particularly those of Ivy League universities. Ziyu Zhou, a 22-year-old male student who was offered a full scholarship to study Biology in an Ivy League university, discussed his ‘membership’ in the ‘meritocratic crowd’: *‘The field [biology] is highly competitive in entry to PKU. This is also in the world. The best field only selects talents and offers scholarships. The half of my classmates to get full scholarships.’* Similarly, another interviewee describes membership of scholarship holders as ‘*world-leading academic geniuses*’. Jiawei Xu, a 23-year-old undergraduate, recalled his outstanding academic performance led to numerous opportunities to travel to the US and to present his research at ‘*leading international conferences*’ where he mingled with leading academics in his field: *‘[in these conferences] some Ivy League professors said I am scholarship material. The only problem is that I got several offers. Which one to choose?’* While describing his membership

in the ‘*international leading talents*’, he misrecognises students who did not have talents and failed to get a scholarship:

‘It’s sad. Their [academic performance] is so low. No chance in the scholarship. But they still wanted to study abroad. I don’t understand why. They should just do whatever suits them. Getting an ordinary job or something.’

Talent is used as a distinctive code of prestige which assigns the status of ‘us’-scholarship holders versus ‘the others’. The ‘meritocracy consensus’ not only legitimises the elite status of the Ivy League, another halo in addition to beidaren, but also attracts students to align their aspirations with Ivy League universities as an ultimate pathway to elite distinction. Haoran Jiang, a 22-year-old undergraduate, obtained an offer to study a law degree in an Ivy League and shared her elite standards:

‘A lot of the PKU graduates got full scholarships. American universities are all about talent. None of the alumni came from Oxbridge. I did some research and found some PKU graduates who studied there. They are all countryside millionaires (土豪)’.

Haoran did not apply for a scholarship partly because her field of study rarely offers a scholarship and partly because she was ‘*just an average student with an average GPA*’. Her parents’ financial commitment to her study allows her to pursue her Ivy League dream. Ironically, she used ‘*countryside millionaires*’ to describe those pursuing degrees without scholarships in the UK. The term has certain derogatory connotation associated with those from the countryside, which implies inferior status. Yet, her reliance on her family’s financial contributions to her postgraduate study in the US does not seem to make her or her family a ‘*countryside millionaire*’.

Distinction through Elite Building, Networks and Developing Geju

The majority of the respondents (31 out of 36) acknowledged that they aspired to and anticipated pursuing overseas degrees prior to entering PKU. These anticipations and aspirations grew ‘organically’ from their elite schooling experiences. Xiaonan Zhong, a 23-year-old female Social Science student, went to a prestigious secondary school in Beijing and explained it was only ‘*natural*’ for her to ‘*go to PKU or Tsinghua, then to an Ivy League institution*’, as most of the graduates from this school established this pathway of ‘*being consistently excellent and distinguished*’. Moreover, her school regularly organised alumni speaker events for secondary school students. Such events helped to amplify ‘role model’ effects, which seemed to have a particular impact on female students, as the majority of female respondents recalled having been inspired by their high school ‘*senior sisters*’ who studied first at PKU or Tsinghua and then at an Ivy League institution. The male respondents, in contrast, did not commonly discuss this role model impact when they described their elite schooling experiences.

Apart from the role model effect, these events were crucial for elite signalling, as the only way to maintain ‘elite status’ is to move continuously upward on the educational ladder, a belief echoed by Xiaonan, who said ‘*you can have a much louder voice when you are in a higher position*’. Elite university degrees and experiences like those from PKU are insufficient to maintain elite distinction, As Keni Yao, a 21-year-old undergraduate explained: ‘*PKU is an important stepping-stone to a much bigger platform.*’ For these graduates from national prestigious schools, elite distinction through education is like an established track lined with key stops at national elite universities and world-leading (e.g., Ivy League) universities. It is crucial to complete this track from home to abroad, building three sequential halos of elite status. When asked whether she was considering studying abroad after school, Keni emphasised that bypassing PKU or Tsinghua undermines the ‘*elite track*’: ‘*A lot of nouveaux riches send their kids abroad from high school, then to a Top 50 university. It’s like buying*

their way to an overseas degree. It's not true excellence.' Keni's narratives demonstrate a unique elite track to distinction while mindfully misrecognising other tracks to world-leading university degrees and experiences.

Another widely discussed distinction marker for pursuing an overseas degree is that of socialisation and networks. Ziyu Tan, a 22-year-old science undergraduate, discussed his choice of an east-coast Ivy League university popular with Chinese students:

I don't plan to socialise with Americans. My future is in China. I will go to [xxx University] because there are many PKU and Tsinghua graduates. So many Chinese from mediocre universities are all going abroad and having some alumni networks. They all make overseas degrees look cheap. I want to be part of that distinguished group with double elite degrees—PKU and xxx University.

Ziyu's double-elite degree aspiration echoes the previous discussion of an established elite track from home to abroad. His emphasis on networking with the 'right' type of elites illustrates recognition of double or triple elites from the 'right' track of degrees and experiences and draws a boundary against those from outside this track.

Finally, a commonly shared rationale for pursuing an overseas elite degree is the lifestyle and associated benefits of 'broadening one's *geju* 格局'. *Geju* 格局 is a popular term used to describe one's outlook, mindset and horizon. Jiawei Huang, a 22-year-old Business undergraduate, discussed his plan of going to an Ivy League college: *'It's not about better job opportunities. It's about foreign lifestyles and seeing the world so I can have a broader geju. You just cannot achieve it in China.'*

His discussion of *geju* 格局 further illustrates the distinctive attributes associated with an elite overseas degree and experiences—including a positive outlook, an advanced mindset, a broadened horizon and higher status—which go beyond economic returns, social capital and elite credentials. Obtaining a 'broader *geju*' through an elite overseas degree is crucial to elite

distinction. Associating a broader *geju* with an overseas degree allows these respondents to draw boundaries against those elite graduates at home who cannot afford to study abroad. Emphasising a broader *geju* achieved by an overseas lifestyle further signals distinctive taste and outlook as well as unique cultural capital.

Co-Authors of Distinction Making

In addition to distinction-making through overseas degrees at the individual level, this section sheds further light on organisational ‘intermediaries’, including student organisations, study-abroad agents and alumni networks, which create a culture of ‘studying abroad’ as distinction-making. Drawing from our observational data, we map out key intermediaries that create and maintain a campus culture of studying abroad and give further distinction to Ivy League universities (Figure 1). The study-abroad culture is a result of carefully orchestrated collaboration between student organisations, the study-abroad industry and agents, and alumni networks. Student organisations are the frontrunners promoting a campus culture of studying abroad. They organise events, seminars and networking opportunities, from booking venues on campus to advertising across the key aspects of students’ campus life, such as canteens, libraries, restaurants, sports centres and accommodation buildings, as well as digital spaces such as WeChat groups or Beidaren.

Figure 1 About Here

One example of the impact of student organisations is the ‘poster culture’ which promotes studying abroad- related events in student accommodations. In total we documented 507 posters advertised 17 different seminars and events on studying abroad in one freshmen’s residential hall. These include five seminars on university-focused applications (Yale, MIT and Princeton), three focused on fields of study (Chemistry and Physics), four on popular field choices (Finance and Information Technology), three on cross-disciplinary choices and two on planning the applications. Exposing study-abroad information to freshmen via the poster

culture plays an important role in feeding information and normalising studying abroad as an elite aspiration.

We further cross-examine the impact of these events on students' aspirations of studying abroad by attending a total of 11 seminars and meet-and-greet events. Notably, the cost of organizing these 11 events was sponsored primarily by study-abroad agents from outside PKU. Promoting study-abroad opportunities on campus is an important business strategy for the study-abroad industry and agents. By working closely with PKU students and alumni, these study-abroad agents have established their business reputation. However, their business boundaries often depend on the pool of available PKU alumni with whom to partner. In other words, PKU alumni are 'double agents' of the study-abroad culture. They are aspirational role models for undergraduates who desire to pursue study abroad, while they are also business partners with study-abroad agents. The PKU alumni identity gives them unique advantages and legitimacy to be 'event speakers', as most interviewees acknowledge that PKU alumni signal elite status and are '*trustworthy*'.

Moreover, PKU alumni play a role in signalling elite distinction through recognition and misrecognition. Among the interviewees, the majority chose to study in the US (27 out of 36); six received unconditional offers from the UK; and the rest planned to study in Australia, Canada and Japan. The widely-accepted 'consensus' that the Ivy League universities are much more meritocratic than non-Ivy League universities or those from Canada, the UK and Australia is further fuelled by personal stories shared by PKU alumni during these meet-and-greet events. Those stories ranged from getting a full scholarship to being talent-hunted by some Ivy League professors.

Apart from student organisations and alumni networks, study-abroad agents play an important role in marketing and normalising a consumption culture among these aspiring students. Among 36 interviewees, 15 confirmed they used or partly used the package services

provided by study-abroad agents who they met at these events, while the rest did not provide this information. The standard package services include a personalised selection of fields of study, suitable universities chosen according to the applicants' GPA, sample personal statements, recommendation letters and application form preparations. The fees charged by these agents range from RMB60,000 to RMB80,000—more than twice as much as the average household disposable income across China, which was estimated at around RMB30,000 per annum in 2019 (NBSC 2020).

Only a few agents were able to establish their client base in PKU, partly because they hired PKU or Tsinghua alumni as their consultants and partly because of their track record of successful applicants to Ivy League universities. The 'secret weapon' offered by these agents and their packages is personalised consultation with PKU or Tsinghua alumni enrolled in Ivy League PhD programmes. The consultation covers an analysis of employability in particular fields of study, university rankings and reputation, identifying matching fields and universities, and preparing for and sometimes ghostwriting personal statements. The more personalised the offered service is, the higher is the fee charged. Zijun Liang, a 23-year-old undergraduate who applied for an Economics and Management programme at a US university, discussed her purchase of the agent service as a way of outsourcing the '*legwork*' and '*maximising my time and energy in preparing for the TOEFL exam*', as her '*parents promised that money is no object*'. Her 'personalised service' helped her tailor personal statements, revise recommendation letters and receive her non-academic-related assistance such as accommodation choices, flights reservations and vaccines.

Study-abroad agents further exploit the acceptance of misrecognition of non-Ivy League degrees among PKU students and transform it into a business strategy that targets a specific pool of PKU students by aggressively advertising UK universities as an easy pathway to elite distinction. This 'client base' is characterised by students with lower-than-average GPA

performance or those studying the Humanities. Luman Shi, a 22-year-old undergraduate who applied for a Humanities degree at a UK university, shared her application experiences with the agent:

I didn't prepare for the exams properly. My English is also poor. The agent advised me to go to the UK as it's much easier [than the US]. So I tried and got accepted to xxx University. It's not Oxbridge, but it's prestigious enough.

By authenticating UK universities as a 'second-best' pathway to elite distinction through international ranking systems, the agents and students further consolidate a tiered system of study-abroad destinations, leading to misrecognition of the universities outside the US and the UK.

Discussion and Conclusions

This present study is among the first to systematically examine elite distinction through a phenomenon of study abroad by Chinese elites. We analyse 36 in-depth individual interview data and observational data on the PKU campus to uncover distinction making first at the individual level and further through the interaction with the organisational intermediaries. We show that the dual processes of educational emulation and (mis-)recognition are consistently woven through two processes. We find that, for some students, educational emulation is 'pre-recorded' in their aspirations prior to their study at PKU. The educational emulation is further illustrated by their rationale for studying abroad as a way to increase their advantages and competitiveness relative to other PKU graduates through authenticating merit, establishing unique elite networks, and/or by achieving unique cultural capital that constitutes 'broader geju'. These findings confirm previous scholarship on studying abroad as unique materialistic and cultural distinction (Findlay et al. 2012; Tindal et al. 2015; Brooks and Waters 2010). Furthermore, Chinese elites use their consumption power to purchase 'personalised' agent services and sponsor overseas tuition fees to guarantee their leading position in the competitive

game of studying abroad. These findings are consistent with arguments from the studies on MMI and EMI (Raftery and Hout 1993; Lucas 2001), but show that the stratification logics also extend to overseas study patterns.

Our study has a number of theoretical and empirical significance in researching elite distinction through studying abroad. At the theoretical level, we argue that recognition and misrecognition are the key to unpacking the process of distinction seeking. Elites seek to carve a unique ‘track’ of elite status, such as through triple elite ‘halos’ on a path from elite schooling to PKU to an Ivy League institution and elite alumni networks. We summarise our findings as building halos in Figure 2 which highlights how PKU elite graduates fend off challengers and construct their boundaries of distinction through studying abroad. These intentional strategies aim to signal superiority by gradually building a narrow circle of ‘us’ with triple halos of distinction and excluding aspirational ‘others’. By not recognising those from outside their track (i.e., elite schools, PKU and the Ivy League), the elites are able to establish an unbeatable track of superiority justified by a code of meritocracy and authenticated by international ranking.

Figure 2 About Here

At the empirical level, our findings further highlight the role of organisational intermediaries in influencing elite distinction by constructing a study-abroad culture on campus. The study-abroad industry and agents function as important drivers of this culture. By recruiting PKU students and alumni, the study-abroad industry and agents are able to penetrate deeply into key aspects of students’ lives on campus and grow their business interests on the back of students’ trust in their alumni. They further develop sophisticated business strategies to target key aspects of elite distinction through role model effects, ‘second-best’ elite pathways and personalised service packages to meet the various demands of students seeking distinction through status enhancement, consumption and authentication.

If the student organisations are the ‘foot soldiers’ of the study-abroad culture, PKU alumni play a role in constructing elite distinction through the study-abroad pathway. Their dual identities as role models and paid agents help to signal the superior status of overseas degrees and justify the existence of the study-abroad industry on campus. More importantly, PKU alumni craft elite distinction through recognition and misrecognition. Specifically, PKU alumni use the availability of scholarships to justify the ‘meritocracy consensus’ of the Ivy League brand among PKU students as an ultimate pathway to elite distinction. Even though the scholarships are limited to a narrow range of disciplines, PKU students are still able to align their aspirations with the Ivy League brand. The international rankings effectively misrecognise overseas degrees from universities in other locations, including the UK, Australia, Canada and Japan as well as the Global South.

These findings have important implications for the study of elite distinction and social stratification in education more broadly. In particular, they highlight the processes of distinction-seeking at the individual levels coordinated with collective ‘consensus’, and organisational intermediaries in seeking, justifying, and (mis-)recognising studying abroad as a pathway to elite branding. The findings from this study also reveal the complexity of the ‘identities’ of the PKU elites as both possessors and challengers of distinction. The possessors utilise the meritocracy discourse with the assistance of the PKU/Ivy League alumni to paint a profile of elite distinction marked by scholarships and form close membership. Meanwhile, the challengers either align their aspirations by pursuing an Ivy League track or seek a new overseas pathway of studying at the ‘good enough’ universities in the UK. Either way, the beneficiaries are the agents of the study-abroad industry, who not only consolidate their client base in PKU but also pursue a new business route of accommodating the challengers.

Building on these findings, several additional questions should be investigated by scholars of elite distinction and social stratification. First, to what extent do the study-abroad patterns

by PKU graduates observed here generalise to a broader population as a pathway to distinction? Second, our choice of the case study method limits our knowledge on elite graduates from other prestigious universities, particularly from non-Beijing areas. How do they seek distinction after graduation? Third, there are disproportionately few female respondents in our interview sample. Is elite distinction a gendered phenomenon? Fourth, there is an over-representation of respondents from Beijing in our interview sample. What about elite graduates from non-metropolitan areas? How does geographical origin factor in the pathway of elite distinction through studying abroad? In undertaking such systematic analysis, scholars can help to sharpen our understanding of elite distinction through education in the 21st China.

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Tables and Figures

Figure 1: Organisational Intermediaries and A Culture of Study Abroad on Campus

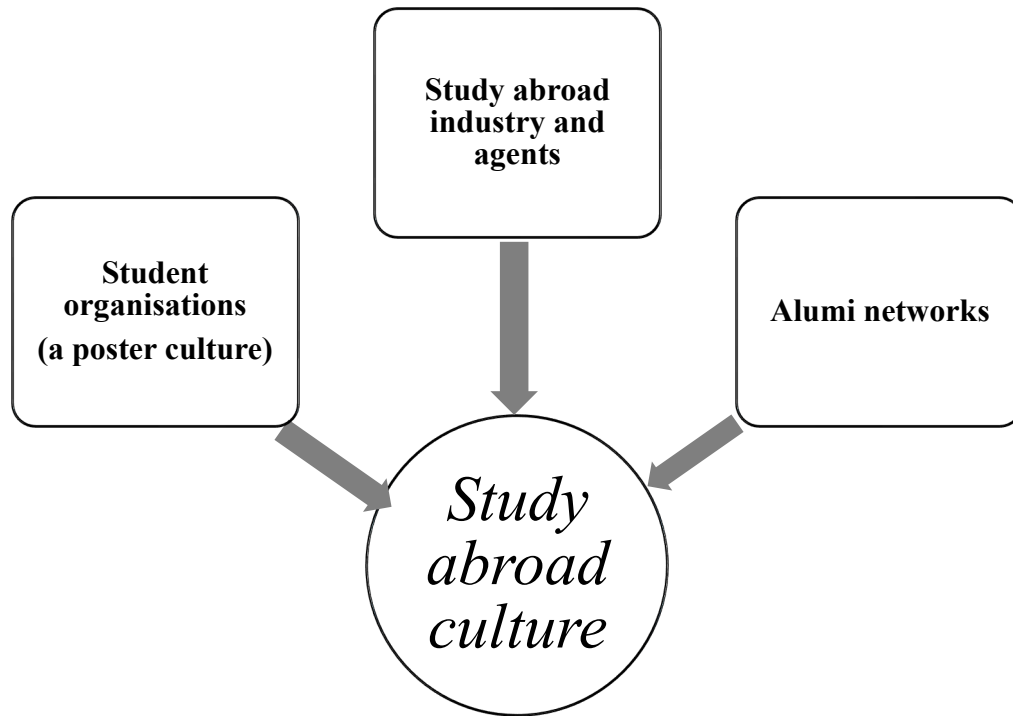


Figure 2: Building Triple Halos: how PKU graduates closes the distinction circle



Table 1: Interviewees' Demographic Profile and Studying Abroad Destinations (N=36)

	N	%
Socioeconomic status		
Leading cadres, governmental officials in managerial roles	14	39%
Executives	8	22%
Professionals	14	39%
Parental level of education		
Postgraduate degrees	13	36%
Bachelor degrees	N/A	N/A
Less than secondary schooling	N/A	N/A
No answer	24	67%
Gender		
Male	22	61%
Female	14	39%
Geographical origin		
Beijing	8	22%
Tianjin	1	3%
Chongqing	1	3%
22 Provinces	26	72%
Study abroad destinations		
US	27	75%
UK	6	17%
Australia	1	3%
Canada	1	3%
Japan	1	3%
Fields of study		
STEM	27	75%
Social Sciences, Humanities, Others	9	25%