



Subject in motion: (de)capitalization and coping strategies of Tibetan “Sea Turtles” in China

Miaoyan Yang¹ · Jiayong Zezhen¹ · Zhenjie Yuan^{2,3,4}

Accepted: 11 April 2023 / Published online: 1 May 2023
© The Author(s), under exclusive licence to Springer Nature B.V. 2023

Abstract

Previous studies on Chinese overseas students have generally presumed a smooth transition from mobility to mobility capital and have lacked an ethnic perspective. In this study, we adopt mobility capital as an analytical lens to explore the life trajectories of a group of Tibetans with studying abroad experiences. Drawing on qualitative data through multiple methods, we find a shift from collective-oriented expectations regarding studying abroad to individualist life planning and lifestyles after returning to work in the Tibet Autonomous Region (TAR). Before studying abroad, the informants viewed such experiences as important capital that could be later used to make a change for the Tibetan group, their local societies, and the state. Those views met a different reality after returning to TAR because the informants generally felt they were being viewed as potentially risk subjects in the workplace, which significantly impeded the capitalization of educational mobility at the institutional level. However, the informants developed coping strategies to find self-worth in private life by capitalizing on educational mobility. By addressing the subjective experiences of Tibetan informants in TAR and their associations with institutional contexts, this article not only engages an ethnicity-sensitive perspective to understand the politics of international educational mobility but also extends the discussion on individuals’ experiences of educational mobility to the successional stage upon returning to their home societies. This article ultimately emphasizes the need for more culturally and politically reflexive policies that can sustain the flow of ethnic talents and help them realize their self-worth.

✉ Zhenjie Yuan
zjyuan@gzhu.edu.cn

Miaoyan Yang
miaoyanyang@163.com

Jiayong Zezhen
zezhenjiayong@163.com

¹ Sociology Department, School of Sociology and Anthropology, Xiamen University, Xiamen, Fujian, China

² Center for Human Geography and Urban Development, School of Geography and Remote Sensing, Guangzhou University, Guangzhou, Guangdong, China

³ Guangdong Provincial Center for Urban and Migration Studies, Guangzhou, Guangdong, China

⁴ Southern Marine Science and Engineering Guangdong Laboratory (Zhuhai), Zhuhai, Guangdong, China

Keywords Studying abroad · Mobility capital · Ethnicity · (De)capitalization

Introduction

The new millennium has witnessed an increasing flow of studying abroad students from the Global South to the Global North, with hopes for bright educational and career futures through capitalizing on educational mobility (UNESCO, 2022). As for China, since the 1978 reform and opening-up, the number of students studying abroad has continued rising and reached 703,500 in 2019, with a 6.25% increase compared with 2018 (Ministry of Education in China, 2020). Existing studies have generally considered studying abroad a capitalizing strategy adopted by middle-class students, especially those from underdeveloped or developing countries, to achieve upward social mobility (Fong, 2011; Holloway et al., 2012; Hu & Cairns, 2017; Ma, 2020).

In the context of globalization, these higher international student flows have been driven by at least three assumptions: (a) The general trend of studying abroad involves travel from the Global South to the Global North, or from East to West (Tsang, 2013). (b) Studying abroad is affordable for mostly middle- and upper-class families, the socioeconomic elites (Wang & Miao, 2013). (c) The transition from mobility to mobility capital (capital generated from mobility experiences) is smooth, although the subjects in motion (i.e., international students) suffer cultural shocks, language difficulties, and other adaptation problems when studying abroad (Ma, 2020). These assumptions have largely lacked an ethnic perspective.

Amid improving social and economic conditions in China's ethnic minority regions, some ethnic minority students have started seeking educational futures abroad. Although no official statistics exist on Chinese ethnic minorities studying abroad, some eminent scholars have recently called for urgent scholarly attention and focus on ethnic minorities with studying abroad experiences (Ma, 2019). The assumptions have also generally failed to consider the complex (de)capitalization process of educational mobility.

To make up such lacuna, we focus on a group of Tibetan “sea turtles” (*haigui*, 海归; generally known as *returnees* in English, hereafter returnees) who came mostly from lower social classes but successfully studied abroad and later returned to work in their home communities in China's Tibet Autonomous Region (TAR). Although studying abroad has been widely considered a capitalizing process (Fong, 2011; Ma, 2019), we reveal nuanced decapitalization processes that a group of Tibetan returnees have encountered and their recapitalization strategies.

This article aims to explore the complexity and uncertainty embedded in the transition from mobility to mobility capital to enhance the understanding of this open research area. We will demonstrate how the institutional features of workplaces in sending societies might have devaluated the mobility capital of ethnic minorities with studying abroad experiences, which would further challenge and supplement theories of mobility and mobility capital in an educational context.

This article raises three specific questions: (a) What kind of institutional contexts were Tibetan returnees facing upon returning to TAR? (b) How did the institutional contexts shape Tibetan returnees' decapitalization experiences? (c) What strategies did returnees employ in response to the decapitalization? By addressing Tibetan returnees' subjective experiences in TAR and the associations with institutional contexts, this article engages an ethnicity-sensitive perspective to understand the politics of international educational

mobility and extends the discussion on individuals' educational mobility to the successional stage upon returning to their home societies.

Literature review

Overview of international students studying abroad

Studying abroad has become a fast-growing field in mobility studies. Existing studies on international students with studying abroad experience can be grouped into three research pools. The first pool focuses on the decision-making process of international students before studying abroad. These decisions include the mobility choice (whether to move), destination (where to move), duration (short-term exchange or degree completion), and postmobility choice (stay or leave afterward) (Jiani, 2017; Mazzarol & Soutar, 2002; Petzold & Moog, 2018; Zhao, 1996). The push factors operating within the sending countries and the pull factors operating within the receiving countries that initiate students' mobility decision have been extensively discussed (Mazzarol & Soutar, 2002). The push and pull mechanism informs the complexities behind the capital-driven mobility choices.

The second pool examines international students' study and life during studying abroad. These studies have widely documented international students' struggles and adaptational processes in academic learning, social relationship-building, cultural adaptation, and identity negotiation (Bótas & Huisman, 2013; King & Ruiz-Gelices, 2003; Streitwieser & Light, 2018; Wu & Hou, 2022), demonstrating the challenges, complexities, and individual agencies in the capital-generating or capital-accumulating process of international educational mobility.

The third pool focuses on the long-lasting effect of studying abroad on the work and life of international students. These studies suggest heterogeneous capitalizing effects on graduates' mobility capacity, employability, job type, starting salary, promotion, and social status (d'Hombres & Schnepf, 2021; Di Pietro, 2012; Netz & Grüttner, 2021; Petzold, 2021; Van Mol et al., 2021). The effects of studying abroad are context-specific based on individual traits, social features of sending and receiving countries, national policies regarding international students, and labor markets (Netz, 2021).

Three distinctive features are identifiable from existing studies. First, these studies have generally explored international student mobility in a specific moment or stage, therefore having failed to examine its long-lasting effect on individuals with an extended temporal and spatial-dynamic lens. Second, these studies have favorably embraced a Bourdieusian theoretical perspective especially his concepts of cultural capital, economic capital, and social capital to examine the capitalizing process and effect of international educational mobility. Third, although existing studies have noted a bilateral educational mobility between the global north and the global south, the heterogeneity of subjects in motion especially those marginal cultural or social groups from the global south warrants future examination.

Situated in such research lacuna, this study intends to examine the “decapitalization” experiences of Chinese returnees with an extended and dynamic time–space lens by following their mobility trajectory to the postmobility period. Moreover, this study also fills the existing studies by engaging an ethnicity perspective, in this case, through looking into the mobility experiences of ethnic minority returnees in China.

Overview of Chinese students studying abroad

Studies on Chinese students with international educational mobility have produced fruitful research outputs, although these studies have generally lacked an ethnicity perspective. Existing studies have well documented the pains as well as the gains of Chinese students by examining their temporal educational mobility trajectory.

When studying abroad, Chinese students face a variety of challenges, struggles, stresses, ambivalences, and disappointments, as usually reflected in multifaceted life stresses (Yan, 2017). Fong (2011) found that Chinese students studying abroad experience unexpected suffering, ambivalence, and disappointment along their educational mobility trajectories, despite enjoying the benefits of flexible citizenship.

Academic stress—which largely stems from cultural differences, cultural shock, language deficiencies, ineffective interactions during and after class, and high motivation or pressure to achieve while studying abroad—has emerged as a primary concern of Chinese students (Cao et al., 2021; Yan, 2017). Moreover, Chinese students suffer from personal and sociocultural stressors. Personal concerns include job opportunities, visa problems, and immigration concerns, whereas sociocultural concerns include interactions with local societies (including professors, local students, and rental agents), foreign language and multicultural adaptation, clashes in values, and health issues (Fong, 2011; Heng, 2017, 2018; Ma, 2020; Yan & Berliner, 2011, 2013). These challenges and struggles are sensitive to individual characteristics and the social contexts that individuals face when studying abroad. Key indicators of adaptations and struggles while studying abroad include gender, culture, race, immigration status, class, and major (Ge & Durst, 2022; Heng, 2018; Ma, 2020; Xu & Yang, 2019; Yang, 2021). The COVID-19 pandemic has brought new challenges for Chinese students studying abroad related to restricted travel, closed labs, disrupted research, financial crises, decreased intercultural communication, devaluation of foreign degrees, and anti-Asian racism (Fu et al., 2022; Yu, 2021). These new challenges have produced increasing doubts about the value of international educational diplomas and concerns regarding their decapitalization (Mok & Xiong, 2020).

Although studying abroad has posed great challenges for Chinese students, researchers have generally remained optimistic about the related gains and capitalizing effects. Existing studies have comprehensively documented how studying abroad positively affects Chinese students, especially by examining their postmobility experiences.

First, studying abroad improves students' language skills, social adaptational capacity, and intercultural competency, thus cultivating cosmopolitan subjects with global mindsets, competencies, and tastes (Fong, 2011; Gu & Schweisfurth, 2015; Ma, 2020). Fong's longitudinal study of Chinese students in North America, Europe, Australia, New Zealand, Singapore, and Japan revealed that studying abroad offers students a particularly flexible citizenship in the so-called developed world, promising the potential for freedom and happiness (Fong, 2011). Gu and Schweisfurth's (2015) study on returnees from UK universities produced similar findings by revealing the development of complex cosmopolitan identities and awareness through transnational educational experiences. Indeed, acquiring cosmopolitan capital has been identified as one primary reason Chinese students pursue education abroad (Ma, 2020).

Second, studying abroad familiarizes students with different cultures in their origin countries and in destination countries (Maeder-Qian, 2018), enabling students to be cultural brokers, bridges, or soft powers for origin and destination countries (Bislev, 2017). Meanwhile,

studying abroad empowers returnees with an identity of superiority and elitism due to gaining transnational skills, competences, worldviews, and tastes (Gu & Schweisfurth, 2015), establishing a distinctive symbolic boundary between returnees and peers who have not studied abroad.

Third, studying abroad facilitates students' expectations and practices regarding future career development and upward social mobility (Ma, 2020; Tsang, 2013; Zhai & Gao, 2021). For Chinese students and their parents, the desire for American college education is rooted in an urgent social mobility quest (Ma, 2020). Surveys have also shown that studying abroad especially qualifications from elite overseas universities positively improves Chinese students' job-seeking outcomes, starting salaries, and career development (Hao & Welch, 2012; Hao et al., 2016; Mok et al., 2016; Zhai & Gao, 2021). Hence, to secure a generational reproduction of class status and mobility for offspring, middle-class parents deliberately capitalize on privileged social capital and send their children to study abroad, especially if they have failed to gain entrance to premier Chinese universities.

Although existing studies have noted both the pains and gains of studying abroad, an overt optimism seems to dominate and direct the mobility decisions and expectations. This overt optimism is rooted in the belief that the price of pains is acceptable in comparison with the (anticipated) benefits and gains of international educational mobility. Additionally, this overt optimism expects a smooth transition from mobility to the production of mobility capital.

Yet, studies on the postmobility experiences of Chinese returnees have also pointed to the complicated and heterogeneous capitalizing effects of international educational mobility. Hao and his coauthors find that, with the increasing competitiveness of Chinese job market, studying abroad is no longer a competitive factor for job seeking, although qualifications from elite universities matter (Hao et al., 2016). Yi's (2011) study of returnees in an eastern elite university finds that the ideological control and a Confucian paternalism have formed a new audit culture different from the West and have posed great challenges for the returnees' adaptation. Similarly, Zweig's (2019) study of returnees in the Chinese Academy of Sciences finds that the institutional parochial culture has impeded the production of transnational capital of returnees, therefore contributing to the struggles and challenges along their academic routines. In sum, studies on postmobility experiences of Chinese returnees have well documented their gains and pains, including the institutional environments, and the challenges and struggles they face. Yet, the adaptational or coping strategies returnees have developed in front of these challenges warrant further exploration.

Established in existing scholarship, this article aims to push further the exploration of returnees by engaging an ethnicity perspective and explores their adaptational strategies in front of institutional challenges. Specifically, this article is interested in the uniqueness of institutional features of workplaces that might have impeded the production of returnees' mobility capital. To achieve this goal, we focus on a group of Tibetan returnees, a small but unique and important returnee group in China. We examine institutional contexts upon which Tibetan returnees face and the way in which institutional contexts shape Tibetan returnees' decapitalization experiences and returnees' strategies in response to the decapitalization.

Educational mobility, mobility capital, and (de)capitalization

According to Bourdieu (1986), *cultural capital* refers to one's social assets that promote social mobility in a stratified society. Cultural capital exists in three forms: embodied, objectified, and institutionalized. Embodied cultural capital is reflected in

the long-lasting dispositions of the mind and body. Objectified cultural capital exists in the form of cultural goods (e.g., books, dictionaries, instruments). Institutionalized cultural capital usually manifests as educational qualifications. Social capital refers to “the aggregate of the actual or potential resources which are linked to possession of a durable network of more or less institutionalized relationships of mutual acquaintance and recognition” (Bourdieu, 1986, p. 21). As demonstrated in the literature review, studying abroad accrues students’ social and cultural capital in a Bourdieusian sense. Scholars also conceptualize the social and cultural capital acquired through studying abroad as *academic capital* or *mobility capital* (Cairns et al., 2021a, 2021b; Hu & Cairns, 2017).

Built on Bourdieu’s capital concepts, Cairns (2022) considers mobility a valuable resource by recognizing and quantifying the embodied, objectified, and institutionalized capital acquired through mobility. Mobility capital accumulates during studying abroad experiences and can be reflected in knowledge about specific societies, enhanced intercultural competencies, higher earning potentials, the heightening of international employability, expanded social networks, increased life chances, and internationally recognized educational credentials, either in financial returns or the less tangible form of acquiring mobility capacity (Cairns, 2022; Cairns et al., 2021a; Hu & Cairns, 2017). Inspired by Bourdieu (1986), Cairns et al. (2021a), and Cairns (2022), we defined *mobility capital* as being reflected in either cultural capital forms (e.g., language skills, intercultural competencies, social adaptational capacities, tastes, and dispositions) or social capital forms (e.g., transnational networks and elite networks) acquired through studying abroad.

By giving individuals a certain cachet, mobility capital becomes something individuals try to accumulate and multiply (Cairns, 2022). Studying abroad being equated to *gold plating* exemplifies the importance of mobility capital in Chinese societies over time. Yet the transition from mobility to mobility capital is less smooth than generally assumed. Hu and Cairns (2017), based on studying Chinese international students’ poststudy experiences, warned about a conceptual misunderstanding that studying abroad automatically leads to capital accumulation and career success. Cerase’s (1974) study of Italian immigrants showed that the physical, moral, and technical conditions of the returnees greatly determine the effectiveness of using mobility capital and transformative power in Italian society. Similarly, Zweig’s (2019) comparative study on returnees from various national talent programs revealed that the parochial institutional culture (e.g., that of Chinese Academy of Science) significantly impedes returnees’ academic and career growth and success. The process that results in mobility capital not being converted to career success and other tangible or intangible positive outcomes can be called *decapitalization*.

Adopting mobility capital as an analytical lens, this study explores the social and institutional conditions in which educational mobility can be capitalized or decapitalized for a group of Tibetans with studying abroad experiences. The term mobility capital contributes significantly to our understanding of youth migration in international contexts, presenting itself an important theoretical tool to explain the values of studying abroad (Cairns, 2022). Like other researchers, we conceptualize *educational mobility* as “geographic movement from home region to another location which is driven by educational motivations of students” (see also Xu & Yang, 2019). Accordingly, *international educational mobility* refers to cross-national geographic movement driven by educational motivation.

To supplement existing studies largely focused on studying abroad experiences, this study aimed to examine the poststudy experiences of students, especially their life trajectories after returning to work in students’ communities of origin. Drawing on fieldwork in TAR with Tibetan returnees, we explore the intersections of educational mobility,

ethnicity, and (de)capitalization processes along Tibetans' life trajectories. In doing so, we used an ethnicity-sensitive perspective to understand the politics and complexity of the international educational mobility of Tibetans in China.

Methodology

We drew the empirical data for this article from the first author's research project on the life politics of Tibetan elites with studying abroad experiences. Three waves of data were collected in 2018, 2021, and 2022. The research methods included individual interviews, participant observations, and archival research.

The first wave of data was collected by the first author to understand the social and institutional culture of higher education institutions in TAR. During that time, 10 professors, including three (associate) deans, were interviewed to elicit perceptions and understandings of their working culture and experiences. The second wave was collected by the first and second authors to understand Tibetan returnees' life trajectories. Because all returnees had educational experiences in TAR, China's interior cities, and overseas, the questions generally aimed to elicit the returnees' life experiences in the three cultural settings; reflections and identity negotiations at different life stages; and life changes before and after going abroad. In addition to interviews, we participated in several online experience-sharing workshops for Tibetans with overseas educational experiences. We also regularly visited the online platforms and websites of start-up companies founded by Tibetans with overseas educational experiences to understand the capitalization process of educational mobility.

Although the second wave of interviews included a highly heterogeneous group of informants and covered various themes, this article elicits the life stories of only nine Tibetans grouped into the early cohort of returnees. All informants reported experiencing both positive and negative consequences of studying abroad after returning to work in home regions and discussed coping strategies. Unlike a later interviewed cohort, the early cohort was aged 40–60 years (with one exception); was sponsored by returnees' workplaces (i.e., universities), the state (i.e., the China Scholarship Council), or third-party sponsors (i.e., overseas partner universities) for studying abroad; and returned to TAR after obtaining a master's or doctorate degree. Five informants were male, and four were female. All informants are now university professors working in Lhasa. Six were married before studying abroad; eight were from rural or nomadic family backgrounds; and one had an urban family background but reported a poor financial situation, especially compared with individuals from rich families in China's interior cities.

The search for potential informants—especially for the early cohort—was challenging. Because the population of early cohort Tibetan returnees was small, recruiting informants following strict sampling methods based on gender, age, class, career, and scholarship categories was difficult. Thus, social networks significantly helped with soliciting informants; the second author is a Tibetan from a middle-class family, and her family had two close friends who were early returnees. Through snowballing, we eventually interviewed nine individuals.

The third wave of data was collected in 2022 to further understand the social and institutional culture of Tibetan returnees, and four professors were interviewed to provide supplementary data. Since all informants in the first and third waves were educated within China, the interview data also provided a comparative lens to understand Tibetan returnees' life

Table 1 Tibetan returnees' profiles

Name	Gender	Age	Decade of going abroad	Destination country	Degree obtained	Current occupation
Lhamo	F	30 s	2010s	UK	Master	Professor
Samdup	M	40 s	2010s	Thailand	PhD	Professor
Dawa	M	40 s	2000s	Thailand	PhD	Professor
Droga	F	50 s	2000s	Norway	Master	Professor
Gonpo	M	40 s	2010s	Singapore	Master	Professor
Jigme	M	60 s	1990s	USA	PhD	Professor
Pamo	F	50 s	2000s	Norway	Master	Professor
Lhundup	M	40 s	2000s	UK	PhD	Professor
Degi	F	40 s	2000s	Thailand	Master	Professor

trajectories. Moreover, two Tibetan professors with studying abroad experience who later worked in interior cities were consulted about personal working experiences. To protect the informants' privacy, we changed all names to aliases (Table 1).

(De)capitalization of educational mobility: Tibetan returnees' life trajectories

(Imagined) capitalization of educational mobility

The interviews with informants surfaced two ambitious goals for studying abroad, both collective-oriented. The first goal was to construct a better TAR after studying abroad. All informants admitted TAR was socially and economically underdeveloped compared to most interior Chinese cities. Some informants reported the primary goal of changing their hometowns. Droga and Lhamo, both professors in medicine, expressed strong urges to promote TAR's medical development by cultivating more students with professional knowledge when deciding to study abroad. Droga stated "I wanted to learn [more medical knowledge], and later I brought back the knowledge I had learned. With my expertise, I [hope] to cultivate more students with professional [medical] skills."

The second goal is to promote disciplinary research in TAR. Jigme, a professor in Tibetan studies, related his motivation to study abroad to developing Tibetology:

Our leaders have an expectation that Tibetology should transcend the past. That is why they chose me [to study abroad]. Then, I realized that, because my institute picked me up, I should study Tibetology well. Only by this trust could I be a good scholar doing research differently after returning.

Upon finishing his degrees in the USA, Jigme had opportunities to work at top-tier universities in China's interior cities. Jigme politely rejected the offers because he was devoted to improving his hometown, something he considered his responsibility, out of concern for Chinese society. According to Jigme, as an undeveloped region of Chinese society, TAR urgently needed talent. As a scholarship beneficiary, he felt obliged to personally contribute.

Similarly, Pamo, a female Tibetan professor, explained why she strived to secure an opportunity to study abroad. As a researcher in TAR, Pamo witnessed many social problems but could not conduct in-depth research due to insufficient academic training. She was therefore eager to apply her new knowledge to study Tibetan society, better understand its modern social problems, and develop a stronger Tibetology after studying in Norway.

Tibetan returnees' motivations and goals to learn knowledge in Western societies and then apply it in China reflected returnees' adoption of national ideology regarding studying abroad between the 1970s and 1990s. As then national leader Deng Xiaoping addressed, "Sending [Chinese] to study abroad is a specific measure [to promote China's scientific and technological development]... We should learn from the world's advanced scientific and technological achievements" (as cited in Renmin Net, 2019). These motivations and goals also reflect the "shortage" mindset Zweig (2019) found among the Chinese returnees from the science fields. For those returnees, studying abroad can enrich them with the *shortage goods* (e.g., knowledge, skills, capital, resources, technology, and networks) in demand in the home society that have the empowering effect of offering comparative advantages and privileged statuses.

The Tibetan returnees' ambitious goals were also motivated by their hierarchical positioning of TAR, China, and Western societies. Having been educated in both TAR and interior China before studying abroad, the returnees' educational mobility empowered them through knowledge of both societies. The returnees were clearly aware of the developmental gaps among TAR, China, and more economically developed Western societies (e.g., USA and UK). As citizens from economic or cultural peripherals, returnees' social and political imaginations were partially shaped by educational mobility. Therefore, prior to studying abroad, these Tibetan educational elites imagined educational mobility to be a form of important capital, upon which they intended to capitalize to improve Tibetan society.

Notably, unlike most overseas returnees who considered studying abroad a critical way to accumulate individual social and cultural capital (Fong, 2011; Hao et al., 2016; Hu & Cairns, 2017; Ma, 2020; Yan, 2017), the early cohort Tibetan returnees embraced a more collective-oriented attitude. For them, studying abroad went beyond individual choice and was connected to communal and societal developments. These deeply embedded viewpoints reflected the early cohorts' strong identification with and commitment to their ethnic group, their local societies, and the state. Gonpo shared the following while driving us to our residence after the interview:

I think Tibetan *haigui* are more patriotic than other minority groups [in China]. I got to know some other minority [Chinese] studying overseas, many of them were reluctant to return [after studying abroad]. Whereas the majority of Tibetans willingly returned [to China].

The comparatively stronger patriotism Gonpo observed among Tibetan returnees reflected an ethno-nationalist patriotism driving the decision-making process regarding whether to return.

Notably, before studying abroad, Tibetan returnees have generally assumed a smooth transition from mobility to mobility capital and have imagined a bright future through capitalizing on that capital upon returning to TAR. In the next section, we explore the social and institutional conditions of returnees in TAR and the complexities and mechanism inherent in the decapitalization of education mobility.

Decapitalization of educational mobility

Returnees' abilities to mobilize their transnational mobility capital depends on whether the state or institutions in which returnees work have created an environment that allows them to actualize comparative advantages (Zweig, 2019). Our data, nevertheless, found a contradiction between the state ideology and institutional positionality of returnees when we explored Tibetan returnees' life trajectories. This finding stands sharp in comparison with Yi's (2011) and Zweig's (2019) studies of returnees in elite high education institutions in the interior China.

In the context of the market economy, especially after the 2000s, the Chinese government has prioritized recruiting highly skilled returnees (Hao & Welch, 2012; Zweig, 2019). The National Plan for Medium and Long-Term Human Resources Development (2010–2020), the National Plan for Medium and Long-Term Education Reform and Development (2010–2020), and the National Plan for Medium and Long-Term Scientific and Technological Development (2006–2020) all emphasized the importance of recruiting returnees to promote the scientific and technological development in China, elevating its international competitiveness and status. Accordingly, the Hundred-Talent Plan, Thousand-Talent Plan, and Changjiang Scholar Plan were developed to attract returnees with international capacity and competitiveness. Returnees were generally favored for housing, start-up research grants, promotions, and research teams in China's interior cities (Zweig, 2019). Yet according to our informants, the state's formal endorsement of returnees' value did not seemingly elevate their social status in the TAR talent pool.

Our document analyses showed that the latest policy about recruiting high-level talents at Highland University, the best TAR university, was issued in 2016. The slow update somewhat reflected a tardy institutional response to the fast-growing talent pool, especially regarding the recent wave of returned overseas Chinese students. In the policy document, only one sentence mentioned the returnees: "Those who were under the age 40, and obtained a doctoral degree in prestigious domestic or foreign university or engaged in postdoctoral research in those universities can be recruited as young academic backbone." Those talent recruitment policies were usually not applicable to our informants, to their dismay, since they were native-born. Due to TAR's high altitude, lack of oxygen, and economic underdevelopment, interior-born high-level professionals hesitate to come work there (Yang, 2019), causing a "talent dilemma," according to an interview with one administrator: "Those who are willing to work here for life-long usually cannot enjoy many policy benefits and those who were from the interior usually employ here as a springboard and could not stay long."

All informants admitted that studying abroad increased their cultural and social capital. However, when they tried to redeem their mobility capital in TAR, challenges emerged and filled the transition from mobility to mobility capital with uncertainty and complexity.

The first challenge was the returnees' felt negative labeling made by their institutions. Pamo spoke about her perceived differential treatment being defined as an *other*:

I feel like my university does not value *haigui* much. This is totally different from many universities in the interior cities of China, which highly value those who have graduated overseas. At Highland [alias] University, *haigui* were even being discriminated against for their overseas experiences.

By reporting her feelings, Pamo convincingly argued that mobility capital failed to empower returnees, despite normally doing so in universities in interior cities. Norbu and Jigme shared similar viewpoints by describing their postmobility workplace experiences. Jigme stated the following:

I was highly confident when returning [to TAR]. I feel like [I] must do a few big research projects and do some important things [to change Tibetan society]. However, after returning, because of different factors, mostly because Tibetan society does not positively accept returnees—did not make good use of [them]—it aroused doubts about certain beliefs to which I had been firmly holding. Although I was confident and wanted to do many things, reality was contrary to my thoughts.

The self-reported institutional neglect of Tibetan returnees could stem from the particularity of TAR. According to Jin (2010) and Yang (2019), state policies express five aspects to that “particularity”: geographic remoteness, ethnic salience, religious piety, social and economic underdevelopment, and the international interference of Tibetan affairs. The political particularity renders the practice of “maintaining stability” as the foundation for achieving national integration, ethnic unity, and the prevention of ethnic separatism in TAR (Xie et al., 2014). Our informants reported that a stricter passport regulation policy on Tibetan people started after the 2008 Lhasa Riot. Yet, Xu and Yang (2019) argued that this policy was non-ethnicity discriminative because it applied to all people with TAR Household Registration. The state emphasis on the particularity and practice of maintaining stability in TAR promoted an institutional political cautiousness toward Tibetan returnees, contrasting the higher status of returnees in China’s interior cities. There, returnees were generally believed to have better social, cultural, and economic capital. As for Tibetan returnees, ideological stances prioritized different forms of capitals.

Some informants blamed studying abroad experiences for the lack of opportunities to achieve a high-ranking administration position. Although these accusations lacked empirical validation, the suspected negative influence on Tibetan returnees’ professional development reflected their psychological insecurity and uncertainty, which were rooted in local, political, and institutional contexts. These informants’ experiences contradicted those of professors in Europe, the USA, and interior China, whose international mobility generally significantly and positively influenced scientific productivity and career development (Veugelers & Van Bouwel, 2015; Zweig, 2019). The decapitalization of Tibetan returnees’ mobility capital produced a new talent dilemma.

The second factor related to the decapitalization of educational mobility is the difficulty in establishing international collaboration. Norbu complained that TAR’s relatively isolated academic environment provided limited opportunities to exert his advantages and strengths obtained by studying abroad.

It is really hard to establish an academic community in TAR. After returning, it is really hard to go abroad again. I am unable to attend many large academic conferences. So the information I get is always behind others in academic studies.

Although some returnees strived to secure international collaboration, the process was painful, time-consuming, and mostly in vain. Pamo reflected on her experience:

We invited an institute in Capital Beijing [university name removed to protect anonymity], as a third party to promote international academic collaboration with overseas universities. Later, we had all the statistics, but we were not allowed to publish these statistics—although they were really good data. I had argued twice with the leaders in the statistics bureau, but it was not working.... However, the institute in Beijing presented no hurdles in publishing the data on their side.

Pamo's difficulty was confirmed by both returnees and locally trained professors, who believed that gerontocracy and oligarchy mainly contributed to the decapitalization of returnees' educational mobility. Professor Duan [locally trained] commented on his observations at Highland University:

The power was tightly controlled by few seniors, and they decided many things. [For returnees], if you did not belong to their circle, you would find it difficult to secure resources and get promotion. [In this sense], those locally trained professors might outperform returnees because they can easily get into the circle of the school leaders.

Professor Ming (locally trained) expressed similar viewpoints by commenting that most school leaders had no studying abroad experiences and lacked motivation to reform the highly administrativized educational environment which stressed maintaining stability.

Professor Duan's and Professor Ming's comments on the administrativization of school management and the entrenched gerontocracy and oligarchy resembled Zweig's (2019) findings. In the Chinese Academy of Sciences, returnees were observed to have published less than the locally trained professors due to a lack of resources after returning to work in China. Our informants also reported it becoming more difficult to attend international conferences. In the two International Association for Tibetan Studies' meetings held in Canada and Mongolia in 2010 and 2013, respectively, some professors from TAR submitted articles but did not attend the meeting due to superiors' safety concerns, whereas Tibetan professors from Minzu University of China in Beijing attended the conferences without such concerns.

Self-censorship at TAR universities has thus seemingly become a hindrance for scholars aiming to engage in international collaboration. Although studying abroad is generally considered a capital-generating process, for Tibetans, the process from mobility to mobility capital is highly influenced and determined by local politics. These challenges suggest ruptures during the capitalization process of international educational mobility. The challenges, the predicaments of studying abroad for Tibetan elites, are deeply rooted in the intersections of local, ethnic, and international migration politics. The predicaments also point to the inherent complexities and contradictions in the mobility politics of ethnic minorities in China.

Coping strategies for decapitalization

In response to the gaps between high career goal expectations and the paradox of the capitalization of educational mobility, the Tibetan returnees start adjusting their life goals and focusing on their private lives. We defined this process as the development of coping strategies in response to decapitalization.

The informants' first strategy was to devote more time to self-improvement. As mentioned during the interviews, informants devoted more time to reading, stopped unnecessary social networking, spent more time with family members, and led healthier lifestyles by drinking less alcohol and eating more vegetables. Most informants also admitted having

learned to make coffee when studying abroad and maintaining this habit after returning. Samdup shared how studying abroad changed his lifestyle:

First, I learned to enjoy exercising. I liked walking around campus every day. I also became addicted to coffee. It has become a habit of mine. My social network also changed. I quit drinking [alcohol]. I went out less to parties with drinking protocols.

When discussing his life change due to studying abroad, Jigme shared the following: “The most important point is that I [started] to exercise. [I] was now more concerned with my health status. And I was reluctant to attend luxurious gatherings. I was more confident, simple, and less complicated.”

Informants’ second strategy was to focus more on upbringing and parenting. Although mobility capital failed to empower them at work, our informants revealed that the social and cultural capital acquired while studying abroad was helpful when communicating with their children. Informants with studying abroad experiences, compared to those with none, thought of themselves as more democratic and more inclined to respect their children’s personalities and worldviews. Lhamo shared her parenting experiences:

I hope my children study abroad [in the future]. I will also get prepared for that. Studying abroad is not only for job seeking. [I] simply hope he can open his worldviews and have more autonomy to choose...I would not ask my children to stay with me or return to TAR upon graduation. My parents were quite traditional and conservative regarding this aspect. They insisted that I must come back and take care of them. As for me, from the bottom of my heart, I can accept my children’s choices—any choices.

Many young Tibetan graduates faced parental pressure to find stable jobs in the state system as public servants (Yang, 2017), but Lhamo clearly prioritized her children’s wishes. By treating her children as independent decision-makers and respecting their choices, Lhamo represented herself as a democratic mother, which differs from how most traditional and conservative Tibetan mothers consider children to be under parental control and expect them to obey orders. Lhamo’s contrasting democratic style of parenting was validated and capitalized by her educational mobility. As an intellectual elite with cultural capital gained through international educational mobility, she was confident her children had higher social and cultural capital than others. Hence, despite failing to empower Tibetan returnees themselves, mobility capital empowered their children by providing social, economic, and cultural capital.

The third strategy was to focus on teaching and student supervision. Feeling vulnerable before the institutions, Lhamo reported learning to find a second way by letting go and spending more time with her students, whom she considered the future of TAR. Lhamo said, “My goal is to cultivate students with critical thinking—the kind of students who say, ‘I am who I am’...I want to train students well. I want to pass my knowledge, experiences, viewpoints, and methods on to my students.” By saying, “I am who I am,” Lhamo was referencing the confidence and personality she hoped her students would develop. She expected students to be confident, critical, and courageous. Similarly, Lhundup shared how studying abroad empowered his teaching:

In comparison with other professors [i.e., those without studying abroad experiences at my university], I can share my research experiences in class. When supervising students, I also passed important things [i.e., how to study and understand the world] through sharing my [overseas] experiences. I also learned to do some

research on math education...These were all the fruits and benefits of studying abroad.

Droga confidently shared the gratification she derived from being a teacher with students everywhere: “After all these years [since returning to TAR], I could not say that my students are everywhere in the world, but they are everywhere in the [TAR] highlands.”

Locally trained professors confirmed the comparatively better teaching of returnees. In the interviews, the professors admitted that the returnees were generally more responsible for teaching and had better teaching quality compared with locally trained professors.

A fourth strategy was to find support and peace within the studying abroad community. All informants admitted that studying abroad had established a symbolic boundary between themselves and those who had not studied abroad, who usually were more conservative, less open-minded, and often shared few common interests with informants. This established boundary promoted unity and cohesion among the Tibetan returnees. Being entrenched by the same mobility paradox, they found it comfortable and easy to talk to members of their community. Pamo described the following:

When studying in Norway, we [Tibetans] hung out a lot. We went to ski in April. After returning [to TAR], we also organized several gatherings. We went to *lingkha* [i.e., ལྷོ་རྒྱུ་ཁྱེད་ལྷོ་རྒྱུ་ཁྱེད་ in Tibetan, meaning “gatherings in the park or open fields with families or friends”]. . . . We also met regularly in pubs and coffee shops, sharing our recent research and collecting feedback.

The final strategy was to seek academic collaboration in China’s interior cities and Hong Kong rather than searching for international collaboration. Lhundup commented “In 2015, I applied for a postdoctoral position at Peking University [to establish a new academic community]. I worked there for two years.” Gonpo reached out to Sichuan University for scholarly development and succeeded in acquiring a PhD position there. Jigme has held a long-term partnership with a Hong Kong-based scholar and coauthored more than three journal articles in distinguished international journals.

Collectively, the coping strategies developed by the Tibetan returnees reflected a transition from a collective-oriented commitment to individualist life planning. This process supplements what Yi and Gadou (2021) found among a group of Tibetan graduates of an English training program. As the authors insightfully highlighted, the Tibetans participating in the study developed individualism prior to individuation practice. Although this article does not focus on individualism, our findings point to a transition from collectivism to individualism in these Tibetan elites’ search for legitimate status and a settled life in Tibetan society and the wider Chinese society. Moreover, these coping strategies suggest the capitalization of educational mobility in the private lives of these Tibetan elites.

Conclusions and discussion

As a supplement to previous studies on the gains and benefits of studying abroad, this article further reveals the nuanced process of decapitalizing and re-capitalizing educational mobility by carefully examining mobility experiences and the coping strategies of a group of Tibetan returnees. Our study reveals that they had collective-oriented life plans and high expectations for future careers when deciding to study abroad. Yet the returnees

encountered an obvious process of educational mobility decapitalization and had to adapt to an individualist-oriented lifestyle after studying abroad and returning to work in TAR.

By exploring the intersections of educational mobility, ethnicity, and (de)capitalization processes along Tibetan returnees' mobility and postmobility experiences, this study contributes to mobility studies in education by addressing the complex and nuanced transitional process from mobility to mobility capital. Although TAR's geopolitical contexts tend to position Tibetan returnees as potentially risk subjects and therefore hinder the institutional capitalization process, these Tibetan elites learned to find security and self-worth by capitalizing educational mobility in their own private lives. Through raising children, cultivating students, developing neoliberal lifestyles, and seeking alternative academic collaboration with scholars in the interior cities and Hong Kong, the returnees learned to develop a new optimal self with worth and easiness. By examining capitalization and decapitalization processes, this study reveals how ethnicity, local politics, and mobility influence Tibetan elites' life trajectories. This study therefore challenges and supplements existing studies, which presume a smooth transition from mobility to mobility capital.

This study ultimately extends the existing literature on Chinese overseas students by engaging ethnicity as an important lens and by adopting an extended time–space perspective. Compared to Han Chinese overseas students, Tibetan returnees demonstrated life trajectories with more diversity and complexity due to being involved in three cultural settings and experienced more educational mobility, from Tibet to China's interior cities and then to foreign countries. The particularity of TAR also adds diversity and complexity to Tibetan returnees' life trajectories. Furthermore, this study extends the existing literature on ethnic minority students by using mobility as an important lens. Ethnic minority research is a prosperous academic field in China, but few studies have focused on ethnic minority students with studying abroad experiences.

This study aims to call on an ethnicity-sensitive perspective to understand the politics and complexity of international educational mobility in China. The often-discussed socioeconomic thinking of educational mobility has largely overlooked the geopolitical and institutional causes of educational mobility. As we have revealed in this study, compared with how studying abroad is treated in interior cities, studying abroad experiences have not been highly appreciated in TAR and are sometimes negatively labeled in tertiary institutions due to the political cautiousness of administrative leaders, which subsequently devalued returnees' self-worth. Such positioning ran contradictory to the state ideology about returnees, in which they are valued for their knowledge, skills, and expertise. Nevertheless, the Tibetan elites in this study were no different from other overseas students in terms of national identities. We find that Tibetan returnees might have possessed strong national identities and embraced collective-oriented worldviews. Hence, we call for more culturally and politically reflexive policies that can sustain the flow of ethnic talents and help them realize their self-worth.

Finally, we are aware of our study's limitations. Although we intended to find many potential informants, we succeeded in interviewing only nine due to the small population of early Tibetan returnees and their cautiousness. Hence, our findings cannot be generalized to all Tibetan returnees. The process of finding informants, however, helped us understand how local and institutional factors influenced these returnees' mindsets and life experiences, which are filled with uncertainty and insecurity. The snowballing process also verified the internal cohesion and unity among these Tibetan elites. Other social factors—such as gender, class, destination countries, and generational differences—are related to the life trajectories of these Tibetan elites as well. In future studies, we will focus on a younger generation of Tibetan returnees.

Funding This work is supported by the National Natural Science Foundation of China (Grant No. 42071183); National Social Science Foundation (22BMZ093); Natural Science Foundation of Guangdong Province (Grant No. 2022B1515020087); and Science and Technology Projects in Guangzhou (Grant No. 2023A03J0063).

Declarations

Conflict of interest The authors declare no competing interests.

References

- Bislev, A. (2017). Student-to-student diplomacy: Chinese international students as a soft-power tool. *Journal of Current Chinese Affairs*, 46(2), 81–109.
- Bótas, P. C. P., & Huisman, J. (2013). A Bourdieusian analysis of the participation of Polish students in the ERASMUS programme: Cultural and social capital perspectives. *Higher Education*, 66(6), 741–754. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10734-013-9635-7>
- Bourdieu, P. (1986). The forms of capital. In J. G. Richardson (Ed.), *Handbook of theory and research for the sociology of education* (pp. 241–258). Greenwood Press.
- Cairns, D. (2022). Migration decision-making, mobility capital and reflexive learning. *The Palgrave handbook of youth mobility and educational migration* (pp. 25–34). Palgrave Macmillan.
- Cairns, D., França, T., Calvo, D. M., & de Azevedo, L. (2021a). An immobility turn? The COVID-19 pandemic, mobility capital and international students in Portugal. *Mobilities*, 16(6), 874–887. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17450101.2021.1967094>
- Cairns, D., França, T., Calvo, D. M., & de Azevedo, L. F. (2021b). Immobility, precarity and the COVID-19 pandemic: The impact of lockdown on international students in Portugal. *Journal of Youth Studies*, 1–15. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13676261.2021.1948981>
- Cao, C., Zhu, C., & Meng, Q. (2021). Chinese international students' coping strategies, social support resources in response to academic stressors: Does heritage culture or host context matter? *Current Psychology*, 40(1), 242–252. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s12144-018-9929-0>
- Cerese, F. P. (1974). Expectations and reality: A case study of return migration from the United States to Southern Italy. *International Migration Review*, 8(2), 245–262. <https://doi.org/10.1177/019791837400800210>
- d'Hombres, B., & Schnepf, S. V. (2021). International mobility of students in Italy and the UK: Does it pay off and for whom? *Higher Education*, 82(6), 1173–1194. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10734-020-00631-1>
- Di Pietro, G. (2012). Does studying abroad cause international labor mobility? Evidence from Italy. *Economics Letters*, 117(3), 632–635. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.econlet.2012.08.007>
- Fong, V. (2011). *Paradise redefined*. Stanford University Press.
- Fu, Y., Hu, D., & Liu, X. (2022). International doctoral students negotiating support from interpersonal relationships and institutional resources during COVID-19. *Current Issues in Comparative Education*, 24(1), 26–40. <https://doi.org/10.52214/cice.v24i1.8785>
- Ge, L., & Durst, D. (2022). The auto-ethnographic inquiry of a female Chinese graduate student in Canada: Challenging, accepting, and transforming. *Journal of Comparative & International Higher Education*, 14(1), 38–50. <https://doi.org/10.32674/jcihe.v14i1.3193>
- Gu, Q., & Schweisfurth, M. (2015). Transnational connections, competences and identities: Experiences of Chinese international students after their return 'home.' *British Educational Research Journal*, 41(6), 947–970. <https://doi.org/10.1002/berj.3175>
- Hao, J., & Welch, A. (2012). A tale of sea turtles: Job-seeking experiences of hai gui (high-skilled returnees) in China. *Higher Education Policy*, 25(2), 243–260. <https://doi.org/10.1057/hep.2012.4>
- Hao, J., Wen, W., & Welch, A. (2016). When sojourners return: Employment opportunities and challenges facing high-skilled Chinese returnees. *Asian and Pacific Migration Journal*, 25(1), 22–40.
- Heng, T. T. (2017). Voices of Chinese international students in USA colleges: 'I want to tell them that....' *Studies in Higher Education*, 42(5), 833–850. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03075079.2017.1293873>
- Heng, T. T. (2018). Different is not deficient: Contradicting stereotypes of Chinese international students in US higher education. *Studies in Higher Education*, 43(1), 22–36. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03075079.2016.1152466>

- Holloway, S. L., O'Hara, S. L., & Pimlott-Wilson, H. (2012). Educational mobility and the gendered geography of cultural capital: The case of international student flows between Central Asia and the UK. *Environment and Planning A*, 44(9), 2278–2294. <https://doi.org/10.1068/a44>
- Hu, A., & Cairns, D. (2017). Hai Gui or Hai Dai? Chinese student migrants and the role of Norwegian mobility capital in career success. *Young*, 25(2), 174–189. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1103308816670821>
- Jiani, M. A. (2017). Why and how international students choose Mainland China as a higher education study abroad destination. *Higher Education*, 74(4), 563–579. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10734-016-0066-0>
- Jin, W. (2010). *Xizang yuanzhu yu fazhan [Aid and development in Tibet]*. Tibet People's Publishing House.
- King, R., & Ruiz-Gelices, E. (2003). International student migration and the European 'year abroad': Effects on European identity and subsequent migration behaviour. *International Journal of Population Geography*, 9(3), 229–252. <https://doi.org/10.1002/ijpg.280>
- Ma, R. (2019). Xuexiao jiaoyu shi shaoshu minzu zouxiang xiandaihua he gongtong fanrong de qiao-liang [School education is the bridge to modernization and mutual prosperous]. *Minzu Jiaoyu Yanjiu*, 30(2), 5–12.
- Ma, Y. (2020). *Ambitious and anxious*. Columbia University Press.
- Maeder-Qian, J. (2018). Intercultural experiences and cultural identity reconstruction of multilingual Chinese international students in Germany. *Journal of Multilingual and Multicultural Development*, 39(7), 576–589. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01434632.2017.1410161>
- Mazzarol, T., & Soutar, G. N. (2002). "Push-pull" factors influencing international student destination choice. *International Journal of Educational Management*, 16(2), 82–90.
- Ministry of Education.(2020). 2019 niandu chuguo liuxue renyuan qingkuang tongji [Statistics on students studying abroad in 2019]. https://www.moe.gov.cn/jyb_xwfb/gzdt_gzdt/s5987/202012/20201214_505447.html. Accessed 30 May 2022.
- Mok, K. H., Wen, Z., & Dale, R. (2016). Employability and mobility in the valorisation of higher education qualifications: The experiences and reflections of Chinese students and graduates. *Journal of Higher Education Policy and Management*, 38(3), 264–281. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1360080X.2016.1174397>
- Mok, K. H., Xiong, W. (2020). *Understanding Hong Kong and mainland university students' intentions to study overseas after the COVID-19 crisis*. Lingnan University. Retrieved from <https://ln.edu.hk/research-and-impact/research-press-conferences/lu-study-reveals-over-80-of-mainland-china-and-hong-kong-university-students-show-no-interest-in-studying-abroad-after-covid-19-pandemic>. Accessed 30 May 2022.
- Netz, N. (2021). Who benefits most from studying abroad? A conceptual and empirical overview. *Higher Education*, 82(6), 1049–1069. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10734-021-00760-1>
- Netz, N., & Grüttner, M. (2021). Does the effect of studying abroad on labour income vary by graduates' social origin? Evidence from Germany. *Higher Education*, 82(6), 1195–1217. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10734-020-00579-2>
- Petzold, K. (2021). Heterogeneous effects of graduates' international mobility on employers' hiring intentions—Experimental evidence from Germany. *Higher Education*, 82(6), 1093–1118. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10734-020-00524-3>
- Petzold, K., & Moog, P. (2018). What shapes the intention to study abroad? An Experimental Approach. *Higher Education*, 75(1), 35–54. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10734-017-0119-z>
- Renmin Net. (2019). Establishing Postdoctoral Policies in China. <https://cpc.people.com.cn/n1/2016/0607/c69113-28416976.html>. Accessed 30 Oct 2022.
- Streitwieser, B. T., & Light, G. J. (2018). Student conceptions of international experience in the study abroad context. *Higher Education*, 75(3), 471–487. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10734-017-0150-0>
- Tsang, E. Y. H. (2013). The quest for higher education by the Chinese middle class: Retrenching social mobility? *Higher Education*, 66(6), 653–668. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10734-013-9627-7>
- UNESCO Institute for Statistics.(2022). *Global flow of tertiary-level students UIS*. <http://uis.unesco.org/en/uis-student-flows>. Accessed 30 May 2022.
- Van Mol, C., Caarls, K., & Souto-Otero, M. (2021). International student mobility and labour market outcomes: An investigation of the role of level of study, type of mobility, and international prestige hierarchies. *Higher Education*, 82(6), 1145–1171. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10734-020-00532-3>
- Veugelers, R., & Van Bouwel, L. (2015). The effects of international mobility on European researchers: Comparing intra-EU and US mobility. *Research in Higher Education*, 56(4), 360–377. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11162-014-9347-6>
- Wang, H. Y., & Miao, L. (2013). *Annual report on the development of Chinese students studying abroad*. Beijing: Social Sciences Academic Press.
- Wu, D. B., & Hou, S. (2022). International student mobility as "aspiration on the go": Stories from African students at a Chinese university. *Higher Education*, 1–15. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10734-022-00864-2>

- Xie, W., He, D., & Cao, Y. (2014). Yuanzang zhidu: Qiyuan, yanjin he tixi yanjiu [Aid for Tibet policy: Origin, development and system]. *Ethno-National Studies*, 2, 14–25.
- Xu, C. L., & Yang, M. (2019). Ethnicity, temporality and educational mobilities: Comparing the ethnic identity constructions of Mongolian and Tibetan students in China. *British Journal of Sociology of Education*, 40(5), 631–646. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01425692.2019.1576121>
- Yan, K. (2017). *Chinese international students' stressors and coping strategies in the United States*. Singapore: Springer.
- Yan, K., & Berliner, D. C. (2011). Chinese international students in the United States: Demographic trends, motivations, acculturation features and adjustment challenges. *Asia Pacific Education Review*, 12(2), 173–184. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s12564-010-9117-x>
- Yan, K., & Berliner, D. C. (2013). Chinese international students' personal and sociocultural stressors in the United States. *Journal of College Student Development*, 54(1), 62–84. <https://doi.org/10.1353/csd.2013.0010>
- Yang, M. (2017). Learning to be safe citizens: State-run boarding schools and the dynamics of Tibetan identity. *Citizenship Studies*, 21(7), 824–841. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13621025.2017.1353738>
- Yang, M. (2019). From dislocated to local: Policy implications of “educational aid for Tibet.” *Asian Studies Review*, 43(1), 94–113. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10357823.2018.1552657>
- Yang, M. (2021). Interior China as the (desired) destination: Educational mobilities, the reflexive project of the self, and ethnic Han youth with Tibet household registration. *Harvard Educational Review*, 91(2), 227–247. <https://doi.org/10.17763/1943-5045-91.2.227>
- Yi, L. (2011). Auditing Chinese higher education? The perspectives of returnee scholars in an elite university. *International Journal of Educational Development*, 31(5), 505–514. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijedudev.2011.03.003>
- Yi, L., & Gadou, Z. (2021). Individualism without full individualization? The compressed life trajectories of the Tibetan graduates of an English training program. *The British Journal of Sociology*, 72(4), 1113–1126. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1468-4446.12879>
- Yu, J. (2021). Lost in lockdown? The impact of COVID-19 on Chinese international student mobility. *Journal of International Students*, 11(S2), 1–18.
- Zhai, K., & Gao, X. (2021). Who achieves superior rates of upward social mobility and better labor market outcomes in China: International student returnees or postgraduates who study domestically? *Asia Pacific Education Review*, 22(2), 223–238. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s12564-021-09669-x>
- Zhao, D. (1996). Foreign study as a safety-valve: The experience of China's university students going abroad in the eighties. *Higher Education*, 31(2), 145–163. <https://doi.org/10.1007/BF02390442>
- Zweig, D. (2019). Returning to the Chinese Academy of Sciences: Shortage, environment and rewards. *Handbook on China and Globalization* (pp. 343–374). Edward Elgar Publishing.

Publisher's note Springer Nature remains neutral with regard to jurisdictional claims in published maps and institutional affiliations.

Springer Nature or its licensor (e.g. a society or other partner) holds exclusive rights to this article under a publishing agreement with the author(s) or other rightsholder(s); author self-archiving of the accepted manuscript version of this article is solely governed by the terms of such publishing agreement and applicable law.