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Migration, Global Middle Class, and Professional Development:
How Chinese Graduate Students in the U.S. Re-establish a Sense of Selfhood

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Bachelor of Economics, Southwestern University of Finance and Economics, China, 2010

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Abstract:

Transnational migration inevitably leads to destabilization of identity. Groups with different characteristics adopt varied strategies to restabilize a sense of selfhood. Elite global migrants, well-equipped with economic, cultural, and educational capital, tend to embrace a cosmopolitan lifestyle in the new location (Favell 2008). In contrast, migrant workers with limited human capital depend on their national peers for useful information and resources in order to make smooth transition across borders (Brown 2011). However, the case of the elite Chinese student migrants fits into neither of the trajectories. In regaining a sense of personhood, those global middle-class migrants end up in a marginal status that is commonly associated with underprivileged migrant groups. This article sets forth to address this puzzling disjuncture between class position and integration trajectory based on an 8-month, multi-sited ethnography at a New England public university with 11 Chinese graduate students. My findings suggest that three aspects of their identity--global middle class, independent young adults, and good students—are key to understand the self-segregation from the public space. This study complicates the literature on global middle class and symbolic boundaries and invites further research on marginal, middle positions to better understand migrant trajectory.

Key words:

Global Middle Class
Destabilization

Professional Development
Restabilization

Status
Symbolic Boundaries

Introduction:

Rain was born in 1988 in a major city in East China. She grows up with two working parents. He is an honored officer in the Army. She has an office job in the lucrative state-owned power industry. Rain has always been a Hermione Granger type in school. She is bright. She is sharp. Her hand is up high when the teacher asks a question. She is a legend in college. She wins First Prize in the China Mathematic Contest in Modeling (MCM), and her team represents China in the U.S. MCM.

In the fall of 2009, she finds a job at a prestigious state-owned power company with great pay and benefits. Others might envy the work where days will be spent drinking tea, reading newspapers, or on conversations about handbags and makeups, but that is not what she desires. She prefers challenge, efficiency, and competition. She wants to prove her self-worth with hard work. She turns down the job offer. Two years later, she comes to the University to work with a Taiwanese professor to get a Ph.D.

The first year in graduate school brings various unpleasant transitions. Her advisor frequently criticizes her academic writing and speaking. She is overwhelmed by the amount of catch-up work needed in meeting the requirement of the new educational system. She works until one or two in the morning every day. She is always tired. Her roommate adds to the frustration whenever they argue over the bills about who should pay more. But she cannot afford to move out and live by herself. She is an adult now and she does not want to ask her parents for money.

After the first year, her life gets a little better. She learns how to navigate academia in this country with some tricks to make work easier. As she gets more advanced in the program, she begins to go to conferences and gain recognition. Her advisor still urges her to improve her English skills, but she is less stressed out by him. Recently, she moves in with her Chinese fiancé,

who comes to the University to work on his Ph.D. Of this, she says, Life here is not much different from China. It is good. I'm happy.

Indeed, her everyday reality in the U.S. mirrors that of China. She is embedded in homogeneous professional and social network of Chinese graduate students. She spends most of her time working in her office, which she shares with a group of Chinese students. She becomes close friends with many of them and depends on them for information about school, work, housing, and traveling. Sometimes she and her fiancé go to parties held by their American colleagues, but she has limited enthusiasm for those occasions. She would rather spend time watching videos online or going to get food with her Chinese friends. (Narrative based on interview and fieldnotes).

Transnational migration inevitably leads to a destabilization of identity. Groups with different characteristics adopt varied strategies to restabilize a sense of selfhood. Elite global migrants, well-equipped with economic, cultural, and educational capital, tend to embrace a cosmopolitan lifestyle in the new location. Migration is instrumental to the establishment of a post-national, global identity that frees them from the nation-states left behind (Favell 2008). In contrast, migrant workers with limited human capital depend on their national peers for useful information and resources in order to make a smooth transition across borders (Brown 2011). They reproduce categories from their home countries in the new society, leading to their social (Portes and Zhou 1993) and spatial (Abrahamson 2005) marginality.

Neither Rain, nor many of her Chinese transnational peers, fit into this trajectory. Her story raises the enigma of why and how the elite Chinese student migrants, in regaining a sense of personhood, end up in a marginal status that is commonly associated with underprivileged

migrant groups. This article sets forth to address this puzzling disjuncture between class position and integration trajectory based on an 8-month, multi-sited ethnography at a New England public university (the University) with 11 Chinese graduate students. My findings suggest that three aspects of their identity — global middle class, independent young adult, and good student — are key to understanding their self-segregation from the public space. With these processual and detailed accounts, I hope to create a positive image of the students as aspirational, responsible, and hardworking young adults to contest the stereotype that Chinese students never make any effort to talk with non-Chinese students.

Literature Review:

Assimilation Theory

Sociology of migration has a long tradition in studying the process through which migrants reestablish a sense of selfhood in the new place of settlement. Assimilation theorists approach the process by looking at how and to what extent migrants are able to reclaim *social* recognition. Earlier studies of migration look at the uprooted settlers (Handlin 1951, Thomas and Znaniecki 1919) facing transitions from village life to capitalist society. Situating the migration experience at a historical moment when communication and transportation were inconvenient and expensive, the earlier studies find that migrants quickly form local community centering on “a mix of old world tradition, new circumstances, and perceived American social values” (Thomas and Znaniecki 1919).

This initial idea that both old traditions and new values shape the decisions of migrants disappears in the influential work of Milton Gordon (1964). His research was conducted in a time when the prevalent social and academic concerns were how to make Americans out of the large influx of newcomers (Hirschman 1983, Levitt and Jaworsky 2007). Consequently, his

classical assimilation theory argues that migrants gain access to socio-economic status in the new cultural, social, and economic context by actively adopting the dominant practices of American society. Upward mobility is largely contingent on the capacity — cultural capital for example — to be part of the “mainstream,” whereas the willingness to conform is implied.

Gordon’s work inspired numerous studies on how migrants take up the host society’s cultural and social practices. However, as the post-1965 migrants increasingly challenged the melting pot metaphor, scholars began to problematize the Anglo-conformist assumptions underlying migration studies (Alba and Nee 1997, Glazer and Moynihan 1963, Glazer 1993). More recent literature shows that migrants can also choose to maintain their culture instead of conforming to the mainstream practices to gain recognition. Perhaps one of the most cited works in post-1965 migration scholarship, segmented assimilation theory (Portes and Zhou 1993), problematizes “social recognition” and shows that both assimilation into the white middle-class society and strong attachment to ethnic communities can facilitate recognition and upward mobility.

Empirical studies on various migrant groups such as Chinese (Zhou 1992) and Vietnamese (Zhou and Bankston 1994) have confirmed the hypotheses of segmented assimilation theory with evidence that cultural maintenance can be favorable for adaptation. Noticeably, the new assimilation theory no longer focuses on either assimilation or cultural maintenance as the end point (Brubaker 2001). Instead, they examine the processes of transition and various paths through which migrants claim recognition (Gibson 1988, Portes and Zhou 1993, Smith 2006, Waters 1994) against specific local dynamics such as race (Omi and Winant 1986), class (Portes and Zhou 1993), and gender (Simon and Brettell 1986).

Transnationalism

Critics of assimilation theories point out that, when studying restabilization of identity, the focus on social recognition leads to adopting artificial categories in testing the outcome of adaptation (Glick Schiller, Basch and Blanc 1995, Levitt and Jaworsky 2007). They contend that assimilation scholarship fails to ground migration experience in the everyday life context and thus tends to leave multiple aspects of subjectivity unexamined. To this point, the literature on transnational networks, households, and practices provides an important supplement and modification by approaching adaptation from the perspective of the migrants whose lives stretch across multiple locations.

Scholars from varied disciplines have long noticed the juxtaposition and disjuncture of geographic place and social space (Appadurai 1996, Brettell 2006, Fortier 2000, Gupta and Ferguson 1992, Harvey 1989, Meyrowitz 2005). They argue that individual nation-states do not contain human experiences and are not the sole sources for recognition. In the 21st century, with new forms of instantaneous communication bridging close and afar, local experiences are interpreted and understood with respect to audiences existing elsewhere and standards external to the local (Meyrowitz 2005). Therefore, the migrant experience needs to be understood from the ways that people living in it actually perceive it (Levitt and Jaworsky 2007), rather than an objective, measurable yardstick.

In other words, transnationalism scholarship suggests that both social recognition and self-recognition are fruitful concepts to understand post-migration trajectories. This might be especially so for counterintuitive cases. Louie (2006) compares second-generation Chinese-Americans and Dominican-Americans and finds that, despite their higher educational attainment, the Chinese-Americans are pessimistic about their educational standings and future trajectory. This is due to the intense co-ethnic competition and the fear of falling short of the overachieving

model minority stereotype. In contrast, the Dominican-Americans compare themselves with peers living in the Dominican Republic with lower educational achievements, resulting in a counterintuitively optimistic view of their current status and future development, considering their educational attainment.

Global Middle Class

The past century has witnessed unprecedented economic development in countries that are lumped into the category of global South. Drastic social transitions, either by establishment of new nation-states or a shift from a planned economy to a market economy, usually means that the symbol that once signified privilege can no longer serve the same function in the new society (Cohen 2004, O'Dougherty 2002, Patino 2008). It is against this backdrop that a “global middle class” emerges. Different from their North Atlantic counterparts, the global middle class possesses a sense of anxiety that stems from their unstable class and cultural identity.

As a project in the making, the global middle class is lost in the new social environment where class identity does not have a preset boundary. They find themselves struggling through a multiplicity of inclusionary and exclusionary practices in an attempt to constantly fuel their status claims. Consumption is a particularly important site for such distinction work (Bourdieu 1984). By referring to the consumption choices of others, they gain a better sense of financial security and self in relation to the working-class poor (Owensby 1999). Through interactions with salesclerks, consumers are able to further define and reinforce class boundaries that overlap with the line along which the two parties participating in interactive work experience power relations differently (Hanser 2008).

In addition, rising from a period of rapid social change, the global middle class is the epitome of the tension between traditional and modern discourses (Otis 2012). The global middle

class does not simply pass from tradition to modernity, but is shaped by both nation-states and neoliberal globalization, patronage and merit, hierarchy and egalitarianism, and collectivism and individualism (Owensby 1999). The global middle class is ambiguous with respect to their cultural identity. In some cases, they are the leaders of a nation and the nationalist vanguards (Ray and Qayum 2009), bearing with them the highest moral standards and national spirits (Power, Brown, Allouch et al. 2013). In other cases, however, “market reform has replaced the identity between individual fulfillment and national potential with the nonidentity of individual and global economy” (Cohen 2004).

Despite the ambiguity, global middle class subjectivity usually bears a neoliberal hallmark that is linked to the neoliberal policies adopted by developing countries in order to participate in the world economy and become a modern state. Such policies, at the macro level, not only encourage competition, but also emphasize efficiency and economic rationality (Ong 2007). At the micro level, neoliberal governmentality creates self-managing and self-enterprising subjectivity that is well-influenced by market logic. The global middle class is competitive, hard-working, aspirational, and self-dependent. To them, life is a project in which the goal is to approach the ideal of the self (Power et al. 2013).

Professional Development as a Project of the Self

The primary medium in which individuals define, pursue, and fulfill their ideals of self is occupation (Levinson 1978). On the one hand, individuals choose occupations that reflect their ideals. On the other hand, the ideal is shaped or modified along the way of professional development. The audience, both inside and outside the professional network, both real and imagined, all play a key role in disciplining (Foucault 1979) individuals into desirable self-governing entities (Rose 1990). This disciplinary power is enacted through the audience’s

expectations, which helps to shape individual perspectives, define their career paths, and develop their professional identities.

Studenthood at the graduate level is a specific stage of professional development. It is through this period that the outsider students are socialized into a profession through extended education and training and the acquisition of the skills, languages, and norms needed to communicate with others in the new profession (Becker 1961). Although graduate students take into account the opinions of mentors, peers, families, and friends when they make decisions about their careers and lives, of particular importance and relevance are mentors. Mentors are a crucial source of external recognition and validation. They also help the young adults gain a fuller sense of authority and facilitate the “I am” feeling within them when families gradually step out of their lives (Levinson 1978).

A Quick Summary So Far

The literature on assimilation and transnationalism suggests that in order to understand how migrants make sense of their post-migration trajectory, we must account for both the capacity to win social recognition and individuals’ subjective evaluations of the extent to which they meet their own and relevant audiences’ expectations. However, those studies tend to share an interest in the outcome of integration and link class position with a specific upward trajectory. Some researchers have utilized survey data to compare the socio-economic status of migrants with their local counterparts. Others have analyzed interview data to understand migrants’ trajectories. Those studies nevertheless conceptualize a trajectory as an end-point without examining the micro processes that guide trajectories to the observed end-points in which individuals make status claims in everyday contexts.

In addition, when studying migrants from economically disadvantaged countries such as China, scholars tend to focus on migrant workers who face great economic, social, or political obstacles in their home countries (Massey 1999, Sassen 1998). The emerging global middle class migrants display qualitative differences from those cases. Migration is instrumental for them to benefit from the global opportunity structure and to ease the anxious undercurrents linked to their recently-acquired privileges. It is part of a self-development project (Power et al. 2013). Unlike their predecessors who come and stay, they prefer the plan to cash in their accumulated human capital someday and go home, especially if the mobility structure in the country is blocked (Favell 2008).

Those two factors make it difficult to apply the existing literature on migration to explain the puzzle that inspires the project. Outside this subfield of sociology, scholars of cultural sociology have devoted much of their energy to studying status and distinction in daily encounters. Here I turn to the literature on boundary work and review some of the key concepts which inform my interpretation of the data.

Sociology of Culture and Boundary Work

Sociology of culture has generated prolific scholarship on different mechanisms through which varied groups make status claims at the micro level. Bourdieu (1984) raises the concept of habitus, a “structured structure and structuring structure” classifying social worlds into logical categories. Habitus serves as the basis for distinction and boundary work. It allows individuals, especially the middle classes, to make status claims by emulating what is desired and rejecting what is despised. For example, he notes that while the upper class embraces the logic of art for art’s sake and the working class favors popular entertainment, middle-brow art such as photography features “both aesthetic realism and populist nostalgia.” It expresses the aspiration

and ambition of the middle classes and also provides an opportunity for them to distance themselves from the working class.

Building on the work of Bourdieu, the literature on symbolic boundaries addresses how groups reconcile their status when it falls short of their expectations. Lamont (1992) shows that the working class, facing greater economic disadvantage compared to the more affluent strata, employs an alternative hierarchy of morality to dissociate socio-economic status from moral worth and locates themselves above, or at least side by side with, the upper middle class. Sherman (2007) confirms such comparative strategies with two additions. She shows that the hotel workers in her study invoke multiple symbolic hierarchies of worth and advantage, and mobilize these hierarchies selectively and strategically to establish themselves as superior to the rich clients. The success of such strategies requires others' recognition of their valued skills and professional authority. When they do work, the result is the normalization of their disadvantage.

In short, the literature on boundary work complicates the middle-class position by problematizing the link between class characteristics and strategies for post-migration status reestablishment. It suggests that those destabilized, marginal groups, in regaining their status, have two options. They can adopt the dominant practices, to assimilate, or they can reject the idea of assimilation, recast themselves on an alternative hierarchy, and embrace their subordinate positions. How do varied migrant groups sharing the anxiety of a loss of selfhood choose between those options? Are there other ways to make status claims in everyday life? In an attempt to examine those questions, I provide a case study of the elite Chinese graduate students in a geographically isolated New England public university.

The Chinese Graduate Students at the University:

As members of the global middle class, the Chinese graduate students bring in another dimension of characteristics that differentiates them from other subjects of the middle-class project. As Weber (1978) puts it, students in China, through engaging with knowledge, center the project of the self on a self-controlled, cautious conduct of life and on correct ways of thought. As a status group for whom academic excellence is a high status symbol, and as the sole bearers of the homogeneous culture of China, they are expected to display not only the accumulation of expertise, but also a certain internal and external comportment in life. This expectation, from their superiors and thus linked to promotion, is internalized as *habitus*. It serves as a self-enforced directive of everyday practice and carries into various situations with great continuity despite external changes in conditions.

The participants in this study are all Chinese Ph.D. students in their early to mid-20s. They concentrate in “Asian fields” such as engineering, computer science, business, and chemistry (Louie 2004). Those areas promise stable and handsome economic rewards while “relying less on face-to-face contact, subjective judgments, and language skills, and more on objective data and licensing.” Freshly graduated from college, most of them came to the University from global cities such as Beijing and Shanghai, or other major metropolitan areas in China with abundant opportunities for consumption. The University, in contrast, is spatially isolated and a 30-minute drive away from the closest city. Within walking distance from the campus, there are no clothes stores or cinemas and only a few restaurants, one serving Chinese food and another serving Asian cuisine. Public transportation to the city or the adjacent town with a large population of working-class Latinas/os is limited.

I often heard the American students I worked with commenting about the University being “*too white*,” referring to its lack of racial diversity. In terms of national origin, during the

2013/2014 academic year when the fieldwork was conducted, only 4% of the nearly 23,000 undergraduates were international students and 20% of its almost 8,000 graduate and professional students were born in countries and regions outside the U.S. Indeed, the University is by no means a preferable choice for Chinese transnational students in general. According to the Institute of International Education, Chinese students prefer institutions in major metropolitan areas with busy commercial centers and a large local Chinese population such as University of Southern California and University of California – Los Angeles in Los Angeles, New York University and Columbia University in New York City, and Northeastern University and Boston University in Boston.

How typical then is the case of the University? How useful are the findings of this project? I argue that the University is a particularly good site to study the elite Chinese student migrants exactly because of its difference. It isolates in extremes some of the dimensions that I plan to analyze and frees them from unnecessary noise. First, since this rural setting lacks shopping opportunities, a natural environment in which to study the anxiety of the global middle class is presented, since they are no longer able to fuel their class identity that relies on consumption. Additionally, the campus has a predominantly white, American student body, which allows me to more clearly observe the self-segregation of the Chinese students and their disappearances from the public space. In comparison, sites such as Los Angeles and New York City, where Chinese students tend to concentrate, are less ideal for this project.

Method:

The study is based on 8-month ethnography from September 2013 to April 2014 at a leading public research university in New England. I gained access to the Chinese students by observing the language class they were taking. This class is a language service provided by the

university to all international teaching assistants (ITAs). Its primary goal is to help ITAs who fail the Versant test—a telephone-based automated test of spoken language required for all international students to be working as teaching assistants—to improve English pronunciation and communication skills in classroom settings. All but one Chinese student was registered in the class for this reason. The class met twice a week for two hours each time. The 120 minute session is usually designated to several rather fixed components. It began with a 15-minute casual group conversation, followed with pronunciation and campus communication exercises for about an hour, and ended with a presentation about the student's past experience and research interests.

In the class, there are six American undergraduate coordinators. They help the instructor to guide group discussions and activities, and evaluate the international students' class performances. Among the graduate students, three are from Iran, Bangladesh, and Pakistan, respectively, and 11 from China. They have been studying at the University for between a couple of months and 4 years. I conducted direct observations in the class once a week from September 2013 to December 2013. Concurrently, with more frequency from January 2014 to April 2014, I followed the Chinese students to settings outside the classroom such as their apartments, offices, labs, restaurants, shopping malls, churches, and social gatherings where I also met their friends. Through the fieldwork, I collected data on how the Chinese students cope with their destabilized statuses and how they organize everyday life.

Data Analysis:

"There is nothing I can do."

Leaving China for the U.S. alone in one's early 20s is a big challenge. All of the students in my sample either were born in or had lived extensively in major metropolitan areas such as

Beijing, Shanghai, and Xiamen before coming to the U.S. Spending their whole lives in urban areas with accessible and highly efficient transportation systems, the spatial isolation of the campus places an initial obstacle upon arrival. The students feel the location is “*inconvenient*” and that they “*can’t go anywhere.*” To maximize their mobility, they actively and quickly join and/or construct a local Chinese social network to help them with essentials such as grocery shopping. They soon after prioritize getting a driver’s license and the purchase of vehicles.

Initially, I did not really understand what they meant when they complained about the location of the University on a frequent basis. It was not until I asked myself “what are the things that the geographic constraint prevents them from doing” that I started to see their real concerns. While in China they have abundant opportunities to “*see a movie, go to the restaurants, go shopping,*” consumption opportunities are highly limited at the University and its surroundings. Thus in my fieldnotes, comments on the location of the University are often followed by their complaining that “*there is nothing I can do,*” “*compared to Beijing*” or “*compared to Shanghai.*”

To be clear, there is a lower-end shopping center in the adjacent town that is a 20-30 minute bus ride away. Inside and close to the shopping center there is a movie theater, a few restaurants serving Japanese, Chinese, Italian, and American food, several department stores such as Kohl’s and T.J. Maxx, and a supermarket. While some students go to the supermarket regularly, they refuse to shop at the mall because it is “*horrible*” and “*a joke.*” In contrast, when we went shopping at a fancy mall where she could find A&F, Coach, Tiffany, L’Occitane, and Louis Vuitton, Lana, a Chinese graduate student who grew up in an affluent family in Beijing, told me she was happy to be “*finally back to civilization.*”

“*I’m poor lately.*”

All the Chinese students in my sample receive Graduate Assistantships from the University ranging from \$20,000 to \$25,000, depending on the stage of their academic career. Often the students complained about their financial situation. “*I’m poor lately*” is something I heard most frequently. The comment results partly from their income level. However, this financial insecurity has another dimension that goes beyond money itself; it is, at least partially, subjective. This second dimension is highlighted in the conversation between Tony and his friends Danny, Ken, and Lin during a dinner at the nearby Chinese restaurant. Tony told them he was:

“Short of money lately after he moved in a new apartment, bought a car, and got new furniture. He was excited about the approaching pay day, but nothing would be left after paying the credit card bill. He was thinking about asking his family for some money. Danny told him that every time he Skyped with his mom, she would always ask if he needed money. He always said no. But the next time they talked, she would ask again and tell him whenever he needed anything, just ask. That was until one day. She asked him whether he needed money. He said no. And she said, That’s good. And since that she never asked. Tony told him that very similar thing happened between his mom and him. He said, But next time we talk, I will forget about all the independence nonsense, and tell her that I really need money.”

“My English is not good enough.”

The language class is structured to meet seven objectives. The top priority is to improve pronunciation, which is followed by increasing vocabulary, improving listening comprehension, increasing grammatical accuracy, practicing presentation skills, practicing specific language functions for academic English, and improving fluency and general speaking ability. During the

very first class, Jean, the instructor, “*talked in details about the first objective*” and the focus on pronunciation at the phonemic level. When a student asked what “phonemic” meant,

“Jean, in explanation, put down the word ‘through’ on the whiteboard and then the phonemes. She said, For example, this word. There are three phonemes in the word ‘through.’ The first one ‘th-’ is difficult for any non-native speaker. We will spend time pronouncing every phoneme in the right way. She then said, You will need to get a recorder... and email me the recordings [of you pronouncing the words].”

The class structured as such is thus totally devoted to correcting the way the newly-arrived Chinese students speak English. Even though part of the class is spent helping the students learn about the American educational system and campus culture, in practice it constantly reminds the students of their outsider status in this new environment. For example, by the end of the first class, Jean gave the students the assignment for next week—talking about themselves as if it were the first day of their class and they were introducing themselves to their students. She said, “*You will need to talk about your name. You should put down on the whiteboard your name in your native language. You should talk about how to pronounce your name in your native language and how you want to be called... Also, you should talk about your own country.*”

Twice a week, the Chinese students come to the language class and learn the correct way to pronounce English. Throughout the semester, they spend dozens of hours learning how to differentiate between phonemes such as /m, n, ŋ/ and /θ, ð/, and how to properly use their tongue muscle to pronounce /l/ and /r/, to name a few. Entering the class and surprised that they did not pass the Versant test, the students yet became increasingly self-conscious that their “*English was not good enough.*” One day Mark showed me an evaluation form he got from Jean which listed

his pronunciation and grammatical mistakes during the micro-teaching test. I asked him if he thought all the corrections made sense or the evaluators were being too picky. He said,

“It doesn’t matter. It’s better to be strict with myself. It’s a good thing that they pointed out my mistakes. People usually won’t point it out, unless they can’t understand. Many things I say are wrong. But they could guess and get what I try to say. That’s it. What’s the point of that for someone like me who speaks really bad English? I don’t expect myself to be able to speak English like a native speaker, but at least it should be fluent. No grammar mistakes, no pronunciation mistakes, and use the right words.”

It is worth pointing out that Mark’s English skills are competent with respect to effectiveness of his communication. When he spoke English in the class, I barely had any problems understanding him. He insists that he “*speaks really bad English*” partly because he evaluates himself by the standard of native speakers. In the language class, my observation was that most of the Chinese students’ English is more than competent, which is confirmed by the instructor and many of the American students in the class. That being said, I want to show that the unease expressed by the Chinese students about their English competencies is not unreal. Part of the unease is indeed their self-consciousness about their English falling short of perfection. Another reason of their subjective under-evaluation is a direct result of the daily interaction with their American and European colleagues.

One particular elaboration comes from Mark when he tells me that he does not know “*What can I ask about them? Where are the boundaries? Can I ask them about their boy/girl-friends? Can I ask them about their parents? How about their private lives? I don’t know what’s appropriate and what’s not here. There is no such problem when I speak Chinese. I know what it means to say something.*” Most of the Chinese feel such a loss in the new cultural context where

they are still learning to engage. Many students tell me that they don't know what to talk about with their American colleagues and that they are afraid "*the conversation will be always on the surface.*" When they explain this to me, they often use the example that they cannot understand their jokes. Such occasions are especially unpleasant when "*everybody else was laughing but I really didn't think the joke was funny at all.*"

A third aspect where many Chinese students express the frustration with English is with respect to their academic achievement. The Chinese way of learning English is examination-based. Chinese students are trained to pass English exams with high scores, not to communicate their ideas. Along with the demanding schedule of graduate school and the pressure to publish, this puts great difficulty on their academic and professional careers that emphasize idea exchange. When they write, they often spend a lot of time correcting and editing their writing, something they consider meaningless and burdensome. When they read, they often feel there is not enough time to finish the readings. Mark experiences such difficulty on a daily basis:

"My GPA is good. But I feel tired when I study, instead of fully adapting to this new environment. When I read a paper in Chinese, I look at the first sentence of each paragraph and read the conclusion. Then I will be able to get most of it. In class the professor [in China] will talk about the paper and that will solve the few confusions I have. But when I read a paper in English, I need to read twice word by word from the beginning to the end to be able to get the main idea. It takes a whole day to read a 20-page paper. I can't predict the main meaning of the paragraph by just reading the first few sentences. And I can't locate the key words."

Consumption and Class Identity

In this part I will present data on how the Chinese students use consumption as a strategy to reclaim a sense of selfhood towards different audiences. The first group is Americans. As we have seen above, although the objective of the class is to improve their English for better daily communication, especially with their future students, it is more accurately described as a class to *correct* their accent so they can sound more like Americans. The Chinese students are in a dominated position in the class, but they are able to temporarily escape the dominance by talking about their past experiences of consumption. During one session, Jerry, Flora, and Rose, an American undergraduate, were talking about traveling experiences. By talking about her travels in Europe, Flora for a moment was able to distance herself from the here and now:

“Rose talked a lot about Boston and said she liked Boston more than NYC.

Jerry: I have never been to Boston. I flew to New York and then came here.

Rose: I flew only once when I went to Italy. I went to Verona, a small town.

Flora: Actually, I kind of travelled all around Europe. I studied in France for a year.

Because I had the visa, I could travel through Europe.

Rose: Really? That’s great! I wish I had the chance to do that.”

Indeed, while in other cases expressing a sense of unease when interacting with Americans, the Chinese students show a subtle sense of entitlement when interacting with salesclerks. For example, when shopping for UGG boots, *“Lana tried four pairs of different colors and sizes. The salesclerk came over to help her every once in a while. The first pair she tried on was chestnut slippers. She thought they were too tight and when the salesclerk came back she asked for a larger size. The second pair was too large because it was a full size up. The salesclerk told her that for slippers they didn’t have half-sizes. She spent almost 20 minutes trying on the two pairs...When the salesclerk came back later she complained about the size.”*

A second group of audience is their families and friends in China. Having access to products of better quality, of cheaper price, or simply not accessible in China, they are frequently asked to “*buy something here for them and bring them back to China.*” Consciously or unconsciously knowing that the quintessential product they have access to while in the U.S. is the U.S. itself, they post on social media and share with their friends and families in China about their life in the U.S.—about the beautiful New England campus and occasions such as dining out and shopping.

One particular product they have access to, as mentioned by Flora, is the greater global mobility, thanks to the U.S. visa. According to the Euromonitor International report, in 2011 the top ten destinations for Chinese international travelers were Hong Kong, Macau, South Korea, Taiwan, Thailand, Singapore, Malaysia, USA, Vietnam, and France. All of those destinations, even Hong Kong, require a visa or some form of document for Chinese citizens to enter the boarder. With a valid U.S. visa, Chinese citizens are able to enjoy much greater mobility. Take South Korea as an example. While most Chinese citizens have to go through a tiring process that costs both time and money to obtain a visa to go to South Korea, those with a U.S. visa or re-entry permit who are traveling through Korea are granted visa-free entry for 30 days.

Many of the students acknowledge the convenience of the U.S. visa for travel in comparison to their Chinese passports. At a dinner party, Ken suggested a trip to Taiwan together. Tony quickly seconded the idea and said that they could go next summer. Everyone got very excited about the idea and a group discussion hence began:

“Lin: But how could get the visa?”

Ken: It’s super easy, won’t take much time.

Tony: Go to NYC and you could get it done very easily. As long as you have a valid U.S. visa, it's easy to go to Taiwan.

Danny changed the topic a little and said: Still Taiwan is no competition to Hong Kong. You could stay there for up to seven days without the need to get any visa. As long as you fly to Hong Kong from a third country! You would get a visa that allows you to stay in Hong Kong for seven days upon arrival.

Tony: Why don't we fly to Japan first?

Ken: Then we get to spend two days in Japan and we could tour around. (Japan grants all Chinese citizens connecting in Japan from/to the U.S. a two-day visitor visa.)

Lin: That will be awesome."

Every consumption occasion presented in this section so far is, however, not the everyday routine of the students. Consumption as a routine activity has a different meaning. The Chinese students, sensing financial pressure, attempt to be well-informed consumers. They depend on their Chinese peers for information about sales and to compare prices in different stores. This information exchange is voluntary and frequent, helping students get the most value out of their money. In addition, the students apply their knowledge of American culture to find loopholes to gain economic utility. For example, one night when I was at their apartment doing fieldwork, Adam, Jerry, and Emma invited me to have pizza with them at a local pizza house where the residence committee was holding a free pizza night for the residents. Knowing that Asians are sometimes seen as "*all looking similar*," Adam encouraged me to take advantage of that and pretend I was Sally, another Chinese girl who actually lived there, to get a free meal.

Two particular products of everyday consumption are worth mentioning here: food and housing. To begin with, the students find it difficult to find food they enjoy on campus. At the

food court and the so-called commercial center five-minute walk from the campus, the students can only find places serving pizza that is “*too salty*,” burgers, burritos, and sandwiches that they “*can’t eat every day*,” salad that is like “*eating grass*,” Panda Express that serves “*fake Chinese food*,” one “*decent Chinese restaurant*,” and another one serving Asian cuisine such as Chinese and sushi. In addition to that, the lower cost of cooking compared to eating out also means that the Chinese students tend to prepare their own meals.

This plan has one tiny problem: the complexity of Chinese cooking. Stir frying, for example, requires precision in timing and heat that is impossible to perfect without practice. Devoting their whole lives to studying, many of the students are amateur cooks and a few barely cooked at all before coming to the U.S. In dealing with those issues, the Chinese students often cook and eat together with their friends. By doing so, they bring in a wider range of knowledge and allow each one to enjoy the variety of food otherwise not available. This cooking arrangement is also highly time-efficient. One night, while I was at their apartment, Ken and Lin invited me to stay for dinner. Lin cooked for the three of us while Ken was in his room working. After dinner, Lin went back to his room to Skype with his girlfriend in China, while Ken went to the kitchen to do the dishes. The systematic division of labor grants both of them extra time to their own and eases the time constraints of graduate school.

Those two benefits, coupled with their self-consciousness about “*the cooking smoke that Americans don’t like*,” lead to their preference of living with other Chinese students. A further reason for this preference has to do with the financial concerns mentioned earlier. In this context, such concerns result in the tension between trying to save money and refusing to look cheap. A compromise is reached when students sharing a similar sense of space come to live under the same roof. For example, a solution to their financial concerns presents itself when the students

find someone who shares the understanding that a living room is valued not for its function as a social space, but for its potential as an extra bedroom. Therefore, renting out a living room does not undermine one's status, nor does living in one.

This living arrangement is indeed quite common among the Chinese students. When Jerry and Leo moved off campus into a two-bedroom townhouse in a nearby residential enclave, Leo stayed in the living room and they rented one of the bedrooms to an undergraduate Chinese girl at the University. Rain and two other Chinese girls lived together for a year before her fiancé came to the University. Sally is also about to move into the living room with Flora and her current Chinese roommate. As a result, the Chinese students inevitably situate their lives largely in the Chinese community.

Professional development and Cultural Identity

The Chinese students prefer to work with Chinese or Taiwanese professors. Most of these students are from disciplines, such as physics and engineering. In those departments, graduate students' funding, instead of coming through the department, depends on faculty members who bring in research projects from industries. They then recruit graduate students to work for them. This practice gives the faculty members greater autonomy in the admissions process. The Chinese professors often value research experience and hard work over language and social skills. Ken told me that his advisor *"has to have some American students in his lab otherwise he wouldn't be able to get external funding. That's why Mike C. and some other American students are his advisees. It's mostly to get funding."* To him, *"it creates trouble to accept American students. They don't work hard."* As a result, the Chinese students usually find themselves land in a largely homogeneous Chinese professional network right off the flight.

This homogeneous configuration of social space has direct impact in the physical space of their office. Rain shares the office with five Chinese students, one Russian student and an Italian exchange Ph.D. student. However, the two non-Chinese students occupy a corner of the room which is almost divided by the table cubicles. From the other side of the cubicle, it is very hard to tell whether they were there or not or what they are doing. Similar spatial division also happens in Mark's office where the American student and the Iranian student were sitting on the edge of the room while the Chinese students occupy the center of the office.

Such separation is not unintentional, which is obvious in the case of Lin's office. Lin and his four Chinese officemates recently moved in a big office where he now shares with nine other Chinese students and three American students. The Chinese students were sitting together with a clear physical divide from the three American students. He told me that, after they moved in, they "*cornered*" the two American students to a corner section which is spatially segregated from the rest of the office by tall cubicle walls. The third American student was using a table adjacent to the segregated cubicle with his back towards the Chinese students. When I told him I felt sad for them, Lin said, "*No way. Look at them. They are having fun there.*"

The Chinese students usually work ten to twelve hours per day on weekdays and frequently during the weekends. A typical work day starts at 8 or 9 in the morning and goes until sometime between 6 to 9 in the evening, with a one hour, brief lunch break at the office. For most of the time, the Chinese students work independently without talking to anyone. Bathroom breaks are quick and subsequently they go directly back to work. The students are highly work-oriented and express a strong sense of discipline. When Oliver and Rain were having a brief dinner break at the lounge close to their office, Rain made fun of Oliver and used him as an

example of someone with “*no discipline*” because he comes to the office around 10:30 or 11 every morning.

However, sometimes such devotion to work is as desired by the students as it is expected by their advisors. Rain, for example, told me that her advisor expects them “*to come to the lab every day. And sometimes if he walks in the office and sees someone is not there, he is not happy with it.*” Indeed, Rain’s advisor has a great impact in shaping her everyday schedule. Every afternoon he talks with all his advisees individually to gauge the progress they have made since yesterday. The purpose of this “*daily talk,*” according to Oliver who works with the same advisor as Rain, is so that their advisor can show the company that they are making progress and better incorporate the new demands of the company. As a result, they “*have to follow a strict schedule every day, and no time could be wasted.*”

The advisors play a key role in the students’ everyday life. On the one hand, they are often demanding and even harsh towards the Chinese students. Instead of treating the students as colleagues, the Chinese professors tend to act like a parental figure. Ken often “*gets yelled*” by his advisor when he shows him the lab results. Rain’s advisor tells her that her writing is “*a disaster.*” Conversely, this means that it is highly rewarding when they actually win recognition from their advisors. For example, when Ken and his advisor were working together to find an upgrade to a very popular computing method in engineering, he realized that the directive his advisor gave him missed a very important condition. Ken “*told him that. It made sense, and he listened. So now I am doing it my way.*”

As a result of self-discipline and pressure from advisors, work is prioritized when it comes to the choice between work and leisure. One example is given by Lin and Ken when they describe their American roommate who has parties at their place every Friday night. Once at a

restaurant I asked them with whom they lived. Without answering my question directly, Ken turned to Lin and said, *“He’s totally degenerate now. You know he bought a bucket of beer that will last for a whole month? More parties! Now he does nothing. He’s been playing all the time. He doesn’t work or go to school.”*

The Chinese students do take some time off every week to relax, but when they have free time, they prefer watching TV or videos online, playing video games, or eating out. In the case of Lin and Ken, every Friday when their roommate is having parties, they play video games with their Vietnamese roommate until the party is over and then go to bed. Actually, Ken told me that he did go to his roommate’s party a couple of times where they were playing beer pong, but soon he stopped going. *“It is fun the first time. But he does it [beer pong] every time. It’s boring! His party is boring. Otherwise they set up a bonfire and talk,”* which is no fun to Ken. Similar narratives are provided by many other Chinese students who stated that the parties held by their American, European, or Indian colleagues where people drink and talk are boring.

In contrast, the Chinese students express a strong curiosity or aversion to clubs or dance parties. Mark’s inquiry about a dance club on campus is particularly illuminating. After knowing that I go to parties with my American friends, Mark told me he also wanted to go to parties but he didn’t know where to go. His roommates go to the club, but he didn’t go with them because he doesn’t like drinking. He asked me whether it was true that the girls in the club were “loose” and said that he *“would like to go there and experience that.”* Unlike Mark, Sally described her first time in a club in a totally different way. To her, *“it was boring. All they did was drinking. Or they went dancing. The way they danced was disgusting. I mean, their bodies all stuck to each other. The girls were twerking and doings things. It was disgusting. I never went to a club after that once.”*

In general, when the Chinese students talk about parties or social gatherings on campus, they raise two statements: First, they do not drink and second, sexuality is outside their everyday realm. When Mark talks about the girls in the dance clubs, he embraces the idea that night life in clubs is in no way his everyday reality. Instead, he expresses a tourist sentiment towards such occasions as something exotic and unusual. Both statements, I argue, reflect their view that students should embrace a cautious and correct way of life that is different from members outside the group. Such a distinction between the two groups is best shown by Danny's description of a concert at his undergraduate university where the large presence of non-students on campus endangered the purity of the first group and caused problems:

"I went there [the concert] when I was still in college. 2009. And I didn't even pay for the ticket because the concert was in the university stadium. There were so many people and at a point the situation almost got out of control because there were, um, using the words of our teacher at that time, too many 'people from the society' in the university."

Specifically, the moral standard of the Chinese students is defined in relation to the profanity of business culture in China. Centering on *guanxi*, or networking, the Chinese business culture is notoriously known for its promotion of heavy drinking. Historically, women did not participate in business banquets. Those who did were usually objectified and commodified sex workers who helped the merchants negotiate the deals. Therefore, the students reject drinking and the female students specifically distance themselves from open displays of sexuality. It is a coincidence that the two key elements of the Chinese business culture happen to be the main themes of parties in the U.S., which results in the students' withdrawal from the most common social form on campus.

Discussion:

The data presented above shows that the Chinese graduate students, facing difficulties in affirming their class identities and cultural statuses, involve heavy boundary work in their everyday life in order to regain a sense of selfhood. Three intertwined aspects of their identities — middle class, independent young adults, and good students — are crucial in understanding the deployed symbolic boundaries. As newly defined middle-class in a location with limited consumption opportunities, they strategically direct different forms of consumption — consumption talk, consumption practice, and consumption of the American experience — to various audiences in the U.S. and China, and thus place themselves at a higher position in the status hierarchy.

In the language class, a space devoted to the implementation of the Foucauldian sense of power to discipline a docile body (Foucault 1977), talking about consumption is a potential source for role distance (Goffman 1961). It distracts from the focus of the class and shows both the American and Chinese students in the setting that part of them exists outside the here and now. Clerk-customer interactions at the site of consumption, particularly the deference of the interactive workers, contribute to a sense of class privilege in the Chinese students purchasing luxury goods (Hanser 2008). Furthermore, by comparing their everyday experiences with those of their friends and families in China, the Chinese students are able to interpret their daily realities as all-encompassing sites of consumption. Thus by carrying out their everyday routine, they are simultaneously fueling their class identity.

As young adults, they want to be financially independent. Although consumption is still the primary arena, it almost completely ceases to be an instrument for distinction, but instead becomes a strategic tool for the young adults in a foreign country to make the best of their lives with limited financial resources. In order to resolve the tension between down-classing and

maintaining status, between worsened economic condition and habitus, they embrace a heightened sense of economic rationality and calculation, and depend on the Chinese social network to become well-informed, dignified consumers. In so doing, they are able to re-acquire the neoliberal ideal of the self to better control their lives.

As good students, the high-achieving status group suddenly faces the loss of their cultural privilege as they are labeled as outsiders with insufficient cultural capital. The fulfillment of their ideal as good students is further challenged by the fact that they fall short of their own expectation when they continue applying the previous standards to evaluate their academic performance in the new context. To restore their honor, they emphasize one aspect of the Chinese cultural ideal of studenthood—hard work. This commitment to hard work is reinforced by their Chinese advisors, who discipline the students into self-governing, work-oriented entity. Consequently, the students equate work with life and draw a symbolic boundary between hard work and leisure.

The coincidental similarity between Chinese business culture and American college party culture makes possible the overlap between symbolic boundary and social boundary. By focusing on professional development, the students put themselves above American, European, and Indian students participating in the party culture in order to reestablish the status as “good students.” This alternative hierarchy of professionalism also helps the Chinese students to reconcile with their marginalization from the public social space on campus. Ironically, as they successfully become financially self-supporting adults, and regain recognition and restabilize their cultural identity in the segmented academic community, they gradually contribute to and reproduce their self-segregation from the American society at large.

The puzzle of the Chinese students contributes to our understanding of the global middle class and boundary work. First, it challenges the Eurocentric understanding of a cosmopolitan global middle class as the vanguards of post-national multiculturalism. Indeed, the unstable nature of their class and cultural identity could encourage them to integrate in a nationless culture, as is documented by the work of Favell. In other cases, however, the increased instability resulting from migration makes it much more desirable to join a local community of nationals in order to regain recognition and a sense of continuity. As is shown by this study, this latter case is more likely to happen when the core ideal of the self can no longer be sustained by the new context.

Second, the case of the Chinese students also invites us to reconsider symbolic boundaries. The literature tends to provide two sets of strategies for people with marginal, middle positions to make status claims. For those with sufficient resources, they emulate the elites to differentiate themselves from those below them. For those with limited economic and cultural capital, they reject the dominant ideal of self-worth and place themselves on an alternative hierarchy based on their preferred values. However, the Chinese students follow neither of the trajectories. Instead, they combine the goal of upward mobility in the academic profession with the strategy to remain outside the dominant society. With that finding, this study suggests new possibilities for boundary work and status claim.

Conclusion:

Situated within the larger academic debate on assimilation and transnationalism, this empirical study provides new evidence on the problematic link between social recognition and self-worth in shaping post-migration, daily strategies to gain mobility. It shows that societal expectations have limited impact on individuals and on how they organize everyday life, even

for those aiming at professional success in the “dominant society.” In fact, the very idea of a unitary dominant/mainstream society is put into question. It suggests that the society is not only divided into mainstream and ethnic communities, but also segmented along other lines such as profession. Thus students of segmented assimilation might find it fruitful to ask to what segment of the white middle-class mainstream society the migrants are assimilating and how that affects their trajectory.

To study those less observable divisions, I argue that the conventional focus on either elites or lower- or working-class migrants is no longer sufficient. This project contends that middle, marginal groups are particularly useful to study those questions because of their ambiguous positions that allow them to go either way. This shift in focus also means that we should start to conceptualize class as more fluid and complex than a measure of socio-economic status or human capital. Class could be both the reason and the outcome of specific mobility strategies. However, those are only tentative suggestions, and future research is needed to test the uniqueness and generalizability of the findings here. For example, how do we understand the experiences of the Korean businessmen in China? What about the Mexican middle-class in California? Those comparative studies will further our understanding of migration trajectory.

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