

# Family Background and Overseas Education of Chinese Students in Thai Universities

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## Abstract

Based on recent surveys of overseas Chinese undergraduates in Thai universities, this paper discusses the relationship between family background and a series of decisions / results along the process of studying overseas. The findings include: lower classes origins represented by students of rural origins are more intentionally using overseas education as a way to explore opportunities abroad and are more serious about academic performances so as to enhance human potential that can help to find jobs in the labor market of the host country. In contrast, upper classes origins represented by students from state cadre families are either more likely to return and work in China upon graduation or more likely to go to a graduate school even though they have worst academic performances. Furthermore, students of rural origins with clear intent for opportunities abroad, as well as students from state cadre families in big cities, have more positive evaluations on overseas experiences. Institutional contexts were proposed to be examined together with the rational-agent perspective to shed light on these findings.

[Thammasat Review, Volume 17, No.1, 2014]

**Keywords:** Social Classes, Overseas Students, Thai Universities, Social Mobility

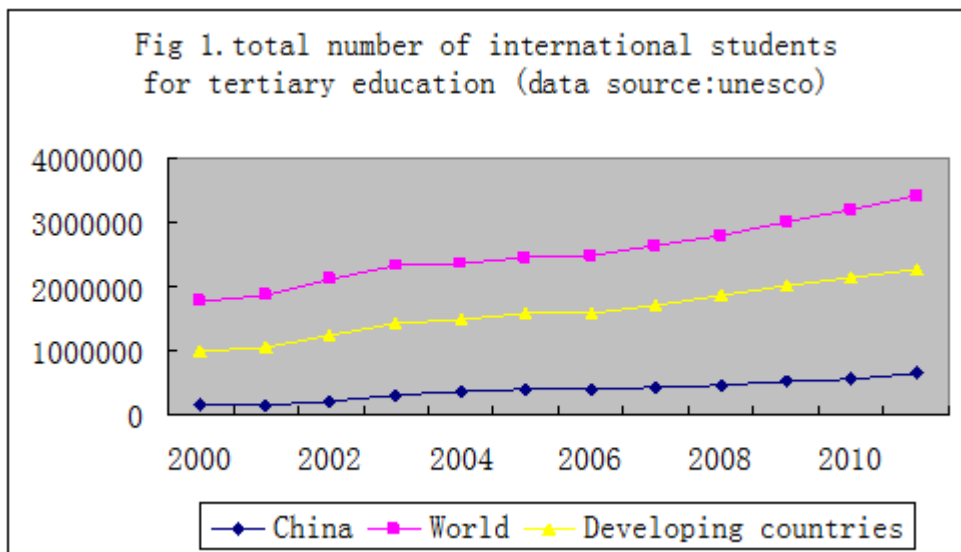
## Introduction

Historically, Chinese society has allowed social mobility to a large extent. Confucius argued “education can be applied to any kind of people” (有教无类) and believed that anybody has the potential to achieve self-perfection while education plays a critical role in that process. In practice, no matter how lowly the family one was from, he could become a member of the elite group by passing the imperial civil examinations. Once a man became a government official, it was the glory for the whole family and family members could benefit from it in some ways. In a sense, family support behind students could be understood as an investment and it is not uncommon to see parents spare no effort to give their children the best education.

Since the late Qing dynasty, China was forced to face the challenges from the west. After a series of major failures, China had to “learn the barbarian’s strong point” (师夷长技). To that aim, the Qing government began to send students abroad at state expense, hoping they could assume key positions in the government after graduation. International/overseas students, or “students who have crossed borders expressly with the intention to study”(OECD 2013:58), emerged for the first time in China.

In the early years of the People’s Republic of China, to build a new industrialized country, select students were sent by the Chinese government to study abroad in some socialist countries. Individuals, on the other hand, were not allowed to study abroad on their own initiative until the state council announced the “The Temporary Regulations on Self-financed Overseas Education” in 1981 and thus opened the gate for self-financed overseas education. However, in the 1980s and early 1990s, few Chinese could afford overseas education and they would need scholarships from foreign higher education institutions to realize their dreams. Consequently, only those crème de la crème, or most likely the undergraduate students of elite universities in China, won the scholarship to be able to go to graduate schools in developed countries.

Recent economic growth of China has allowed many Chinese to study abroad without scholarships. In the meantime, marketization of the education system in some countries transforms higher education into a profitable export product and Chinese students are widely welcomed. Consequently, China has become world’s largest overseas student sender country, accounting for 14% of all overseas students (王耀辉 2012). This trend is shown in Figure 1 below.



There are problems and concerns that come with this self-financed-mass-studying-abroad fad in China. The first issue is about the quality of overseas education. Some young overseas students find themselves in a very different environment free of supervisions from parents, and those who lack self-discipline quickly lose themselves to self-indulgence. This has cast doubt on the old notion in China that overseas students equal professionals or experts with high human wealth. Another concern involves students' family background. As Chinese are better off now, it is not only those wealthy families that can afford the tuition of foreign universities, some working class families are also considering to send their children abroad. As a result, the socio-economic status of overseas students varies to a larger extent than before, especially in those new overseas education destinations with lower tuition fees, such as, Malaysia, South Africa, Thailand, Russia, etc. Even so, studying abroad is still quite a big burden for an ordinary household in China, especially when overseas education does not necessarily guarantee good jobs in today's China. Naturally, people are asking: is studying abroad a smart choice, or simply an act of conformity?

Some sociologists studying post socialist countries propose to change the focus from macro-level institutional transformation to a more micro-level of individual's agency (Walder 2003, wu and xie 2003, 吴愈晓 2010, 吴晓刚 2006, 吴晓刚 2008). Economic and social reforms in China since the late 1970s have had profound implications for the general landscape as well as concrete mechanisms of social stratification and mobility. As social actors, Chinese people are trying to understand this grand reform so as to make the best out of it. Indeed, some risk takers grasp new emerging opportunities, such as the legalization of the private sector, reinstatement of stock markets, permission of private owners to join the communist party, etc.; either to maintain their advantages, or to change their unfavorable fates. In the eyes of many, studying abroad is just one of these opportunities that have emerged along the years of reform.

In this article, I use this rational-actor perspective to analyze people's behavior and decisions concerning overseas education. However, different institutional contexts where individuals or their families face respectively must be carefully examined too. The core question for this article can be put as "Is it really worth it to spend such a large amount of money to study abroad?" This is especially poignant for those who come from the upper class and do not cherish this opportunity at all, as well as for those from lower class given that jobs are not guaranteed for overseas returnees in a post socialist China? Concrete questions include: What are people looking for when they decide to study abroad? What do they do in their college years? Do they get what they want or regret the choices that they made?

In the last decade, educational exchange and cooperation between China and Thailand are thriving. Thailand is listed as the 33<sup>rd</sup> major overseas education destination by the ministry of education of China, and Chinese overseas students account for about half of all overseas students in Thai universities. Obviously, the lower tuition and living costs in Thailand is very attractive to students who are not that well off, at a time when some Thai universities are under the process of marketization and respond actively to the unsaturated education needs found in China. The larger variation of family background among Chinese overseas students in Thailand provides a precious opportunity to generally examine the relationship between family background and overseas education. In this article, I used data collected from Chinese overseas students in Thai universities for analysis.

## Research Hypotheses

One of the core questions asked in the field of social mobility study is the complicated role played by education. Some sociologists believe that in a modern society, upward mobility is totally possible, especially with the help of merit-based social institutions such as education (Becker 1964, Blau and Duncan 1967, Treiman 1970). Another school of scholars put emphasis on the mechanisms of the reproduction of inequality. The education system is examined and declared by them to be more of a tool to maintain social inequality while the disadvantaged classes can not effectively use education to change their fates. For example, French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu pointed out that the cultural capital that upper class youths acquired unconsciously during childhood, go a long way in improving their academic performances (Bourdieu 1973, Bourdieu and Passeron 1977). Even in the event of education expansion, research suggests that the increased educational opportunities are likely to be exploited by the upper class and the stratification in education is maximally maintained in terms of both quantity (MMI) and quality (EMI) (Lucas 2001, Raftery and Hout 1993, Samuel R. Lucas 2001).

The limited educational opportunities for people in relatively lower classes may not be absolutely true in the case of China. Due to some features of Chinese traditional culture that value education, Chinese parents are willing to live a thrifty life and save the money for their children's education. In the socialist era, policies also favored those who originated from worker or peasant families, offering them more educational opportunities than kids from the distrusted former upper classes such as capitalists or land owners (Wu and Treiman 2004, 吴晓刚 2007). After reform and opportunities opening up, holding to the faith that "knowledge can change fate", the newly disadvantaged classes in China tried hard to use education as a way to realize upward mobility. Nevertheless, the rural urban divergence widens on many fronts, including higher education (Wu and zhang 2010a).

These findings surely remind us of the MMI and EMI theories, however, a more relevant question here would be: does education really improve life chances and plights of people in a transitioning society like today's China? We know that in the socialist era, despite the unequal access to educational resources and opportunities, once a person got admitted by college, he or she was guaranteed an urban Hukou (official resident) status and a decent job, regardless of his or her social origins. Back then, the graduates did not get to choose jobs because there was no labor market, while in today's emerging market economy, graduates need to find jobs by themselves. For many, the bad news is, the expanding higher education system seems to have admitted more students and generated more graduates than China's labor intensive economy can absorb. At this moment, a higher education diploma is no longer a golden ticket to professional or managerial positions.

Meanwhile, some other factors are playing increasingly critical roles in determining the labor market outcomes of graduates in today's China. Unlike those of countries in Eastern Europe, the reform of the state socialism regime in China is a long-lasting, incremental process. Before a full-fledged market economy is established, the Chinese government will continue to exert control over economic matters, including the labor market. For example, some positions in the government are reserved for communist party members while most good positions in the work units are only open for people with a local (urban) Hukou. While these can be seen as testimonies of socialist vestige, informal norms rooted in the Chinese culture highlighting the importance of personal connections are also revived in the post reform years. Under this culture, people assume responsibilities for each other in their social network and exchange favors with each other on a regular basis. When in trouble, more often than not, people tend to seek help in their personal network rather than turning to the market, the state, or the law. With regard to job hunting, people are used to ask favors from friends or relatives, while the employers or human resources staff have to take into account an applicant's "Guanxi"(关系), not just his or her human capital (Bian 1997).

These formal regulations and informal norms alike defy the meritocracy principle of a market economy and keep the more qualified personnel out of the good jobs. The working of informal norms become more salient at a time when the labor market cannot absorb the surplus of labors generated by expansion of higher education in the early 2000's. As a result, it is not uncommon to see that students from urban origin, with strong connections easily find good jobs while talented youths with rural origin either cannot land a job at all or have to accept low end jobs. Thus, many painfully learn that, differently from the socialist era, tertiary education or even the gaining of human capital do not automatically or necessarily bring about a bright future to them.

The new economics of international migration theory argues that international migration is often caused by more than just the attraction of higher incomes for isolated individuals. The decision making unit is often family or household, and the aims includes some practical considerations such as reducing risks in a flawed economic system. For example, due to the lack of a mature credit market and insurance system, small family businesses cannot raise enough capital to invest, and are difficult to manage any potential risks. Some families members are thus sent to work abroad so as to, on one hand, diversify the domestic venture risk, and on the other hand, earn the capital needed for investment (Massey et al. 1993). Following this line of thought, I believe that the imperfection of social institutions beyond the economic system could become a pushing force too. In case of a country undergoing fundamental changes like China, it is only natural that the reform could help some to take advantage of the situation while causing specific disappointments for some others. On top of that, as noted above, features of traditional culture that are revived in this reform era play into the hands of those already advantaged. As Sun (孙立平 2004) argued, capitals of different kinds including political, economic and cultural; tend to concentrate in the hands of same group of people which exacerbates the inequality and substantially restricts the life chances of the lower class or even the masses.

Trapped in such a disadvantaged position, how should people with neither formal institutional edge nor informal social connections respond? As the path of getting a tertiary education in China proved to be a dead end for many, a foreign diploma on the other hand may open up the gate of new opportunities for the disadvantaged, namely, if they can work abroad, they effectively sidestep the unfavorable opportunity structure in China. Of course there would be barriers in the foreign labor market, but in a more mature market economy, the return of human capital is more likely guaranteed than in China. Thus, people without formal/informal institutional edges are expected to be more likely to consider working in the host country after graduation; for that purpose, they would need to carefully choose their majors, and would study hard to gain human capital that can help them find jobs in the foreign labor market. This should be even truer for the poor since expensive overseas education is often a calculated investment of the whole family.

For most people, working in an alien cultural environment alone is quite challenging. Unsurprisingly, as the economy of China keeps growing, the probability of Chinese overseas graduates staying and working in the host country decreases (Szelenyi 2006). In the past in China, overseas graduates were seen as professionals or experts who could easily assume key positions in the government or other public institutions. Nowadays, when overseas students are large in numbers and varying in qualities, it is hard to tell who are the “talents”. This leaves more room for a certain amount of backstage dealing in favor of those from families with political power or social connections. As long as the overseas graduate holds the diploma, he or she can be defined as “talent” and can have good jobs through some evaluation and interviews only of a formality nature. Unfair as it is, few can challenge this arrangement in an immature market economy with heavy path dependence. Thus, I expect overseas students from families with institutional advantages take overseas education more as an experience to gain diploma than as an opportunity to gain human capital. They are expected to be more careless when choosing majors and not study hard to improve human capital. Upon graduation, they would be more likely to come back to China to look for jobs. On the other hand, they are also hypothesized to be more likely to pursue a higher degree since this could further guarantee the possibility of assuming of key positions.

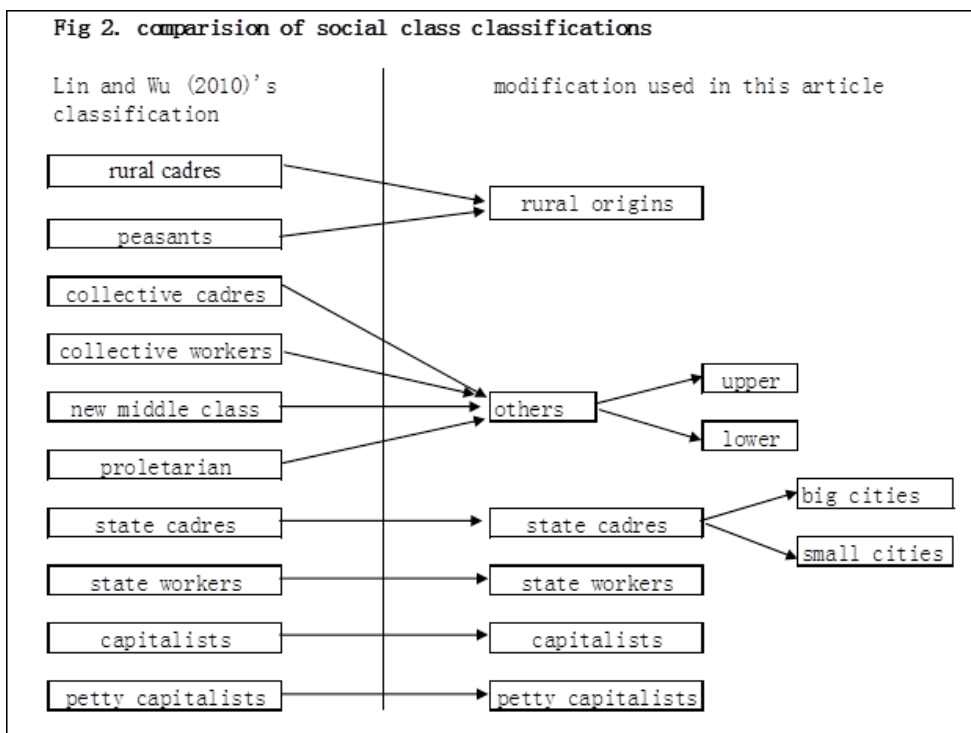


Lastly, overseas students shall have their own evaluations and feelings of the overseas experience upon graduation. This article also tries to examine the effect of family background in that regard. I assume that those who really gain from the overseas education would have a more positive evaluation of it. As noted above, relatively higher or lower classes can benefit from the overseas experience alike, but with different mechanisms. This leads to the hypothesis that those from the so called “upper class” cannot benefit from the interplay of overseas education and institutional edges, and therefore tend to regret the decision of studying abroad. On the other hand, those from lower classes who are also with strong determination to use this overseas education as opportunities towards a future abroad would have more positive evaluations. For those from disadvantaged families that had wished to have a career back home when armed with a foreign diploma; the chances are that they would be disillusioned and thus have negative feelings towards the experience of studying abroad.

### Measurement and Data

Before putting testing these hypotheses, social classes of overseas students should be operationalized. There are some standards to classify a family’s socio-economic status or class by occupation and employment status (Blau and Duncan 1967, Erikson, Goldthorpe and Portocarero 1979, Wright and Perrone 1977), but those standards are mainly theorized and/or inducted in a western context. To better analyze the social classes in contemporary China, Lin and Wu (林宗弘 and 吴晓刚 2010) proposed a new classification in light of institutionalism and new Marxism perspectives. They take into account specifically the institutional factors in today’s China such as: the work unit system, household registration system, cadre/personnel system and property right system, ending up with ten class positions: rural cadres, peasants, collective cadres, collective workers, state cadres, state workers, new middle class, proletarian, capitalists, petty capitalist. At this point, it is worth noting that state cadres are the group of people that are vested with lots of institutional resources, formal or informal.

Lin and Wu's classification shares with this article the concerns with institutional contexts. However, I simplified and revised their classification for analytical purposes. First, since the portion of rural cadre is rather low and given that the rural cadres are closer to peasants than to government in light of governance reform in villages (周雪光 2009, 邓燕华 2012), I combined the rural cadre with peasants into the same class and call it "rural origins". Secondly, since the collective sector has been in decline in recent years and the situation in this sector is not clear, I combined them with new middle class and proletarian. Nevertheless, through an interaction term with "professional or managerial position", I discerned this class into upper and lower subgroups. Thirdly, for state cadres, I added family location to further differentiate the institutional resources one may actually have access to for this elite group. I assume that state cadres in regional or larger cities may have more institutional resources to mobilize, since resources are concentrated disproportionately at upper levels of local governments after the late 1990s' tax division reform. For the state cadres in county cities or township, they have less institutional resources to maneuver for their children's job hunting outcomes. The relationship between Lin and Wu's classification and my modification is described in Figure 2 below.



In 2010, I participated in a research survey targeted at understanding the overseas experiences and labor market results of Chinese undergraduate students in Thai universities. From January to March of 2013, I presided over a follow up survey collecting more information on students' family backgrounds. This has made it possible for the first time to examine the effect of family background on the rationality, behavior and result of overseas education since a larger variation of social characteristics of Chinese overseas students in Thailand is observed.

The survey in 2010 was more of a census nature. Based on the data from the Thai ministry of education, we included in the sample 16 universities with the greatest Chinese presence among the student body. The survey in 2013 was administered through a random cluster sampling and ended up with data from 13 Thai universities. In both surveys, Questionnaires were distributed to the fourth year undergraduates. There are 11 overlapping universities from the two surveys and I combined them to form the sample for analysis. Since the descriptive statistics from the surveys are quite close, and not too much a departure from the information from the Thai ministry of education in terms of some variables such as gender and major distributions, hereinafter, I assume this sample as not far away from a result of random sampling. However, to take account of the unobserved heterogeneity among universities, robust estimations are warranted to account for the cluster effect.

For the variables used in the analysis, as noted above, independent variables include the classification of social class that highlights the institutional features such as types and levels of work unit. The dependent variables in this study cover a whole set of social processes from the planning till the evaluation of overseas education. I organized them in three stages along a temporal order. The first group of variables is about the rationalities and aims for overseas education before it actually happened. I used Thai majors to represent the majors that can be useful in a foreign labor market and directly asked respondents their main reasons to study in Thailand. The second group of variables concerns the academic performances and was operationalized by three indicators including Thai language level, major courses academic level, as well as counts of failed courses. Lastly, for the result and evaluation of this overseas education experience, I asked students to name their current status, including job already secured, looking for jobs, preparing for a master program, etc. The dependent variables in this stage also include how long they plan to stay in Thailand and whether they believe the overseas education in Thailand is worthy. Table 1 depicts basic descriptive statistics of the sample. For binary variables such as gender, I only report one category.

**Table 1** descriptive statistics (in percentage, except for family income)

variables	2010 (528)	2013(313)	total (841)
<b>male</b>	32.40%	27.40%	30.60%
<b>social class</b>			
state cadre	32	26.2	29.9
state worker	9.3	5.8	7.9
private owner	8.1	9.9	8.8
petty capitalist	24.8	23.9	24.5
rural origin	16.7	26.2	20.2
others	9.1	8	8.7
<b>family income (log)</b>	1.45(0.97)	1.48(1.03)	1.46 (0.99)
<b>living in regional or bigger cities</b>	52.7	45.4	50
<b>reasons to study in Thailand</b>			
for opportunities in Thailand	37.4	32.3	35.5
for general knowledge	43.7	53.7	47.5
failed in college entry exam	18.9	14	17.1
<b>Thai language major</b>	42.1	45	43.1
<b>Good in Thailanguage</b>	34.5	30.1	32.9
<b>Good in major courses</b>	31.1	37.4	33.4
<b>counts of failed courses</b>			
0	72.7	79.6	75.3
1	11.7	5.8	9.6
2	5.5	3.2	4.7
3	3.8	3.9	3.8
4 and above	6.3	7.4	6.7
<b>intermediate plans</b>			
have secured a job	20.6	13.2	17.8
looking for jobs	57.7	56.9	57.4
help parents with their business	3.4	2.1	2.9
start a business or freelance	5.8	7.6	6.5
go to a graduate school	12.5	20.1	15.4
<b>positive evaluation</b>	38.1	50.5	42.7

note:family income is measured in 10,000 yuan,the corresponding figures are mean and standard deviation.

## Methods and Results

In this part, I examine the effects of family background on overseas education along a temporal order, paying special attention to the rationality and agency of actors in their respective institutional contexts. For those lacking institutional resources, a more rational calculation towards a future in Thailand is expected to be observed in the first stage, and in the second stage, they are expected to study hard too. In the last stage, the rationality and accessible institutional resources could make a difference where the graduates want to work and their evaluation of the whole overseas education experience.

The analyses of this article mainly used limited dependent variable models (Wooldridge 2009) since most of the dependent variables are categorical. Binary and multi-nominal logistic models were conducted to estimate the effects of family backgrounds on the odds of some choices and results. Due to the roughness of measurement in the survey, zero inflated models and censored models were used. Robust estimators taking into account of the cluster effect were conducted since the sampling unit was a university, assuming no macro level variables correlating with the key independent variables in the models. In addition, the analyses and discussions hereinafter are only about the directions of coefficients rather than focusing on the specific numbers.

**Table 2 Aims and Reasons to Study in Thailand**

	Logistic model for major chosen (choose Thai=1)		Multinomial logistic model for reasons to Thailand (for opportunities in Thailand vs. for general knowledge) <sup>1</sup>		
	Model 1a	Model 1b	Model 2a	Model 2b	Model 2c
male	-0.566*** (0.166)	-0.509*** (0.175)	0.591*** (0.171)	0.655*** (0.187)	0.662*** (0.203)
Father's class <sup>2</sup>					
State cadre	-1.334*** (0.217)	-0.910*** (0.246)	-1.087*** (0.209)	-0.939*** (0.204)	-0.695** (0.298)
State worker	-0.899*** (0.307)	-0.492 (0.314)	-0.721** (0.360)	-0.635* (0.377)	-0.459 (0.427)
Private owner	-1.645*** (0.308)	-1.309*** (0.346)	-0.618 (0.418)	-0.427 (0.386)	0.120 (0.370)
Petty capitalist	-1.024*** (0.223)	-0.714*** (0.245)	-0.0792 (0.146)	0.0277 (0.168)	0.269 (0.248)
others	-1.092*** (0.358)	-1.086*** (0.384)	-0.709 (0.489)	-0.585 (0.489)	-0.221 (0.621)
Others X (professional or managerial position)	-1.329** (0.583)	-0.815 (0.607)	0.00473 (0.650)	0.132 (0.656)	0.0811 (0.627)
Year 2013	0.00203 (0.154)	0.115 (0.163)	-0.355* (0.189)	-0.366* (0.200)	-0.468* (0.263)
Family income (log)		-0.282*** (0.0895)			-0.190 (0.140)
Thai major				0.567** (0.247)	0.633** (0.271)
constant	0.900*** (0.191)	0.971*** (0.197)	0.161 (0.162)	-0.228 (0.328)	-0.175 (0.333)
Pseudo R square	0.073	0.08	0.056	0.065	0.072
observations	827	765	776	772	715

note: numbers in parentheses are robust standard error, specifically, standard errors in model 2 are robust ones accounting for cluster effects. \*\*\* p<0.01, \*\* p<0.05, \* p<0.1

1 the third category of the dependent variable is "because of failure in college entrance exam". If we compare the odds of "for opportunities vs. because of failure in the college entrance exam", the results are even more significant. These results are omitted here and are available upon request.

2 reference group is "rural origins".

The model 1a in Table 2 shows that rural origin students (mainly peasants' kids) were more likely than others to choose Thai language as their major. When the family income was controlled in model 1b, the coefficient of state worker (-0.492) was no longer significant. This suggests that state workers with low income are as likely to be majoring in Thai, possibly for the consideration of finding jobs in Thailand. The negative coefficient of family income (-0.282) shows that economic pressure may force people to be more rational in choosing majors.

The assumption that those who choose Thai as their major are for jobs and career opportunities in the host country is also supported in model 2 which shows that people from different family backgrounds came to Thailand for different reasons. Generally speaking, those whose fathers work in public sectors (state cadre and state worker) were not interested in the new opportunities in Thailand, as compared to those with rural origins. Some norms such as the practice of replacing parents in a state owned enterprise or the social connections at work in a post socialist era can be pulling forces for those with institutional edges. Model 2a and 2b suggest that even if those from families with a decent work unit may choose Thai as their major, it is often more of a personal hobby than a family's careful decision. The coefficient of state workers (-0.459) becomes insignificant when family income was controlled, proving again that economic consideration is at work here. However, the clear disparity remains between students from state cadre families (-0.695) and those with rural origins in their motivations to study in Thailand. The fact that state cadre' children were not interested in opportunities in Thailand even when their families were not that well off may suggests that relatively more opportunities exist in China for them. For students from families of the private sector, they equally cherish the opportunities in Thailand. This is not surprising given that many of them are actually of rural origins and there is no reason to ignore the opportunities in Thailand for these risk takers.

### *B. Academic performances*

When students are in Thai universities, does family background affect their academic performances? As hypothesized above, students who carry the expectation of their families to recoup the investment and improve the economic condition may cherish this overseas education opportunities more. As a matter of fact, given that the bachelor programs in Thai universities are not that challenging for Chinese students, it is unlikely that they would fail in many courses. On the other hand, if the gaining of human capital does not make too much a difference in the future since there is help from parents to count on anyway, one is unlikely to take the school work seriously.

Table 3 shows the effect of family background on academic performances of undergraduate Chinese overseas students in Thai universities. In model 5b, zero inflated Poisson model distinguishes two processes with one process modeling the odds of never failing a course (5bII) and the other modeling, the counts of course failure when there exists the chance of failing (5bI).



**Table3 academic performances of Chinese students in Thai Universities**

	logistic model for Thai level (good=1)	logistic model for major courses level (good=1)	logistic model for failing courses (ever failed=1)	Zero inflated Poisson model for counts of failures <sup>1</sup>	
	Model 3	Model 4	Model 5a	Model 5bI	Model 5bII
Male	-0.0564 (0.200)	-0.495** (0.207)	1.043*** (0.273)	0.319*** (0.122)	-1.023*** (0.280)
Father's class <sup>2</sup>					
State cadre	-0.474*** (0.176)	-0.616** (0.260)	2.830*** (0.546)	-0.466 (0.495)	-3.175*** (0.583)
State worker	-0.0284 (0.463)	-0.458 (0.389)	2.225*** (0.750)	-0.0637 (0.501)	-2.285*** (0.777)
Private owner	-0.336 (0.424)	-0.512 (0.521)	2.646*** (0.527)	-0.726 (0.518)	-3.156*** (0.576)
Petty capitalist	-0.0552 (0.269)	-0.143 (0.271)	1.584*** (0.548)	-0.689 (0.603)	-1.902*** (0.681)
others	0.0724 (0.383)	-0.299 (0.401)	1.547** (0.698)	-0.253 (0.537)	-1.645** (0.742)
Others X (professional or managerial position)	-1.143* (0.593)	-0.390 (0.669)	1.277*** (0.493)	-0.273 (0.362)	-1.644*** (0.554)
Year 2013	-0.222 (0.191)	0.234 (0.189)	-0.213 (0.331)	0.330** (0.137)	0.451 (0.352)
Family income (log)	0.0581 (0.105)	-0.0562 (0.0632)	0.175 (0.112)	0.0804** (0.0374)	-0.125 (0.154)
Thai major	0.593** (0.250)	0.124 (0.325)	-0.904 (0.591)	-0.0781 (0.226)	0.977 (0.656)
constant	-0.735* (0.376)	-0.299 (0.320)	-3.517*** (0.606)	0.715 (0.465)	3.296*** (0.668)
Pseudo log likelihood ratio	-469.68	-463.92527	-336.70	-611.4238	
observations	758	755	762	762	

Note: numbers in parentheses are robust standard errors taking account of cluster effects in universities.\*\*\* p<0.01, \*\* p<0.05, \* p<0.1

1 model 5bI is the part for counts and model 5bII is the part for zero inflation.

2 reference group is "rural origins".

Results of model 3 and 4 show that rural origin students were not necessarily doing better academically than others except for those from state cadre families. Nevertheless, model 5 shows that students with rural origins were most unlikely to fail. Model 5b shows that the counts of courses failed can be distinguished by two processes. For those who were at risk of failing a course (Model 5bl), their family backgrounds did not have impact in general except that more family income (with a coefficient of 0.0804) can increase the expected counts of courses failed. Model 5bl again shows that rural origin students were most unlikely to fail. I figure that even those from relatively richer rural families may have been through hard times and thus are more likely to cherish this overseas education opportunity, needless to say that, rich or poor rural families alike, they lack the access to institutional resources that are often taken for granted by many students with urban origins.

The emphasis on academic performance of rural origin students presents a sharp contrast with those from state cadre families. Having received better education in secondary education, students from state cadre families nevertheless did worse than all other family origins in the analysis sample. This can only be explained by their lack of drive to accumulate human capital and it is consistent with the reasoning that they do not count on the human capital to secure good jobs if their parents could inadvertently hint that a mediocre performance and a diploma itself would be enough to lead to good jobs.

### *C. intermediate plans and Evaluations near Graduation*

The questionnaires for this study were collected in January and data show that only 17.8 percent of Chinese students had found jobs at that time. This is not surprising since Thai graduates often need a diploma in hand to find jobs which are not available until later while the induction of new employees does not commence until after July in China. However, the impact of family background can still be observed in Table 4.

**Table 4 intermediate plans of overseas students in Thai universities**

	Multinomial logistic model for goings Model 6		Planned duration of staying Model 7
	(job secured vs. looking for jobs)	(plan for a master program vs. looking for jobs)	(Tobit model truncated below 0 and above 4) <sup>1</sup>
Male	0.534 (0.370)	0.275 (0.263)	-0.0304 (0.409)
Father's class <sup>2</sup>			
State cadre	1.142*** (0.429)		-0.570* (0.336)
State worker	1.087** (0.531)	-0.887* (0.498)	-0.202 (0.748)
Private owner	1.947*** (0.474)	-0.839 (0.530)	-1.183** (0.468)
Petty capitalist	0.768*** (0.266)	-1.078*** (0.236)	-0.233 (0.465)
others	1.500*** (0.470)	-0.818** (0.407)	0.0925 (0.638)
Others X (professional or managerial position)	-0.174 (0.665)	0.0160 (0.300)	-0.656 (1.092)
Rural origin		-1.313*** (0.412)	
Year 2013	-0.425 (0.395)	0.599* (0.344)	-0.581 (0.559)
Thai major	1.326*** (0.382)	-0.954** (0.424)	1.570** (0.771)
Good in major courses	0.0433 (0.241)	0.407 (0.255)	1.121*** (0.393)
constant	-2.900*** (0.523)	-0.863** (0.422)	0.837* (0.501)
Pseudo log likelihood ratio		-774.55343	-675.25
observations		729	418

Note: numbers in parentheses are robust standard errors taking account of cluster effects in universities. \*\*\* p<0.01, \*\* p<0.05, \* p<0.1

1 The sigma for Tobit model is 2.9, standard error is 0.32, significant at the level of 0.01.

2 reference group is "rural origins".

Model 6 shows that students from state cadre or private owner families (-0.839, not significant) were more likely than others to go to a graduate school. In a time of college expansion and mass overseas education, a bachelor degree might not be enough to signify the “talent”, one needs at least a master degree to legitimately assume key positions and at the same time to quiet the gossip. For students from private owner families, many are expected to have an MBA degree to inherit the family business. Interestingly, as showed in Table 3, these were also the same groups of students who were not that interested in academic performance. It can be inferred that going to a graduate school is more likely a request of parents than of their own free will. In terms of labor market outcomes, even though these upper class students were not more likely to have secured jobs (as opposed to looking for jobs), for those who were looking for jobs, model 7 shows that they were at a higher odds (-0.570 and -1.183 respectively) to return and work in China rather than in Thailand. In model 6 we observed that students with rural origins were more likely to be in a state of looking for jobs while model 7 further suggests that students with rural origins were more likely to try their luck in Thailand.

Unfortunately, as shown above, the data collected at a time before graduation did not allow an analysis of actual labor market outcomes. However, at a stage near graduation, every student would have an evaluation of the years at Thai universities. Besides, just because the labor market results for some people were better does not necessarily mean they had more positive evaluations. When we cannot control the heterogeneity and when counterfactual data are not possible, individuals’ evaluations of the decisions made, things done and the road ahead of them can be important too. In this case, the following questions need to be answered: Does the overseas experience in Thailand really enhance people’s life chances? Students of what family and through what mechanisms, can make the best out of the years in Thai universities? Who would be the ones that regret the decisions made as well as money and years spent?

**Table 5 evaluations for overseas education in Thailand**

	Logistic model for evaluation (worthy=1) <sup>1</sup>			
	Model 8a	Model 8b	Model 8c	Model 8d
<b>Male</b>	-0.177 (0.236)	-0.225 (0.215)	-0.192 (0.238)	-0.236 (0.220)
<b>Father' class<sup>2</sup></b>				
State cadre	-0.187 (0.217)	0.186 (0.224)	-0.526* (0.291)	-0.644*** (0.239)
State worker	0.0956 (0.303)	0.297 (0.309)	0.0983 (0.303)	-0.00205 (0.256)
Private owner	-0.110 (0.305)	0.124 (0.432)	-0.108 (0.306)	-0.176 (0.390)
Petty capitalist	-0.109 (0.159)	0.184 (0.186)	-0.108 (0.159)	-0.134 (0.129)
others	0.381* (0.224)	0.524* (0.282)	0.382* (0.224)	0.224 (0.220)
OthersX (professional or managerial position)	-0.534*** (0.187)	-0.180 (0.228)	-0.530*** (0.187)	-0.160 (0.233)
Year 2013	0.511*** (0.163)	0.546*** (0.149)	0.514*** (0.164)	0.543*** (0.149)
<b>Reasons to Thailand</b>				
For chances in Thailand		0.918*** (0.293)		1.084*** (0.295)
For general knowledge		1.121*** (0.288)		1.140*** (0.287)
<b>Peasant X for chances in Thailand</b>		0.639** (0.293)		
<b>State cadre X regional or bigger cities</b>			0.474* (0.247)	0.770*** (0.220)
<b>constant</b>	-0.352 (0.230)	-1.466*** (0.320)	-0.351 (0.231)	-1.228*** (0.303)
Pseudo log likelihood ratio	-558.15	-508.75	-556.85	-507.00
<b>observations</b>	831	776	831	776

Note : Numbers in parentheses are robust standard errors taking account of cluster effects in universities. \*\*\* p<0.01, \*\* p<0.05, \* p<0.1

1 The variables of intermediate plans are omitted from the model since they are not significant and do not change the results.

2 Reference group is "rural origins".

Model 8a shows that students of different family background were in general agreement in terms of the evaluation of their overseas education experiences in Thai universities. This general picture hid more detailed differentiations. When the reason to study in Thailand and its interaction with “from peasant families” were controlled in model 8b, we observed a disparity within rural origin students. The positive and significant coefficient (0.639) of the interaction term means that, for those with rural origins, if they came with clear intentions for the opportunities in Thailand, they were more satisfied than those with other reasons. In other words, those rural kids who were not particularly targeted at the labor market of Thailand may regret their decisions.

Model 8c added an interaction term and differentiated those of state cadre origins into two subgroups. As can be seen, students from state cadres living in middle size or big cities were more likely to positively evaluate their experience in Thailand, compared with those from state cadre families living at a county or township level. In addition, the inclusion of this interaction into the model made coefficient of state cadres itself significant too (-0.526), which means that students of state cadre families in small places were more likely to regret this overseas experience than students with rural origins. Not only does overseas education not suit everybody, it does not suit everybody in a so called upper class too. The low evaluation can be attributed to the fact that resources are disproportionately concentrated at upper administrative levels that make the jobs at county levels less attractive to these overseas graduates. When these graduates have to compete with others for jobs in bigger cities where their parents have little influence and they do not have local Hukou, they may have experienced special frustrations. On the other hand, graduates from state cadre families in bigger cities have a more positive evaluation than their counterparts at lower administrative levels, possibly because institutional advantages can help them to realize the returns of overseas education. This divergence within state cadre origins widened if the reason for studying in Thailand was controlled as a bigger and more significant coefficient (from 0.474 to 0.770, from significant at the level of 0.1 to significant at the level of 0.01) of the interaction term was observed in model 8d. Actually, if we continue to add academic performance variables into the model, the coefficient of the interaction term keeps growing. In other words, the institutional advantages that big city state cadre origins enjoy while small place state cadre origins do not make a huge difference even if they came to Thailand with a similar plan and had an equal academic performance.

Additionally, there are controlled variables such as gender in the models whose effects are worth mentioning here: generally speaking, males were less likely to study Thai language major, their academic performances were not that good, however, they valued the opportunities in Thailand more. In year 2013 compared to year 2010, Chinese overseas students became less interested in the opportunities in Thailand, were more interested in getting a master degree, and they had more positive evaluations of their experiences in Thailand. The implication of these findings will be discussed in another paper.

### **Summary and Discussion**

Chinese believe that “knowledge can change one’s fate” and indeed education has served as a major mechanism for many to achieve upward mobility from ancient times up until today. For ancient Chinese, learning Confucian classics might lead to a position in the government, while in the socialist era, those who could go to colleges were guaranteed precious non-manual jobs in cities. Up until the turn of the century, education remained to be one of the few channels left for peasants to break through the barrier of the household registration system. More specifically, overseas education has been even more valued through f the last hundreds of years by the government and people alike. Overseas education is widely recognized as a shortcut towards a successful and prosperous life even today.

However, as studying abroad increasingly becomes an option for the average Chinese in recent years, this shortcut toward success might turn into a dead end for mindless ones. Based on recent surveys conducted in Thai universities, this study discussed the relationship between family background and a series of decisions, performances and outcomes concerning the experiences of Chinese undergraduate students in Thai universities. The results show that middle to lower classes represented by the rural origins more intentionally capitalized on overseas education for new opportunities abroad, while students from state cadre families were more inclined to return and work in the home country. During the years at universities, students from state cadre families were less likely to achieve academic excellence even though they had had access to better educational resources before college. Although those with rural origins were not necessarily the best students, they were those who were most unlikely to fail a course. This suggests that those with rural origins take the overseas education more seriously and try hard to enhance their human capitals. Indeed, they planned longer stays in Thailand after graduation. By contrast, the poor performance of the state cadre origins suggests that they do not count on the accumulation of human capital for jobs, possibly because they have

the institutional advantages in the post socialist and transitioning China, such as the labor market regulation in their favor and their family social connections. With these advantages, overseas education is more of a gold plated nature rather than an opportunity to improve human capital profoundly. At a stage near graduation, students with rural origins were more likely to be in a state of looking for jobs while students from state cadre families were more likely to have plans for a master degree. For the latter group of students, given the lack of drive for studying, it is probably a decision or advice given by their parents rather than made by themselves. Among those who were in a state of looking for jobs, students from state cadre and private owner families could not wait to go back home, compared with others.

With regard to students' evaluation of overseas education in Thailand, although there was no significant difference among classes in general (even when rural origin students are less likely to have secured jobs at the time), fine disparities were observed within classes. For the rural origin students, those who were conscious of the opportunities in Thailand tended to have more positive evaluations than others. It can be inferred that to make a peasant family's overseas education investment worthwhile, one needs to be calculative and rational from the very beginning. Students from state cadre families were also diverged in their evaluations. Those from county cities or lower tended to regret their overseas education in Thailand, while those whose families located in bigger cities had relatively positive feelings, possibly because of the believing that a good job in bigger cities is achievable or can be arranged either now or upon graduation from a graduate school. It is argued that institutional arrangements, formal or informal alike, play a critical role in defining people's opportunity structure and thus people's rational actions. Overseas education does not benefit everybody through an homogenous mechanism, rather, as shown in this article, it both presents an upward (also geographically outward) mobility road for the middle-lower classes in China, and serves equally well as a vehicle of inequality reproduction for those vested with institutional advantages who plan to return and work in China.



Inherited with a tradition that stresses determinative structures, sociologists in recent years have tried to adopt a more balanced approach. To be specific, rational, constructive or reflective actors in practice are brought back to life. As discussed by Pierre Bourdieu, constraining notwithstanding, a field is also a place for game players (Bourdieu 1977, Bourdieu 1984, Ritzer and Goodman 2004). I would argue that this is particularly true for Chinese. Chinese cherish worldly successes, even if they cannot make it, they may do their best to prepare their children for it. The socialist revolution further strengthens the belief in equality and mobility. Poorness does not mean stupidity; Mao's famous saying that "The lowly are most intelligent, the elite are most ignorant" speaks right to the hearts of those who believe that some new rich in today's China are just lucky in grasping new opportunities. Thus, it is to my liking that some empirical sociologists suggest that when we study the social processes of a post socialist society, we should not just focus on the relative change of powers among the former social positions; rather, an alternative to the rigid institutionalism approach should pay special attention to the changing opportunity structure and the individual's endeavor to occupy new advantaged positions (Wu and Xie 2003, Wu and Zhang 2010b, 吴愈晓 2010, 吴晓刚 2006). I agree with this line of thought in that it brings rationality and agency of individuals back, especially against the backdrop of a great transition. After all, barring some complaints about unfairness from time to time, many Chinese never hesitate to take chances to change their fates and indeed most people are living better lives in the post-reform years.

However, institutional factors should never be neglected in the agenda. Macro mechanism involving the change of fundamental logic for resources distribution may have seemed awkward when applied to explain the vivid social practices, yet some more concrete institutions constitute key factors defining individuals' respective opportunity structures and have bearings on the outcomes of choices and actions. In another article, I discussed the haunting effect of the household registration system on the career advancement of those with rural origins (林易 2010), while the point I am making in this article is that concrete institutions (including household registration system, work unit system, cadre-personnel system and the distribution of power and resources among levels of government) together with informal social norms (like Guanxi) form most relevant contexts or even determining factors behind the rationality and actions of people. As shown above, students with institutional advantages, represented by those from state cadre families in big cities, can take the overseas education as a way to legitimately assume

good jobs and steps toward the reproduction of inequality across generations, while some of those without institutional advantages represented by those with rural origins, out of the worries of being left behind permanently, may rush to join the bandwagon of overseas education (Xiang and Wei 2009). Unfortunately, if they are not aware of their restricted opportunities, they are more likely to be stranded nowhere and regret their decisions. Just like other new opportunities that emerged in the reforming years, overseas education can either serve as a mechanism of maintaining inequality, or provide new opportunities for the disadvantaged. As for the empirical sociologist, the interplay of rational actors and their institutional contexts is warranted to shed more light on societies undergoing major social and economic changes.

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