

Spring 2022

Increasing Numbers of Chinese Students at U.S. Higher Education: Theories, Discussions, and Survey Findings in context of Chinese Education and Social Stratification

Youren Yu
Bard College

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcommons.bard.edu/senproj_s2022



Part of the [Educational Sociology Commons](#), and the [Inequality and Stratification Commons](#)



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 4.0 License](#).

Recommended Citation

Yu, Youren, "Increasing Numbers of Chinese Students at U.S. Higher Education: Theories, Discussions, and Survey Findings in context of Chinese Education and Social Stratification" (2022). *Senior Projects Spring 2022*. 194.

https://digitalcommons.bard.edu/senproj_s2022/194

This Open Access is brought to you for free and open access by the Bard Undergraduate Senior Projects at Bard Digital Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Senior Projects Spring 2022 by an authorized administrator of Bard Digital Commons. For more information, please contact digitalcommons@bard.edu.

Increasing Numbers of Chinese Students at U.S. Higher Education:
Theories, Discussions, and Survey Findings in context of Chinese Education and
Social Stratification

Senior Project submitted to
The Division of Social Studies
Of Bard College

By
Youren Yu

Annandale-on-Hudson, New York
May 2022

Table of Content

Abstract	4
Introduction	4
Literature Review	6
Methods	24
Findings and Discussions	28
Conclusion	41
Reference	45

Acknowledgement

First and foremost, I would like to thank my Advisor Dominique Townsend, who has given me the kindest support throughout the year, and the Sociology Professors Yuval Elmelech, Laura Ford and Allison McKim who have continuously offered me critical insights to exploring the academic realm of sociology.

I would also like to thank the 15 respondents who have participated in my survey. Their contributions are crucial to the completion of this paper.

Last but not least, I want to thank my parents who have supported me in studying at Bard and sociology all along. Their kindness and support make my academic endeavors possible.

Abstract

The U.S. Immigration and Custom Enforcement reports that Chinese international students have been increasing continuously for over a decade, and they are also the biggest group of international students in the U.S. Reviewing key theories and literature on social stratification such as the rational choice model, maximally maintained inequality, and effectively maintained inequality, and conducting in-depths surveys with 15 Chinese students studying in U.S. higher education institutions, I discuss micro and macro level reasons why some Chinese students choose U.S higher education. I argue at the micro level, the decision can be explained by individual disagreement with the Chinese education system. At the macro level, the phenomenon can be explained by the increasing number of Chinese families who seek to maintain and reproduce their generally high socioeconomic status through choosing higher education in the U.S. for their offspring.

Introduction

Society is stratified. Education is stratified. In societies around the globe, people attain different levels of education, different tracks of education, and receive different returns to their education. Since the Chinese higher education expansion in 1999, increasingly more students are able to access higher education. On the other hand, in the recent decade, increasing numbers of Chinese students are choosing an international track of higher education – mostly choosing to attain higher education in the US, as opposed to receiving higher education in China. The U.S. Immigration and Custom Enforcement reports that China has been the biggest input of international students into the US since year 2008. In 2020, there are in total 382,561 Chinese international students in the US (U.S. Immigration and Custom Enforcement).

Even so, this number pales in comparison to the number of students attaining higher education within China. To attain higher education in China, students are required to enter the College Entrance Exam, and the exam score is a major determinant of what kinds of universities they will be studying at. Generally, it is understood that there are 3 tiers of universities in China, the top tier being the most elite institutions, the second tier being the 211/985 programs, and the third being the rest (Jia and Li 2017; Wu 2017). Given the number of students competing in the exam, there are immense competitions, and students have to go through trainings and practices that are often deemed overly rigid. Still, the majority of Chinese students attain higher education within China, and being able to enter a quality university in China is associated with beneficial returns without a doubt (Jia and Li 2017; Li et al 2011).

But what is special about those who attain higher education in the US? And why do we need to sociologically study this group? The key is that education is almost always stratified and varied. Individuals don't all have the same chances in accessing higher education, and not all groups will attain the same track of education. Families of different social class may also prefer education tracks or institutions that resonate with their values (Becker and Hecken 2009). Like those competing for top universities in China, advantageous groups in the U.S. compete for elite private institutions, or top-ranked programs.

So in order to understand this higher education phenomenon, we are going to study it in the context of stratification. To do this, we are first going to review literature and theories that discuss ways in which different groups in societies attain different quantities and qualities of education, as well as different tracks (vocational vs. academic). We want to understand patterns in which stratification and inequalities in societies are maintained, and see how that informs us about Chinese students attaining

higher education in the U.S. Then, we will also review literature on higher education in China and the U.S., giving us more knowledge to the practical benefits to receiving higher education. Through engaging in in-depth surveys with Chinese students who are currently studying in the U.S., we are going to research this phenomenon qualitatively. In the surveys, we seek to understand the students' primary reasons to studying in the U.S., in terms of individual reasons, expected returns, and what the students believe to be large scale factors that influence the increasing popularity of this education track.

Literature Review

Education and Stratification: Patterns, Choices, and Explanations

To start, we are going to discuss the empirical study by Becker and Hecken, testing the rational choice model of education choices by Breen, Goldthorpe and Esser (2009). This study centers in the context of higher education in Germany. The rational choice model proposes that working-class individuals, facing the choice of higher education and vocational training after high school, are more likely to favor vocational training, due to the expected costs, and class-specific ideals of status maintenance (Becker and Hecken 2009). For Becker and Hecken, status maintenance ideals are a crucial concept to understand why individuals of different social class choose different tracks of education. For middle and upper class families, they consider the intergenerational maintenance of their class status when choosing education tracks. For them, higher education helps protect against significant downward mobility. On the other hand, the working class does not need to maintain a "social status", and given the costs of higher education, the alternative vocational trainings are clearly more practical and involve less financial risks.

Along with theoretical discussion by Boudon (1974), the article discusses the

primary and secondary effects of social origin on one's education attainment. The primary effect refers to the role of individuals' school achievements prior to higher education, and the secondary effects refers to individuals' class status maintenance motives. The article concludes that given the primary effects of social origin, the secondary effects are explanatory of inequality that emerges at the stage of higher education (Becker and Hecken 2009). The theoretical frameworks of the article present a discussion on the role of social origin on one's education attainment, and how individuals of different social class choose different tracks of education. This framework can be helpful to the discussion of Chinese students choosing higher education in the US, if individuals' social class and social origin are explanatory of their higher education decisions. In the context of Chinese higher education, increasing numbers of Chinese students are choosing higher education abroad. If we consider the cost factor, higher education abroad costs much more, which means that individuals of higher socioeconomic status are more likely to choose this track.

Next, we will discuss two respective theories of inequality, maximally maintained inequality and effectively maintained inequality, which addresses patterns in which different social groups attain different levels and qualities of education (Raftery and Hout 1993; Lucas 2001). The two theories provide crucial insights into understanding patterns of stratification in Chinese education, and those choosing higher education in the US.

First, the theory maximally maintained inequality is proposed by Raftery and Hout in their paper which researches the education expansion in Ireland in the 1960s (1993). Their aim was to investigate the changes in the effect of social origin on education attainment in Ireland, based on cohorts from 1908 to 1956. What they find is that unless schools increase total enrollments of students, the ratio between students of different

social classes in access to education does not change (Raftery and Hout 1993). In other words, students of higher social origins will always dominate a proportion of total enrollment, regardless of education expansion – an increase in opportunities of education. In fact, scholars studying higher education in China have also found patterns of maximally maintained inequality (Guo and Wu 2008; Yeung 2013). They find the Chinese higher education expansion in 1999 lead to increased inequality of access to higher education, despite the increased opportunities brought about by the expansion. What this suggests is when more opportunities of higher education became available, students of higher social origin take up the opportunities earlier than the less advantaged students. Overall, the theory of maximally maintained inequality highlights that more advantageous families attain higher education opportunities earlier, which means that increased opportunities does not equal fairer access.

Raftery and Hout also point out that increases in the enrollments of higher education suggest increases in demand of higher education, which may be caused by (1) population growth and (2) “the gradual upgrading of social origins over time” (1993). When a population grows, there may be more families that will seek higher education, and if more families attain higher education and experience upward social mobility, there is a general uplift of social statuses.

This point can be highly relevant to the discussion of higher education in China and those who choose higher education in the US. If the population of the middle and upper class increases, more will be able to afford higher education, and more may value higher education (Becker and Hecken 2009), which can lead to increasing enrollments. If, in the context of China, higher education enrollment and enrollment of students in US higher education both increase over time, it must suggest something about the population that can afford and choose to attain higher education.

Now, effectively maintained inequality was proposed by Lucas to address patterns in education attainment and school transitions (2001). The theory essentially posits that advantageous groups will secure quantitative and qualitative advantages to maintain their status and advantages (Lucas 2001). For example, when most are generally achieving a similar level of education, advantageous groups will aim for qualitative differences, such as entering a more prestigious program, securing better qualities. If there are clear quantitative differences not met by most, advantageous groups will try to gain quantitative advantages, such as seeking a more advanced degree thus gaining more years of schooling. This theory provides a highly illuminating framework to understand different education tracks and education inequalities, and it is a good Segway to discuss patterns of education attainment and inequality in China.

In the context of education in China, scholars have demonstrated patterns of effectively maintained inequality at the high school level. Ye finds that in urban regions where senior high school enrollments are generally higher, families of more socioeconomic advantages compete for “key-point” high schools, essentially schools with better resource and prestige, to secure qualitative differences (2015). What is special about “key-point” high schools is they not only provide qualitative differences but also future long term advantages in entering higher education. For those who attend “key-point” senior high schools, their chances of transitioning into higher education is close to twice of those who attended regular senior high schools (68.5% vs. 35.1%). This can be partially explained by the fact that those who enter “key-point” high schools already come from more advantageous backgrounds, therefore, they are more likely to continue securing quantitative and qualitative advantages at higher education.

Like the pattern of effectively maintained inequality suggests, at the stage of higher education in China, scholars have found when higher education enrollment was low,

meaning when such quantitative differences was uncommon, those who attain higher education are mostly from more socioeconomically advantageous families (Guo and Wu 2008; Yeung 2013). Advantageous groups secure the quantitative differences when higher education enrollments were generally lower. Over time, as enrollment in higher education in China grows, advantageous groups will end up in more competitive institutions to secure their qualitative advantages. Along the same line, as higher education enrollment in China continues to grow, a different qualitative difference becomes gradually realized and seized by the advantaged – higher education abroad. Like EMI suggests, qualitative differences are maintained within the same level of education, if enrollment and competition in higher education in China continues to grow, less qualitative differences become available at the stage, causing a need for further qualitative differences, which in this case would be an international higher education. The advantaged send their children abroad for higher education, to receive quality education and other advantages associated with the different social environments.

The theory of maximally maintained and effectively maintained inequality provide insights into how the advantaged groups grasp education opportunities earlier, and secure quantitative and qualitative differences to maintain their status. The theoretical discussions around the rational choice model by Becker and Hecken offer crucial explanations as to why individuals of different socioeconomic standings seek different education tracks. The more advantaged take into consideration of status maintenance and intergenerational mobility, leading them to value higher education more. The less advantaged are daunted by the cost of higher education, and given their background, vocational trainings seem more practical and realistic investment wise. The theories and explanations are crucial frameworks to consider in order to examine the increasing number of Chinese students who are choosing higher education abroad. We will come

back to these theories when we discuss the findings, and see if what we find correspond to what is discussed by the theories and if the theories continue to provide explanations for what we would like to understand.

Returns to Higher Education, the U.S. and China

Along with understanding the theories behind the patterns of education stratification and inequality, it is also important to understand the benefits, or the returns to higher education, or education in general. Contrary to status maintenance, understanding the returns and benefits of higher education gives us a more practical view of the costs and benefits of higher education. As we seek to understand the phenomenon of the increasing number of Chinese students who are studying in the U.S., it is important that we review some literature on both Chinese and U.S. higher education, not necessarily for comparison, but for a more holistic review of both sides.

To start with U.S. higher education, we are going to examine sociological findings on the returns to US higher education. Generally, scholars have presented various benefits associated with receiving higher education in the US.

First, findings demonstrate that education correlates with positive economic outcomes (Hout 2012; Julian and Kominski 2011).

Hout presents that workers with a college degree are much less likely to be unemployed (2012). Measuring rate of unemployment for people aged from 30 to 54, Hout finds clear differences in unemployment rates between people with and without a high school degree (2012). He finds that, from 2007 to 2009, individuals with less than a high school diploma had an unemployment rate of 11%, and men with a high school degree had an unemployment rate of 7.4% and women at 5.2% (Hout 2012). College graduates have much lower unemployment rates, at 2.8% (Hout 2012). Individuals with

degrees higher than undergraduate have an unemployment rate of less than 2% (Hout 2012). In addition, Hauser and Warren finds that as one's level of education increases, their chances of finding a job that pays well also increases (1997).

On earnings, studies show that earnings grow as one's level of education increases (Julian and Kominski 2011). First, for persons aged between 30 to 54, income increases about 20% for each level of education one receives. Similarly, hourly wages increase 17% for each earned educational level (Julian and Kominski 2011). Furthermore, Julian and Kominski show that college educated men make 1.1 million dollars more than high school educated men, assuming people work for 40 years in life (the number differs slightly for different racial groups) (Julian and Kominski 2011). For college educated women, they make 636,000 dollars more than those with high school degrees (Julian and Kominski 2011). Scholars have also measured family incomes as a unit, in order to understand long-term effects of education on marriage and economic success (Harding et al. 2004). They show that the family income of college educated men were \$91,800, in comparison to \$50,100 for high school education men. For women, college educated income were at \$86,700 in comparison to high school educated at \$45,200.

The results show increasing one's level of education is often associated with benefits to employment status, employment satisfaction, and earnings. These are clear practical benefits to why individuals may choose to attain higher education. During one's time of education, one accumulates skills and knowledge. There are also degrees that are directly applicable to particular positions in the labor market, such as data analysts or MBA executives. In addition, education also provide networks and opportunities. Individuals meet lots of people during their education, and establish networks and contacts that can benefit their chances in the labor market.

In addition, scholars have also studied how attaining college education impacts

different groups of people differently, and what kinds of group benefit the most from receiving college education (Brand and Xie 2010). These scholars have all adopted a similar method – comparing a group of students that normally do not qualify for admission and a group of students that do qualify, and examining which group benefitted more from receiving college education. They have generally found that students that do not usually qualify end up benefitting more from receiving college education than those who do. Although this method of negative selection has been critiqued by some scholars (Carneiro et al. 2011), others point out that such findings provide some explanations for why random assignments of individuals to education tend to produce more significant results (Hout 2012).

This effect points to how the “selection” in higher education does not produce the greatest benefits to students. The studies show that students who do not normally qualify tend to benefit more from higher education. The standards set by institutions then arguably limit the most benefits students may be able to receive. Suppose that universities adopt some forms of policy to increase the chances of students from less advantageous backgrounds to enter the university, more of less advantaged students will not only receive a better chance in admission, but also enjoy the negative selection effect studied by different scholars (Brand and Xie 2010).

Last, studies have also shown strong associations between education and health – people with college degrees are generally healthier (Mirowski and Ross 2003). This is also not necessarily surprising, as education can promote regular working schedules, regularly accomplishing tasks, and regular socializing between colleagues and peers. People who receive more education may also be more likely to engage with scientific facts about one’s health, which informs their decisions in maintaining good health.

In addition, higher education institutions are certainly not uniform in prestige,

resources, and accessibility. Some institutions are much more competitive to get into, some programs are higher ranked, and often these factors influence the quality and quantity of returns to one's degree. Statistics also show that student bodies of Ivy League institutions are predominantly white (Ashkenas, Park, and Pearce 2017). Therefore, we will also examine returns specifically associated with attending selective institutions. Since advantageous groups are more likely to enter elite institutions, are there additional benefits associated with it, such as promoting particular appeals to employers?

Scholars have generally found that graduates of elite or highly selective institutions earn more than graduates from less selective institutions. And scholars provide several explanations (Gerber and Cheung 2008). The first theoretical explanation is the theory of human capital. Students in selective or elite institutions gain both "cognitive and non-cognitive skills" more than those in less selective institutions (Gerber and Cheung 2008). This mechanism may occur in two aspects. One is selective institutions may possess better quality educational resources directed toward students. Students can learn from more experienced professors, and professors impart quality teaching and advice to students. Also, students studying at selective, high-quality institutions study with other students with similarly higher academic abilities and may learn useful skills from peers more.

Along the argument of human capital, if students in selective institutions in fact do gain more quality skills, students when graduating from such institutions will accumulate much more quality skills that can benefit them in the labor market. But if students of more advantageous backgrounds are more likely to enter selective institutions, as they are more likely to possess the resources and skills that are sought after by selective institutions, these institutions provide a pathway for the advantaged

to gain even more exclusive skills and capitals. What they gain from selective institutions can further benefit them in the labor market, which creates for them more advantages in life. In other words, selective institutions play a huge stratifying role in higher education, as they select students that will gain the benefits of attending a selective institution. Students of less advantaged backgrounds not only have less chances in attending an elite institution, and attending a less selective institution creates further distance between them and the more advantaged students.

The second explanation to why graduates from highly selective institutions earn more is the theory of “signal effect” (Spence 1973). This theory posits that employers, when seeing an applicant with degrees from a selective institution, receive a “signal” of higher abilities. Thus, applicant with such credentials may have better chances in getting into certain positions and earning more. However, this “signal” is only a signal, as it cannot fully demonstrate the individual from selective institutions do in fact possess higher skills. There are other explanations that scholars value. The theory of social capital provides that individuals at high-quality, selective institutions have access to better quality social networks, thus they have better chances in accessing positions that pay more. Lastly, scholars also point to the selection effect. The view of the selection effect posits that graduating from selective institutions is not the cause of working at positions with high earnings. Rather, it is the learning and working abilities of the individuals that get them to achieve their outcome (Dale and Krueger 2002).

Dale and Krueger have produced findings that clearly illustrate the selection effect (2002). Their key finding is that college freshmen who were admitted into elite, selective universities but still chose to study in less selective universities ended up earning just as much as those who attended elite universities (2002), demonstrating that attending selective institutions is not the cause of higher earnings. In 2011, Dale and

Krueger produced similar finding that supports the ability explanation. They have found that although earnings were in fact higher for people who attended elite, selective universities, earnings correlated with average SAT score of the universities they applied to (Dale and Krueger 2014). Furthermore, in relation to previous discussions on negative selection, their finding suggests that for black and Hispanic students whose parents held lower levels of education, attending a selective university had positive effect on their earnings (Dale and Krueger 2014).

Scholars of both the sociology and economics disciplines have studied higher education in China, paying attention to questions of mobility and returns to attaining higher education. Similar to scholars studying higher education in the US, sociologists and economists have also studied “elite” higher education in China, investigating questions such as the returns to elite education in China. I will present and summarize scholarly research, in sociology and economics, on higher education in China, specifically what questions scholars have explored, relevant findings, and relevant theories. Here, I am interested in understanding how elite education further stratifies students and graduates in China. In previous discussions, we have examined studies and theoretical discussions that show how selective institutions provide better quality resources and skills to its students, but as students at selective institutions are more likely to come from more advantageous families, selective institutions produce more advantages for the students, creating more distance between the advantaged and the less advantaged students.

To start, various studies have investigated the returns to attaining elite higher education in China (Li et al 2011; Jia and Li 2015). Before diving into the research, I will present some contexts to higher education in China. First, in order to get into

colleges, students attend the College Entrance Exam, and the score they obtain is a major determinant of what colleges they will be able to attend. Competition in this exam is massive and intense. Scholars report that around 10 million Chinese students attend the College Entrance Exam each year, while only approximately 380,000 attain higher education in the US (Jia and Li 2017; U.S. Immigration and Custom Enforcement). Second, similar to rankings of universities in the US, universities in China are also categorized into different tiers. There are 3 main tiers of universities in China: the top tier includes the most well-known universities such as Tsinghua University and Beijing University, and statistics show that the top tier only admits 5% of the total number of students who enter the exam (Jia and Li 2017). The second tier are the 211 program universities, and the third tier are the rest. 211 programs are state-recognized programs also with relative prestige.

Onto the scholarly research on the topic, various studies have investigated the returns to elite higher education in China. To start, economists Li et al. in 2011 investigates returns to attending elite higher education in China (2011). Using data on college graduates from 2010, they measure first job wage and its correlation with attending elite colleges in China (Li et al. 2011). Although they find that students graduated from elite colleges on average obtain 26.4% higher monthly wages than those from other colleges, the number drops to 20.4% when they control for College Entrance Exam score, college location, and college major. These factors were considered because they may be unique to some elite colleges, since some elite colleges are located in cities with higher average wages and elite colleges may offer major different from other colleges. In addition, once they factored in individual and family characteristics, the coefficient decreased to only 10.7%. Also, they measured returns in terms of gender, father's years of education and parental income. They find that female students obtain

much more returns than male students, and students whose father obtained years of education higher than the medium obtain more return than those below. Parental income bears no influence on returns to elite higher education.

To provide explanations to these returns, Li et al. present that students from elite colleges possess better human capitals, such as better English scores (2011). When they controlled human capital attributes and variables associated with student experiences in college and measured return again, the coefficient becomes small and no longer significant, which suggests that human capital is a sufficient explanation for higher returns for elite college students.

Here, the findings demonstrate, just like attending selective institutions in the US, attending elite institutions provide considerable returns to graduates. No matter Chinese or US higher education institutions, it is important to consider who consists of the graduates. If more graduates come from socioeconomically advantageous families, the higher education institutions furthers and reproduce their advantages. But if more graduates come from less advantaged families, the institutions provide significant upward mobility for the students.

Similarly, Jia and Li in 2017 also investigates the returns to elite higher education in China, but focusing more on whether being able to attend elite higher education has any influence on attaining an elite status, such as working in an elite occupation (2017). Jia and Li measures wage returns to elite higher education through observing differences between the cutoff score for elite colleges. Indeed, their finding supports that those who scored above the cutoff obtains higher wage returns (Jia and Li 2017). They present that scoring above the cutoff raises one's wage by 122RMB, approximately \$18. Then, they investigate whether scoring above the cutoff has any effect on mobilizing into the elite class. Their finding demonstrates that scoring above

the cutoff does not have any significant impact on mobilizing into elite occupations, elite industry, elite ownerships, or non-wage benefits of the elites.

Their findings suggest that though attending elite higher education provides wage returns, it does not mobilize one into the elite class. Whether one is able to mobilize into the elite class has more to do with the family background. As the data Jia and Li works with also includes information on parents, they investigate whether parental backgrounds are more predictive of mobilizing into the elite class. They do find that parental backgrounds are predictive of attaining elite occupations, ownerships and working in elite industry. Students whose parents have already attained an elite status are the ones more likely to also mobilize into the elite class.

Again, we want to understand who are usually attaining elite higher education in China, as elite higher education do provide returns, if more students of advantageous families attend elite higher education, the institutions simply reproduce and further their advantages. However, if a significant portion of students in elite institution come from less advantaged families, the institutions and the education they receive provide upward mobility and to some extent reduce the disparity between the more advantaged and the less advantaged students.

Sociologist Xiaogang Wu investigates higher education in the context of social stratification in China, focusing on family backgrounds, special admission policies and key-point high schools in contributing to the formation of elites (2017). First of all, Wu demonstrates that students of upper and upper-middle class families, and students from county-level cities, prefectural cities and provincial capital/Beijing are more likely to get into elite universities and mid-tier 211 universities (2017). Then, Wu highlights that high schools play a key role in stratifying students. He presents that students graduated from key-point high schools have better chances in getting into elite universities and

211 universities. Students who graduated from key-point high schools at the provincial level are 10.1 times more likely to get into elite universities, and 5.7 times more likely to get into 211 universities, than those not from key-point high schools. Lastly, Wu shows that qualifying for special admission makes one 1.5 times and 7 times more likely to get into elite universities and 211 universities. However, Wu further demonstrates that chances of students of upper-middle and upper class families to receive special admission are 47.2% higher than those from middle and lower class families.

Again, Wu's findings essentially highlight that students with socioeconomic advantages and location advantages generally have better chances in entering elite tier 1 universities and tier 2 universities. Here, the more prestigious universities' selection of students favors the more advantaged, which gives them further advantages in life. If elite universities intend on providing more chances of upward mobility for students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds, they must provide some incentive and extra help for the less advantaged students. Otherwise, the higher education process continually reproduces advantages and statuses of the higher socioeconomic groups. In addition, the finding on special admission policy in China indicate a need for such policy to aid students of lower socioeconomic background. Generally, students of higher socioeconomic background already have better chances in entering a more quality institution, the special admission policy must consider extra aid for the less advantaged students.

The stage of high school is highlighted a key stage of stratification in China. The key point schools, just like the elite higher education institutions, possess more education resources and are better equipped to train students for the coming college exam. But just like the elite higher education institutions, it is highly competitive to be

admitted into key-point high schools, and those who get into key-point high schools are more likely from a more advantageous social background. Ye's study on key-point high schools in China investigates who are more likely to be admitted into key-point high schools (2015). She finds that the variable parental level of education produces a positive effect on one's chances in entering key-point high schools (Ye 2015). Parental level of education is a key indicator of students' family socioeconomic background, and a higher level of education may indicate a student come from a middle- or upper-class background. What the finding suggests is that students of higher socioeconomic background are more likely to enter key-point high schools, receive the better quality resources and training, as well as having a better chance to compete in higher education (Ye 2015).

Prior to higher education, students in China are already beginning to be stratified based on their background, which has an effect on their achievements. Also at the high school stage, students who decide to attain higher education abroad attend a different type of program, which are international high school programs. Such programs are designed to train students to be prepared for higher education outside China, more often in countries such as the US, UK, and Canada. For families who intend to send their children abroad for higher education, decision making is usually essential at this stage.

To sum up, scholars have demonstrated returns to elite higher education in China, particularly in terms of wage returns (Li et al. 2011; Jia and Li 2017). Li et al. have also demonstrated father's years of education also plays a role in wage returns (2011). Similarly, Jia and Li presents that students who scored above the cutoff for elite universities in the Chinese College Entrance Exam receive higher wages, but scoring above the cutoff has no impact on mobilizing into the elite class. Instead, they show that having parents who have achieved an elite status increases one's likelihood to also

attain an elite status. Lastly, Wu shows that being from upper and upper-middle class families increases one's chances in getting into elite universities and 211 universities, and graduates from key-point high schools have much better chances in getting into elite universities and 211 universities (2017). While the special admission option increases one's chances, students from upper and upper-middle class families are much more likely to qualify.

Sociological research has shown higher education as an institutional mechanism which reproduces the statuses of those already socioeconomically advantaged. In the case of China, researches show that certain groups (socioeconomically advantaged, geographically advantaged) are much more likely to attain elite higher education, but attaining elite higher education has no relationship to mobilizing into an elite class. What this means is that students who already come from a generally advantageous background are going to be able to reach a similar status, through attaining higher education. A smaller number of students from less advantageous backgrounds can achieve boosts to future incomes, through attaining higher education, but this route does not promise significant upward mobility.

For those intending to attain higher education in the US, this educational track is primarily different from attaining higher education within China in two ways, one is students who choose this track does not need to prepare for the Central College Exam, and two, this track is significantly much costly than attaining higher education within China. We know limited things sociologically about Chinese students attaining higher education in the US, but we know that attaining higher education reproduces statuses. And since Chinese students who choose to attain higher education in the US need to have some strong economic resources to start with, attaining higher education will

reproduce their parents' statuses. We do not know if this educational track promises higher chances of upward mobility. So, Chinese students attaining higher education in the US is a phenomenon in which socioeconomically advantageous families choose to reproduce their status.

The findings generally show that while elite higher education in China brings returns to students, family background also plays roles in wages and chances in attaining an elite status after receiving elite education. Moreover, family backgrounds also play major roles in getting into elite universities in the first place, as well as key-point high schools. Thus, the findings suggest that students of higher socioeconomic background, from higher administrative cities, are certainly favored in the elite higher education process, which means the process reproduces and furthers the status of those already from higher socioeconomic backgrounds and more developed cities. Students from less advantaged backgrounds have lower chances at the high school level to enter key-point high schools which can help them achieve better at the college exam. Their chances are lower again at the higher education level, competing with not just students from more advantageous backgrounds, but students from key-point high schools. Thus, Chinese students begin to become highly stratified at the high school stage, and the admission and exam process creates further distances between the advantaged students and the less advantaged. Sociologists have demonstrated ways in which higher education reproduces status. For students choosing to pursue higher education in the US, they maintain a status through choosing a much more expensive track of high school and higher education, aiming for quality and international higher education.

Methods

Survey and Sampling

To understand qualitatively the phenomenon of Chinese students studying in the US, we are going to engage in in-depth surveys with Chinese students who are attending higher education in the U.S.

Given its time efficient nature, we are going to conduct surveys involving short and long answer questions that encourage detailed explanations from the respondent. I aim for a sample size of approximately 18 respondents. This is a relatively small sample, since I seek to engage with quality and in-depth responses, rather than short responses in greater quantities.

Though interviews are certainly an effective method for probing detailed insights from respondents, surveys are more time efficient as respondents will be able to participate in the survey on their own within a short period of time. But to make up for some disadvantages of probing detailed answers, I will primarily design open-ended questions over close-ended questions in my survey, guiding the respondents to provide more details and explanations.

An advantage that surveys possess is that all respondents will be presented with the same set of questions, and respondents are less likely to be influenced or distracted by the researcher since they will complete the surveys independently. After collecting the responses, having respondents complete the same set of surveys allows me to effectively organize and analyze the responses. Having the respondents completing the surveys independently has the benefit that they are less likely to feel pressured to answer in a certain way, and their answers will not be accidentally swayed by an interviewer.

My sample will primarily be Chinese students currently studying at US institutions,

and I will also accept respondents who have graduated from US institutions. I choose to not limit to only current undergraduate students, because those who have already graduated not only had the same higher education experience, but they also may have a more thorough understanding of their experience and choice, as they already have graduated. As stated before, I aim for a sample size of approximately 18 respondents, since we are aiming for quality over quantity in the responses.

To reach out respondents, I will first contact a first round of 3 of my peers studying at my institution, to see if they are willing to participate in my research. If they are, then, utilizing snowball sampling, I will ask the initial respondents to refer to 1 or 2 more potential respondents who may also be interested in participating in the survey. I will encourage the respondents to refer to potential respondents from a different institution, so I will ideally have respondents spread out at different institutions in the U.S. If the respondents are unable to provide further respondents, or the suggested potential respondents are not able to participate, I will contact more of my peers at my institutions to see if they are interested in participating the surveys. I will repeat this process several times until I reach the desired number of respondents.

In order to make sure that respondents can provide some detailed answers and explanations, I will personally communicate to them prior to participation the importance of providing detailed answers, and encourage them to do so, I will also include a reminder at the start of the survey to highlight the importance of providing detailed answers and explanations. In addition, since I will be conducting the survey through Google forms, I will be able to see the survey responses systematically by respondents. So, I will also communicate to the respondents prior to participation, that I may contact them for further details and explanations regarding their answer after they have completed the survey.

In terms of the protection of the respondent, my research will certainly be approved by the Institutional Review Board before I start. The survey will be conducted anonymously. I will not reveal the personal information of the respondents in any way. I will also only share the findings with my academic advisor. Furthermore, though respondents are encouraged to provide detailed answers and explanations, they can choose to omit any question they want to, and they can choose to quit the survey or withdraw their answers if they wish to.

Survey Design

The primary aim of the survey is to understand why individuals are choosing U.S. higher education over Chinese, and see if we can detect any macro-level reasonings and explanations. Along this aim, I will also collect information on respondents' family background, and questions on how respondents evaluate their current experience of studying in the US, to get a fuller picture which will be beneficial to the analysis and discussions.

The first section of the survey collects basic information such as the institution the respondent is studying at, the respondents' major, and year of study. I also collect information on respondents' parental level of education and occupation, both are commonly used by sociologists to understand social class. Knowing these information will help us better understand respondents' answers to more in-depth questions.

The second section deals with the key in-depth questions that seek to understand students' motivations and reasons for choosing to study in the US. Along with asking the question "why do you choose to study in the US", I also ask respondents' to provide their expectations and opinions on the alternative higher education track, attaining higher education within China. I also ask how do you think you will do if you were to

enter the College Entrance Exam, in attempts to push the respondents to reflect on why attaining higher education in China was not a fit for them in the first place. In addition, as we have discussed in the literature review, middle- and upper-class families are likely to consider intergenerational status maintenance when choosing education tracks for their children, so it makes it crucial to also understand to some extent the parents' view and reasonings to send their children to the U.S. I therefore ask the respondents for what reason do they think their parents supports them in attaining higher education in the US. Lastly, since all the previous questions deal with individual reasons and circumstances, I then ask the respondents, for what reason do they think more and more Chinese students are choosing this U.S. higher education track. Asking this question may give us some insight into more macro level discussions of the phenomenon. Combining with the more individual reasons, it give us a more all-rounded discussion of the phenomenon.

Lastly, in the third section, I collect information on how respondents' evaluate their experience in studying in the US. This will give us a full picture to understand if their intentions match their experience. To do this, I ask the respondents to rate their overall satisfaction with their institutions, their overall well-being while studying in the US, and their academic achievements in the US.

During the process of distributing my surveys and talking to my respondents prior to participating, I made clear to my respondents that detailed answers and explanations are highly appreciated and will be more beneficial to the research. In doing so, I was able to get in-depth responses from most of my respondents.

Findings and Discussion

Towards the end of the research stage, I was able to receive responses from 15 respondents, which roughly meets the initial goal number of respondents. The research may benefit from a few more respondents, but given the limit of time, and after looking through the responses, the 15 responses I have collected are generally satisfactory. The respondents generally concentrate in institutions on the east coast, with a few studying in institutions on the west coast.

I will present the findings and discussions in order of the different sections of the survey, 'Primary motivations', 'Expectations', and 'Experience'. At the start of each section, I will discuss the general aim of the section, and the questions I asked in the section. I will also indicate the number of responses I received for each question. To present specific findings and responses, I will summarize and highlight responses to each question, followed by discussions in relation to the aim of the research, as well as relevant theories and literature. The key question we aim to understand is why increasing numbers of Chinese students are choosing US higher education, and what does that mean in the context of education and social stratification in China.

The Why Question

Understanding why Chinese students choose to come to the US for higher education over China is one of the key aims of the research. Through qualitative research, we want to understand at the individual level why some students choose US higher education over Chinese higher education, and we also want to see if respondents may highlight any macro level explanations that will benefit our understanding and discussions to the broader context of higher education and social stratification in China.

To fully examine the why question, I asked four questions in the survey, to push

the respondents to think about the issue at the individual and the macro level. At the individual level, I ask, “Why did you choose to study in the US?”, “When did you decide that you are going to study in the US?”, and “What do you think is the reason your parents also support you in attaining higher education in the US?”. To attempt to evoke large scale discussions, I ask, “What do you think is the reason that so much Chinese students are coming to study in the US?”. Through this question, I hope respondents will provide broader, large-scale discussion of the phenomenon as opposed to their individual reasons.

On the first question, I received a total of 14 responses. Asking this question allows me to understand the individual reasons for choosing this education track. Not surprisingly, respondents have provided various reasons for choosing this education track. While some are more personal reasons, others stress on the recognition of US higher education. To go into some details, those highlighting the strength of US higher education provides several different points, such as that U.S. higher education is more catered to individual needs, is more diverse and free, and has better training in the arts. A few respondents simply highlight the U.S. has the “better education”.

On the more personal reasons, some express that they prefer to learn in a more diverse and international environment, and others express a general disagreement with the education system in China, indicating things such as the stress associated with the College Entrance Exam, and that Chinese education often does not cater to individuals, and lack sports and extracurricular activities.

Based on the first question, two main points to take notice are the recognition of the strength of US higher education, and a disagreement with the Chinese education system, as these points reoccur in later responses.

On the next question, I ask when did you decide to come to the US, and I received

a total of 8 responses. The question of “when” pushes the respondents to provide more details and explanations on their decisions. And we also wish to understand at what stage of their previous education did they make the decision, as informs us ways in which education tracks start to vary in China. 7 out of 8 responses indicated they made the decision during late middle school, prior to senior high school. They indicate that it was around 8th grade in middle school when they and their family decided they were going to apply for universities in the US, and the decision meant that they may attend a non-traditional high school program in China. Traditionally, students who will attain higher education in China compete for prestigious high schools which may prepare them better for the Central College Exam. Non-traditional high school programs cater to students who do not intend to attain higher education within China, and are usually English-based, international programs that prepare students for higher education abroad. This informs us that the stage of senior high school is a point of differentiation for many Chinese students. A few indicated that this decision means they will not have to go through “toxic competitions” required in China (Anonymous student participant 2022). Lastly, one respondent indicated they made the decision to transfer to the US to study during the first year of college in China. The response provides that the respondent was unsatisfied with the previous major of study, which was English-Chinese interpretation. Recognizing some limits to studying the social sciences in China, which was the respondents’ preferred area of study, the respondent decided to transfer to study in the US.

Studies on education inequality in China have investigated the senior high school stage as a crucial stage of stratification of Chinese students (Wu 2017; Ye 2015). Our findings here indicate an additional track of high school education for Chinese students. For students intending to apply to universities in China, they need to enter a pre-senior

high school exam, also known as the ZhongKao. The ZhongKao is large scale universal examination for all middle school Chinese students to enter senior high school, similar to the nature of the college entrance exam. The ZhongKao score also determines what kinds of senior high school a student will attend. On the other hand, students who decide to attend higher education abroad do not need to enter this exam to enter a senior high school program. They simply need to satisfy the exam or requirements set by the specific high school programs they intend to attend.

Chinese students aiming to apply for universities in China compete for “key point” senior high schools, and entering “key point” high schools is usually associated with getting better trainings for the college entrance exam, increasing one’s chances in getting into a prestigious university in China (Ye 2015). Sociologists have conducted quantitative studies on factors that influence ones’ chances in getting into a key point senior high school, and how entering key point high schools influence one’s chances in getting into prestigious universities. Ye’s study points out that students whose parents are more educated have better chances in entering key-point high schools, and, graduates from key-point high schools have much better chances in transitioning into higher education and competing for top schools (2015). On the other hand, those who plan on applying to universities outside China tend to aim for international high school programs. Contrary to traditional high schools, international high school programs do not provide curriculum and trainings for students to enter the college entrance exam, but adopts international high school curriculums to prepare students for higher education outside China.

Next, I ask reasons for parental support for U.S. higher education. I received 9 responses in total. Though I cannot directly collect answer from the parents, the responses can indicate how their parents view U.S. higher education, and why they

support them in doing so. 6 responses indicate that their parents also value U.S. higher education, believing it to be the “better” education track, other responses point to better resources, and global perspectives.

One respondent, whose parents work as professors and library faculty in a Chinese university, indicate that her parents have lived in the west before, and they are aware of the differences in education between the west and China. Given this, her parents believe that U.S. higher education provides intellectual trainings that promote critical thinking, whereas Chinese education stresses too much on exams.

Another respondent, whose father is a CEO, indicate that her parents want her to receive better education and experience diverse culture through studying in the U.S. Eventually, they hope that this will prepare her to become competent in the labor market.

As parents play crucial roles in choosing education tracks for their offspring, highlighting the strength of U.S. higher education demonstrate attentions paid to the quality of education, and referring to it as “better” almost project a status of superiority.

To draw on Becker and Hecken’s theoretical discussion of the rational choice model, they posit that middle and upper class families are more likely to value higher education, because it helps them maintain their status and protect them from significant downward mobility (2009). Based on our responses, the parents not only value higher education, but also care about the quality, and intend to support their children in choosing the “better” track. For the parents of the respondents, higher education for status maintenance and social mobility is taken in mind, but it is the “better” U.S. higher education track they insist. Clearly, the responses project an upper-middle or upper-class stance, in that it is the “better” U.S. higher education that is fitting to their family, as opposed to Chinese higher education, the option for most Chinese families.

The last question asks, “why do you think increasingly more Chinese students

choose to study in the US?”. Contrary to the first question, which intends to understand individual reasons, this question seeks to invoke the macro-level discussions. Understanding both the individual level and the macro-level reasons help us gain a fuller perspective.

Similar to the responses to the previous questions, respondents continue to highlight US higher education as the “better education”. 2 responses provide detailed elaborations, which involve some macro-level discussions.

One response indicates that first, Chinese students who choose attain higher education in the U.S. are generally from “well off” families, in other words, families that are socioeconomically advantageous. And, attaining higher education in the US is becoming a “trend” that socioeconomically advantageous families in China like to pursue. This point certainly corresponds to our discussion previously, on how the responses project an higher socioeconomic status.

Another respondent also discussed some potential macro level explanation. The response indicates 3 points. First is an increase of the middle class in China in the recent decades, “the drastic growth of middle-class population” in their own words (Anonymous student participant 2022). An increase of the middle class can lead to an increase in demand of higher education. As more families are able to afford it, and more are considering intergenerational status maintenance when considering education tracks.

The second reason is a “peer influence” effect, which may be that as more families choose one education track over another, more families may catch on and make the same decision. “The growth of the middle class” certainly makes sense as a precondition to this effect. Lastly, the respondent points to a prevalent ideology of the Chinese labor market as the third reason, that “only getting a strong diploma would guarantee you a good job, which is one of the crucial prerequisites of living a happy,

flourishing life” (Anonymous student participant 2022). I may add that this ideology is not necessarily unique to China, but quite a universal ideology, that individuals must work hard and contribute to the society in order to be respected as a decent member of society.

To quote a respondent whose response ties into our discussion on social class and education tracks, “Most of them are quite well off and that leaves them with more options for their education” (Anonymous student participant 2022). Social class, or socioeconomic standing often have some relationship to one’s level of education or education track. Raftery and Hout’s theory of maximally maintained inequality describe patterns in which more socioeconomically advantageous families are able to take advantage of new education opportunities in an education expansion earlier than the less advantaged (1993).

Lucas’ theory of effectively maintained inequality describes that more advantageous families maintain quantitative advantages when possible, such as level of education, and qualitative advantages when possible, such as school quality and prestige (2001). Like we have previously discussed, the parents intend for their offspring a track of higher education that is deemed “better” than what is available to most in China. Here, U.S. education may possess an unique quality that is pursued by upper-middle or upper-class. The parents want the children to attain this “better” track, because they want to maintain their family status. This corresponds with the theory of EMI, as more advantageous families seek to secure qualitative advantages to maintain their status (Lucas 2001). On a bigger scale, if more families are able to afford higher education in the US, they can certainly constitute for the growing number of the middle and upper class families.

Overall, the responses and discussions clearly indicate a crucial role of

socioeconomic status in the decision to attain higher education in the United States. The families not only intend for their children to attend higher education, but also they specifically want this “better” track. This “better” track is certainly not the track that most Chinese families pursue, and it is also costlier than what most families would pursue. Additionally, this repeated emphasis on the “better” education corresponds to the theory of effectively maintained inequality, positing that socioeconomically advantageous families secure qualitative differences to maintain their status (Lucas 2001).

On Higher Education in China, College Entrance Exam

Next, I try to understand respondents’ opinions on the College Entrance Exam in China. I wish to understand respondents’ thoughts on the exam because it is one of the key differentiating factors between higher education in China and in US. Another differentiating factor would be costs. To understand this, I ask, “what is your general opinion on the College Entrance Exam in China?” And to further provoke their thoughts on this, I ask, “if you were to enter the College Entrance Exam in China, how do you think you will do?”

In the previous section, many responses have already indicated a disagreement with having to go through the College entrance exam to apply for higher education in China. Here in this section, I wish to understand more in-depth why respondents may disagree with the College Entrance exam.

On the first question, I received a total of 9 responses. The responses generally disagree with the exam due to its “brutally difficult and competitive” nature, and a few responses point out that it is however a fair system given the number of students in China. For those clearly disagreeing with the exam, they highlight points such as the

exam reduces students only to a score, and leaves no room for creative and critical thinking. They also indicate that the trainings before the exam can be highly rigid and repetitive. On the other hand, one respondent concedes that while the exam is certainly “not the best way to determine the overall quality of a student”, the respondent cannot think of a better way given the huge population of students in China. Another respondent also points out that the exam offers a fairer chance for socioeconomically disadvantaged students to enter prestigious universities, in comparison to the higher education system in the US. Here, I also wish to clarify that while the respondents express disagreement with the brutal competitions associated with the College Entrance exam, the respondents are also pointing to the rigid trainings and style of education under this system, which often shadow other aspects of learning, such as exploring their areas of interest and developing critical thinking skills – the respondents are not simply rejecting the exam because it is difficult and requires hard work.

To further provoke respondents’ thoughts on the exam, I asked if they were to enter the exam, how do they think they will do. I received a total of 8 responses for this question. 3 responses indicated some confidence in entering the exam, others expressed uncertainty. One response acknowledges that since the respondent is from Beijing, they possess some privilege in the process. This is a highly interesting point in terms of who is advantaged and who is disadvantaged in the exam, also given that a number of respondents discussed the fairness of the exam. A sociology study on the College Entrance Exam in China discussed advantaged and disadvantaged groups in the exam. The study demonstrates that students from more developed urban regions are more likely to score better on the exam, so do those from socioeconomically advantaged families (Wu 2017). However, the respondents are also not necessarily wrong in pointing out the fairness of the exam, since all students are assessed by this one score.

This response corresponds to literature on higher education in China.

Expectations for Future

In this section, I focus on trying to understand what respondents expect to gain from attaining higher education in the US, in terms of what they believe may be the returns for this track. Understanding their expectations is essentially another way to investigate the why question, and unlike the previous section where I try to understand more general reasons for this education track, here I focus on what specific credentials they believe they can gain through higher education in the US.

It is common knowledge and shown by research that attaining higher education is usually associated with some returns in the future. For Chinese students gaining their higher education degrees in the US, they often face a decision of whether to seek employment in the US where they have graduated, or back home in China. Often, these students express uncertainty towards seeking employment in the US or back home in China, and also where their degree may have more value. In this section, I ask straightforward questions regarding whether respondents believe getting a degree in the US will give them advantage when seeking employment in the future. I wish to understand ways in which respondents may believe receiving a degree in the US is more or less advantageous than receiving a degree in China. I also wish to understand in what ways receiving a degree in the US may influence students' decisions to want to seek employment in the US or China.

The first question I asked in this section is, “do you think getting higher education in the US can be benefit when you apply for jobs in the future?”. This is a short response question, followed by a space to explain the answers.

I received 15 short responses and 10 explanations. On the short responses, 8 responses

indicate positive answers, suggesting that they believe getting higher education in the US will be beneficial when seeking employments in the future, and 7 responses express uncertainty.

On the explanations, a few responses indicate that receiving higher education, attaining the degree credential is certainly valued on the job market. Also, higher education usually provides a platform of opportunities and networks that may benefit the individuals when seeking jobs. which are all useful resources that can benefit the students beside their degree. One response expresses ambiguity, and provides reasons for why receiving higher education in the US may or may not benefit future employment seeking. The response suggests that receiving higher education allows one to explore academically an area of interest, plus individuals get to practice “self-management” and “mental resilience”. On the other hand, the response points out that since international relations between China and the US is unstable and unpredictable, one cannot be certain if a degree if the US will be necessarily an advantage if seeking employments in China. Similarly, 2 other responses also indicate that employers in China may prefer graduates from Chinese universities, simply because they may be more familiar with the credentials of Chinese universities.

Overall, responses recognize that higher education generally provides platforms and opportunities that benefit individuals when seeking jobs, however, it is also interesting that some responses acknowledges that a degree from the US may not be a necessary advantage in the labor market in China. Recognizing this hypothetical disadvantage, respondents still chose higher education in the US, suggesting that some respondents may be willing to give up some potential advantages in the labor market, that they value more, or that they plan on seeking employments in the US.

Some responses indicate due to recent attentions to globalization, there may be an

increasing demand for bilingual graduates, in that being able to speak English and Chinese fluently may be an advantageous skill in the labor market.

Sociologists have long explored the different capitals individuals gain and accumulate through different social and institutional processes, and for Chinese students attaining higher education in the US, I wish to understand to some extent what different capitals Chinese students may gain through this educational track. I simply asked, what capitals respondents believe they are gaining through studying in the US. I received 11 responses to this question. What kinds of “capitals” as in credentials, valuable experiences do you think you are gaining through studying in the US?

A number of respondents point to social and cultural capital, such as meeting and learning from people of different backgrounds, and connecting with professors who are doing works that they are interested in. One respondent further explained that due to increasing attention to globalization, experiences of working with people of different backgrounds and professions, hence social and cultural capital, will give them some advantage when seeking careers in the future. Perhaps in comparison to higher education in China, living in the US exposes respondents to individuals of more diverse backgrounds, and hence richer social and cultural capital.

To relate to the theoretical discussions of human capital, scholars argue that when students enter selective institutions, they are likely to gain more quality skills and enjoy better quality education resources. Such skills and resources may translate to better positions in the labor market as well as more desirable earnings. For Chinese students studying in the US, they also gain different human capitals from their peers studying in China. The way people interacts, what institutions expect from students, and how classroom operate is different for those in the US and those in China. The different capitals Chinese students gain during their time of study in the US may be more

beneficial under a US, or international context.

To connect to some research on returns to higher education, scholars have found, quantitatively, that one's income increases with one's level of education. On higher education in China, scholars have found attaining higher education and elite higher education gives boosts of different strengths to one's income. For Chinese students attaining higher education in the US, they will most likely also receive some returns to their education, but unlike those who receive their higher education within China, they are in an ambiguous zone – no one knows for certain if their degrees received in the US will be more beneficial in the Chinese labor market, or in the US.

Experience and Satisfaction with Studying in the US

The last section deals with students' experience and satisfaction with studying the US. Since choosing to attain higher education in the US is a huge decision that also involves great costs, it is important to try to understand students actual experience while studying in the US. This can inform us to some extent if students' expectations were met, or if they are experiencing unexpected.

To gain some understandings to students' experience while studying in the US, I first asked respondents to rate their satisfaction with the institution they are studying at, out of 10, and then provide explanations for their answer. I received 15 ratings and 10 explanation responses. Based on the 15 ratings, the respondents are generally satisfied with their schools. The lowest rating was 5, by one respondent, and the highest, 10, by another respondents. Most responses concentrate in 7 and 8. 7 respondents rated 7 and 4 respondents rated 8. On the explanations, more than half the respondents expressed satisfaction with the academic aspects, such as classes, peers, and professors. 2 respondents point out their schools provided various opportunities for future

professions. One respondent, referring to dorm conditions, expressed that “the living conditions were below expectations”, given the extraordinarily high tuition.

Then, I also asked respondents to rate their overall wellbeing in the US. I received 15 ratings, and 10 explanatory answers. On the rating, respondents seem to be in relatively well state of living. The lowest rating was 5, rated by two respondents, and the highest was 9, rated by one respondent. Six respondents rated 8, three respondents rated 7, and three respondents rated 6. On the explanations, those who reported better state of wellbeing, tend to express satisfaction with friends, freedom to pursue intellectual passions, and participating in community events. One respondent points out some difficulty in connecting with the “space” and “people” in the US.

Lastly, since the cost is so central to their education experience, I ask the respondents to provide their thoughts on the importance of financial resources when it comes attaining higher education in the US. I received 9 responses to this question. 8 out of 9 responses all express that the cost of attaining higher education in the US, is extremely high, which includes not only the tuition, but also various living expenses. Such costs require that families can provide stable financial resources and support. One respondent highlights that housing, transportation and entertainment are all essential aspects of living in the US, so to ensure some well-being, one needs to take into consideration these costs too.

Conclusions

To sum up, as to the question why some Chinese students choose to come to the US to attain higher education, I think it is best to understand this based on a micro and macro level approach. At micro level, students express that US higher education allows them to more freely pursue their interests, learn under a culturally diverse environment,

and lastly, to be freed from the cruel competition of the college exam. Most reasonably, most people will likely prefer an education like this, but who are actually able to do so, this leads to the macro level discussion. To just compare the numbers, much more Chinese students still participate in the exam to study in Chinese universities. On the other hand, higher education in the US costs much more. If affordability determines if someone actually can pursue education, it is the smaller number of families who are able to afford the costs that actually sends their children to the US. As to the fact that the number of Chinese students coming to the US are increasing year by year, it is possible that this may suggest an increase of the middle class, but it can be verified by future quantitative studies.

To link to the previously discussed rational choice model, choosing higher education in the US can be a strictly class maintenance strategy of the middle and upper class (Becker and Hecken 2009). The theoretical discussions by Becker and Hecken also illuminates some findings on the micro level. First, Becker and Hecken's theoretical discussions propose that individuals' decision on higher education is influenced by their evaluation of school performance, whether they need to maintain a social status, and additionally the expected costs and returns (2009). On the micro level, many responses have indicated that they to an extent disagree with the Chinese higher education system, which is a crucial factor to why they choose higher education in the US. Based on the theoretical proposition, if individuals have evaluated the costs of higher education and finds a particular track unfitting to their financial and class situation, they will likely lean to the track more fitting to their situations. In expressing views of disagreement to the Chinese higher education system, they essentially project a class status. Those knowing that they cannot afford higher education abroad will likely not express such a view because they know higher education abroad is not really

a choice. For those attaining higher education in the US, their education choice at the higher education level is not whether to pursue higher education, but between higher education in China and abroad. The class status and financial abilities produce an additional stratifying opportunity amongst Chinese students.

Like the theory of maximally maintained inequality and effectively maintained inequality suggests, more advantageous groups secure education opportunities earlier, maintain quantitative differences when available, and maintain qualitative advantages when possible, and thus inequality and stratification is consistently maintained (Raftery and Hout 1993; Lucas 2001). Education provides individuals with opportunities of upward mobility, but through education, already advantageous groups also gain and maintain further advantages, leaving the less advantaged far behind.

Higher education provides students with upward mobility, and for Chinese students attaining higher education in the United States, while they are receiving their education, they are also learning within a much more diverse environment, attaining social and cultural capital that are much less available to those studying within China. For Chinese students, attaining higher education in the US is an opportunity, but it is an opportunity open only to those who can afford it. This opportunity allows the students to divert from the rigid trainings and cruel competitions of the College Entrance Exam in China, and engage with an education that is recognized to be more individualized, and gaining social and cultural capitals unique to this experience. Education is rewarding, but education is rarely free. The affordability or cost of education is often the biggest determinant of whether an individual can attain a certain level of education. It is my guess that out of the majority of families who participate in the College Entrance Exam, the students and the parents may all prefer a way to attain quality higher education, without the cruel competitions of the exam, and an education that also rewards unique

social and cultural capital. All in all, US higher education for many Chinese families is a valuable opportunity, but not quite the reality for all.

Reference

Ashkenas, Jeremy, Park, Haeyoun and Adam Pearce. “Even With Affirmative Actions, Blacks and Hispanics Are More Underrepresented at Top Colleges Than 35 Years Ago.” *The New York Times*, August 24, 2017.

Becker and Hecken. 2009. “Higher Education or Vocational Training? An Empirical Test of the Rational Action Model of Educational Choices Suggested by Breen and Goldthorpe and Esser.” *Acta Sociologica* 52(1).

Boudon, R. 1974. *Education, Opportunity, and Social Inequality*. New York: Wiley.

Brand JE, Xie Y. 2010. “Who Benefits Most from College? Evidence for Negative Selection in Heterogeneous Economic Returns to Higher Education.” *American Sociology Review* 75:273–302.

Carneiro P, Heckman JJ, Vytlačil E. 2011. “Estimating Marginal and Average Returns to Education.” *American Economic Review* 101:2754–81

Dale, Stacy B., and Alan B. Krueger. 2014. “Estimating the Effects of College Characteristics over the Career Using Administrative Earnings Data.” *The Journal of Human Resources* 49 (2): 323–58. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/23799087>.

Gerber, Theodore P., and Sin Yi Cheung. 2008. “Horizontal Stratification in Postsecondary Education: Forms, Explanations, and Implications.” *Annual Review of Sociology* 34 (1): 299–318.

Guo, Maocan, Xiaogang Wu. 2008. “School Expansion and Educational Stratification in China, 1981-2006.” Paper presented at the American Sociological Association 103rd Annual Meeting, August 2008, Boston MA.

Harding DJ, Jencks C, Lopoo LM, Mayer SE. 2004. “The Changing Effect of Family Background on the Incomes of American Adults”. In *Unequal Chances: Family*

Background and Economic Success, ed. S Bowles, H Gintis, MO Groves, pp. 100–44.
Princeton, NJ: Princeton Univ. Press

Hauser RM, Warren JR. 1997. “Socioeconomic Indexes for Occupations: a Review, Update, and Critique.” *Sociology Methodology* 27:177–298

Hout, Michael. 2012. “Social and Economic Returns to College Education in the United States.” *Annual Review of Sociology* 38 (1): 379–400.

Jia and Li. 2017. “Access to Elite Education, Wage Premium, and Social Mobility: The Truth and Illusion of China’s College Entrance Exam.”

Julian T, Kominski R. 2011. “Education and Synthetic Work-Life Earnings Estimates.” *American Community Survey Reports ACS-14*, US Census Bur., Washington, DC

Li et al. 2011. “Does Attending Elite Colleges Pay in China?” *Journal of Comparative Economics* 40.

Lucas, Samuel R. 2001. “Effectively maintained inequality: education transitions, track mobility, and social background effects.” *American Journal of Sociology* 106:1642–90

Mirowski, J and Ross CE. 2003. *Education, Social Status, and Health*. Hawthorne, NY: Aldine de Gruyter

Ponzini, Arianna. 2020. “Educating the New Middle-Class Chinese Youths: the Role of Quality Education on Ideas of Class and Status.” *The Journal of Chinese Sociology* 7(1).

Raftery, A.E., and Michael Hout. 1993. “Maximally Maintained Inequality: Expansion, Reform, and Opportunity in Irish Education, 1921-75.” *Sociology of Education* 66 (1): 41–62.

Spence, M. 1973. “Job Market Signaling.” *Q.J. Econ.* 87:355-74.

U.S. Immigration and Custom Enforcement. “2020 SEVIS by the Numbers Report.”
<https://www.ice.gov/doclib/sevis/pdf/sevisBTN2020.pdf>

Wu, Xiaogang. 2017. “Higher Education, Elite Formation and Social Stratification in Contemporary China: Preliminary Findings from the Beijing College Students Panel Survey.” *Chinese Journal of Sociology* 3(1).

Ye, Hua. 2015. “Key-Point Schools and Entry into Tertiary Education in China.” *Chinese Sociological Review* 47 (2).

Yeung, WJ. 2013. “Higher Education Expansion and Social Stratification in China.” *Chinese Sociological Review* 45(4):54–80