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Social Mobility via academic mobility: reconfigurations in class and gender identities among Asian scholars in the global north

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ABSTRACT

Geographic mobility is increasingly perceived worldwide as a key to academic excellence, career advancement and upward social mobility. Drawing on long-term qualitative fieldwork data, this paper interrogates the impact of academic mobility in reconfiguring class and gender identities among students, early professionals and their families from Hong Kong and Indonesia who have studied or received further training in Germany, the Netherlands and the USA. This analysis problematises the crude 'academic mobility → upward social mobility' formula and considers international academic mobility as a contextual, dynamic and multi-directional process. Through this process social positions and identities of the moving individuals and families are negotiated in an on-going manner as migrants insert into, depart from and re-insert into the various social milieus where their mobility trajectories touch ground. Narratives of interviewees illustrate the complexity and contradictions in class and gender configurations as students move across borders. They show how these individuals are inserted in contrasting social positionings, and experience how a particular social class or gender position carries different connotations. The paper concludes with a few conceptual and methodological reflections.

Introduction

I called my mother during the first week of my university study in the USA. The most emotional part of the conversation concerned my work placement. I was on 'work-study', meaning that I had to work about 10-15 hours per week to earn part of the generous scholarship/financial aid package I received from my university.

> Mom, I have been placed to work in the cafeteria. I dipped toast into frozen egg mix for like an hour and then it became too cold for my fingers. After that I was sent to the soiled tray return conveyor belt, and had to throw away a lot of food. I felt so bad having to do that, throwing away so much food.

My mother was shocked and very upset, saying,

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> How come? Why are you doing such jobs? They are not for you. I thought you were on a big scholarship, going to a world class university. Why can't you give tutoring to pupils instead? Like university students here (in Hong Kong) do? You should come back home and be a real university student.

The above vignette captures one of my most vivid memories of the early stage of my life as a university student. Coming from a working class family in Hong Kong, I was the first one to have access to higher education, and not only at a local university but at an Ivy League college in the USA. Certainly, this opportunity has provided me with enormous cultural and social resources for upward social (and outward, geographical) mobility. Nevertheless, this social mobility happened neither all at once, nor in an even, uni-directional or coherent manner. My prestigious international education mobility opportunity also entailed 'downward' social mobility as read in a comparative and transnational frame. My social positioning of being 'a university student on scholarship in the USA' contradicts the kind of part-time work I had to carry out as judged by the general class reading practised in Hong Kong. My class reconfiguration experience is shared by many international students (and academic staff) who find themselves having to readjust their work and social life(style) in order to 'survive' the way to upward mobility. These class mobility experiences call for a critical examination of the crude 'academic mobility → upward social mobility' equation, which is widely circulated by actors and institutions that are actively engaged in fuelling the 'business' of international mobility of students, academic and research staff.

This paper contributes to a more differentiated understanding of the multiple relations between academic mobility and social mobility. Rather than considering international academic mobility as a defined factor that adds to a student's or scholar's class resources, the paper considers mobility as a process through which class and other social positions and identities (such as gender and race/ethnicities) of the moving individual and his/her family are negotiated in an on-going manner. Like other migrants, scholars who are on overseas stay for study and/or research purposes insert into, depart from and re-insert into the various social milieus where their mobility trajectories span. In order to unpack the general and simplistic 'academic mobility leads to upward mobility' nexus, narratives of interviewees will be used to illustrate the complexity in class – intersecting with other social categories such as gender and race/ethnicity – configurations as students and scholars move across borders and are inserted in contrasting social positions (Bailey and Mulder 2017). Lived experiences of my informants also show how a particular social class or positioning is connoted differently across time and space, complicating an assessment of the effect of academic mobility on social mobility.

International movements of students have become more common in the increasingly interconnected global knowledge economy. This form of mobility has become one of the major forms of contemporary international mobility. Over the past three decades, the number of students enrolled outside their country of citizenship has risen from 0.8 million worldwide in 1975 to 4.5 million in 2012 – a more than fivefold increase (OECD 2014, 344). The Asia and Pacific region is one of the most active macro regions in this respect. International academic mobility among students and staff (lecturers and researchers) has proliferated in Asia in the past few decades. Students from Asia represent 53% of foreign students enrolled worldwide, according to recent OECD statistics. The largest numbers of students from Asia are from China, India and Korea (OECD 2014,

342). Like in other parts of the world, geographical mobility is often perceived as a key to academic excellence, career advancement and upward social mobility. An array of institutions ranging from education ministries, higher education institutions, scholarship and research funding bodies, to education consulting agencies are involved in fuelling the academic dream among youngsters and their parents, as well academics and researchers.[1] This paper contributes to our understanding in these diverse, complex and dynamic mobility trajectories. Specifically, it interrogates the impact of academic mobility in reconfiguring class and gender identities among students and their families from Hong Kong and Indonesia who have studies or received academic training in the Global North. Rather than considering class as an objective political-economic position, this paper interrogates class from the perspectives of the individual agents living the mobility experiences, that is, the mobile scholars themselves, producing what Parreñas (2001, 30) calls a 'subject level of analysis'.

This inquiry draws on both empirical research and tacit knowledge, which in turn inform its conceptual contribution to extant scholarship. Part of the analysis is based on qualitative fieldwork data collected in a number of research projects on international (academic) mobility I have conducted in the past decade. The first project was my dissertation research on transnationalism among Chinese in Germany, conducted between 1999 and 2002. The second substantial research, conducted from 2010 to 2011, focused on the motivation and experiences among Chinese scholars who had had academic mobility experiences in Germany. Currently, my research focuses on the experiences and impact of academic mobility among Indonesian and Zambia students to China. While having different specific research objectives, all these projects also study the motivation and experiences among my informants, comprising students, young researchers and their families. This paper connects and reflects on the experiences among Asian students and academics whom I have come across in these projects. While their class background and social positioning in their home context differ, this group of informants can all be considered to belong to (upper-) middle class, with age ranging from early 20s to late 40s. This paper draws on in-depth, face-to-face individual interviews conducted with these research participants, while concentrating on a few exemplary narratives for illustration. The analysis here is also informed by documentary research and my extensive participant observation based on first-hand experiences of these processes as an international student, then academic in the USA, Germany, Hong Kong and the Netherlands.

Migration, academic mobility and class

This paper contributes to the recent rejuvenated discussion on class in migration studies, well accounted and elaborated in the interventions made by Kelly (2012) and Van Hear (2014). Though arguably having receded from the dominant place in social analyses during the past two decades of 'cultural turn', class or social-economic stratification has maintained an important positon in the study and conceptualisation of migration. Class has been found to be an important factor in determining who is able to move, made to move, how one moves, where to, how far s/he manages to get to and how her/his migration experiences will unfold. Migration and other forms of mobility (e.g. tourism) in turn shape class formation and relations. Using occupation as a proxy, a body of work (especially in sociology) has focused on migrants' employability, as well as their work and remuneration

conditions (e.g. Castle and Kosack 1973; Cohen 1987; Currie 2007; Portes and Walton 1981). This body of work often points to the process of deskilling or brain-waste. Besides considering class as a relation to the means of production (e.g. labour) – that is, according to (a variant of) a Marxian perspective, other understandings of social class concern also status and prestige (as in Weber's sense), and the possession or non-possession of different forms of capital – economic, social, cultural and symbolic (after Bourdieu's (1986) theorisation). Beyond recognising the different aspects and manifestation of class position, post-structuralist and feminist scholars have made important interventions in the class debate by emphasising the complex ways intersecting social positions and identities give rise to systems of oppression, domination, or discrimination (Anthias 2005, 2013; Browne and Misra 2003; Crenshaw 1994). Applied in migration studies, analyses have brought forth the intersections between class and other social categories such as gender, place-based identity, race/ethnicity and religion in migration experiences (Anthias 2008, 2012; Bastia 2014; Erel 2010; McDowell 2008). A number of recent studies on labour migration have illustrated the deskilling of skilled migrants especially among those from the Global South/East in the economy of their destinations (mostly in the Global North/West). Some well-known cases are, for instance, the common downward occupational mobility of educated nurses to domestic workers or engineers to mechanics (e.g. Creese and Wiebe 2012; Man 2004; McDowell 2006; Nowicka 2014; Wright 2006). On the other hand, migration and other form of mobilities can add to the class resources among (mostly Western/White) 'privileged migrants', 'expatriates' or 'mobile professionals' (Beaverstock 2005; Findlay et al. 1996; Kothari 2006; Leung 2013). This paper grows out of this body of literature to investigate the impact of migration on class, gender and racial/ethnic positions and identities, which plays out in complex, contextualised and intersecting ways.

Kelly (2012) offers an inspiring discussion by proposing a typology that considers class as four dimensional comprising 'position', 'process', 'performance', and 'politics'. Such a framework offers space to integrate the major theorisations of class mentioned above. In addition, Kelly also emphasises the need to understand the 'spatiality of class' by detecting how 'in various ways, migration brings places together such that class (in all its dimensions) in one place is complicated by class in another' (164). This perspective is particularly important in our increasingly globalised world, where class is less and less a category to denote power positions in a national context. One phenomenon has been the emergence of a transnational capitalist class (Sklair 2001) or the 'global elite' (Mazlish and Morss 2005) who see themselves or are perceived as cosmopolitans or global citizens, with a class identity (defined in a broad sense) that 'embraces but that also transcends the nation-state and its restricted sense of territoriality' (171). These elites are often represented in the academic and media as cosmopolitan *sans frontiers* who can freely cruise the world, traversing and occupying seemingly undifferentiated space, to achieve their objectives of capital accumulation. Such over-generalised 'global talk' has, however, also invited critique. David Ley (2004), for instance, has convincingly argued against the global vs. local dichotomy to conclude that 'cosmopolitanism itself is always situated, always imbued with partiality and vulnerability' (162).

Further to the need for a more spatially sensitive perspective, a temporal blind spot in extant scholarship also calls for attention. In his recent paper, Van Hear (2014) comments that class or social mobility has mainly been considered as a migration outcome in

destination countries and fallen short on accounting for the way class shapes the migration process. I would augment to his argument that indeed class has been treated either as a determining factor for (im)mobility (as in who can move or stay) or an outcome of which (as in social mobility or lack thereof). In order to more fully understand the dynamic and highly contextualised relation between class and migration, more sensitivity should be given to the ways how they interact in the whole process of migration and to recognise the highly changeful experiences. By focusing on the process of migration, we can better map out how class 'becomes articulated in unexpected and sometimes contradictory ways when viewed through a transnational frame' (Kelly 2012, 155). Telling examples of such transnational classed articulations can be found in a set of research on Filipino migrants who experience multiple, complex and often contradictory changes in class (intersecting with gender, age, human capital) positions through migration (Gibson, Law, and McKay 2001; Kelly 2012; Lutz 2010; Parreñas 2001; Shinozaki 2005). These processes result in what Parreñas (2001) calls 'contradictory class mobility' that denotes the simultaneous experience of upward mobility (in financial status) and downward mobility (in social status). Such insightful analyses have primarily been applied to migration experiences among (female) domestic workers. This paper will extend this analytical lens to a subset of the so-called skilled/skilling migrants.

In extant scholarship on academic mobility, class has also mainly been rendered a factor – intersecting with other categories such as gender, birth order among siblings, ethnicity and religions, etc. – for mobility or an effect gauged by social mobility or accumulation of certain capital. Past research on student mobility has concluded that young people of more privileged socio-economic background tend to be able to enjoy international education mobility compared to their less-privileged counterparts (e.g. Brooks and Waters 2009; HEFCE 2004; Huang and Yeoh 2011; Waters 2006a). There is also a need to consider beyond the local or national scale. In the last few decades, we have observed that transnational capitalist class has created a demand for an internationalised and interlinked higher education system. This complex transnational higher education system is very much geared to the needs and aspiration of the children of this elite group. These youngsters often move around with their parents and subsequently on their own, attending schools and universities that are capable of reproducing the political and social advantages that their parents enjoy, such as being comfortable and considered to be fit for living and working in diverse cultural settings (Findlay et al. 2012; Mazlish and Morss 2005). Though there are plenty of evidences to illustrate the power of this elite transnational higher education system, one should be cautioned to assume its smooth functioning (cf. Ley 2004; Waters 2006b).

Regarding impact, research has also generally concluded that rather than an equalising effect, intra-national and international academic mobility – as formal education as a whole in many cases – has reproduced social differences (Hall and Appleyard 2011; Jeffrey, Jeffrey, and Jeffery 2005; Robertson 2005; Waters 2012; Xiang and Shen 2009). Often applying Bourdieu's capital model, research has confirmed that education is the major player in transmission of 'cultural capital', which serves a foundation for the accumulation of other forms of capital, between generations (Waters 2006b; Waters and Brooks 2010). As the field of higher education is highly uneven, particular social practices are deployed by more privileged families to reproduce social advantages through the internationalised education system. The study by Waters (2006b) shows how (upper) middle class Hong

Kong parents seek to maximise the cultural capital of the next generation by sending them to international elite universities in Canada. Her research points to a distinctive and needed spatial – transnational *and* place-specific – perspective in our understanding of class reproduction through academic mobility. Beyond reproducing 'conventional' class advantages, students also cultivate cosmopolitan identities (Beck 2000), an arguably new form of trans-/inter-national(ised) class identity in our contemporary world. Students are expected to be better placed to cultivate such identities through their international study and living experiences. This is confirmed by the research conducted by Findlay et al. (2012) on UK students enrolled in universities overseas. Their respondents interpreted their decision to study abroad as part of a progression from a national to an international context, with the international reputation of the university helping to trampoline them into an internationally oriented career.

In addition to charting the impact of academic mobility on class position, this body of research also underlines the hierarchy in the globalised education field. It also illustrates how the value and transferability of knowledge, skills and competencies gained through education are highly context-dependent. My paper builds on this body of work and pushes it forward first by considering how class is experienced, reconfigured and performed in the course of scholars' overseas study/training and afterward. It conceptualises class formation as a process that involves constant contestations, rather than an objectively delineated factor or outcome of geographical mobility. It maps out how class is culturally connoted and (academic) mobility brings together different and sometimes contradictory understandings of what a particular class position means and is performed. Lastly, this analysis provides insights also into the gender impact of academic mobility, which has been side-lined in student mobility research (King and Raghuram 2013; but see Ackers 2004, 2010; Leung 2014).

Being a university student is different from being a university student …

'Asian international student' is a highly heterogeneous group. While many among them are cushioned with a very comfortable life paid by their wealthy parents as portrayed in Pe-Pua et al. (1996) and Waters (2006b), there are also many whose middle-class status cannot be converted to a comparable lifestyle transnationally. Esther Lee,[2] now in her late 40s, a senior manager of a medium-size company in Oregon, USA, recalled the difficult transition she had to make when she first started her university study in mid-1980s. Without any scholarship or financial aid from the university, she had to labour hard to survive:

> I had to work of course. My parents could pay for my tuition and plane tickets, but I still had to work for my living expenses. I worked as a waitress and cleaner. I cleaned so many people's houses. That was ok but I really hated ironing [with a bitter expression] … It was tough. I was quite disillusioned sometimes. I cried when I was exhausted. I asked myself, 'How come I ended up doing this kind of work?'

Esther's parents owned a small manufacturing workshop in Hong Kong. While she had always 'helped out' (de facto worked for) her parents in her 'free' time – a practice not uncommon in the 1970s and 1980s, she had not worked outside of her family business before going to the USA. As illustrated in my story that opens the paper, class is a

space-time differentiated notion. While working as a waitress, in a cafeteria or driving a taxi might not be considered as activities that contradict the status of a university student of middle class background in one place (and time), it is perceived so elsewhere, like in the eyes of Esther and my mother. As students (like any other migrants) move across geographical and cultural borders, they find themselves inserting into a different social class structure compared to that back home. Some also find them being in a categorically same/similar position that is, however, culturally connoted in very different ways, characterised by contrasting practices and meanings. Hence, locating individuals in a positional class structure across transnational space is not straight-forward. A university student's livelihood or lifestyle in the Global North might contradict its classed identity in Asia. Students' class positionings are fluid and dynamic – their current class positioning may not (or likely does not) reflect their long-term class trajectory. Students – though often treated as a simplistic socio-demographic category in migration studies – embody multiple identities and are embedded in wide webs of social relations across space (as family members, actual or potential skilled or manual labour, etc.), which in turn have different classed connotation across geographical and cultural borders.

Esther's academic mobility trajectory should also be contextualised. In the 1980s, numerous individuals and families explored all possible channels to leave Hong Kong due to the unexpected future that the return of the territory's sovereignty to China would bring.[3] Being able to establish a new life in the USA as a university student, which is commonly considered as a social status that promises 'a better future', was perceived socially and for Esther personally a privilege – a form of upward class mobility in itself – even when relocation was known to involve (temporary) hardship. In fact, the fear of the unknown or distrusted future had led to the out-migration of many professionals and their families to Canada, USA, Australia and New Zealand, most of whom had to endure deskilling. And yet, despite such downward mobility, most of these migrants were able to convert their economic and human capital to a more comfortable life (e.g. commonly characterised with a bigger house, garden at home, one or two cars, 'good' education opportunities for the children, healthier environment, more free time, etc.) (Bailey and Law 2013; Man 2004; Salaff, Wong, and Greve 2010). This echoes what Parreñas (2001) notion of contradictory class mobility and observations made, for instance, by Pukayastha (2010) in migrants' and their children's simultaneous experiences of privilege and marginalisation across national and transnational contexts.

Impact beyond the student: classed and gendered impact on the family

While extant literature on academic mobility (and skilled mobility in fact) has treated the moving person as individuals – what Kofman (2004) calls 'methodological individualism', a body of scholarship has emerged to interrogate the inter-relations between family and academic mobility. Focusing on household situations in which both partners in a couple are employed in scientific research, Ackers (2004) concludes that high levels of mobility expected in the scientific profession often leads to tensions in these partnerships. Women tend to sacrifice their career in such circumstances, by either leaving the profession or forgoing chances of progress. Ackers and Gill (2008) examine the gender bias of life-course dynamics such as partnering and having children on academic mobility and career development. Their research focuses on the experiences of researchers from

Bulgaria and Poland who have worked in the UK and Germany, respectively. Women were found to be tied to a specific spatial context because of private responsibilities and dual-career partnership. In their work on skilled migrants in Germany's academic sectors, Föbker et al. (2014) and Shinozaki (2014) show how work and family are closely interrelated in building skilled migrant workers' career pathways and social life. My own work on Chinese mobile academics has also shown how professional mobility affects family and gender relations. While promoting female career development, academic mobility fails to challenge gender relation in the household fundamentally (Leung 2014). Going beyond the role of and impact on spouses, research by Huang and Yeoh (2011) explore the phenomenon of Chinese study mothers in Singapore. Study mothers are mothers who accompany their young children to go to the primary and secondary schools in Singapore, are found often having to 'degrade' themselves from being a professional to a work as a waitress or masseur to accomplish the transnational project of education for their children.

Academic mobility is a gendered terrain. Many more male academics engaged in academic professional mobility projects than women. Ackers (2000, 2004, 2010) has shown in her research the barriers to training and mobility of female researchers and examined the extent of female participation in research and knowledge production in Europe. She (2000) shows that female mobile researchers predominantly move as 'tied' movers, typically following a male partner. This reflects the general pattern observed in other economic sectors (Boyle et al. 2008; Cooke 2008) – hence calling for a 'linked life' perspective (Bailey and Mulder 2017). Among academic migrant, tied movers are usually also highly skilled. Usually they are confronted with downward class mobility when their (male) partners lead a move, if occupation is used as a proxy (see also Föbker and Imani 2017). But before we make a classical 'brain waste' conclusion, I will provide the narrative from Citra, wife of an Indonesian scholar. Her reflection illustrates the complexity in class and gender reconfigurations induced by academic mobility in linked lives.

For Citra (in her early 30s), leaving her job as a medical doctor to accompany her husband, Suseno, on his PhD study in Germany was the only logical option. Suseno (also in his early 30s then) received a scholarship from the German government to pursue a PhD degree in chemistry in the early 2000s. Before his PhD research, Suseno had already been working as lecturer at one of the key universities in Indonesia. Citra considered the overseas stay also a valuable chance for her to 'widen her horizon'. Citra comes from a upper(-middle) class background. Though being a mother of two already when the family decided to take on the scholarship, Citra had hoped to work as an intern or further her medical training in Germany while her husband embarked on his PhD. However, her training was not recognised in Germany and hence she was not able to pursue her career development plan. Not only was paid work not possible, Citra would have to repeat much of her basic medical training to be qualified for an advanced training placement. Citra then decided to be a full-time home-maker.

Citra's experience is by no means rare among migrants. Professionals often encounter significant obstacles in practising their profession after migration. Qualifications and competencies of migrants are often not recognised, accredited and/or validated. In many sectors, migrant professionals must be recertified, which is mostly time-consuming and expensive, involving complicated rules, procedures and examinations. In order to do so, migrant professionals have to acquire a certain (high) level of professional language

proficiency, which is another serious barrier. Even with successful recertification, migrants often need to learn to deal with different recruiting practices and demonstrate their skills, knowledge and work experiences to local employers, and last but not least, to navigate differences in work culture after they have found a job. All these illustrate how the cultural capital or 'skills repertoires' (Portes 2010) of migrant scholars from the Global South often fail to convert coherently across socio-cultural and institutional borders. This in turn gives rise to a high level of skill waste among migrants. Barriers to professional practice are not spread out evenly. Qualification recognition among migrant medical professionals, for instance, is particularly difficult. Analyses by feminist scholars have concluded the gendered nature of immigration categories and policies (e.g. Fincher, Foster, and Wilmot 1994; Hyndman 1999; Kofman and Raghuram 2006). Geography also plays an important role. Migrants moving from the Global South/East to the Global North/West, as a rule, experience more difficulties in having the qualification recognised or recertified compared to their counterparts from the Global West/North. This reflects the hierarchy in the globalised education and knowledge field.[4]

In order to advance their career, academic staff of both junior and senior rank from the Global South, like Citra's husband Suseno, often become students again in middle age (between early 30s and late 40s) to pursue a foreign (i.e. Western) PhD degree. Coming with this objective decline in social positioning are very material 'downgrading' of lifestyle. Among my informants, it was very common to hear about how life as a student, fellow or even an exchange scholar entails radical adjustments. A prestigious scholarship often means leaving behind a comfortable life as family father (as most academic mobility is male-biased) with a house, maybe a car and round-the-clock household support (provided by the wife, parents and/or live-in domestic workers which is common in many parts of Asia), etc. to a basic standard with shared house facilities with fellow students or PhD candidates, travelling by public transport and taking care of one's social reproductive needs – not to mention the pain of separation from one's family and friends, which are high emotional cost side-lined in the generally celebratory narratives on academic mobility (but see Leung 2014).

For Citra and Suseno also, moving to Germany was both an upward and downward mobility experience. They lived in a student housing complex, located in the middle of a 'socially weak neighbourhood' which means in German connotation in the early 2000s, a kind of 'social burning point (Sozialbrennpunt)' at the edge of the city with higher share of foreigner residents, social housing, asylum seekers' homes and discount chain stores. This strikes a stark contrast with the upper(-middle) class living standard they had had in Indonesia, namely with a comfortable house, a car, domestic workers, etc. Though one might considers this downgrading condescending, Suseno and Citra, like many other scholars I have met, also considered this as a 'fun' challenge. Many a times Suseno took pride in telling me how to get the best deal out of the system: how to get the cheapest train tickets to see Paris or Brussels for the weekend, how to read all fine prints to apply for all possible subsidies from the city, the scholarship foundation and the university, etc. The 'fun' to survive downward mobility can be accounted for by the temporary nature of the experience. Suseno and Citra were certain that a German PhD degree would bring much distinction and capital upon return to Indonesia, which was also the case.

How do class and gender positions and identities unfold after Citra 'returned' to her home context? Years after they have returned to Indonesia, Citra shared her bitter-

sweet experiences with me. At this moment, Suseno had become a Vice Dean of one of the key universities in Indonesia and Citra worked as a full-time doctor:

> It was tough. We were lucky already to be able to rent all the rooms in the student dormitory apartment so that we could build our new family life. I had never managed a household before we went to Germany, you know? At home we had a large house and we had helpers [domestic workers]. And my parents also helped us. But in Germany I had to become a housewife, a mother. I was on my own. And I had to learn the language. I was disappointed at first but then I told myself, since I cannot work, I would concentrate my energy to provide the best for Suseno and the children. It was difficult, especially at the beginning. But it was also very nice. I would have never done so much for my family, all by myself, if we were not away. My family was my everything. I was and am proud of myself that I managed everything in the household. Now being back we have help of course. But I still try to take care of my family because I started like this in Germany. I get up every day at 4am to make breakfast and pack lunch for my children. The traffic is so bad here; they need to leave the house [with the driver] by 6am! My helper is also up by then of course. She helps me preparing and cleaning. But I insist cooking myself! Some people might think I am silly. Why torture yourself? [Smiling with pride.] After they go, I prepare myself for work.

Citra's narrative reminds us the need to contextualise migrants' experiences from an agent-centred perspective. In conventional class analysis, we would have simplistically categorised Citra's case as an epitome of gendered brain drain, deskilling, 're-domestication' (Man 2004; Yeoh and Willis 2005), compromised career (Suto 2009), and hence downward class mobility. All these are objectively true and should not be discounted. Nevertheless, it is also important to see how Citra, as an active agent gives meanings to this 'degrading' experience. Objectively negative migration experiences can, however, also be positive and empowering for individuals and their families in other ways. This is, however, not to be interpreted as an excuse or romanticisation for structural inequalities in the migration system such as the exclusion Citra experienced in the medical work and training field. Migrants are 'forced' to make certain adjustments to their class identities and practices as a result of migration. They are, however, equipped differently with various forms of capital in order to manage the (temporary) downward class mobility. Not only is contradictory class mobility in the course of migration a complex experience, individuals and families do not just stop having to/wanting to negotiate the meaning of their class (and gender, ethnicity, age, etc.) identities and return to their previous class structure. Like Citra, many migrants challenge dominant class identities and practices 'back home' because of their overseas experiences. Citra's case also reminds us that rather than perceiving tied movers as 'trailing spouses', their role as active agents in shaping the family migration and return processes should be emphasised (cf. Kõu et al. 2015; Ryan and Mulholland 2014).

Conclusions

Geographical mobility has increasingly become one of the major resources (or capital) (Leung 2013; Murphy-Lejeune 2002), which is spread out unevenly and 'has become the most powerful and most coveted stratifying factor' (Bauman 1998, 74). More critical and contextualised analyses of its inter-relation with other key notions and relational constructs such as class and gender hence deem necessary. Drawing on two exemplary life stories I have encountered in my past research projects, and reflecting on my own mobility

biography, this paper considers the impact of international academic mobility on class. Academic mobility is conceptualised here as a dynamic process through which class and other positionings and identities of the moving individuals and families are negotiated in an on-going manner. Migrants insert into, depart from and re-insert into the various social milieus – constantly and simultaneously among many – along their mobility trajectories. These shifts in geo-social spaces shape the class, gender and ethnic consciousness and practices of the mobile scholars and their families. Narratives from my interviewees, who generally come from middle and upper-middle class background in their home societies, demonstrate how they and their families first experienced 'downward' social mobility during their education overseas before they could harvest upward social mobility. Their experiences problematise either-or markers, such as 'downward' vs. 'upward', in conventional class discourse. They demonstrate how migrants practise and attach meanings to class and gender-relation reconfigurations in multiple directionalities. Besides complicating the general and simplistic 'academic mobility leads to upward mobility' equation, narratives of my interviewees also illustrate the complexity in class expressions across geo-cultural and institutional borders. Examples have shown how a particular social class or position implies different manifestations or 'ways of doing class' in different time-space. Their narratives contribute to add layers to conventional, almost exclusively positive portrayal of academic (as in other skilled or elite) mobility, which in fact comprises intertwining empowering and dysfunctional elements (Waters 2015). In so doing, the analysis here unsettles uni-directional and dichotomous terminologies such as 'downward' vs. 'upward' in conventional class and migration discourses. They demonstrate how migrants practise class and attach meanings to class (and other) identities in multiple and often contradictory ways in the course of their mobility experiences and afterwards. In Cantonese Chinese, those who have studied overseas are referred to as those who have soaked in sea water (*jum guo ham sui* 浸過鹹水) – as in having crossed the ocean. Indeed, the expression captures the processes presented in this paper; before student and academic migrants can capitalise on what they have set out for, they will most likely first have to get wet and salty, and sometimes the sea salt hurts and brings tears.

Some of these tears are shed as a result of differences in ontological and epistemological norms across the 'South-North divide'.[5] Rather than being considered as evidences and resources for an international, diverse knowledge field, these differences are more often than not treated as hurdles for the acquisition of international (meaning mostly Western) credentials. Cultural capital embodied by students and scholars from the Global South cannot be converted smoothly in other space-time. In the academia, we need to reflect on more respectful and productive ways to capitalise on the diversity of knowledge and ways of knowing in the world. Indeed, a critical debate can be observed in education and pedagogic sciences on the 'internationalising the curriculum' imperative (e.g. publications in *Journal of Geography in Higher Education* and alike), which points out its faulty ideology and common dysfunctional implementation. In particular, I concur with Madge, Raghuram, and Noxolo (2009, 2014) that more critical thoughts should be given to the notion and practice of 'international education', so that we aim for more international study (i.e. emphasising the content and the practice of education), rather than only focusing on the individuals who move internationally (i.e. the students). Doing so requires the recognition of inter-relations between power relation in the academic field and other historical and socio-political processes dynamics. During their study abroad,

scholars cross the Global South-North border, which is not only marked by differences in academic practices and educational pedagogies. Rather, the border is also marked by power differences deeply rooted in the 'painful politics associated with colonialism and its past spatial relations, inequities and injustices are essential to shaping contemporary neo-colonial relations of education' (Madge, Raghuram, and Noxolo 2014, 4). How could international education be reformed so taken-for-granted hierarchy and prejudice can be unsettled? Madge, Raghuram, and Noxolo (2009, 2014) have called for engaged pedagogy and a higher sense of responsibility from the Global North. They argue for a reconceptualisation of international education so that international students can be recognised as agents of knowledge formation – rather than pure receivers of defined (western) knowledge. Hence student/staff (especially from the Global South) mobility can be considered, finally and rightly, as circulations of knowledge, where multiple contributions should be recognised. Paradoxically, the very fact that career advancement is (still) almost guaranteed for those who have graduated from this South-North *rite de passage*, individuals once were subjugated by this power hierarchy feed into its very reproduction.

The theoretical motivation in gaining insights into the intricate negotiation of class, gender and other social positionings through migration has methodological implications. In order to tease out the complex and dynamic relationships between mobilities and class formation or reproduction, grounded, agency-centred and longer-term fieldwork is necessary. More quality longitudinal and 'slow' scholarship on migration, transnational families and communities would contribute to the collection of grounded evidence across life stages and generations for more substantiated theorisation. Nevertheless, as we are aware, conducting large(r) scale, well-executed longitudinal study is challenging when funding sources and research projects and jobs tend to be, and becoming increasingly, intermittent.

Vigilant contextualisation is also called for in order to avoid simplistic transfer of interpretation about class and mobility across time and space, socio-cultural and institutional borders. An agency-centred approach allows the tracing of the dynamics of mobility and how it is experienced in the course of mobility (across multiple contexts). This contrasts with linear thinking that aggregates impact comparing the before and after mobility, which is seen as a vector connecting two points on a map and in time. As such, we zoom closer into the individuals and mobility process itself to understand them as series of moments, time-spaces where notions (e.g. class, youth, parenthood, family, career, etc.) are contested and redefined in comparative and transnational frame. By 'following' their experiences, therefore, we can produce more dynamic, differentiated and agentic view of individuals whose characteristics and identities undergo changes, and how power relations are negotiated between the migrants (and their families) vis-à-vis other actors and institutions they encounter or embedded in.

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Disclosure statement

Notes

1. See Leung (2015) for an analysis of the Chinese case.
2. Pseudonyms are used for all research participants. Their affiliated higher education institutions are also masked.
3. For more detailed accounts, see Ley (2010), Ong (1999) and Salaff, Wong, and Greve (2010).
4. Readers of this article, especially among those who are located in the Global North, can probably find examples of common narratives about 'insufficiencies' among staff/students from Global South places. Insufficiencies' such as a lack of proper training, critical thinking, proactive expression of thoughts, and language proficiency (mostly meaning English, which is also often not the principle working language of their supervisors), are commonly used markers for this group of scholars (Madge, Raghuram, and Noxolo 2014).
5. I am fully aware of the danger in using such a generalised term, since it is obvious that neither North nor South can be considered as homogenous. I have done so to make my argument more straight-forward.

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