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Understanding Youth Educational Mobilities in Asia: A Comparison of Chinese ‘Foreign Talent’ Students in Singapore and Indian MBBS Students in China

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ABSTRACT
While scholarship on international student mobility (ISM) has proliferated in recent times, understanding of educational mobilities within the Asian region remains limited, empirically and theoretically. This paper contributes to this nascent intra-Asian ISM perspective through offering a comparative overview of two contemporary empirical cases: Chinese students recruited as ‘foreign talent’ by Singapore and Indian students headed to China to study English-medium MBBS degrees. Using an analytical framework based on integrating key existing theoretical approaches in ISM scholarship, this paper compares the two cases in terms of the push–pull conditions/factors underlying them, as well as the physical, socioeconomic, and cultural im/mobility outcomes for the two groups of students. Although both groups may be regarded as belonging to Asia’s vast rising middle classes, the more academically and socially advantaged Chinese students in Singapore are found to enjoy more favourable outcomes than their less privileged Indian counterparts. Theoretically, this paper underscores the divergences between the two cases as manifestations of an increasingly class-differentiated landscape of international student/youth mobilities in Asia.

KEYWORDS
International education; international student migration/mobility; educational mobility; social mobility; youth; Asia; push–pull; education migration

Introduction
Over the past several decades, tertiary-level international student mobility (ISM) has grown significantly. The number of students enrolled in tertiary education outside their countries of citizenship rose from 1.3 million in 1990 (OECD 2013) to an estimated 5 million in 2014 (ICEF Monitor 2015). This figure had been projected to increase further to 8 million by 2025 (Institute of International Education 2015). With this significant rise in ISM, a sizable body of multidisciplinary scholarship has emerged (e.g. Brooks and Waters 2011), analysing a diverse range of issues from various theoretical perspectives (King and Raghuram 2013). One prominent concern of this scholarship (see e.g. Rao 2010; Arnot et al. 2013) has been the relationship between educational migration/mobility and students’ socioeconomic outcomes, owing to the primacy of education as a mechanism of social reproduction (Bourdieu and Passeron 1990) as well as a perceived means for...
achieving social mobility. Other prevalent perspectives on ISM include the macro-oriented ‘push–pull’ analysis and the more micro-level focus on social aspirations and lived experiences of mobile youth. However, even in these latter perspectives, the role educational mobility is presumed to play in relation to social reproduction and/or socioeconomic mobilities is often considered central. For instance, it can be seen to ultimately underpin the ‘push–pull’ reasoning as well as the lived social aspirations and experiences of international students. Thus, suffice it to say, there is potential for different ISM analytical perspectives to be brought together under a general framework trained to understand how educational mobilities lead to or affect social mobilities and related outcomes.

To date, ISM research has been characterized by a geographical imbalance, with most of the attention having been paid to student mobilities to Western or Global North destinations (Arnot et al. 2013). Admittedly, this reflects the prevailing pattern of ISM: whereas more than half of the world’s tertiary international students hail from Asia, the top destinations remain Anglophone and/or European countries (UNESCO 2013). Consequently, relatively little empirical attention has been given to alternative ISM patterns, particularly those taking place in Asia. However, according to the UNESCO (2016), in 2016 the East Asia and Pacific region hosted 19 per cent of the world’s international students, trailing only behind North America and Europe. Despite signs of an emerging scholarship focused on this development in the recent few years (e.g. Ziguras and McBurnie 2011; Chan 2012; Collins 2013; Collins and Ho 2014), there remains much scope for furthering the understanding of intra-Asia student mobilities through empirical work.

This paper seeks to contribute to this nascent intra-Asia ISM scholarship by offering a comparative analysis of two cases of educational mobility that respectively involve students from China and India who move within the region. Besides being the two largest developing nations in Asia and the world, China and India are collectively home to a third of the world’s higher education students (Morgan 2016), as well as the top and the second largest senders of international students respectively. Thus, examining the educational mobilities embodied by youth from these two countries may hold significant heuristic value towards understanding the future of ISM, regionally and globally. In specific, the first case entails academically able youth from middle-class urban China recruited by the government of Singapore as ‘foreign talent’ through long-standing scholarship schemes dating back to the 1990s. The second case consists of a phenomenon starting in the early 2000s (Aiyar 2006), in which academically lower-performing youth from emergent middle-class India headed to second-tier/provincial universities in China for English-medium degree studies in clinical medicine (or MBBS).

Both cases represent notable inflows of students for the receiving countries. For city-state Singapore, international students from China likely make up the largest single nationality group (Yang 2016). Even though scholarship-recipients are only a sub-set of the total, these so-called ‘PRC scholars’ have been noted for their not insignificant impact on the local educational ecosystems (Yang 2014a, 2014b, 2017). On the other hand, Indian students in China – numbering 18,626 in 2016 – ranked as the fourth most numerous nationality among all international student groups in the country (Ministry of Education China 2017), or the second most numerous (following the Korean) if non-degree students are excluded. The majority of these Indian students are believed to be enrolled in English-medium medical studies, which is also the second most popular subject field for international students in China (Kuroda 2014). To date, however, both
cases have largely evaded research attention, reflecting again the ‘East-to-West’/‘SouthNorth’ bias of the ISM scholarship. Thus, with a few exceptions (Dimmock and Ong 2010; Yang 2014b), not much has been written about Chinese students in Singapore, in contrast to a manifestly vast educational scholarship on Chinese students elsewhere in Anglophone West. Similarly, most existing accounts of mobile Indian students are concentrated in Western contexts (e.g. Baas 2010; Sondhi 2013; Walton-Roberts 2015; Sondhi and King 2017).

The unique natures of the two cases render a comparison between them analytically significant. Whereas the former is an example of state-organized ISM directed strongly by state interests and agenda, the latter appears to be a somewhat surprising outcome – after all China is far from recognized as an international destination for English-medium medical education – of market-based behaviours. Furthermore, the socioeconomic and academic positioning, the actual experiences of academic sojourn, and the eventual outcomes also vary notably for the youth in the two cases. Comparing the two cases thus serves to illustrate not only the empirical diversity of student mobilities currently taking place within Asia, but also the diverse underlying logics as well as variegated embodied experiences within such intra-Asian educational mobilities. Lastly, as King and Sondhi (2016) point out recently, the comparative analysis remains an under-utilized approach in ISM research. One additional contribution of this paper – besides the empirical data – lies in exploring the theoretical potential of the comparative approach.

Comparison in this paper shall be carried out under a multi-dimensional analytical framework that draws on some of the main existing theoretical approaches to ISM, including the classic push–pull analysis, the Bourdieusian framework on class reproduction, and the experiential emphases of the youth mobilities perspective. This framework is developed in the following section through a necessarily limited review of the literature. Subsequently, some notes elaborate on the fieldwork and data collection underpinning this paper; the nature of the comparative analysis is also explained. The main body of the paper then follows, comprising a structured comparative overview of the two cases. Finally, the conclusion draws attention to the ways in which, in Asia, widened participation in educational mobilities in recent times is accompanied by the class-di

differentiation of the experiences as well as the potential outcomes of such mobilities for youth.

**International Student Mobility: Towards a Comprehensive Analytical Framework**

According to King and colleagues (King et al. 2011; King and Sondhi 2016), there are broadly four ways to conceptualize ISM in existing scholarship: (1) As a form of migration (potentially highly skilled migration); (2) as a manifestation as well as mechanism of higher education globalization; (3) as a trans-border strategy and process in social class reproduction and/or formation; and (4) as a locus of youth mobility culture, experience, and identities. Since (2) globalization of higher education is a topic often discussed in the policy/practitioner-oriented literature that goes beyond the scope of the present paper, the following discussion mainly engages with the other three conceptual angles.

First, when viewed from a migration perspective, analyses of student mobility have been influenced by neoclassic migration theories which emphasize rational choice based on ‘push–pull’ factors (Raghuram 2013: 142). The ‘push’ factors are typically social and
economic ones in the host country that spur students to seek education abroad, whereas the ‘pull’ factors often pertain to the choices as to which specific countries or institutions to opt for. Such a ‘push–pull’ lens has been applied to student mobilities in a variety of contexts (e.g. Mazzarol and Soutar 2002; Li and Bray 2007; González et al. 2011; Lee 2014). Its continued popularity attests to its analytical strength, although more recently Gopinath (2015: 290) points out rightly that ‘a sharp distinction between “push” and “pull” factors may not be helpful’ or even possible, as various factors may be difficult to separate. Another potential problem with ‘push–pull’ analysis is that it risks lumping together macro-level conditions on the one hand and meso-/micro-level institutional/organizational mechanisms on the other, that could both be seen to ‘push’ and ‘pull’ international student flows. In light of these issues, this paper adopts a two-tiered push–pull analysis: it looks at (a) macro-level ‘push–pull’ conditions and (b) meso/micro-level ‘push–pull’ factors that include institutional mechanisms and organizational actors.

Second, scholars approaching ISM principally as a matter of class reproduction/formation strategy have typically drawn on Bourdieu’s (1986) seminal theories about different forms of capital and their conversions. ISM is seen as a way of accumulating cultural capital which can translate into social and economic capitals through enhanced access to social networks and employment opportunities (e.g. King and Ruiz-Gelices 2003; Baláž and Williams 2004; Waters 2006, 2008; Findlay et al. 2012). Thus, a link is here established between educational mobility and socioeconomic mobilities: for those already socioeconomically advantaged (such as the established middle-class), ISM can serve to reproduce such advantages (i.e. a reproductive mechanism); for those belonging to the aspirant social groups, ISM (and education in general) bears the even heavier expectation of generating socioeconomic mobilities (i.e. a formative or generative mechanism). Among these two mechanisms, scholarship thus far has focused more on the reproductive mechanism, since it is often assumed that ISM is pursued by those already somewhat privileged (Waters 2012; Lorz et al. 2016). Considerably less has been said about to what extent and how ISM may serve the less privileged, such as aspiring/emergent lower middle classes, to achieve socioeconomic mobilities. In this paper, the Indian students’ case presents a unique opportunity to scrutinize this link between ISM and social im/mobilities for the less privileged.

A third strand of scholarship recognizes ISM as an important space of youth experiences, cultures, and identity-making possibilities and practices (Geisen 2010). As King and Sondhi (2016: 6) helpfully summarize:

Under the youth mobilities approach, ISM is seen partly as an end in itself: as an exciting personal experience, an ‘adventure’. The study-stay abroad becomes a life-stage ‘consumption good’ corresponding to a ‘rite of passage’. Whilst the academic qualification retains its importance (at least to the extent that it is important not to ‘fail’), the key objective is the sensory and cultural experience of being in another place/country, with its different climate, scenery, historical patrimony, recreational opportunities, food and music traditions, and new opportunities for social encounters and friendships.

Thus, under this framework, it is the lived experiences of internationally mobile youth, especially their cross/inter-cultural experiences, that are foregrounded. If the trope of im/mobility were also to be used here, one could coin the notion of ‘cultural im/mobility’
to designate the youth’s (in)experiences and (in)capacities of crossing cultural boundaries as part of their educational mobility.

The above-discussed three ISM perspectives constitute the building blocks of a more comprehensive analytical framework to be used for this paper’s comparison of the two empirical cases of Asian student mobility. Because mobility in the physical and geographical sense is an integral part to educational mobility, and it underlies socioeconomic and cultural mobilities, this category is added to the framework.

As a result, the following composite framework emerges, with the main analytical categories being:

1. **Push–pull conditions/factors**, which further encompass (a) themacro (or structural) conditions framing the youth’s educational projects from the outset, and (b) the meso/micro-level drivers behind their mobility, which may include institutional mechanisms and organizational actors;

2. **Physical/geographical im/mobility**, which self-explanatorily refers to the physical im/mobilities or the potentials for geographical mobilities experienced by the two youth groups;

3. **Social im/mobility**, designating the socioeconomic consequences – observed or projected – of the two groups of young people’s respective educational endeavours; and

4. **Cultural im/mobility**, referring to the youth’s (in)experiences and (in)capacities of crossing cultural boundaries.

**Notes on Fieldwork, Data, and Comparative Analysis**

Both research projects were qualitative in nature, with in-depth interview and ethnographic observation being the two main methods for data collection.

The study on Chinese ‘foreign talent’ students in Singapore was chiefly carried out between 2011 and 2012, involving ethnographic work in both China and Singapore, spanning a total of 16 months. Semi-/un-structured interviews with 49 informants were also conducted in Singapore. Whereas the fieldwork in China mainly examined the Chinese students’ schooling experiences and the scholarship selection processes, data collection in Singapore focused on these students’ intercultural experiences as university students and, subsequently, student-turned-immigrants. Beyond such formal processes of data collection, the author – now based in Singapore – has also been able to continue to observe and collect data informally about this group.

Research on the Indian medical students in China was conducted between 2014 and 2016 at a provincial university in eastern China (to be dubbed ‘CNU’ in this paper). At the time of writing, CNU has cumulatively enrolled at least 400 Indian students, accounting for more than 80 per cent of its total international MBBS student headcount over time. The author’s fieldwork consisted of three phases. First, over a week of intense ethnographic observation and interaction with Indian students on CNU’s MBBS programme in March 2014, the author shadowed a small group of students closely, trying to understand their academic and social lives in China. Secondly, during June–July 2014, the author embarked on a two-week long trip to India with four Indian students, visiting and staying at their respective homes in the southern state of Tamil Nadu, in order to find out in greater detail the backgrounds of the students and their motivations for
China-bound educational mobilities. Finally, a week-long visit to India took place in January 2016, during which the author visited Kolkata and Bengaluru to meet and interact with the owners and officials of a leading Indian educational agency that had been involved in facilitating Indian students’ medical studies in China since the early 2000s. These three field trips, while not long in duration, were nevertheless intense in terms of the amount of information gathered and insights generated, resulting in copious ethnographic notes being written. Furthermore, this ethnographic work was supplemented by sustained informal conversations with the Indian students through social media such as Facebook and WeChat which continue to the time of writing.

It ought to be noted that the two studies were pursued independently, without prior intention of a comparative analysis. This means that parallelism has not always been possible between the two cases. For instance, data collection and field engagement for the first project is more extensive than that of the second project. However, this problem is partially mitigated by the use of a common conceptual framework as outlined in the foregoing section. Furthermore, the objective of this post hoc comparative exercise is primarily heuristic, namely, to seek indicative understanding of emerging forms of intra-Asia student mobility. Hence, some degree of inference and projection (more pronounced in the analysis of the Indian students case) is arguably inevitable. Wherever appropriate, attempts have been made to address imbalances in empirical data through references to existing literature.

A Comparative Analysis

1. Push–Pull – (a) Macro Conditions; (b) Meso/Micro Factors

Chinese ‘foreign talent’ students in Singapore

(a) Macro conditions: Historically, education has had a special importance in the Chinese society as a legitimate and more or less meritocratic means for social mobility (Ho 1964). This cultural heritage, acting in conjunction with contemporary social conditions relating to the demography, the education system and the labour market, led to the prevalence of an intense ‘educational desire’ in the country (Kipnis 2011). Following the expansion of the Chinese higher education (HE) since 1998, which saw the HE gross enrolment rate rise dramatically to approach the 40 per cent mark by 2020 (Cai and Yan 2015), increasing pressures are felt by Chinese youth (and their parents) to not just obtain higher education, but to distinguish themselves through accessing more exclusive forms of tertiary education. Since the beginning of this millennium, the number of Chinese students heading overseas for education each year has increased drastically, from less than 50,000 in 2000 to 544,500 in 2016 (PRC State Council 2017). Pursuant to the Bourdieusian perspective, it has been pointed out that the rise of ISM of Chinese youth is closely related to larger processes of social stratification in the country (Xiang and Shen 2009). For the Chinese youth themselves, however, studying abroad is experienced perhaps in equal measure as a matter of gaining exposure to cultures and societies of the developed world; an adventure in cosmopolitanism and cross-cultural experiences (Fong 2011).

As for the receiving context of Singapore, owing to sub-replacement local fertility rates as well as deepening integration into the knowledge-based global economy, the government has increasingly sought to attract talented human resources from overseas (Yang...
Thanks to Singapore’s history as a migrant settlement with an ethnic Chinese majority for more than a century, the country remains culturally Chinese to a significant degree. More recently, this ‘Chineseness’ has been self-consciously re-appropriated and promoted by the Singaporean state as an asset in a world witnessing an ascending China (Goh 2012). As a result, China has been seen as a viable source of human resources for Singapore to tap on.

(b) Meso/micro factors: The Singapore government’s recruitment of Chinese students began soon after formal diplomatic relationship was established between the two countries in 1990. In the same decade, three significant schemes (subsequently known as the ‘SM3’, ‘SM1’, and ‘SM2’) were instituted. Set up in 1992, the SM3 scheme targeted first-year engineering/science undergraduate students in more than a dozen leading Chinese universities, offering fully funded places in engineering/science degree programmes at Singapore’s two major public universities. Beginning in the mid-1990s, the SM1 scheme recruited students who have just completed nine years of compulsory education in China’s top urban schools, granting these 15/16-year-olds four years of fully funded study at upper secondary schools and then junior colleges in Singapore. Lastly, the SM2 scheme commenced in 1997, selecting second-year science stream students in top senior middle schools (thus 17/18 year-olds) across many provinces in China. The intake scales of these scholarship programmes increased over time, rising from an estimated 100 students per year per programme initially to 300-400 students annually per programme in more recent times, although the most recent several years saw a notable decline in the numbers. At the time of writing, the SM1 and SM2 schemes are still ongoing, whereas the SM3 scheme had terminated after 2011. Cumulatively, these programmes have brought an estimated total of 15,000–20,000 Chinese youth into the Singaporean education system – not an insignificant figure considering the compact size of the local system.

This China-to-Singapore educational mobility based on scholarship schemes is unambiguously state-orchestrated. Both countries’ educational authorities are involved in the recruitment processes. The substantial funding needed for the scholarships is provided by a number of prominent Singaporean government-linked corporations (GLCs); but apart from funding, their role is otherwise negligible. As a condition to receiving the scholarships, scholars on the SM2 and SM3 programmes are legally obligated to work in Singapore for six years upon obtaining their Bachelor’s degrees. While this ‘bond’ is nominally owed to the sponsoring companies, scholars are generally only obliged to seek employment in Singapore. The fulfilment of this obligation is monitored by the Singaporean Ministry of Education (MOE). In short, administrative power and resources of the Singaporean state, and the consent and cooperation from its Chinese counterpart constitute the main institutional mechanism and organizational drivers of this case of educational mobility.

Indian MBBS students in China

(a) Macro conditions: Also an Asian developing country with a large population, India has certain commonalities with China when it comes to normative desires for education and educational mobility as means for socioeconomic betterment. India has the world’s largest number – 234 million – of young people in the 15-24 age group, signifying a massive demand for HE (Joshi 2015). However, with a gross enrolment rate of 19 per cent in
2012 that had been projected to reach 22 per cent in 2020, this immense demand is not being met domestically. This is in spite of a significant private HE sector in India that already accounted for 59 per cent of all tertiary student enrolments in 2012 (Joshi 2015) to make up for the inadequate public HE sector provisions. Furthermore, it has been widely noted that both the public and private education sectors in India are faced with significant quality issues (Altbach 2009). Scholars have argued that improved access to HE has not always translated into better employment outcomes or socioeconomic mobility, especially for the lower sections of Indian society (Jeffrey et al. 2004; Jeffrey 2010). As such, for those Indians whose educational and class aspirations are not adequately catered to domestically, international educational mobility has risen as an alternative option. According to UNESCO (2018), currently there are 278,383 Indian students abroad.

Education in professional fields such as medicine, law and engineering is an integral part of the middle-class social aspiration and strategy in India (and elsewhere). In response to highly limited number of seats in government aided medical schools which generally maintain higher entry and training standards despite affordable tuition fees, a large for-profit private medical education sector has developed, accounting for most of the recent increases in admissions to medical schools in India (Sood 2008). However, because the private medical education sector is characterized by very high tuition fee levels, it excludes doctor-aspirants from less well-to-do backgrounds. As a result, some Indian youth who are academically excluded from public medical schools and financially excluded from private options, end up seeking affordable overseas provision in countries outside the Anglophone world. While Russia and Ukraine had been popular destinations up to the end of the first decade of the 2000s, more recently China has taken over as the top destination for Indian students seeking English-medium MBBS abroad (Mishra 2012). An English-medium MBBS degree for international students in China usually costs only one-quarter to one-third of what it would cost in a private medical school in India.

It should be added here that 'middle class' is a particularly complex notion in India, and the subject of an extensive scholarly discussion (e.g. Fernandes 2006) that cannot be comprehensively reviewed here. However, the socioeconomic backgrounds of the Tamil Nadu informants in this study can be characterized by what Sancho (2017: 3) has recently termed as 'the lowest or more struggling sections of India’s new middle classes’. Highly similar to Sancho’s research participants from Kerala/Kochi who were headed to Australia, my interlocutors also usually went to vernacular-medium schools which means their English language competence tends to be limited; their parents worked in low-level civil service jobs, small trades, sometimes rural farming that provided modest incomes; and importantly, these students were academically ‘low-performing’ and not considered successful in light of the hegemonic middle-class culture of education in India (Sancho 2017). No doubt, they were more fortunate than the offspring of Indian rural laborers who ‘cling to hope through education’ despite having little (Jakimow 2016). However, they did not quite belong to the more established middle class who pursue ISM with greater ease to reproduce their social advantages (Tuxen 2017). The very fact that they pursue MBBS in China suggests a struggle to emulate the class strategies of more privileged middle-class subjects.

As for the receiving context, China now ranks as the third largest receiver of international students globally (Institute of International Education 2015). In absolute terms,
the number of foreign students in China has increased from a mere 14,000 in 1992 (Kuroda 2014: 448) to more than 440,000 as of 2016 (PRC State Council 2017). The Chinese Ministry of Education (2010) has planned to host up to 500,000 international students by 2020. While for the Chinese state ‘soft power’ is one consideration, ‘Chinese universities view hosting international students partly as a way of earning income as well as adding a valuable international dimension to the institution’ (Altbach 2009: 18–19). In fact, it has been estimated that 9 out of 10 foreign students in China are fee-paying (Haugen 2013).

(b) Meso/micro factors: When it comes to institutional and organizational factors, state policies certainly play some roles in the India-to-China medical student mobility, but such roles are largely passive. For instance, the Medical Council of India (MCI) provides that Indian candidates who have obtained training in foreign countries other than the US, UK, Australia, New Zealand, and Canada must pass the Foreign Medical Graduate Exam (FMGE) before they can practice medicine in India. In China, where a highly centralized and bureaucratized higher education system is in place, university admission quotas are typically set by the MOE. The total number of official seats on English-medium MBBS programmes for international students increased steadily from 2095 offered by 24 universities in the 2007 admission year, to the high watermark of 6020 places offered by 52 institutions in 2013 (Medical Council of India 2015). In the admission year of 2017, 45 institutions offered a total of 3520 places (“China Medical Education Information” 2018), which meant an average programme size of about 80 students. However, the Indian and Chinese states mainly act in such broad-brush regulatory roles, unlike the extensive state involvement in the case of Chinese ‘foreign talent’ students to Singapore.

Private for-profit educational intermediary organizations based in India are the key drivers behind Indian medical students’ mobility to China. Indian educational agencies provide their clients ‘one-stop’ services, covering application paperwork, travel arrangements, pastoral supervision, ongoing supplementary lessons, and even post-study exam coaching. Furthermore, agents actively create demand, in proactively convincing potential clients about the desirability and viability of MBBS degrees from China. The Indian entrepreneurs operating educational agencies usually enjoy wealth and high social status, whereas their local recruiters are typically resourceful men with extensive social connections and prestige. In the local cultural context, this often translates into considerable influence over the decision-making of the prospective students as well as their parents who, due to their relatively lower class background, often know little about overseas education, medicine, or China. Finally, social networks of kinship and friendship were also found to be relevant in shaping the students’ and their families’ view on pursuing educational mobility.

2. Physical/Geographical Im/Mobilities

Chinese ‘foreign talent’ students in Singapore

For many Chinese youth selected by Singapore as ‘foreign talent’, the scholarship schemes provided them their first experience of international mobility, and proved to be the first link in a chain of subsequent mobilities to places further away. Situated at leading universities in global city Singapore, various opportunities for international exchange, overseas...
internship, and/or summer study abroad become available to these Chinese youth, and they ambitiously take advantage of such opportunities to enrich their CVs and self-identities. Furthermore, after having obtained an internationally recognized university education, the mobility potential of these Chinese youth is usually enhanced. A small but steady proportion of them go on to study further towards postgraduate qualifications, in Western countries or at Singaporean institutions. For the majority who enter the workforce upon graduation, the skilled/professional nature of their work, coupled with Singapore economy’s global connectedness, can lead to opportunities to travel or relocate abroad (sometimes back to China). Many of those who remain in Singapore eventually acquire Singapore citizenship, which means significantly greater ease of international travel. In short, Chinese youth benefiting from educational mobility programmes funded by the Singaporean state over time enjoy considerable and increasing physical mobilities across more expansive geographies. Most importantly, their educational mobility serves to enhance their future mobility potential.

**Indian MBBS students in China**

The Indian youth studying MBBS in China, in contrast, enjoy relatively limited physical/geographical mobilities from the outset. Due to limited financial means and language barriers, these students often remain entirely on campus during term time, and choose to go back to their home country as soon as vacation commences. The Chinese institutions hosting them offer virtually no other opportunity for further international mobility, although some local trips may be organized as part of the students’ extra-curricular experiences. A minority among the students, typically those more well-to-do, are able to explore their host country more, but the nature of such mobility is almost always leisurely, rather than the more diverse forms of onward geographical mobility that Chinese ‘foreign talent’ students enjoy in or through Singapore.

Crucially, for most Indian MBBS students in China, future mobility potential is not notably enhanced. The medical credentials obtained from second-tier/provincial Chinese universities are currently unlikely to be strong mobility-enablers professionally, although the global currency of Chinese-based professional credentials may improve in the future along with China’s global power. Indeed, as previously mentioned, the Indian students must still pass a licensing exam in India before being eligible for medical practice. The more general sociocultural capitals they accrue in China, such as Chinese language/cultural competencies and social connections, on the other hand, may become enablers of physical and geographical mobilities to some extent. These will be dealt with in subsequent sections.

**3. Social Im/Mobilities: ‘Success’, ‘Failure’, Uncertainty**

**Chinese ‘foreign talent’ students in Singapore**

For the majority of Chinese youth recruited by the Singaporean government, educational mobility is likely leading to positive life/career outcomes, although it is debatable whether such outcomes can be characterized strictly in terms of social mobility. Chinese ‘foreign talent’ scholars are largely selected from among academically successful students from China’s top urban schools/universities. This means most of them come from urban middle class in China. After completing studies in Singapore, the vast majority of them
enter mainstream professional work, earn middle-class incomes and have middle-class lifestyles. In other words, settling into middle-class adult life in Singapore may not be perceived as a drastic case of social mobility from their upbringings in China. Nevertheless, given Singapore’s arguably superior social and material infrastructure and political stability, most Chinese student-turned-migrants seem to regard coming to Singapore a pathway of success, and are on the whole satisfied with their current circumstances.

Certain factors, however, can limit their social mobility within Singapore. Apart from the ‘bond’ requirement that limits their opportunities of pursuing further studies immediately after undergraduate degrees, SM2 and SM3 schemes also limit scholars’ fields of study to that of science and engineering, to the exclusion of prestigious courses such as law, medicine, and business/finance that typically lead to higher graduate salaries in Singapore. With further studies increasingly curtailed by the authorities in recent years, some recent Chinese students express feelings of being constrained. Finally, the explicit and implicit costs associated with their foreigner/immigrant status, which have lately been intensified by policy recalibration, arguably also slow down Chinese student-turned-migrants’ upward socioeconomic mobilities.

**Indian MBBS students in China**

The data presented in this paper did not follow Indian MBBS students into postgraduate life. Further research is thus needed in order to assess the Indian students’ social immobility outcomes following studying MBBS in China. However, a few indicative observations are possible based on research done so far (Yang 2018b). For most Indian students, the road to gaining social mobility through becoming medical doctors seems fraught with uncertainties. The degree they obtain from China does not guarantee the right to practice medicine, since they must pass the FMGE exam administered by the Indian authorities, which often necessitates additional coaching at further financial and time investments. For most Indian students the author met at CNU, their parents have already taken out loans, either from the bank or from relatives, in order to pay for tuition fees. It is thus possible that some of them will eventually fail to complete their training or certification process, or end up in significant debt upon completion.

The quality of medical education offered by different provincial Chinese colleges varies. In addition, students generally seem to lack academic preparedness. This generates uncertainties as to the subsequent employability of the candidates when they return to India. After operating four cohorts of international MBBS programmes, CNU, the fieldwork site for this research, was suspended by the Chinese MOE from further recruitment from 2014 onwards due to quality concerns, although existing students were allowed to continue. For the Tamil students followed closely during this research, the investment into studying MBBS in China may ultimately fail to deliver the desired outcomes of realizing socioeconomic mobilities through qualifying as medical professionals. Nevertheless, Indian students at Chinese institutions that offer higher-quality teaching and learning may enjoy better outcomes.

Finally, whether their educational mobility to China turns out a productive one also somewhat depends on the extent to which *individual* students are able to take advantage of their cross-cultural learning and socialization experiences; an issue examined next under ‘cultural immobilities’.
4. Cultural Im/Mobilities: Inclusion, Exclusion, Friction

Chinese ‘foreign talent’ students in Singapore

To recall, ‘cultural mobility’ is defined here as the state of being able to move across and/or bridge cultural boundaries, to develop cosmopolitan outlooks and skills, which contribute to the success and wellbeing of mobile subjects. In general, Chinese ‘foreign talent’ students in Singapore enjoy high cultural mobility thanks to a number of factors: first, their generally higher academic abilities and ambitions tend to translate into an openness to new cultures and a desire to develop cross-cultural experiences and skills. Second, their bilingual competency in Chinese and English languages generally supports their successful cross-cultural functioning, although initially English may represent a barrier. However, to mitigate the latter, Chinese serves as a particularly useful tie connecting them to Chinese Singaporean society. Third, after entering the labour market as professionals, their middle-class socioeconomic outcomes allow them to participate in mainstream local life and share the same concerns with local middle classes. Taken together, these factors facilitate the integration, though perhaps not complete assimilation, of the Chinese student-turned-migrants.

This notwithstanding, evidence of cultural im/mobilities can also be found. For students, this might manifest in non-integration in campus life (Yang 2014a). The student-turned-migrants in this study indicated that most of their peers marry spouses of similar backgrounds, and seldom marry local-born Singaporeans or people of other nationalities. With Singaporean society increasingly wary of immigration, Chinese immigrants now more frequently find themselves at the receiving end of anti-immigrant or xenophobic sentiments and/or discrimination (Yang 2018a). A far greater number of PRC nationals now live and work in the city–state, scattered across a wider socioeconomic spectrum. This can affect the general local perceptions of Chinese ‘foreign talent’ student-turned-immigrants in ways that limit their cultural mobility.

Indian MBBS students in China

Indian MBBS students in China have lower levels of cultural mobility on the whole. Very rarely do Indian students manage to learn Chinese to a meaningful level of fluency, despite a clear intention on the part of Chinese universities to impart Chinese culture and language to them. In fact, based on author’s field observations at CNU, Indian students tend to regard Chinese language learning a waste of time, useless towards their aim of obtaining the MBBS degree. At the same time, few ordinary local Chinese are able to communicate in English which, in any case, not every Indian student is fully conversant in. As a result, when it comes to social life or interaction, there is typically a conspicuous segregation between the international students and local Chinese students on campus, expressed in separate accommodation arrangements, facilities utilization, and so on. Local Chinese students generally show little interest in or friendliness towards the Indian students, due to the latter’s inferior socioeconomic status as well as perceived lower position in the global racialized hierarchies. Some of the Indian participants in this study also directly accused the CNU staff of being discriminatory. All in all, for many Indian youth, coming to China does not turn out to be a deeply enriching experience, adding relatively little to their accumulation of sociocultural capital.

Exceptions to this general state of cultural immobility certainly exist. Students of greater financial means may find it easier to establish connection with local Chinese, sometimes
even forming romantic relationships (typically Indian men with Chinese women). Through hard work, a small number of Indian students become highly fluent in Chinese, which sometimes brings about useful cultural or career opportunities. For instance, one jet-setting senior officer at the leading Indian educational agency was himself previously an MBBS graduate from a Southern Chinese medical college. Another former graduate encountered during fieldwork in India not only secured employment in a reputable government hospital in Kolkata, but was also contemplating starting a pharmaceutical trading business between India and China, with his Chinese wife as a partner. Cases such as these illustrate that Indian youth’s cultural im/mobility outcomes are contingent.

Conclusions

Comparing these two cases above serves to illustrate, even if only in a small way, the diversity of conditions and drivers as well as potential outcomes of educational mobilities that can obtain within the Asia region alone. This comparison also shows how the different types of im/mobilities examined are often interconnected and mutually reinforcing.

On the one hand, the Chinese ‘foreign talent’ students case highlights how state-initiated (and funded) educational mobility for academically successful youth can lead to generally positive socioeconomic and cultural mobility outcomes, further enhancing their existing privilege. The Indian MBBS students case, on the other hand, seems to suggest that for academically and socially less advantaged youth, market/profit-driven educational mobility can generate much more mixed experiences, even considerable uncertainties in relation to the ultimate objective of obtaining socioeconomic mobility through international education.

In a recent study about Indian students’ pursuit of global HE, Gopinath (2015) conceptualizes two types of educational mobility: ‘controlled’ and ‘emergent’. While ‘controlled mobility’ refers to more entrenched and clearly defined ways of social reproduction or social mobility obtainment for privileged classes, ‘emergent mobility’ refers to those pathways now open to emergent aspiring social groups that were previously not possible. Although Gopinath conceptualizes both types within the Indian context, the two can be usefully appropriated to describe the two cases of youth mobilities in this paper. Of the two groups, the Chinese students enjoy a more ‘controlled’ form of mobility in the sense that the Singaporean ‘foreign talent’ scholarship schemes were designed from the outset to recruit academically elite and often socially more advantaged youth from China. In fact, only highly ranked schools and universities in urban China were eligible to be potential feeders for the Singaporean schemes. In contrast, the Indian MBBS students are mostly members of an emergent but rather insecure lower section of the Indian middle class; their emergent mobilities are characterized by notable uncertainties, sometimes ‘failures’.

Arguably, this divergence between the Chinese students’ controlled mobilities and the Indian students’ emergent mobilities is essentially a class-based differentiation. Such class-differentiation within international HE, deemed by a leading scholar in the ISM field to be ‘very much in its infancy’ (Waters 2012: 132) only a few years ago, seems to have become more pronounced now even within Asia. Taken together, then, the two cases in this paper illustrate that the geographies of international educational mobility are increasingly complex, involving a diverse array of assemblages in terms of student background, location, and directionality. International education is no longer the privilege of the
few, but has become accessible to people from a wider socioeconomic spectrum. Accordingly, today’s Asian youth seem to have more opportunities than ever before to partake in projects of educational mobility as part of their youth-to-adult transitions, and the hopes and aspirations pinned on such projects are often high. However, accompanying this wider access to educational mobility is a clear class-differentiation within this mobility field. In other words, not all study abroad is the same, and the outcomes can be even more divergent. Young people differentially positioned in terms of their parental socioeconomic statuses, academic ability, geographical location, nationality, ethnicity/race, etc., will likely end up receiving international education of drastically different qualities, leading to divergent socioeconomic and cultural outcomes.

Herein also lies the unique value of an intra-Asian perspective on student mobility in exposing the limit of ISM theorization based on Western experiences. Findings in this paper, especially those pertaining to the Indian students, echo Jeffrey and McDowell’s (2004: 137) observation more than a decade ago – ‘as Western ideals of youth transitions have been exported outside Euro-America, it has become increasingly difficult for young people in Third World setting to emulate these ideals’. Asian developing-country youth’s educational mobility and their associated experiences of physical, socioeconomic and cultural im/mobilities are the outcomes of complex negotiations between youth’s own differential starting social positionings, constellations of power structures (e.g. the state and the market), and contextual social dynamics such as local immigration politics and exclusion.

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