Education, Migration, and Cultural Capital in the Chinese Diaspora: Transnational Students between Hong Kong and Canada

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EDUCATION, MIGRATION, AND CULTURAL CAPITAL IN THE CHINESE DIASPORA: TRANSNATIONAL STUDENTS BETWEEN HONG KONG AND CANADA

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Johanna Waters, in her book *Education, Migration, and Cultural Capital in the Chinese Diaspora: Transnational Students between Hong Kong and Canada*, explores the strategies and practices employed by middle-class Chinese families in Hong Kong for their children to accumulate cultural capital in the broader context of international education and transnational migration.

Rather than a pure individualistic determination, transnational education represents the pivotal position of family, which, according to Ong and Nonini, acts as a long-standing flexible habitus that is placed to serve capital accumulation strategies to later capitalism (1997). Though migrating with the intention to be accepted in host countries, most children from middle-class Hong Kong families plan to return to Hong Kong with foreign credentials in the hope of realizing the accumulated capital to the greatest extent. However, in terms of employability and winning promotion, only the qualifications gained from specific geography – namely Western countries, carry the anticipated cultural capital. Overseas qualifications therefore represent differential symbolic power in conferring social status, which has remained concealed considerably. This is the very point that the author intends to address in this book.

To contribute to the scholarship in this field, Johanna Waters carried out her in-depth study over the symbolic and material meanings of international education related to transnational mobility. Her study was conducted over three years in British Columbia.

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and Hong Kong, interviewing 50 current immigrant or international students in tertiary education in B.C. and 28 returnee graduates living and working in Hong Kong; in addition, she interviewed education officials in Vancouver and Hong Kong. Adopting the perspective that “academic qualifications can be strategically accumulated by individuals with access to financial, cultural, and social capital and that practices of, and success in, education are often determined by social class rather than necessarily reflecting natural talent or intelligence” (Bourdieu, 1984; Brown, 1995; Goldthorpe, 1996; cf., Young, 1958)” (Waters, 2008, p.6), Waters illustrates her study in six chapters.

In Chapter 1, “Globalization, Neoliberalism, and the Transformation of Education”, the author examines the functions the supranational organizations play in the context of expansion of international education as a lucrative industry. The impact of neoliberal ideology is reflected in the standardization of assessment in both the local and global scale, leading to the differentiation of national educational systems. “[A] myth around various educational institutions” (p.26) is thereby created and brings about the uneven distribution of international education in global geography as a result. As pointed out at the end of the chapter, however, in spite of the lucrative prospect embodied by the “golden goose” (MacLeod, 2004, n.p.)” industry, concerns should be given to “the practice of international education and the dangers of unfettered market involvement” (p.40).

The author draws the attention of the readers to Canada in Chapter 2, “Internationalization, Transnationalism, and Education in Canada”. The education in Canada is impacted, in terms of policy and practice, by the ideology of neoliberalism from the national and the provincial level down to the municipal. With the federal government shifting its concern on education from nation-building to commercial terms, the institutions at provincial level pursue the financial possibility by marketing international education. International education at the municipal level, the Vancouver School Board, focuses on the national and international relations to transcend the spatial scales. International education in Canada as a whole is inspected in this chapter, with internationalism functioning as ideology and internationalization as discourse and practice.

In Chapter 3, “Education and Middle-class Strategies in Contemporary Hong Kong”, the author explores the wider economic
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and political milieu that nurtures the fascination middle-class Hong Kong families hold in academic performance and overseas credentials. In addition to the shared perspective on “sanctuary” seeking (Bourdieu, 1997), meaning to escape the competitive HKCEE (Hong Kong certificate examination), many respondents attribute their international education experience to the “uncertainty and pessimism” of the economic restructuring of Hong Kong after the 1997 handover. The local credential inflation, the result of public education expansion, is another factor for the middle-class Hong Kong families to doubt the capital transferability of locally-earned qualifications. Furthermore, the migration culture of Hong Kong people, the eminent status of English as an inheritance of colonialism and the experience of Hong Kong education all play significant roles in the choice of spatial mobility as an education strategy. Emigration to a certain degree is the result of sanctuary seeking and implies students’ failure in the local educational system of Hong Kong.

As the title “Transnational Families and Education in Canada” indicates, Chapter 4 focuses on the strategy and practice of middle-class Hong Kong migrating families in their cultural capital accumulation in Canada. Adjusting the lens to Vancouver, Johanna Waters offers the ways in which those families apply the capital at their disposal, be it cultural, economic or social, to pursue foreign academic credentials together with their attached symbolism under the globalization of education. The imagined and perceived educational distinction and cultural capital is bestowed to different global geographies by students and their families, an unsurprising outcome of the promotion of institutions by governments at various levels. As an additional factor, it is the “magical properties”, or the symbolic qualities of the university degree that the Asian parents lay emphasis on, rather than the quality of the studying experience. Here the author turns to Bourdier again. Such negative aspects as family separation and the segregation of immigrant students are also touched on in this chapter. However, the overseas credentials paradoxically are bestowed with more value in the job market, which is dressed in Chapter 6.

In Chapter 5 “Return to Hong Kong: Transnational Geographies of Cultural Capital” Johanna Waters responds to the question posed by Bourdier how “the indirect route become the royal route” (1996, p.200)” in the case of Hong Kong students having their Canadian credentials transfer to economic and social capital in the Hong
Kong job market. By interviewing 28 returnee students (a different focus group from the ones in Vancouver) from Simon Fraser University, Waters found that local social capital of the returnees plays a critical role in the recognition and evaluation of cultural capital. Overseas credentials, to most Hong Kong employers, carry the implication of valuable qualities and desirable workplace skills that Hong Kong education system seems to fail to cultivate. Similar education background with the managerial staff, superb communicative skills, creative thinking and advanced English proficiency win the returnee students a 20% greater chances in job hunting than the local graduates. “[A] transnational circus of students, graduates and employers” (p.17) is thus established and nurtures the ongoing flow of the geographical embeddedness and spatial variability of cultural capital.

In Chapter 6 “Employability into the Future: Capital and the Ongoing Pursuit of Positional Advantage”, the author examines what follows the temporal advantage in securing a job for the returnees to Hong Kong. No further advantage can be seen after the returnee graduates are employed and they have to face the same competitive situations in the work place. Though foreign credentials earn returnee graduates an advantage in job seeking, it doesn’t guarantee that they can keep the job once they have. Several respondents expressed the intention to pursue post-graduate education to supplement the advantage bestowed by Canadian accumulated cultural capital.

In her “Conclusion”, Waters probes the defining qualities and the symbolic value attached to international education with its stratification and future development. Though successfully accomplishing the process of transforming academic failure in Hong Kong to success in Canada, the students from Hong Kong middle-class families meet with more difficulties in finding a job in Canada than in Hong Kong. Therefore, only going back to Asia can their overseas accumulated cultural capital be valued.

Education, Migration, and Cultural Capital in the Chinese Diaspora: Transnational Students between Hong Kong and Canada illustrates the geography of international education through a thorough case study of middle-class Hong Kong families in terms of cultural capital accumulation. In the broad context of transnationalism and transnationalization, the book provides a peculiar perspective concerning the global flow of capital – the economical on the part of
host countries and the cultural for international students. Migration and diaspora, therefore, represent the different forms of disposal of current capital in pursuit of overseas credentials in the case of Hong Kong middle-class families, which demonstrates the concepts of education in typical Chinese families.

As an educator, researcher, and an immigrant living in the Chinese diaspora pursuing a Canadian degree, I found the book thought-provoking and inspiring. The increasing tendency for Hong Kong middle-class families to send their children overseas for education demonstrates the desire for the younger generation to acquire foreign credentials, which will in turn lead to the accumulation of cultural and social capital. So what is the invisible hand that manipulates the flow of international education, therefore making the global geography of this industry “highly uneven” (p.27) and “very few countries benefit from the export of education” (ibid)? By illustrating how Hong Kong middle-class families protect social status and retain social production by employing capital accumulation strategies in transnational migration, Waters displays the subtle relationship between the social capital and cultural capital, and the way the two forms supplement each other.

However, I found the book unsatisfactory in four aspects. To begin with, Waters doesn’t question the uneven flow of capital in current international education, failing to relate it to the power relations of nations in globalization. The present cultural capital tends to flow from Western countries to the East, but why? In addition, though touching the vulnerability of immigrants in diaspora, she fails to point out the same, even worse, vulnerability suffered by international students across the whole process of degree pursuing. Thirdly, she attributes part of the reason for Hong Kong students going abroad to the 1997 handover of Hong Kong to China; nevertheless, in illustrating their return after graduation, she doesn’t give any hint of the political situation, which seems to me as contradictory. Is there any change in the political situation in Hong Kong? Or this factor just not as important when it comes to job hunting? The last but not least, when comparing international education with the education in Hong Kong, she seems to consent with the view that the disadvantage of local education is the result of a culture of learning-by-rote and an excessive emphasis on examination success, which is highly controversial. In fact there is much evidence in the literature showing that this is a misconception of Chinese
learning and a stereotype (Briggs, 1996).

*Education, Migration, and Cultural Capital in the Chinese Diaspora: Transnational Students between Hong Kong and Canada* makes an important contribution to the literature of international education and contains a wealth of ideas for professionals interested to go on probing. The clear development, novel perspective and convincing argument are worthy of a good read. I recommend this volume to all those working in education and its related fields.

**REFERENCES**


