


RESEARCH ARTICLE

The Normative Biography: International Higher Education Fever among China's Middle-class Families

Zhe Wang¹ and Xuerui Hu² 

¹Department of Education, University of Oxford, Oxford, UK, and ²Social Research Institute, Institution of Education, University College London, London, UK

Corresponding author: Xuerui Hu; Email: xuerui.hu@outlook.com

Abstract

This paper explores the international higher education (IHE) fever gripping China's middle-class families. Drawing on data gathered from 69 qualitative interviews with Chinese middle-class international students whose education is financially supported by their families, the paper points out that the desire for IHE is influenced by the pursuit of the “normative biography,” a term conceptualized by the authors to refer to the societal expectations that prescribe the specific life milestones and sequences that young middle-class adults should follow on their life trajectories. IHE is perceived as an important pathway to help such young adults meet these social expectations. Moreover, parental support for IHE is not only an educational investment but also assists offspring in conforming to the normative biography. This paper enriches the understanding of how educational practices are influenced by broader sociocultural contexts in contemporary China.

摘要

这篇论文探讨中国中产阶级家庭的国际高等教育热。通过定性访谈的方式，本研究采访了69位来自中国大陆中产阶级的自费留学生。本文指出，国际高等教育热受到了“规范性人生”的影响：这个术语由作者构建，以指代社会期望和规定的中产阶级青年在生活轨迹中应该遵循的人生目标及其顺序。作者指出，国际教育被中产阶级家庭认为是可以帮助青年满足规范性人生的捷径。此外，文章还指出父母对国际教育的支持不仅是被视为教育投资，还是其子女完成规范性人生的重要助力。因此，这篇论文丰富了对当代中国教育实践如何受到更广泛的社会文化影响的理解。

Keywords: international higher education fever; Chinese international students; middle class; modernity; intergenerational; the normative biography

关键词: 国际高等教育热; 中国留学生; 中产阶级; 现代性; 代际性; 规范性人生

In recent years, the swell in the number of Chinese students pursuing international higher education (IHE) has positioned them as the largest international student group worldwide.¹ Héctor Cebolla-Boado and his colleagues attribute part of this trend to the expansion of China's middle class, for whom IHE is more accessible and affordable.² Biao Xiang and Wei Shen suggest that international education is perceived by middle-class families as a conduit for upward social mobility and a means to attain status in a global context.³ Researchers such as Vanessa Fong analyse how geographical imaginations of concepts such as “Western” and “developed” impact these educational choices.⁴ Peidong Yang's study links middle-class students' aspirations for IHE

1 Textor 2024.

2 Cebolla-Boado, Hu and Soysal 2018.

3 Xiang and Shen 2009.

4 Fong 2011.

to the overarching educational desires in China, highlighting how China's cultural reverence for education, which is deeply rooted in Confucian values and aspirations for social mobility, motivates international education mobilities.⁵ He posits that such educational aspirations are not just individual pursuits but are ingrained within the societal psyche that guides Chinese students' experiences within these complex sociocultural matrices.⁶ Recent literature also incorporates a gender perspective, focusing on how female Chinese students perceive an overseas education, suggesting that female Chinese students view IHE as a way to confront and negotiate patriarchal norms in Chinese society.⁷

Another notable aspect of this rapid growth in the number of Chinese international students is that they are predominantly funded by their families. According to the Ministry of Education, in 2018, over 90 per cent of the Chinese students studying abroad were family-funded.⁸ While existing research has focused on the substantial support provided by Chinese families, particularly through the lenses of cultural capital and social reproduction,⁹ this study contributes a new perspective by examining how broader sociocultural forces in China influence the trend among middle-class families of pursuing higher education overseas and linking IHE fever to China's modernity. By unpacking the participants' perceptions of IHE and interrogating their family's support of it, this paper argues that the normative biography, as conceptualized by the authors, is fundamental in shaping IHE fever among China's middle-class families. This conformist narrative outlines a societal expectation of a structured life path, marked by sequentially timed milestones. Education is a key stepping stone in helping young adults construct the normative biography, with family support for education being an integral part of the endorsement of this life path. Our analysis of student narratives about their pursuit of IHE and their family's support and encouragement reveals that IHE represents a priority channel for young adults from middle-class families through which they can align with the normative biography. In other words, this paper suggests that pursuing IHE is seen as a strategic means to adhere to socially and culturally defined life milestones and goals valued in China.

We begin this article with a review of the literature on educational desire in contemporary China, illustrating how Chinese educational aspirations and parental support for these aspirations are intricately interwoven with China's modernity. We then provide the details of our research method before exploring how IHE fever among China's middle-class families is shaped by their attempts to align themselves with the normative biography.¹⁰ This concept of normative biography is characterized by two main features: temporality and interconnectedness. Our findings show how these two features work to position IHE as a crucial milestone in the collectively imagined life paths of the middle class. While scholars have conducted fruitful works on international higher educational practices from the perspective of temporality, this paper expands the discussion.¹¹ It not only shows how international educational mobility is structured by the dominant life-course narrative but also goes further by examining how the broader sociocultural context, specifically within the framework of modernity in China, shapes the life-course narrative (for example, its rigid timetable and sequence) and its impact on middle-class families' pursuit of IHE. Moreover, the normative biography also requires parents to play a vital role in guiding their children through various life stages, preparing them for and helping them align with its prescribed expectations.

5 Yang, Peidong 2016.

6 Ibid.

7 Martin 2022.

8 Ministry of Education 2018.

9 Tan et al. 2023; Wang, Zhe 2023b.

10 The normative biography presented in this study is drawn from the narratives of middle-class students. It is important to note that we do not intend to give an essential definition of this concept, recognizing its variability across diverse socio-cultural backgrounds.

11 For example, linking IHE mobility with lifecourse (Wang, Zhe 2022).

Parents' support of IHE forms part of their parental role in fostering the normative biography of their children. This research provides a nuanced understanding that the IHE fever among middle-class families is deeply rooted in the discourses of modernity and intergenerationality of Chinese families.

Educational Fever, Modernity and Intergenerationality in China

Education desire, the standardized life pathway for youth and modernity in China

Educational desire in China has long been a central focus of scholarly research, with existing literature demonstrating how the pursuit of education in China is deeply influenced by broader socio-cultural contexts.¹² In his study on the educational desire of Chinese families, Andrew Kipnis noticed that the interweaving of the state discourse of modernity and a deep-seated cultural aspiration for academic achievement in China transforms educational desire into a mode of governmentality, defining education as a pathway towards higher morality, social mobility and the actualization of life's values.¹³ According to Kipnis, inherent in educational desire is the establishment of a hierarchical framework that links educational attainment with factors such as income and moral standing, thereby differentiating individuals based on their adherence to the dominant discourse.¹⁴ Therefore, educational desire in China not only fosters a hierarchical view of education but also imposes a hierarchical perspective of life success.¹⁵

In a similar vein, Paul Willis explores how the discourse of modernity in China defines a standardized life pathway and shapes a hierarchical education system.¹⁶ Delving into the college entrance examination (*gaokao* 高考), Willis's research reveals the profound influence of modernity on the role of education in Chinese youths' daily lives and their choices in life course. He identifies three critical aspects of modernity – the rural–urban divide, the growth of Chinese-style consumerism and the rise of the internet – as key factors shaping educational practices and their associated meanings. These three aspects of modernity function as crucial instruments for comprehending educational practices in China, as they create a symbolic framework that delineates anticipated life trajectories through education, subsequently impacting daily life and the process of making sense of one's experiences. To elaborate further, the discourse of modernity defines a hierarchical and standardized educational pathway, where studying in a university via *gaokao* is seen as the gateway to a desired life trajectory marked by a more modern urban lifestyle and upward social mobility, aligning with these three aspects of modernity.

More recent scholarship calls for attention to students' agency in understanding their compliance or resistance within the normative educational life pathways and their adaption to their specific temporal and social realities.¹⁷ According to Ziyu Wang and colleagues, there are variations and unevenness in youth transitions and biographies, where young people can exercise their agency to navigate conventional linear and predetermined pathways.¹⁸ They further notice that class background influences Chinese individuals' ability to adapt and exert agency in constructing their temporal orientations and educational trajectories. Their research findings resonate with the scholarly observation that students' social backgrounds (for example, class, sexuality and gender) guide their navigation of the normative educational life transitions. For example, while both working-class and middle-class parents in China recognize the importance of conforming to the normative

12 Howlett 2021.

13 Kipnis 2011.

14 Ibid.

15 See also Kipnis 2012.

16 Willis 2020.

17 Wang, Ziyu, Liu and Julkunen 2024.

18 Ibid.

educational transitions,¹⁹ middle-class students often receive considerably more support from their parents in adhering to these norms.

Such agency has also been found in the IHE mobility of middle-class LGBTQ+ individuals in China to seek freedom from restrictive societal norms and to pursue their desired lifestyles and aspirations. Lucetta Kam details how the agency of Chinese middle-class queer women manifests in their negotiation of sexual normativity through international migration from China to Australia.²⁰ She highlights how going abroad has become a collective aspiration for Chinese middle-class queer women to evade the heteronormative expectations imposed on them by their parents and society. One of the main ways this international mobility is achieved is through IHE, sometimes with parental financial support. Suzanne Choi demonstrates the importance of education for gay men from privileged family backgrounds when negotiating heteronormative family pressure and achieving their own desired life goals through multiple global migrations throughout their lifetime.²¹

While these studies highlight how the intersection between individuals' agency and their social backgrounds enables them to negotiate the normativity through IHE, understanding how parents perceive and support their children's life trajectories through IHE mobility requires further exploration. In the context of IHE in China, fruitful research has explored Chinese students' IHE mobility as family practices and experiences, particularly through the lens of class.²² However, there is a scarcity of research into how IHE mobility is shaped by broader social contexts, for example intergenerationality and modernity, as noticed by this paper. Only Zhe Wang's research addresses how the discourse of modernity shapes the transnational mobility of Chinese students by instilling in them discourses such as modernization, individualism and industriousness.²³ Although her studies offer valuable insights into modernity and educational practices, the underlying motivations that drive families to provide such substantial support for their children's education within the Chinese context remain underexplored. Hence, this paper offers a familial aspect to the understanding of educational desire and practices influenced by modernity in China.

Parental desire for children's education: intergenerationality and modernity in China

The preceding subsection explored the connection between individual educational aspirations and modernity. This subsection reviews the research that can provide insights into how modernity influences intergenerational relationships, transforming educational fever into a familial pursuit. The significance of intergenerational relationships in Chinese families has been conceptualized as "intergenerationality," a term that emphasizes intergenerational interactions between parents and children as well as between grandparents and children.²⁴ The concept of intergenerationality is crucial to understanding China's modernity. In the early years of the People's Republic of China, political leaders attempted to disrupt reciprocal intergenerational care, at least on an ideological level.²⁵ Now, following China's engagement with the global neoliberal economy in the 1980s and onwards, individuals have been exposed to the marketization and commercialization of urban housing, healthcare services and the education system.²⁶ This has resulted in a re-emphasis on the importance of family alliances in managing these new risks.²⁷

19 Murphy 2020; Hong and Zhao 2015.

20 Kam 2020.

21 Choi 2022.

22 Chiang 2022.

23 Wang, Zhe 2022; 2023b.

24 Yan 2021.

25 Yan 2010.

26 Davis and Harrell 1993.

27 Yan 2021.

Existing literature on Chinese parents' aspirations for their children's education highlights the parental obligations to maximize their children's human capital when navigating the challenges of the risk society.²⁸ Yang Ke's research reveals that modern motherhood has evolved into a profession focused on securing a "good" education. Tasks include activities such as networking for educational resources, researching tutorial markets and school requirements, creating personalized study plans and integrating these resources to give their children a competitive edge in the education system.²⁹ The family has a moral responsibility for creating the right "conditions" (*tiaojian* 条件) for its children's education³⁰ and equipping them for the competitive global market.³¹ As the tasks of motherhood have shifted, with mothers taking on a greater role in their children's education, grandparents have stepped in to play a more substantial role in childrearing, often taking on the physical childcare responsibilities.³²

While these studies provide some insights into parental support for education, few studies focus on IHE. As students reach adulthood, they can enter the job market and achieve independence from their parents. What does this parental support for education mean? This paper aims to bridge the gaps by examining what IHE fever entails for middle-class families in China.

Method

This paper draws on qualitative interview data gathered from a larger research project on the international education mobilities of Chinese students that was conducted by one of the authors between 2017 and 2022. The interview selection procedure for this paper was based on a multifaceted framework of eligibility criteria designed to capture the nuanced intricacies of the middle-class socio-economic status in the Chinese context. The delineation of the Chinese middle class presents a challenge owing to its multifaceted dimensions.³³ As China's rapid urbanization has substantially reconfigured the landscape, regional disparity is a crucial factor in defining the identity of the middle class.³⁴ Urban *hukou* 户口 status,³⁵ particularly within megacities, first-tier cities³⁶ and provincial capitals, is significant because it decides whether an individual has access to critical social services, such as healthcare and social security, adding further layers of complexity³⁷. Hence, a comprehensive understanding of China's middle class mandates the consideration of various factors, including *hukou* status, city of residence, property ownership, access to healthcare and social security, educational level, and managerial-level or managerial-type employment.³⁸

To uphold the tenets of methodological rigour and soundness, we applied the following specific criteria. First, participants had to be fully financially supported by their families or parents. Second, participants and their parents had to be urban *hukou* holders. Third, as the possession of residential property within their *hukou* city is deemed a pivotal benchmark of middle-class life in China, participants' parents had to own at least one residential property, symbolizing their socio-economic standing and stability. Finally, participants' parents had to have post-secondary education (technical or non-technical) or higher, hold managerial-level or equivalent positions, or be professionally

28 Liu, Fengshu 2019.

29 Yang, Ke 2018.

30 Kuan 2015.

31 Greenhalgh 2010.

32 Xiao 2016; Qi 2018.

33 Li 2010.

34 Goodman and Chen 2013; Tsang 2014; Zhang 2011.

35 The *hukou* (household registration) system is used to control the flows of internal migrants by excluding migrants without a local *hukou* from certain localized social welfare (Chan and Buckingham 2008).

36 A first-tier city in China refers to a major, highly developed urban centre with advanced infrastructure and a significant economic, cultural and political influence, and typically includes cities like Beijing, Shanghai, Guangzhou and Shenzhen.

37 Song 2016; Gustafsson, Yang and Sicular 2020.

38 Goodman and Chen 2013; Tsang 2013.

qualified, for example as a doctor, professor or engineer. It is important to recognize that while annual household income is a significant indicator of class status, many participants were not fully aware of their family's income during their time abroad. Additionally, the income of middle-class families can vary greatly over time and is influenced by regional disparities in provinces, municipalities and economic zones throughout China. Therefore, in our participant selection process, we did not set a specific minimum household income threshold. Finally, we factored in participants' personal perceptions of class. In accordance with the prevalent view among our participants, we decided to exclude individuals whose annual family income was in excess of 1 million yuan, an amount often identified in interviews as representative of wealthy or upper-class families in China.

In total, we analysed 65 in-depth interviews with 28 male and 37 female Chinese participants. In terms of educational level, 3 had a bachelor's degree, 48 had a master's degree and 14 had doctoral degrees. Two interviewees were from first-tier cities, 21 from second-tier cities or provincial capitals, and 42 were from third or lower-tier cities. The highest number of students (32) had chosen to study in the UK, 11 in Asian regions/countries like Hong Kong, South Korea, Japan, Singapore, etc., 9 in the US, and 7 had gone to Australia and New Zealand. Four students had gone to mainland Europe and two to Canada. Most participants in this study were aged between 22 and 35 at the time of the interview (2018–2019). This age distribution aligns with the 2015 statistics provided by the Ministry of Education, which indicate that 95 per cent of returnees are between 23 and 33 years old.³⁹ The study strictly adhered to ethical guidelines and principles, including informed consent and confidentiality. Stringent measures were taken to protect the privacy of participants, including the use of pseudonyms and the anonymization of personal information. We employed a narrative approach to analyse the data.⁴⁰

Findings: IHE as a Priority Pathway to the Normative Biography

In this section, we illuminate the IHE fever among middle-class students in China and the parental support offered by uncovering a unique perspective of what we term the normative biography. The term refers to the aspirations and imaginations participants hold for their life in their 20s and early 30s, including specific milestones they hope to reach. The normative biography can be divided into three key stages, including securing “good” education during their early 20s, living a modern and cosmopolitan life in a megacity in their mid-20s, and establishing a family in their late 20s or early 30s, with stable and advantageous conditions for their children's education. IHE is perceived as a priority pathway to realizing these life milestones and attaining the imagined life. Moreover, intergenerationality is salient in the sense that the parents of these international students are expected to ensure that their offspring conform to the normative biography by supporting their education. Next, we elaborate two characteristics of the normative biography that shape IHE fever: temporality and interconnectedness.

IHE fever and the temporality of the normative biography

The order of life stages

The first characteristic of temporality is the sequence of the three stages in the normative biography. Many participants emphasized that their early 20s should be the time for educational pursuits. At this stage, opting for a job or remaining unemployed is generally less socially accepted among children from middle-class families. As we delved deeper into the concept of the “right” age for studying, participants revealed the pressure to conform to the collective choices of their peers. Consider, for example, Betty (25, master's degree), who came from a second-tier city and whose parents both

³⁹ Ministry of Education 2015.

⁴⁰ Wengraf 2001; Elliott 2005.

worked for state-owned companies. She completed her undergraduate degree in China and a master's degree in the UK. When discussing her decision to study abroad, she explained, "At that age [22], everyone around me was pursuing a master's degree. Why not study? It's too early to look for a job in your early 20s; it's not the right age for it." Like Betty, most participants saw their early 20s as the most opportune time for educational pursuits. This collectively defined age for study was further enforced by the belief that failing to seize educational opportunities in one's early 20s might lead to missing the chance for further education later on in life, as other priorities would inevitably take over. As Jimmy (28, master's degree) reflected:

Certainly, I should study now [in his early 20s]. Once I enter the workforce, it's time to earn money and start a family. There won't be time for further education. Plus, even if I could abandon everything and focus on studying, what about my parents? What will my relatives and neighbours think about that? It's like I'm leaving them in a difficult situation. We're expected to do certain things at certain ages.

Jimmy's words reveal the heavy influence of societal expectations at his age and the importance of the chronological order of his life stages. Jimmy recognized the importance of timing in his education and when he entered the workforce and established a family. Deviating from these expectations would cause a sense of disorientation in his life and was also perceived as potentially problematic for his family's reputation. This suggests that parents are also involved in the normative biographies of their young adult children, which we discuss in more detail below.

A collectively defined "good" education and timeframe

Another characteristic of the temporality of the normative biography is its tight timeframe, which results from the interplay between the chronological order of life stages and a collectively defined "good" education. Not only were our participants expected to pursue an education in their 20s, they had to attain what is collectively considered to be a "good" education. Our interviews revealed that, for middle-class families, there are two criteria for a "good" education: it should be of a high level, with a master's degree often considered the minimum standard, and the institutions where individuals complete their master's programmes should be ranked highly in the hierarchy of universities. To be more specific, our interviewees felt there was a sense of urgency to secure a master's degree from a top university during their early 20s. Before delving into how the definition of a "good" education is shaped by the modernity discourse, we first explore why this sense of urgency leads participants to collectively regard IHE as the ideal pathway to reaching the expected milestones of their 20s.

Many participants revealed that they had made the decision to pursue a master's degree before they opted to study abroad. Their preference for IHE was the result of overseas universities offering comparatively easier access and better rankings than China's universities. While good education can be found within China, accessing it is extremely difficult and intensely competitive. Consequently, studying abroad emerged as an attractive option that bypassed this hurdle, as noted in other research.⁴¹ Bill (28, master's) explained about the fierce competition of the postgraduate entrance examination (*kaoyan* 考研):

Preparing for *kaoyan* is really challenging. It demands extensive preparation, typically spanning a year. The examination comprises four rigorous written tests, each lasting approximately three hours, and culminates with an interview. The level of difficulty is akin to that of the *gao-kao* 高考 (college entrance examination), and I was reluctant to relive that nightmarish experience.

41 Xiang and Shen 2009.

Similar to Bill, 42 out of 65 of our participants had completed their undergraduate studies in China before pursuing their postgraduate/doctoral education abroad. Among those, 27 expressed their reluctance to sit the *kaoyan*. The more prestigious the university in China, the fiercer the competition becomes – indeed, the intense competition for such a limited resource is often likened to “thousands of troops crossing a single-log bridge” (*qianjun wanma guo dumuqiao* 千军万马过独木桥), and the statistics reflect this.⁴² For students from middle-class backgrounds, however, gaining admission to a high-ranked overseas university can be a more achievable goal:

Unlike the domestic postgraduate entrance examination, pursuing a master’s degree overseas typically requires only the IELTS, without the need to take specialized courses. In terms of the application process, I found an agent, so I didn’t have to worry about preparing and submitting documents myself... Regardless of the circumstances, you are almost guaranteed admission to a university abroad. Moreover, the probability is high that the ranking of the university you get into will be much higher than what you could achieve through strenuous efforts in the domestic postgraduate entrance examination. For instance, if I were to strive for the domestic postgraduate entrance examination, I might have a chance at Zhejiang University, but Zhejiang University ranks significantly lower than Imperial College London. (Jane, 26, master’s)

In this context, IHE emerges as a priority pathway that offers the normative biography for middle-class Chinese in their 20s.

Some interviewees further pointed out that the IHE pathway was preferable because not only did it require less preparation time but it also offered a shorter duration of study, reducing the risk of missing out on other opportunities that might arise in their early 20s. Some participants, particularly female students, explained that they chose postgraduate programmes in the UK or Hong Kong because of their one-year duration. This not only allowed a swift transition into the workforce, another crucial milestone in the normative life path, but also minimized the risks of falling behind in terms of getting married and starting a family, the subsequent milestones in the normative biography. It is, therefore, important to acknowledge that gender is a factor in the perceived value of IHE in the pursuit of the normative biography. Although the temporal norms of life pathways have been studied for marriage⁴³ and reproduction,⁴⁴ this paper adds to our understanding by examining its impacts on educational practices.

The normative biography timetable and parental support for IHE

The normative biography not only influences the life trajectories of middle-class young adults; their parents also embrace the social expectations surrounding the timings of specific events, a factor that shapes parental support for IHE. The important chronological order of life milestones and the tight timeframe mean that parental support is crucial if young adults are going to be successful in following the normative biography, as they may not have had the opportunity to become financially independent before embarking on their educational journey. Parents regard supporting their children’s education as a fundamental parental duty. During our interviews, the participants revealed that while they were preparing for their IHE, their parents consistently emphasized their own “responsibilities” (*zeren* 责任) and “efforts” (*jinli* 尽力) to provide any assistance necessary to ensure their children’s access to education. This commitment can be exemplified by the “division

42 In 2020, the number of students taking the postgraduate entrance examinations surged to 3.41 million, an increase of 510,000 compared to 2019. However, the enrolment rate was low, standing at just 32 per cent as reported in National Development and Reform Commission 2020.

43 To 2013.

44 Chen 2024.

of labour,” as described by Nancy (28, PhD): “My parents always told me that my responsibility was to focus on studying, while their responsibility was to create the conditions (*tiaojian* 条件) for my education; they would spare no effort in fulfilling their role.” This quote resonates with Teresa Kuan’s argument that, when faced with uncertainty over their children’s future in a neoliberal context, parents’ efforts to create the correct “conditions” can be viewed as a moral practice that could free them from future blame for not being qualified parents.⁴⁵ Pei-Chia Lan, in her study of Taiwanese parents and immigrant parents in the United States, attributed parental efforts to secure a good education for their offspring to the unequal global structures that immigrants face, such as the racialized US labour market and global competition.⁴⁶

Although these studies enrich our understanding of the educational fever among Chinese parents, upon closer analysis, we find that parental support for IHE is not only to support their children’s education but also to ensure that their children conform to the normative biography. The parents of our participants felt a significant obligation to ensure that their children received the education prescribed by the normative biography during their early 20s. According to some interviewees, their parents made it clear that it was unacceptable to deviate from the normative biography. Yun’s (27, master’s) response highlights how parents perceive the importance of education and timing in adhering to the normative biography:

When I failed the postgraduate entrance exam, I was just sitting at home ... My parents urged me, suggesting that perhaps I should go abroad; after all, obtaining a postgraduate degree is necessary, and re-taking the exam after a year was considered a waste of time. I initially didn’t want to study abroad owing to the expenses. However, my parents felt that while money can be earned back, lost time cannot be reclaimed.

Parents’ support of the normative biography, rather than just education, is also reflected in how their attitudes towards IHE change at different stages of their children’s normative biography. During our interviews, participants who had gone abroad to study at an “older” age revealed that they had often received less encouragement and even disapproval from their parents. Rong (32, master’s), for example, enrolled in a master’s degree in her late 20s, and her parents were strongly opposed to her decision to study abroad:

When I had just graduated from my undergraduate studies, my parents wanted me to study abroad and even urged me to do so. But at that time, I considered working instead, and though they didn’t like my choice, they respected my decision. However, when I expressed a desire to study abroad again, they felt I was past the ideal age for it. They believed I should have been getting married at that point and were concerned that by the time I returned from studying abroad, I might miss out on finding a suitable partner. So, they were initially quite against my decision to study abroad. They argued that I had already passed the ideal age for such an endeavour, especially since I had a stable job, and they didn’t see the value in further education, so they would not support it.

Other participants who had worked before studying abroad also said that they had difficulty convincing their parents to support their IHE journey, indicating that parents consider international education worthwhile only when it aligns with the expected timings of the normative biography. Parents often feel that they are no longer obligated to support the education aspirations of their children, regardless of academic achievements and preparedness, when their children reach the age of employment. At this stage, they believe their children should prioritize the next life stage or career

⁴⁵ Kuan 2015.

⁴⁶ Lan 2018.

goals. Therefore, parental support of IHE is subject to specific temporal considerations, as dictated by the normative biography.

Parental support for the normative biography is also reflected in parents' support for post-graduation transitions. Parental assistance in ensuring their children conform to the right sequence and timetable of events according to the normative biography is not only concerned with education but with all life events for their children in their 20s. Many of our participants revealed that their parents had covered the entire costs of their airfare, accommodation and living expenses as they transitioned to work in a megacity, a process that typically took six months to a year. Once their children have secured employment, particularly in the new city, parents also assist in purchasing a home and helping them settle into adulthood and the next life stage. This level of support is part of the parents' preparation for their children to eventually become parents themselves. This ongoing parental influence on the lives of adult children resonates with the findings of Jieyu Liu's study on the urban cohort born in China in the 1990s.⁴⁷ Parents of this cohort placed a strong emphasis on academic performance in their children's upbringing, and as these children reached adulthood, their parents continued to be involved in various facets of their lives, including career choices, dating, marriage and even divorce decisions. Our study further points out how the two generations make joint decisions to ensure that each generation of the family conforms to the normative biography.

IHE and the interconnectedness of the normative biography

Above, we discuss how the right timeframe to secure "good" education shapes educational choices. In this section, we delve deeper into how the interconnectedness of the three key stages of the normative biography for young adults in their 20s and early 30s shapes their perception of IHE as a form of "good" education.

During interviews, participants usually categorized universities, jobs and cities into different tiers, believing that only by attending high-tier universities could they access corresponding high-tier jobs and cities. The majority of participants linked their choice of IHE with their aspiration to live a modern urban professional life once they had completed their studies in their early 20s. Interviewees believed that IHE would facilitate their entry into the professional world by allowing them to secure positions in reputable companies within China's megacities. This formed part of their collective vision for their life in their mid-20s, which encompassed not only pursuing high-flying careers in fields such as finance, the arts or high technology, but also extended to their everyday middle-class consumption and modern way of life. Our participants explained that achieving this normative biography would entail working and living in major cities in China. In our interview, Kate (29, master's) shared the following:

Shanghai offers more than just competitive salaries in big companies; it provides an opportunity to learn and grow by collaborating with intelligent and open-minded individuals. The work culture here is modern and dynamic ... Additionally, the city boasts a diverse culinary scene and a wide range of commodities ... there are international [musical] shows and [art] exhibitions that you can only find in Shanghai in China ... While I considered staying in the US, I realized that working in Shanghai offers a similar or wider experience.

According to Kate's narrative, the city – particularly megacities like Beijing and Shanghai – is an essential element of her desired lifestyle. Megacities form the backdrop to an ideal career and a life intertwined with the modern world. In other words, megacities not only offer better opportunities for superior career pathways but also serve as gateways to a global urban professional life. Our interviewees' reflections on education and lifestyles resonate with the existing scholarly

⁴⁷ Liu, Jieyu 2022.

discussions on educational practices and modernity in China that argue that Chinese cities, especially megacities, serve as symbols of modernity and embody an aspirational way of life for students when making their educational decisions.⁴⁸ We also found that our interviewees' aspirations for a modern urban lifestyle influenced their IHE fever.

IHE is valued because of its capacity to facilitate a smoother transition to becoming a cosmopolitan urban professional in one's mid-20s. When participants referred to promising and stable employment in megacities, they implied positions within "state-owned companies" (*guoqi* 国企), Fortune Global 500 companies, new/high-tech companies, etc. These jobs offer superior career prospects and the higher and stable salaries required to live a cosmopolitan urban life, and our participants' pursuit of IHE was woven into their aspirations for such jobs. Mary (26, master's) elaborated:

I wanted to find a job in Shanghai and needed a master's degree at that time ... Holding a master's degree enhances the likelihood of securing a position in foreign or state-owned companies, where you will benefit from a more stable job, a higher salary and superior career platforms. However, without a master's degree, you won't even have a ticket to enter [the competitive job market].

A master's degree is not the only mandated job requirement; the recruitment process is heavily influenced by the university ranking system. As Mary further explained:

In Shanghai, the job search process typically involves stringent résumé screening, where only graduates from universities ranked in the top 500 or those who have graduated from 985 and 211 universities have a chance to pass the initial screening. Graduates from universities outside of these categories often struggle to even get their résumés considered. Many UK universities perform well in various ranking systems. As a result, it remains easier for students who have studied at UK universities and then returned to China to secure good employment opportunities.

The importance of university ranking in deciding what constitutes a "good" education echoes Ran Ren's research on how educational success is perceived and valorized in the Chinese job market.⁴⁹ Ren finds that the initial résumé selection process heavily prioritizes educational credentials, with a candidate's alma mater being a prime determinant. Recruiters predominantly refer to rankings and lists, like Project 985/211 or the *Times* World University Rankings, to sift through vast numbers of applications. As a result, Ren argues, university ranking, as an indicator of a graduate's "learning ability," leads to a form of "credential cronyism" within the job market.

Moreover, IHE also plays a role in helping newcomers relocate and settle in megacities. Megacity governments often implement favourable policies to attract overseas student returnees, making the process of relocation more accessible and welcoming. For instance, megacity governments institutionalize IHE degrees as a form of cultural capital in the *hukou* application process, with a specific focus on master's graduates from universities ranked within the top 500 of prominent global ranking systems.⁵⁰ For a significant portion of our participants, the importance of *hukou* was closely linked with their aspirations to become good parents in their late 20s and early 30s by providing a good education for the next generation, as their parents did for them. There are better educational resources for children in megacities, but to access these resources, the family must have local *hukou*.

The interconnectedness of these three life stages can also be seen in the reluctance of parents who imagined a different life from the urban professional one for their children to support IHE. For

48 Wang, Zhe 2023b; Wills 2020.

49 Ren 2022.

50 Wang, Zhe 2023a.

instance, some of our interviewees explained that when their parents preferred them to pursue a local career, prepare for the government examinations or else stay close to home, they faced significant challenges in persuading their parents to support their pursuit of IHE. Therefore, the differing perspectives of what constitutes the normative biography impacted the extent of parental support of children's IHE. This suggests that the value of IHE is determined by its capability to help participants conform to the normative biography at later life stages, emphasizing the interconnectedness of the three stages.

Discussion and Conclusion

During our interviews, the concept of the normative biography emerged as a significant theme underlying our participants' interpretation of IHE fever. This normative biography refers to the collective life path prescribed for middle-class adults in their 20s and early 30s in mainland China. IHE is perceived as an efficient, prioritized and reliable pathway to facilitate these young adults' adherence to the normative biography. More specifically, the normative biography has two distinct features: timing and interconnectedness. The importance attached to timing means there is an unalterable sequence and exact timeframe for three different life milestones for these young adults: they should be getting a "good" education in their early 20s, securing a "good" job in a megacity in their mid-20s, and starting a family in a megacity in their late 20s and early 30s. Thus, the pursuit of education is not only about the type of education pursued but also about the sequence and timing of it: it is only considered "good" when undertaken at the appropriate life stage. IHE is easier to access for children from middle-class families and is less competitive to enter. Thus, it can provide an opportunity for these young adults to obtain a "good" education at the right time. Moreover, the interconnectedness of the normative biography means that the level of education young adults can attain significantly determines the level of job they can secure and the tier of city they can settle down in. In China, there are collectively defined hierarchies in each of these three stages: university ranking, job hierarchy and city ranking. IHE is "good" in the sense that many overseas universities hold higher positions than domestic universities in the university rankings. Consequently, IHE can be key in reaching milestones at subsequent stages of the normative biography, ultimately facilitating young adults' aspirations to become cosmopolitan, modern and middle-class individuals, and preparing them to be good parents for the third generation.

The normative biography also influences parental support for IHE. In our research, we observed that parents were deeply committed to ensuring that their adult children adhered to the normative biography. Parents supported IHE when it occurred in their children's early to mid-20s, i.e. before they entered the workforce, if parents imagined the same cosmopolitan professional life for their children. Thus, the influence of this cultural norm for a young adult biography extends to intergenerational family expectations, prompting significant parental investment in IHE to ensure that children follow the "correct" path. Moreover, parents not only support their children's education but also their transition to the workplace and relocation to a megacity. The two generations also make concerted efforts to ensure that the third generation enjoys the benefits of having a "good" education, living in a "good" city and having a "good" job.

This paper has enriched our understanding of how China's modernity, as the broader sociocultural context, influences the IHE fever of its middle-class families. First, China's modernity features a strong collective characteristic, which may explain why the participants in this study exhibited a strong inclination towards following the normative biography. As some scholars argue, modernity in East Asian countries emerges as an unintended consequence of government-driven development initiatives with unified aims, and thus often finds expression through the cultural and discursive articulation of collective desires and aspirations.⁵¹ Second, in line with the observations of other

51 Han and Shim 2010.

scholars, this paper also finds that Chinese middle-class families' pursuit of the normative biography through IHE is moulded by rigid hierarchical norms, as reflected in their emphases on a megacity-centric lifestyle and university rankings.⁵² A successful life path is collectively defined as a professional career and residency in a megacity at the right time of life, and IHE is viewed as a stepping stone towards achieving this. Third, China's modernity involves strong reciprocal intergenerational relationships, explaining why the pursuit of IHE is a familial endeavour. By leveraging their class advantages to access IHE as a shortcut to achieving this normative biography, middle-class parents can equip their children with the resources required to secure professional jobs and settle down in cosmopolises, and thereby reproduce their middle-class status.⁵³ Their use of IHE to reproduce class privilege resonates with the existing literature on IHE as a field of social reproduction.⁵⁴ However, much of that literature focuses on class habitus and distinctions, viewing IHE practices as a cosmopolitan consumption and lifestyle of the global middle class;⁵⁵ this is different from the normative biography that Chinese middle-class families aspire to. Therefore, while the existing literature has exemplified how IHE mobility is not an isolated phenomenon but is intricately connected to the broader sociocultural contexts (for example, uneven global power relations),⁵⁶ this paper contributes to the literature by showing how Chinese students' IHE mobility is shaped by the normative biography in China.

While our study suggests that IHE mobility is a superior pathway to the normative biography, counterexamples also demonstrate the agency of students to negotiate with the normative biography through IHE mobility. For example, Rong's agency can be seen in her insistence on pursuing IHE, even though it was perceived by her parents as diverging from the normative biography. In her case, she believed that IHE could help her find a job in Shanghai and build a promising career, which she considered more important than getting married in her 30s, as dictated by the normative biography. This agency resonates with the reviewed literature on Chinese LGBTQ+ individuals who turn to the mobility offered by IHE to evade the heteronormativity in China.⁵⁷ However, while the literature has explored individuals' agency in using IHE to evade rather than conform to the normativity, it has not adequately examined parents' perceptions of IHE. Although Kam states that her research subjects received family support to pursue IHE, it remains unclear whether parents actively supported their children's international mobility to deviate from heteronormative paths, or whether this support resulted from children concealing their sexuality and life plans.⁵⁸ Thus, the relationship between IHE fever, parental support and normative biographies is complex and deserves further exploration.

Acknowledging the complexity and heterogeneity of international Chinese students, this paper suggests that future research should consider more diverse backgrounds when examining the influences of sociocultural structures on IHE practices. This paper draws mainly from interviews with students from middle-class families; it would be worthwhile to investigate students from other class backgrounds and those receiving less family support. Other scholars have shown that Chinese elite families who support their children's transnational middle-school education are looking for a "well-rounded" Western education and aspire to attain a more mobile and geographically flexible global middle-class status, which is in contrast to the normative biography pursued by participants in this study.⁵⁹ Thus, we encourage further exploration of how these aspirations are shaped

52 Kipnis 2011; 2012; Willis 2020.

53 This finding resonates with the existing literature that finds that international higher education reproduces social class. See, e.g., Brooks and Waters 2011.

54 Brooks and Waters 2009.

55 Ibid.

56 Kölbel 2020.

57 Kam 2020; Choi 2022.

58 Kam 2020.

59 Tu 2022; Lan 2018.

by other political and social contexts and discourses, such as Western modernity, as characterized by individualism or by whiteness, which has been shown to influence educational practices.⁶⁰

Additionally, the changing sociopolitical context in China shapes the life events and stages within the normative biography and influences the definition of a “good” education. Future scholarship on the normative biography should adopt a fluid and time-sensitive approach to accommodate these sociopolitical changes. Finally, during our fieldwork, we noticed that IHE mobility has influenced students’ reflections on the normative biography and their valuation of education. We propose that the concept of the normative biography should be considered fluid and adaptable, subject to changes and reflexivity based on experiences. Therefore, although this study does not primarily focus on the impact of mobility, future research could explore how IHE may trigger reflexivity through other sociological lenses, such as agency.

Conflicts of interest. None.

References

- Brooks, Rachel, and Johanna Waters.** 2009. “A second chance at ‘success’: UK students and global circuits of higher education.” *Sociology* 43(6), 1085–1102.
- Brooks, Rachel, and Johanna Waters.** 2011. *Student Mobilities, Migration and the Internationalization of Higher Education*. Basingtoke: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Cebolla-Boado, Héctor, Yang Hu and Yasemin Nuhoglu Soysal.** 2018. “Why study abroad? Sorting of Chinese students across British universities.” *British Journal of Sociology of Education* 39(3), 365–380.
- Chan, Kam Wing, and Will Buckingham.** 2008. “Is China abolishing the *hukou* system?” *The China Quarterly* 195, 582–606.
- Chen, Jung.** 2024. “Taiwanese gay fathers’ queer family making: toward a temporal-relational path.” *LGBTQ+ Family: An Interdisciplinary Journal* 20(1), 35–54.
- Chiang, Yi-Lin.** 2022. *Study Gods: How the New Chinese Elite Prepare for Global Competition*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Choi, Susanne Y.P.** 2022. “Global multiple migration: class-based mobility capital of elite Chinese gay men.” *Sociology* 56(5), 946–966.
- Davis, Deborah S., and Stevan Harrell.** 1993. *Chinese Families in the Post-Mao Era*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.
- Elliott, Jane.** 2005. “Using narrative in social research: qualitative and quantitative approaches.” In Jane Elliott (ed.), *Using Narrative in Social Research*. London: Sage, 1–232.
- Fong, Vanessa L.** 2011. *Paradise Redefined: Transnational Chinese Students and the Quest for Flexible Citizenship in the Developed World*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.
- Goodman, David S.G., and Minglu Chen.** 2013. *Middle Class China: Identity and Behaviour*. Cheltenham: Edward Elgar Publishing.
- Greenhalgh, Susan.** 2010. *Cultivating Global Citizens: Population in the Rise of China*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Gustafsson, Björn, Xiuna Yang and Terry Sicular.** 2020. “Catching up with the West: Chinese pathways to the global middle class.” *The China Journal* 84, 102–127.
- Han, Sang-Jin, and Young-Hee Shim.** 2010. “Redefining second modernity for East Asia: a critical assessment.” *The British Journal of Sociology* 61(3), 465–488.
- Holdsworth, Clare.** 2009. “‘Going away to uni’: mobility, modernity, and independence of English higher education students.” *Environment and Planning A* 41(8), 1849–64. <https://doi.org/10.1068/a41177>.
- Hong, Yanbi, and Yandong Zhao.** 2015. “From capital to habitus: class differentiation of family educational patterns in urban China.” *The Journal of Chinese Sociology* 2, 1–18.
- Howlett, Zachary M.** 2021. *Meritocracy and Its Discontents: Anxiety and the National College Entrance Exam in China*. New York: Cornell University Press.
- Kam, Lucetta Y.L.** 2020. “Coming out and going abroad: the *chuguo* mobility of queer women in China.” *Journal of Lesbian Studies* 24(2), 126–139.
- Kipnis, Andrew B.** 2011. *Governing Educational Desire: Culture, Politics, and Schooling in China*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

⁶⁰ Holdsworth 2009; Shahjahan and Edwards 2022.

- Kipnis, Andrew B.** 2012. "Private lessons and national formations: national hierarchy and the individual psyche in the marketing of Chinese educational programs." In Andrew B. Kipnis, *Chinese Modernity and the Individual Psyche*. New York: Springer, 187–202.
- Kölbl, Andrea.** 2020. "Imaginative geographies of international student mobility." *Social and Cultural Geography* 21(1), 86–104.
- Kuan, Teresa.** 2015. *Love's Uncertainty: The Politics and Ethics of Child Rearing in Contemporary China*. Los Angeles: University of California Press.
- Lan, Pei-Chia.** 2018. *Raising Global Families: Parenting, Immigration, and Class in Taiwan and the US*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.
- Li, Cheng.** 2010. *China's Emerging Middle Class: Beyond Economic Transformation*. Washington, DC: Brookings Institution Press.
- Liu, Fengshu.** 2019. *Modernization as Lived Experiences: Three Generations of Young Men and Women in China*. Abingdon: Routledge.
- Liu, Jieyu.** 2022. "Childhood in urban China: a three-generation portrait." *Current Sociology* 70(4), 598–617.
- Martin, Fran.** 2022. *Dreams of Flight: The Lives of Chinese Women Students in the West*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Ministry of Education.** 2015. "Zhongguo liuxue huiguo jiuye lanpishu 2015 qingkuang jieshao" (Introduction to the *Blue Book of Employment of Returned Overseas Students to China in 2015*), http://www.moe.gov.cn/jyb_xwfb/xw_fbh/moe_2069/xwfbh_2016n/xwfb_160325_sfc101/201603/t20160325_235214.html. Beijing: Ministry of Education.
- Ministry of Education.** 2018. "2018 niandu woguo chuguo liuxue renyuan qingkuang tongji" (Statistics on China's overseas students, 2018), http://www.moe.gov.cn/jyb_xwfb/gzdt_gzdt/s5987/201903/t20190327_375704.html.
- Murphy, Rachel.** 2020. *The Children of China's Great Migration*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- National Development and Reform Commission.** 2020. "Guanyu 2019 nian guomin jingji he shehui fazhan jihua zhixing qingkuang yu 2020 nian guomin jingji he shehui fazhan jihua cao'an de baogao" (Report on the implementation of the National Economic and Social Development Plan for 2019 and the Draft National Economic and Social Development Plan for 2020), <https://baijiahao.baidu.com/s?id=1668106920412440945&wfr=spider&for=pc>.
- Qi, Xiaoying.** 2018. "Floating grandparents: rethinking family obligation and intergenerational support." *International Sociology* 33(6), 761–777.
- Ren, Ran.** 2022. "Educational success in transitional China: the *gaokao* and learning capital in elite professional service firms." *The China Quarterly* 252, 1277–98.
- Shahjahan R., and Kirsten T. Edwards.** 2022. "Whiteness as futurity and globalization of higher education." *Higher Education* 83, 747–764.
- Song, Yu-Ling.** 2016. "From newcomers to middle class: the social and spatial mobility of new urban migrants." *China Review* 16(3), 121–147.
- Tan, Yining, Lucia Lo, Wei Li and Guanglong Pang.** 2023. "Intellectual capital and student mobility." *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* 49(18), 4641–61.
- Textor, C.** 2024. "Number of students from China going abroad for study from 2010 to 2022." *Statista*, 15 August, <https://www.statista.com/statistics/227240/number-of-chinese-students-that-study-abroad/>. Accessed 28 April 2023.
- To, Sandy.** 2013. "Understanding *sheng nu* ('leftover women'): the phenomenon of late marriage among Chinese professional women." *Symbolic Interaction* 36(1), 1–20.
- Tsang, Eileen Yuk-ha.** 2013. "The quest for higher education by the Chinese middle class: retrenching social mobility?" *Higher Education* 66(6), 653–668.
- Tsang, Eileen Yuk-ha.** 2014. *The New Middle Class in China: Consumption, Politics and the Market Economy*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Tu, Mengwei.** 2022. "Institutional gap and mobility–immobility transition: international students' study-to-work experience in China." *Sociological Research Online* 27(4), 1094–1103.
- Wang, Zhe.** 2022. "Chinese students at UK universities: transnational education mobilities as a stepping-stone to adulthood." *Population, Space and Place* 28, e2571. <https://doi.org/10.1002/psp.2571>.
- Wang, Zhe.** 2023a. "Citizenship and the hukou system." In Zhe Wang, *Transnational Student Return Migration and Megacities in China: Practices of Citizenship*. Singapore: Springer Nature, 87–108.
- Wang, Zhe.** 2023b. *Transnational Student Return Migration and Megacities in China: Practices of Citizenship*. Singapore: Springer Nature.
- Wang, Ziyu, Fengshu Liu and Ilse Julkunen.** 2024. "Diversifying youth temporal orientations during educational transitions in China." *Children and Society* 38(2), 563–577.
- Wengraf, Tom.** 2001. *Qualitative Research Interviewing: Biographic Narrative and Semi-Structured Methods*. New York: Sage.
- Willis, Paul.** 2020. *Being Modern in China: A Western Cultural Analysis of Modernity, Tradition and Schooling in China Today*. Cambridge: Polity.
- Xiang, Biao, and Wei Shen.** 2009. "International student migration and social stratification in China." *International Journal of Educational Development* 29(5), 513–522.

- Xiao, Suowei.** 2016. "Intimate power: the intergenerational cooperation and conflicts in childrearing among urban families in contemporary China." *The Journal of Chinese Sociology* 3(1), 1–24.
- Yan, Yunxiang.** 2010. "The Chinese path to individualization." *The British Journal of Sociology* 61(3), 489–512.
- Yan, Yunxiang.** 2021. *Chinese Families Upside Down: Intergenerational Dynamics and Neo-Familism in the Early 21st Century*. Leiden: Brill.
- Yang, Ke.** 2018. "Muzhi de jingji renhua: jiaoyu shichanghua beijingxia de muzhi bianqian" (Motherhood as educational agent: changes in motherhood in the context of market-oriented education). *Funiu yanjiu cong* 2, 79–90.
- Yang, Peidong.** 2016. *International Mobility and Educational Desire: Chinese Foreign Talent Students in Singapore*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Zhang, Li.** 2011. *In Search of Paradise: Middle-class Living in a Chinese Metropolis*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.

Zhe WANG is a postdoctoral researcher at the department of education, University of Oxford. Her research focuses on international higher education, mobility, social and spatial inequality, and development, with a regional interest in China.

Xuerui HU holds a PhD in social sciences from the Social Research Institute, University College London. Her research interests include family studies, reproduction, sexuality and gender studies.