

Crossing Borders in Sports Education: International Mobility among Chinese Students

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Abstract. Despite China still being the largest sending country of international students, the sub-stream of mobility in sports education has become under-theorized because of fragmentation between migration studies and sports pedagogy. The paper builds an integrated lifecycle model for Chinese sports students in which this paper combines the push–pull framework, cross-cultural adaptation theory, and Bourdieu's capital theory. The analysis was able to draw three conclusions regarding the mobility mechanism. To begin, outflow is prompted mainly by the structural limitation of the domestic Gaokao system rather than purely academic pull factors. Secondly, the students' adaptation abroad is identified as not just a linguistic adjustment but a fundamentally embodied struggle to navigate dissimilar physical cultures, which is termed as a pedagogical friction. Findings reveal a severe conversion crisis upon return, which is categorized as status discordance; in this case, the transnational capital accumulated does not get converted into value in the state-driven country's labor market, which is due to a lack of local networks (*guanxi*). The study highlights that with the volumes and flows of students becoming more important than before, internationalization of higher education institutions can no longer afford to merely focus on capital conversion.

Keywords: Chinese International Students, Sports Education, Student Mobility, Embodied Adaptation, Bourdieu's Capital Theory

1. Introduction

China is still considered to be the world's largest source of international students, with over one million students going abroad every year. A stream of students pursuing education in sports is gradually emerging from this big flow itself. The traditional cohort of students who are not merely academically oriented in Western countries but are also growing in the regional Asian markets. In spite of the growing magnitude of these flows, the specific mobility mechanisms of sports students remain undertheorized due to fragmentation between the general approach to migration studies and sports pedagogy.

The main problem with this group is the uniqueness of the discipline undertaken. Sports education has embodied pedagogy when compared to academic qualifications. Consequently, the students will have to showcase their physical literacy and negotiate bodily practices that are very different from those in their home country. This creates something complex that not only involves

language but also the struggle with different physical cultures and "pedagogical frictions". Writings on international students' education almost always forget this, hiding the double consciousness that students must negotiate at the crossover between their home country habitus and the host country. Additionally, although the 'departure' and study stages tend to receive greater emphasis, the 'conversion crisis' on return is evidently more important, whereby transnational capital often fails to acquire value in the state-run Chinese labor market.

Recognizing the complexity of the trajectory requires more than a 'one theory' explanation. This article looks to pull these various perspectives together into one. The main research question that steers the study is as follows: How do structural constraints, embodied cross-cultural adaptation and capital conversion mechanisms shape the international mobility lifecycle of Chinese students enrolled in sports education? This review fills in contemporary gaps by bringing together the Mazzarol and Soutar Push–Pull model to explain structural exits, adaptation findings from Ma et al., and Tran's use of Bourdieu's Capital Theory to analyze the return phase [1-3]. Through the combination of these frameworks, this paper develops an integrated lifecycle model that considers the complete journey of students from the structural limitations of the Gaokao and embodied struggles abroad to the final "status discordance" on return.

2. Theoretical construction and lifecycle analysis of Chinese sports student mobility

2.1. Model construction: theoretical frameworks

To gain a comprehensive understanding of the trajectory of Chinese sports students, it is necessary to move beyond one theory. The article presents a combined conceptual framework that utilizes the Push–Pull Model to account for structural factors in departures, Cross-Cultural Adaptation Theory to interpret lived experience abroad, and Capital Theory by Bourdieu for skills conversion functional at return. The three dimensions of the framework interact to produce a cycle of mobility. First structural constraints at home drive students to engage in a transformative process abroad. Second, the value of this is to be tested in the labor market at home.

2.1.1. Structural logic: the push-pull framework

The Push-Pull model explains how mobility originated. At a broader level, the literature verifies that mobility in China is structurally determined by the scarcity of high-grade sporting educational resources and the rigidity of the Gaokao system [4]. At the same time, Western institutions create pull factors by marketing sports degrees as cultural products. According to Mazzarol & Soutar, the 'Pull' for sports students is usually a misnomer as they are not pulled by the quality of education but the credential power that will possibly shield them from the Push factors in the domestic context [1].

2.1.2. Mechanism of experience: cross-cultural adaptation

Adaptation Theory explains the process of migration. As opposed to other pupils, sports pupils must experience embodied adaptation, according to Aggerholm [5]. Without acclimating their bodies to the new training standards, they cannot really cope or study. It is, therefore, a pedagogical necessity and not just coping. Research evidence shows that sport acts as a unique form of acculturation. It provides a contact zone that is non-verbal. Thus, it helps students to socially integrate and bypass language deficits via physical competence [2].

2.1.3. Logic of outcomes: Bourdieu's capital theory

The concepts of capital, field, and habitus by Bourdieu provide a robust framework to explain the outcome of this mobility. Gaining a degree and starting to accumulate new coaching philosophies serves as a transformation for the students. To be more precise, Tran explained the study abroad period as a process of accumulating Institutionalized Cultural Capital and Embodied Cultural Capital [3]. Nonetheless, there is a crisis on the return when the students transfer from the field of Western Higher Education to the field of the Chinese Labor Market. Capital derives its value not in itself, but in the field [6]. According to the literature on the Chinese sports field, there is an internal logic that is based on political loyalty and local networks (*guanxi*), which renders Western capital unsuitable.

2.1.4. Synthesis: the cycle of sports mobility

The fusion of these theories implies a cyclical model of migration. Travel expectations are shaped not only by initiation of travel but also by push factors. Adaptation is what generates capital. The cycle ends with a conversion test, where success refers to the ability of the successful graduate to translate their foreign capital into terms recognizable by the domestic field.

The integrated model (Figure 1) illustrates the student journey, which proceeds from a structurally driven departure, through embodied transformation, to a contested return.

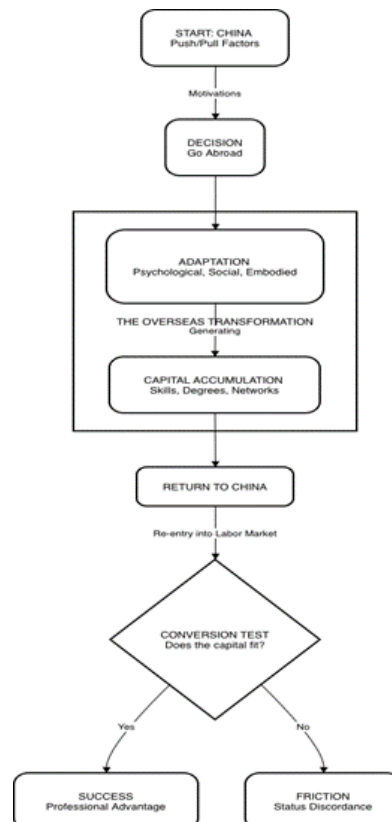


Figure 1. Conceptual model of Chinese students' cross-border sports education experiences

2.2. Problem analysis

This part of the homework applies the framework to the three stages of the student lifecycle. The synthesis of worldwide observations pertaining to institutional prestige and domestic realities pertaining to structural constraints reveals the practical workings of the "cycle of mobility."

2.2.1. Departure decision

The pressure on students to go abroad takes place due to global pulling factors and local pushing factors. Historically, literature has framed mobility as prestige-seeking [1]. However, for Chinese sports students, domestic constraints offer a greater push than the pull of studying abroad. The Gaokao pressure makes those with athletic ability and lower exam scores to study abroad as an essential pathway due to a structural bottleneck [4]. The exit, therefore, is often instrumental. There is a similar logic driving the shift to regional Asian hubs, which offer cheaper quality credentials much closer to home [7].

2.2.2. On-site decision

Upon arrival, pedagogical friction becomes an intense embodied adaptation. Chinese students are often socialized into a master–disciple relationship where learning is mimetic and repetitive [8]. This contrasts with Western models requiring critical questioning, creating a silent body phenomenon where students struggle to re-program their physical engagement [5]. To cope, students often use sport as a non-verbal haven to integrate socially and bypass language deficits [2,9].

2.2.3. Divergent evaluation standards and contextual reintegration

The last step is to contextualize the transnational capital already achieved in the domestic sphere. Instead of just a transfer of skills, research shows that returnees also face the complexity of reintegration, which Xu characterizes as "Status Discordance" [10]. Misalignments between people and positions are seen as an issue with the adaptability of the environment. Returnees have a lot of institutionalized capital (degrees), so there can't be an issue with that, but they can't make sense of the logics at play in the local networks (guanxi), which is a key logic for the domestic professional field. It matters for people's ability to use their degrees practically. Furthermore, competent professionals achieved by Western commercial sports management in the state-oriented structure of the domestic sports system have different standards of evaluation. Thus, the friction upon return is not necessarily a lack of ability, but rather a discrepancy between the professional norms learnt overseas and the systemic norms in the home country.

3. Discussion

The synthesis of the selected literature reveals that the current mobility ecosystem for Chinese sports students is characterized by significant structural and pedagogical frictions. While push and pull factors successfully facilitate the departure of students, the accumulation of transnational capital abroad does not guarantee its successful conversion upon return. The findings suggest that the challenges are not merely linguistic but fundamentally embodied and structural.

3.1. Practical reasons

The outcomes present important implications for educational actors by focusing on two points of friction, which are the learning environment in the classroom and reintegration in the world of work post-graduation.

With respect to pedagogy, the major issue is the silent body, where students are either too passive or isolated in Western classrooms. It is not due to lack of desire that this silence emerges, but rather a "pedagogical friction" instituted by their internalized "master-disciple" habitus, which champions mimetic learning and the Western demand for critical, embodied inquiry. As such, the host institution should devise pedagogy scaffolding, going beyond merely providing linguistic support. Understanding physical competence as a form of knowledge means that curricula should include simple tasks that help the student smoothly transition from doing as a repetitive task to doing so as a critical task.

With respect to the professional dimension, the core issue involves the difficulty of 'status discordance' upon return when students are unable to convert their abroad credentials into local opportunities. The root cause here is differing evaluation standards. Students generally aim to acquire institutionalized capital (degrees) from the college or university. They seem to underestimate the environmental adaptability to negotiate locality (guanxi) in the state-sport system. As one potential solution, students and families could explore the regionally emerging education hubs in Asia. Places with cultural closeness serve as a buffer zone as it lowers the cost of adaptation and maintain social capital value. Thus, the environmental adaptability friction will be less when returning.

3.2. Strengthen academic research

The product of the application of the lifecycle model has made clear the fundamental limitations on which present-day student flow scholarship rests, essentially descriptive in nature. Future studies will require a shift in three specific areas to fully comprehend the mechanisms underlying this mobility.

To begin with methodological innovation, a vital need exists to move beyond conventional interviews and surveys that privilege cognitive and linguistic adaptation. As this review demonstrates that adaptation for sports students is essentially physical, future research should utilize embodied methodologies, for example, video ethnography or sensory phenomenology. Translate these methods so they're useful for things like capturing "pedagogical frictions" and the "silent body" in Western gym regimes and classrooms that allow people to see how the bodily competence acts as a cushion for cross-cultural frictions.

Secondly, research should change its focus from departure analysis to the horizon of capital conversion. The current literature is robustly biased towards studying student motivations and departure decision-making. Most structural friction occurs during the return phase, however. Longitudinal studies of graduates as they re-enter the domestic labour force should be part of future scholarship to examine how these issues of environmental adaptability unfold over time. To be specific, future research can focus on how returnees negotiate the different evaluation standards of the commercialized skills learnt abroad against the state-aligned logic of the Chinese sports system. In this sense, they can measure the real exchange rate of transnational capital.

To conclude, future research must broaden its geographical focus to include comparative investigations of regional centers. As the Western-centric models are gaining criticism, researchers should test whether returnees from the Global North experience "status discordance" as much as

returnees from emerging Asian education hubs. By contrasting the capital conversion rates of graduates from traditional Western powers with those from destination countries that are culturally close in the region, researchers can better test the generalizability of Bourdieu's framework and see whether regional mobility presents strategic solutions to the frictions identified in this study.

4. Conclusion

This review synthesizes existing empirical and theoretical literature to create a comprehensive lifecycle model of Chinese sports student mobility. This helps in closing the existing gap between migration studies and sports pedagogy. Utilizing the Push-Pull framework, the Cross-Cultural Adaptation Theory, and Bourdieu's Capital Theory, the paper aims to analyze the structural dynamics of the students' entire trajectory. By this is meant the domestic pressures causing departure, the embodied frictions of cross-border adaptation, and the eventual return.

The analysis results in three principal conclusions on the functioning of this mobile stream. In terms of the departure phase, the study confirms that student outflow is primarily caused by the structural constraints of the domestic Gaokao system and not purely by the academic pull factors of Western institutions. For many, going abroad is seen as a way to circumvent domestic bottlenecks in education rather than a simple status chase. Next, concerning the experience of on-site, it finds that adaptation is reframed as an embodied negotiation rather than a verbal one. Students experience pedagogical friction trying to move from a mimesis, master-disciple habitus to the critical, student-centered inquiry required in Western classrooms. Physical competence is often used as a non-verbal buffer that promotes social integration, where linguistic incompetence fails. This is also referred to as the "silent body" phenomenon.

The analysis of the return phase highlights the difficulties that come with the capital conversion. According to the results, high doses of transnational capital (compete) do not automatically transform into domestic value due to differing and more complex standards of the evaluating agents and local adaptability problems. Returnees often suffer from "status discordance" as their skill sets, often commercially oriented and influenced by the West, do not match the state-directed logic of the Chinese sports system. Furthermore, returnees often lack the *guanxi* that is critical in this specific environment. Drawing on these conclusions, future scholarship must reconsider not just the overall extent of flows but also the quality of capital conversion mechanisms. Understanding how returnees negotiate the globalized sports economy and local institutional logic necessitates longitudinal tracking of returnees, comparative reviews of regional education hubs, and the like.

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