

# *An Analysis of the Wave of Overseas Studying on College Graduates in First-tier Cities in China from the Perspective of Bourdieu's Theory of Class*

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**Abstract:** Based on Bourdieu's concepts of "capital" and "habitus" in his theory of class, this paper uses qualitative research methods to analyze the motivations for studying abroad and interpret the consciousness and perceptions of students growing up in China's first-tier urban areas. Through the analysis of personal interviews with five students from Beijing, Shenzhen, and Dongguan, three categories of motivation were summarized: perceived class, ubiquitous habitus, and unusual paths beyond habitus. The result indicates that studying abroad is not a mechanical inheritance from social class, but also an active self-pursuit from the spirit cultivated by capital, which is related to the self-expectation and realization of individual value. Therefore, studying abroad is a creative result of their growth process, and the experiences brought by studying abroad are breakthrough products of self-growth under social stratification.

**Keywords:** capital, habitus, overseas studying, middle class, self-expectation

## 1. Introduction

With the increasing trend of Chinese students studying abroad, research on factors affecting studying abroad has attracted more and more attention. According to official statistics from the Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China, from 1978 to 2019, a total of 6,560,600 people of various types studied abroad. In 2019, the total number of Chinese students studying abroad was 703,500, an increase of 41,400 or 6.25% over the previous year. Nearly 10 years ago, this number still stood at 180,000. In the boom of studying abroad, the proportion of self-payment remains above 90%. Similarly, based on the Open Doors 2022 Report released at the end of 2022, even if affected by geopolitical factors, China is still the largest source of international students in the United States, with 290,086 international students accounting for 30.6% of the total number of international students in the United States. Different from younger international students, college students who choose to study abroad after graduation have received a complete education from basic to advanced, are relatively mature in age and mind, and are more independent and rational in their choice of studying abroad. What are the motivations that influence their decision-making? How do they review their options? Based on Bourdieu's concepts of "capital" and "habitus" in his theory of class, this paper uses qualitative research methods to analyze the factors that influence college students' decision-making to study abroad and explores the attitudes and perceptions of students growing up in China's

first-tier urban areas, looking for their own meaning and interpretation of the world behind the middle-class symbol of “studying abroad” and the tension between their inescapable “habitus” and the new life they are facing.

## **2. Literature review**

### **2.1. Cultural capital**

In the early 1960s, Bourdieu conducted research on the performance of socially disadvantaged students in French universities and proposed the concept of "cultural capital". He believed that the criterion for determining which students could enter university was the cultural knowledge that middle-class students were already familiar with before entering school, rather than the knowledge acquired by students who did not have such privileges. Class, he claimed, was defined simultaneously by its being and its being-perceived [1]. He defined class as a group of individuals with a common disposition and the same external living conditions and proposed using four types of "capital" such as economic, social, cultural and symbolic to analyze the external living conditions of individuals in social space, and using habitus analysis dispositions that are internalized in the heart [2]. Bourdieu believes that capital is a set of resources and power that can be manipulated. Compared with economic capital, the transmission of cultural capital is more secretive, risky, and difficult to transmit. But once cultural capital acquires its role as a class barrier, it also becomes stronger. In modern society, education has become an important approach for individuals to obtain social status and is a core element of cultural capital.

### **2.2. Habitus**

Class divisions arise not only from economic and external social conditions. It also depends on the formation of a distinctive way of life that is associated with a specific position in society, that is, "habitus" [3]. In Bourdieu's view, habitus is a set of acquired patterns of thought, behavior and taste. The acquisition is not necessarily conscious, but individuals with the same economic, cultural, social and symbolic capital often have the same or similar characteristics in the disposition system. However, habitus is considered to be unobservable directly and can only be understood interpretatively [4]. In 2019, a report showed that among the current undergraduate group of international students, nearly half of the students came from "managerial class" families, accounting for 49.9%, followed by "professional" families, accounting for 25.1%. Different from the trend of going abroad in the 1980s, "study abroad" currently is not only an academic choice, but also a lifestyle choice like "life is elsewhere". If "studying abroad" is regarded as a specific embodiment of "habitus", then this is in line with what Bourdieu proposed. "Habitus" is the product of a series of objective norms for a specific class, so it can produce all behaviors that are consistent with these norms, "reasonable", and consistent with common sense [5].

### **2.3. The educational tendency of the middle class in first-tier cities**

Since the reform and opening up in 1979, with the development of China's economy and the improvement of people's living standards, China's social gaps have become more obvious [6]. Each class has significant differences in the social resources they possess and the rights and opportunities they possess. Family economic capital and cultural capital affect middle school students' educational attainment in different ways [7]. According to a quantitative study in 2019, the role of high-income families in promoting the choice of studying abroad has continued to be prominent over the years, and studying abroad has become an important way for the middle class to maintain their status [8]. The willingness to study abroad and the family's demand for international education are not evenly

distributed but are closely related to the level of regional economic development. The more economically developed regions have a relatively strong demand for international education [9].

Most current research focuses on quantitative analysis, analyzing motivations for studying abroad from a macro level, emphasizing the role of social structure and social stratification. From the perspective of social stratification, advantaged class families are able to pay increasingly expensive education costs and invest in human capital. To maintain and improve the superiority of their social status, they have higher educational expectations for their children [9]. The dominant social class with the highest family cultural capital and economic capital, the education level their children received was mainly higher education [10]. This article attempts to use the qualitative research method of personal interviews from the micro level, through students' perception and consciousness of studying abroad, and uses Bourdieu's concepts of capital and habitus to analyze the motivation for studying abroad. The aim is to interpret and summarize subjective factors from individuals in a micro sociological perspective.

### 3. Methodology

This study used the personal interview in qualitative research. The data comes from personal interviews conducted in August 2023 with five Chinese students from three first-tier cities in China (Beijing, Shenzhen, and Dongguan) who chose to study abroad for postgraduate studies after completing undergraduate education in China. Respondents' background information in Table 1 shows below.

Table 1: Respondents background information.

No.	Gender	Age	University	Major	Hometown	Notes
S-1	Male	26	Academy of Art University	Game Development	Shenzhen	In the USA
S-2	Male	26	NA	Data Science	Shenzhen	In the USA
S-3	Male	25	University of Manchester	Urban Design	Shenzhen	Back in China
D-1	Male	25	New York University	Screen Scoring	Dongguan	Back in China
B-1	Female	25	University of Southern California	Communications	Beijing	In USA

**Coding method:** The coding method of interview data is city + serial number. Beijing is B, Shenzhen is S, and Dongguan is D. Among them, S-1, S-2, and S-3 are from one of the four well-known high schools in Shenzhen. Taking 2023 as an example, the high school plans to enroll about 504 students (including recommended places), and information released by the Shenzhen Municipal Education Bureau shows that there are about 126,211 students taking the high school entrance examination in various districts of Shenzhen. B-1 comes from a nationally renowned model high school in Beijing. D-1 comes from one of the largest private high schools in Dongguan.

#### 3.1. Sampling

This article uses purposive sampling, selecting samples that are likely to provide the greatest amount of information for the research question based on the purpose of the research. First-tier cities have a higher demand for international education than other regions. Our definition of first-tier cities comes from the GDP rankings of cities released by Chinese official agencies. Beijing and Shenzhen rank first and third among the four first-tier cities. Dongguan ranks 11th among the 15 new first-tier cities.

The five respondents all come from middle-class families in these cities, and they all actively chose to study abroad after completing their domestic undergraduate education. The distinction between middle-class families here mainly comes from their descriptions of their own family circumstances in interviews, their parents' educational experiences, and family-level support during their overseas studies.

### 3.2. Collecting

This article uses open-ended interviews to collect materials, and each interview lasts 30 to 60 minutes. Recordings were made with the consent of the interviewees. Moreover, compiled into written materials after the interview.

## 4. Results

With the development of China's economy after the reform and opening up, the gap between urban and rural areas has gradually expanded. Children of the middle class in cities have inherent advantages in acquiring and inheriting cultural capital. However, different individuals have different struggles with the trend of studying abroad. Studying abroad is not just a mechanical inheritance from a family mission but also a kind of active self-pursuit from the spirit, which is related to the self-expectation and realization of individual value. This self-expectation comes from the internal drive accumulated by objective social rules day after day and is not simply limited by the environment and external indoctrination.

They internalize the mainstream values of the circle in which they live and integrate them with their own pursuits. Therefore, studying abroad is a creative result of their growth process, and the experiences brought by studying abroad are the products of self-growth. Based on the interview content and the respondents' behaviors and motivations, I summarized the wave of overseas studying as three characteristics: class: being perceived, ubiquitous habitus, and beyond habitus: an unusual path.

### 4.1. Class: Being perceived

"I am a person who has a longing for studying art. After graduating from high school, I did not enter the ideal school for studying art, but I still wanted to study game design, so I came to Academy of Art University in San Francisco. In the process of completing this plan I was 99% funded by my family. After all, if you don't have money, you don't have the qualifications to make the initial choice, and you don't have the capital to try and make mistakes." (S-1).

"Classmates, friends, children of parents and colleagues, etc., they will give you a trend in your circle, such as studying abroad, choosing future majors and employment, and even short-term life plans and goals. "Trends" have a big impact on me. For example, when they were in college, they were taking TOEFL or IELTS, and they were thinking about whether to go to Australia, the United Kingdom, or the United States to study for postgraduate. At this time, personal goals will always sway with the group trend, and choices will be made on this basis." (S-2).

"Most of the voices of studying abroad came from the South, but there is no denying the influence of my environment. A person's circle itself will give you a sense of trend that is inconsistent with the mainstream." (S-2).

"When I was in high school, my parents expected me to enter an international class and go to the United States to study as an undergraduate. At that time, many of my friends chose to pursue undergraduate studies in China, so I was unwilling. After entering college, more and more high school classmates and friends chose to study abroad for graduate master and I began to be really interested in studying abroad." (S-3).

Bourdieu believes that there is a consistent relationship between students' self-expectations and the actual opportunities provided for them, which is an individual's inner experience and positive construction of the life world [11]. Art activities usually require considerable financial expenditure as a prerequisite. Families with favorable financial conditions can afford these expenses, providing a fundamental means for the accumulation of cultural capital. At this time, the family's economic capital protects the individual's determination and courage to pursue their dreams, and the individual will internalize the limited opportunities that exist in higher subjective expectations. In contrast, groups whose cultural capital and economic capital are in disadvantaged classes generally have lower subjective expectations.

Respondent S-1 mentioned that “studying abroad was 99% funded by my family” and “if you don’t have money, you don’t have the capital to try and make mistakes.” The perception shows that the respondent is very clear about the connection between the capital provided by the family and the feasibility of personal planning. The economic capital provided by his family is the basis for his trial and error in acquiring cultural capital.

In the interview with respondent S-2, he mentioned the "circle" 5 times. Respondent S-2 is very familiar with the personal plans of his high school classmates or the peers of his parents’ friends and feels that his decision to study abroad is affected by this trend. He went to college in the Northeast in China. Most of his classmates were from the north. They were basically considering taking civil service exams or postgraduate entrance exams, joining the army as civilians, or going to Beijing to work as a "Beijing Drifter", the southernmost plan was to Shanghai. " Under unconscious comparison, respondent S-2 realized that “students from different regions have different preferences for future planning.” The different choices of these young people are related to the differences in economic development between northern and southern China. The southern region has enjoyed booming economic development due to policy advantages after the reform and opening up, while in northern China, the brain drain and lay-offs in the 1990s have severely damaged the people in these lands. Differences accumulated in the economy and culture affect the values and career choices of young people in different regions. A person's expectations and estimates of the chances of success for a person of his or her social status are shared by members of that social class. It is formed from long-term social experience and is passed down from generation to generation. It is unconsciously taken for granted and becomes a habit that is extremely difficult to change [12]. Therefore, when people choose educational opportunities, they are often subconsciously dominated by habitual behaviors. Students' continued education, dropout, and even choice of majors are all restricted and dominated by habitual behaviors.

Respondent S-3, who studied in the same high school as respondent S-1 and S-2, also admitted that his decision to study abroad was greatly influenced by the classmates around him. People who were born in the middle class of Shenzhen and attended elite high schools share a behavioral pattern. Overseas master's degrees have become standard in these "circles". Even if there will be a gap of 1 to 2 years due to factors such as Covid-19, they will eventually successfully study abroad and even find employment abroad. Respondent S-2 graduated from the United States in June of last year. After receiving limited support from family and friends, he relied on his own ability to work in a company and engaged in a job that matched his master's degree. He said, "The process of finding a job is not easy. It didn't go well, but fortunately, I achieved some success. Unlike others, I was not obsessed with finding a job in the United States. Initially, I just wanted to see if I could get an opportunity to work abroad.” There is a consistency between his personal expectations and objective achievements. This consistency is brewed in the "circle" in which he has grown up for more than 20 years, the cultural capital and social capital that his family can provide, and even those who are best friends in his school days.

## 4.2. Ubiquitous habitus

“When I was in high school, I originally planned to study abroad. I was not mature enough at the time, I finally chose to study abroad at the postgraduate level. But in high school, I had a one-semester exchange student experience. I was exchanged with a Catholic family in the United States and the boy from that family spent a semester at my home in Beijing. Since I was a child, I have felt that studying abroad for a master’s degree is my ultimate academic goal, and the domestic postgraduate entrance examination has never been in my consideration.” (B-1).

“My parents were relatively well-educated in those days. They were both college students in the 1990s. Most of the children in their circle had experience of studying abroad. Before I entered high school, I went to the best schools in district I lived. My classmates’ family backgrounds were all very good, since from junior high school many people started studying abroad.” (B-1).

According to Bourdieu's definition of the cultural reproduction model, children of parents with a higher cultural and educational background possess advantages in educational opportunities. The cultural and educational level of the parents can be inherited and continued by the children, thereby completing the process of family cultural reproduction. In the 1990s, the first decade after the resumption of the college entrance examination, the college entrance examination system had not yet been fully implemented. This respondent’s parents had already obtained a bachelor’s degree. Like the other two respondents S-2 and S-3, in the education field, “study abroad” is a common trend in the “circle” in which she is located. The difference is that in this case, respondent B-2 emphasizes the educational level of parents, the “circle” of parents greatly affects her educational expectations. In her perception, studying abroad has always been her ultimate academic goal. As Bourdieu pointed out, habitus helps to construct the field into a world full of meaning, a world endowed with feeling and value, worthy of your investment and efforts [13]. In June 2020, due to the impact of Covid-19 and geopolitical factors, the respondent's plan had to be postponed for one year. Although many students have given up going abroad, for the respondents B-2, who was born in Beijing, attended prestigious schools from childhood to adulthood, and whose parents were highly educated, this choice seems to be a predetermined outcome in her life. The respondent studied in a model high school located in Xicheng District, Beijing. The school's history can be traced back to 1907, which makes it 116 years old. In 2007, it ranked first among the "Top Ten Famous Middle Schools in China". Just as Bourdieu said that cultural capital must be accumulated over time, this century-old famous school has been soaked in the years of history, and itself is a rich cultural treasure.

## 4.3. Beyond habitus: an unusual path

"I think art has a greater impact on a person, including but not limited to painting, music, literature and other forms." (S-1).

“When I was a child, I was enchanted with Japanese animation, which gave me a great spiritual shock. Abstractly to say, those works deeply move me and make me feel very gorgeous. This feeling makes me want to be someone who can create such outstanding works and touch others. Since then, 20 years have past, and my life has been chasing that initial touch.” (S-1).

“My parents work in the system, so they tend to have preconceived values about career choices. They prefer that I can enter the system. In their eyes, this is a steady choice. I did not listen to their opinions and was still trying to take a less conventional path. Studying film composition was a more willful choice of my own, and it was a pursuit of myself.” (D-1).

“During college, my interactions with classmates from all over the country allowed me to see more possibilities in life. Studying abroad made me gain more understanding of life itself. I saw a lot of different lifestyles and attitudes. Not everyone spends their middle school years immersed in studying, and not everyone’s job is just to support household expenditures.” (D-1).

“When conditions permit, great ideals can really arise. So, I was inspired to do as many of my ideal things as possible when conditions mature, instead of taking the "right path" early like many of my peers, especially some jobs I don't want to do. It is a state of life that you don't want to live, and you will be more resistant to it.”(D-1).

Chinese international students tend to choose popular majors such as finance and IT. “Game development” and “Screen Scoring” chosen by S-1 and D-1 are not very prevalent. Respondents admitted that this was not what their parents originally expected, but they did not believe those expectations were the path they should take. They have their own ideas and persistence about life, which are not a mechanical inheritance of the previous generation's ideas. Beyond habits is individual critical thinking and creative decision-making. Society itself is a creative reality, a world of meaning that is constantly reconstructed [14]. External living conditions provide a basic threshold for the choice of life encounters, but there is also tension between "habitus" and "thresholds." When asked, what do you think of the fact that most international students choose to study IT majors and eventually work in Silicon Valley? S-1 said, "You can see the end of that kind of life at a glance. There is no right or wrong in what kind of life you choose. It's just I'm lucky enough to criticize from this perspective."

China's economic growth is slowing down due to Covid-19 and economic cycle impacts. Youth unemployment is as high as 21.3%; taking the civil service exam and working in the system are popular choices now because of their stability. Private business has suffered varying crisis over the past three years, with employees facing the risk of layoffs and breaking contracts. Respondent D-1 was not affected by these objective factors and persisted in his pursuit after returning to China. Like S-1, they were all born in families with no art-related background, and their parents' expectations have nothing to do with it. Therefore, “pursuit of art” is more of a creative existence. In the long accumulation of various “capital”, the growth logic of actors can be different from the objective constraints of the social structure [14]. Although "the pursuit of art" conforms to Bourdieu's classification of middle-class tastes, there is an obvious contradiction between the pursuit of art and the original trajectory of family. This "contradiction" is also a "habitus" composed of a series of historical relationships accumulated in an individual's body. It is the internalization of objective and common social rules and group values. It is also a creative product outside the trajectory, rooted in the independent ideological spirit of the individual's heart.

#### 4.4. A future brewing in anticipation

"Now I am still exploring and in the job search stage. I think I have found the career I like, the life I want, and understand the importance of independence."(B-1).

“I have returned to China; the most important thing to me is to be responsible for myself, work hard, and strive to live the life I want.” (D-1).

“Since then, 20 years past, my life has been chasing that initial touch.” (S-1).

Two years of studying abroad is just an episode in life. Whether in the United States, the United Kingdom or China, education is always an important field for individuals to realize their life course and growth trajectory. However, this external structure cannot mechanically constrain the actions of participants because habitus plays a role. Individuals' subjective expectations manipulate the various “capital” they possess. As the "contradictions" that exist in the present mentioned previously, the future that has not yet been fully described is also nurturing a creative possibility.

## 5. Conclusions

Combining the above interviews with five college students who grew up in first-tier cities, we can see that the behavioral logic of five respondents from middle-class families in making the choice to

"study abroad" is basically in line with Bourdieu's class theory. In modern society, different types of capital describe the social spatial structure in people's minds through different forms, such as educational environment, interpersonal relationships, family expectations, etc. As a result of the internalization of external structures, habitus has a generally consistent systematic way of responding to the external field and becoming the rules of their lives. The "circle", "study abroad trend" and "capital of trial and error" mentioned by the respondents come from their perception and accumulation of life in the past twenty years. As Bourdieu pointed out, class is simultaneously defined by its being and its being-perceived. They feel the existence of class from each other's choices and find belonging in shared behavioral patterns. Furthermore, they rationally mobilize the resources and power belonging to their circles and pursue their own meaning in life.

According to the interviews of the five interviewees about their study abroad experiences, no "result" is achieved at once. The social world is accumulated history, and if it is not to be reduced to a discontinuous series of instantaneous mechanical equilibria between agents who are treated as interchangeable particles, one must reintroduce into it the notion of capital and with it, accumulation and all its effects [15]. When describing their choice of studying abroad, the five respondents all mentioned the support of their families and their own circles, as well as their high school education background. The moment they made a choice seemed to be just an ordinary morning in one autumn, but behind this behavior is the result of individuals being invested in different types of capital for almost 20 years. The results of this self-planning should not be simplified to symbols of modern middle-class culture in a globalized context. Individual agency and critical inheriting from "previous generation" brewed behind the symbols.

The objective influence of "cultural capital" and "social capital" provided by family is still the main reason for most respondents choosing to study abroad. In other words, Within the circle of families of elite high school students, middle-class families in first-tier cities share the same model in the educational field. For parents, studying abroad is a general trend in their circle. For students, "study abroad" just means acting like their classmates around them. This can be seen from the statements of S-2, S-3 and B-1. In essence, both the former and the latter are the internalization of the values of the group in which they belong. The "internalization" appears to be mechanical compliance on the surface, but reviewing the internal psychological activities of respondents, individuals have always exerted active subjective initiative in implementing this decision.

In addition, there is another motivation for studying abroad that comes from individuals' passion for certain careers, and there is a tension between this passion and habitus. The motivation for studying abroad is not based on the purpose of making a living and fulfilling family expectations but is rooted in the individual's inner recognition and judgment of self-worth, that is, what kind of lifestyle they want, what kind of touch they are pursuing, and what kind of future they expect.

Based on the interviews with S-1 and D-1, "unusual way" is also born from various forms of capital shared within the class. However, the difference is that they derived an innovative motivation from established objective rules. Studying abroad is not even a plan of parents, but a personal pursuit. They clearly understand the practical role that an overseas master's degree can bring to the ideals they pursue. In view of this, studying abroad is a result of rational consideration after comprehensively considering advantages in their class. Individuals mobilize the various forms of capital they possess to achieve the most significant benefit in personal achievement.

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