

Finding agency as a Taiwanese youth: On the cultural capital, social ties, and self-efficacy of  
Taiwanese prospective international graduate students

Eric D. de Roulet  
Ph.D. Candidate  
Interdisciplinary Graduate Studies, UBC Okanagan

## Abstract

This study aims to understand how Taiwanese recent university graduates make academic career decisions through their “bounded rationality” and limited access to information (Spaan & van Naerssen 2018, 682-683; see also Carling & Collins 2018, Hu et al. 2022), especially while facing degree inflation and high unemployment rates. Additionally, this study examines how students’ views of their possible futures as migrants are shaped by social pressures to emigrate and by their inventories of migration-supporting social and cultural capitals. Interviews with prospective and current international students, site visits to university campuses and private study-abroad agencies, and participatory observation at study-abroad expositions demonstrate that cultural and social capitals meaningfully influence the migration information students access; their advisors and consultants in turn constrain the possible migration pathways students pursue. The experiences of Taiwanese international students have not received adequate attention given these students’ precarious and complex circumstances. This analysis also yields fruitful comparisons to student populations from other highly developed states with now-stagnant economic growth and furthers understanding of how prospective students process news about increasingly onerous visa regimes (Chen et al. 2020) and rising rates of anti-Asian hate crimes (Allen & Ye 2021; Gover et al. 2020; Kim et al. 2022).

**Keywords:** migrant subjectivities, international higher education, neoliberalization, cultural capital, social capital, transnational families, family-mediated migration infrastructure

## 1. Introduction

As the current generation of recent university graduates in Taiwan has considered how they can advance their academic careers abroad, they have experienced the ground shifting rapidly beneath their feet. The international higher education (IHE) landscape they now navigate would be largely unrecognizable to their parents' generation: Whereas the previous generation enjoyed considerable opportunities for upward social mobility thanks to the growth of Taiwan's export- and technology-driven economy towards the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century (Chow 2023), slowing economic growth, rising rents, and lopsided industrial development now limit opportunities for recent graduates.<sup>1</sup> Likewise, in the latter half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Taiwanese who were not satisfied with the range of opportunities available to them frequently sought alternatives in the US and elsewhere abroad, with roughly a fifth of college graduates leaving the country in the 1970s and 80s (O'Neil 2003; see also Cheng 2023).<sup>2</sup> Yet, as this study affirms, while older generations of Taiwanese still broadly view the US as a premier emigration destination, the current cohort of prospective international students is comparatively open to alternative study destinations and warier of escalating racial animus and immigration enforcement in the US. Even the future of Taiwan's position in the international order appears increasingly unpredictable, with both the Chinese government under Xi Jinping and the three most recent US administrations threatening to upend the longstanding status quo of a minimally acknowledged cross-Strait impasse.<sup>3</sup>

Amid these developments, the aim of this study is to understand the subjectivities<sup>4</sup> of Taiwanese prospective international graduate students, especially within their country's particular information environment, as they gather and process information about the IHE landscape as they imagine their possible futures. Prospective international students the world over are impacted by instabilities in the international geopolitical order and shocks to the global economy. But Taiwan's unique geopolitical positioning and historical circumstances equip Taiwanese students (though not equally) with certain *migration-supporting social and cultural capitals*, i.e., features such as transnational social networks and cosmopolitan socialization that accommodate their aims to study abroad. (See Section 2.2.) These facts prompt the following questions:

1. Given Taiwan's robust if informal transnational ties (especially to the US, but also the UK,

---

<sup>1</sup> Section 2.1 reviews some of the relevant literature.

<sup>2</sup> Prior to Taiwan's democratization at the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, a number of these students went abroad to allied countries (especially the US) at their government's behest, though others used studying abroad as a means of evading political persecution and did not have plans to return to Taiwan.

<sup>3</sup> There have, of course, been past episodes of heightened cross-Strait tensions since the Republic of China (Taiwan)'s loss of its charter member status in the UN since 1971. That said, the past two decades substantively differ from the late 20<sup>th</sup> century with respect to China's increasingly assertive approach to foreign relations, the potential for the use of Taiwan as a bargaining chip amid serial China-US trade wars, and the US leadership's ambiguous posturing with respect to its once-normative One China Principle.

<sup>4</sup> In the migration studies literature, 'subjectivity' typically refers to (1) individuals' experiences as "existentially complex beings" exercising agency in the face of constraints on their life decisions (Kara 2016, 51-52) and/or (2) the status of being subject to the regulations and agendas of a migrant-sending or receiving state. See Kara (2016, Section 2.2.4) for a detailed overview; Pun and Lu (2010) also discuss subjectivity in these two senses. This study emphasizes the first of these two senses, but the second sense also features in interviews with study participants.

EU, and more<sup>5</sup>), and its once-rapidly improving but now precarious standards of living and socioeconomic opportunities, what *migration-supporting social and cultural capitals* do prospective international graduate students lean into as they prepare to compete in the IHE market?

2. How do students' individual inventories of migration-supporting social and cultural capitals shape their sources of, and access to, information about the global IHE sector and their prospects for studying abroad?

This study investigates the above questions through mixed qualitative methods: semi-structured interviews with prospective graduate students, informal interviews with other informants (including current international students), and site visits and participatory observation (the latter with the help of research assistant Hsuan Li 李媛). This study finds that both Taiwanese youths' social and educational backgrounds and their agency (senses of self-efficacy) significantly shape both their prospects and their strategies for navigating IHE admissions options and processes. While access to migration-supporting social and cultural capitals generally improves study-abroad candidates' senses of self-efficacy, self-efficacy nonetheless varies among those candidates who enjoy advantages such as transnational family ties, advanced foreign language skills, and prior experience living abroad. Thus, migration-supporting capitals and self-efficacy interact to sort potential study-abroad candidates into the following (somewhat porous) categories:

|                                                |                                     |                                   |
|------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------|-----------------------------------|
|                                                | Greater self-efficacy →             |                                   |
| ↑ Greater access to social & cultural capitals | <i>Generational wealth group</i>    | <i>Cultural savvy group</i>       |
|                                                | [Unlikely study-abroad candidates.] | <i>Exploratory approach group</i> |

Figure 1.1: A typology of Taiwanese prospective graduate international students. (Each category is elaborated upon in Section 4.)

More important than this typology itself is the additional finding that students' positions within this typology significantly correlate with the information-gathering strategies and sources they favor while preparing to apply for graduate programs abroad. Different social and educational backgrounds steer students towards different sources of support, such as family members, peers, and *migration information brokers* (including university-based advisors and private consultancies). Crucially, these information brokers not only provide but also filter information about study-abroad options, thus constraining the migration paths that prospective students can imagine. Those students relatively lacking in migration-supporting social and cultural capitals are found to be the most likely to consult private or sometimes government-sponsored consultants, which make study

<sup>5</sup> See, for instance, Chiu (2024).

destination recommendations and support students' applications on the basis of self-interest.

Ultimately, these students' abilities to imagine and pursue alternative lives for themselves are meaningfully shaped by generational experiences, family resources, academic and personal networks, and their own embodied cultural capitals. And while their life circumstances are particular to Taiwan, insight into their experiences with investigating graduate programs abroad can be informative to universities and recruiters who struggle to reach these students. Further, the socioeconomic factors informing Taiwanese students' study-abroad planning potentially offer insights into the decision-making processes of prospective students from other economies that once saw explosive growth and now face stagnation and high rates of youth unemployment, namely the other former Asian Tiger economies as well as Japan and China.

## 2. Literature Review

A bird's-eye view of Taiwanese migration and Taiwan's socioeconomic development can contextualize the precarities that drive or inhibit the current Taiwanese youth generation's emigration. From this starting point, migration theory can assist with developing a systematic understanding of these prospective migrants' aspirations and their agency in setting their life courses. As the immigration streams that Taiwanese youth are targeting are mainly education and employment streams (they do not, as of this writing, qualify for refugee streams), a Bourdieusian view of cultural and social capital can make sense of students' prospects for fulfilling their migration aspirations, though how they *understand* their own prospects is one object of this study.

### 2.1. Migrant precarities and agency

Migrating as a means of improving one's circumstances is not new to the current generation of Taiwanese students. During Taiwan's era of one-party rule under the Nationalist Party (Kuomintang, or KMT), the KMT-led Party-state simultaneously repressed intellectuals at home to maintain political control and encouraged them to go abroad (especially to the US) so as to develop the country's industries and human capital (Law 1995, 1996). These policies resulted in a brain drain crisis in the 1970s and 80s, which reversed itself as the country's democratization movement achieved its main goals (O'Neil 2003; see also Cheng 2023). While these historical turns produced well-developed higher education,<sup>6</sup> high-technology manufacturing, and export sectors<sup>7</sup> enjoyed by a relatively free society, Taiwan has more recently faced economic stagnation and high youth unemployment of the sort that have already driven their peers' emigration from China (Lo 2009; Bodenhorn et al. 2020; Hou et al. 2021; Keyser-Verreault 2025). Degree inflation and poor employment prospects increasingly pressure Taiwanese students to pursue advanced degrees, yet domestic options lack appeal, as higher education is underfunded (relative to other

---

<sup>6</sup> For example, Times Higher Education (2024) ranks eleven Taiwanese universities, not all of them in Taipei, among the world's top thousand institutions.

<sup>7</sup> Chow (2023).

OECD countries)<sup>8</sup> and concerns loom regarding Master's programs' expenses, length, and quality of supervision.<sup>9</sup> Prospective graduate students face these and other difficulties amid immense pressure to attain upward social mobility (see Keyser-Verreault 2025), not the least thanks to the successes enjoyed by older generations.<sup>10</sup>

This historical and socioeconomic context informs prospective international students' subjectivities as potential migrants, important for understanding how both social forces and their subjective perspectives through their lived experiences shape their migration decisions (see Kara 2016, section 2.2.4). Subjective life satisfaction is more important than objective circumstances to one's aspirations to migrate (McGarry et al. 2021). Privileges such as higher education and wealth generate pressure to attain upward mobility as well as fostering self-efficacy; conversely, awareness of deprivation or marginalization can drive opportunity-seeking through migration (Xu 2021; Schewel & Fransen 2022). Migration aspirations are also tied to the ability to imagine oneself as a migrant. Prospective migrants may come to view themselves as migrants well before they move, whether at their own initiative or at the behest of institutions and social forces that encourage movement as part of the life course (Rodriguez & Schwenken 2013; Xu & Montgomery 2019).

Prospective migrants are objectively agentive so far as they have the means to successfully migrate, but of greater interest to this study is their subjective sense of agency (i.e., self-efficacy) as decision-makers in their migratory life courses. The rational actor framework common to early Western migration research falls short here, as what any given migrant feels is a rational goal to pursue depends on priorities and motives that can change with shifting individual preferences and social dynamics (Boccagni and Baldassar 2015; Carling & Collins 2018; Rahman et al. 2023). Migrants' rationality is also subjective due to the many constraints on their knowledge of migration pathways. Spaan and van Naerssen characterize migrants as operating on a "bounded rationality" constrained by limited information and "spatial, socio-cultural, economic and political factors" (2018, 683). Understanding prospective migrants' access to and primary sources of information about study- and work-abroad opportunities (and immigration regimes) can clarify the parameters within which they plan their migratory life courses.

Prospective students' exercise of agency in their migration planning is further complicated by the incentive-driven behaviours of the sizeable international migration industry. *Migration information brokers* facilitate migration in pursuit of their own business interests, whether these are private immigration consultancies (Beech 2017; Harvey et al. 2018; Spaan & van Naerssen 2018) or university recruiters as higher education institutions (HEIs) increasingly rely on

---

<sup>8</sup> Taipei Times (2022).

<sup>9</sup> One issue is that Master's programs frequently function as revolving doors between politics and academia, negatively impacting their quality of thesis supervision and intellectual rigor (Taipei Times 2022; see also Peng et al. 2022). Interviews with informants for this study, including Brian Hioe at *New Bloom Magazine*, have further affirmed these claims.

<sup>10</sup> As research assistant Hsuan Li stated in one conversation, after commenting the threat of Taiwan's "unification" with China: "If I'm running away from anything, it's the competitive attitude [here in Taiwan]."

international students' elevated tuitions to compensate for funding shortfalls, especially in the US, Canada, the UK, Australia, and New Zealand (Cantwell 2015; Castiello-Gutiérrez & Li 2020; Clayton 2020; Whatley & Castiello-Gutiérrez 2021). The explosion of international student enrolment numbers since the 1990s (Yang 2020; Glass & Cruz 2023) is not only driven by rising global standards of living but by these profit incentives. At the same time, the overall core-periphery structure that mainly drew international students, including Taiwanese, to these countries (and continental Europe) has shifted somewhat, with universities outside North America and Europe gaining success at courting international students (Glass & Cruz 2023; Pongsin et al. 2023; Wu et al. 2024). China itself is among the study destinations attracting Taiwanese students, thanks in part to lower costs of living and favourable student recruitment policies (Lin 2018; NHK World 2024).

IHE development in these emergent destinations is one driver of migration, but it is also possible that students are being driven away from the US and other popular Anglophone destinations by both rising tuition fees and students' growing concerns about punitive immigration scrutiny and enforcement, anti-Asian hate crimes, and other human security issues in these countries (Chen et al. 2021; Gover et al. 2020; Allen & Ye 2021; Allen & Bista 2022; Kim et al. 2022; Buch et al. 2025). Notably, too, changes in Anglophone destinations' labour migration policies are likely to affect interest in student visa schemes as well (Shih 2016).<sup>11</sup> Ultimately, factors particular to Taiwan already drive students to study abroad, yet their paths, like those of other international students, are also shaped by the structural forces of destination-country politics and public policy, the Western-led neoliberal IHE model and performance metrics, and more broadly, academic capitalism.<sup>12</sup>

## 2.2. *Cultural capital, social networks, and the possibility of moving*

Although program application screenings and immigration schemes are typically presented as meritocratic (see Chen et al. 2021), prospective migrants' abilities to compete in the field of target destination countries' university admissions have much to do with the sources of social support that assist them in navigating the program search and application process. Further, their skills and credentials are subjectively valued according to the priorities of graduate programs abroad. A Bourdieusian perspective on these *social capitals* and *cultural capitals* respectively helps make sense of how these resources empower prospective students to shape their academic careers and life courses.

---

<sup>11</sup> Indeed, in interviews conducted for this study with both prospective students and students who are currently living abroad, destination countries' post-graduation work opportunities and policies frequently entered the discussion.

<sup>12</sup> For an overview of the relationship between the Anglo-American-led global academic hierarchy and academic mobility, see Kim (2017). A formative early work in the academic capitalism literature is the book *Academic capitalism and the new economy: Markets, state, and higher education* (Slaughter & Rhoades 2010), though the broader study of the industrialization and commercialization of the academy goes farther back. (See Kleinman & Vallas 2001.)

Social capital consists of “the actual and potential resources that can be mobilized through membership in social networks of actors and organizations” (Anheier et al. 1995, 862). For prospective international graduate students, relevant social capital might include academic advisory networks, classmates with experience abroad, supportive potential graduate supervisors, and transnational personal and family connections.<sup>13</sup> Meanwhile, cultural capital consists of personal traits that are obtained through socialization (especially through education) and can help one earn social recognition or advancement (Bourdieu 1989; Davies & Rizk 2018; Tan et al. 2023; Ying & Wright 2023). Examples of cultural capital range from readily evident qualities (e.g. foreign language skill attainment, university degrees) to the less substantial (e.g. familiarity with how to present oneself in a cover letter for a graduate program application).

The utility of one’s social and cultural capitals for attaining upward mobility depends on their applicability to a given social space. Bourdieu conceives of attempts to attain social mobility as occurring in the context of a *social field*: Outsiders seeking entry into a social space, such as an exclusive group or a field of study or industry, must learn and contend with rules and norms set by hegemonic individuals, groups, or institutions in hopes of earning membership (Bourdieu 1985; Anheier et al. 1995; see also Portes 1998). Prospective international students, for instance, seek to earn acceptance into international programs’ social spaces, and it is up to admissions committees to evaluate the worth of their cultural capital (e.g. a degree from NTU, “the Harvard of Taiwan”) within the target field.<sup>14</sup>

This Bourdieusian framing can help make sense of Taiwanese students’ study-abroad prospects, yet critically, relatively little research indicates how access to these social and cultural capitals can *constrain* students’ academic career decision-making. Hu et al. (2022) refer to a “family-mediated migration infrastructure” in which international students’ family members provide material support for their studies but also impose their own expectations on students, prompting complex relational work and emotional labour from both parties. Taiwan’s history of robust circular migration from the 1970s onward suggests that the current generation of prospective international students may simultaneously lean into transnational extended family connections for support and face considerable pressure to follow the migration pathways their relatives did. Another prominent feature of Taiwan’s IHE sector is an abundance of study-abroad consultancies offering advice and information that may not be readily available to students lacking in certain cultural capitals.<sup>15</sup>

---

<sup>13</sup> This study concentrates on the experiences of prospective *graduate* students in part because they depend less on support from their families and more on diverse sources of social support. Nonetheless, the role of family support should not be ignored, especially for students pursuing programs in which their studies are likely to be self-funded.

<sup>14</sup> In the context of IHE, one point of conflict in the transferability of cultural capital (i.e., the ability to have one’s cultural capital be deemed valuable in another cultural context) is that international university performance metrics and internationalization drives, including in Taiwan, are modeled on Western metrics of success to a large extent—even as educators in Taiwan may prefer a model that respects Taiwanese traditional culture while borrowing some Western innovations (Lin & Yang 2022).

<sup>15</sup> As per interviews with prospective and current students plus industry experts for this study, there is a widespread cultural norm of seeking assistance from these consultants for identifying target universities and/or preparing program application packets. See Section 4 for details.

Students (or parents) paying for consultants' services constitutes one form of what Ying and Wright (2023) refer to as *outsourced concerted cultivation*, in which clients pay professionals to develop students' embodied cultural capitals on their behalf. Although such consulting services are widely assumed to confer competitive advantages upon prospective students, a more critical approach would consider the extent to which these consultants' self interest-driven recommendations (especially in the context of the neoliberalized IHE sector) bias, rather than simply inform, students' academic career decisions. This study therefore utilizes Spaan and van Naerssen's (2018) concept of *bounded rationality* as a launching point for investigating the web of relationships among students' social and personal resources, the norms and expectations attached to these sources of support, their information sources about study-abroad options, and their academic career decisions.

### 3. Methodology

This study employs multiple methods to investigate prospective students' bounded rationality, their envisioning of possible lives as migrants, and their use of social and other resources to navigate Taiwan's information environment as it pertains to the IHE sector. Findings from semi-structured interviews with prospective graduate students are contextualized by informal interviews with other informants, site visits to offices and resource centres of migration information brokers, and participatory observation conducted at international education fairs and expositions (both by the author and by Hsuan Li 李媛, a Taiwanese university graduate and this study's research assistant).

#### 3.1. Semi-structured and supplemental informal interviews

This study primarily employs semi-structured interviews to analyze prospective international students' bounded rationalities and migration aspirations. Interviewees (n = 38 prospective students, plus five current/recent international students) were recruited through a combination of snowball sampling (from several initial participants) and solicitations at study-abroad events during site visits by both the author and Hsuan Li, with a focus on diverse sampling to ensure participants represent a wide range of academic majors and study destinations of interest. Interview lengths ranged from 15-30 minutes at study-abroad events and from 45 minutes to an hour during one-on-one meetings at cafes or via video conferencing.<sup>16</sup>

Interviews began with open-ended questions about students' rationales for their selections of programs and study destinations, as well as the precarities and aspirations that drove them to pursue graduate studies abroad. (The open-ended format helped avoid skewing interviewees' attention toward any particular topic, thus better reflecting the motives and concerns that were foremost on their minds.) Follow-up questions further investigated the rationales behind interviewees' academic career decisions, their views of their study prospects and access to migration-supporting

---

<sup>16</sup> One interviewee was Hsuan Li herself, who was identified as a suitable research assistant only after she was interviewed about her plans to pursue graduate studies abroad.

capitals, and the sources of information and support they drew upon (or recalled drawing upon) as they conduct(ed) their graduate program search.

### 3.2. *Site visits and participatory observation*

While the aforementioned semi-structured interviews yield students' direct insights into their experiences and risk-benefit analyses, prospective international students are understood to be potentially unreliable narrators with respect to the bounds of their bounded rationality. As such, this study contextualizes and qualifies interviewees' statements through uses site visits to study-abroad expositions and the offices of *migration information brokers* (i.e., student resource centres on university campuses and private consultancies offering advising and other services for prospective international students).

At study-abroad expositions, research assistant Hsuan Li conducted participatory observation, compared attendees' apparent interest in different exhibits or exhibitors (usually university representatives or recruiters), collected or photographed texts ( $n = 25$ ) such as pamphlets and exhibition banners, and informally interviewed students in attendance regarding their study-abroad aspirations and concerns as well as their plans for medium- or long-term emigration versus return migration. Hsuan drew upon extensive lived and professional experience to conduct this research, having previously studied as an exchange student in France during her undergraduate program, worked at study-abroad expositions as an interpreter, and visited other expositions as an attendee. (As a Taiwanese university graduate, she also fits the profile of the target client for international university recruiters, making for naturalistic interactions with recruiters and attendees alike.)

The author of this study, meanwhile, visited university campuses and the offices of migration information brokers, collected or photographed promotional materials such as pamphlets and posters ( $n = 48$ ) from these offices, and informally interviewed centre and consultancy employees. Topics for informal interviews with employees depended on their specialties but included trends in Taiwanese students' study-abroad paths, undergraduates' job market prospects and perspectives, and consultancy clients' prior knowledge of study-abroad risks and opportunities. In conducting these interviews and site visits (as well as the above-mentioned semi-structured interviews with prospective students), the author has drawn upon his own experience in the IHE sector, consisting of past roles as an English teacher and student of Mandarin in China, an exchange student for a Mandarin program at National Taiwan University (NTU), and an international graduate student in Canada.

### 3.3 *Data analysis*

A grounded approach to data collection and analysis helped ensure that the key findings from this study were not shaped by a pre-set agenda (beyond investigating prospective students' subjectivities and agency) but are rooted in prospective students' experiences as they were communicated with the research team. Early interviews with prospective students and informants assisted the identification of themes and issues that were worth investigating further, such as the

prominence of transnational social networks and private information brokers in Taiwan's IHE information environment. From there, the data from semi-structured and informal interviews as well as collected texts is analyzed via a close text analysis through hand coding in NVivo.

Thematic coding of responses from semi-structured interviews with prospective students is the primary means through which prospective students' inventories of social and cultural capitals are identified and the typology of study-abroad candidates is constructed. Supplementing that data are observations from site visits plus thematically coded informal interview responses and textual data. These data corroborate or qualify findings from the semi-structured interviews, elaborate upon the precarities underlying prospective students' migration aspirations, and identify the roles played by information brokers in shaping their aspirations and trajectories.

#### 4. Paths to Becoming a Prospective Migrant: Capitals, Information, and Constraints

Several possible pathways are evident through which prospective students investigate potential destination countries and programs. While developing a typology of prospective international students was not originally an aim of this study, this study's grounded approach to identifying themes from early informant interviews nonetheless revealed clear patterns to students' backgrounds and the ways in which these backgrounds shaped their strategies for identifying and selecting potential study destinations. These categories should not be construed as being completely mutually exclusive, either: Given that *exploratory approach* and *cultural savvy* groups (described below) differ in information-seeking practices and self-cultivation, it is conceivable, for example, that a student in the *exploratory approach* group could later develop into a member of the *cultural savvy* group. Likewise, a member of the *generational wealth* group, raised with significant embodied transnational cultural capital, could either take a relatively passive approach to applying for international programs (relying on others' support, as with the *exploratory group*) or use that embodied capital to their advantage to investigate programs exhaustively (more similar to the tactics employed by the *cultural savvy* group).

##### 4.1. "Generational wealth": Transnational capitals—with strings attached

An early conversation with a staff member of *New Bloom Magazine* revealed one key line of inquiry for this study. The staff member, who had studied in an arts program in Germany and was well familiar with other Taiwanese students' academic career choices, observed that their own experiences might be "unrepresentative," as they were multilingual and benefiting from a "generational wealth" of diasporic family ties as well as elevated language skills.<sup>17</sup> A similar theme arose in a later conversation with *New Bloom* co-founding editor Brian Hioe, who explained how the ruling Kuomintang Party's orientation towards the US during Taiwan's martial law era resulted in numerous Taiwanese families developing extensive US ties (and sympathies).

---

<sup>17</sup> One benefit of snowball-sampling and interviewing widely, of course, is that one study can represent both social circles like those of the *New Bloom* staff member and those of students who are navigating the IHE industry with relatively little prior knowledge or support.

This notion of generational wealth (of cultural and social capitals) soon proved useful for framing some prospective students' experiences. Andrea\*<sup>18</sup>, despite the US's rapidly developing political situation in February 2025, still expressed her motivation to study there. Further discussion revealed she had been researching how she could use her dual citizenship status to be considered an in-state student to offset the considerable fees of a target MBA program. (She had also experienced the US as a diverse and cosmopolitan place, though by this time she was already investigating alternatives such as working holidays and English teaching jobs in Europe.) Andrea\* was not alone in this: Taiwan's marginalized status on the world stage, paired with its rapid socioeconomic development in the mid-20th century and its strong (though now unofficial) ties with the US, have resulted in a migration path with considerable legitimacy—and inertia—in Taiwanese culture.<sup>19</sup>

An interesting problem for the question of agency in international student migration emerges in cases like Andrea's\*. A transnational family background can afford students embodied cultural capitals such as language skills and cultural knowledge. At the same time, the embodiment of these capitals by one's parents or other influential figures arguably reduces one's *objective* agency, whether by imposing pressure to emigrate or by constraining the range of migratory paths that are deemed worthwhile. For example, Andrea\*, having developed an attachment to the US thanks to her family ties and her secondary education there, was distraught over the hard xenophobic turn in US immigration policy and had started her search for international education alternatives anew. This finding is consistent with Hu et al.'s (2022) notion of “family-mediated migration infrastructure,” as prospective students planning their study-abroad paths frequently must also negotiate the expectations and concerns of the family members who support them. One student at a QS study-abroad exposition reported preferring to study in the US but lacked her family's support in this, as they saw Canada as a safer destination. The mutual emotional labours involved in family-mediated migration infrastructure may be especially salient for Taiwanese students who worry over their families' safety as they follow Taiwan's geopolitical news and, as per one current international student interviewed for this study, contend with guilt while living abroad.

Despite the previous normalization of Taiwanese emigration to (or circular migration with) the US, these prospective students' cosmopolitanism could be what leads them to seriously consider alternatives. Several informants for this study stated that whereas the previous generation of Taiwanese had a rosy view of the US, the current generation of students have more varied, better-informed—thus more frequently negative—opinions of the country. (Politically active students

---

<sup>18</sup> Pseudonyms are indicated with an asterisk (\*). Hsuan Li (research assistant) and a few informants for this study have elected to be mentioned by name.

<sup>19</sup> Sassen (2007, 137-138) describes many post-colonial migration flows as gaining momentum and “a certain autonomy” after they are established. A life courses framework in migration studies could help illuminate the large extent to which migratory paths and behaviours are learned from prior migrants in a shared cultural context. Other research (see Brunarska & Ivlevs 2023) indicates that children whose parents were subjected to forced migration are themselves more likely to migrate in the future, a finding which is potentially applicable here due to the political persecution faced by older generations of Taiwanese.

and former students' views of the US had particularly soured.) The US's reputation for soaring tuition fees and costs of living is well established, and the US media's hyper-focus on violent crime appears to influence onlookers' views of personal safety in the country. Yet significant prior identification with the US and envisioning one's future life there could heighten one's commitment to studying there, even amid turbulent times.

#### 4.2. An exploratory approach: Seeking cultural capital abroad for a lack of existing resources

Later into the research team's fieldwork, it was surprising to learn of many Taiwanese prospective students who had relatively *unformed* opinions about current events in the US and the IHE sector. One interviewee, Salary Worker J\*, who was undecided as to whether to study in the US or the UK, acknowledged that her view of life in those destinations was largely based on entertainment media such as *Sex and the City*. Further, Hsuan Li, while attending study-abroad expositions throughout March 2025, met several students who reported that they “[didn’t] care about [US] politics” or believed that students who are “strong enough” or “have something to contribute” need not be concerned about the Trump administration’s increasingly strident and irregular immigration enforcement.<sup>20</sup>

For students who were already considering alternatives to the US, it was evident that some went in with open minds but relatively little prior information. Most notable out of these cases was Business Student C\*, who did consider the US among possible study destinations but also took an interest in Singapore as soon as he had a positive interaction with an exhibitor there. (Business schools in France also piqued his interest—after Hsuan had shared her plans to enrol in an MBA program there.) At a separate event, Business Student A\* was undecided on a target country or university—so she visited every exhibitor’s booth at that event.<sup>21</sup> At a Study Abroad Asia event hosted by NTU, two interviewees were primarily interested in studying in the Netherlands or elsewhere in Europe (but were open to exploring alternatives, particularly in Japan).

Students in this *exploratory approach* group appear to share an open-mindedness to study destinations, resulting in part from a lack of prior knowledge of said destinations or of the IHE sector at large. These students might lack the advantages enjoyed by the *generational wealth* group—and relatedly, lack that group’s strong emotional-social commitments to particular migration destinations. At the same time, *exploratory approach* students are not wholly without migration-supporting cultural, social, or financial capital. An example case is that of Student YJ\*, who conducted a largely self-directed search for programs—and whose parents had never been to the US—yet enjoyed her parents’ material support to pursue a Master’s program in biomedical

---

<sup>20</sup> These interviews were conducted prior to the Trump administration’s rollout of its globe-spanning tariffs in April, though abductions of international students by ICE, despite these students having valid visas and not being accused of any crimes, had already come to light. These findings also appear to be consistent with a June 2024 survey of (not only Taiwanese) international students finding that 43% of respondents felt that the outcome of that year’s election “does not influence their decision to pursue an education in the US at all” (Nash 2024).

<sup>21</sup> The author expects that this would be a common course of action for a student who is early in the process of investigating international programs—at least without strong preconceived notions about potential destinations.

engineering there. Likewise, attendance at recruitment events, especially paid ones for prestigious international universities, suggests some “outsourced concerted cultivation” (Ying & Wright 2023) of attendees,<sup>22</sup> and international education consultancies certainly do not offer their services *pro bono*.

How *exploratory approach* prospective students with less access to capital can attain academic social mobility is more difficult to ascertain, as such students tend to self-select out of studies of international students. (There is a significant survivorship bias in the field of IHE studies.) Language schools (at all levels of proficiency, at least for English) are commonplace in Taipei, and several interviewees for this study shared anecdotes about students who, interested in studying abroad yet lacking confidence in their language skills, pursue working holidays and other low-barrier-of-entry international experiences. Even relatively well-to-do explorers still meaningfully differ from the *generational wealth* students: The skills and cultural knowledge imparted by tutors, consultants, and the like may not wholly replace those forms of social capital derived from intergenerational cultural capital or transnational ties.<sup>23</sup>

Crucially, a baseline level of self-efficacy is necessary to undertake this exploratory approach, yet those lacking the relevant cultural capital are likely the most susceptible to the influence of migration information brokers.<sup>24</sup> These information brokers are, in theory, well positioned to tailor recommendations to applicants’ individual desires and needs. Yet at least in the private sector, brokers exhibit a broad tendency to base their recommendations mainly on university rankings and other surface-level indicators of programs’ suitability for study-abroad plans. That said, some agencies do offer information about a wider range of programs and study options: One company office the author visited hosted a testimonial session by a graduate of Kwantlen Polytechnic University (KPU), a career college in metro Vancouver; this office had several bookshelves full of three-ring binders with information on both Canadian and US colleges as well as universities in Canada, the US, Australia and New Zealand. Nonetheless, pamphlets promoting the GRE and TOEFL (contained in gift bags given to participants at the aforementioned event) almost exclusively listed high-ranking universities and their target test scores.<sup>25</sup>

---

<sup>22</sup> Ying & Wright refer to students whose parents have wealth but limited experience with the IHE sector and consequently choose to pay international schools and education consultants to cultivate their children’s academia-facing cultural capital.

<sup>23</sup> An analogy can be made to a first-generation university student (i.e., one who the first member of their family to attend university) who commences their studies with a significant reserve of savings and makes a point of meeting with academic advisors—versus their classmate who can tap into the experiences of their university-educated parents or older siblings. *Exploratory approach* prospective students, like the first-generation college student, may well be able to achieve remarkable upward social mobility, but only after hyper-compensating for disadvantages that their more privileged peers (akin to *generational wealth* students) need not spend time and energy to overcome.

<sup>24</sup> This is not to say lacking cultural capital compared to their peers is the only reason students might consult with information brokers. At least in the private sector, brokers’ services are not provided cheaply, as informants for this study have attested, meaning access to *financial* capital can help compensate for lacking cultural capital to an extent. See Lan (2019) for an overview of the development of this industry in China.

<sup>25</sup> It ought to be noted that the (competing) international university ranking systems, far from being neutral

So far as brokers do recommend target universities and programs based on considerations beyond universities' rankings and overall prestige, questions remain about the neutrality of these recommendations. For one, universities in Taiwan often have study exchange partnerships with universities abroad. While these partnerships mainly concern short-term study exchanges or 2+2 agreements<sup>26</sup> rather than (post-)graduate studies, several interviewees for this study mentioned seeking information from their peer networks. Salary Worker J\*, who had graduated several years prior and whose plans to study in either the US or UK were based on admittedly vague impressions of life in those countries, mentioned planning to follow her classmates' academic/career paths of going abroad for at least a few years to earn higher wages. Such a path is even evident in the cases of *cultural savvy* prospective students (see Section 4.3) such as Hsuan Li herself, who viewed moving to France for graduate school as a realistic possibility partly based on the prior experiences of two of her friends from the same university (one and two years older than her respectively) who had already followed a similar path to studying in France. Through the peer influence or social learning seen in these cases, universities' study exchange partnerships are likely to shape the life courses of *other* students, not only those who engage in study exchanges themselves.

University-based and private-sector information brokers alike may steer prospective students' international program selection due to institutional and corporate partnerships. Notably, the websites of several Taiwanese universities include clauses discouraging the recruitment of their students by private-sector companies or non-partner universities. The main webpage for National Chengchi University's Office of International Cooperation prominently features the following disclaimer:

本校外國學生招生皆未委外辦理，  
若申請人有疑問可洽國合處國教組。

We do not grant authority to any third parties to conduct international student recruitment.<sup>27</sup>

Disclaimers like this one appear to forbid third-party recruitment of outgoing international students, incoming students, or both,<sup>28</sup> suggesting considerable competition between universities (and their partners) and private-sector recruiters (and their clients). As per Consultant M\*, “a number of” international education consultancies receive commissions from enrolment management companies, which often have contractual arrangements with universities abroad to help those universities fill seats. Consultant M\* characterizes this as a relatively widespread “mobility scheme... primarily structured by US universities.” Thus, not only do Taiwanese and international

---

appraisers of program quality or student outcomes, are themselves an interest-driven component of the IHE industry, and these ranking systems are legitimized in part through the promotional activities of organizations that stand to gain from their popularization. See Brankovic et al. (2022).

<sup>26</sup> Consultant M\* in correspondence with the author, February 2025.

<sup>27</sup> Office of International Cooperation 國際合作事務處, National Chengchi University 國立政治大學. <https://oic.nccu.edu.tw/#> Accessed Feb. 20, 2025. Mandarin and English translations both appear on the webpage.

<sup>28</sup> See, for instance, this webpage for the Office of International Affairs at Taipei National University of the Arts (TNUA): <https://oia.tnua.edu.tw/en/foreignstudent>. Accessed Apr. 6, 2025.

universities steer actively court prospective students, but recruiters (and potentially consultancies by extension) steer students towards yet other universities, potential competitors of the aforementioned ones.<sup>29</sup> Although international education advisers present themselves as sources of information on study-abroad options, the reality is that under academic capitalism, universities' international affairs offices and private companies compete with each other and are both incentivized to promote a limited suite of study-abroad options to their students or clients. So far as these offices and consultancies comprise an important facet of Taiwan's study-abroad information environment, these actors also *constrain* this information environment, steering students' study-abroad trajectories under the pretense of empowering them to make their own academic career decisions.

#### 4.3. *New possibilities for a new generation: Cultural savvy and access to opportunities*

As has been established, students with the generational wealth of strong family ties to the US are substantially influenced by their family-mediated migration infrastructures, and those taking the exploratory approach depend on university and private information brokers to a noticeably greater extent. Yet among the current generation of Taiwanese students, there are also those who, in the context of Taiwan's developing cosmopolitanism and robust digital globalization, prove to be comparatively savvy purveyors of opportunities for academic and social mobility abroad.

An archetypal example of this *cultural savvy* type turned out to be Hsuan Li herself. Although she was introduced to the author simply on account of her plans to study in France, it soon became clear that she'd based her study plans on a combination of considerable lived experience (in Taiwan and on a short-term exchange in France) and some professional experience in the international education industry. Hsuan, who had come from a smaller city in Taiwan to earn her undergraduate degree in Taipei, acknowledged that her academic career followed the life courses of two of her classmates fairly closely. (Both had studied in France as well, one after the other.) Yet she also made ample use of the French language skills she'd developed in relation to her exchange program, saving funds for her studies by tutoring other students in French and working as an interpreter at several international education expositions.<sup>30</sup> By the time she and the author had met, she had already been accepted into a prestigious MBA program, one she had selected after extensive, mostly independent research on others' experiences through social media searches and outreach to program alumni.

A few students interviewed at international education expositions similarly demonstrated a combination of cultural capital (language skills, degrees, lived experience abroad) and savvy with respect to the program application process (familiarity with destination countries and program

---

<sup>29</sup> As Consultant M\* affirms, Western universities' disproportionate reliance on international students' relatively high tuition fees for funds—colloquially, their treatment of incoming international students as “cash cows”—is a widespread industry practice and open secret, and is a clear motivator of these practices.

<sup>30</sup> Hsuan is additionally fluent in English, a notable asset for acting as an intermediary between Taiwanese students and international university recruiters.

offerings). At an event held in an upscale hotel in Taipei's Xinyi District, Students K\* and L\*, who had earned Bachelor's degrees in the US together but, after a spate of layoffs in their respective sectors, made use of their social networks (including workplaces) while researching job prospects in Singapore and Canada. A registered nurse (RN) who was pessimistic about Taiwan's healthcare industry had decided against pursuing nursing in Australia due to lacking confidence in her English proficiency for work, but she had since identified a Canadian postdoctoral program that would allow her to ease herself into preparing to join the workforce and develop her language skills along the way. And one attendee at a NTU event promoting Asian exchange programs had earned a dual degree in Japan *and* completed a six-month exchange in Germany; she sought further information at this event even though she appeared familiar with the working environment in Japan, including Japanese employers' preference for employees with domestic degrees.

Certainly, the cultural savvy of this group is gained at least in part through experience, whether abroad or in Taiwan. All of Taiwan's high-ranking universities, at least, appear to have study exchange agreements with partners abroad, opening this potential option to a number of students. But social connections in Taiwan, too, can help aspiring international students foster the skills they need. Language exchange social events (often Mandarin-English) are abundant in Taipei and are often attended by Taiwanese Americans seeking to practice using their heritage language. Sizeable European language communities are present there as well (perhaps due to Taiwan's relatively friendly exchanges with EU countries). Ghost Island Media publishes cultural commentary in French, the author of this study encountered German nationals at several social events, and Hsuan integrated herself into a network of French language associations and cultural programs in the vicinity of NTU and National Taiwan Normal University (NTNU).

Another shared characteristic of these students is their inclination to diligently research their study and work options, but more importantly, they had also cultivated a cosmopolitan cultural savvy—and built their own embodied cultural capital to advance their social mobility—despite likely having started with less cultural capital than the *generational wealth* group of students. While it is difficult to imagine that any student with serious aspirations to study abroad would entirely lack cultural or social capital supporting this goal, students in the *cultural savvy* group appear to be more reliant on self-cultivation than on concerted cultivation (outsourced or not) to develop their advantages as international graduate program applicants.<sup>31</sup>

Students who have already spent significant time abroad (at least a semester of study or several months as a visitor or worker) can potentially, though not universally, be included in this category as well. Not only do they conduct their search for graduate programs with a set of prior international study experiences to compare to, but they can make relatively clear-eyed assessments of the risks, challenges, and benefits of moving to their previous host countries and educated guesses about how these destinations might compare to other potential study destinations. That

---

<sup>31</sup> It is also worth investigating the extent to which students create or curate their own social networks for the sake of self-development and future advancement, comparable to what is seen in Zhang and Xu's study of Chinese women students during their time abroad (2020).

said, relatively positive experiences during study exchanges will almost certainly shape students' perceptions in favour of those destinations. Hsuan found France to be "very diverse," with less focus on individuals' ethnic identities and who "belongs" (or not) to French society accordingly; she readily compared France favourably to the US in this respect. One student who had gone to Australia on a working holiday planned to not only pursue graduate studies there but hoped to move there permanently. (Personal experiences of this sort have the additional function of countering non-knowledge of potential destination countries: Another interviewee recounted being discouraged from studying in Australia by relatives who had assumed that mining and agriculture were the country's only major industries.)

Notably, though, students with extensive experience in a given country exhibit far from uniform attitudes towards the possibility of returning there. For previous visitors or students in the US, for instance, cases range from that of Andrea\* and her strong attachment to the US (see Section 4.1) to the above-mentioned Students K\* and L\* who had studied finance in the US for their undergraduate degrees yet were scouting out future destination countries based on more practical considerations. Time spent abroad combined with networking with other Taiwanese students can also meaningfully shape students' attitudes towards multiple countries: the *New Bloom* staff member was an engaged social activist and well versed in social movements across international contexts, readily comparing mutual aid networks in Europe to the lack of them in Taiwan and commenting knowledgeably of the difficulties faced by Southeast Asian students and labourers in Taipei. So far as *cultural savvy* prospective students glean information from the mainstream news and social media while researching international programs (and they do), they are also susceptible to adopting stereotypes and misconceptions common in that coverage. (Multiple students shared views of the US as a crime-ridden place.) Exposure to more news coverage likely also means more time spent pondering Taiwan's fate from outsiders' perspectives. Hsuan, as well as a personal contact of the researcher who had recently traveled to the US for a workplace function, both discussed the spectre of "unification"—using the English term for this—with China.<sup>32</sup>

## 5. Discussion and Conclusion

### 5.1. Primary takeaways

The interviews and fieldwork for this study demonstrate that while Taiwanese students' motives to go abroad are broadly similar to those of any other prospective international students, their prospective migration pathways and migration-supporting research exhibit several distinct features. Namely, Taiwan's particular transnational ties, the relative cosmopolitanism of Taipei, and the country's educational culture all result in distinct migration pathways and patterns for Taiwanese prospective international students. That Taiwan's historical international relations and migration

---

<sup>32</sup> A key topic of the dissertation, of which this study is a part, is the matter of which precarities primarily seem to drive Taiwanese students' migration decisions. As Hsuan said in our interview after her comment on "unification," "If I'm running away from anything, it's the competitive attitude [here in Taiwan]."

routes (especially with the US) have caused the development of a transnational *generational wealth* subset of prospective international students is abundantly clear from the research data. Two other categories of prospective students are more difficult to define yet appear meaningful. One is that of students who enjoy less access to migration-supporting capitals and take an *exploratory approach*, relying considerably on private and university-based immigration brokers (who frequently act on self-interest) for assistance with migration planning. The other is a group of students who develop and exercise *cultural savvy*, both cultivating cultural capital and using relatively self-directed, judicious information-gathering methods to help them succeed in their study-abroad endeavours.

Merely typologizing study-abroad candidates is not this study's chief contribution to the literature, however. What is most significant, rather, is the finding that different family and educational backgrounds, language skills, and so on steer students towards disparate sources of information about migration; more crucially still, different classes of supporters or information brokers each endorse—and, through affective work or persuasion, foreclose on—different sets of academic career options. Enjoying the support of family members who live abroad may predispose both study-abroad candidates and their relations to favour those destinations; students who learn from peers who have participated in exchange programs will necessarily develop more concrete impressions of their peers' study destinations; and while migration consultancies tailored to particular client demographics may prove to be a relatively suitable match for prospective students, consultants will almost certainly steer students towards the study destinations they are most knowledgeable of (or have business partnerships with). The “certain autonomy” of post-colonial migration flows described by Sassen (2007, 137-138) may result from both social learning and persistent imbalances of power and prestige in the global higher education field.

## 5.2. Limitations and further research

While this study identifies patterns of causation from prospective students' backgrounds to their ultimate study-abroad endeavours, the three typological categories it identifies should not be taken as wholly representative of Taiwan's population of prospective international graduate students. Indeed, this study's purpose is not to identify which academic career goals are the most common, nor even what percentage of students falls into each category of study-abroad candidate. Instead, this study has aimed to provide an informative view of how students from disparate social and personal backgrounds understand and exercise their agency in shaping their academic career courses. Questions about the distribution of migration-supporting capitals and other social advantages among the Taiwanese populace are better left to surveys or other quantitative studies. Additionally, as the prospective students recruited for this study were based in the Taipei metropolitan area, follow-up studies of other regions and demographics of Taiwan—especially southern Taiwan's cities and the country's linguistic minority groups—could yield valuable insights into the range and diversity of migration-supporting social and cultural capitals enjoyed across the country.

While the selection of student interviewees has proven fairly diverse up to this point, especially with respect to students' fields of study, more targeted outreach to specific demographic groups can offer further information about marginalized students' leveraging of social networks and their risk calculations as they choose prospective study destinations. LGBTQ+ interviewees, for example, are expected to have unique experiences as Taiwan offers a relatively friendly legal environment for this population compared to most countries in Asia—not the least as the politics of gender and sexuality grow more contentious in historically liberal countries such as the US and the UK. Additionally, while a majority of this study's participants have been women, subsequent research could focus more specifically on the gendered dimensions of cisgender women's and other gender minorities' study-abroad planning. Inquiry into the specific experiences of Taiwanese Aboriginal students and further investigation of class disparities in study-abroad aspirations could build upon this study's insights into cultural and social capitals as both precursors to self-efficacy and as resources to be attained through the exercise of agency.

Given the tumultuous political and higher education situation in the US at the time of this writing, further research ought to continue examining Taiwanese students' sustained interest (or lack thereof) in the US as a study destination. International students, broadly, have already exhibited a sharp decline in interest in US postgraduate programs during the first quarter of 2025 (Nash 2025a). Alternative Anglophone destinations stand to gain from these developments, though in order to do so, they may have to avoid implementing immigration controls that impact their reputations as welcoming study destinations, as has been observed in Canada recently (see Nash 2025b). In Taiwan's case specifically, this study's typology of prospective international students may help explain which groups of students are likely to remain interested in the US, albeit in unpredictable ways. For instance, the *exploratory approach* class might remain less aware of these issues and/or narrowly focus on target universities' international rankings; alternatively, they might be dissuaded by those anti-immigrant, anti-higher education developments with sufficient visibility on the news and social media. (While some interviewees for this study were optimistic that a US degree could compensate for its cost in wages or career dividends later, many others who had once considered the US as a prospective destination were contemplating studying, or had already studied, in Asia or continental Europe as well as other popular Anglophone destinations.) The *cultural savvy* class is expected to take such developments directly into account, while the *generational wealth* class is likely to harbour the most complicated feelings towards them.

Beyond the scope of this study is another worthwhile line of investigation: The above-mentioned cultural and social capitals can be sought abroad, yet possession of these capitals is broadly necessary to earn admission to graduate programs. Thus, there remains a question of the directionality of the relationship between these capitals and migration agency. Aspiring migrants may feel they have agency thanks to their extant cultural and social capital, yet it is also possible that if they feel they lack agency in their careers and life courses, they may hope to gain this agency from developing their human capital and social networks abroad.

### 5.3. Contributions to the literature; conclusion

The typology developed through this study (see Figure 1.1) can be a useful framework for explaining how social background and privilege shape students' subjectivities and brokered rationalities as prospective migrants, though it should be noted that these typological categories are not deterministic. Two key variables that are somewhat independent from these categories are *financial resources* and *emotional affect* with respect to students' program searches and application processes.

The accessibility of some information sources is fundamentally tied to financial resources, namely migration consultancies' services and admission to higher-end study-abroad expositions. Many other information sources, such as peer and advisory networks and access to university service centers, are determined by access to higher education, which is loosely correlated with class privilege. (Access to web forums and other social media is comparatively equitable.) These findings coincide with the notion that outsourced concerted cultivation is a commonplace strategy for improving students' program admission prospects, yet it is not certain that paying for access to these services can override the advantages that a cosmopolitan and/or transnational upbringing would confer upon prospective students.

Further, students' confidence in their ability to investigate and apply for programs abroad will inevitably shape their information-seeking behaviours. For instance, given developments resulting in significant affective (emotional) changes, such as program rejections (assuming the candidate decides to reapply for programs in the future) and changes in destination countries' apparent openness to immigrants, it is worth considering whether candidates are more likely to fall back on conventionally accepted sources of information and support. (The latter is evident in Andrea's case of being dissuaded from her once-preferred option of applying for US-based programs and subsequently paying for consulting services to help her investigate safer alternatives.) That said, neither variable undermines the model based on this typology, as both financial resources and drastic changes in emotional affect can impact candidates' perceived or actual agency.

It should be acknowledged, too, that the capitals and agency underlying each typological category exist on spectrums and not as binaries; thus, it should be assumed that the categories themselves are not wholly separate from each other. In particular, there is likely considerable overlap between the *cultural savvy* category and the *generational wealth* category. For instance, although the aforementioned *New Bloom* staff member characterized themselves as benefiting from "generational wealth," their academic career and knowledge of the IHE sector were more typical of the *cultural savvy* group. More broadly, it should be remembered that students hailing from transnational family backgrounds can differ in self-efficacy even given comparable inventories of migration-supporting capitals. No typology is without its caveats, of course, yet a systematic (as much as possible) understanding of how prospective students' social advantages and backgrounds shape their migration aspirations and behaviours can prove valuable for identifying the background-based obstacles to exploring the best possible options for advancing their academic

careers. Thus, this study's findings can be informative both for prospective students themselves and the relatives, academic advisors, industry professionals, and others who support them in advancing their academic careers and imagining alternative futures for themselves. And while Taiwan's case is uniquely shaped by its Cold War legacy and its particular trajectory of socioeconomic development, the socioeconomic challenges facing Taiwanese youth can inform comparable struggles experienced by youth in the other former Asian Tiger economies, Japan, and China. Further still, Taiwanese students' mobility can be a valuable case study of how prospective international students negotiate the global higher education field—governed as it is by passport recognition and immigration regimes—from a country-of-origin that lacks widespread international recognition.

## References

- Allen, Ryan, and Ying Ye. 2021. "Why Deteriorating Relations, Xenophobia, and Safety Concerns Will Deter Chinese International Student Mobility to the United States." *Journal of International Students* 11(2):i–vii. doi: 10.32674/jis.v11i2.3731.
- Anheier, Helmut K., Jurgen Gerhards, and Frank P. Romo. 1995. "Forms of Capital and Social Structure in Cultural Fields: Examining Bourdieu's Social Topography." *American Journal of Sociology* 100(4):859–903. doi: 10.1086/230603.
- Beech, Suzanne E. 2018. "Adapting to Change in the Higher Education System: International Student Mobility as a Migration Industry." *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* 44(4):610–25. doi: 10.1080/1369183X.2017.1315515.
- Bodenhorn, Terry, John P. Burns, and Michael Palmer. 2020. "Change, Contradiction and the State: Higher Education in Greater China." *The China Quarterly* 244:903–19. doi: 10.1017/S0305741020001228.
- Bourdieu, Pierre. 1985. "The Social Space and the Genesis of Groups." *Theory and Society* 14(6):723–44.
- Bourdieu, Pierre. 1989. "Social Space and Symbolic Power." *Sociological Theory* 7(1):14. doi: 10.2307/202060.
- Brankovic, Jelena, Leopold Ringel, and Tobias Werron. 2022. "Spreading the Gospel: Legitimizing University Rankings as Boundary Work." *Research Evaluation* 31(4):463–74. doi: 10.1093/reseval/rvac035.
- Brunarska, Zuzanna, and Artjoms Ivlevs. 2023. "Forced Displacement and Subsequent Generations' Migration Intentions: Intergenerational Transmission of Family Migration Capital." *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* 1–21. doi: 10.1080/1369183X.2023.2290443.
- Buch, Tanja, Carola Burkert, Stefan Hell, Annekatrin Niebuhr, and Anette Haas. 2025. "Do Xenophobic Attitudes Influence Migrant Workers' Regional Location Choice?" edited by C. Erisen. *PLOS ONE* 20(2):e0316627. doi: 10.1371/journal.pone.0316627.
- Cantwell, Brendan. 2015. "Are International Students Cash Cows? Examining the Relationship Between New International Undergraduate Enrollments and Institutional Revenue at Public Colleges and Universities in the US." *Journal of International Students* 5(4):512–25. doi: 10.32674/jis.v5i4.412.
- Carling, Jørgen, and Francis Collins. 2018. "Aspiration, Desire and Drivers of Migration." *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* 44(6):909–26. doi: 10.1080/1369183X.2017.1384134.

- Carling, Jørgen, and Kerilyn Schewel. 2018. "Revisiting Aspiration and Ability in International Migration." *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* 44(6):945–63. doi: 10.1080/1369183X.2017.1384146.
- Castiello-Gutiérrez, Santiago, and Xiaojie Li. 2020. "We Are More Than Your Paycheck: The Dehumanization of International Students in the United States." *Journal of International Students* 10(3):i–iv. doi: 10.32674/jis.v10i3.2676.
- Chen, Mingyu, Jessica Howell, and Jonathan Smith. 2021. "Best and Brightest? The Impact of Student Visa Restrictiveness on Who Attends College in the US." *SSRN* 70. doi: 10.26300/ddes-jm98.
- Cheng, Wendy. 2023. *Island X: Taiwanese Student Migrants, Campus Spies, and Cold War Activism*. Seattle: University of Washington Press.
- Chiu, Adrian. 2024. "Taiwan-Europe Relations under Lai Ching-Te: Which Way Ahead?" *Taiwan Insight*. Accessed April 7, 2025 (<https://taiwaninsight.org/2024/03/18/taiwan-europe-relations-under-lai-ching-te-which-way-ahead/>).
- Chow, Peter C.Y. 13 March 2023. "Why does Taiwan's development in the past century matter?" *Taiwan Insight*. University of Nottingham Taiwan Research Hub. Accessed August 28, 2025 (<https://taiwaninsight.org/2023/03/13/why-does-taiwans-development-in-the-past-century-matter/>).
- Clayton, Kate. 2020. "Not Time to Go Home: Why Australia Needs International Students." *Australian Institute of International Affairs*. Accessed April 1, 2021 (<https://www.internationalaffairs.org.au/australianoutlook/not-time-to-go-home-why-australia-needs-international-students/>).
- Cranston, Sophie, Joris Schapendonk, and Ernst Spaan. 2018. "New Directions in Exploring the Migration Industries: Introduction to Special Issue." *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* 44(4):543–57. doi: 10.1080/1369183X.2017.1315504.
- Glass, Chris R., and Natalie I. Cruz. 2023. "Moving towards Multipolarity: Shifts in the Core-Periphery Structure of International Student Mobility and World Rankings (2000–2019)." *Higher Education* 85(2):415–35. doi: 10.1007/s10734-022-00841-9.
- Gover, Angela R., Shannon B. Harper, and Lynn Langton. 2020. "Anti-Asian Hate Crime During the COVID-19 Pandemic: Exploring the Reproduction of Inequality." *American Journal of Criminal Justice* 45(4):647–67. doi: 10.1007/s12103-020-09545-1.
- Harvey, William S., Dimitria Groutsis, and Diane van den Broek. 2018. "Intermediaries and Destination Reputations: Explaining Flows of Skilled Migration." *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* 44(4):644–62. doi: 10.1080/1369183X.2017.1315518.
- Hou, Angela Yung-Chi. 2011. "Quality Assurance at a Distance: International Accreditation in

- Taiwan Higher Education.” *Higher Education* 61(2):179–91.
- Hu, Yang, Cora Lingling Xu, and Mengwei Tu. 2022. “Family-Mediated Migration Infrastructure: Chinese International Students and Parents Navigating (Im)Mobilities during the COVID-19 Pandemic.” *Chinese Sociological Review* 54(1):62–87. doi: 10.1080/21620555.2020.1838271.
- Kara, H. (2016). *The makings of migrant subjectivities: Time and intersectionality in the transnational everyday lives of Latin American women in Barcelona* [Dissertation, University of Helsinki]. Accessed December 14, 2023 (<https://core.ac.uk/download/pdf/43337013.pdf>).
- Keyser-Verreault, Amélie. 2025. “Lying Flat in Taiwan: Young People’s Alternative Life Choices in a Post-Developmentalist Era.” *Critical Asian Studies* 1–21. doi: 10.1080/14672715.2025.2474510.
- Kim, Chunrye, Claire Seungeun Lee, and Hyeyoung Lim. 2022. “Hate-Motivated Crime/Incidents Against Asians in the United States of America: A Systematic Review.” *Race and Justice* 1–23. doi: 10.1177/21533687221117280.
- Kim, Terri. 2017. “Academic Mobility, Transnational Identity Capital, and Stratification under Conditions of Academic Capitalism.” *Higher Education* 73(6):981–97. doi: 10.1007/s10734-017-0118-0.
- Krarup, Troels, and Martin D. Munk. 2016. “Field Theory in Cultural Capital Studies of Educational Attainment.” *British Journal of Sociology of Education* 37(5):761–79. doi: 10.1080/01425692.2014.969398.
- Lan, Shanshan. 2019. “State-mediated Brokerage System in China’s Self-funded Study Abroad Market.” *International Migration* 57(3):266–79. doi: 10.1111/imig.12515.
- Law, Wing-Wah. 1995. “The Role of the State in Higher Education Reform: Mainland China and Taiwan.” *Comparative Education Review* 39(3):322–55. doi: 10.1086/447326.
- Law, Wing-Wah. 1996. “Fortress State, Cultural Continuities and Economic Change: Higher Education in Mainland China and Taiwan.” *Comparative Education* 32(3):377–93.
- Li, Yu-Chih, Bob Lingard, Vicente Reyes, and Sam Sellar. 2021. “Performative Bilingual Policy: An Analysis of Two Taiwanese White Papers on International Education.” *Compare: A Journal of Comparative and International Education* 53(2):1–16. doi: 10.1080/03057925.2021.1889359.
- Lin, Warangkana, and Rui Yang. 2022. “Revitalizing Cultural Consciousness in Taiwan’s Higher Education: Ambitions and Tensions.” *International Journal of Chinese Education* 11(3):1–17. doi: 10.1177/2212585X221136734.

- Lin 林, Chen-ju 珍汝. 2018. “Why Are Taiwanese Students Choosing China for University?” *The Taiwan Gazette*. Accessed April 7, 2025 (<https://www.taiwangazette.org/news/2018/11/18/why-are-taiwanese-students-choosing-china-for-university>).
- Lo, William Yat Wai. 2009. “Reflections on Internationalisation of Higher Education in Taiwan: Perspectives and Prospects.” *Higher Education* 58(6):733–45. doi: 10.1007/s10734-009-9209-x.
- McGarry, Orla, Zaiga Krisjane, Guido Sechi, Piaras MacÉinrí, Maris Berzins, and Elina Apsite-Berina. 2021. “Human Capital and Life Satisfaction among Circular Migrants: An Analysis of Extended Mobility in Europe.” *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* 47(8):1883–1901. doi: 10.1080/1369183X.2019.1679421.
- Nash, Polly. 2024. “International Students Largely ‘Indifferent’ about US Election.” *The PIE News*. Accessed April 4, 2025 (<https://thepienews.com/us-election-international-student-sentiment-survey/>).
- Nash, Polly. 2025a. “Postgrad International Student Interest in US Plunges by 40%.” *The PIE News*. Accessed April 4, 2025 (<https://thepienews.com/postgrad-international-student-interest-in-us-plunges-by-40/>).
- Nash, Polly. 2025b. “UK Universities Set to Benefit from Trump Presidency.” *The PIE News*. Accessed April 4, 2025 (<https://thepienews.com/uk-universities-benefit-trump-presidency/>).
- NHK World. 2024. “Concerns as China Tempts Taiwanese Students.” *NHK World*. Accessed April 7, 2025 (<https://www3.nhk.or.jp/nhkworld/en/news/backstories/3079/>).
- O’Neil, Kevin. 2003. “Brain Drain and Gain: The Case of Taiwan.” *Migration Information Source*. Accessed March 9, 2025 (<https://www.migrationpolicy.org/print/4821>).
- Peng, Shi-Shu, Chung-Cheng Lin, and Hsiao-Pei Lin. 2022. “Degree Inflation: Why Do More College Graduates Pursue a Master’s Degree in Taiwan?” *Taipei Economic Inquiry 經濟研究* 58(1):107–34.
- Pongsin, Viseshiri, Nuttaporn Lawthong, Gerald W. Fry, Lakeesha Ransom, Seongdok Kim, and Ngoc Nguyen Thi My. 2023. “Thailand as a New International Higher Education Hub: Major Challenges and Opportunities, a Policy Analysis.” *Research in Comparative and International Education* 18(2):249–76. doi: 10.1177/17454999231163401.
- Portes, Alejandro. 1998. “Social Capital: Its Origins and Applications in Modern Sociology.” *Review of Sociology* 24:1–24.
- Rahman, Md Mizanur, Sabnam Sarmin Luna, and Pranav Raj. 2023. “Disgraceful Return: Gulf Migration and Shifting National Narratives amid COVID-19.” *Journal of Ethnic and*

- Migration Studies* 1–21. doi: 10.1080/1369183X.2024.2268987.
- Rodriguez, Robyn M., and Helen Schwenken. 2013. “Becoming a Migrant at Home: Subjectivation Processes in Migrant-Sending Countries Prior to Departure.” *Population, Space and Place* 19(4):375–88. doi: <https://doi.org/10.1002/psp.1779>.
- Sassen, Saskia. 2007. *A Sociology of Globalization*. New York.
- Schewel, Kerilyn, and Sonja Fransen. 2022. “Who Prefers to Stay? Voluntary Immobility among Youth in Ethiopia, India, and Vietnam.” *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* 48(19):4457–84. doi: 10.1080/1369183X.2022.2092085.
- Shih, Kevin. 2016. “Labor Market Openness, H-1B Visa Policy, and the Scale of International Student Enrollment in the United States.” *Economic Inquiry* 54(1):121–38. doi: 10.1111/ecin.12250.
- Slaughter, Sheila, and Gary Rhoades. 2010. *Academic Capitalism and the New Economy: Markets, State, and Higher Education*. Paperback ed. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Univ. Press.
- Spaan, Ernst, and Ton van Naerssen. 2018. “Migration Decision-Making and Migration Industry in the Indonesia–Malaysia Corridor.” *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* 44(4):680–95. doi: 10.1080/1369183X.2017.1315523.
- Taipei Times. 2022. “Editorial: Taiwan’s Higher Education in Crisis.” *Taipei Times*. Accessed April 6, 2025 (<https://www.taipeitimes.com/News/editorials/archives/2022/09/02/2003784593>).
- 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. doi: 10.1080/1369183X.2023.2270332.
- Times Higher Education. 2024. “Best Universities in Taiwan 2025.” *Times Higher Education Student*. Accessed April 11, 2025 (<https://www.timeshighereducation.com/student/best-universities/best-universities-taiwan>).
- Whatley, Melissa, and Santiago Castiello-Gutiérrez. 2022. “Balancing Finances, Politics, and Public Health: International Student Enrollment and Reopening Plans at US Higher Education Institutions amid the COVID-19 Pandemic.” *Higher Education* 84(2):299–320. doi: 10.1007/s10734-021-00768-7.
- Wu, Hantian, Rui Yang, and Mei Li. 2024. “‘On the Centre–Periphery Borderline’: Educational Studies on/in Mainland China in the Global Context.” *The China Quarterly* 258:548–58. doi: 10.1017/S0305741023001480.
- Xu, Cora Lingling, and Catherine Montgomery. 2019. “Educating China on the Move: A

- Typology of Contemporary Chinese Higher Education Mobilities.” *Review of Education* 7(3):598–627. doi: 10.1002/rev3.3139.
- Xu, Xing. 2021. “The Enactment of Agency in International Academic Mobility: A Case of Chinese Female PhD Students in Australia.” *The Australian Educational Researcher*. doi: 10.1007/s13384-020-00411-x.
- Yang, Peidong. 2020. “Toward a Framework for (Re)Thinking the Ethics and Politics of International Student Mobility.” *Journal of Studies in International Education* 24(5):518–34. doi: 10.1177/1028315319889891.
- Ying, Ma, and Ewan Wright. 2023. “Outsourced Concerted Cultivation: International Schooling and Educational Consulting in China.” *International Studies in Sociology of Education* 32(3):799–821. doi: 10.1080/09620214.2021.1927143.
- Zhang, Siqu, and Cora Lingling Xu. 2020. “The Making of Transnational Distinction: An Embodied Cultural Capital Perspective on Chinese Women Students’ Mobility.” *British Journal of Sociology of Education* 41(8):1251–67. doi: 10.1080/01425692.2020.1804836.