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Failing to succeed ? The role of migration in the reproduction of social advantage amongst young graduates in Hong Kong

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Failing to succeed ? The role of migration in the reproduction of social advantage amongst young graduates in Hong Kong

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Johanna L. Waters

Introduction

“Employers generally prefer graduates who have international experience.” (British Council, 2009, *Guide to UK qualifications in Hong Kong*, p. 6)

- 1 Migrants’ personal narratives are very often marked, in one way or another, by failure. Individuals frequently migrate to avoid, or escape, failure of some kind. Usually – the weight of scholarship would suggest – this involves failure to secure adequate employment (to meet basic social reproductive needs) in their country or place of origin : migration generally presents individuals with new opportunities for work. A recent literature on international student migration has also begun to suggest, albeit tentatively, that some young people migrate to mitigate the effects of *academic* failure. Migration for education occurs because these individuals have been unable to secure a place at a domestic university, or on the degree-programme of choice at home (Brooks and Waters, 2009 ; Findlay and King, 2010 ; Waters, 2006, 2008). In their study of British “international” students, Brooks and Waters found that an overseas education offered high-aspiring and generally high-achieving middle-class students the opportunity to access a prestigious higher education institution abroad, when the preferred option of attending Oxford or Cambridge in the UK had been foreclosed (Brooks and Waters, 2009).

Raikou and Karalis (2007), in their work on international students from Greece, argue that severe competition for university places at home often motivates young people to seek degree-level study abroad ; whilst Wiers-Jenssen (2008) has shown that individuals who fail to be admitted on to highly competitive medical courses in Norway frequently choose to pursue a medical degree in another part of Europe. There is, therefore, some evidence to suggest that international students perceive themselves as having “failed” in their local or domestic education system, and they therefore migrate abroad in order to acquire an acceptable alternative qualification. Pierre Bourdieu (1996, p. 217) has made parallel observations in relation to the emergence of new institutes of management in France from the 1950s onwards and especially during the 1970s and 1980s, providing “a second chance, as it were, to students who have not received from the academic world the recognition they had been anticipating”. In this context, new institutes of management are seen, by some sections of the middle-class, as “honourable substitutes” for the highly prestigious *Grandes Ecoles*. The association between academic failure and migration has historical precedents, also. Kurtz (2010), for example, has shown how the founders of modern philosophy in China and Japan (between 1850 and 1911) originally migrated to Europe because they *failed* competitive national examinations within their respective countries, and migration allowed them to continue studying (albeit overseas).

- 2 This paper examines, in part, the place of failure in the contemporary narratives of young migrants from Hong Kong. It considers the role that academic failure has played in the decision of families to migrate to Canada “for education”. I focus, however, upon the fact that, like the protagonists in Kurtz’s account, these “failing” students are, on completion of their studies and after returning to Hong Kong, *very successful* – in short, they find that their international qualifications are in fact “worth more” than locally acquired ones. Drawing upon Bourdieu (1996), I have described elsewhere this magical transformation as “social alchemy” (Waters, 2006), to indicate the way in which the physical act of migration and return can convert failure into “gold”.
- 3 Although this paper begins with the premise that a “local” university degree is widely considered superior to one acquired abroad, in much of the extant literature on international education, the human capital bestowed upon internationally mobile students is frequently taken for granted, and it is assumed without question that an overseas qualification will be *advantageous* for the student (Findlay *et al.*, 2006 ; Ono and Piper, 2004 ; Sin, 2006, 2009)¹. A few attempts have been made to describe, conceptually and empirically, the qualities of an international education that make it seem inherently superior (King and Ruiz-Gelices, 2003 ; Waters, 2006). King and Ruiz-Gelices (2003, p. 246) examined the effects of the “Year Abroad experience” for UK undergraduate students, and found that it resulted in three notable benefits : “linguistic improvement, the cultural experience of living in another country, and general personal development”. These benefits subsequently resulted in “a greater propensity to engage in postgraduate study, better job profiles, higher incomes and less experience of unemployment” (King and Ruiz-Gelices, 2003, p. 246). For Sin (2006, p. 255), who examined Malaysian students in Australia, the benefits of an international education as described by her research participants included “exposure to a Western environment, which they believe would refine their speech and manners, thus granting them social prestige in Malaysia”. In their work on Slovak students in the UK (and returnees to Slovakia), Baláž and Williams (2004) describe the extremely positive experiences of graduates, who cite significant improvements in employment prospects after returning home with a British

qualification. They argue that there is a “need to adopt a “total human capital” approach” to the study of international student mobility. There is “a need to look at a range of competences, rather than narrower measures of qualifications and formal courses of studies” (p. 234). These include “the value attached to language competence, in particular, but also to learning, attitudinal and interpersonal competences, as well as networking” (Baláž and Williams, 2004, p. 217). They also argue, rightly, that the “most significant gap in our knowledge of international student migration is probably in respect of the process of return” (p. 218). This paper is, in part, an attempt to address this enduring gap.

- 4 The symbolic advantages bestowed by an international education have also been addressed, albeit indirectly, in work that has examined the capital accumulation strategies of middle-class Chinese families (Mitchell, 1997 ; Ong and Nonini, 1997 ; Ong, 1999). Today, Chinese young people represent the largest international student group globally. Several writers, most notably Aihwa Ong (1999, p. 90), have argued that a North American university qualification (in particular) is “for many middle-class Chinese in Malaysia, Singapore, Hong Kong, and the Philippines, the ultimate symbolic capital necessary for global mobility.” But what, we are left wondering, *are* these symbolic advantages – what do they equate to *in practice* ? Similarly, what is the full “range of competences” to which Baláž and Williams (2004) refer ? In what follows, the paper explores the symbolic and material properties of international educational qualifications with a focus on Canadian university degrees utilised (exchanged into economic capital within the labour market) in Hong Kong. The paper examines especially the role of *migration* – and how the act of spatial relocation, residency and return can indicate a valuable and valued experience. This is what Murphy-Lejeune (2002) has termed “mobility capital”. She says : “the main difference between student travellers and their [non-mobile] peers rests in the acquisition of what we shall refer to as “mobility capital”... Mobility capital is a sub-component of human capital, enabling individuals to enhance their skills because of the richness of the international experience gained by living abroad” (Murphy-Lejeune, 2002, p. 51). This paper attempts to suggest what lies behind the “richness” of the overseas experience, and argues that its worth should not be taken for granted. I begin with a brief discussion of the research underpinning these arguments.

Research Methods

- 5 The paper is informed by fieldwork undertaken in Hong Kong during two periods : 2001 to 2003, and 2009 to 2011. For the first period, extensive research was also carried out in Vancouver, Canada, with university students originating from East Asia. One key objective of the work has been to elucidate the significance of “international” credentials in contemporary Hong Kong – in other words, what does it *mean* for young graduates to be in possession of an “overseas” university degree ? How do international qualifications affect their employment prospects ? And why do they choose to go abroad for their education in the first place ? This paper will focus on the experiences of young people from Hong Kong who migrated to Canada for the last few years of their high school, before completing higher education in a Canadian university and returning to Hong Kong to take up employment. In recent years, the important role of education in propelling the migration of families from Hong Kong to Canada has been increasingly well documented

by the academic literature (Kobayashi and Preston, 2007 ; Ley, 2010 ; Ley and Kobayashi, 2005 ; Waters, 2003, 2005, 2006, 2008).

- 6 During the first period of fieldwork, on which I focus in this paper, I conducted semi-structured interviews with 50 immigrant students (from Hong Kong or Taiwan). The majority were attending the University of British Columbia (UBC) in Vancouver and had immigrated with their families (and not travelled alone as most international students do), whilst they were still in secondary school. When asked about the reasons for their move, all these young people emphasised the importance of their education. Over half of them indicated that they intended to *return* to Asia following their graduation (where they believed their “cultural capital” could be maximised). In Hong Kong, interviews with 28 “returnee” graduates, also educated from secondary-level as immigrants in Canada, were carried out. They were recruited primarily through the Hong-Kong-UBC Alumni Association and I also used some personal contacts and relied in part on snowball sampling. On return to Hong Kong, the majority of “overseas” graduates had found work in a limited number of industries, and most had found themselves employed in financial services (as accountants, assistant managers, human resources consultants and market traders). They all displayed very similar trajectories when it came to their migration histories, their educational experiences, and their work.
- 7 The second period of fieldwork in Hong Kong, which informs the arguments made in this paper but on which I will not directly draw, has involved an examination of students undertaking “British” university degrees (at undergraduate, master’s and doctoral level) *in situ*, in Hong Kong. This project², like the first, considers the value of “overseas” qualifications in the context of contemporary Hong Kong. In the remainder of the paper, I discuss students’ and graduates’ initial motivations for migration to (and education in) Canada, and how and why their experiences of living in Canada translate into successful labour market outcomes.

The role of failure in migration

- 8 For a small number of young people, “political concerns” were the primary driver behind their family’s relocation to Canada. James, for example, was 13 years old when he left Hong Kong for Canada. He said : “In 1983 there was a joint declaration between China and Britain, and Mrs. Thatcher slipped on the floor of Tiananmen Square. That really brought along a stock crash. People really got shaky, right ?” Consequently, his family relocated to Canada in 1984. A Canadian graduate, he now works as a banker in Hong Kong. However, although “political reasons” were mentioned by a number of young people, these were far superseded by concerns around education. Tim, an undergraduate student in Vancouver, Canada, here explains why his parents decided that the family should emigrate from Hong Kong :

“The education system in Canada is better than the one in Hong Kong ; less competitive. In Hong Kong, it’s more like a pyramid, right ? If you can’t get certain grades you can’t go on to post-secondary level education. And the quality of education in Canada is way better than in Hong Kong, so that’s why we came here....”
- 9 Tim continued to argue that the system in Canada is far easier too :

“They tend to ask really hard questions in Hong Kong. Most people have exam anxiety and they will just fail the exam. They just can’t go on to the next level.

That's why the Hong Kong education system is so depressing, compared to Canada's education system. It [in Canada] is more like, if you don't do well in the provincial exam you can try again... You can try it three times in a year. But in Hong Kong, you can only try it [the Hong Kong Certificate of Education Examination] once a year and you can only try it twice. If you fail it more than that you just get a low job or your self-esteem will go down so badly..." [Interviewer : What happened to friends who have failed ?] One of my friends works for a cleaners' company. He just cleans floors and stuff like that. He used to get similar grades to me, but he just failed exams so badly he couldn't go on".

- 10 For the vast majority of research participants, then, the fear of failure in Hong Kong underpinned their relocation to Canada. The perceived "easiness" of education in Canada (the ease with which once can succeed) was a major theme emerging from the transcripts. Here Cindy, an undergraduate in Vancouver, draws on her experiences to compare education in Canada and Hong Kong :

"[In Hong Kong] it was a lot of studying... I hate it when I talk on the phone to my friends or my grandma now, and they're like 'why are you so stressed ? It's Canada.' But it's not true! At UBC [University of British Columbia] I work so hard, but they don't get it. They think it's like Canada, and so no school work whatsoever. And it bugs me! But they still think the same thing - it's easier in Canada to get a degree."

- 11 For most students, migrating to Canada was their only option if they wanted a university place. I asked Louis if his parents were worried that he'd not get into university in Hong Kong. He replied : "*Laughs. Not with my marks! There's more opportunity here than back there.*" And Gavin, another undergraduate student in Vancouver, had similar thoughts, as revealed in the following exchange :

"Because in Hong Kong... you have to get really high marks to get into university. I think that [there are] 150,000 [people] in grade 11 and only 20,000 in grade 12."

- 12 Interviewer : You left Hong Kong before you sat the exams right ?

"Yeah, in grade 11."

- 13 Interviewer : Were your parents worried about how well you would do in the exams ?

"I was doing really bad."

- 14 In this section, then, I have tried to illustrate the point with which I opened the paper - much migration can be attributed to failure, and student migration is often linked to academic failure. In what follows, I want to try to understand why it is that returnee graduates apparently do so well in the local labour market, why it is seen as a "definite advantage" to have an overseas qualification in this context and how, consequently, this feeds in to the reproduction of their "social advantage".

Life abroad : the acquisition of cultural capital

- 15 The acquisition of embodied cultural capital does not, as Bourdieu (1986) has argued, occur "over night" - this type of capital cannot be passed from one individual to another but must be acquired slowly, *over time*, and in person. Thus, living abroad for several years (and during one's formative teenage years) is crucial. It is this immersion overseas, in a different social and cultural environment, which underlies the value inherent in the international academic qualification. As King and Ruiz-Gelices (2006) argued in relation to their own study, "academic learning" is of minor importance to the internationally mobile student. What, then, do these students actually acquire from living and attending school in a foreign country ? How does this translate into a valuable commodity for

prospective employers in Hong Kong ? By far the most important acquisition for these students is fluency in the English language. However, mere fluency is not enough - a North American *accent* is required (Lee and Koo, 2006). Several young people mentioned a hierarchy of accents, with a British-English accent at the apex and a North American accent just below. A local Chinese-English accent is found near the bottom. More generally, the ability to converse easily in English was stressed. Kirsten, an undergraduate student, explains the importance of English for business in Hong Kong :

“You can speak Cantonese in Hong Kong – it’s taken for granted. If you know English, your pay will be doubled. Yes, yes, it’s very different. In many businesses, especially in manager grade, you need to deal with Caucasians – overseas people. That’s why your English needs to be very understandable and presentable”.

16 Gabriel makes a similar point :

“My dad wanted me to learn more English, ‘cause English is the international language. I mean, in Hong Kong the level of English that people have is pretty low. My dad thought it’s not enough so we came here to study.”

17 Migration to an English-speaking environment is seen by many families as an easy way of accumulating this form of cultural capital. And employers, I was told, greatly value fluency in English. Most job interviews were held in several languages, as Lily described : “Actually, it [my job interview] was trilingual – it’s in three languages...Here in Hong Kong, whatever job, they want you to be fluent in three languages, basically.” After graduating from university in Canada, Lily returned to Hong Kong and joined a large banking firm as a management trainee. After just one year she was promoted to assistant manager. She attributes her success squarely to her overseas educational experience.

18 A second important feature of students’ and graduates’ cultural capital is related to contrasting pedagogical styles found in Hong Kong and Canada (Waters, 2006). Becca, an undergraduate student in Canada, alludes to this when she explains why most of her friends are planning to go back to Hong Kong once they graduate : “*I think jobs. It’s so much easier to get a job in Hong Kong I think [Interviewer : Why ?] I don’t know. Maybe it’s just the fact that people think you are better. Like, your way of thinking is different. It’s just unique, it stands out more.*” Overseas-educated graduates’ different “way of thinking” can in large part be attributed to a different approach to teaching and learning in Canada, compared to Hong Kong. Ewan explains this difference in more detail :

“As for the education method, it is more ‘spoon feed’ [in Hong Kong]. Like, I give you the book and you read these all and you remember all the stuff in it and then comes the exam... After I came here [Canada] I feel more like, wow, there’s no one to tell me you’ve got to study and stuff like that. It’s free. It’s more of your own style here. There is more room for creativity here, whereas in Hong Kong every student is basically the same personality. They just study, and they are not studying for their interest, they are just studying for the exam, just to get the high marks.”

19 There would seem to be the recognition then, by some employers, that an education system not so heavily driven by examination marks will produce more productive, creative employees. However, as discussed below, employers are often *themselves* educated overseas (see Waters, 2009). Individuals (students, parents and employers) only really become critical of the Hong Kong education system *after they have left it*. This in part explains the conundrum as to why Hong Kong universities are so revered before migration occurs, and so critically appraised afterwards.

20 A third important factor in the favourable valuation of overseas credentials relates to the social capital nurtured by these young people – both intentionally and “by accident”

(Waters, 2009). There is a specific *geography* to the transnational, trans-local social capital that has developed between Hong Kong and Vancouver, and one that might not be replicated elsewhere. As Holly (a graduate now living and working in Hong Kong) explains in relation to her own academic qualifications :

“UBC is quite well known in Hong Kong... If you talk to people who live in Hong Kong, they know about UBC. I think it is because a lot of Hong Kong people came to study in UBC too, and then a lot of them are back in Hong Kong after they graduate so... That’s why it is quite well known.”

21 Returnees, it emerged, have had an important role to play in the positive recognition of their own cultural capital – several young people described the ways in which employers – themselves “overseas educated” – would reward those possessing similar qualifications. The reputation of UBC in Hong Kong is largely attributable to the very high volume of trans-Pacific migration that has occurred over the past thirty years between Hong Kong and British Columbia, and the number of students who have returned, as graduates, to enter the labour market, as Holly describes.

22 Baláž and Williams (2004), in their work on Slovak students in the UK, identify an important distinction when it comes to the recognition of overseas credentials. They write that “the advantages [of an overseas qualification] were realised by those working in internationalised private sector companies. In contrast, some of those who worked in the public sector complained of lack of recognition of their enhanced competencies (Baláž and Williams, 2004, p. 234). Our research on Hong Kong students undertaking British degrees in Hong Kong has similarly highlighted this significant public-sector/private-sector distinction (Waters and Leung, 2010). International credentials are highly valued in the private sector but not, it would seem, in public sector work. It is not inconsequential, therefore, that with very few exceptions, nearly all the Canadian-educated graduates who returned to Hong Kong to seek work found employment in private sector firms (most notably large banking corporations).

23 Finally, I want to touch upon the inevitable process of acculturation that occurs when young people live for a time abroad. My interviews – particularly with students still living in Canada – revealed that individuals were in some way “acculturating” to a different (Canadian?) lifestyle. Several talked about their “unfamiliarity” with Hong Kong. Kirsten’s account of returning to Hong Kong was quite typical :

“I just don’t like the weather, the environment. It’s more crowded... I like Vancouver a lot... This summer I went back to Hong Kong. On my first day I went shopping with a friend. We were going so slow people were passing us! I don’t have many friends in Hong Kong anymore. Usually, if I go back I’ll be with my Canadian friends. We were like, wow, everyone is in such a hurry. And then, when we were about to cross the road we saw the sign flashing telling you that you should stop, and we stopped, and everyone else was walking... I guess people were working and they had to hurry...”

24 This sense of feeling “out of place” in Hong Kong (where these young people were born) was common. Jimmy said of this :

“When I first came here I felt like I belonged in Hong Kong. I was definitely going back to Hong Kong after my degree. But now I think that... I actually like Canada more than Hong Kong. [Interviewer: Why?] I think it’s basically about the environment. I visited Hong Kong last summer and I think that the conditions are not so good. Like the pollution, and it’s so crowded there... and I think my sense of belonging to Hong Kong has gone down a bit after all these years that I’ve lived here.”

- 25 Despite their reservations, however, the majority of Canadian-educated graduates return to Hong Kong, for the simple reason that it is easier to find work there. And yet, no academic accounts of international student mobility to date have taken account of the fact that young people *change* through the process of migration and living abroad, and this change may impact favourably upon their employment prospects. In her work on the Chinese diaspora in North America, Aihwa Ong describes the components of a “Western” comportment, so valued in contemporary transnational business spaces :

“Though everyone there was fluent in English, practically all spoke Cantonese, and we could have been at an exclusive gathering in Hong Kong. I spoke to one of the younger people at the party. Like many teenage émigrés, she was actively taking lessons – piano, tennis, singing, and dancing – to be able to participate in the social activities of upper-class life [...] she and her Chinese American classmates [...] were intent on learning how to dress, walk, and generally comport themselves in ways that would make themselves “more acceptable to the Americans.” Chinese parents frequently encourage their children to display social poise and public confidence by urging them to perform before guests after dinner. Indeed, the young woman I spoke with was very well groomed and was determinedly presenting herself to each guest, as if to practice her lessons in social mixing among this cosmopolitan crowd. Propitious location, the trappings of wealth, and appropriate body language are the cultural forms immigrants must gain mastery over if they are to convert mere economic power into social prestige...” (Ong, 1999, pp. 87-88).

- 26 Back in Hong Kong, graduates’ “Canadian” (as they described it) body language, style of dress, sense of humour, and accent find them able to convert “mere” academic credentials into both economic power and social prestige.

Conclusions

- 27 In this paper, I have drawn attention to the role of spatial mobility in affecting the employment experiences of “overseas educated” university graduates in Hong Kong, and, consequently, the reproduction of their social advantage. Drawing on extensive fieldwork in Hong Kong and Canada, the paper has scrutinised the link between international credentials and migration, asking : do experiences of living abroad – for schooling and the whole of a university education – confer distinction upon already privileged individuals and their families ? If so, then why does this process of valorisation occur ? In much of the extant literature on international education, the advantages bestowed upon internationally mobile students are often taken for granted. In contrast, this paper began with the premise that a “local” university degree is widely considered superior to one acquired abroad, and that *failure to succeed* in the domestic education system is often the biggest driver underpinning international student mobility. Despite this clear association between emigration and “failure”, however, graduates educated overseas are clearly advantaged in many ways when they return to Hong Kong to find work. The data have shown that the cultural capital and social capital developed through living and attending an overseas higher education institution override, in various ways, the inherent value of a local university degree. I have attempted, here, to pinpoint more precisely the nature of this capital, summarised as linguistic competences, better communication skills more broadly, physical comportment, recognition by private sector industries and personal social connections. I have also made the point that individuals are far more critical of the nature of formal education in Hong Kong after they have left the system. The paper contributes to wider debates around the role of international education in the

(re)production of privilege and the continuation of class inequalities in educational outcomes (see also Xiang and Shen, 2009) by attempting to understand how it is that relatively privileged individuals are able to “fail” in the domestic education system and yet still be highly successful in terms of career outcomes and prospects. They do this through migration, capital accumulation, and return. Migration for education, therefore, has a pivotal role to play in the reproduction of class privilege in Hong Kong.

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NOTES

1. Although compare Brooks, Waters and Pimlott-Wilson (2011), where it is argued that international qualifications are often seen as disadvantageous by British students seeking work in the UK labour market.

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ABSTRACTS

This paper attempts to unpack the role of failure, and subsequent international mobility, in affecting employment outcomes for 'overseas educated' university graduates in Hong Kong. It draws upon extensive fieldwork in Hong Kong and Canada, to scrutinise the link between international credentials and migration, asking : do experiences of living abroad – for schooling and the whole of a university education – confer distinction and subsequent social advantage upon already privileged individuals and their families, offsetting previous academic "failure" ? If so, then why does this process of valorisation occur ? In much of the extant literature on international education, the advantages bestowed upon internationally mobile students are taken for granted. In contrast, this paper begins with the premise that a 'local' university degree is widely considered significantly superior to one acquired abroad. Despite this, however, graduates educated overseas are clearly advantaged in many ways when they return to Hong Kong to find work. The analysis of the data shows that the cultural capital and social capital developed through living abroad and attending an overseas higher education institution override, in various ways, the inherent value of a local university degree. The paper contributes to wider debates around the role of international education in the reproduction of privilege and the continuation of class inequalities in educational outcomes.

Cet article tente d'examiner le rôle de l'échec et de la mobilité internationale qui en découle, affectant les débouchés professionnels pour les diplômés d'outre-mer à Hong Kong. Il se base sur un vaste travail de terrain mené à Hong Kong ainsi qu'au Canada, dans le but d'analyser le lien entre références internationales et migrations. La question posée est la suivante : les expériences acquises à l'étranger, en matière de scolarité et de formation universitaire, confèrent-elles prestige et avantages sociaux subséquents aux individus et familles déjà privilégiés, en compensant un précédent échec académique ? Le cas échéant, quelle est l'origine de ce processus

de valorisation ? Une bonne partie de la littérature relative à l'enseignement international considère les avantages conférés aux étudiants internationaux mobiles comme allant de soi. Notre article, au contraire, débute par la prémisse qu'un diplôme universitaire "local" est largement considéré comme nettement supérieur à un diplôme obtenu à l'étranger. Cependant, malgré cela, les diplômés formés à l'étranger se trouvent clairement avantagés de multiples façons lorsqu'ils rentrent à Hong Kong pour y chercher un emploi. L'analyse des données démontre que le capital culturel et social développé en vivant et étudiant à l'étranger annihile, de diverses façons, la valeur inhérente d'un diplôme universitaire local. Cet article contribue à élargir le débat sur le rôle de l'enseignement international dans la reproduction des privilèges et la poursuite des inégalités de classe en matière d'enseignement.

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Mots-clés: enseignement international, migrations, jeunes diplômés, reproduction sociale, Hong Kong, Canada

Keywords: international education, migration, young graduates, class reproduction

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