

“Small-town Swots” Studying Abroad

Self-Identification and Challenges Faced by Chinese Overseas Students from Small Towns

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Background

Under urbanisation, socioeconomic progress, and the development of educational concepts in China, Chinese parents from small towns are more willing and able to support their children in studying abroad. Meanwhile, as competition for higher education intensifies and the job market becomes increasingly challenging after the pandemic, more “small-town swots and their families have had to look to studying abroad as a way out. In this process, Chinese overseas students from small towns may encounter various problems in life, study, and state of mind.

Literature Review

Meritocracy: a social system in which personal capacities rather than wealth and social background lead to social advancement directly and each person can achieve a social class leap through personal efforts (Young, 1958; Kim & Choi, 2016).

Small-town swots: emerging in Chinese cyberspace in 2020, this term refers to those Chinese students from small towns or rural areas who have been working hard for years to reach elite universities through the college entrance examination but only to find a huge gap between their ideals and reality (Chen et al., 2022).

Chinese overseas students: it is a growing trend for Chinese students to study abroad, especially in English-speaking countries, but when studying abroad, they may face a language barrier, different attitudes to learning, and academic pressure (Liu, 2015).

Research Questions

- (1) What types of challenges are faced by overseas students from small towns?
- (2) How can these challenges reflect the contradictions between individuals and social orders?

Methodology

Positionality: an overseas student from a small city in a less-developed province

Methods

Autoethnography: from lived experiences to identities, values, and social-political issues

Digital ethnography: based on a Chinese social media platform “Little Red Book”, four times of online observations were conducted from May 24, 2023 to May 30, 2023. The researcher observed posts and comments under hashtags #小镇做题家 (small-town swots) and #我是小镇做题家 (I am small-town swots) one hour for each time, wrote fieldnotes after observation and integrated individual’s narratives and public criticisms.

Findings

Personal experiences

Making my study abroad is a big investment for my family. My parents hope that I can broaden my horizon and pursue a master’s degree at a top university in the world. I myself also made huge efforts to improve my academic performance and language proficiency.

However, after I entered the university, I felt that the people surrounding me were all with a better educational background than me. They are from first or second-tier cities, speak very fluent English, and always feel easy about different in-class and social activities.

Questions from my old friends also never stop. Indeed, I am also privileged when receiving the offer of this degree and going abroad to study, but still, my previous educational experiences and identity are with me, making me feel different from my fellows in this foreign university.

Posts under hashtags regarding “small-town swots”

Descriptions including “school in the countryside / in a town”, “free access”, and “national scholarships” are commonly seen.

Personal efforts were emphasized much by the blogger: “I went to another town to go to middle school... I got almost the **best** result in my college entrance examination. University is a new beginning with **more outstanding classmates and teachers...** under their influence, I earned my money to study in the UK”. Some of them mentioned their **financial issues**: “My three uncles are supporting me together financially, my parents borrowed money, and I am a TA (teaching assistant) now to earn a salary.” “My parents scrimped and saved.”

Public criticisms: “The kind of person like you who has always been in **famous schools** and can **afford to study in the US** should not self-identify as ‘small-town swots.’”

The blogger’s response: “I think this concept can be applied to all students from **second or third-tier cities taking exams every day** to succeed in the **college entrance examination.**”

- Although Chinese overseas students from small towns have already been considered a winner in the meritocratic system, they may also lack self-confidence and a sense of belongings when studying abroad.
- In social media, it is common for Chinese overseas students who are from small cities to fall into a self-proving predicament. They self-identify as “small-town swots”, but such self-identification may invite severe criticism. These criticisms are partially similar to an argument that studying abroad is only a fame game among leading cadres and managerial families, which in fact marginalises working-class and rural students (Shen et al., 2022).

An important question for further discussion

Why does the group of Chinese overseas students who are from smaller cities and in the middle between the upper-class students and small-town students seek a space in the discourse community of “small-town swots”?

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