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A Dialogue Between Chinese Academic Elitism and Western Postcolonialism on Students' Motivation to Study Abroad

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Abstract: Nowadays, the motivation of international students to study abroad has received extensive attention, but there is still a lack of subjective research on the motivation of international students to study abroad. Based on this, this paper analyzes the motivations of students who make their own decisions to study abroad under the combined influence of Chinese elitism and postcolonialism. This paper concludes that the desire for academic hierarchy in Chinese academic elitism and the identity shaping brought about by studying abroad drive students to decide to study abroad, and the excessive idealization of Western education in postcolonialism drives students to study in the West. Together, they influence students to make decisions about studying abroad out of their initiative. Based on this, this study hopes to strengthen international education in China, accelerate the combination of elite education and civic education, cultivate students' diversified critical thinking, and improve the country's academic international status.

Keywords: Academic Elitism, Postcolonialism, Motivation for Studying Abroad, Higher Education.

1. Introduction

For the research on the motivation of Chinese students to study abroad, most of the existing literature focuses on influencing factors other than the students themselves, such as the classical push-pull analysis method and Bourdieus's class reproduction framework as the main research perspectives. Just as the motivation of international students to choose to study abroad is seen in the academic community as a form of immigration for students (potential high-skilled immigrants), as a cross-border strategy and process for the reproduction and/or formation of social classes, and as a place for the accumulation of culture, experience, and identity of youth mobility [1]. Existing research has also focused more on the motivation of Chinese students to study abroad, such as students' family factors and academic pressure in their home countries. For example, Chinese students choose to study abroad mainly due to external reasons such as the high learning pressure in Chinese secondary schools; the intensive competition in the National College Entrance Examination, and friends and relatives' recommendations [2]. At the same time, academics usually divide the Chinese international student population into two groups: pre-undergraduate and post-undergraduate study abroad. Therefore, this study positions the group of Chinese students studying abroad as a group of students studying abroad for graduate but undergraduate studies in China, and at the same time ensures the ideological maturity and self-leadership of students' decision-making, and pays more attention to the subjectivity of

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students' motivation to study abroad, so as to supplement the existing academic research on the group refinement of study abroad motivation and student agency. At the same time, students' motivation for studying abroad is influenced by the elitism in China and the postcolonialism of the Western world, so this article briefly introduces the two isms. Chinese academic elitism shapes the academic grade gap through grading, differentiation, and pyramid hierarchical structure, endows students with hierarchical imagination and desire, and enhances their competitiveness and selectivity. Due to the special importance of education in Chinese society, it is a legitimate, more or less utilitarian means of social mobility [3]. This cultural tradition, combined with contemporary social conditions such as population, education system, and labor market, has led to a strong "thirst for education" in China [3]. At the same time, the expansion of modern education and the implementation of the 985,211 Project further strengthened the hierarchical differentiation within elitism. The theory of postcolonialism mainly exposes and criticizes the intellectual property rights, high-tech monopolies, and cultural infiltration of Western capitalist developed countries throughout the world [4]. This study mainly analyzes students' motivation to study abroad from two perspectives: the interaction between students and Chinese academic elitism and the impact of postcolonialism on students and shows their subjectivity.

2. Method

This study conducted in-depth, semi-structured interviews with students who were preparing to study abroad in English tutoring institutions and study abroad institutions. The purpose of this study is to explore the influencing factors of international students' motivation to study abroad and the choice of study destination. This study conducted in-depth interviews with 6 students who were planning to go abroad. Among the six interviewees, 2 students decided to study abroad more to external factors such as their parents, while the other 4 students made the decision more on their wishes. In the past, academic research on the motivation of studying abroad has focused more on external factors such as students' family factors, the high pressure of domestic higher education competition, and the driving force of intermediaries. This study attempts to supplement the research on the motivation of international students to study abroad from the perspective of students' subjectivity. Therefore, it is more valuable to focus on the motivation of 4 of the 6 interviewees who are more motivated by their own perfection and personal wishes. The selection of the four research subjects focused on Chinese students studying abroad for postgraduate studies but undergraduate in China. Because they have gone through the selection of the domestic college entrance examination, they ensure that the research subjects are familiar with Chinese academic elitism, and ideological maturity ensures the degree of individual dominance in deciding to study abroad. Three of the four interviewees are domestic undergraduates who are currently preparing to go abroad for graduate school, and the other is an alumnus who has graduated from the undergraduate program and joined the workforce. The first two interviewees were enrolled in a national university and the third was a local provincial university. All three interviewees who are currently studying at university have decided to study abroad, and the fourth interviewee has already joined the workforce. The interviews focused on the motivation of international students to study abroad and the current level of students' satisfaction with their own academic experience, to show the role of Chinese elitism and Western post-colonialism in international students of China and the differences in critical thinking within the group of international students of China.

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3. Result

3.1. The Interaction between Chinese Academic Elitism and Students' Self-Awareness

The study found that the four interviewers had different experiences of Chinese academic elitism and had different views on China's academic elitism, which also affected students' perceptions of themselves. As existing researchers have pointed out, academic elitism not only encompasses the various subtle practices and infrastructure arrangements in the system, but it also becomes an ideology that shapes human subjectivity in the education system to a greater or lesser extent [5].

3.1.1. The Self-Driving Effect of Chinese Academic Elitism on Students

Research shows that in China's academic elitism, the dominant logic of meritocracy leads to students who rely on their own ingenuity and hard work getting into top universities. It is precisely the mechanism of Chinese elitism in which symbolic privileges are distributed according to academic rank that drives students to strive for more elite resources. As Respondent A put it:

"There is nothing wrong with China's education system, and there is no education system that is more egalitarian than China's education system. Under China's education system, as long as you work hard, you will succeed. When I get excellent grades, I sigh that the hobby I gave up is worth it, and the sense of accomplishment of excellent grades makes me feel that it is self-discipline to give up useless things, and it is also a choice I have to make. Those who have not achieved success in their studies should reflect on whether they have made an effort instead of complaining about the system."

Respondent A has achieved a high academic rank through his efforts and serious learning attitude. At the same time, his excellent academic achievements have brought him recognition in self-shaping. Respondent A believes that under China's academic elitism, opportunities are equal, and through one's efforts, one can gain elite status and symbolic capital in society. It is the meritocracy logic of Chinese academic elitism that drives interviewer A to work towards a more top-notch academic field. As has been pointed out, it is the nature of education in China that reduces the disadvantages suffered by students from rural and/or lower socio-economic backgrounds and gives them a relatively level playing field, thus establishing a system of relatively merit-based admissions. Under China's academic elitism, schools and teachers have declared that this elite status is open, and the idea of meritocracy has also won the approval of students and parents [5].

3.1.2. Reflection on the Lack of Individualized Development of Middle School Students in China's Academic Elitism

Compared with the ideology of absolute identification with Chinese academic elitism, Chinese students' reflection and criticism of Chinese elitism are often based on their denial and dissatisfaction with their diversified development. Such students begin to critically recognize the flattening of Chinese elitism on students' personal development, and the limitations of evaluating students by academic achievement and school hierarchy. As noted in previous studies, mainstream schooling in China has been widely criticized for being test-oriented, and as a result, instilling a value system and self-worth that is centered on test scores and academic qualifications [6]. Under the intense pressure of test scores, Chinese students often do not have the time and opportunity to freely explore non-academic interests, and many students become pragmatists or utilitarians [6]. The study found that students' reflection on Chinese elitism began with dissatisfaction with their individuality, and this process was often accompanied by dissatisfaction and regret with the previous concept of "learning-centered". However, the criticism and denial of Chinese academic elitism by such students did not hurt themselves, on the contrary, students formed a critical self-consciousness and a broader sense of

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personal identity in the process, which played a positive role in self-development. As Respondent B described in the interview:

"I was expected to be an academic elite since I was a child, and I have the impression that I have always been working towards a more top-notch, more elite field. I'm not a particularly gifted person, and I feel anxious and negative because my grades are in the top five in my class and not the top three in my class. Later, I was admitted to TJU (a 985 university), but I would feel anxious about not being admitted to FDU, I was immersed in the pursuit of academic qualifications, and I seemed to have been making myself deserve more points. But this chase began to stop me from feeling accomplished, even painful. I felt like a "flat" figure, and I began to regret that I hadn't developed my passion....."

Respondent B, in his obsession with academic hierarchy and dissatisfaction with the degree of self-three-dimensionality, critically recognized the one-sided characteristics of China's academic elitism system, and there was no absolute obedience and negation, but more reflection and make-up for his lack of development in many aspects under China's academic elitism system. From an objective research perspective, in the process of interacting with Chinese academic elitism, Interviewer B realized the inadequacy of his previous self and formed a more expanded and superior self-identity.

3.1.3. The Personal Negation of Students Brought About by Chinese Academic Elitism

But the critique of Chinese elitism is not limited to students with higher academic hierarchies and a desire for self-individualism, it also emerges in another group of students in a less optimistic form. The common denominator of these students is that they have had the experience of high academic grades in their previous studies, but their grades have slightly regressed in the high-pressure environment of the domestic college entrance examination. Due to the experience of academic grade gaps, such students often fall into dissatisfaction with the status quo of academic grades or even complete denial of themselves, and frustration is the main characteristic of such students. It is worth noting, however, that this type of student does not completely reject Chinese academic elitism, but on the contrary, it has a stronger desire for a higher academic rank in Chinese academic elitism. It is precisely China's academic elitism that makes these students more aware of their competencies, and at the same time promotes the formation of more resilient personality traits in these students. This group of students is as Respondent C described himself in the interview:

"I had good grades until I went to high school, I liked who I was at that time, but when I went to high school my grades were mediocre and I didn't get compliments, and that was the darkest day I felt. In the end, I didn't get into a first-class university, just a good local reputation, I couldn't accept my mediocrity, the huge gap made me feel frustrated, and I felt inferior in front of the students of the top universities. Failure and denial made me have to bow my head, and a long period of low self-esteem made me start to hate the hierarchy between schools... This seems to be a subject that I have been having since I graduated, and I often ask myself why... But I'm not satisfied with the status quo and want to change all the time....."

Respondent C's critical perception of past academic grades is more focused on the denial of one's academic hierarchy than on the lack of self-individuality. It is precisely the hierarchical status in Chinese academic elitism and the desire for elite resource allocation that make interviewer C dissatisfied with the status quo and aggressive.

3.1.4. Rebellion Against Chinese Academic Elitism

In the above research results, although students have a critical understanding of Chinese academic elitism, they do not completely violate Chinese academic elitism. On the contrary, students are motivated to study abroad precisely because they accept their academic status and adherence to the

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meritocracy of Chinese elitism. Regrettably, some students have a rebellious attitude towards China's academic elitism. Some students blame the confusion in their studies and even their life plans on competition within China's academic elite system. Such students believe that it is the pursuit of academic hierarchy within China's academic elite system that forces them to compete for no purpose selflessly. Such students do not critically accept China's academic elitism, but they also fail to realize their adaptation to academic elitism and do not balance themselves with the system. As interviewee D said:

"Looking back on the time when I was admitted to graduate school, I think I had to be brave enough to be myself, do what I wanted to do, and overcome the shackles of worldly vision. But after two years of work, I only regret the decision I made, am I? I didn't seem to know what I wanted, I blamed it all on the meaningless "rolls", the Chinese students never seemed to come ashore, and I thought that by blindly rebelling against the constraints imposed on me by the system, I would find my way. But when I escaped and didn't imagine freedom...."

Respondent D did not recognize his acceptance of Chinese elitism itself, and the choices he made were more like a social rebellion. Respondent D blames his confusion on the endless pursuit of hierarchy within the system.

To sum up, Chinese academic elitism has a shaping effect on students' subjectivity, and students have formed a sense of self-subjectivity in self-affirmation, self-individualized cognition, and self-denial under the influence of Chinese academic elitism. While criticizing China's academic elitism, students are aware of their academic status in China's academic elitism system and recognize their adaptation to China's academic elitism system. The dominant logic of meritocracy in China's academic elitism drives students to study at more top-tier universities in the West.

3.2. The reflection of post-colonialism on students' motivation to study abroad

The study found that postcolonialism manifested itself in students as a desire for Western institutions of higher learning. Chinese students perceive Western higher education as more advanced, open, and liberal than China. Chinese students even believe that the Western education system can make up for the shortcomings of the Chinese education system. In the field of education, postcolonialism manifests itself in a dominant global imagination that "assumes the superiority and universality of Western knowledge, and therefore also the superiority and universality of Western education" [7]. In terms of students' ideology, Western institutions of higher learning are more advanced than those of China, and by learning language and more advanced knowledge in Western institutions of higher learning, one can gain recognition of a higher academic rank in China's academic elitism. It is the desire for hierarchical disparities in Chinese academic elitism and the idealization of Western education by postcolonialism that drives students to decide to study abroad. As previously studied, the desire for English is actually "a desire for the identity represented by a particular accent and variant of English; the desire for capital, power, and image associated with the English language; a desire for something beyond the doors opened by the English language" [7].

Interviewer A views Western higher education as a high-level academic field, and decides to study abroad through the driving role of Chinese academic elitism. Interviewer B argues that the Western education system is more open and diverse, which can make up for the lack of personal development in China's academic elitism. Interviewer C argues that obtaining academic qualifications from Western institutions of higher learning can alleviate the frustration within China's academic elitism and gain recognition of the higher academic status in China's academic elitism. Whatever the motivation of the three interviewers for choosing to study in the West, it was out of adherence to Chinese academic elitism and a desire for Western education.

In summary, drawing on the push-pull model of the academic community's motivation to study abroad, the desire for academic rank in Chinese academic elitism drives the decision to study abroad,

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and the over-idealization of Western education in postcolonialism drives students to study in the West. Together, they influence students to make decisions about studying abroad out of their initiative.

4. Discussion

Although this study shows Chinese students' critical understanding of Chinese academic elitism, it is not a complete denial of Chinese academic elitism. This study acknowledges that China's academic elitism is a more egalitarian and well-suited education system to China's national conditions. In the face of the increasingly complex international background of globalization, on the one hand, China must actively respond to the competition and flow of international higher education resources, and use international high-quality higher education resources to enhance its international competitiveness and influence, but it must also always be vigilant against the infiltration of cultural values and ideologies of Western countries, as well as the new colonial strategies of developed countries hidden in various transnational cooperation [8]. Therefore, it is the main task at present to strengthen the screening of Western ideologies and values among Chinese students, so that students can shape their ideologies and values based on Chinese culture [8]. Looking forward to the future development of education, to enable students to view the differences between Chinese and Western education more objectively, China should develop civic education that will help Chinese learners understand themselves, others, and the world in this unequal global structure [9]. At the same time, it combines civic education with elite education to cultivate the critical thinking of Chinese students while pursuing higher academic standards and academic quality.

China should enhance its academic status in international education and enhance its subjectivity through the practice of educational philosophy, education system, and education policy.

5. Conclusion

By studying the interaction between Chinese academic elitism and postcolonialism and students, this paper draws a more subjective motivation for studying abroad. By limiting the interviews to graduate students, this paper complements the previous academic research that roughly divides Chinese international students into two groups: pre-undergraduate study abroad and post-undergraduate study abroad, and increases the diversity of research. By expounding on the interaction between students and Chinese academic elitism, this paper shows the differences among Chinese students, especially the differences in critical thinking, and complements the previous academic research on the single critical thinking of Chinese students. It is hoped that the sample selection of future studies will pay more attention to the differences in geography, infrastructure, and education policies, to expand the capacity and diversity of the research sample in this field. It also calls on the academic community to pay more attention to the subjectivity of students' decision-making, supplement or adjust the existing teaching practices, and call on society to give more humanistic care to students in the academic elitist system.

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