

# Students' strategies for position-taking in transnational education

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The article illuminates the positions distributed and the strategies for position-taking which students pursue in order to transform or preserve their positions in a classroom with a transnational context where students have different national and international education experiences. Furthermore, how their positions are related to their aspirations for the future will be elucidated. Based on interviews with Danish and Chinese students enrolled at a Sino-Danish university situated in Beijing, the article identifies four different navigation strategies for position-taking in such a classroom as a field of struggle. The article discusses in depth how different student positions are led by the dispositions of having a certain nationality combined with international experiences/travel mobility. It will furthermore also discuss how the dispositions of national academic capital are related to students' ways of operating the positions.

**Keywords:** symbolic capital, transnational education, globalization, student strategies

## Introduction

While offshore national education providers, primarily English-speaking universities, have been operating for decades offering education programs outside their campus and nation-state of origin, new forms of transnational education<sup>1</sup> phenomena are emerging. It is new constellations of cofounded university cooperations across national borders like Sino-Danish Center in Beijing (SDC), and NYU-Shanghai in Shanghai, or Yale-NUS in Singapore. This trend has been evolving since the 2000s (Knight 2016). The emergence of new ways to provide higher education heralds transformation of organization of one of the central welfare institutions from a national to a transnational level. The purpose of this article is to illuminate how and due to what circumstances students with different national and international education experiences can achieve recognition for their educational performances at a university center based on transnational cooperation. This question will be pursued by using the notion of strategies for position-taking from Bourdieu in the context of transnational education, focusing on how students transform or preserve their positions by identifying how students in a transnational setting as a field of struggle are disposed to valorize and aspire to optimize different kinds of field-specific capital. Hence, this article is related to the theme

‘transformations and welfare organization’ in two aspects: 1) It sheds light on the educational processes when organization of education is transformed from a national to a transnational level, and 2) It uses the transformations as an analytical tool to construct the field of positions of transnational education, through focusing on how students valorize and aspire to optimize different kinds of field-specific capital in their negotiations of transforming or preserving their position.

### **Bourdieu used in studies of international student mobility and transnational education**

Recently, new notions have emerged in the reception of Bourdieu’s concept of capital within the research field of international student mobility and transnational education. These studies have extended the notion of capital, by adding terms such as “transnational”, “foreign” and “cosmopolitan” to the concept of capital. These concepts have emerged in order to investigate strategies for education across nation borders or in international schools with a highly global focus as strategies for (re)production of resources for preserving or transforming the social position in a global labor market. A notion such as “transnational general capital” is deployed in Blanck and Börjesson’s (2014) and Börjesson’s (2005) studies of transnational education strategies among Swedish students studying abroad and the relation between the social background of the students and their choice of (non)elite universities abroad. “Transnational cultural capital” has been utilized in Kenway and Koh’s (2013) exploration of how a Singaporean elite school carefully and successfully educates the future state nobility for Singapore’s field of power. Here the development of students’ transnational capital plays a major role. “Foreign cultural capital” has been Kim’s (2011) attempt to combine the notion of global positional competition with Bourdieu’s theory of cultural capital in the field of global education in his studies of Korean students’ motivations for studying at US graduate schools. Another attempt using the extended term is provided by Sin’s (2013) exploration of the perceived role of cultural capital, achieved through UK offshore education in Malaysia, in facilitating middle-class social mobility in Malaysia. “Cosmopolitan capital” has been developed in Weenink’s (2008) examination of the relation between Dutch parents’ perception of cosmopolitan competencies in their investment into their children’s internationalized education in the Netherlands and the parents’ own social position. Munk et al. apply the concept of cosmopolitan capital to explore the relation between social background and acquisition of an elite or non-elite higher education degree among Danes going abroad (Munk, Foged, and Mulvad 2012). It seems that Bourdieu’s concept of capital has been developed in order to capture the new transnational movements in education with a primary focus on how this transnational capital is perceived by students or parents as having an effect on the students’ future positions and how these strategies are related to their family’s current social position, and with less focus on the formation of the capital in transnational education practices. There is therefore a need to discuss the content of such capitals in practices,

how these kinds of capital in a transnational educational space are configured, their transformations and their convertibility rather than assuming that they are an automatic mechanism of transnational education. This will be discussed based upon the result of this study's analysis of the circumstances and the specific forms of cultural capital that become inscribed with symbolic value in transnational education in the cofounded university. For the sake of convenience, the term 'transnational capital' will be applied as an umbrella term for these specific forms of cultural capital in the article.

Firstly, the article will introduce a framework to discuss the practice of transnational education as a social space of educational struggles for recognition. Secondly, the analysis of the students' experiences of such educational practices will be presented through four different position-taking strategies. Thirdly, a theoretical discussion about the convertibility and transformations of these capitals into a future attractive social position in a (global) labor market will be unfolded.

### **The formation of the forms of specific capital**

To unfold the investigation into what forms of specific capital in a transnational educational space are at stake, the article is inspired by Erel's (2010) "anti-rucksack approach" in her studies on how migrants "*create new forms of cultural capital and validation*" in the new transnational setting with focus on formation of the specific form of capital used in position-taking. Erel argues that the purpose of her research is to identify "these forms of *specific capital*" (Bourdieu and Wacquant 2007: 108, emphasis in original. Quoted in Erel 2010), as according to Bourdieu's notion of capital, the relationship between field and capital is based on people entering the field by their certain formation of forms and volumes of different capitals. She reasons that her approach goes beyond the "rucksack approach", as the rucksack approach in migration research focuses on how the cultural capital from the country of origin fits in the country of residence. The approach is criticized by Erel as neglecting that the assessment of the cultural value of migrants' cultural resources is not neutral, seeing that the measures of cultural capital are formed by policy productions of national economic interest and protectionist professional policies (Erel 2010). Thus the "rucksack approach" is restricted by its reliance on "methodological nationalism". By "methodological nationalism" Erel is referring to the approach as having a tendency to examine social issues by the interests of the nation-state, e.g. focusing on success from an ethnocentric point of view rather than the migrants' own measurement of success (Erel 2010: 646). For my case of study, the education institution should be viewed as a transnational rather than a national space, as it is an education cooperation between two nation-states represented by their universities, and therefore all the students will be viewed as migrating to a new space where performances of success will not necessarily be assessed according to the interests of one nation-state. However, as we will see through the analysis, the students' resources are not as-

essed neutrally in this transnational space, and that is one of the focuses of this investigation.

### **SDC as social space: recognition in a transnational classroom**

To capture the forms of specific capital at stake in a transnational educational space, the study will look at the micro dynamics in a pedagogical institution with transnational context. This can be done by adding the conceptualization of the classroom as a social space to the anti-rucksack approach, inspired by Buchardt's (2014) work with Bourdieu's sociology. It means to identify how and which student positions gain recognition or non-recognition by teachers and students in this kind of educational practice. The pedagogical institution is hence viewed as a social space of educational struggles for recognition (Bourdieu and Passeron 2000), where the classroom is: "as an arena for social classification and distribution" (Buchardt 2012: 45). In this strategy, we are able to focus on how and which (groups of) students' strategies in the classroom are subject to recognition or non-recognition by means of competing struggles, as the social space is the configuration of systems of relations between social groups (Broady 2003). The notion of social space is hence the backdrop of this study. The operational tools to capture the struggles in the configuration are primarily the concepts of strategy and position-taking. However, this cannot be understood without the concept of capital and habitus.

Capitals are expressions of the types of symbolic and material resources recognized within the field. Bourdieu argues: "*A capital does not exist and function except in relation to a field. (...) As a space of potential and active forces, the field is also a field of struggles aimed at preserving or transforming the configuration of these forces*" (Bourdieu and Wacquant 2007: 101, emphasis in original). Bourdieu distinguishes between different kinds of capital: cultural capital (cultivated language and confidence in the so-called high culture, skills which are first and foremost achievable within elite schools in France), social capital (bond of kinship, friendship) and economic capital (material resources and familiarity with the economic rules of the game) and the more field-specific capital such as education capital and academic capital (Broady 2003). A form of capital that is different from the above mentioned is the *symbolic capital*. It is the capital which the social group acknowledges as valuable as its members ascribe significance to it. The symbolic capital can only exist under the conditions of correspondence between objective structures and systems of dispositions (Broady 2003). Therefore, one might argue that the analysis deploys the concept of field analytically as a framework to construct the field of transnational education. The inquiry here is to dig deeper into how students in a transnational setting as a field of struggle valorize and aspire to optimize different kinds of field-specific capital. In that sense, by searching for the field-specific capital the article is an attempt to construct what the field of transnational education looks like rather than explain why it looks like

that through the analysis of the relationship between the dispositional and the relational.

### **Strategies for position-taking in struggles for recognition**

To elucidate how the specific symbolic capital is distributed in the field of the SDC at the moment in question we can look at what positions are possible and for what students (Bourdieu 1993: 183). This means that the analysis will search for how students' ways of handling the challenges correspond with the institutional (non)recognition of resources they bring with them. In other words, how the objective prospects are converted to possible positions for students to occupy. This can be done by searching for what vocations, aspirations and expectations are at stake, and how these are recognizable and non-recognizable by those students' different dispositions. The objective prospects encrypted in the field at a specific moment can only be converted to be operative through vocations, aspirations and expectations, i.e. if they are viewed and appreciated by categories of perception and appreciation which constitute a habitus<sup>2</sup> (Bourdieu 1993: 63–64). The link between habitus and action is mediated by what Bourdieu calls “strategy” (Bourdieu 1977). In this study, the construction of the students' habitus will not be in operation, as the notion is included in the theoretical framing in order to understand the concept of strategy and position-taking which is the main analytical focus here.

Strategy is the process of the individual's or a group's conscious or unconscious attempts to preserve or transform their position. Strategy is not necessarily an intentional or rational calculation (Broady 2003; Bourdieu 1977), viewing that the embodiment of the system of dispositions is not necessarily intentional, as Bourdieu argues that cultural capital can be obtained quite unconsciously (Bourdieu 1986). However, Bourdieu acknowledges that social agents are not passive creatures determined solely by external forces, but rather skillful beings who actively create the social reality through categories of perception, appreciation and action in the field of competition between the categories of perception, appreciation and action as embodied sediments (Wacquant 2011). Therefore, in general the students as the object of the investigation are viewed as having relational positions that can be preserved or transformed to other positions depending on the strategy they pursue. The positions are dynamic and not fixed, and in order to see “what each of the positions is at each moment, one still has to understand how those who occupy them have been formed and, more precisely, the shaping of the dispositions which help to lead them to these positions and to define their way of operating within them and staying in them” (Bourdieu 1993: 63–64). In that way, the position-taking in SDC classrooms is the “space of creative works” (Bourdieu 1993: 39). However, it is not a completely endless creativity. The classroom with transnational context is in this study hence viewed as a micro cosmos of position-taking. So to illustrate how the students struggle to occupy a *position* in the classroom in relation to what is perceived as appropriate and how that position is me-

diated by dispositions constituting their habitus is to map the field of position-taking (as a product of a continuous conflict) (Buchardt 2014). The article will hence look into how the specific forms of capital used in position-taking in a classroom of students with different national and international education experiences are produced by posing the following analytical questions to the empirical material: What position(s) are distributed among students, and what strategies do they employ to transform or maintain the positions? How can their current position(s) and the capitals they seek to achieve be connected with their aspirations for the future after graduation? And furthermore, do they link these capitals to a national field of education and labor market, or do they exceed beyond the national fields? Thus the research questions seek to elucidate the field-specific capital through how the students themselves assess their challenges and success in their study experiences (in this kind of institution).

### **Method and the empirical material**

The study is based on students' retrospective verbal explanations of the process of their active attempts to preserve or transform their position in the transnational classroom<sup>3</sup>. Qualitative interviews with 15 students (Danish and Chinese) about their experiences of study challenges at the Sino-Danish Center for Education and Research (SDC) and their aspirations for the future make up the basis of the analysis. SDC is a newly emerged university center situated in Beijing, jointly run by Chinese and Danish universities. It provides seven master programs where both faculty and students consist of Chinese and Danes. This kind of interview is suitable to unfold multi-faceted and often contrasting articulations of experiences and frames of orientation and interpretation. An interview shall be viewed as a social meeting between the interviewer and the informant, where the topic for the conversation is prearranged, and the purpose is to produce the narrative about the informants' reality and the way she or he ascribes meaning to it (Staunæs and Søndergaard 2005). The interviews were conducted in the summer of 2013 in Beijing and summer of 2014 in Copenhagen, at the time when the students were finishing their last exam of their first year, participating in summer school courses or writing their master thesis. I had the chance to interview three of the students twice, in their first and second year. These interviews are the preliminary empirical material for my PhD project. The students' experiences expressed through the interviews will be seen as a way to capture the forms of transnational capital and validation which are being utilized/produced in transnational education programs across national institutions.

### **The differentiated attempts for legitimate positions**

The following analysis illustrates through the four examples (Ning, Guohai, Anna and Niels<sup>4</sup>) how students experience the transformations of their own positions at the SDC. At first glance, there seems to be only two distinct positions at stake at the SDC. Those are the positions of dominance that appear to be held by the Dan-

ish students (the students perceived to exhibit legitimate behavior), whereas the dominated positions are inhabited by the Chinese students (the students perceived to exhibit behavior that needs to be adjusted). This observation is based on how Chinese students in the interviews expressed the need to transform their way of study in order to handle the struggles under their education program, while the Danish students expressed that the way to handle the struggles is by convincing the other students to transform their educational practices. However, the analysis finds more nuances than those two distinct and contrasting positions as four different routes for navigation toward legitimate positions through varied strategies can be identified. Thus, the analysis provides an illustration of four different navigation strategies through the link between the perception of the transformations of positions and the transformations of students' cultural capital in the position-taking. It shows two strategies within the positions that appear to be dominated (represented by Ning and Guohai) and two strategies within the positions with the appearance of dominance (represented by Anna and Niels). When looking at the differentiated ways of operating the dominated and dominating positions the ways of operating the positions can be related to the students' varied degrees of national academic capital. For the dominated positions, it can be observed that: Ning has less space for navigating the dominated position than Guohai. At the same time it is seen that Ning does not value herself as a "sharp" student the same way Guohai does. For the dominating positions, it is quite clear that the struggles to obtain recognition are harder for Niels than for Anna. This shows that the creative space for position-taking is smaller for Niels than for her. At the same time academic confidence differs between them as Anna seems to be rather confident and natural about her own academic level, whereas Niels is surprised that he is doing better. This illustrates that the degree of national academic capital of the dispositions defines the students' way of maneuvering and transforming the positions. Thus the students' degree of achievement of transnational capital is dependent on the national academic capital.

The achievement of the transnational capital becomes more visible when connecting the differentiated positions with the future career wishes and the (un)certainly of the convertibility of the capital obtained at the SDC. In that way those two who occupy dominating positions are more certain about the convertibility of the capital obtained at the SDC to a desirable social position in a global labor market with a national twist. The twist becomes apparent when both Niels and Anna specifically mention that they are also interested in Danish companies and organizations operating in China and Asia. However, Guohai with a dominated position is also striving for future work in a global market. He is certain that the capital he has achieved at the SDC can help him, he is just not sure how. Ning, on the other hand, with the most dominated position does not strive towards a global labor market at all; Ning rather refers to a national labor market, where she is quite unsure about the convertibility of the capital obtained at the SDC. These differentiated positions' aspirations for working in a global labor market can also

be related to the students' differentiated international mobility, as the two students who possess the dominating position are very experienced international travelers both as leisure and in a professional perspective, whereas the students who occupy a dominated position have no experiences of transnational mobility. The embodied capitals which are symbolically more highly valued are Danish and have the behavior of the internationalized body/competitor. These capitals are used in the discussions, as Niels and Anna (the dominating positions) are used to being in an international setting, and therefore are good at decoding the differences and taking the initiative to bring up the important discussions in order to avoid misunderstandings. These capitals are what Ning and Guohai are interested in learning. This shows that transnational capital is not an automatic mechanism for education with a transnational context, but rather that the degree of transnational capital that can be achieved in such an educational setting depends on the students' disposition for position-taking strategies via their national academic capital and transnational mobility.

These transformations of positions should not be viewed as representing all the positions that seem available to the students at the SDC, nor as fixed routes for specific transformation of positions. Rather, they should be seen as four analytic nodal navigation routes for legitimated positions, which can show us how the possible positions and how students handle the challenges correspond. Thereby how the objective prospects are converted to possible positions for students to occupy where the nuances of the processes of (non)recognition in the transnational educational field become visible.

### **Navigating by accepting the position**

Ning is a master student at the end of her second semester in the program "Water and Environment". These two semesters are her first experience with what she calls "international education and experiences". She holds a Bachelor degree in "Environmental Engineering" from Sichuan University in China. She describes herself as having always been a hardworking student, but not necessarily the smartest one. However, she also says that her hard work pays off most of the time. Her motivation for studying this particular major was her drive to "do something" about river pollution in China. She has observed problems with river pollution in her own village, where there is no water treatment plant, and where the sewage runs directly into the river. She did not choose to study at the SDC as her first priority; she applied for an environment engineering program at The University of Chinese Academy of Sciences (*UCAS*) (The Chinese partner of SDC). She got SDC's master program "Water and Environment" recommended by her supervisor at UCAS. After having thought about SDC for a while, she agreed to apply for it. She thought it might be a good opportunity, allowing her to combine education with improving her English skills, and not least learning international communication and foreign Western cultural knowledge. Ning experienced the first year at the SDC as very challenging. However, she made huge progress during that year,



so she did not find the studies as difficult as in the beginning. Many of the study challenges at the SDC in the beginning were in her opinion caused by the big differences between the Chinese and Danish students' ways of doing things as far as education goes. It was not only the struggles of differences but also the misunderstandings between different nationalities that emerged in-between.

However, after one year these differences and misunderstandings have almost disappeared. In her view, it is because both parties are willing to accept the differences and have tried to do things on each other's terms. She emphasizes that this has made her stronger as a person and less shy, which means that she has learned to be able to speak up for herself. She has learned these abilities by doing what is expected in the classroom of the SDC and by following what she sees her Danish classmates do. She says this is an important part of studying at the SDC, being willing to accept different ways of doing education and adopting new study 'attitudes' which have been necessary for her. She appreciates the study environment at the SDC highly as she assesses that she has developed in positive ways, surprising even herself. However, even though she experiences that she has grown stronger personally, and become more aware of how to pursue good results in her studies at the SDC, she also expresses some concerns. She is very uncertain whether they will be useful for her future career. She puts it thus:

Mmm, I think some, but this is a bit different from Chinese traditional culture, we are kind of one step back. We are kind of thinking more about if someone will feel embarrassed. I don't know what it will be, like good or bad to do, but after this time in SDC, I think right now, it will be good to speak out, but in the real world, like in the Chinese company, I don't know what the situation will be.

Ning imagines that her future career will be within the borders of China or at a Chinese company based on Chinese cultural practices. She values the abilities of speaking up greatly and connects them to Danish/Western culture in contrast to Chinese culture. In her comparison, she assesses that the 'Danish' skills she learned at the SDC do not fit into Chinese culture, as Chinese culture is one step behind (Western culture). She implicitly uses an evolutionary concept to compare what she identifies as cultural practices. Ning expresses some ambivalence: She has now learned skills which are one step ahead, but she is still bound by the borders of the nation-state, so even if those skills are recognized in the transnational space of the SDC as cultural capital with high symbolic value, it is not certain that they will be useful. That is what makes her unsure as to whether these very positive effects of studying at the SDC and the abilities that are good to have right now will be the skills she needs in the future.

Ning's experiences demonstrate a dominated student position at the SDC, as she is the one who needs to accept other ways of doing education and to adopt different expectations of educational behavior. In the beginning, Ning experiences

that her ways of practicing education are insufficient and must be adjusted to fit in the transnational educational space of the SDC. In that way, her practices are not acknowledged as useful capital. The difficult challenges she had in the beginning display that the processes of adaptation to the new set of recognized resources are not quite peaceful. After one year, Ning seems to be very aware of what is expected of her at the SDC, and how she will work toward fulfilling the expectations – even though she is not sure that these achievements will be convertible. In this she is not only renouncing her own academic practices (as they are not recognized as capital), but she strategizes to obtain recognition by aspiring to the valued capital at the SDC, i.e. academic resources attached to being and acting like a Dane. Her talk about how the practice of Chinese culture is seen as “one step behind” shows that she is becoming fully transformed according to the expectations of what she perceives as valuable at the SDC. However, when we talk about the future, she refers to a labor market within a national field where the convertibility of these capitals toward a desirable social position in a national context seems to be difficult and uncertain for her. Hence Ning’s creativity in her position-taking appears to be quite limited. It seems that the objective prospects (becoming acknowledged as a good student by adopting ‘Danish’ behavior and gaining an attractive social position in the labor market) encoded in the SDC at the moment somehow become little operative for Ning. She is what seems to be in the process of gaining cultural capital ascribed with the symbolic value of the SDC by giving up the value of her own resources, but the convertibility of these capitals into a desirable future position seems uncertain. Hence, Ning is accumulating a sort of SDC currency which is without value outside of the SDC.

### **The selective adaptive path**

Guohai is a master student at the end of his second semester in “Chemical and Biochemical Engineering”. He has a Bachelor degree in “Material Chemistry” from Harbin Engineering University in China. Guohai had also been recommended to apply at the SDC by his supervisor, although unlike Ning, Guohai did not think a lot or for very long about the application. He was just happy about the international opportunity, and “felt that it was refreshing, and wanted to have a taste of foreign pedagogy and did not think there should be a specific purpose with it.” However, after one year he says that the refreshing part is long gone. It was already gone after the first semester. He expresses that there are still some differences in the ways that students of different nationalities work. He suggests that the refreshing part is perhaps gone because they have gotten used to the differences. He says that in the beginning it was quite hard to adjust, as for many years he was used to Chinese ways of schooling, and then suddenly with the SDC he encountered some new pedagogy, but along the road he thought he must challenge himself. A feeling of depreciation of his academic resources prevailed throughout the year. He said that before arriving at the SDC, they (the Chinese students in his class) all felt like sharp top students (one of a chosen few), scoring

high in Gaokao [Chinese university entrance exam] and achieving a Bachelor degree with good results and then managing to pass the test to enroll at a master program in connection with a well-recognized research institute in China. But after beginning his studies at the SDC he and his Chinese co-students had to revise their positions, as he felt there were even sharper people here. Guohai says: “You must degrade yourself and look at the others, it is not enough that your supervisor thinks that you are a sharp student. In that way you can get inspired”.

Even though Guohai felt a degradation of his position, he still sees his situation at the SDC as a positive learning situation, allowing him to get inspiration from the best co-students. Guohai says the very special influence of this education program is that it is an education program which requires one to change personally to become an innovative thinker. The reason is that the Chinese students are only trained in predetermined ways of and perspectives for thinking, and that makes it harder to think innovatively. However, if they spend enough time with a Danish student, they might gain a different perspective on the problems. That is what he thinks will create the innovative ways of thinking.

Guohai also mentions that the SDC degree is more important in relation to future international career opportunities, as right now in China there are a lot students going abroad for foreign degrees. Guohai says it is likely that he will apply for a PhD in China if there is an opportunity and through there go on exchange in a foreign country. The degree from the SDC will make the application for exchange easier. He sees himself working in China in the future. Nevertheless, if he could choose freely, he would choose to work outside China. He sees himself as a person who likes to travel to other countries, working in international teams and establishing contact to foreigners. All this can help his career in the long run.

Guohai's position is one that fully realizes the devaluation of his own resources. Guohai had from the beginning expected that there would be differences between the students with different national educational background, as he was motivated by the foreign pedagogy and interested in another form of education. However, he was somewhat surprised at the differing levels of student sharpness. This led him to revise his position within the classroom of the SDC. Guohai finds his explanation of the devaluation through his general critique of education in China, as Chinese education does not embrace innovative thoughts. And innovative thinking is a requirement at the SDC. Unlike Ning, Guohai experiences that his resources were in some degree recognized as capital, although they were just not strong enough. In Guohai's critique of Chinese education in general, the distinction between Chinese and Western/Danish practices similar to Ning's can be found. However, Guohai is not as convinced as Ning that the Chinese practices are one step behind. Rather, he points to what needs to be implemented in Chinese education, elements like innovative thinking. In that way, Guohai utilizes a strategy which does not force him to renounce his resources but rather enable him to use his energy to become even sharper by adding elements to the resources. Guohai says with some certainty that the innovative personality he is developing at the

SDC and the SDC degree will help him in his future international career. He is thus referring to a labor market within an international field where he is quite sure that the newly embodied (innovative thinking) and institutionalized capital (SDC degree) will be valuable, but is not quite certain how: It will depend on the opportunities that come up.

Guohai displays that even though he also holds a dominated position, his is more flexible with no need for total adaptation to the pursued dominant and legitimated behavior of students at the SDC. The space of creative work for Guohai is not quite as limited as Ning's, as in his strategy for position-taking he only strives for a part of the cultural capital which is highly symbolically valued at the SDC as an additive resource. Nevertheless, Guohai's position still appears as dominated (with devaluation), even though the aspiration and expectation at the SDC is recognizable to Guohai. However, the prospects become more operative for Guohai than for Ning, as only some selective elements of the prospect are appreciated by Guohai's habitus – his strategy will not enable him to achieve the symbolic capital fully. This is strategically different than Ning, as he is able to select some part of the symbolic capital. In his perception, however, he will not be disposed to convert these elements of symbolic capital of the SDC entirely into a desirable future position – without inflation. For Guohai the earning of the currency at the SDC is earning a currency with inflation, but at the same time it is a more highly valued currency compared to the solely national (Chinese) one. Hence it seems that the objective prospects encrypted in the SDC converted to a possible position for Guohai are not the same as Ning's.

### **The missionary way**

Niels is a master student at the beginning of his fourth semester at the program "Public Management and Social Development". He holds a Bachelor degree in "Asian Studies" from Copenhagen Business School (CBS). Niels was very excited about applying for the program, as he saw the great opportunity to build upon his knowledge from previous work and study experiences in China in combination with learning about issues regarding the social welfare state in a comparative aspect. In contrast to Ning and Guohai, Niels has a lot of experience studying and working in international contexts. However, in Niels' description of the SDC, he also refers to the challenges of working cross-nationally, even though he thought that he was quite well-prepared. About the study environment at the SDC, he says:

Niels: The collaboration with the Chinese students has been challenging, but I would not say that one should adjust oneself, to say that they work differently in group work and stuff like that, the level was just not the same. The scholarly level was not super overwhelming, we had expected that we would be rolled out by the Chinese students, you see. But in general they were at a bit lower level than the Danish students. Also they had maybe some difficulty to think critically. We had difficulties with getting them used to, at many points, to pose

critical questions about what we're supposed to do in our studies. But also generally, when you discuss with them, ehm we discussed what we think the Chinese Government is doing wrong in different policies. And it's difficult for them to see criticism as something positive; they take it personally and see it as a personal attack...After half a year, when we brought up these issues, then I had to explain to them the whole practice of critique you have in Denmark, it's not particularly because we have something against China...It's not because they are not critical in China, of course, they are.

JHL: How did they find the explanation?

Niels: They could actually see that it was reasonable... after you had that debate – on a meta-level, the way to do it, they could see the reason for it.

Niels experiences that his academic level is valued higher than what he expected, as he compares himself with Chinese students and assesses that their academic level is lower than he had assumed. In Niels' perception it is because the Chinese students do not sufficiently practice critique; what he believes to be at the core of academic practice. For him the difficulties in working with Chinese students have been solved when he as representing the Danish party has convinced the Chinese students of the importance of critique in academic practices. In that way Niels is experiencing that the value of his academic skills increases – in contrast to what Guohai experiences. Niels explains that the things he has learned at the SDC only constitute part of acquiring a degree in China; as he points out, it is not only about what one learns in the classroom, but also those things which are outside: “the international experiences of living in a foreign country, which is very much tacit knowledge”. This builds on his early experiences of living in a foreign country. With the degree from the SDC, Niels imagines with some confidence himself a future career at the state institutional level. He mentions two specific places he could work, the Danish Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Asian Development Bank. For Niels, the experiences at the SDC make him even more certain of what he wants in his future career, he is still striving to realize the wishes for the future that he had from the beginning of his studies at the SDC.

Through Niels' experiences a position is illustrated which has risen out of the value of his resources and recognition of the skills as symbolic capital and through that becomes a dominating position. This transformation surprised Niels, but it seems to empower his academic self-confidence. The higher position seems to have been consolidated after half a year. The tense struggles Niels had to go through testify that this position is not naturally given from the beginning at the SDC, but is rather a position which is won through many battles. In the discussions Niels is stubborn and keeps on arguing that the (Danish) academic practices as the only true ones should be maintained and practiced at the SDC. The fact that it seems to work out that way indicates that the prospects of the objective structures at the SDC support this rise of his position. Niels' experiences display that his resources are being recognized, as he wins the discussions and neither has to

adjust himself to the new situation nor think that the group work is completely different than what he is used to in his country of origin. This strategy – which can be characterized as a missionary one – shows the assumption that there is only one true scientific educational practice through which the world can be understood and studied. In Niels' experiences he presumes that all Danish students share his beliefs, and that all Chinese students share another, which calls for conversion. The success of his conversion of the Chinese students shows that Niels is rewarded for his tenacious striving. This increased recognition of his capital makes him even surer that he will achieve his desired future career. This appears to reinforce Niels' belief in a future career in an international setting; Niels comes to occupy a position which makes him quite confident that the capital he achieves at the SDC can be converted to an attractive social position both in a global and a national labor market. In this way Niels is earning a currency at the SDC with a high value of convertibility both in and outside the SDC. Hence the space of Niels' creativity in his position-taking seems to be broad, as he appeared on the scene with the embodied capital (being Danish and having the behavior of the internationalized body/competitor) which become symbolic capital. The objective prospects presented at the SDC at the moment become quite operational for Niels, as the prospects are progressively absorbed by Niels' habitus. The progression towards what is valued can be tracked in the increasing acknowledgement that Niels gains.

### **The doubly dominant position**

Anna is a master student at the end of her fourth semester in the program “Public Management and Social Development”. Anna has a Bachelor degree in Political Science from the University of Copenhagen in Denmark. Her motivation for applying for the program at the SDC was partly her “appetite for the world” and partly the focus on the relationship between the public and private sectors in the studies. She has been “out in world” [internship at the Danish Embassy in Kenya] and came home again, but had the feeling that she could not settle down in Denmark again. At that time she had just started her third semester of the master program in Political Science, but she felt she had to ‘go out’ again. The SDC program seemed interesting to her, as the program was based in a foreign country. She says that traveling to places where the world is strange and different is what gives her energy. She seems quite certain that she will be challenged, but also that she will do well in a new study program in a foreign country. She explains that she is used to traveling. Already in her childhood she would travel a lot with her parents and also lived with them in Africa.

Unlike those other three students, the main challenges Anna experiences in studying at the SDC are primarily based on the interpretation process for understanding the academic level at the SDC. She underlines that it took some time before she figured out the academic level. However, she emphasizes that as op-

posed to other students, she does not find the academic level lower compared to a Danish national master program. According to Anna,

[i]t is just another kind of academic level. I have been used to going really deep into the heavy texts and discussing small details, at the SDC we discuss the issue with some superficiality, but on the other hand we get a more differentiated perspective on things, I think if you reflect upon that, then you actually gain more towards the transition from being at a university study program to the life of profession after graduation.

Anna also underlines that she is not like those Danish students who dropped out, as they are frustrated and find the level too low. She thinks these Danish students are a bit 'spoiled' as they cannot handle that they are learning something other than what they expected and fear wasting their time in China. Although Anna primarily focuses on challenges in the content of the educational program, she also mentions that there have been struggles of working cross-nationally. In her perception, the requirements at the SDC are rather based on 'Danish education methods' such as formulating a critical research question for the assignments, and it takes time for Chinese students to get used to it. However, she has learned that she must be careful what she says to the Chinese students, as they have their pride of nationality. These issues should in her opinion be solved by dialogue and constructive methods, and not by just telling the Chinese students "that they just have to learn how the Danes work". Anna had good experiences working across nationalities through dialogue and discussion of what good scientific methods are, and at the same time she quite often has to remind the Chinese students of the specific perspective through which their performance will be evaluated. Anna feels that the ways the master program has influenced her future is by making her profile even more international. She says that she has never imagined that it would be difficult to get an international profile, but right now, it makes her worry whether she has so much of an international profile that she cannot get rid of it again. Additionally, through the educational program she has concentrated on environmental issues related to China, so the jobs she wishes for the future are now more or less oriented towards China. She would like to either work in Danish organizations that promote Danish industry and commerce in China or small organizations which pop up within the field of environmental solutions. Anna says that she is very aware that these kinds of job positions are not necessarily announced, and her plan is to send unsolicited applications and sort of invent her own position. She assesses that it will be challenging to find a desired position with her profile, but not impossible.

Anna's experiences illustrate a characterization of another and different (from Niels') dominant position that appears in the transnational space of the SDC. With Anna we also see a position which deals with struggles in the beginning of the studies, but not as tensely as the other three students. The way Anna describes

how she overcomes the challenges with the academic level at the SDC is by reflecting on the current learning content and context. Thereby she readjusts her expectations to the studies and sets up different learning goals for herself. In her comparison with the other Danish students who dropped out she is implying that the readjustment is an important skill to have in a transnational setting. Along with the readjustment Anna assesses her own position as the good/sharp student position (in a national educational setting) to be the same or once again recreated; she just had to adjust her expectations to the studies. This is possible as her resources are recognized as valuable capital. With the acknowledgement of Anna's resources through her practice of 'ways of Danish education', Anna is apparently very conscious that the recognized educational methods at the SDC seem to be perceived as Danish. This demonstrates a position which is quite reflexive about the resources she brought with her and how they work with the mechanism of recognition at the SDC. However, Anna with her awareness of the mechanisms of the system of recognition chooses to exercise the educational practice differently than Niels. Her strategy to preserve and maintain her dominant position is to have an open mind and invite to dialogue and discussion about the methods they practice at the SDC, at the same time having very diplomatic ways to persuade her co-students that the valued ways of doing education are connected to the Danish way. Although she talks in terms of dialogue and constructive methods, she did not have to change her attitude or strive for utterly different education goals like Ning and Guohai. In that way her position at the SDC from the beginning seems to be a more subtle/implicit dominant position, as her way of negotiating seems to be natural and not as difficult and highly tense as that of Niels.

In Anna's experiences, a strategy towards the Chinese students but also towards the Danish students is identified. The strategy towards the Danish students is to critique those Danish students who dropped out and implicitly criticize those Danish students who are too harsh in their methods when working with Chinese students. In that way Anna occupies a 'doubly dominant' position as she describes herself as distinct from both the Chinese and the other Danish students. The space for creative work in her position-taking is doubled. Anna has never doubted that an international profile would be attainable. However, the recognition she gets at the SDC appears to affect her future dreams with even more focus on getting a career in an international arena. She refers to her international embodied experiences (accumulated since her childhood) as an incentive, as these have given her a drive for exploring the strange/unfamiliarity of the world. This demonstrates that Anna maintains a position which makes her even more certain that the capital she is gaining at the SDC can be converted to a desired and attractive social position in a global labor market. The currency/symbolic capital seems to be paying off in a global labor market.



## Discussion

The analysis of this study provides a nuanced view of the presumption of the mentioned studies within the field; the presumption being that the field-specific capital understood as transnational capital gained in transnational education is automatically convertible to an attractive social position, whether in a national or a global labor market. The analytical findings illustrated that the convertibility of transnational capital is not perceived by all students as a definite mechanism of transnational education, as it is related to how the students are in a position to gain (non)recognition in a transnational space of education. Furthermore, the analysis shows that the national academic capital becomes one of the field-specific capitals deployed in struggles for transnational capital. It is also important to point out that the findings indicate that the transnational cultural capital's convertibility may not only be related to the national field of power like the studies would have it (Sin 2013; Börjesson 2005; Kim 2011), nor one transnational field of power shaping a transnational class formation the way Weiss' studies (2005) suggest. This makes the construction of the field of transnational education in relation to other social fields even more complex, as a sufficient work of construction of the field will require a mapping of the different national fields of power which are at stake in order to understand the dispositions of the agents. Furthermore, we would need a mapping of how the specific national fields of power are related to each other in order to grasp why the Danish (Western) educational values are dominant and Danish dispositions appear to be preferable in the transnational classroom, when the idea of cooperation and exchange is based on equal values. Another interesting question for further exploration in relation to the construction of the field of transnational education is whether the capitals recognized can be viewed as an expression of the winning national policy productions of national economic interest in their investment in education and professional training. However, using the concept of the field applied as framing and theoretical ground has given analytic insight into how students in a transnational setting as a field of struggle valorize and aspire to optimize different kinds of field-specific capital. In that sense, i.e. by searching for the field-specific capital, the article attempts to construct what the field of transnational education looks like, whereas an attempt to explain why will require an analysis of the homologies between the specific capitals in the field of transnational education and the fields of power.

## Conclusion

Through the four position-taking strategies, two processes have been identified: one about transformations of students' positions in the (non)recognition processes in the current space of the SDC and one about the perception of convertibility of the gained (non)recognition. It illuminates that the preferred and recognized capitals at the SDC are connected to imaginations of the Danish ways of practicing education in combination with the students' degree of embodied internationalized capital. And thereby the students with a high degree of "Danish behavior" and

international experiences seem to be preferred and have the possibility of being one step ahead when evaluating their academic performance. This becomes obvious by the two similar positions illustrated; two which are dominated as they are seen as Chinese and only national behavior, and two positions which are dominant as they are associated with Danish and international behavior. The different positions express how the specific capital of having Danish-ness and international-ness becomes cultural capital inscribed with symbolic value distributed in the field. The experiences thus show that the disposition of having a certain nationality in combination with international experiences/travel mobility leads certain students to these different positions. However, it is the dispositions and their degree of national academic capital that define the students' way of transforming the positions.

Jin Hui Li, Ph.D. student, Department of Learning and Philosophy, Aalborg University

## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> Transnational education (TNE) is understood as the mobility of education programs and providers between countries. This includes the traditional form of TNE as twinning programs and international branch campuses, newer forms such as joint/double/multiple degree programs, and a more recent form, namely cofounded new universities by two or more universities from different countries (Knight 2016). It is the latter form of TNE that this article will explore; SDC will be the case for the study.
- <sup>2</sup> Habitus is the result of social experiences, collective memory, and ways of behaving and thinking, which is incorporated in the agent's body and senses as indicators of distinction (Broady 2003; Bourdieu 1977). Habitus is the embodied state of cultural capital. Cultural capital appears in three states: embodied, institutionalized and objectified (Bourdieu 1986). It is a system of durable, transposable dispositions which allows the agent to act, think and orientate in the social world (Bourdieu 1977).
- <sup>3</sup> Only applying interviews to map the field of positions can have some analytical limitations as it only give access to the verbalised reflections of the actors' actions and not the embodied actions. However the interviews can give insight in how the students in this transnational setting is creating new forms of cultural capital and validation (cf. Erel 2010), which is the main focus here.
- <sup>4</sup> I use pseudonyms to protect the anonymity of the informants.

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