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# A qualitative exploration of the socioeconomic status and motivations of Chinese students in Hungary

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**Abstract**

Surprisingly little research has been conducted on Chinese students in Hungary, despite their growing number. Education has gradually become a crucial element in attaining higher socioeconomic status, so it is vital to understand such students' socioeconomic backgrounds and motivation for studying in Central Eastern Europe. Applying cultural mobility theory, this article explores students' family backgrounds and motivations for pursuing tertiary education in Hungary. Twenty-six narrative interviews were conducted and analysed using grounded theory method. The results indicate that three important factors influenced lower-middle-class Chinese students' choices to study in Hungary: the constraints of reality, educational aspirations, and a desire for self-expression. Working-class or lower-middle-class families were required to make compromises for their children to study abroad because their financial means limited the opportunity for international study. Therefore, education in a relatively low-cost country like Hungary became an option. This research contributes to current theories of educational mobility by offering fresh understandings about students with a lower-middle class SES, the influx of working-class Chinese students into Hungary, as well as the relationship between upward social mobility and studying internationally. The recommendations for policymakers in China and Hungary made in this paper enable the development of practicable strategies for enhancing learning environments, producing positive educational outcomes, fostering equitable education systems, and ameliorating the impact of a lower SES background on educational and social mobility.

**Keywords:** Chinese students; Hungary; socioeconomic status; motivation; qualitative research

## 1 Introduction

The relationship between China and Central and Eastern European (CEE) countries, including Hungary, was not well developed until approximately ten years ago. Since 2011, the Chinese-CEE relationship started to intensify with the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), which wrote a new chapter in their relations and in which both parties lost traditional

trade partners and perceived opportunities for economic growth through cooperation (Turcsányi et al., 2019). Chen and Ugrósdy (2019) stated that China and Hungary increased their bilateral cooperation after signing the 17+1 Cooperation Initiative.

In the two decades between 1998 and 2019, the number of international students enrolling in degree programmes outside their home countries rose from 1.95 million to 7.03 million worldwide. Thus, the number of Chinese students engaged in studies abroad rapidly increased by 720 per cent globally, making China the largest country of origin for international students worldwide, and this significantly influenced global higher education (Education in China, 2021).

The main target locations of Chinese students are Anglo-Saxon countries and more economically developed ones (i.e., Japan and South Korea). Similar patterns can also be observed in Germany, where the number of Chinese students has grown rapidly, but the requirement of being able to speak German of several universities has limited this growth (Studying in Germany, n. d.). Although Hungary has a relatively small number of Chinese students compared to English-speaking countries, and there was a very small number of Chinese students at Hungarian universities before 2013, they are now the fastest-growing group of international students. For this reason, the CEE countries, including Hungary, receive relatively large numbers of Chinese students, and it is mostly the English-language programmes that attract them. Their number rose by 73 per cent in 2019 compared to in 2014 (Hungarian Central Statistical Office, 2020), as can be seen in Figure 1.

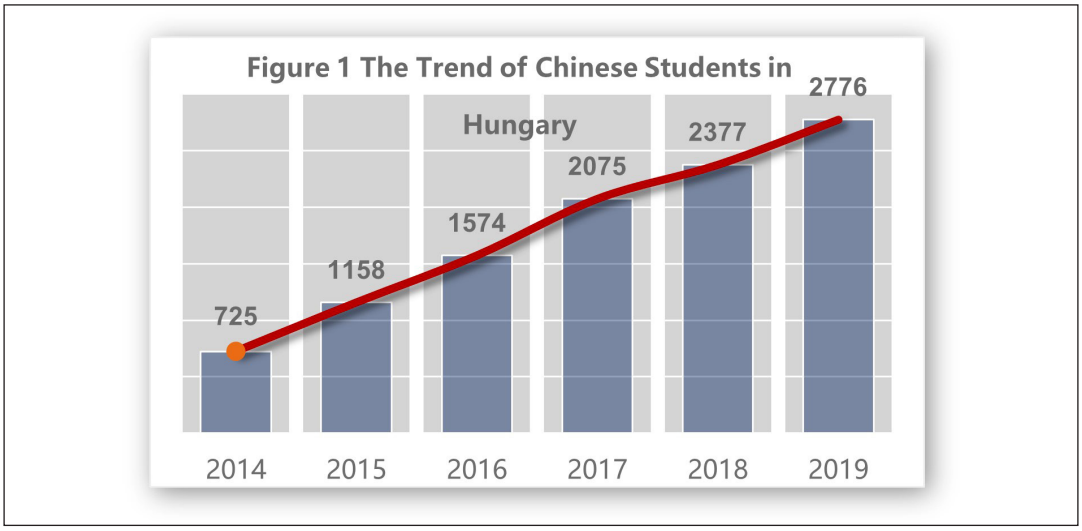


**Figure 1** Number of Chinese Students in Hungary

*Source:* Hungarian Statistical Office (2020)

Chinese students constituted Hungary's second-largest international student population (after Germans) in 2019 and the largest group of non-European international students in Hungary (Hungarian Central Statistical Office, 2020). Education is a crucial element in

attaining higher socioeconomic status (Zhu, 2020), and it is vital to understand the socioeconomic status of the significant numbers of Chinese students in Hungary since this influences their learning outcomes, as do the kinds of economic, social, and cultural capital they possess. Knowing this, policymakers at the institutional and governmental levels could adopt useful strategies for enhancing learning environments, producing positive educational outcomes, fostering equitable education systems, and ameliorating the impact of SES on educational attainment and mobility. Moreover, it is also essential to reveal what motivates Chinese students to choose Hungary as a place to pursue their studies because Hungary was not always a typical target country for international student mobility, especially not from China.

Based on narrative interviews with 26 Chinese students in Hungary, this article examines the social, economic, and cultural capital of the group. It also aims to uncover the major motivational factors which cause Chinese students to choose Hungary. The first part of the article outlines cultural mobility theory as a theoretical framework and is followed by a detailed presentation of the data collection process and analysis. The findings and discussion reveal that the majority of Chinese students in Hungary have a working and lower-middle class background that influenced their choice of country. Ultimately, this empirical investigation illustrates that Chinese students often compromise by studying in Hungary, as Anglo-Saxon and Western countries are unaffordable. The choice of Hungary is thus a pragmatic one, and it is not a dream destination.

This article contributes to theories of cultural mobility because it provides new understandings of the trajectories of lower-middle socioeconomic status students. The study finds that migration to Hungary involves upwardly mobile individuals through the Hungarian education. This study offers insights for policymakers in China and higher education institutions in Hungary and its immediate vicinity, not least by increasing understanding of the different social statuses of students and how to promote equal opportunities in education and society to improve educational attainment.

## 2 Theoretical framework: Cultural mobility

The number of students studying abroad is steadily growing, and this contributes to the internationalisation of universities – a process that, by necessity, involves sociocultural adaptation and accumulation (Savicki, 2008). This phenomenon needs to be investigated in depth. With globalisation and knowledge proliferating across the world, international educational mobility is regarded as an effective means of increasing intercultural understanding and cultural accumulation (Messelink et al., 2015). There is a debate between proponents of cultural reproduction (CR) and cultural mobility (CM) theories (Blaskó, 2003; Breen et al., 2009; Zhu, 2020). Breen et al. (2009) demonstrated that more privileged students have greater cultural capital that can be transformed into educational gains; hence, cultural capital is viewed as a mediator between educational achievements and origin (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992). In contrast, CM asserts that underprivileged students are more likely to benefit from cultural capital that compensates for their disadvantages (DiMaggio, 1982; Harvey et al., 2016).

## 2.1 Cultural reproduction

International educational mobility has risen among (upper)-middle-class students. Regarding the phenomenon of cultural reproduction, Bourdieu & Wacquant (1992) argue that parents from the upper-middle classes support their children by ensuring that they receive the most prestigious education, and in contemporary societies, international education contributes to cultural reproduction in these families. Thøgersen (2016) also indicated that middle-class families send their offspring to Western Europe to obtain higher cultural capital, even though a Western education does not always pay off economically.

Education has been seen as a top priority by Chinese families. Many people in China regard educational resources as an instrument for changing their lives and climbing ever higher on the social ladder. Most Chinese parents believe that better education will contribute to their children's professional status and give them more opportunities to get a decent job with higher socioeconomic status (Wang et al., 2014). Following Bourdieu's analysis, Lee (2011), Waters et al. (2011), and Xiang and Shen (2009) highlighted that students with a well-educated family background reproduce their class advantage. Wang (2021) undertook Bourdieusian analysis of the middle-high sociocultural capital of Chinese international graduates who study in the United States and concluded that parents put effort into their child(ren)'s educational attainment.

## 2.2 Cultural mobility

Cultural mobility theory was proposed by DiMaggio (1982), who argued that parents in the lower-middle class adopt the same strategy, making efforts to pursue a similar approach to accumulating cultural capital through schooling, as well as encouraging their children's educational success in order to achieve upward mobility. Several other scholars have arrived at similar conclusions (Daloz, 2013; Harvey et al., 2016; Lü, 2015; Wong et al., 2015). The emphasis on the importance of education in poverty alleviation indicates its relevance for helping low and middle-lower socioeconomic status (SES) families escape the vicious poverty cycle.

For people of low and middle-lower socio-economic backgrounds, schooling is a means of achieving their ambition for social mobility (Boyden, 2013; Kalmijn & Kraaykamp, 1996). Parents from working-class backgrounds may adopt strategies similar to those of the middle classes, supporting their children to achieve educational success through parental effort (Devine, 2004). In particular, people from a principally working-class background push themselves to acquire skills, thus leading to educational success (Goldthorpe, 2007). Since working-class families consider postsecondary and higher education to be a risky use of their resources, they desire greater certainty about educational success when they invest in higher education (Lynch & O'Riordan, 1998).

An equal distribution of cultural capital in the population would lead to lower educational inequality. Therefore, cultural mobility should be promoted across social classes and benefit students who are from disadvantaged families. Crul et al. (2017) concluded that immigrants with poor education may become steeply upwardly mobile by studying how they can overcome obstacles through education. Meng (2020) pointed out that the modern-

isation of China has resulted in growing competition for a good education, in combination with the global trend of 'intensive mothering', which has led to increased attention on education among Chinese parents, especially mothers. At the same time, educational attainment is socially structured; middle-class families fight to prevent their children from dropping out of relatively advantageous positions in society, while working-class parents, perceiving the significance of education equally, are more realistic but also invest heavily in their children's education.

Promoting educational equity is one of the main ways for the Chinese government to secure low and middle-lower-SES students' academic paths. By this means, scholarship-based support by the government that contributes to the success in international mobility could lead to a more successful career trajectory; and eventually, it could potentially create greater economic prosperity for the nation (Chui, 2013). In addition, Chinese students are influenced by China's ancient Confucian tradition of seeing education as a fundamental cultural value (Woronov, 2015). Lee (2014) also argued that immigration policy reduces the poverty rate and increases the cultural capital of the second generation.

There is evidence that working class parents have high expectations about their children's higher education, although they lack economic, cultural, and social capital (Kipnis, 2011; Sheng, 2014). Khattab (2015) explained that cultural capital is a result of aspirations, expectations, and achievements in child-rearing practices, whereby members of the dominant class acclimatise their children to a particular work ethic and orientation towards education and employment, as manifested in their aspirations, expectations, and achievements. Parents in a worse economic situation and with less cultural capital will find it more difficult to support their children to develop a different and better social and economic destiny than their own.

A growing number of lower-middle-income families support their children's studies abroad, following the rules of the global education hierarchy. Chen and Ross (2015) demonstrated that Chinese students' beliefs in a global education hierarchy are reflected in their choice of universities and majors, as well as their perceptions of academic quality. Lörz et al. (2016) differentiated students' motivations for pursuing education abroad at various phases of the life stage. For instance, some students who would like to study abroad might avoid it because they lack financial support, have poor language skills, or low self-esteem.

### 2.3 The Bologna Process and educational mobility with respect to Hungary

Internationalisation activities in many European nations are dependent on the higher education institutions themselves and the policies and plans of the central government. The Bologna declaration of 1999 was designed to create comparable degrees across the forty-eight countries that signed up to the related policy and practice changes under the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) umbrella. In 2012, countries in the EHEA established and implemented international educational mobility initiatives.

Additionally, the European Commission's (2017) 'Strengthening European Identity through Education and Culture' initiative aims to increase educational mobility and improve cross-border collaboration. Several countries in Europe reported that strategically addressing students' incoming mobility on the national level had enhanced their overall

student population. Eleven European countries reported that their entire higher education system is associated with an internationalisation educational mobility plan (European Commission, 2017). In this regard, the Hungarian Parliament adopted a new Act amending the 2011 Higher Education Act. The amendments added new requirements regarding the names of foreign higher education institutions, the requirement for bilateral agreements between Hungary and the foreign higher education institution's non-European Economic Area (EEA) country of origin, the provision of higher education services in the country of origin, as well as additional registration requirements (European Commission, 2018).

Students from different socioeconomic backgrounds attend different types of institutions and courses with varying modes of study. Students from the working class are over-represented in lower-prestige courses that predominantly result in unclear professional outcomes (Fehérvári et al., 2016; Nyüsti, 2018). Some of the Chinese students who study in Hungary are regarded as disadvantaged in terms of cultural capital, although there is little literature regarding the situation in Central and Eastern European countries (Li, 2020). Hungary aims to attract more Chinese students and supports around 500 per year with the *Stipendium Hungaricum*, which attracts international students by implementing multilateral agreements for international students to study in Hungary that cover their tuition fees and funding housing/living costs. Additionally, there is a growing number of fee-paying Chinese students.

Li and Primecz (2021) suggested that Chinese students studying in Hungary contribute to the development of beneficial networks between Hungary and China. Hungary, a non-English speaking nation, is seeing an increase in Chinese students for a variety of reasons: (1) the *Stipendium Hungaricum* scholarship promotes proficiency in both English and Hungarian, a critical component of international educational mobility; (2) the majority of Hungarian educational institutions offer language-training programmes to assist international students who do not meet language requirements to begin their academic studies and thus provide a 'bridge', with particular emphasis on incoming Chinese students, in relation to becoming acquainted with the necessary academic skills and adjusting to the local culture; (3) the Hungarian education platform promotes academic mobility to other European regions and the entire world through programmes such as the CEMS Master's in International Management (CEMS Global Alliance). Little research has hitherto attempted to determine the SES of Chinese students in Hungary. This study addresses the following questions: (1) What is the socioeconomic status of Chinese students in Hungary? (2) What economic, social, and cultural capital do they possess? And (3) what are their primary motivations for choosing Hungary?

## 3 Methodology and data

The research questions necessitated a qualitative methodology. Consequently, semi-structured narrative interviews were conducted with twenty-six Chinese students studying in Hungary. This was augmented by observation before and after the interviews, which was noted in a research diary. Following the guidelines for narrative interviews, life stories were collected about the respondents' experiences in Hungary (Kvale, 1996; Rosile et al., 2013). The interview covered events and considerations before arrival, including formative education; previous higher education (if any); the motivation for moving to Hungary to

study; and the interviewees' experiences and plans for after they complete their studies. This article, however, focuses on the first part – namely, their family backgrounds and their motivations for studying in Hungary.

A purposive sampling method was applied to create the most reliable sample. The sampling procedure aimed to ensure maximum variation among the interviewees (cf. Horváth & Mitev, 2015). The first author, a Chinese doctoral student in Hungary, contacted Chinese students at different universities in Budapest and other university towns in Hungary (Pécs, Debrecen, and Szeged) and asked her contacts to introduce her to Chinese students at the chosen university. Most of the interviewees were not in personal contact with the interviewer before the phase of data collection, but the first author could relate to the experiences of her new contacts relatively easily. Thereafter, semi-structured face-to-face narrative interviews were conducted by the first author in Mandarin. The participants' demographic information can be seen in Table 1:

**Table 1** Participants' demographic information

| **Variables** | **Overall Sample (N=26)** | |
|---|---|---|
| | **N** | **%** |
| Gender | | |
| Male | 14 | 54% |
| Female | 12 | 46% |
| Education Level | | |
| Bachelor | 13 | 50% |
| Master | 9 | 35% |
| Ph.D. | 4 | 15% |
| Study location | | |
| Budapest area | 10 | 38% |
| Non-Budapest area | 16 | 62% |
| Major | | |
| Humanities | 9 | 35% |
| Science | 9 | 35% |
| Medical field | 8 | 30% |
| Financial Sources | | |
| Tuition fee-paying | 15 | 58% |
| Stipendium Hungaricum Scholarship | 11 | 42% |
| Age | | |
| Average age | 23.8 | / |
| Max value (year) | 29 | / |
| Min value (year) | 17 | / |

Respondents gave informed consent before the interview, and all interviews were recorded with their permission. They lasted 60–90 minutes and were conducted at the end of November 2019. The interviewer visited the interviewees at their homes, in a quiet café, or in study rooms in dormitories. The audio data were converted to written transcripts in Chinese, and NVivo 9 software was used to assist with data analysis by coding categories.

The author adapted elements of the grounded theory (GT) approach for the data analysis, as summarised by Strauss and Corbin (1998). Interviews and research diary notes were the basis of the data analysis. The first phase, open coding of data, involved the naming and categorisation of phenomena through close examination. This was followed by axial coding, with the explicit aim of understanding the data more deeply. Finally, selective coding was applied, whereby more abstract analysis was conducted, and the grounded model was constructed from the empirical data. After open coding, axial and selective coding were applied. Extracts from the open and axial coding are presented in two tables in the Appendix (Tables 2 and 3), and selective coding is presented in Figure 2.

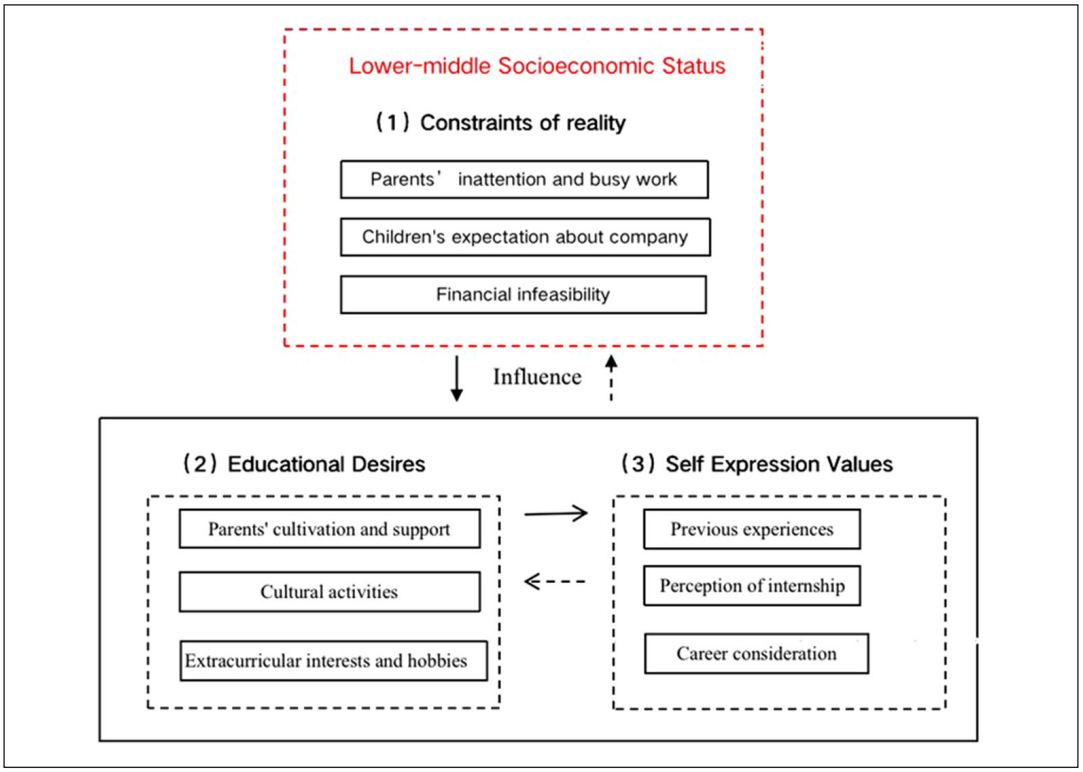


**Figure 2** Selective coding

## 4 Findings and discussion

The majority of interviewees described their family as lower middle class. The financial conditions of their parents were weak compared to the Chinese average, while the parents' education and occupation were also indicative of low social status. Beyond that, the geo-

graphical location of their home and the cultural consumption habits of their family reinforced the finding of low status; moreover, childhood hobbies and extracurricular activities contributed to their upward mobility, according to interviewees.

Although many of the interviewees were aware of their disadvantageous social situations, they were determined to change their socioeconomic status by studying. Chinese parents sent their children to Hungarian universities, ultimately aiming to enhance both their individual and familial cultural capital on their return to China. Their international studies represented a conscious step towards their economic, social, and cultural advancement. Consequently, the respondents were committed to working hard, and in most cases, their parents had not supported them economically while they were growing up.

### 4.1 The social, economic, and cultural background of Chinese students studying in Hungary

The narrative interviews directly addressed family background from the outset, and most interviewees voluntarily shared information about their parents, their occupation, and childhood memories. There was only one interviewee who seemed to want to avoid providing direct information about his family background: he concealed such details and excused this on the grounds that he was too busy to care about his parents. The remaining 25 interviewees explained that the limited economic resources in their childhood had resulted in limited access to education. Although family income was a very sensitive topic, some interviewees shared information about this openly and directly with the interviewer. While the main focus of the study was cultural capital rather than economic status, explicit expressions, unconscious comments, and observations of interviewees' outfits and personal circumstances made their social class visible. Indeed, some interviewees even mentioned poor housing conditions in their childhood. One respondent openly described his family's poverty, elaborating on his parents' working-class jobs, which had resulted in their low or maximum mid-level socioeconomic status.

> I definitely would say I am from a poor, poor family... It is true, my father is a blue-collar worker, his wages are too low, and he was transferred to another sector. My mother has never had a job her whole life; yes, she is a housewife. My mother sacrifices herself and has cared for me and my father all her life. (Interviewee 9)

Some participants migrated within China before emigration; the geographical location of their birthplace and childhood was also mentioned in some cases. These were rarely upscale neighbourhoods but rather rural areas. While some interviewees came from metropolises, such as Shanghai, with local Hukou (户口, cadastral management), they still originated from relatively disadvantaged areas and confessed that their families were not wealthy:

> As regards previous work, my father was a teacher who taught physics in high school, and my mother ran her own small manufacturing business, but she has sold the product line already. Although I was born in Shanghai, I would not say every person from Shanghai is rich. (Interviewee 16)

Although family economic resources played a fundamental role in educational trajectories, many interviewees admitted that their parents had cultivated, supported, and, in particular, invested in their educational paths, even though their parents' education level was mainly secondary and only rarely tertiary, and sometimes less than average. Moreover, every participant explicitly claimed that having support with their education from their family impacted their choice to study abroad and pursue education in Hungary.

Most participants indicated that their parents expected that their international education would contribute to their upward social mobility and that their studies abroad would be a way of accumulating different forms of capital (Harvey et al., 2016; Lu, 2015; Wong et al., 2015). Perhaps surprisingly, however, Interviewee 23 turned down an offer from a famous British university and opted for a scholarship from a non-Budapest university to further her doctoral studies; the primary reason was that the tuition fee was so high in Britain that she feared putting more of a financial burden on her family. Thus, the Chinese cultural logic of filial piety remained a moral imperative in most interviewees' transnational choices.

Children appreciated their parents' investments and sacrifices for their education. Family affirmation helped the students feel more confident about their transitional experience abroad; their families supported their educational endeavours, in spite of their families' everyday fiscal challenges. The most important form of support was encouragement in their English-language education. One interviewee remarked on how his mother had concentrated on his English skills since childhood, even though she was a labourer and did not speak English. Another interviewee acknowledged the investment in her English language studies of her parents:

> Although my mother does not speak English very well, she helped me get in touch with an English environment very early on; I started taking English classes in the third grade of elementary school. Actually, it was quite difficult for me at that time, but I really appreciated that my mother put pressure on my education. (Interviewee 21)

Another statement by an interviewee exemplified his family's focus on English studies:

> My dad created an outstanding environment for me; for instance, he encouraged me to listen to the English radio every morning. (Interviewee 3)

The other aspect of educational support was the encouragement to study further. An interviewee described his father's concern about his further studies, despite his family's location in a socially disadvantaged area:

> Believe it or not, China attaches a great deal of importance to education, which is essential for boosting economic capital. You know, my parents are successful 'North drift' (北漂, *'beipiao'*), which means they immigrated and survived in Beijing, eventually. But my family was still out in the 'fifth rings' (五环, *'wuhuan'*) – that is, far away from the central area, like in a suburb. However, my father still wanted me and my naughty brother to get educated because he figured that education and being equipped with knowledge would be helpful to our careers and achieving our dreams. (Interviewee 23)

Another interviewee explained that her parents attached great importance to education, despite the fact she was a girl in an environment in which there was 'more attention to boys' (重男轻女, *'zhongnanqingnv'*); her parents had deposited money into an education fund and encouraged her to continue her doctoral studies abroad. She was really grateful for the educational support from her family, while another interviewee highlighted the role of her grandmother in her cultural development; she was taught how to write calligraphy, which is considered to be part of the privileged knowledge of the well-educated elite:

> My grandma has been a great influence on my mother's generation and me. What I want to emphasise is that education is very crucial to our personality development. And my grandparents taught me how to write calligraphy, which has had a great influence on my current writing. (Interviewee 13)

Beyond that, supporting children's extracurricular interests and hobbies – for instance, dancing, playing an instrument, sports, singing, art, and so on – was typical among economically fragile families. While these extracurricular activities might be characteristics of middle-class families in most societies, families with high educational expectations of their children tried to provide middle-class educational support so their children could achieve higher socioeconomic status. These attempts often caused financial burdens for the families. However, most families invested more in purely academic activities and less in extracurricular ones. Last but not least, such hobbies had eased the situation of Chinese students in Hungary: one interviewee highlighted her experience with learning to play musical instruments. Her mother had fostered her extracurricular hobbies:

> Neither my father nor my mother is well educated. Even though she was under economic pressure, my mother still invested in an extracurricular pursuit [for me] – the Chinese dulcimer (扬琴, *'Yangqin'*) – in my childhood. I remember that after three years I was educated by a famous tutor, and she encouraged me to reach a high level of skill on the dulcimer, and my mother continuously supported me. (Interviewee 9)

Well-off households may have schedules for participating in cultural activities and interact in a process of 'concerted cultivation' that elicits children's abilities and talents, while parents in the lower classes and disadvantaged families depend heavily on 'the accomplishment of natural growth', and encourage their children to develop naturally within their boundaries and allow them to develop spontaneously (Lareau, 2002). However, in China, education is regarded as fundamental and is prioritised during childrearing by parents of varying socioeconomic classes; they instil Chinese characteristics in their children via their cultivation in a purposive process, rather than permitting their spontaneous development.

This approach is described by the self-expression values of the Inglehart–Welzel cultural map, which indicate a strong focus on subjective well-being; this signals a change in child-rearing values away from hard work towards creativity and tolerance (Haerpfer et al., 2020). However, our respondents were often left unattended when parents were busy with work, and several interviewees spoke of their vulnerability. One interviewee even explained that their parents' lack of work-life balance had resulted in neglect.

> As my parents were busy at work, they did not spend too much time with me, I felt that they wanted to be with me, but the reality is they needed to work hard for a living. (Interviewee 3)

Several other interviewees also complained of parents' inattention and focus on business.

> My dad had a small agricultural business, which was quite far from home – six hundred kilometres away. I remember my parents didn't always stay with me and my younger brother when we were young. Instead, my grandma took care of us. (Interviewee 2)

> My parents were running a small business. They were not with me much from when I was young, you know, they were busy making money to support the family, then I went to boarding school in junior high, and I was only home at weekends. (Interviewee 10)

This explanation is based on the perspective of children's expectations of their parents rather than the traditional viewpoint of an adult-centred and dominated childhood. Some interviewees were extremely dissatisfied with their parents:

> My childhood was unaccompanied. I lived alone, without the care of any elders. That is the reason I did not study well at my primary and secondary school. Actually, we don't talk a lot, as they only care about their own business. (Interviewee 22)

Most interviewees revealed that they did not develop the habit of engaging in cultural activities, such as visiting museums, theatres, and so on. However, several interviewees showed great interest in cultural activities when they were teenagers. A few interviewees remained uninterested in culture, as they had not experienced this in their childhood. Many other interviewees initiated their own cultural studies and became well-informed about art. One interviewee became a huge theatre fan when he was studying for his bachelor's degree in China.

From this sociocultural perspective, studying abroad seems to be a step towards increasing intergenerational social mobility. Interviewee 13 from a non-Budapest university provided an interesting quotation that illustrated his views about Chinese students with a poor socioeconomic background who dream of studying in Hungary:

> Take me as an example; I come from a rural area in China. My dad couldn't work for physical [medical] reasons; thus, my mom was the only one to support the family. In fact, not all students who go abroad are from wealthy families: the [structure of the] Chinese population does not mean that all people are at the top, for sure. Many extremely ordinary families like us, children from low- and middle-income conditions, dream of going abroad, which means that coming to Hungary is an opportunity for [them]. (Interviewee 13)

He added that the fact that he studies abroad, although not in a highly celebrated British or American university, gives him a unique chance for social mobility:

> I may not need to use the knowledge [I would have got from going] to a high-level university in Britain or the United States. What I have learnt at the Hungarian university has enabled me to find a very good job in my area. Personally, that is: different situations apply to different people. (Interviewee 13)

The number of Chinese students in Hungary is small in comparison to Hungarian students and to Chinese students in Anglo-Saxon or other Western countries. Interviewees of lower-middle socioeconomic status were determined to study abroad and believed that their studies would contribute to their mobility. Students and parents expected that studying abroad would help them build their social and cultural capital. Parents typically support their children to continue their education, despite their own lack of economic and cultural resources. Parents primarily and equally encourage their children throughout their education, and both children and parents anticipate a high rate of return on their investment in the former's future.

### 4.2 Reasons for studying in Hungary

The family background of the interviewees was working class or lower-middle class. Families made efforts to secure their children's future by encouraging them to study abroad. Therefore, it is relevant to investigate why Hungary was a target country when choosing international mobility. Some previous (practically derived) perceptions about working experiences and specialised courses impacted the interviewees' choices, but the main reason for studying in Hungary was its financial feasibility.

The previous practical perception of work experience also influenced interviewees' decisions; specifically, some participants had encountered a working environment at a time when they lacked good credentials and wanted to pursue further education abroad, but their choices were limited by their financial constraints. One interviewee explained that she had worked as an English teacher and she was considering broadening her horizons and strengthening her future opportunities through obtaining a master's degree.

> I worked as an English teacher in the northern part of China for three years, during which time I helped lots of local students to improve their English knowledge so they could pursue their dreams [of going] abroad. After my teaching, I started questioning whether I should go abroad to broaden my horizons and gain international experience rather than stay in my small hometown for my whole lifetime. And I am sure that I can benefit from the international environment in Budapest. (Interviewee 1)

Additionally, complicated life situations, such as educational diversions and personal challenges, had made some interviewees' lives difficult, and one way of escaping was to study abroad.

> My personal experience is more complicated, I did not graduate from junior high school, and I went to a joint program that secondary school and college as a social candidate. (Interviewee 22)

Indecision and dissatisfaction with work situations were also decisive factors in choosing to study abroad. A Hungarian university education and the associated studies represented a lot more than just obtaining a specific degree; this meant practical academic achievement, diversified attitudes and values, increased language skills, and so on.

> I did three kinds of jobs before I came to Hungary; each job lasted for 3–4 months, which was an experience that frustrated me a lot. I paid more attention to my career trajectory than my emotional well-being. I had to apply to a university in Hungary in order to maximise my academic competitiveness on the job market. (Interviewee 3)

Another student enrolled in a 'lower-ranking' university after a summer internship, as he realised that he would be an assembly line worker if he did not improve his qualifications. In agreement with his mother, he decided to study abroad rather than continue his education in China.

> My initial [period of] study abroad came at the end of my internship. You know, it was really hard and tiring to do manual work without any stimulation. My mother and I both realised that I would have no bright career if I did not choose to study abroad. (Interviewee 11)

While the decision to study abroad was rather straightforward, it was difficult to find an appropriate place due to financial constraints, but Hungary seemed to be affordable to even less fortunate candidates. Needless to say, the relatively generous scholarship scheme was a great help for many students in relation to pursuing their dreams of studying abroad. One might assume that there would be a clear socioeconomic distinction between students who receive a scholarship and those who self-finance their studies in Hungary, but the present study could not identify this. Eleven self-funding students affirmed that they had considered the financial burden on their families when asked about their reasons for choosing Hungary. One interviewee was very explicit about the financial problems that his family was facing, even though he was a self-financed student in Hungary:

> I understand our family was poor during my childhood, and I do need to take into consideration my parents' financial capacity. I did not consider the USA or other countries that have good opportunities and resources. I think Hungarian education is affordable for me and my family. (Interviewee 22)

As a self-funding student, Interviewee 4's initially chose a British university, but she changed her mind after considering the tuition fee:

> The UK has always given everyone the impression of [providing a] high-quality education. I dreamt of going to England for two years after studying in Hungary. However, the tuition fee was increased after the plan to leave the European Union, so I needed to consider my financial capacity. (Interviewee 4)

Two other interviewees practically acknowledged that although they were ambitious to study in the US or the UK, they needed to consider the financial reality, and they wanted to support their studies on their own, not with a student loan. The tuition fee for medical schools is high all over the world, but there are considerable differences among countries in this respect and living costs also vary. In terms of the tuition fee in the medical field, two interviewees who had been in Hungary for the last ten years confirmed that the tuition fee in Hungary is much lower than in the United States, while the quality of education, medicine, and professional opportunities are considered equal by Chinese students.

Finally, although some Chinese students who study in Hungary might be academically less talented and have weaker English than international students in Anglo-Saxon countries, participants regard Hungarian higher education as a good opportunity when considering their career prospects. A direct question about the three most important reasons the respondents are pursuing studies in Hungary revealed that worries about their future career and financial constraints were the most important. A large majority of the Chinese students were realistic and reflected on their opportunities and potential future gains, therefore, they use self-expression to pursue educational and career prospect. One interviewee spoke of her initial source of motivation to study in Hungary.

> I became qualified through my Chinese master's degree… but I don't want to be a statistician all my life. What I hope is that I can have my own project team within five to ten years, step by step. (Interviewee 23)

Cost-benefit analysis had shaped the interviewees' decision to study in Hungary. One interviewee from a small town in western China wanted to achieve a respectable social position in the future. She mentioned that she had done research on Hungarian education before moving and found that there were many Nobel Prize winners from Hungary, so the education level in Hungary must be acceptable. Likewise, another interviewee acknowledged the quality of education at his university.

> I need to consider my future and the reasons for studying in Hungary; one is the university's connections, and the other is an important factor – I think the Hungarian agricultural profession is among the most developed in Europe, so I chose to do my agricultural bachelor's in Hungary. (Interviewee 13)

Another interviewee is a veterinarian. He mentioned the current situation in the veterinary industry in China and that he wanted to be a high-level veterinarian:

> China is a big agricultural country, but the development of veterinary science is completely different from that of the European veterinary field. You know, municipal veterinary practice is basically different from that in towns. Hence, I started to understand foreign education systems and considered going abroad at that time. […] I value the accumulation of experience and improvement in my ability. (Interviewee 8)

The quotations above help verify the argument of Hansen and Thøgersen (2015) that the Chinese state has developed policies concerning students' individual courses of study according to a framework of national development. Furthermore, other interviewees came because specific majors – such as a combination of law and market policy in the form of an 'economic policy major' –were appealing and not to be found in other countries. The respondent wanted to return to their homeland to work in their field or to serve as a bridge between China and CEE when they graduated. The reputation of certain Hungarian universities was considered to be high, and this attracted some students.

> After searching the official website, I found that economic policy was very suitable for my interests, and combined my bachelor-level legal studies and current market policy. The courses mainly focus on legal provisions and concepts. The first consideration must be [that the course is] in line with my interests and future career plans. (Interviewee 3)

Another interviewee had chosen to work with an anti-cancer research team in an institution because of his academic interests. Meanwhile, another interviewee had paid attention to practical work: he mentioned that his university was in an important industrial town in Hungary and that the metallurgical industry was the focus of his interest. Moreover, another interviewee explained his choice as being due to his career plans as a curator:

> I want to become a curator to help artists in the near future. My career plan is currently the only motivation. (Interviewee 6)

The above quotation demonstrates the respondent's strong self-expression. It is also worth mentioning that the choice of location was mainly made by the students themselves, and their parents had supported their children's international studies. This represented a transformation of the traditional familial hierarchy. One interviewee explained this directly:

> I made the decision to study law in Hungary. Actually, my father was initially worried about my safety as a lawyer. But this time, I just mentioned it to him, and he finally agreed. (Interviewee 7)

Overall, the interviewees with a lower-middle socioeconomic background were determined to study abroad. They believed that their studies would contribute to their mobility and that their socioeconomic status would increase. Their parents also encouraged their children. Students made a decision about which country to apply to, but this was constrained by financial matters; several students had made a compromise by choosing to study in Hungary instead of in the UK or the USA. Initially, fee-paying and scholarship students seemed to be distinct, but deeper investigation revealed that they were in a similar socioeconomic situation and were limited by financial constraints.

## 5 Conclusions

There are three crucial factors for Chinese students from lower-middle-class socioeconomic backgrounds who study in Hungary: the constraints of their SES, educational aspirations, and their desire for self-expression. Their parents' preoccupation with work and concomitant inattention and students' expectations about their parents' financial support and presence contributed to the constrained reality of educational aspirations. Although these constraints existed, the parents had aspirations for their children, which can be seen in their cultivation of cultural activities and hobbies at an early age. On the other hand, career aspirations were managed during this relatively early period of development.

This study has highlighted that the socioeconomic status of Chinese students studying in Hungary is lower than that of those studying in Anglo-Saxon or other Western countries. Students and their parents expected that studying abroad would increase their social and cultural capital. Parents usually encouraged their children to continue studying, although they themselves were short of economic and cultural capital, and typically supported their children's international studies. Those with scholarships and tuition-fee payers were not socially distinct groups because both were financially constrained. While

the students dreamt of studying in Anglo-Saxon countries, most of them compromised by choosing Hungary. Some of them were fortunate to find specialised courses that were not widely available, but most of them made their decision based on conscious or unconscious cost-benefit analysis, and Hungary seemed to be a reasonable choice.

From a theoretical perspective, this study provides a new understanding of the trajectories of students with a lower-middle-class socioeconomic status and identifies factors that determine their international mobility. By distinguishing those with a lower-middle SES from those with working-class backgrounds, student flows into Hungary can be better delineated, as can the aspirations of these two distinct groups. These findings are also relevant for Chinese employers since they will enable them to create new strategies for analysing prospective employees' accumulation of Hungarian credentials and their relevance in the labour market. Furthermore, beyond developing a better understanding of the challenges that Chinese students face, the results of this study are relevant for Hungarian higher education institutions and national policymakers. Ultimately, the findings may enhance the capacity of institutions to create diverse learning environments for Chinese students, while policymakers can use them to ameliorate the impact of students' different social statuses by fostering more equitable international education systems.

One limitation of the research is that it concentrated on students' socioeconomic backgrounds and motivations as applied to international higher education in Hungary and did not include international students from other countries who may find themselves in similar situations. Follow-up studies of other Chinese students in Central Europe are invited to generate further empirical evidence about the transformative nature of studying internationally. Moreover, further study is needed to examine the nature of the accumulation of intercultural benefits (and challenges) for Chinese students in Hungary and the wider vicinity.

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## Appendix

**Table 2** Examples of open coding

| **Open coding** | |
|---|---|
| Lower-middle socioeconomic background | *I definitely would say I am from a poor, poor family... It is true, my father is a blue-collar worker, his wage is too low, and he was transferred to another sector. My mother never had job during her whole life, yes, she is a housewife. My mother sacrifices herself and has cared for me and my father all her life.* |
| Parents cultivation and support | *Although my mother does not speak English very well, she let me get in touch with an English environment at a very early stage.* |
| Extracurricular interests and hobbies | *Neither my father nor my mother is well educated. Even though they were under economic pressure, my mother still invested in extracurricular interests—the Chinese dulcimer (扬琴, 'Yangqin') in my childhood.* |
| Cultural activities | *When I was a child, I pleaded with my parents to buy me a piano; they got into debt to buy the piano. I played it for a time and then got bored, but my parents encouraged me to continue practising. To be honest, my parents wanted me to pursue the piano as a hobby rather than as a potential profession. But it helps me a lot to cope with study-related pressure.* |
| Parents' inattention and busy work | *When I was a kid, I never saw my father during the daytime for many years; he came home very late every day. This is my impression of him. In fact, I had very little contact with him in my childhood, so I personally feel that it is the reason why I was afraid to communicate with boys.* |
| Children's desire relating to parents' company | *My childhood was unaccompanied. I lived alone, without the care of any elders. That is the reason I did not study well during my primary and secondary schooling. Actually, we don't talk a lot, as they only care about their own business.* |
| Previous practical perception for working experiences | *I did three kinds of job before I came to Hungary, each job lasted for 3–4 months, which was an experience that frustrated me a lot. I paid more attention to my career trajectory than my emotional wellbeing. I had to apply for a university in Hungary in order to maximise my academic competition in the job market.* |

**Table 2** *(Continued)*

| **Open coding** | |
|---|---|
| Internship perception | *My initial foreign study came at the end of my internship. You know it was really hard and tiring to do manual work without any stimulation. My mother and I both realised that I would not have a bright career if I did not choose to study abroad.* |
| Financial feasibility | *I understand our family was poor in my childhood, and I do need to take into consideration my parents' financial capacity. I did not consider the USA or other countries that have good opportunities and resources. I think the Hungarian education is affordable for me and my family.* |
| Scholarship opportunities | *My parents had already offered me support for my master's degree, so I was embarrassed to ask again for support for doctoral study. I got an offer from the United Kingdom, but the major consideration was finance. Thus, I accepted the scholarship from Hungary.* |
| Consider career path | *I need to consider my future; one reason for studying in Hungary is the university's connections, the other is an important factor – I think that the Hungarian agricultural profession is among the most developed in Europe, so I chose to do my agricultural bachelor's in Hungary.* |

**Table 3** Axial coding

| **Axial coding** | |
|---|---|
| **Lower-middle socioeconomic background** | |
| Educational desires | Parents' cultivation and support |
| | Extracurricular interests and hobbies |
| | Cultural activities |
| Self-expression values | Previous practical perception of working experience |
| | Perception of internship |
| | Consideration of career path |
| Reality-based Constraints | Parents' inattention and engagement with work |
| | Children's expectation of company |
| | Financial feasibility |
| | Scholarship opportunities |