

## YOUTH MIGRATION CULTURE, YOUTH TRANSITION AND LIFESTYLE: THE CASE OF POLISH AND CHINESE INTERNATIONAL STUDENT MIGRANTS IN LONDON

### 1. Introduction

Migration culture has been an important topic in migration studies. It has various definitions and meanings in the literature. For instance, Massey, Arango and Hugo et al. use the term to explain how changing values and cultural understandings facilitate the migratory process, in a community where migration becomes normal.<sup>1</sup> Some other researchers adopt an anthropological approach more focused on understanding the local cultural context. Elrick understands migration cultures as the emerging cultures in sending societies brought or triggered by migration, including the changing values, norms and social adjustment to the absence of many key community members.<sup>2</sup> Horváth clarifies the context of migration cultures amongst Romanian rural youth as “an indeterminate context in which the uncertainties of a prolonged transition to adulthood can be negotiated.”<sup>3</sup> White defines migration cultures as “conventions about why and how people should migrate, which people should migrate and where they should go.”<sup>4</sup> These definitions cover the level of societies, communities and individuals.

However, while these studies are insightful in elucidating the concrete context of migration cultures, they mainly focus on rural migrants, and are rarely linked

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<sup>1</sup> D.S. Massey, J. Arango, G. Hugo et al., *Theories of international migration: A review and appraisal*, “Population and Development Review” 1993, vol. 19, no. 3, pp. 431–466.

<sup>2</sup> T. Elrick, *The influence of migration on origin communities: Insights from Polish migrations to the West*, “Europe-Asia Studies” 2008, vol. 60, no. 9, pp. 1503–1517.

<sup>3</sup> I. Horváth, *The culture of migration of rural Romanian youth*, “Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies” 2008, vol. 34, no. 5, p. 783.

<sup>4</sup> A. White, *Polish Families and Migration since EU Accession*, Policy Press, Bristol 2011, p. 61.

to International Student Migration (ISM), a burgeoning phenomenon in the past two decades, when its drastic growth worldwide is more than apparent. Many participants in ISM come from middle-class or social elite families,<sup>5</sup> which markedly differs from the pattern of rural migration. Therefore, examining the migration culture within the ISM cohort is crucial for fully understanding the concept of migration culture. This study chooses Polish and Chinese international students in London as the research sample, for they represent two key groups in ISM. The EU enlargement in 2004 and the expansion of university enrolment in China since the late 1990s have driven a growing preference in both countries for education abroad, especially in the UK. Data show that Polish and Chinese international students in London make up a substantial portion of the student population (see more discussion in Methods section). Since students are typically young, they develop a youth migration culture characterised by youth transition and the pursuit of a lifestyle through migration. These contexts will be reviewed in the next section. It is also important to note that this research focuses on contexts prior to Brexit, when the fieldwork was conducted. Since then, the pattern of international student mobility in the UK has shifted.

This article consists of four parts. It begins with a literature review on youth transition, lifestyle, and migration. The second part explains the methods used in this study and clarifies the choice of Polish and Chinese ISM participants. The third section presents and discusses the findings in detail. The article concludes with a summary of the findings and final remarks.

## 2. Youth transition, lifestyle and migration

Social scientists revealed the ‘blurred conditions’ of youth transition and pointed out that emerging adulthood is an increasingly fluid phase of the life cycle.<sup>6</sup> The life cycle model assumes that life carries on strictly with the stages of birth, childhood, adolescence, nest-leaving, marriage, work, giving birth and retirement.<sup>7</sup> However, today’s researchers increasingly favour the life course approach in response to the changing nature of the contemporary society, such as “solo living, postponement of partnership and childbearing, rising divorce rates, non-traditional family

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<sup>5</sup> C.L. Xu, *Time, class and privilege in career imagination: Exploring study-to-work transition of Chinese international students in UK universities through a Bourdieusian lens*, “Time & Society” 2021, vol. 30, no. 1, pp. 5–29.

<sup>6</sup> R. King, *Theorising new European youth mobilities*, “Population, Space and Place” 2018, vol. 24, no. 1, pp. 1–12.

<sup>7</sup> A.M. Findlay, D. McCollum, R. Coulter *et al.*, *New Mobilities Across the Life Course: a Framework for Analysing Demographically Linked Drivers of Migration*, “Population Space and Place” 2015, vol. 21, no. 4, pp. 390–402.

structures, living apart together, greater participation in higher education, later retirement ages and the geographic dissociation between work and the workplace.”<sup>8</sup> Its acknowledgement as being preferable to a life cycle approach indicates a shift from understanding human lives as rigid, linear, and irreversible to fluid, flexible and de-standardised.

In the entire life course, youth transition is the particular interest of this article. Its links with migration are discussed by King, including a trend towards social individualisation which draws young people away from strong framing structures; youth-to-adult transition linked to marriage and parenthood delayed from a person’s 20s to their 30s; and the impact of geopolitical and economic events on the process of youth mobility and transition. He also defines the prolongation of youthful appearances, lifestyles and self-perceptions among migrants as a form of delayed ‘unbecoming’ or postponement of the youth-to-adult transition.<sup>9</sup> Relevant to this transition is a key concept named ‘liquid migration’, a term coined to explain the dynamic and fast-changing flows after the EU’s eastern enlargements termed by Engbersen and Snel. They conceptualised six key elements of liquid migration: a) Most migrants tend to follow a circular or onward migration pattern rather than settle permanently, but some may prefer to stay longer and pursue upward socio-economic mobility; b) Labour migration is dominant but student migration also characterises liquid migration; c) Migration is usually legal due to the rights of EU membership; d) Liquid migration flows are often sudden and spontaneous; e) Many liquid migrants are young and single people postponing marriage and children, reflecting the rise of individualisation in decision-making and the drop of family influence in European societies; f) Borrowing a term from Eade, Drinkwater, and Garapich,<sup>10</sup> Engbersen and Snel suggest that migrants are likely to adopt a strategy of ‘intentional unpredictability’. More plainly put, this refers to a deliberate stance of keeping options open.<sup>11</sup>

However, generalising this pattern to all EU youth migration has also been criticised. White demonstrates that many young migrants are influenced by push and pull factors such as unemployment and low wages in sending countries, and new opportunities in receiving countries, especially access to social networks. Not everyone, however, enjoys access to these, and some of them are constrained by the

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<sup>8</sup> D. McCollum, K. Keenan, A. Findlay, *The case for a lifecourse perspective on mobility and migration research* [in:] *Handbook on Demographic Change and the Lifecourse*, eds. J. Falkingham, M. Evandrou, A. Vlachantoni, Edward Elgar Publishing, Camberley 2020.

<sup>9</sup> R. King, *Theorising new European...*, pp. 1–12.

<sup>10</sup> J. Eade, S. Drinkwater, M. Garapich, *Class and ethnicity – Polish migrants in London*, University of Surrey, Guildford and Roehampton 2006.

<sup>11</sup> G. Engbersen, E. Snel, *Liquid migration: Dynamic and fluid patterns of post accession migration flows* [in:] *Mobility in transition: Migration patterns after EU enlargement*, eds. B. Glorius, I. Grabowska-Lusińska, A. Kuvik, Amsterdam University Press, Amsterdam 2013, pp. 21–40.

migration culture, for example, regarding gender roles.<sup>12</sup> Other scholars also argue that young migrants' agency towards migration is limited by structural constraints, such as family backgrounds, schooling, social class and work experience,<sup>13</sup> and that time is perceived as a kind of aspirational cultural capital whose possession is class-stratified amongst international students.<sup>14</sup> That is to say, they have different agency when choosing ways of youth transition.

The emphasis on human agency, usually resting on the structure-agency model in sociology studies, underscores the contribution of migrants' own motivation and planning to their migratory trajectories. Their life course is no longer institutionally organised pathway, but personal construct in response to social structures. However, the strength of human agency should not be overstated as migrants can still be constrained by the imbalanced structural opportunities. It is therefore instructive to investigate and compare the constraints faced by different groups of international students, and how they utilise their agency, to understand the diversity of structure-agency model within the ISM body.

When youth transition has a focus on time, lifestyle migration put more emphasis on place. Lifestyle migration, which usually means seeking a better way of life, is also a key part of youth migration. Benson and O'Reilly define lifestyle migration as the action of affluent individuals of all ages moving to new places in search of the work-life balance, quality of life, and freedom from prior constraints.<sup>15</sup> In the European youth mobility context, lifestyle could be the attractiveness of exciting European metropolises, featured in Favell's book *Eurostars and Eurocities*. In the context of student migration, lifestyle refers to the pursuit of atmosphere and cultural attractions of European cities famous for their student lifestyle.<sup>16</sup> According to King, "Particularly for those studies which focus on London, this European and global city is seen as a place where a highly desirable young-adult lifestyle can be experienced at a particular life-stage of being young, single, individualistic, ambitious, and open to new challenges." So this "urban lifestyle becomes a trip or rite of passage to adulthood."<sup>17</sup> Young migrants mainly emphasise openness, cosmopolitanism, multiculturalism, cultural attractions, and the possibilities for them to realise their potential.

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<sup>12</sup> A. White, *Young people and migration from contemporary Poland*, "Journal of Youth Studies" 2010, vol. 13, no. 5, pp. 565–580.

<sup>13</sup> B.Y. Wang, F. Collins, *Temporally Distributed Aspirations: New Chinese Migrants to New Zealand and the Figuring of Migration Futures*, "Sociology" 2020, vol. 54, no. 3, pp. 573–590.

<sup>14</sup> C.L. Xu, *Time, class and privilege...*, pp. 5–29.

<sup>15</sup> M. Benson, K. O'Reilly, *Migration and the search for a better way of life: a critical exploration of lifestyle migration*, "The Sociological Review" 2009, vol. 57, no. 4, pp. 608–625.

<sup>16</sup> A. Favell, *Eurostars and Eurocities: free movement and mobility in an integrating Europe*, Blackwell, Oxford 2008.

<sup>17</sup> R. King, *Theorising new European...*, p. 9.

London has emerged as the primary destination for numerous young migrants worldwide. Vertovec introduced the concept of ‘super-diversity’ to illustrate the intricate complexity experienced by Britain since the early 1990s. This complexity manifests in various aspects such as diverse country of origin, migration pathways, legal statuses, levels of human capital, employment opportunities, residential areas, transnational connections, and responses from local communities.<sup>18</sup> In a similar vein, Favell argued that London has become a pivotal point in the life journeys of a large number of European citizens. Its rich history of immigration and asylum sets it apart, further enriched by the uniquely postcolonial multiculturalism that has evolved since the post-war era.<sup>19</sup> This multicultural environment has attracted numerous young migrants, including many students.

Although the aforementioned discussions of youth transition and lifestyle migration take place in the European context, some concepts can also be used in other contexts. For instance, Xu and Yang show how some Chinese students try to pursue an individualised way of life and get rid of constraints by means of mobility.<sup>20</sup> However, overall there seems to be a lack of generalisation from Western youth transition literature into other, for example Asian contexts. Whether or not life of Chinese students is becoming fluid and flexible, and the similarities and discrepancies between them and Polish students in this regard, should be examined. Also, the role they play in the youth migration culture should be investigated.

### 3. Methods

To investigate youth migration culture within the framework of ISM, this study focuses on Polish and Chinese international students in London. Recently, there has been a notable increase in Chinese students seeking international education, with the UK being a key destination. China consistently leads in the number of international students in the UK, a figure that continues to grow. Concurrently, Poland has been among the top 10 EU countries for student presence in the UK over the past five years. According to the Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA), in the 2020/21 academic year, UK universities enrolled 143,820 international students from China, the highest of any country. Additionally, 10,755 students from Poland were enrolled, placing Poland second among Central and Eastern European countries, behind only Romania. These statistics make students from these

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<sup>18</sup> S. Vertovec, *Super-diversity and its implications*, “Ethnic and Racial Studies” 2007, vol. 30, no. 6, pp. 1024–1054.

<sup>19</sup> A. Favell, *Eurostars and Eurocities...*

<sup>20</sup> C.L. Xu, M.Y. Yang, *Ethnicity, temporality and educational mobilities: comparing the ethnic identity constructions of Mongolian and Tibetan students in China*, “British Journal of Sociology of Education” 2019, vol. 40, no. 5, pp. 631–646.

two nationalities representative of various EU and non-EU international student groups in the UK. London is a highly desired destination for many young people and has a significant number of overseas students. In the 2017/18 academic year, HESA reported that 111,665 non-UK students were enrolled in 39 higher education institutions in London, accounting for about 30% of all international students in the UK (377,140 in total). Specifically, 20,215 of the 106,530 Chinese students and 2,095 of the 7,545 Polish students were studying in London.<sup>21</sup> These figures underscore London's representativeness for this fieldwork.

This research employs qualitative, in-depth interviews to explore the migration culture amongst Polish and Chinese international students in London. The study conducted 60 in-depth semi-structured interviews, with 30 interviews each for Polish and Chinese students. Participants were selected based on their citizenship status, with each ethnic group comprising 15 men and 15 women. Recruitment was carried out through acquaintances, snowball sampling, social media, and email advertisements. All participants were enrolled in degree programmes at universities in London at the time of the interviews. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, all interviews were conducted online between April 2020 and March 2021. The research, guided by White's definition of migration culture, placed significant emphasis on exploring participants' motivations for choosing UK universities for their studies.<sup>22</sup> To ensure ethical standards, pseudonyms were assigned to all participants in the article.

#### 4. Findings and discussion

In today's fast paced life, and with their fluid mobility, more and more young people are starting to treat migration as a pathway to various unknown possibilities. People in their adolescence or 20s are in the most daring period of their lives and there are certain migratory features unique to youth. In my sample, we can see some students perceive migration as a means leading them to what they want to become or experience. Such a belief is becoming increasingly popular amongst young people in both Poland and China. What does this youth migration culture consist of? Do Polish and Chinese students possess similar or different strategies when they migrate? This study aims to demonstrate how students talk about their migration decision as due to being young and adventurous.

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<sup>21</sup> *Where do HE students come from?*, <https://www.hesa.ac.uk/data-and-analysis/students/where-from> (access: 10.05.2022).

<sup>22</sup> A. White, *Young people and migration...*

#### 4.1. Transition migrants: the road to independence

The transition from youth to adulthood is an important life phase for everyone. It is a period when a person begins to take shape. When transition meets with geographic mobility, it could lead to a trend towards social individualisation, postponed marriage and parenthood. Today within the altering nature of family bonds, a new individualised migration pattern has emerged, as people migrate for their own sake. Getting higher education occurs exactly around the transition period. At this very age, young people want to gain independence, have some experience and are getting to know themselves. International migration provides them with a great opportunity to leave the environment and structure they are familiar with. Transition was the motivation for migration for many students, who mentioned that they chose to go abroad in favour of independence. Take Ling as an example:

I went to day school all the time. I wanted to try living alone, so I chose to study abroad. I was looking forward to seeing what it is like when I take care of myself.

– Ling

Around the age of 18, when they are at the border of adulthood, interviewees displayed a strong will to achieving independence. Ling was an only child raised by her parents for 18 years in Shanghai. She never needed to worry about daily errands as her parents did everything for her. Shanghai, the largest city in China, gave her ample resources to grow up. She could have lived a pleasant life with nothing to worry about in China, but the passage to adulthood motivated her to examine what she could do without care from her parents, so she moved to the other side of the world and started to live on her own. Ling's move echoed what McCollum et al. suggest about the changed meaning of youthful adulthood in life courses, which facilitates geographic mobility.<sup>23</sup> Life course is no longer a static combination of linear stages, but a fluid process mediating by ISMs' own agency.

The one-child policy, which lasted for three decades, had outcomes for the family patterns in contemporary China. The only child obtains all the resources as well as expectation of the entire family. He or she may grow up 'happily' without competition or sacrifice within the family, but is also unconsciously more dependent on parents, as they take parents' assistance for granted. When they want to shed this dependence, their youthful nature plays a critical role. After being under the protection of their parents for so many years, they finally had an opportunity to test themselves and live on their own. Migration at this moment functions as a path towards independence or at least, as Krzaklewska suggests, "an experience of semi-independence."<sup>24</sup> However, since this policy was applied much more strictly in cities

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<sup>23</sup> D. McCollum, K. Keenan, A. Findlay, *The case for a lifecourse perspective...*

<sup>24</sup> E. Krzaklewska, *Youth, mobility and generations – the meanings and impact of migration and mobility*



than in rural areas, and because Chinese international students often come from urban backgrounds, it is important to recognise that the connection between the one-child policy and international student mobility primarily pertains to urban Chinese families.

Clearly, we need to bear in mind that this path towards independence is class-based.<sup>25</sup> Only a few students, those from families of privileged status, can afford such chances, making their life courses distinct as a result of their international mobility.<sup>26</sup> Meanwhile, students from economically less privileged families have less, even no such chances. In such a context, migration culture amongst these international students is clearly not in the same way of Jack Kerouac's 'on the road', but an opportunity offered by their privileged families. We may say the way interviewees tried to escape from the protection of families was guaranteed by their families.

#### 4.2. Lifestyle migrants: the vibe of London

When people migrate in search of a desirable way of life, they become lifestyle migrants. The expression is often understood to denote rich people migrating for a better quality of life, life-work balance and to escape from preceding constraints. Young migrants, particularly student migrants, are also largely interested in lifestyles. They are attracted to culturally exciting global metropolises. London has a long tradition of immigration, and under the European free movement framework, the UK capital became increasingly fascinating to young continental Europeans before Brexit.<sup>27</sup> Its cultural and economic resources are second to none, so "London has become the key stage in the life-course trajectories of a vast number of European citizens."<sup>28</sup>

Many of my interviewees noted that they chose London as the destination city on purpose. An appealing young-adult lifestyle seemed to drive them to this enormous metropolis. They arrived with either a vague idea of their London dream, or concrete expectations about their opportunities, or pursuit of freedoms which their home countries failed to offer. From the interviews, I identified several main attractions.

First is the 'vibe' of London. This is the English word *Kuba* used in our conversation in Polish. Even the word 'London' can sound like a symbol of endless possibilities and thrilling challenges, so simply hearing it means people are inspired and

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*experiences on transitions to adulthood*, "Studia Migracyjne – Przegląd Polonijny" 2019, t. 45, nr 1, p. 41.

<sup>25</sup> C.L. Xu, *Time, class and privilege...*, pp. 5–29.

<sup>26</sup> A.M. Findlay, D. McCollum, R. Coulter *et al.*, *New Mobilities Across...*

<sup>27</sup> K. Andrejuk, *Europeizacja w diasporze: studenci polscy na uczelniach w Londynie po 2004 roku*, Wydawnictwo FHS PAN, Warszawa 2013.

<sup>28</sup> A. Favell, *Eurostars and Eurocities...*



envision what they could achieve in the city. Before they arrived, both Polish and Chinese students had some hazy but positive ideas about London, as a place where one can become whatever one wants and with diverse entertainment opportunities.

I just wanted to live in a big city like London. I always liked the ‘vibe’ of London... I was also admitted by universities in Rotterdam and Tilburg. But they are small cities and I don’t like their ‘vibe’. That was why I chose London.  
– Kuba

Kuba’s imagination of London depicted a favourable image, which is not visualised but rather appealing. For him, the prestige of the institution seemed less significant than what the city can offer, which backs up Prazeres et al.’s finding that urban features can be the more decisive factor for ISM.<sup>29</sup> The quality of life and elements beyond academic study matter the most in this case.

London’s metropolitan lifestyle was especially favoured by students who already had study abroad experience, but in small towns. In my research sample, students with study abroad experience at a younger age were usually from elite families in big cities, and were probably used to the metropolitan lifestyle in their home countries. In the interviews, they could not help complaining about the boredom and inconvenience they faced during their previous studies. Coming to London seemed like a necessary upgrade for them in their non-academic life. Consider Wanyi’s case:

I don’t want to return to the village, because Bath is a small town, and I don’t want to do my PhD in a small town. It must be a big city, as there will be more career opportunities and entertainment.  
– Wanyi

According to my observation, it is very common amongst Chinese students to call foreign smaller cities ‘small towns’ or even ‘villages’. As a country with over 1.41 billion people, China has about one hundred cities with a population of over one million. Against this background, only a few of the largest megalopolises are considered ‘big cities’ in China. A city with 2 million people is thought to be a ‘small town’. Only a small number of capital cities in the West could reach this ‘big city’ standard, including London, meaning in London students can achieve the familiar city lifestyle they are used to. While Kuba compared London with Rotterdam and Tilburg, Wanyi compared it with the English city Bath. For her, London’s attraction far outweighed Bath, where she had her undergraduate programme. This seems especially the case given that the study sites in England are often overshadowed by London in the imagination of my interviewees, while in Beech’s study international

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<sup>29</sup> L. Prazeres, A. Findlay, D. McCollum et al., *Distinctive and comparative places: Alternative narratives of distinction within international student mobility*, “Geoforum” 2017, vol. 80, pp. 114–122.

students in Nottingham also belittle their own city over London.<sup>30</sup> In this comparative framework of different cities, students distinguish the unique features of the city they choose and highlight its spirits. The significance of city becomes salient when choosing destination universities.

The next reason is more practical – more career opportunities, including placement chances, alumni networks and more job offers. This is a very important advantage that London offers for ambitious young adults. As a global professional hub for culture and finance, London is an ideal place for graduates to start their careers, and for students to earn placement experience to improve employability. Study experience, as well as placement and work experience in London, are highly valued by employers all over the world. No second city could offer such functions. Kewu gave a valuable insight into this:

I realised universities in big cities like London have access to much more resources than smaller cities. For instance, when I did my undergrad at University of Manchester, the programmes or coursework were only virtual projects. But when I am at UCL, in similar courses we had projects authorised by big international companies... These resources exist only in top universities, or universities in big cities.

– Kewu

The choice of Kewu's destination university was directly linked to the importance of London. Compared to Manchester, London offers a wider range of opportunities for students to practice their projects and find employment in big companies. Its identity as a hub for technology, finance and science in the UK and even in the world interacts with university prestige and career development, strengthening the power and attraction of London. Similar to Seoul in Collins' study,<sup>31</sup> the learning experience in London and the support from large international companies are crucial contributors to the image of a city as a desirable destination for higher education.

The final type of response relates to distaste for the atmosphere or lifestyles in their home countries. Some students mentioned that they did not appreciate certain situations in their home countries and thus emigrated. Reasons mentioned included the homogeneity of society, negative political or societal situations, or unpleasant working and living environments. In comparison, they regarded London as a more liberal and tolerant city and its diversity made them more comfortable than where

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<sup>30</sup> S.E. Beech, *Why place matters: imaginative geography and international student mobility*, "Area" 2014, vol. 46, no. 2, pp. 170–177.

<sup>31</sup> F. Collins, *Globalising higher education in and through urban spaces: Higher education projects, international student mobilities and trans-local connections in Seoul*, "Asia Pacific Viewpoint" 2014, vol. 55, no. 2, pp. 242–257.

they were from. They migrated in order to leave the oppressive environment in their home countries and to find freedom. Pola talked about it:

I felt that I might be a little better here. It is about different world views and politics. Poland is very conservative so I definitely prefer the more liberal culture in the UK.  
– Pola

Pola was constrained by the conservative atmosphere where she is from. In the interview, she claimed that she grew up in a hermetic Polish small town, where everybody knew each other and knew everything. Pola made such an example to manifest the atmosphere there: “it is literally such a place that when you wear new shoes, people in the church will say oh Pola you bought yourself new shoes! But here (London), no one cares what you are doing.” Pola asserted clearly that she enjoyed the freedom she had in London, where her life was not observed or exposed to people around. London, which provides a liberal lifestyle, relieved many young migrants of previous pressures and offered a more desirable environment. As Prazeres et al. suggest, these lifestyle-pursuing students aim for the chance to stay in a specific comfortable place, such as London, rather than being focused only on career development.<sup>32</sup> It is the particular liberal vibe of the city that attracts them to study there.

There are various categories of lifestyle migrants amongst Polish and Chinese students, but they are all attracted by the opportunities that London offers them, thus they flow there in great numbers. The influx of migrants from different backgrounds reinforces the diversity of London. In this way, cumulative causation emerges and a youth migration culture is strengthened. However, this does not mean that students from different countries come with identical attitudes.

#### 4.3. Experimental, experienced Polish students vs strategic, pioneer Chinese students

Mobility is becoming more and more common among today's youth. In my sample both Chinese and Polish students were attracted by London's diverse lifestyle, but they presented different attitudes when they arrived. Some Chinese students expressed the view that they came to London simply for the experience itself. After obtaining degrees they would soon return to China. This is especially true in the cases of one-year-master's students.

I study for my master's degree only for the experience abroad. For me it is just an adventure, an experience in my life.  
– Wenwen

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<sup>32</sup> L. Prazeres, A. Findlay, D. McCollum *et al.*, *Distinctive and comparative places...*

I come to the UK mainly for the master's degree. Oh and I want to experience as well...  
Then I will return to Shenzhen or Guangzhou, maybe Shanghai.  
– Yunhai

These Chinese students were strategic in their decisions to study in the UK. The overseas experience was the most important motivator for them. It could be a reward for long-term hard work within the Chinese education system, or a way of promoting their resume, or a dream from when they were very young. Whichever the case, “it is just an adventure” in their life and in the end they will always return. They knew it before departure. They reflect Andrejuk’s definition of ‘educational tourists’,<sup>33</sup> who perceive their overseas education as an adventure and tend to return home after this journey.

In contrast, Polish interviewees never showed such an explicit return-home propensity. Rather, they talked about migration as an experiment, with open options. Eade, Drinkwater and Garapich termed it ‘intentional unpredictability’, a concept which is heavily quoted by migration scholars.<sup>34</sup> The term is used to describe migrants without specific ambitions or plans pertaining to the future. Instead of sending back remittances or settling down permanently in receiving countries, they keep options open. Such is the case amongst many of my Polish interviewees. They depicted their arrival to London as part of an ongoing process, and that there is no clear-cut indicator of when or where this process was going to end.

It was important for me to have connections with other countries than with only Holland and Poland. It always seemed to me that higher education is a good way to have such connections.  
– Zygmunt

I definitely wanted to know more than Poland. Because I lived abroad earlier, and then 6 years in Poland. Later I wanted to go somewhere else to see other different countries.  
– Kaja

It is worth noting that many Polish interviewees were like Zygmunt and Kaja, who already have overseas experiences. Zygmunt did his undergrad in Holland and spent a term at University of Edinburg as an exchange student. Kaja spent her childhood in China as her parents had trade business there. For students like them, studying abroad is just a way for them to experience different countries. Although both highlighted experience, Polish and Chinese students have different subtexts. Chinese students, at least in my sample, wanted to gain experience, and return home with such experiences. But Polish students were always ‘during’ the experience. After

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<sup>33</sup> K. Andrejuk, *Europeizacja w diasporze...*

<sup>34</sup> J. Eade, S. Drinkwater, M. Garapich, *Class and ethnicity...*

dwelling in the UK, there might be another experience elsewhere. That is to say, relatively speaking, Polish students were more experimental in terms of migration culture, whilst Chinese students were more strategic in their motivations for studying abroad.

However, the term 'liquid migration' needs to be re-examined in the context of this study. Some strategies and attitudes of Polish participants did fit in with this notion, such as impermanent stay and an individualised orientation, but some others did not conform to this type. The Polish interviewees had mostly arrived before Brexit and were able to benefit from freedom of movement, but UK's dropout from the EU made them less capable of being 'liquid'. In addition, though Polish participants were more experimental compared to Chinese peers, their moves were not as sudden and spontaneous as Engbersen and Snel suggest. In reality, many of them had made good preparations and aimed for international careers before studying abroad. Usually, their decisions were made as a result of rational calculations rather than out of spontaneity. Student migration is not necessarily liquid, but can be constrained by institutional factors.

What is more, we can see different purposes in relation to migration culture between Polish and Chinese students. This period of migration to the UK seems to serve different functions for them. For Polish students, such as Kaja, it is a stepping-stone for subsequent mobility. Study in the UK is part of an on-going mobility process, during which they keep their minds open and accumulate cultural and social capital in order to settle down or keep moving. Polish students are experiencing highly individualised lives beyond the frame of nation-state. For Chinese students, however, this period seems like an anomaly in their planned life, and "just an adventure," as the participant Wenwen suggests. This supports Wang and Collins' findings that the linear life course is no longer suitable for international students, and that they refuse to follow the temporal norms in the home country, but seek for new adventures outside China in their youthful days.<sup>35</sup>

Close scrutiny reveals a few clues as to the reason for this difference. First, Polish students have more prior migration experience, therefore are more likely to possess a migration identity. We can see from the case of Zygmunt and Kaja that migration is common in their life, and studying abroad is just part of their migration experience. That means these Polish students were already migratory before studying in the UK, or in other words, studying abroad is the outcome of their migration identity. For most Chinese students, however, their scarce migration experience meant they did not have such a nature. For many, it was the first time that they had stayed away from home for such a long time. Also, they were usually the pioneer migrants in their family. It would be too risky to keep their options open. Hence, they should be careful and less experimental.

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<sup>35</sup> B.Y. Wang, F. Collins, *Temporally Distributed Aspirations...*

Another reason is the geographic distance. Many Polish students highlighted the short distance from the UK to Poland as a key motive for them to choose a university in London. Cheap flights, the short travel time and the visa-free policy (before Brexit) make it much easier to fly back and forth between Poland and the UK. However, in China, a flight of two hours will only take you from Beijing to Shanghai. It takes 12–24 hours to fly from Beijing to London. The cheapest one-way ticket costs around £500. In addition, there is the complicated and expensive process of applying for a visa. Such differences would certainly have an impact on the attitudes of Polish and Chinese students. With lower costs and risks, it is easier for Polish students to experience foreign (European) countries. Time and money spent on international journeys within Europe are like domestic journeys within China. That also means that for Chinese students, it will be a bigger challenge to study in the UK than for Polish students. It would be unwise to migrate thousands of miles without specific goals and they think strategically to make sure their investment pays off in the future.

To conclude, although migration culture exists amongst both Polish and Chinese students, its meaning is different for the two groups. Both of these groups are mobile, ambitious and curious about the world. Migration is a means to obtain independence and their favoured lifestyles. But many Polish students, with a strategy of intentional unpredictability, migrated with exploratory attitudes. Studying abroad was not an end, but part of a longstanding migratory process. Chinese students usually have plans to return home even before departure. Study abroad is an experience they want to earn, and with it they will have more credentials for their future.

## 5. Conclusion

The results of this study reveal a youth migration culture in which young people seek independence and a favourable lifestyle through overseas education. However, this culture is not universally shared among all young adults; it is a class-based privilege shaped by human agency in navigating structural constraints. Participants from wealthier families are more capable of embracing this culture and taking subsequent actions to realise their goals.

Additionally, there is heterogeneity within this migration culture. From my research sample, it is evident that Polish and Chinese international students have different attitudes towards migration. Polish students tend to be more experimental and have more migration experience, while Chinese students are more strategic and often pioneer migrants in their families. This suggests that youth migration culture should be examined more carefully in the context of different cultural and historical backgrounds, even when participants generally come from economically advanced families.

The greater migration experience among Polish participants compared to Chinese participants may be attributed to the recent historical and geographical contexts of both countries. Poland has a long history of emigration. With the collapse of communism in 1989 and the entry into the European Union in 2004, the country has witnessed a growing international migration trend. A visa-free policy, cheap flights and the short distance to Western countries are all motivators triggering migration for both individuals and families. It has generally been easy for Polish people to migrate internationally for the last three decades.

Chinese nationals, unlike Polish citizens, do not enjoy the same freedoms as those in the European Union when it comes to international mobility and study opportunities. For those who do manage to move abroad, they and their children often seek permanent migration and apply for citizenship in the host countries.<sup>36</sup> However, in my study, participants were selected based on their citizenship status, so the Chinese individuals who might have similarities to the Polish participants were not included in this research. In addition, the reform and opening-up policy in the 1980s boosted the Chinese economy on a large scale. A growing middle class started to emerge in China, and within it are today's international students' parents in my sample. These parents seldom have experience of international mobility due to lack of opportunities (out-migration regulations and visa policies are complex), necessity (they could obtain wealth inside China), and connections abroad (most of them come from entirely local backgrounds). But they have enough wealth to invest in their children to secure their position in society. Of course, there are families who have foreign contacts, or manage to live or work abroad, but they are greatly outnumbered by the middle-class families from mainland China.

Polish parents were more mobile than their Chinese counterparts due to different historical and geographical contexts. It suggests that the life course of the same age cohort may be shaped by socio-economic contexts in separate places, which can have long-term effects on the life course of their later generations. It is therefore argued that migration culture should be examined not only within individuals, but also across generations.

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## STRESZCZENIE

### KULTURA MIGRACJI MŁODZIEŻY, PRZEJŚCIE MŁODZIEŻY I STYL ŻYCIA: PRZYPADEK POLSKICH I CHIŃSKICH STUDENTÓW MIĘDZYNARODOWYCH W LONDYNIE

Kultura migracji jest kluczowym tematem w badaniach migracyjnych, ale rzadko jest badana w kontekście międzynarodowej migracji studentów (ISM). Niniejszy artykuł, koncentrując się na dwóch reprezentatywnych grupach ISM: polskich i chińskich studentach międzynarodowych w Londynie, ma na celu zbadanie kultury migracji młodzieży. Korzystając z jakościowych, pogłębionych wywiadów, przeanalizowano naturę kultury migracyjnej tych studentów, obejmując takie aspekty jak przejście młodzieży i migracja stylu życia. Badanie ujawnia również heterogeniczność kultury migracji młodzieży. Niniejszy artykuł dostarcza wglądu w typy migrantów oraz bada przyczyny ich różnych postaw w ramach tej kultury.