

Migration as Class-based Consumption: The Emigration of the Rich in Contemporary China

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Abstract

Labelled as the third wave of migration out of post-reform China, the recent emigration of wealthy Chinese has attracted worldwide attention. Although this form of mobility involves primarily the richest 0.1 per cent of the Chinese population, the high profile of the people who move and the amount of wealth implied have made it a sensational social phenomenon. Through interviews, participant observation and media reports, this paper searches for the social meanings of this trend of emigration. Journalists generally attribute the exodus of the rich to a desire to secure their wealth, an aspiration for a different education for their children, or concerns with air pollution and food safety. What this paper argues is that underneath these stated motivations, emigration is in fact a form of class-based consumption, a strategy for class reproduction, and a way to convert economic resources into social status and prestige. “Emigration” (*yimin*), a form of mobility that may not entail settling abroad, is a path created by wealthy Chinese striving to be among the global elite.

Keywords: wealthy Chinese; migration; class in China; status consumption; *tuhao*; elite

Summer 2014, Shanghai. My iPhone beeped. A Wechat message popped up.¹ It was from Andrew.² He sent me a photo of a document in Chinese. It was an announcement by the US government stating that the quota for the EB-5 Visa³ for Chinese citizens had been filled, and that no more applications would be accepted during the financial year ending on 30 September 2014.⁴ For the past three years, Andrew had been in the process of applying for an EB-5 visa

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1 Wechat (*weixin* in Chinese), is a form of social media and communication service operated by Tencent.

2 Pseudonyms are used throughout the article to preserve the anonymity of the interviewees.

3 The EB-5 visa is a US visa granted to immigrant investors that started in 1990. It asks foreign investors to invest at least US\$500,000 in a new “at-risk” commercial enterprise, either directly or through an EB-5 Regional Center. Please see: <http://www.uscis.gov/eb-5>. Accessed 23 February 2015.

4 The quota for Chinese nationals is set at around 85%. See “US quota for Chinese investor visa runs out,” *China Daily*, 28 August 2014, http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/world/2014-08/28/content_18504466.htm. Accessed 6 January 2015.

to the US. Only a week before, he had told me that the message he received from his agent was positive. The immigration agent promised him that his application would go through, and he might get his I-526 Form soon.⁵ “*Hai*,” he sighed in his Wechat message, “I was hoping to send the kids out sooner so they could have an adventure and broaden their perspectives.”

Andrew is one of hundreds of thousands of wealthy Chinese aspiring to emigrate to a foreign country as business investors. The US immigration office expected that the EB-5 quota would be filled as soon as the 2015 financial year began on 1 October, as many applications were already in the pipeline. This wave of rich Chinese migrating through business investment rose suddenly. In 2012, an immigration lawyer in southern California mentioned that the annual quota of 10,000 EB-5 visas had never been maximized since its inception in 1990; in just two years, the situation has completely changed.⁶

The US is not the only target destination: Chinese nationals were the main recipients of business investment visas in Australia. Their share of that country’s business innovation and investment programme was 72.2 per cent of the total 7,010 granted in the 2012–2013 financial year, rising from 11.3 per cent in 2002–2003.⁷ Canada, Singapore, Hong Kong, Spain and other European countries have also attracted Chinese investors. According to a *Hurun Report* published in 2014, among a sample of 393 Chinese who had a net worth over 10 million yuan, 64 per cent had already emigrated to a foreign country or would attempt to do so in the near future.⁸

There are many obvious motives for this apparent exodus of wealthy Chinese: anxiety over children’s well-being in the competitive Chinese education system; a desire to protect one’s wealth; concerns over food security and air pollution in urban China; and worries about potential social upheavals and changing political attitudes towards the wealthy are all mentioned in the media or by other China scholars.⁹ I acknowledge that these reasons undoubtedly encourage the rich to emigrate, but I argue that this type of migration is above all a form of class-based consumption. International mobility is one of the most valued commodities and the business investor visa comes with an extraordinary price tag. Possessing it signals the recipient’s class position and provides access to a perceived wholesome living environment and an imagined elite lifestyle overseas. Emigration also allows the first-generation rich to secure and advance the class position of their children among the global elites. Moreover, the particular form this type of

5 The I-526 form is called an “Immigrant petition by alien entrepreneur” and is filed by EB-5 investors after they have taken the appropriate measures to invest in an acceptable EB-5 project.

6 Interview with an immigration lawyer, Alhambra, California, 23 August 2012.

7 Australia Department of Immigration and Border Protection. 2013. “Australian migration trend,” <http://www.immi.gov.au/pub-res/Documents/statistics/migration-trends-2012-13.pdf>. Accessed 23 February 2015.

8 See Hurun Report 2014. This number is close to the figure of 60% provided in “2011 White paper on Chinese people’s private wealth management,” published by Hurun Report and Bank of China, available at: <http://www.hurun.net>. The sample size for the latter is 980.

9 Wang and Liu 2012, 28–49; Osburg 2013.

migration takes, *yimin bu yizhu* 移民不移住 (migrating without settling), and the split household it frequently entails, allows some businessmen to fulfil their family responsibilities without abandoning their businesses or indeed the fun of a Chinese masculine business culture.

Class Society and the Logic of Mobility

The emigration of rich Chinese is both a Chinese social phenomenon and a migration phenomenon. Before introducing the empirical analysis, this section presents a brief review of selected research in these fields.

Class in post-reform China and the changing face of the elite

The exodus of wealthy Chinese forms part of the process of class formation in post-reform China. The transition from a planned to a market economy, as well as its engagement with global capitalism, has inevitably changed the social landscape of China. The old institutional bases of classification, such as the household registration system and political hierarchy, have compounded with market forces to give rise to an increasingly stratified society.¹⁰

Several characteristics distinguish class in China. First, China has a relatively underdeveloped middle class. The 2006 Chinese General Social Survey shows that only 12.1 per cent of the population in China and 25.4 per cent in urban China could be objectively categorized as middle class.¹¹ Second, class boundaries are increasingly salient. Government officials, corporate managers, private business owners and technical professionals form the top strata, and the rest of the population occupies peripheral positions in society. There is insufficient mobility between classes.¹² Finally, class-consciousness has emerged among Chinese people. Those who identify themselves by class status express their class identity through their consumption, ranging from food, clothes and leisure to housing.¹³ Li Peilin observes that consumption style itself, where one lives and what one buys, enhances one's subjective class identification (*zhuguan jiecheng ren-tong* 主观阶层认同).¹⁴

Most recent academic research about class in China focuses on the middle class, and studies about the upper class or the elite are relatively few. There is an uncertainty about who the elites are. In the earlier post-reform era, the elite class (*jingying jiecheng* 精英阶层) usually encompassed Party bureaucrats who had political power and professional employees with higher education.¹⁵

10 There have been extensive discussions on the mechanisms that shape the new class system in China. See Bian 2002; Li, Lulu 2002; Walder, Li and Treiman 2000.

11 Li, Peilin, and Zhang 2008.

12 Cheng 2010.

13 Li, Chunlin 2011; Zhang, Li 2012; Zhang, Xiulin, and Zhang 2014.

14 Li, Peilin 2005.

15 Walder 1995; Walder, Li and Treiman 2000.

Increasingly, the elite category has extended to include successful business owners. However, because the label *jingying* 精英 in Chinese denotes a certain cultural superiority, the inclusion of wealthy business people – a category of people often associated with unethical behaviour and sometimes decadent lifestyles in popular imagination – makes the social status of the *jingying jieceng* ambivalent.

Most scholarship on contemporary elites is concerned with the production and reproduction of the so-called elite.¹⁶ John Osburg's ethnography is among the few that probe into the social practices of the wealthy. Following the leisure activities of rich men in a provincial city, he points out that their private consumption, especially their nightlife consumption, is essential to establishing their business networks and defining their elite masculinity. Consumption, that is the goods they purchase, the places in which they entertain and the women they are seen with, is an important signifier of their status among their peers.¹⁷ However, amidst the panic surrounding the perceived decline in morals in China¹⁸ and Xi Jinping's 习近平 anti-corruption campaign, the practices Osburg describes no longer carry the prestige they may once have had owing to their linkage with political corruption and lax sexual mores. In the second decade of 21st century, several Chinese entrepreneurs have become among the wealthiest people in the world, and the rich people in urban China, with the assistance of an industry that services the rich, are looking for different and maybe more legitimate ways to distinguish themselves.

From economic to cultural logic of migration

The contemporary outmigration of wealthy Chinese also manifests the cultural logic of migration. Except for forced displacement, migration studies prioritize the economic logic for migration.¹⁹ Not only do studies of labour migration focus on its economic motivations, the analyses of the motives for the contemporary outmigration of ethnic Chinese business people from South-East Asia also stress economic rationales.²⁰ The growth of the East Asian economy in the 1980s and the increasing pace of economic globalization, coinciding with the initiation and expansion of business immigration programmes in North America and Australia in the 1980s, motivated ethnic Chinese capitalists, the *Homo Economicus* as described by David Ley, to search for profits and capital accumulation globally.²¹ However, the cultural logic of migration has been highlighted in more recent mobility phenomena. Migration is seen as a

16 Zheng and Li 2009; Zhang, Le, and Zhang 2012.

17 Osburg 2013.

18 Yan 2011.

19 Economic rationale is the departure point of most analyses of the causes for voluntary migration. For a review, see Massey et al. 1993.

20 Political reasons are considered part of the driving force behind the flow of affluent businessmen out of Hong Kong before the Chinese takeover in 1997. See Li, Peter 2005; Skeldon 1994.

21 Ong 1999; Ley 2011.

form of lifestyle consumption, an ideology and a way to fashion oneself as a modern subject.²²

In the 1990s, a new form of cross-border mobility captured researchers' attention. Labelled lifestyle migration, it refers to "relatively affluent individuals of all ages, moving either part-time or full-time to places that, for various reasons, signify, for the migrant, a better quality of life."²³ Under the umbrella concept of lifestyle migration are diverse types of migration phenomena, including retirement relocation, second-home ownership and leisure migration.²⁴ Lifestyle migration literature emphasizes individuals' quest for self-realization and for quality of life, and describes this migration practice as a form of break from the pre-migration life.

Julie Chu's *Cosmologies of Credit* provides another insight into the motivations for migration. Chu argues that mobility has become an index, a value signifier and "a privileged qualisign of modern selves and relations" among aspiring Fuzhou migrants.²⁵ In other words, mobility or immobility signifies a rural villager's social distance to modernity.

Both lifestyle migration's emphasis on mobility as an identity expression and Chu's observation of migration's performative dimension help us to understand the phenomenon presented in this study. The migration of rich Chinese mainlanders can certainly be considered a form of lifestyle migration. Wealthy Chinese investors do not see their migration as a means to economic gain, at least not primarily. Instead, each aspires to a version of a good life. Collectively, however, this practice becomes a "qualisign," helping to erect class boundaries and signify elite class position.

Data and Methods

This paper uses three types of qualitative data supplemented with statistics published by commercial consulting companies. First, I conducted interviews with 18 individuals or families in China and the US from May 2012 to August 2014. Three of the interviewees were immigration agents (*yimin zhongjie* 移民中介) who worked for two migration service providers, and one was a paralegal with a Los Angeles law firm that handled immigration cases. Fourteen of my cases were wealthy individuals or families who had successfully migrated as business investors, or who were applying for investment visas. Table 1 in the Appendix presents the profiles of these emigrants, including age, education, occupation, sources of wealth and migration destinations. Individuals from the same family are considered as one case. Some individuals and families were interviewed multiple times at different stages of their migration process. Most of the informants

²² Chu 2010.

²³ O'Reilly 2000; Benson and O'Reilly 2009, 609

²⁴ Huber and O'Reilly 2004; King, Warnes and Williams 2000.

²⁵ Chu 2010, 14.

were in their late 30s and early 40s and had a university education, matching the profiles of investor emigrants reported by Hurun Report (*Hurun baifubang* 胡润百富榜), a publishing company that surveys high net worth individuals (HNWIs).²⁶

The second type of data used is ethnographic data from participant observation. I undertook field trips to Shanghai and a nearby city in China in January 2012, May 2012, January 2013 and August 2014. In August 2013, I stayed at an informant's house in Orange County, California, and visited areas populated by Chinese immigrants in Southern California. During these field trips, I participated in social gatherings and documented people's discussions about emigration and their evaluations of different destinations. Through participant observation, I gained a more comprehensive understanding of the general concerns that led to emigration decisions and the issues that emerged during the emigration process, as well as post-migration life.

Journalistic reports supply the third type of qualitative data. The visibility of this form of migration has stirred up heated discussions in the Chinese media, providing a wealth of data for researchers. With the help of a research assistant, I accumulated over 80 media reports dated between May 2010 and February 2014. These media reports, mostly in Chinese, were originally published in newspapers in mainland China and Hong Kong, and later posted on websites such as xinhuanet.com, Time-weekly.com and news.sina.com.cn. All quotes are translated from Chinese to English by the author. In addition, this paper employs statistics from commercial marketing or financial firms, especially Hurun Report.

The Emigration of the Wealthy in Contemporary China

In China, the trend for the rich to emigrate is considered as the third migration wave (*yiminchao* 移民潮) of the post-reform era. The first wave was family reunion-oriented migration, as well as student migration, in the 1980s. The second wave took place from the late 1980s to the early 2000s and saw a large group of skilled professionals and students leaving China. The third wave, composing of wealthy emigrants, started in the 2000s.²⁷

According to the 2011 “Private banking white paper” (*Zhongguo siren caifu guanli baipishu* 中国私人财富管理白皮书) published by the Bank of China and Hurun Report, there were 960,000 individuals in China who had a net worth of over 10 million yuan in 2011.²⁸ The number has been steadily increasing every year but it is still less than 0.1 per cent of the population of China. These individuals were relatively young, with an average age of 39. The major sources of their wealth came from private enterprises (55 per cent), real estate

26 For more information, see <http://www.hurun.net/en/>.

27 Wang, Huiyao. 2013. “Zhongguo zheng jingli disanci yiminchao” (China is experiencing the third migration wave), 9 January, <http://www.ftchinese.com/story/001048374?full=y>. Accessed 6 January 2015.

28 Bank of China and Hurun Report 2011.

investments (20 per cent), stock market investments (15 per cent) and high paying professional jobs (*jinling* 金领, 10 per cent).²⁹ Of these rich Chinese, 60 per cent intended to emigrate, or had already emigrated, to a foreign country, with the US being the most popular destination.³⁰

The emigrants, contrary to the popular image of the uncouth nouveau riche, are mostly well educated. According to one survey conducted by Hurun and Visas Consulting, over half (55 per cent) have graduated from university and nearly one third (30 per cent) have master's degrees. Only 13 per cent have less than a high school education.³¹

Many motives are attributed to the current wave of emigrants from China. The most common reason cited is children's education. The 2011 Hurun Report shows that 50 per cent of the people who expressed an interest in investing overseas stated that their "children's education" was their primary motivation.³² The rigid and competitive Chinese education system, which demands excessive homework and encourages cramming practices, has incited widespread criticism within Chinese society. Emigrant parents hope to use their economic resources to give their children a quality education.

Asset protection is another frequently reported reason. The rich are seen as busily moving their wealth overseas for safekeeping. Ye Tan, an economic analyst, writes that asset insecurity is a "shadow" looming over wealthy Chinese.³³ China is perceived as lacking adequate protection for property rights. In addition, wealthy business people are haunted by the discourse of "original sin" (*yuanzui-lun* 原罪论) – an accusation that most successful enterprises obtained their wealth, at least initially, by partnering with corrupt government officials and by illegally appropriating public resources.³⁴ Xi Jinping's anti-corruption campaign has only heightened these insecurities. Furthermore, the historical precedents of the communist persecution of the wealthy give the current rich little assurance that their assets will be safe.³⁵ However, although the public is anxious about the draining of wealth from China,³⁶ rich emigrants reportedly moved on average only 16 per cent of their assets to a foreign country. A mere 8 per cent of the people surveyed by Hurun Report invested more than 50 per cent of their money in the host society; most invested in real estate property in the destination countries.³⁷

29 Ibid.

30 Ibid.

31 Hurun Report and Visas Consulting Group 2014.

32 Bank of China and Hurun Report 2011.

33 Ye Tan 2010.

34 It is a term popularly associated with the economist Lang Xianping.

35 Ye Tan 2010.

36 "Zhusanjiao furen yiminchao – qunian woguo wailiu baiyi yimin zijin" (The migration wave of the Pearl Delta rich – trillions of investor capital flowing out of China last year), *Yangcheng wanbao*, 19 July, http://www.qingdaonews.com/gb/content/2010-07/19/content_8433967.htm. Accessed 25 February 2015.

37 Hurun Report and Visas Consulting Group 2014.

The Hurun and Visas Consulting Group's survey also indicates that air pollution, food safety and welfare come before concerns over wealth itself. One media report highlighted a popular statement among wealthy Chinese: "If a problem can be solved by money, it is not a problem."³⁸ The report argues that rich people do not have a sense of "well-being" (*xingfu* 幸福) in China. In the face of the environmental consequences of rapid industrial growth, the public health consequences of irresponsible business operations and the social consequences of polarizing economic development, many wealthy Chinese opt for a more peaceful and wholesome living environment.

These stated reasons may all be real, but what this paper aims to show is that despite these expressed motives, this form of migration is essentially a type of class consumption. Mobility, along with the recent fads of spiritual pursuits, cultural learning and physical exercises, is a practice the moneyed urban elite, and especially those with a better education, adopt in order to attain social status and to adopt the style of a global elite without breaking with their accustomed business practices and, in the case of some men, the particular masculine culture they have embraced. Moreover, mobility allows rich Chinese to equip their children with elite educational credentials and transnational cultural capital.

Mobility as Elite Class Consumption

In sociology, consumption has always been considered a status symbol that solidifies the group and creates boundaries between groups.³⁹ Among the rich Chinese, there is a strong desire for social distinction but their wealth has yet to be converted to social prestige. In reality, their ostentatious consumer behaviour has been the target of public ridicule, gaining them the satirical nickname, *tuhao* 土豪 (the country millionaires), which projects an image of crassness and a lack of taste. In response, an industry has sprung up in China that aims to service and accustom the rich to an elite consumer culture. As Lin Jiang, a successful lawyer and entrepreneur who launched a magazine to promote luxury commodities and an elite lifestyle remarked, "There are several tens of millions of people with cash savings of over 6 million yuan in China. We need to educate the rich about an elite consumer culture."⁴⁰

The well-publicized Hurun Report is a flagship of such an industry. As a publishing and event company, Hurun Report has been publishing China's Rich List since 1999, tracking the changing demographics and consumption styles of the richest segment of Chinese society. While "documenting" the changes, it actively educates rich Chinese about luxury brands and elite lifestyles through magazines such as *Best Things in Life*. By describing what the most successful Chinese

38 Lan, Hengmin. 2011. "Weihe furenmen jiyu yimin; guoren chulu zaina?" (Why do rich people rush to emigrate? Where is the way out for Chinese people?), *Jingji daobao*, 12 October, <http://finance.huagu.com/pl/111012/99194.html>. Accessed 25 February 2015.

39 Veblen 1994[1899]; Goffman 1951; Bourdieu 1984.

40 Interview with Lin Jiang, Shanghai, 18 August 2014.

entrepreneurs and global moneyed elites do and consume, it serves as a weather-vane for aspirational wealthy Chinese. From wearing a Patek Philippe timepiece to drinking Perrier-Jouët champagne or driving a Lamborghini, the urban rich emulate the consumption style of other global elites.⁴¹ “Emigration” (*yimin* 移民) is one such coveted commodity.

Emigration has the ability to signify class status because the freedom to move is “perpetually a scarce and unequally distributed commodity,” and “in our late-modern or postmodern times” has fast become “the main stratifying factor.”⁴² It is an especially prized commodity in contemporary China. Decades of restrictions through passport control and household registration have intensified the desire for mobility among Chinese people. From the “fever to go abroad” (*chuguore* 出国热) to the sense of “displacement” at home, emigration has always been seen as a ticket to a better life.⁴³ With the loosening of passport controls and economic development in recent decades, accompanied by the flourishing study abroad opportunities and travel agencies, mobility itself is now no longer unattainable. Yet, means of mobility now represent different levels of power and resources.⁴⁴ Emigration through business investment comes with a much higher price tag and brings immediate long-term residency with no demand for physical labour and very few institutional constraints. It ensures a higher degree of freedom of movement and thereby signals a higher social status. The recent trend in business investment migration is a form of class consumption through which the wealthy Chinese express their social status and group membership, as represented by my informants’ narratives and practices surrounding emigration.

“Shenfen” as an exclusive commodity

The rich use the expression “buying status” (*mai shenfen* 买身份) when talking about emigrating. Here, *shenfen* refers to legal residency in the destination country. It is not a commodity most Chinese can afford. The minimal capital requirement for the US EB-5 business investment visa is US\$500,000, and can run as high as AUD5 million for the Australian equivalent. Therefore, it is an intrinsically “restrictive” resource, preventing “misrepresentative use.”⁴⁵ In other words, it is not to be appropriated by people who do not belong to this class.

In the summer of 2014 in Shanghai, all the immigration agents I interviewed clearly indicated that their targets were successful entrepreneurs (*qiye zhu* 企业主), high-level managers (*gaoguan* 高管) at private or foreign firms, and those who have made substantial gains from early investments in the real estate markets.

41 According to Hurun Report 2014, these are considered the most desirable consumer brands by individuals whose net worth is more than 10 million yuan.

42 Bauman 1998, 2.

43 Chu 2010. I wish to thank Jamie Coates for this insight.

44 Urry 2007.

45 Goffman 1951, 297.

They considered migration unsuitable for people who could barely afford it. One agent told a story of a couple who had used up all their savings and sold their apartment to make up the more than 3 million yuan required for the EB-5 visa in order to send their 21-year-old son to the US. The son succeeded in his immigration attempt. Nonetheless, the agent said gravely:

I understand the old couple's love towards their son. Although we processed this application for them upon request, this is one case where I think that migration is not a good idea for them. Migration should be for those who have surpluses (*youyu de* 有余的). Looking at the makeup of their investment capital (*zijin goucheng* 资金构成) – they even borrowed some money – I don't think migration is suitable for them.⁴⁶

The EB-5 visa, as well as the other investment visas, requires a substantial amount of money, and families who don't have several apartments or large amounts of cash savings run the risk of losing all of their savings in the migration process. Therefore, despite the various social and environmental imperfections of living in China, emigration is not a path most families can embark upon.

“Yimin bu yizhu”: mobility as consumption

The appeal of business investment migration lies in the flexibility of residency and freedom of mobility. Emigration, or getting a permanent residency overseas, does not mean permanent relocation to a foreign country, as reflected in the popular slogan, “immigrating without settling” (*yimin bu yizhu* 移民不移住), promoted by immigration agents. For rich Chinese, emigration is primarily a form of lifestyle consumption. For a number of them, it is also a solution to particular lifestyle problems pertaining to Chinese masculine business culture.

Aiwa Ong's study of wealthy ethnic Chinese business people found that obtaining multiple residencies and passports was a strategy for capital accumulation, reflecting a form of historically cultivated cultural logic of overseas Chinese business families.⁴⁷ In contrast, among the mainland Chinese new rich, active capital accumulation was not the primary motivation behind them becoming “business investors” in the destination country. All the entrepreneurs I interviewed agreed that China was the place where opportunities lay and where they knew how to play the rules of the game. They had no clue how to make money overseas other than buying and selling properties. They imagined that only the big capital firms in the US or Australia were able to make money and that individual immigrants could not really be part of that.

Many investors did not expect to make money from their so-called investments and indeed some even foresaw a significant loss to their seed money. But they were okay with exchanging the value of an urban apartment for a foreign residency. Having a foreign residency means freedom of mobility, and with it a consumer haven and a particular lifestyle: one can spend several weeks a year

46 Interview with immigration agent, Shanghai, 19 August 2014.

47 Ong 1999.

relaxing in a Spanish town or just get away from the intense dealing and socialization of the Chinese business world.

One interviewee, Andrew, was even prepared to accept the potential global taxation regime in the US. He explained his calculations from a consumer's perspective:

A half a million to one million [US\$] house ... in the US would cost me over 30 million yuan in Shanghai, the latter without a swimming pool. Ferrari 458 [costs] 4.5 million yuan in China, but just over 1 million [yuan] in the US. The Porsch Turbo I am driving is 2.6 million [yuan] here, but only US\$120,000 in the US. I want one more child (a third one). In China, they will fine me several million [yuan]. It won't cost anything in the US. How much can I save – you think about it. A bit more tax is legitimate (*yinggaide* 应该的). [We] shouldn't always think of taking advantage and not giving some. Plus food, air, water. These are not calculable with money.⁴⁸

Peng was a real estate developer in his 50s. He spent AUD1 million and applied for residency under the Business Innovation and Investment scheme (188).⁴⁹ He bought an apartment near Chinatown in Sydney, within walking distance of Darling Harbour. Peng usually spent two months a year there. Australia, in his mind, was a place where he could relax. In his own words:

The air is clean, and the food is the same. When I am there I don't have to deal with all these business issues. As soon as I come back, I am on high alert (*gaodu jinzhang* 高度紧张). It is very tiring doing business in China. So, being able to relax there (*qingsong qingsong* 轻松轻松) is really great.⁵⁰

Yang bought two apartments in Barcelona. After spending over half a million Euros, his family received their five-year residency visa for Spain. He and his wife had separate businesses in China. His daughter had just entered an elite high school in Shanghai and wished to study in a US university. None of the family members planned to live in Spain. It was purely for the freedom of mobility. "We only visit once a year – we go there for vacation anyway (*fanzheng ni ye qu wan ma* 反正你也去玩嘛)."⁵¹

Yimin bu yizhu, the freedom of mobility investment migration brings, is also a solution to the problems that arise from the lifestyles of rich Chinese businessmen. It allows some business people, especially men, to fulfil their responsibilities to their family without giving up the excitement of China and the lifestyles they have embraced. A popular saying compares the better living environment abroad to the excitement of China: "Terrific mountains, terrific waters, but terribly boring; terrible filth, terrible chaos, but terrifically exciting."⁵² Among some Chinese businessmen, elite masculinity is expressed through their "economic might" as well as "their desiring" and "being desired" by young and beautiful women.⁵³ Homosocial leisure and extramarital sexual activity are integral to the business

48 Discussion on WeChat with Andrew, 7 July 2014.

49 The Business Innovation and Investment scheme includes different types of visa programmes. Chinese migrants usually refer to them by numbers: 188 and 132 are the typical subcategories they refer to. See <http://www.immi.gov.au/pub-res/Documents/statistics/migration-trends-2012-13.pdf>. Accessed on February 23, 2015.

50 Interview with Peng, 12 August 2014.

51 Interview with Yang, Shanghai, 18 August 2014.

52 In Chinese, *haoshan*, *haoshui*, *haowuliao*; *haozang*, *haoluan*, *haojingcai*.

53 Song and Hird 2013, 259.

activity of *yingchou* 应酬 (socializing for business purposes).⁵⁴ Informants in my study displayed a more reflexive or ambivalent attitude towards this kind of masculinity, perhaps because of regional differences – my study was carried out in Shanghai and a nearby town – or because of the aforementioned recent attempt at a cultural makeover in order to distance themselves from “*tuhao*.” They often expressed a strong desire for a healthier and cleaner lifestyle. Several business owners, one real estate developer included, specifically stressed that they tried to minimize *yingchou*, and alcohol consumption in particular, in order to protect their own health. Almost all of them exercised regularly. Nonetheless, extramarital affairs were commonplace and brought tension to family life. The men I interviewed who had mistresses were not indifferent to the impact of their sexual practices on their families, and some felt guilty because their wives were their college sweethearts. *Yimin bu yizhu* conveniently removed the wives and children away from the businessmen’s lives inside China, while giving them parallel “cleaner” lives abroad.

The wives of these businessmen also wanted to emigrate to escape these family situations. They were often dependent on their husbands for a comfortable lifestyle and unwilling to forsake the luxury that money had brought them. This form of migration split the household geographically and assigned to the women the role of caretaker of their children abroad. This arrangement was desirable because it provided both the coveted big house and clean air – the imagined upper-class life overseas – whilst at the same time saved them from the pain of facing an unhappy marriage. The split household in a way allowed them to maintain the semblance of a normal, albeit long-distance, family life.

Social networks and group migration

Emigration as a form of class-based consumption is also reflected in the social nature of such a practice. Chinese business people’s decision to emigrate is heavily influenced by their social connections. The majority of my interviewees admitted that they started to “do migration” (*zuo yimin* 做移民) because other people in their social circles were doing so. Peng applied to move to Australia because “my friends have all been doing it.” One of his limited activities in Sydney was hanging out with old friends in downtown Chinatown. Rich businessmen who spoke no foreign languages were particularly worried about loneliness. Chen Qiang tried to persuade his friends to migrate together with his family. He couldn’t speak any English and rarely left his house in Orange Country by himself when he visited. He told me, “I need to take my tea-drinking buddies (*hecha pengyou* 喝茶朋友) to California with me. Otherwise I have nothing to do there. I can’t just stay at home watering the plants! My wife said I killed them by watering them too often.”⁵⁵

54 Osburg 2013.

55 Interview with Chen Qiang, Jiangsu, 30 April 2012

There have even been incidents of “group migration” (*zutuan yimin* 组团移民). One news report mentions that the chief executive of a bank and eight of his managers all emigrated at the same time.⁵⁶ In southern California, several residential neighbourhoods were popular destinations for Chinese investors. In the summer of 2012, when I visited one family who had bought a million-dollar house on the top of a hill near Pomona, I noticed that there were more houses under construction. My host explained that those were all advertised for sale in China. A year later when I inquired about that development, he laughed and told me that they were all occupied by rich Chinese. The owners of the new houses only stayed for part of the year, but my interviewee knew many of them because his family was invited to participate in their barbecues or mah-jong parties. Several houses were purchased together by executives from the same company.

Social comparison exerts migration pressure as well. When Andrew first called me long distance to discuss his EB-5 application, he expressed a degree of urgency. His daughter had just entered the top-ranked middle school in Shanghai. Yet, several months into the new school year, many of his daughter’s classmates were leaving to continue their education overseas. “My wife was nagging me about this. If our children don’t leave earlier, it will be more and more difficult to get into the good private schools in the US. Families are competing for the limited spots.” He wanted his daughter to start as early as possible: “Nowadays, there are already waiting lists for private American high schools. Too many Chinese children are applying. So, I want my daughters to start from junior high school.”⁵⁷

That the overseas migration of the wealthy elite in China has become a “wave” (*chao* 潮) shows that the decision to migrate is no longer a purely individual one. Several people I interviewed used the expressions *genfeng* 跟风 (following trends) or *yangqun xiaoying* 羊群效应 (herd mentality) to describe the phenomenon. Although individuals present their own reasons for emigration, what is obvious is that emigration itself signals their understanding of which social grouping they see themselves belonging to.

“*Wan Shangceng*”: Cultivating the Next Generation of Global Elites

Physical mobility is a form of capital that has the potential to be converted to other forms of capital, such as cultural and social capital.⁵⁸ Emigration is undoubtedly a strategy for capital conversion and class reproduction among rich Chinese. The most cited reason for emigration in China, as mentioned above, is concern over the quality of the education and learning environment

56 Chen, Xiangpeng, and Chen, Xiangle. 2011. “Furen de jiaolu: yimin huozhe bu” (Rich people’s agony: to emigrate or not), *Huaxia ribao*, 12 November, <http://finance.sina.com.cn/money/roll/20111112/075710803619.shtml>. Accessed 26 February 2015.

57 Phone interview with Andrew, 10 August 2013.

58 Kaufmann, Bergman and Joye 2004.

in China. However, this “concern” has a strong class connotation. People of different income levels have different strategies for dealing with their children’s education in China. Well-to-do, middle-class families opt for private education in China, so that their children are not “in the same school as migrant children and the children of their maids,” as one middle-class mother explained to me. Only the most affluent parents emigrate in order to give their children an alternative to the domestic education system.

But what kind of education do the emigrating Chinese expect to get for their children? What future do they envisage for their offspring? The expression used by Andrew, *wan shangceng* 玩上层 (playing at the level of the upper class), captures the aspirations of many rich parents. “*Wan shangceng*” involves, first of all, *wan* 玩 (play), indicating the possibility of not taking things too rigidly and seriously, that is, not to be like the ordinary Chinese students who “only know how many points they get from tests” (*zhi zhidao fenshu* 只知道分数). The children of the rich can opt out of the educational rat race and life can be fun and individuals can grow freely. Tao Ting and Chen Qiang, the couple who invested US\$1 million through the EB-5 programme, sent their son abroad because they didn’t want to see him miserable and spending 14 hours a day, six days a week, at school. They were very happy that their son, after enrolling in a private American high school, became a quarterback in the school football team, went fishing on weekends and participated in community service. Bank manager Zhou Ying’s expectations for her son were that “he was happy.”

However, “*wan shangceng*” also involves “*shangceng*” – the upper class status that the emigrant parents imagine their children should occupy. In order to be among the elite, certain skills, educational credentials and characteristics are needed. Language skills are the first thing many parents believe will help their children get ahead. Andrew wanted to send his 11- and eight-year-old daughters to the US because, in his words, “*wan shangceng* needs good English, because in this world, the West still leads the world in whichever aspect you can think of.”

Other parents also had multilingual skills in mind. Xia Bin, an entrepreneur in his early 40s who had obtained Australian permanent residency, emphasized that China would continue to be a strong economy and Chinese would still be very important. He wanted his three-year-old daughter, who was living in Australia, to come back to China for elementary school in the future.

By the end of elementary school she will be able to read and write Chinese very well. That is enough. I don’t really need her to read *The Dream of the Red Chamber* (*Hongloumeng* 红楼梦) ... Nowadays, people spend 80 per cent of their day on WeChat. If you can’t read and write Chinese, you can’t communicate.⁵⁹

Aside from language skills, emigrant parents want elite education credentials for their children. Emigration is merely a means to circumvent the competition they witness in China. Even Tao Ting and Chen Qiang, while delighting in their son’s opportunity to play sports in a private American high school, expected their son

59 Interview with Xia Bin, 3 August 2014.

to go to a top college in the US, preferably an Ivy League college. After the son had repeatedly received unsatisfactory ACT and SAT scores, the parents resorted to paying for various education services and had people write the application essays for their son. With much help, the son entered a college in the University of California system.

It is clear that the “happy education” emigrant parents hope to obtain for their children does not mean that they give up trying to provide them with a competitive headstart. A “happy education” is a lifestyle affluent parents feel that they can buy for their children. Nonetheless, by escaping the highly competitive education system in China, what they expect is a form of transnational cultural capital that will place their children above others within China itself.⁶⁰ A story told to me by Xia Bin conveys this logic:

We used to have this store on the first floor of our office building, selling rice noodles. You ordered and they would deliver. Once this small boy, maybe only three or four years old, came up to deliver the noodles alone. We asked, “How come you are alone?” He said his sister was delivering for the fifth floor. He looked so small. So, one person joked with him, saying to him, “I will give you these snacks and you give me the noodles.” He said, “The boss will scold me.” “Who is your boss?” “My papa.” So, you see, my children will not be able to compete with a child like that in the things they are able to do. I can only hope that they will have more skills and do things at levels above them.⁶¹

Mere skills are not enough. Elite character and disposition are also needed. Tao Ting wanted her son “to grow up to have greater character” (*daqi* 大气). She said, “In China, especially in the town where we lived, he would have just grown to be a limited and docile person (*xiaojiaziqui* 小家子气), not having the real manly disposition (*nanziqui* 男子气).”

The elitist aspirations of rich Chinese are clearly indicated in the 2014 Hurun Report on the educational choices of the richest Chinese. Among the surveyed millionaires, 28.7 per cent chose the UK for their children’s education before university.⁶² The *Financial Times* reported that English public boarding schools were receiving a rapidly rising number of Chinese applications.⁶³ Zheng Qing chose to send her 12-year-old son to a prestigious all-boy school in the US that listed among its graduates several prominent intellectuals.

A desire for class reproduction is also manifested in the concerns rich parents have for their children’s future marriage prospects. Fei Yulin had been discussing different migration options with an immigration agent. His children were eight and three years old. He would remain in China to manage his business enterprise but he wished to send his children to a foreign country. His rationale was simple: “People like us are all emigrating. If staying in China, my children will have to marry the children of my drivers and employees.”

60 Waters 2008.

61 Interview, Xia Bin, 3 August 2014.

62 Hurun Report 2014.

63 Warrel, Helen. 2014. “Chinese parents scramble to send children to top British schools,” *Financial Times*, 21 March.

Concluding Remarks

What are the social meanings of this business investor migration trend, the “third wave” of transnational migration out of post-reform China? This paper sees it as a form of class-based consumption and a strategy for class reproduction. Emigration through business investment is for the super rich only. Through this form of mobility, one can discern the solidifying class boundaries and the emergence of a self-conscious status group in contemporary China.

China today is an increasingly stratified society. Chinese are among the richest and the poorest people in the world. However, wealth has yet to be consolidated as a basis of social status. Wealthy Chinese, depending on their various means of getting rich and their levels of wealth, are a diverse group. They are both envied and targets of moral critique and cultural disdain, as symbolized in the satiric name “*tuhao*.” With the emergence of a coaching industry, including migration agents, devoted to cultivating and servicing a moneyed elite, rich Chinese in big cities can opt for a lifestyle makeover in an effort to gain social prestige. It is reported that China’s millionaires have been smoking and drinking less, exercising more, giving fewer personal gifts and donating more to charity, and placing more emphasis on family relationships.⁶⁴ The wealthiest also show an inclination for self-cultivation. They are taking philosophy courses and embarking on spiritual pursuits, with some embracing esoteric religions.⁶⁵

Mobility is a major symbol of an elite lifestyle. By converting some of their wealth into a foreign residency, wealthy Chinese gain legitimate access to the West. What can counter the image of *tu 土* in *tuhao* better than its direct opposite – overseas (*yang 洋*)? The West has always featured prominently in the Chinese imagination as representing modernity and civilization. Vanessa Fong’s study of high-school students in Dalian points out that the “developed world,” and especially the West, has been imagined as a “paradise” by the Chinese youth.⁶⁶ The West is considered as a source of elite culture, even though Western culture, as construed in the Chinese imagination, is a (contradictory) hodgepodge that ranges from European aristocratic traditions to American liberal democracy.

Mobility itself, as a valued commodity, has become a characteristic of the global elite. A study by Barclays reports that high net worth individuals around the world are more mobile than ever.⁶⁷ Emigration, therefore, allows the Chinese urban rich to access an elite lifestyle. A residency in a developed country, with the freedom of mobility it brings, opens a gateway to the symbolic capital of the West and an opportunity to be physically among the global elite.

64 Hurun Report 2014.

65 Gu, Wei. 2015. “From wealth to health: rich Chinese seek spiritual fulfillment,” *The Wall Street Journal*, 12 February, <http://www.wsj.com/articles/from-wealth-to-health-rich-chinese-seek-spiritual-fulfillment-1423732348>. Accessed on 10 March 2015.

66 Fong 2011.

67 Barclays Bank plc. 2014. “Wealth insights vol. 18: the rise of the global citizen,” <https://wealth.barclays.com/content/dam/bwpublic/global/documents/shared/wealth-insights-volume-18.pdf>. Accessed 7 March 2015.

Nonetheless, attaining a global elite lifestyle through migration might be more an aspiration than an immediate reality. The post-emigration lives of rich Chinese are far from that imagined. They are, after all, immigrants. The cultural and racial barriers can be immense in many of the destination countries. From what I have observed in southern California, those immigrants lived a segregated social and cultural existence. One migration agent informed me that in order to help overcome her clients' post-migration social isolation, her company has been organizing charity events to help them donate money to local causes in order to make inroads into the local community.

Moreover, the Chinese rich, especially men, are torn between different desires. In a way, this form of migration is fundamentally at odds with the aspiration to attain an elite lifestyle and a cultural makeover. The “*yimin bu yizhu*” practice tends to split the family and impose a regressive gendered division of labour in the household, assigning the mother duty of care of the children overseas. The geographic distance between the husband and wife that such an arrangement entails is conveniently used to deal with the consequences of illicit sexual activity endorsed by the masculine business culture. Even among those families that have not yet encountered a marital crisis, such physical separation strains spousal relationships and is a clear threat to family life. In the end, emigration might just be yet another luxury commodity of the “*tuhao*.” Alternatively, maybe a male-dominated business culture is part of the global elite culture after all.

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Biographical note

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摘要: 近年中国富裕阶层纷纷移民国外, 在中国被称为改革开放后的“第三次移民潮”。虽然能够走投资移民这条路线的人口仅是中国最富有的千分之一, 他们的经济地位和可携走财富使此移民现象不仅震动中国社会, 也在全世界受到瞩目。本篇论文通过个人访谈, 参与观察及媒体报道, 试图深层次分析这次移民潮的社会含义。中外媒体一般认为中国富人大量出国或是为了保证自己的财产安全, 或是为孩子教育考虑, 也或是出于对中国空气污染, 食品安全之类生活环境的忧虑。虽然这些因素确有存在, 本文认为, 富人移民实质上是一种阶层性消费, 一种社会阶层再生产的手段, 也是一种把经济资源转化为社会地位和身份威望的方式。“移民”, 对于当代中国富人来说, 并不意味着移居国外, 更是一条通向全球精英行列的途径。

关键词: 中国富裕层; 移民; 中国社会阶层; 地位消费; 土豪; 精英

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Appendix

Table 1: Profiles of the 14 Emigrating Individuals/Families

Interviewees	Gender	Age	Education	Profession	Main source of wealth	Destination
Fan Yulin	M	35+	University	Business owner	Business profits	US
Song	M	40+	University	Business owner	Business profits	Canada
Andrew	M	40+	University	Business owner	Business profits	US
Peng	M	55+	Below high school	Business owner	Business profits	Australia
Ni Lin	F	40+	2 years of college	Business owner	Business profits	Australia
Lin Jiang	M	40+	Masters degree	Business owner	Business profits	Spain
Xiao Jia	M	45+	Below high school	Business owner	Business profits	US
Xia Bin	M	40+	University	Business owner	Business profits	Australia
Yang	M	40+	University	Business owner	Business profits	Spain
Gan Guiying	F	40+	University	Business owner	Business profits	US
Frank	M	35+	University	Corporate manager	Salary income	US
Zhou Ying	F	40+	University	Corporate manager, wife of a business owner	Salary incomes (husband's business profits)	US
Zheng Qing	F	40+	MBA	Former corporate manager, wife of a business owner	Business profits	US
Chen Qiang/ Tao Ting	F/M	45+	Vocational schools	Public employees	Real estate investments	US

Notes:

Pseudonyms are used throughout.