

Research on the Social Safety Valve Function of the Stigma towards Studying Abroad

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Abstract. There is no lack of research on stigma and international students in China, but little research has been done on the stigma experienced by Chinese Students Studying Abroad for a Master's Degree. Through semi-structured interviews with domestic groups and overseas masters, the study explores the sources and functions of stigma in the context of the social safety valve. The study found that the stigma of masters studying abroad is homogenized by the domestic community due to the fermentation of the "craze for studying abroad" and the "return to China" wave. Through the stigma, the domestic community has resolved their dissatisfaction and anxiety, and master's degree holders have achieved the positive function of the social safety valve by reducing the high expectations they have to bear.

Keywords: Stigma; Social Safety Valve; International Students; Internet Conflict.

1. Introduction

With China's economic development and the improvement of national living standards, studying abroad is getting closer and closer to the general public. Nowadays, China has become the world's largest exporter of international students. The popularisation of study abroad has made it possible for the working class to support their children in studying abroad. However, the cost of studying abroad from undergraduate level is still relatively expensive, so the number of people choosing to study at master's level after undergraduate studies (hereinafter referred to as "MSA", which means masters studying abroad) has been rising year by year. From 2009 to 2018, in a number of well-known Chinese universities, the number of mainland Chinese students studying abroad for master's degrees reached 123,182 in 2021/22 academic year, an increase of 3.64 percent compared with the previous year.

The rising "craze for studying abroad" and the rising wave of "returning to China" have led to an increase in the number of interactions between domestic undergraduate groups (hereinafter referred to as "DG", which means domestic group) and MSA in their daily lives, which has also led to concerns and perceptions of MSA. In contrast to DG who can only be admitted to graduate schools through examinations or postgraduate recommendations, which is a crowded and competitive track, MSA can apply for master's degrees through intermediaries or on their own to multiple universities in multiple countries, and only need to wait for the offer after submitting the documents. Among them, there are not a few cases in which the undergraduates have average grades but gained offers from prestigious universities in foreign countries. Against this background, the following phenomenon exists in the fermentation of public opinion: MSA has been given all kinds of labels and stereotypes by DG, such as "rich" and "studying for a water master's degree". The "water" in "water master" refers to easy admission, short study period, and easy graduation, which usually refers to a one-year master's degree, i.e., masters by coursework.

Previous research on stereotypes focused on gender and geography[1]. However, there are fewer studies on the stereotypes of masters studying abroad, which may also have a "social safety valve" to maintain social equilibrium. In The Function of Social Conflict, Coser proposed the concept of "social safety valve"[2], which refers to a system that allows hostile emotions to be released without destroying the structure in order to maintain social integration.

Therefore, this study focuses on DG and MSA, and conducts semi-structured interviews with them to understand DG's perceptions of MSA, and to delve deeper into the stereotypes of DG towards MSA and their potential impact on both groups. The following questions are hoped to be answered: Are there homogenized stereotypes or even stigmas in the domestic community about MSA? What do these stigmas reflect about DG's opinions? Does DG construct MSA as a threatening Other, which in turn develops a "social safety valve", and what are the social effects on both communities?

2. Literature review

2.1. The Development and Changes of Chinese International Students: The Decline of the "Sweet Pastry"

In the 1980s, the majority of Chinese students who studied abroad were those who graduated from undergraduate programs at home and went abroad to pursue master's and doctoral degrees[3] and were seen as "elites" when they returned to their home countries. In recent years, Lu Genshu et al. found that undergraduate students' willingness to go outbound for a master's degree is strong and influenced by the interaction of self and environmental factors.[4] However, the growth in the number of MSA is not synchronized with the improvement in quality due to the differences in the motivation for studying abroad.[5]

Some people study abroad in order to pursue better education and better development opportunities, some people are looking for another way out under the pressure of employment, examination, and research, and there is no doubt that lots of undergraduate students unthinkingly choose to study abroad in order to be "gold-plated". After returning to China, many employment agencies evaluate them negatively, such as "not much real talent but arrogant", and "Aim High But Accomplish Little", because the superior family conditions of the returnees can not be satisfied with the general salary level. The "Sweet Pastry" of the market have fallen.

DG who has not personally experienced studying abroad will inevitably make generalizations, and the inequality of information about studying abroad makes them think that studying for a master's degree "takes a shortcut" and that "studying abroad is an easy life".[6] After Li Pan analyzed online media reports about Chinese international student groups, 48% were negative, mainly focusing on academic misconduct, corruption in life, and criminal problems.[7] Chinese students are labelled as "second-generation government officials" and "second-generation rich" in order to attract people's attention. This has led to the original neutral concept of "second-generation rich kids" being equated with "playboys" under the media's construction.[8]

2.2. Stigma - Negative Stereotypes

The above experiences of negative comments and media reports about Chinese students accumulate over time and exist in people's minds in the form of stereotypes.

Lippmann first introduced the concept of "stereotypes" in his book *Public Opinion* in 1922, "In most cases, we do not first understand and then define, but first define and then understand".[9] Bandura's social cognitive theory explains the mechanism of stereotype formation.[10] The mass media has a vital role in forming stereotypes when there is a lack of direct contact. Although stereotypes do help us to categorise and process information about the outside world quickly, they are a kind of over-categorisation and the phenomenon of "cognitive miserliness".[11] Moreover, people are accustomed to attributing certain stereotypes to other group members.[12]

Stereotype is a neutral term, and this paper focuses on the negative stereotypes suffered by MSA. "Stigma is essentially a negative stereotype"[13], so this paper uses "stigma" to describe the negative stereotypes suffered by master's degree learners.

The specific concept of "stigma" was first introduced by Goffman.[14] He describes it as "a disgraceful characteristic". The essence of the process of stigma formation is a generalised perception

and accompanying attitudes and behaviours that result from the amplification of specific differences.[15] Guo Jinhua traces the source of stigma from the psychological, sociological, and anthropological perspectives.[16] The psychological school believes that people produce stigmatising behaviour out of ignorance and self-defence; the sociological school sees stigma as a result of social inequality; and anthropology looks at stigma from a moral perspective. From the sociological perspective, stigmatisation is an inevitable consequence of social stratification and is not an individual problem but a social context problem.

2.3. The Hidden Function of Stigma - A Social Safety Valve

In the above study, stigma is harmful and negative, but it can also have a positive effect. In the case of stigma, the stigmatised are also labelled as "transgressors". In general, transgressions have and show adverse functions, but some also have positive functions from the perspective of society as a whole and social development, such as acting as a safety valve . [17]

In 1956, the American sociologist Coser put forward a theory of social conflict, in which he put forward the theory of the positive function of social conflict and elaborated on the concept of the "social safety valve". In his book *The Function of Social Conflict*, Coser summarised the functions of social conflict, and the role of the "social safety valve" is one of them. Coser classified the "safety valve" system into two types. One is to allow hostility or conflict behaviour against the original target to be expressed or manifested within socially acceptable means or limits without destroying intra-group relations. The other is to set up alternative targets against which the resulting hostility can be expressed. The latter type of "safety valve" system has both positive and negative functions for society or the individual to a certain extent. Peng Yuanchun believes that the "social safety valve" system is a communication relationship and channel between social groups.[18] The "social safety valve" mechanism can eliminate the hostility and dissatisfaction that usually build up between social groups and maintain stable social relations.[19]

In conclusion, although there are theoretical studies on stigma, there are fewer studies on the stigma of MSA from the perspective of the social safety valve mechanism. In this paper, we would like to introduce Coser's "social safety valve", and from this perspective, we would like to explore the reasons for the stigma of MSA in China, the mechanism of the social safety valve.

3. Methodology

This study adopts the semi-structured interview method in qualitative research. The interviewees included DG and MSA, and DG included students who had no experience studying abroad and chose to further their studies in China. MSA included students who have studied abroad at master's degree level in the past five years. The researcher used snowball sampling to find more typical interviewees and ultimately achieve information saturation.

Between October 2023 and February 2024, the researcher interviewed a total of 30 people, aged between 21 and 27 years old, including 13 students who were recommended to graduate school, four students who were admitted to graduate school through exams, 2 office workers, and 11 Chinese students studying overseas for graduate studies. The interviews were conducted by telephone and webcam and averaged around 40 minutes. The interviews were audio-recorded, and the text was transcribed immediately after the interview was concluded.

Interviewees were coded as: letter + date of interview. Students who went to graduate schools through postgraduate recommendations are numbered as B, those who were admitted to graduate schools through examinations are numbered as K, those who are already working are numbered as W, and MSA are numbered as O.

4. Social Safety Valve Mechanisms for Stigma

The intense competition in the job market is one of the factors contributing to the stigmatisation of MSA by DG. In order to compete for "scarce and valuable resources", different communities will form a set of strict rules within each community in order to exclude the outside group. At the same time, the group will create an Other ("scapegoat") in the external group and construct a stigma against it, building a mechanism of "othering" and exclusion.[20] DG otherises MSA, creating a dichotomy between "them" and "us". When members of DG feel anxiety and pressure, they will adopt mobile strategies to adjust their negative emotions.

Researchers have found that Coser's "social safety valve" theory can help us understand this phenomenon. The American sociologist Coser further distinguished between hostility and conflict based on the German sociologist Simmer's conflict theory and developed the "social safety valve" theory. He argued that hostility can be expressed in three ways: (1) by directly expressing hostility towards the individual or group that is the source of the frustration; (2) by directing hostile behaviour towards an alternative target; and (3) by releasing stress through activities that do not themselves require an object or an alternative object.

Therefore, domestic groups unconsciously choose to use "stigma" as a path of catharsis and expression, and by shifting the object of confrontation, transforming the emotions of confrontation and switching the confrontation field, they play the function of "stigma" as a social safety valve. Social safety valve can take various forms, providing individuals with a window of catharsis and releasing tensions. The operation of the social safety valve mechanism has, to a certain extent, diverted conflicts and avoided social unrest.

4.1. Changing the Subject of Confrontation

Due to the influence of technology, economy and education, the number of graduates in China nowadays is increasing year by year, while the number of recruits in the job market is shrinking year by year. The market is gradually saturated, the demand exceeds the supply, and the job market situation is poor. Under the same conditions, in order to reduce the trouble, save time and improve recruitment efficiency, the recruitment requirements will set the threshold for the academic qualifications. A degree certificate from a famous university is a "knocking brick". (W02, 20240110)

Every individual is a product of society. Stigmatisation is an inevitable result of social stratification and is not just a personal issue. The broader social context of group survival cannot be ignored. In June 2023, China's National Bureau of Statistics announced that the youth unemployment rate was as high as 21.3%. Domestic groups tend to increase defensive external attributions after hitting a wall in their job search. In this context, the domestic group cannot directly fight against the job market or even the whole society by itself, so it can only shift the target of confrontation and "focus the fire" to express hostility by taking MSA as an alternative target to the one it competes with. Interviewees B09 and K02 both complained that the overseas masters could not find good jobs abroad and had to come back to China to "compete" with them for jobs. "I hope that the reputation of returnees is getting worse and worse and that such a trend (of the job market favouring returnees) can be reversed as soon as possible." (B06, 20231227)

In the process of transferring the object of confrontation, the domestic group "labels" the master's degree of study abroad by stigmatising it, completely separating it from the group. Yang Linduan points out that labelling can one-sidedly portray the Other and is a tendency to exclude the Other. [21] "I would label international students in Australia: they cannot read in school at home, so their families send them out to return with a gold plating." (W02, 20240110) In fending off the threat of MSA, the self-esteem of DG spontaneously serves as a protective mechanism, which can be boosted by downward comparisons and improve individual self-efficacy.

"When I read comments about master students going abroad who 'have only a diploma, but are not good at work or study', I feel like gloating, thinking that they are no better than the rest of the world. I think they are just like that, but I still have a solid life at home." (K04, 20240112)

4.2. Converting Antagonism

After hostility is turned towards the object of confrontation, the "safety valve" system allows for the free expression of behaviour, preventing the accumulation of blocked hostility. Hostile expressions are unblocked and transformed in specific activities, namely by DG, i.e., through stigmatisation, which transforms intense hostility and resentment into banter and jesting in order to dissipate negative emotions. [22] Banter is a mockery of the norm and helplessness in the face of an unchangeable status quo. Through creative and circuitous defiant banter, the domestic group succeeded in expressing their views, releasing their long pent-up emotions, and ensuring that their emotional expressions were self-explanatory in playfulness.

Interviewee B11 recalled her path to higher education by telling how, during the most anxious period of her bailout, the children of two of her mother's friends (whose undergraduate colleges were normal in China) had both received offers from University College London. At that time, upon learning of the university's ranking (No. 9 in the world's QS rankings for the year 2024), she was internally feeling a sense of injustice, a sense of complex feeling. "But what can be done? You can only take your time to adjust your mindset" (B11, 20240105). B06 indicated that the worst student in the same faculty in her undergraduate studies was studying at prestigious universities such as the University of Edinburgh, the University of Hong Kong, and the Chinese University of Hong Kong. She teased, "I even sometimes think that those universities are pheasant universities, and those students who studied abroad went to branch campuses with the titles of prestigious universities." Some DG members think more long-term. Although the present is unchangeable, the future is unknown. Even if the study abroad phase goes well, it may be "painful" when looking for a job (W02, 20240110).

DG constructs a set of self-consistent values through self-compassion and ridicule, reaches emotional transformation, indirectly buffers the impact of hostility, and enhances individual satisfaction while relieving personal anxiety.

4.3. Switching the Field of Confrontation

According to Bourdieu, the field is a network or configuration of objective relations between various positions, and the members of the society construct the field together according to specific logical requirements.[23] The target of "stigma" in the operation of the "social safety valve" mechanism is MSA, but DG does not directly confront the overseas masters in reality; more often, it shifts the confrontation field to anonymised digital space and discourse output with non-MSA members.

Digital space eliminates the realistic social relations between DG and MSA in localised spaces such as schools and companies and transforms the relational order, rendering socially formatted routines such as pre-existing identities and social relations meaningless.[24] DG attempts to break away from primitive social relations and constraints and reconstruct the field of autonomy in the digital space. By reconstructing the field, the statute is reshaped to gain satisfaction, and ultimately, the transformation of the confrontation field is achieved. The digital spaces DG members choose are generally social platforms, such as Douban, Xiaohongshu and Weibo.

K02 is a third-year grad student studying in a 985 university in China and is currently in the process of job hunting. He usually hangs out on social platforms such as Douban. He always feels uneasy when he meets returned masters in job interviews because employers have a preference for international students. The frustration he suffered during his job search deepened his hostility towards master's degree holders, and he would occasionally follow the posts in Douban to express his resentment anonymously and "gain a sense of self-identity". The rest of the interviewees, such as B03, B09, and K03, also said that they would read the tweets about the master's degree of study abroad on

social platforms such as Xiaohongshu and Weibo, finding someone the same as them, empathised with each other, understood and supported each other, and established a sense of belonging.

The spatial transformation transforms actual conflicts into virtual emotional, literal and verbal symbols. Hostile internal dynamics are released peacefully in anonymised digital spaces, in "sterile" realities. In these areas, DG deconstructs conflict and defuses emotions by constructing a self-contained logical order through stigmas that dismantle the relational ordering of actual conflicts.

5. Conclusion and Discussion

At a time when studying abroad has become popular, young Chinese people who choose to study abroad at the master's level are epoch-making. Their motives and purposes for studying abroad are different from those of the "golden age" elites, who chose to study abroad to improve their diplomas because of the depreciation of academic qualifications in China's job market and the fierce competition for education at home. In this process, it is DG that is in competition with them, and there is an "undercurrent" of conflict between DG. It has gradually triggered the stigmatisation of MSA by DG.

Previous studies on stigma have basically focused on the formation and harm of its negative impacts, and few of them have analysed the stigma suffered by young Chinese people studying abroad in different stages. In this paper, we confine the study of MSA to those who stay in China until the master's degree stage, take them and DG pursuing further studies in China as the research objects, conduct semi-structured interviews, and innovatively bring in the perspective of "social safety valve" to analyse the formation of stigma and its function as a social safety valve, so as to draw people's attention to the plight of DG and MSA. It has been found that stigma can play a positive role as a social safety valve, alleviating the anxiety and dissatisfaction of domestic groups.

This study focuses on the analysis of the positive functions of the social safety valve developed by stigma, but its functional limitations are not mentioned. Besides, there may be a trend of the social safety valve of stigma which needs further study. The social safety valve can only provide temporary relief but can not address the root causes of real problems. In other words, although the social safety valve mechanism of stigma has its value, it is not a long-term solution. If we keep relying on stigma to play the function of social safety valve autonomously, we may even aggravate the development of stigma. Perhaps only by uncovering the underlying logic of stigma and targeting it can the problem be solved at its root. The interviews in this study have already touched upon reflections on social problems such as social inequality in education and the poor job market. In the future, further research could be conducted on the limitations of the social safety valve function of stigma, the underlying logic of stigma, and measures to eliminate it.

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