Macrothink Institute™

International Journal of Linguistics
ISSN 1948-5425
2026, Vol. 18, No. 5

Constructing Chinese Overseas Master's Students' Identities in Marketised Higher Education: A Discourse-Historical Analysis of Xiaohongshu

Yuxin Liu

Faculty of English Language and Culture, Guangdong University of Foreign Studies

No. 2 Baiyun Avenue North, Guangzhou, Guangdong Province, China

Tel: 86-138-2851-9924 E-mail: yuxin.daisy.liu@gmail.com

Shujun Chen (Corresponding author)

Faculty of English Language and Culture, Guangdong University of Foreign Studies

No. 2 Baiyun Avenue North, Guangzhou, Guangdong Province, China

Tel: 86-135-6037-7532 E-mail: chenshujun1030@foxmail.com

Received: September 3, 2026 Accepted: October 19, 2026 Published: November 8, 2026

doi:10.5296/ijl.v18i5.24008 URL: https://doi.org/10.5296/ijl.v18i5.24008

Abstract

Social media provide an important space in which international students narrate overseas study and construct identities. Existing research on Chinese students' social media practices has mainly focused on doctoral students, with less attention to master's students' everyday textual posts. This study uses the Discourse-Historical Approach to examine 67 Xiaohongshu posts from 64 accounts. It identifies four recurring identities: the deserving study-abroad self, the rational educational investor, the entrepreneurial self and the transformative self. Posters legitimised overseas education through effort, family sacrifice, cost, risk and anticipated return, while also presenting themselves as responsible for improving their abilities and future value. Retrospective accounts of hardship further supported claims of independence and personal transformation. However, some posts also questioned established ideas about productivity and success. The findings show how Chinese master's students negotiate market-oriented understandings of educational and personal value through everyday digital discourse.

Keywords: Chinese international students, discourse-historical approach, identity construction, marketised higher education, social media, Xiaohongshu

1. Introduction

Social media are now part of the infrastructure through which study abroad is imagined, organised and narrated. Prospective students use online networks to obtain peer advice and insider knowledge, while students already abroad document academic and everyday life for audiences at home (Han et al., 2026; Jayadeva, 2024). Xiaohongshu is prominent within this digital environment. The platform combines user-generated content, e-commerce and lifestyle sharing (Wang & Bhatt, 2025). Often described as the "Chinese Instagram" or as a blend of e-commerce and Pinterest (Wei, 2023), it is widely used for communication, entertainment, commerce and information sharing (Gao et al., 2022). Its users also curate names, profiles and posts in ways that make different aspects of identity publicly visible (Wang & Bhatt, 2025). For overseas Chinese students, Xiaohongshu therefore provides a space to record study-abroad life and present different aspects of identity to a largely Chinese-speaking audience.

Against this background, recent research has begun to explore Chinese doctoral students' translanguaging, self-naming and vlogging practices on Xiaohongshu (Han et al., 2026; Wang, 2024; Wang & Bhatt, 2025). However, the textual discourse of overseas master's students' Xiaohongshu image-text posts has received much less discourse-analytical attention. The present study examines these posts from the perspective that identity is not a stable attribute expressed through language, but an emergent and relational outcome of linguistic and other semiotic practices (Bucholtz & Hall, 2005). It uses the Discourse-Historical Approach to investigate how recurring topics, discursive strategies and linguistic choices participate in identity construction and how they relate to the wider context of marketised higher education (Reisigl & Wodak, 2009). It asks:

1. What identities are constructed in Chinese overseas master's students' Xiaohongshu posts?
2. How are these identities discursively constructed through topics, strategies, and linguistic resources?
3. How are these identity constructions related to wider market-oriented understandings of educational and personal value?

2. Literature Review

Identity is increasingly understood not as a stable internal property but as an ongoing process shaped by social, cultural and historical conditions (Hall, 1996; Baumeister & Muraven, 1996). From a narrative perspective, Ricoeur (1992) conceptualises narrative identity as the interpretation of continuity and change in life stories, while Bruner (1996) emphasises that these stories draw on culturally available models of identity and agency. Identity is therefore dynamic (Bauman, 2013) and processual rather than a pre-existing essence.

This process becomes visible in language use. Bucholtz and Hall (2005) argue that identity is produced through linguistic and other semiotic practices rather than simply expressed by them. It emerges in interaction and is also relational: people position themselves through

similarities, differences and other relations between self and other (p. 585). Thus, identity construction depends on the discursive resources available in a particular interaction. Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) places this interaction within a wider social setting by treating discourse as a form of social practice (Fairclough, 1995). Discourse not only represents the world but also participates in the operation and reproduction of power and ideology (Reisigl & Wodak, 2009). Identity construction must therefore be examined in relation to both local language choices and the social conditions that make those choices meaningful.

In educational contexts, identity construction takes the form of participation in learning and social practices. Wenger (1998) emphasises that learning involves not only the acquisition of knowledge but also the formation of identity through participation in communities of practice. Students thus provide a particularly relevant context for examining processes of identity construction. As they move through higher education, increased attention to graduate attributes and work-readiness encourages students to view themselves in relation to future employment (Daniels & Brooker, 2014).

International students provide a particularly relevant context for observing these processes. They often need to adjust their self-positioning in new cross-cultural environments (Liu & Rathbone, 2021). Their identity construction is therefore not simply a one-way process of adaptation, but a complex negotiation across different contexts and sociocultural environments (Baumeister & Muraven, 1996; Morita, 2004). During this process, they may negotiate multiple and intersecting identities that shift and are reconstructed over time (Bond, 2019; Liu & Rathbone, 2021). Liu and Rathbone (2021) argue that international student identity should be viewed as an open and ongoing system whose development is fluid and non-linear. Furthermore, some researchers argue that the label “international student” can be othering and homogenising, which may position students in opposition to domestic students, reinforce stereotypes of deficiency or difficulty in adaptation, and obscure the diversity and complexity of individual experiences (Bond, 2019; Tavares, 2021). International student identity construction extends beyond cross-cultural adaptation and is embedded in wider discursive and power relations (Morita, 2004), taking diverse forms across cultural contexts and creating space for more fine-grained investigations of specific groups.

Within this literature, Chinese students have drawn particular attention because studying abroad brings identities formed in China into new social and educational contexts. Research on Chinese postgraduate students in the UK shows that they actively interpret their experiences and negotiate national identity across home and host contexts, rather than simply adapting to life abroad (Liu & Xue, 2026). Digital media extend this process beyond students’ immediate environments by circulating study-abroad experiences and interpretations among wider audiences. They also facilitate the exchange of peer knowledge that may shape how overseas education is understood and pursued (Jayadeva, 2024). These functions make Xiaohongshu a relevant site for examining the identity work of Chinese students abroad.

Recent studies have examined several forms of identity performance by Chinese students abroad on Xiaohongshu. Wang (2024) shows how Chinese doctoral students use multilingual and multimodal resources to present academic identities and abilities. Han et al. (2026)

examine overseas Chinese PhD students' performances of an "ideal scholar-self", showing how vlogs turn neoliberal academic pressures into narratives of discipline, efficiency and emotional resilience. Zeng (2025), by contrast, focuses on adolescent study-abroad influencers whose performances of desirable girlhood and authentic sisterhood negotiate tensions involving age, class, gender and nationhood.

However, a significant gap remains. Existing studies mainly focus on doctoral students, vlogs, translanguaging practices or influencer self-presentation, with less attention to how ordinary Chinese overseas master's students construct identities through discourse strategies in everyday Xiaohongshu image-text posts. This group is worth examining because master's study occupies a comparatively transitional position: the transition to postgraduate study involves shifts in practice and identity positioning rather than a straightforward continuation of previous higher education experience (Tobbell et al., 2010). The social media discourse of Chinese master's students abroad therefore provides a valuable site for examining identity construction at this transitional stage.

More importantly, identity construction among this group offers a useful lens for understanding subject formation in neoliberal higher education. Internationalisation has increasingly been linked to competition, economic value and individual gain (Bamberger et al., 2019), while in the Chinese context, study abroad is associated with elite status, transnational competences, career-related advantages and identity transformation (Gu & Schweisfurth, 2015). Examining Chinese master's students' Xiaohongshu image-text posts can therefore extend research on Chinese international students' social media practices and show how their identity discourse is connected to broader logics of success, competition and self-optimisation in higher education.

3. Analytical Framework

3.1 Discourse-Historical Approach

Building on CDA, this study adopts the Discourse-Historical Approach (DHA) proposed by Reisigl and Wodak (2009). DHA emphasises the relationship between discourse and its broader social and historical context, arguing that meanings are produced and interpreted in relation to wider social practices, historical developments and ideological processes (Reisigl & Wodak, 2009, pp. 89–93). This perspective is suitable for the present study because discussions of study abroad on Xiaohongshu are closely connected with broader public debates over educational value, employability, social mobility and the legitimacy of overseas qualifications.

The analysis connects macro-level topics, meso-level discursive strategies and micro-level linguistic realisations (Hu & Xu, 2023; Reisigl & Wodak, 2009). Topics show what is discussed; nomination, predication, argumentation, perspectivisation and intensification or mitigation show how actors and actions are named, evaluated and justified; and linguistic analysis examines evaluative wording, modality, metaphor, pronouns and narrative positioning. Identities are inferred from recurring interactions among these dimensions, including how users position themselves in relation to others (Bucholtz & Hall, 2005). Figure

1 summarises this framework. The analysis pays particular attention to data-derived topoi of usefulness, cost–benefit and risk as warrants connecting arguments with claims (Reisigl & Wodak, 2009, p. 108).

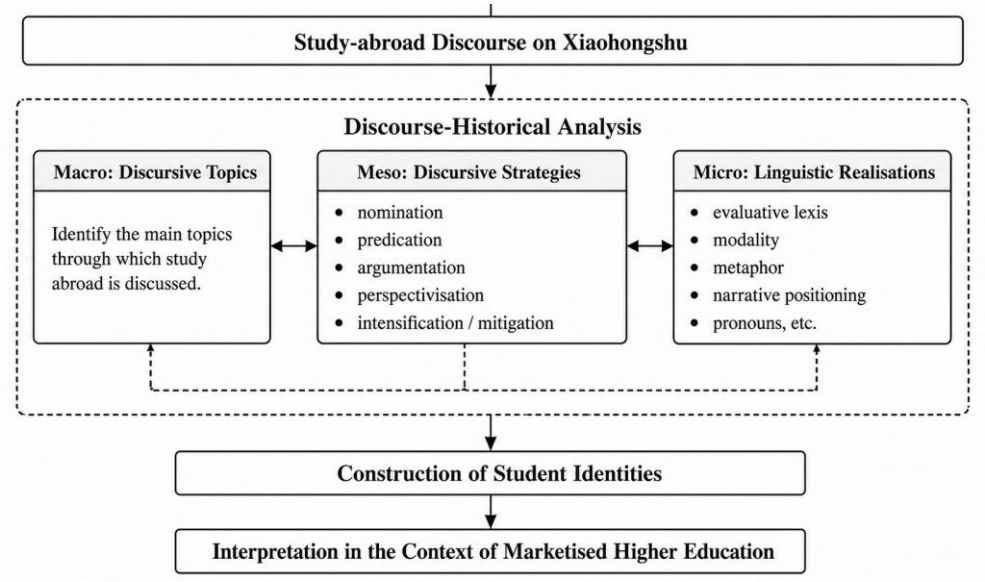


Figure 1. Analytical Framework of the Present Study

3.2 Neoliberalism and the Marketisation of Higher Education

Neoliberalism provides a theoretical perspective for understanding evaluative logic in higher education. Brown (2015) defines it as a governing rationality that extends economic reasoning into non-economic domains and recasts individuals as human capital whose value must be maintained and enhanced. In higher education, value is increasingly expressed through economic return, employability and position within a measured market (Tomlinson, 2018, pp. 711–720). Internationalisation is likewise tied to competition, commercial considerations and individual gain (Bamberger et al., 2019, pp. 207–209). This perspective helps explain why international education is evaluated through cost, return and competitive advantage.

This logic shapes expectations of the person as well as the institution. Neoliberal rationality helps define which subjects appear valuable, successful or responsible (Brown, 2015). When individuals are treated as human capital, they are also expected to carry the risks of educational investment and to explain its outcomes (p. 37). Digital self-presentation offers a setting in which these expectations can be accepted, managed or challenged. Han et al. (2026), for instance, show how overseas Chinese PhD students incorporate discipline, productivity and resilience into their online academic identities.

This study therefore uses neoliberalism as a sensitising framework for interpreting market-based judgements in Xiaohongshu discussions of study abroad. DHA provides the tools for tracing how those judgements are produced in discourse, while the neoliberalism literature helps relate them to a broader evaluative context. The framework is not treated as a

complete explanation. Chinese higher-education internationalisation is also shaped by state policy, national development priorities and local institutional conditions (Bamberger et al., 2019, pp. 209–212). The analysis consequently looks for negotiation and resistance as well as agreement with market-oriented ideas.

4. Methodology

4.1 Data Collection and Selection

Data were collected and compiled during April–June 2026 through keyword-based purposive sampling using a new account that did not interact with posts or follow users. A pilot search used “硕士留学” (overseas master’s study) and “研究生留学” (postgraduate study abroad).

Patterns identified in the pilot informed 17 expanded search terms covering investment and value, emotion and anxiety, negative evaluation, self-improvement and employability (see Appendix). Approximately the first 20 visible results for each keyword were reviewed, producing an initial pool of 109 potentially relevant posts. Because Xiaohongshu search results are dynamic and personalised, the corpus is not statistically representative of the platform, and the keywords guided data collection rather than predetermining the identity categories.

Accounts were included when authors could be identified as Chinese students who were undertaking or had recently completed an overseas master’s degree. Agencies, commercial accounts and accounts focused mainly on tourism or general lifestyle were excluded. Posts had to concern study abroad and be published during the programme or within one year after graduation; up to three posts were retained per account. Screening retained 67 posts from 64 accounts, published between 31 January 2024 and 9 May 2026.

The final corpus consisted of titles, captions and transcribable wording embedded in Xiaohongshu image-text posts. Visual composition, image–text relations, vlogs, livestreams and comments were excluded to maintain a consistent textual focus. The retained posts yielded 438 excerpts, each defined as a coherent unit of experience, evaluation, argument, advice or self-positioning. Chinese texts were treated as the primary data, and quoted translations were checked against the originals.

Only publicly accessible posts were collected; private accounts, direct messages, comments and researcher interaction were excluded. As the study used publicly accessible, non-interactive material and involved no contact with users, formal ethical review and individual consent were not sought. Usernames, profile identifiers and source links were removed, and the full corpus and links are not publicly shared because quotations may remain searchable.

4.2 Data Analysis

All 438 excerpts were first coded for recurring topics and forms of identity construction in relation to their original posts. Codes were developed iteratively rather than from the five search areas used during data collection. Through constant comparison, related codes were

grouped into six discursive clusters: Growth Through Adversity; Self-Transformation and Belonging; Negotiating Legitimacy; Educational Investment and Return; Self-Optimisation and Future-Making; and Imagining Alternative Futures. The clusters represented recurring forms of discursive work rather than mutually exclusive categories. Excerpts could receive a primary and a secondary cluster label when they performed more than one discursive function. The clusters were then consolidated into the four identities that structure the Results section.

A purposive subset of 162 excerpts then underwent detailed DHA strategy coding. The subset covered all six clusters and four identities, included both common and contrasting cases, and avoided excessive reliance on individual posts or accounts. These excerpts were coded for nomination, predication, argumentation, perspectivisation, and intensification or mitigation. Detailed claims about DHA strategies are based on this subset, while the full corpus informed the identification of recurring topics, clusters and identities. The first author conducted the thematic and DHA strategy coding and translated the quoted excerpts into English. The second author reviewed both the coding and the translations. Earlier excerpts and ambiguous cases were checked against their original post context, and translations were checked against the Chinese originals. This process provided an additional check on coding consistency and the representation of meaning in English.

5. Results

5.1 Negotiating Legitimacy: Constructing the Deserving Study-abroad Self

A prominent identity in the posts is the deserving study-abroad self. Overseas education is not treated as automatically legitimate. Posters frequently positioned themselves as subjects who needed to justify why they deserved this educational opportunity while also presenting themselves as responsible recipients of family support. Educational and moral deservingness are therefore closely connected: the degree must be shown to involve hard work, and the resources invested in it must be used meaningfully.

The first pattern concerns educational stigma. Labels such as shuishuo (“low-value master’s degree”) nominate students as members of a devalued educational category, while quoted criticism predicates overseas study as easy, recreational or academically weak. By reporting these external voices before presenting their own evaluations, posters create distance from the judgement and establish a position from which to challenge it.

(1) 收到墨尔本大学的 offer 时，有人笑说：“澳洲水硕，不就是去墨尔本度假？”但只有我知道，这张飞往墨尔本的机票，承载着多少深夜的挣扎。

When I received my offer from the University of Melbourne, some people mocked me, saying, “An Australian shuishuo? Isn’t that just going to Melbourne for a **holiday**?” But **only I know** how many **late-night struggles** this ticket to Melbourne carried.

What is challenged is not only the label shuishuo, but the credential hierarchy behind it. The quoted rhetorical question presents the criticism as taken for granted, predicating overseas study as leisure rather than serious education. “But” rejects this view, while “only I know”

shifts the authority to evaluate the experience from the critic to the student. The contrast between "holiday" and "late-night struggle" replaces ease with effort. The "ticket" also carries the hidden hardship behind the opportunity. These choices support a topos of effort: the student claims legitimacy by presenting study abroad as requiring sustained work.

A second pattern concerns the moral dimension of legitimacy negotiation. The poster is nominated as a student without unlimited resources. Meanwhile, expressions such as "the first half of their lives" and "everything they could" make parental sacrifice concrete by intensifying its moral weight.

(2) 想起在港中文留学时最焦虑的，大概就是担心"花掉爸妈太多钱"，总在深夜攀上心头。我来自四川一个普通的工薪家庭，爸妈几乎是攥着前半生的辛苦钱，把我托举到香港读书。他们真的已经尽了全力。

Looking back on my time at CUHK, what caused me the greatest anxiety was probably the fear of "spending too much of my parents' money". This thought often came to me late at night. I come from an **ordinary salaried family** in Sichuan. My parents used almost all the money they had worked hard to save over **the first half of their lives** to support my studies in Hong Kong. They had truly done **everything they could**.

This is not simply an acknowledgement of gratitude. The recurring anxiety "late at night" highlights the poster's awareness of the cost of family support and positions the student as responsible for what follows. The implicit reasoning is that scarce family resources create an obligation to make the opportunity count; recognising and accepting that obligation presents the recipient as morally worthy of the support. The deserving study-abroad self claims recognition because the opportunity is justified through effort and answered with responsibility.

5.2 Calculating Educational Worth: Study Abroad as Investment and Risk

A second and especially prominent identity is the rational educational investor. Here, study abroad is represented as an investment decision that requires careful evaluation of costs, potential returns, and future risks. Expressions such as "portfolio" and "ROI" do more than add financial vocabulary to education. Through nomination and predication, higher education is reframed as a market activity and credentials as assets whose value can be calculated and compared.

(3) 港硕是一个完美的 portfolio。在决定申请前我就已经计算过港硕的 ROI，读上财研究生 13.8 万/2 年，生活费 5 万，总计约 20 万/2 年；读港硕学费 36 万/1 年，生活费 13 万，总计 50 万/1 年。

A Hong Kong master's degree is a perfect **portfolio**. Before deciding to apply, I had already calculated the **ROI**. A two-year master's programme at Shanghai University of Finance and Economics would cost approximately 138,000 RMB in **tuition**, plus 50,000 RMB in **living expenses**, making a total of around 200,000 RMB over two years. By comparison, a Hong Kong master's degree would cost about 360,000 RMB in tuition for one year, plus 130,000 RMB in living expenses, amounting to approximately 500,000

RMB in total for one year.

(4) 但港硕提前一年工作的机会收益约 30 万一年，所以港硕和保研对我来说的成本是几乎相等的，还能比同期学生多获得一年的工作经验，并且避免了考研的高风险，确实做到了低风险高回报。

However, entering the workforce one year earlier after completing a Hong Kong master's degree would bring me approximately RMB 300,000 in additional earnings. Therefore, **for me**, the cost of pursuing a Hong Kong master's degree is almost equivalent to that of being recommended for postgraduate study in mainland China. Meanwhile, I can gain one additional year of work experience compared with my peers and avoid the high risks associated with the postgraduate entrance examination. It truly achieves a **low-risk, high-return** outcome.

Read together, Examples (3) and (4) from the same post show how calculation becomes part of the account of choosing. "Tuition", "living expenses", programme length and total expenditure are placed into comparable categories, while numerical detail gives the evaluation an appearance of precision. Direct cost alone does not favour the Hong Kong degree: RMB 500,000 remains substantially higher than RMB 200,000. The comparison therefore widens in Example (4), where earlier labour-market entry becomes additional earnings, work experience becomes another return, and avoiding the postgraduate entrance examination becomes a reduction in risk. This supports a cost–benefit topos in which educational value depends on programme duration, foregone earnings, work experience and risk as well as direct expenditure. Time itself becomes an economic resource. Only after these factors are included does the poster arrive at "low-risk, high-return". "ROI" and "portfolio" condense the reasoning into investment language, while "for me" ties the conclusion to the poster's own salary expectations, educational options and exposure to risk rather than presenting it as universal.

However, the same investment logic does not remove uncertainty. Other posters make risk visible through repeated questions about whether the expected return will actually materialise. Posters ask whether the credential will retain its value and whether its cost can be recovered. Questions, the modal verbs "will" and "could", and the conditional "if" keep negative outcomes open rather than promising a return.

(5) 我这个专业，留香港机会多吗？回内地的话，qs 前 50 的 title 真的还够用吗？会不会花了这么多钱和时间，最后简历还是石沉大海？

For my major, are there many opportunities to stay and work in Hong Kong? **If** I return to mainland China, will the title of **a top-50 QS** university still be **valuable** enough? After spending so much money and time, **could** my applications still end up **disappearing into the void**?

These questions do more than express anxiety. Their sequence moves from field-specific employment opportunities, to whether the credential retains its value between Hong Kong and mainland China, and finally to the possibility of receiving no response at all. The interrogative form keeps the outcome unresolved, while the modal verbs "will" and "could"

present return as anticipated. At the same time, "so much money and time" intensifies what is at stake, supporting a cost–benefit and risk topos: if the degree produces neither employment nor recognition, the investment becomes difficult to justify. The nomination "top-50 QS" places the degree within a ranking-based educational hierarchy. However, "still" presupposes that the ranking is expected to carry value while questioning whether that value remains sufficient across fields and locations. Finally, "disappearing into the void" imagines the absence of any employment response, intensifying the feared loss. Rationality is therefore constructed through recognising that ranked credentials have conditional rather than guaranteed value.

5.3 Constructing the Entrepreneurial Self

The entrepreneurial self is constructed as an unfinished project requiring continuous monitoring and improvement. This is not simply the confident image of a high achiever. Achievement provides only temporary reassurance, while stopping is repeatedly predicated as waste, decline, or personal insufficiency. The pressure to keep pace therefore enters the posters' own self-evaluation.

(6) 这种循环我太熟悉了：努力—达标—短暂安心—再设更高目标。只要一停下来，就会立刻感到焦虑和自我否定。

This cycle feels extremely familiar to me: **working** hard — **reaching** a goal — **feeling briefly** relieved — **setting** a higher goal again. **The moment** I stop, I **immediately** feel anxious and start doubting myself.

(7) 接下去我不知道要怎么走，但至少目前我走的每一步都在点上，像个机器。

I do not know how I should move forward, but **at least** every step I have taken **so far** has been the right one, **like a machine**.

In (6), the four-part sequence presents self-improvement as continuous. The verbs "working", "reaching", "feeling" and "setting" keep the self in motion, but the final stage leads to another goal. Achievement becomes temporary. "Briefly" limits the reassurance of success, while "the moment" and "immediately" accelerate the shift from stopping to anxiety and self-doubt. Continued effort thus appears necessary to maintain a sense of adequacy. Example (7), on the other hand, combines uncertainty with positive self-evaluation. "I do not know" foregrounds uncertainty, but "at least" and "so far" shift attention to continued progress. The metaphor "like a machine" depicts the self as required to keep operating despite an unclear destination, making constant movement the main evidence of progress.

The entrepreneurial self also appears in accounts where difficulties are translated into problems of self-management. One example is:

(8) 会不会是因为太不熟悉环境的才会觉得生活很困难，所以天天下午放了学都逼着自己去到处走到处看；会不会是英语太差了才会觉得沟通很困难，所以天天又逼着自己多跟各行各业工作人员还有老师用英语沟通；会不会是自己不够坚强才总觉得有种莫名的难过。

> **Could it be because** I am unfamiliar with the environment that I find life difficult? **That is why** I **forced myself** to go out and explore **every afternoon** after class. Could it be because my English was not good enough that communication was difficult? That is why I forced myself to communicate in English with different kinds of workers and teachers **every day**. Could it be because I was not strong enough that I always felt inexplicably sad?

The repeated sequence of "Could it be because…" and "That is why…" turns self-questioning directly into corrective action. The first two questions produce routines: going out "every afternoon" and speaking English "every day". These time expressions intensify the regularity of the effort, while "forced myself" predicates improvement as discipline. The sequence then stops. Sadness is still interpreted as a possible lack of personal strength, but no corresponding action follows. The unanswered question reveals the pressure created when adaptation, communication, and emotion are all approached as problems within the self.

5.4 Constructing the Transformative Self: Reinterpreting Experience, Selfhood and Success

A further identity is the transformative self. Across the data, this identity is constructed through three overlapping rather than sequential processes: posters reinterpret difficult experiences, redefine who they have become, and reconsider familiar definitions of success. The third process extends transformation beyond personal growth to the standards through which effort, achievement and a worthwhile life are judged.

5.4.1 Transforming the Meaning of Experience

Hardship acquires value retrospectively when loneliness, academic pressure and precarious work are re-predicated as experience, learning and resilience. The underlying argument is that difficulty becomes developmental when overcoming it provides resources for facing future uncertainty.

(9) （我）知道每个人的生活都会不顺心，每个异国他乡的人都要自我成长，也知道其实这些都是好事情，是经历，是历练，是塑造坚韧的过程。就把人生当探险吧，闯过的每一关都能赋予自己有更强的装备面对未知。

> I know that everyone experiences difficulties in life, and that everyone living far from home in a foreign country has to grow on their own. **I also know** that these things are actually valuable: they are experiences, lessons, and part of the process of building resilience. **I will treat life as an adventure**, because every challenge I overcome gives me stronger **equipment** to face the unknown.

(10) 那些在教室啃三明治的午休，在图书馆通宵写论文的凌晨，把中文家教广告贴遍墨尔本大学论坛的周末——它们让我长出铠甲。

> **Lunchtime** sandwiches in classrooms, **late-night essays** in the library, and **weekends** spent posting Chinese-tutoring advertisements across University of Melbourne forums—they helped me grow **armour**.

The "adventure", "equipment" and "armour" metaphors turn adversity into something that can protect and prepare the individual. Temporal perspectivisation is important: "I also know" presents the positive evaluation from a later reflective viewpoint, while "I will treat life as an adventure" marks an active reframing of hardship rather than treating its positive meaning as inherent. The repeated "lunchtime sandwiches", "late-night essays" and "weekends" accumulate ordinary hardships before the armour metaphor converts them into resilience. Predication and argumentation work together here. Difficulty becomes valuable because it is said to equip the person for what remains unknown.

5.4.2 Transforming the Understanding of the Person

Other posts focus on who the students understand themselves to have become. Contrasting nominations divide past and present selves: a "timid little girl" becomes a "capable adult". These labels are supported by lists of what the poster can now do. Internships and difficult projects appear alongside speaking Cantonese and travelling alone, grounding transformation in both achievement and everyday independence. The temporal expression "became" positions overseas study as a boundary between the previous and present self. The change concerns not only what hardship means, but also the identity of the person who has endured it.

(11) 可能复杂在畏畏缩缩的小女孩突然变成厉害的小大人：可以去好多厉害的头部公司实习，可以自信的学粤语和 local 对话，可以完成以前不敢想的 project，也可以一个人拎着行李箱去全世界旅游。

The **timid little girl** suddenly **became** a **capable adult**: someone who could intern at leading companies, confidently learn Cantonese and communicate with local people, complete projects that she once thought impossible, and travel around the world alone with a suitcase.

5.4.3 Transforming the Criteria of a Worthwhile Life

A further process concerns the standards through which success and a worthwhile life are evaluated. Conventional success is negatively predicated as a "single-plank bridge" and life as a "machine for society", while corporate measurement and social comparison position value as something imposed on the individual. What changes is that these rules are no longer presented as natural or unavoidable. Alternative paths, pauses and less competitive ways of studying are made linguistically available.

(12) 曾经我被'普通'两个字压得喘不过气，可跨出去之后才明白：普通女生的路，不必是独木桥。它可以是旷野，是小径，是任何形状。

I used to feel suffocated by the word "ordinary", but after stepping outside, I realised that the path of an **ordinary girl does not have to** be **a single-plank bridge**. It **can be open fields**, **small paths**, or any shape at all.

(13) 对我而言，我就是很想为自己当社会机器的人生按下暂停键，果然东亚人的 gap year 就是读个研吧。

For me, I simply wanted to press the **pause button** on a life in which I functioned as a

machine for society. I guess an **East Asian gap year** is just doing a master's degree.

(14) 因为体会到了不一样的自由，见识到了不用在企业里被工作价值体系量化的自己，不用在社会环境中跟别人家的孩子比较的自己，不用被裹挟在社会焦虑中的自己。

Having experienced a different kind of freedom, I discovered a self that **did not have to** be measured by corporate systems of work value, compared with "other people's children" in society, or swept along by social anxiety.

In (12), "ordinary girl" is accepted. The poster's change lies in seeing future possibilities pluralised by "open fields" and "small paths". Repeated negation and modality do most of the identity work. Across excerpts, the expressions "do not have to" weaken obligations that had previously appeared normal and suggest new possibilities. But even so, this does not suggest complete freedom. The "pause button" creates a temporary distance from compulsory productivity. The ironic nomination "East Asian gap year" reveals the social expectation that even a pause must take the form of another degree.

The argument across the posts can be reconstructed as follows: dominant definitions of success restrict the range of acceptable life choices and subject individuals to external measurement; if these standards can be questioned, pausing or pursuing a different path need not be treated as failure. The transformative self is therefore constructed not only through becoming more resilient or capable, but also through reconsidering what counts as progress, effort and a worthwhile life.

6. Discussion

The four identities addressed three connected concerns: the legitimacy of overseas education, the person it required or produced, and the ideas of success that remained necessary. The rational investor and deserving self made education economically and morally defensible; the entrepreneurial self centred on continuous development; and the transformative self used hardship to narrate change and question familiar expectations. Although analytically distinct, these identities sometimes co-occurred in individual posts.

Higher education massification in China widened access, but educational returns flattened and upward mobility slowed (Mok & Wu, 2016). As Mok and Wu (2016, p. 91) note, when everyone pursues additional qualifications, no one gains a lasting advantage, yet non-participants risk falling behind. Programmes outside mainland China offered a route around the intensifying domestic postgraduate entrance examination, but this changed the terms of competition rather than ending it (Chen et al., 2026). Degrees were still ordered through QS rankings, programme type and destination (Peng, 2025). This helps explain the prominence of educational value and legitimacy, alongside students' efforts to manage pressure and imagine other forms of success.

Uncertainty about educational value placed a double burden of proof on posters. Calculations of tuition, programme length, opportunity cost and employment returns constructed the rational educational investor, distancing the poster from the careless consumer or extended tourist. This translated international mobility into employability and individual gain

(Bamberger et al., 2019), but did not necessarily endorse market values; it could also answer anticipated criticism of overseas study. Institutional standing and expected outcomes nevertheless organised value within a measured higher-education market (Tomlinson, 2018). In Brown's (2015) terms, the student became a self-investing project expected to enhance future value.

Calculation, however, could only show that the decision made economic sense. It could not establish that the student deserved the opportunity. One-year master's programmes attracted negative labels such as shuishuo, while self-funded study might be portrayed as a route purchased with family resources (Peng, 2025, pp. 821–823). Posters responded by stressing effort, hardship, gratitude and the responsible use of parental support. Identity gains meaning in relation to other available positions (Bucholtz & Hall, 2005). In the present study, the rational investor was distinguished from the careless consumer, and the deserving student from the privileged degree-buyer. ROI calculations made the educational choice economically defensible, while accounts of effort and responsibility gave the experience moral legitimacy. The result was a demanding form of accountability. Long before the degree's return could be known, students were already expected to show that the opportunity had been used well.

Abroad, the same human-capital reasoning shaped self-development: time had to be used well, while language weakness and low mood became problems to manage. The entrepreneurial self was organised around continuous improvement, with achievement offering only temporary reassurance and stopping associated with waste or falling behind. The "machine" metaphor captured pressure to move despite uncertain direction. This reflects the expectation that individuals maintain competitive value through continuous self-investment (Brown, 2015), bringing credential competition into everyday self-management.

When posters reflected on difficult experiences, hardship was given developmental value and overseas study was presented as a turning point between an earlier, less capable self and a more independent present self. Research on Chinese returnees has similarly associated overseas study with greater confidence, independence and critical thinking (Gu & Schweisfurth, 2015). Han et al.'s (2026) study of overseas Chinese PhD vlogs further shows how anxiety and burnout may be redirected into narratives of perseverance, competence and individually managed recovery. The present findings echo this pattern among master's students, although transformation here was constructed mainly through retrospective self-narration. Posters used difficult experiences to explain how they had become more capable, independent and courageous. Hardship performed different identity work across the posts. In the deserving self, it demonstrated effort against negative labels. In the transformative self, it gave coherence to personal change. The same difficult experience therefore supported moral legitimacy in one position and a narrative of personal becoming in the other.

Transformation also involved a change in what students regarded as necessary or possible. Living abroad exposed students to different ways of studying and living. This experience

encouraged some Chinese students to reconsider the life they had previously taken for granted and to imagine who they might have become if they had remained in China (Gu & Schweisfurth, 2015, pp. 965–966). Comparing life in China and abroad also made some postgraduate students more aware of the fast pace and pressures of everyday life in China (Liu & Xue, 2026, pp. 9–10). In the present posts, such reflection appeared in less competitive definitions of success, as "can" and "do not have to" weakened the apparent necessity of following a single route through education and employment.

These alternative possibilities remained tentative. Further education could still appear difficult to avoid, even when its connection with involution was recognised (Chen et al., 2026, pp. 913–914). The machine metaphor connects the entrepreneurial self with this part of the transformative self, expressing a shared awareness of compulsory movement. The "pause button" example makes the limit particularly clear. The poster expressed a desire to pause, while the pause itself still took the form of a master's degree. The range of imaginable futures widened, while remaining tied to a credentialled response to pressure. Marketised higher education is therefore best understood not as a total explanation but as an evaluative logic that students orient to, negotiate and sometimes question.

7. Conclusion

This study used the Discourse-Historical Approach to examine how Chinese master's students constructed study-abroad identities in 438 excerpts from 67 Xiaohongshu posts. It identified four recurring identities: the deserving study-abroad self, the rational educational investor, the entrepreneurial self and the transformative self.

These identities were constructed through evaluative labels and contrasts, cost–benefit and risk topoi, metaphors, retrospective narratives and modal expressions. Calculations of cost, time and return made overseas education economically defensible, while effort, gratitude and family sacrifice established moral legitimacy. After departure, continuous self-management presented students as responsible for enhancing their future value. Narratives of hardship also supported claims of independence and opened space to question established expectations of productivity and success. The central tension was therefore between demonstrating personal value and reconsidering the standards by which that value was judged.

By focusing on master's students' everyday image-text posts, this study extends research beyond doctoral students' translanguaging practices and performances of an "ideal scholar-self" (Han et al., 2026; Wang, 2024). The findings support an understanding of international student identity as relational, fluid and open to revision (Bucholtz & Hall, 2005; Liu & Rathbone, 2021), while showing how credential value, family responsibility, self-improvement and personal change become connected in discourse.

However, these interpretations are limited by purposive sampling from one changing platform. Although coding and translation were double-checked, identifying identity patterns and translating evaluative language still involved researcher judgement. The analysis focused on textual material and excluded visual content, image–text relations and comments. The findings therefore concern textual self-presentation rather than the posts' full multimodal and

interactional meanings. Future studies could examine how images reinforce, extend or complicate textual identity claims and how audiences accept, challenge or reshape these identities through comments.

Declaration of Generative AI Use

OpenAI's GPT-5.5 and GPT-5.6 Sol models were used to support language editing, structural organisation, formatting consistency, spreadsheet organisation, basic count checks, and initial excerpt segmentation and thematic organisation. All source posts were collected by the first author. The authors checked the data against the original Chinese texts, made the final coding and interpretive decisions, and reviewed and revised the manuscript before submission.

Funding

This work was supported by the Guangdong Province Philosophy and Social Sciences Project under Grant GD24YWY04; the Guangdong Province General Universities Special Innovation Project under Grant 2024WTSCX121; and the Humanities and Social Sciences Foundation of the Ministry of Education of China under Grant 23YJC740003.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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Appendix. Search Terms Used for Corpus Collection

Search stage	Search area	Chinese search terms	English glosses
Pilot search	Broad study-abroad terms	硕士留学；研究生留学	overseas master's study; postgraduate study abroad
Expanded search	Investment and value	硕士留学值不值；硕士留学回本	whether an overseas master's degree is worth it; recouping the cost of an overseas master's degree
Expanded search	Emotion and anxiety	留学焦虑；留子 emo；留学崩溃；留学压力；留学后悔	study-abroad anxiety; international-student "emo"; breakdown during study abroad; study-abroad pressure; regretting study abroad
Expanded search	Negative evaluation	不建议留学；海归贬值；留学不值得	not recommending study abroad; declining value of overseas returnees; study abroad is not worth it
Expanded search	Self-improvement	留学成长；留学改变了我；留学让我变优秀	growth through study abroad; study abroad changed me; study abroad made me better
Expanded search	Employability	留学求职；留学实习；留学找工作；一年硕找工作	study-abroad job seeking; internships during study abroad; finding work during or after study abroad; job seeking with a one-year master's degree

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