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A New Cosmopolitan Elite?

An Ethnographic Study of Privileged Western Youth in Shanghai

Concepts on migration and transnationalism have shown that in a globalized world cultural flows are promoted, among other factors, by international migration. Although these concepts promote the idea of 'global ethnoscares' (Appadurai 1997) or 'transnational social spaces' (Pries 1998, 2001), recent research on expatriates questions the fluidity, openness, and malleability of these spaces (Fechter 2007).

This ethnographic study draws a detailed picture of expatriate teenagers in contemporary Shanghai. Based on eleven months of fieldwork in 2010/11 and building up on former research on privileged migration (Willis and Yeoh 2008, Coles and Fechter 2008, Hindman 2009), this project examines experiences of teenagers trying to establish their new temporary home among international schools, privileged housing areas, expatriate luxury, and Chinese culture. Parents and experts on international education alike relate to these children, who grow up in different cultures due to their parents' mobility, as 'Third Culture Kids' (TCKs) (D.C. Pollock and Van Reken 2001). Taking a transcultural point of view, this work explores international students' ways of dealing with growing up in such an environment defined by cultural entanglements and high mobility. By capturing adolescents' own perspectives, this dissertation investigates their everyday practices and their engagement with mega-city Shanghai. It discusses their dreams and aspirations as well as questions of belonging and identity, exploring the interdependence and contradictions between the aspired flexibility of 21st century identities and the rigidity of cultural divisions based on nationality, ethnicity or class.