

The Price of Being International: A Self-reflection From Chinese Doctoral Returnee

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The experience of being Chinese international student studying English Education in the U.S. equipped me the “dual identity”, which linked my home country and host country. After obtaining the doctoral degree and returning to China, instead of benefiting from the overseas academic experience in China’s job market, I found myself at a disadvantage to securing a job in the Chinese higher education system. This drove me to ponder how much I was shaped and reshaped by the macro context (China and the U.S.), to what extent a PhD degree was valued in China’s job market, and finally how I situated myself in Chinese context. This reflection is a snapshot to offer insight for anyone who is seeking foreign training experience and returning to his or her home country for a job.

Keywords: higher education, China, international student, job, learning quality

Introduction

Education is a form of human capital not only because it originates from deliberate investment, but also yields returns (Zula & Chermack, 2007). Higher education plays a critical role in linking students with society and the job market. This is especially true in China; as the government within the university-government-industry collaboration (Ma, 2014) strategically establishes China’s higher education. On the one hand, China has been restructuring its higher education in order to promote economy. On the other hand, China responded to globalization in ways that are complex and unique with Chinese characteristics (Zhong, Liu, Coates, & Kuh, 2019). Chinese characters here represent China’s traditional culture, socialism ideology, and the leadership of Chinese Communist Party (State Council, 2015).

Since the year of 1978 when China announced Open-up and Reform policy, higher education has been continually developed in a culturally appropriate and politically localized way. President Deng Xiaoping said that higher institutions in China were operated with the main purpose to train academically and professionally competent human capitals for socialism construction and to strengthen its economy (Chen, 2013).

Meanwhile, China’s higher education transformed itself to be internationally oriented by influencing millions of Chinese students to study abroad (Chen, 2013). However, unlike the early years of studying abroad, the majority of today’s Chinese international students studying overseas were self-funded (Choudaha, Li, & Kono, 2013). Thus, while government and university officials (both in China and overseas) emphasized their various motivations for sending out students and recruiting international students, scholars worry the impetus is largely financial (Matthews & Lawley, 2011).

American universities provide highly marketable degrees which are valued in China (Falcone, 2017). However, many scholars (Su & Harrison, 2016) have concerns about the learning quality and result of international students. Rhoads and Slaughter (2004) describe, “colleges and universities are engaging in market and market-like behaviors” (p. 37). Learning at American campuses becomes a “customer experience” (Su & Harrison, 2016, p. 914). In addition, some campuses are not promoting sociocultural accommodations in class design, not providing career guidance to help international graduates secure jobs, and not offering international students a flexible perspective of their own countries (Tang, Collier, & Witt, 2018).

Specifically, many American universities ignored the different needs and realities of Chinese students’ home country, where sociocultural and political contexts play important roles (Leshner, 2015). In the U.S., the job market is diversified to provide doctoral graduates with various study-to-work opportunities and career paths. However, doctoral returnees in China are expected by the society to work in universities right after graduation, especially women (Zhao & Hong, 2018). Also, Chinese universities are managed under the leadership of the Communist Party with a socialist orientation, which is stipulated in laws (National People’s Congress, 1998).

China is repositioning itself from a rule follower to a global player by attracting Chinese overseas talent to return home (Ma, 2014). Although China needs talent, it does not mean China welcomes all talents from different fields at all levels. Unlike doctoral students from STEM majors or prestigious foreign universities (Cheung & Xu, 2015), students in social science from mid-ranking U.S. universities are having difficulties securing jobs in China’s higher education.

Finally, in the number of doctoral degrees awarded, China’s doctoral education granted 60,724 doctorates in 2018 (Ministry of Education of the People’s Republic of China, 2018). With the increased number of doctoral graduates, the saturated faculty jobs, and the different realities, not all Chinese-born international doctoral returnees can enter the higher education field immediately. Thus, it is helpful to describe the risks of being international returnee with social science degrees and critically reflect on overseas learning experiences. Then, it may be informative for prospective international students with less popular majors (i.e. literature) to make better educational decisions and those who have already obtained a degree to plan future careers.

Knowledge Gap

Despite the growing literature exploring ways international students adjust to local life, fit into Western academic environment, and find jobs after graduation in the host country (Tang et al., 2018), documenting the transnational experience of students with higher degrees (i.e. PhD) who return to their home country from a qualitative perspective is scarce in the literature. There are fewer discussions centering on PhD students majoring in social science and concrete suggestions on how to secure a job and smooth the study-to-work transition as returnees.

For one thing, it may be the lack of “Chinese” perspectives in Western university’s career services. For another thing, the existing literature around China and Chinese higher education still carries a strong sense of post-colonial prejudice, oriental bias, and ambivalent unequal partnership (Jiang & Li, 2016). For articles that did cover topics on China or Chinese education, they are largely based on the Western career theories and concepts, which are rooted in a Western culture and value system, but which do not directly explain the Chinese context (Dyer & Lu, 2010). The risk lies in the academic field both for scholars and doctoral students to intensify the misconceptions toward China and perpetuate the dominating status quo of Western theories to explain culturally different context.

Stay Connected

Care should be taken, when adapting Western models and concepts to explain Chinese society (Whetten, 2009). Scholars should elaborate on the context before making claims or Chinese models should be proposed to thoroughly explain Chinese educational phenomena and policies. Out of many concepts that feature China and Chinese higher education, Guanxi is defined as the relationship between two parties who share information to achieve a win-win situation (Xin & Pearce, 1996). In the literature, scholars describe a Chinese Guanxi structure that deterred doctoral students to return to China and thus adds up negativity on the existence of Chinese Guanxi (Cheung & Xu, 2015). However, the application of Guanxi is more than the exchange of favor, but also a strong tie and interpersonal relationship, especially between the doctoral students and their academic advisors. Through guiding students to develop social networking within academia, academic advisors in China provide doctoral students with more career options and advantages.

In contrast, American education tends to emphasize individual autonomy and minimize the power advisors exert over advisees (Tang et al., 2018). However, it may put Chinese returnees at a disadvantageous position in the Chinese job market. It is not inherently wrong for American advisors to guide their advisees in the way they feel professional, but the practicability should also be taken into account for advisee's future career. Education is not only a "here and now" situation, but also a "there and future" possibility. International students who aim to return to their home country after graduation should be reminded from this perspective.

New Context, New Roles

Chinese government has established various programs to aid key universities' high-end talent recruitment, such as Changjiang Scholars Program (Ministry of Education, 2004). However, it is possible that doctoral returnees know little about these programs and will not receive the benefits. In addition, they may not know about the state expectations for higher education. For example, education at the tertiary level, under President Xi's regime, entails promoting education of Marxist and the Party's ethnic. For international returnees, they may find the regime controversial and conflicting with their training experiences in Western countries and need time to adjust, but this will not be a problem for domestic students.

Conclusion

Words are powerful, in terms of influencing both the academic field and students who are impacted by them. A close relationship among society, government, and higher education is the reality of China, but it also lies in the perspective of individual scholar to interpret Chinese policies, goals, and ideologies. For overseas students who are planning to find jobs in China, it is integral to develop critical thinking. Should we not only see how a home country shapes us, but also realize how much we have been shaped by the Western ideologies, concepts, and culture. Taking a patronizing perspective to judge China might not be a good answer. Be aware of the disadvantages of being today's international students and be open-minded while discussing issues related to China. Finally, be prepared to utilize our knowledge to serve as a bridge between China and the outside world.

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