

TRANSITION FROM UNIVERSITY TO WORK: STUDENT VOICES AND THEIR IMPLICATIONS FOR HIGHER LEARNING POLICIES IN CHINA

Qi, WANG¹ and John, LOWE²

¹Shanghai Jiao Tong University, China

²University of Bath, Department of Education, Bath, UK

ABSTRACT: This paper reports on a study of the transition from university to work by young graduates in the complex and rapidly-changing socio-economic context of contemporary Shanghai. One of the most significant of the many changes that have taken place in China in recent decades is the emergence of a labour market. The disappearance of an employment system based on the allocation of a relatively secure job leaves individuals to take full personal responsibility and to compete against each other in this newly emerging labour market. The ferocity of the competition for employment has been reinforced by other factors, such as higher education expansion and the changing nature of work; consequences of which have included the increased significance of higher education as a positional good, the emergence of graduate unemployment and underemployment, and the increased stratification of esteem among universities. We examine how highly educated young people perceive the nature and mode of operation of the newly emerging labour market for knowledge-based jobs, and how they manage and construct their employability in relation to the prevalent economic, educational and socio-cultural values. The analysis leads to further discussion on the nature and role of higher learning and human capital in relations to the employment 'battle' and with respect to education, training and qualification.

1. INTRODUCTION

This paper presents and discusses studies of university students in Shanghai who are about to enter the labour market or have recently done so. The objectives of this study are:

- To investigate the perceptions of the nature and mode of operation of the newly emerging labour market for knowledge-based jobs in Shanghai among students about to enter it and those who are already employed.
- To investigate how highly educated young people in Shanghai plan and manage the transition from university to employment in this new context.
- To investigate these young people's understanding and construction of their employability in relation to the economic, educational and socio-cultural values of contemporary Shanghai.

We make critical use of Brown and Hesketh's study of young British students' and workers' construction of their 'personal employability' [1], asking about the extent to which both their concepts and their findings might apply in the very different context of contemporary China in general and Shanghai in particular. We also draw on concepts of social and cultural capital as they manifest themselves in the Chinese context and on distinct cultural and historical notions of 'personal virtue' and the role and meaning of education. We recognise that the complex socio-economic context of modern China is very different from that in which many of the theoretical concepts and perspectives to which we refer were generated and, as such, poses a potential challenge to those perspectives. Hence, it is to a necessarily somewhat brief account of the important features of this context that we first turn.

2. THE SOCIO-ECONOMIC CONTEXT OF MODERN CHINA AND SHANGHAI

The economic transformation and growth of China over the last thirty years is well known and needs little repetition. Annual GDP growth rates of around 10% and more have been

maintained for at least two decades and even during the recent global economic crisis fell little below this level. On the one hand, this economic growth has helped to pull millions of people out of poverty, while on the other it has led to the emergence of a burgeoning 'new middle class', although we use this term with caution and would argue that the nature of present-day Chinese social stratification remains in need of considerable study and theorisation. Economic growth has not been equally distributed across the country or social strata. Indeed, over the period of this economic transformation, China has emerged as a country with one of the world's highest levels of income inequality, as measured by the Gini coefficient. In particular, the 'development corridor' of the east coast has seen the most rapid growth, with cities such as Shanghai benefitting in particular.

For the purposes of this study, one of the more important features of the economic transformation that has taken place is the emergence of a labour market. Prior to the 1980s, jobs were allocated by one branch or another of the government and were usually allocated 'for life', constituting China's famous 'iron rice bowl' that ensured at least a minimum level of economic and social security for individuals and their families. The older allocation system was in principle based on egalitarian principles and jobs were supposed to be assigned on the basis of an individual's educational qualifications, but in practice was more often on party lines and dependent on social connections (*guanxi*)¹ [2][3]. Since then, however, a labour market has gradually emerged, in which individuals must compete for jobs and in which job security has decreased, with the phenomena of the 'laid-off' worker and unemployment – even for university graduates – emerging for the first time. At the same time, the employment structure has diversified, with the transition from all enterprises being state-owned to a complex mix of state and private, foreign and local ownership, in various proportions between and within enterprises. As

¹ *Guanxi* means 'connections', similar to the notion of 'social capital' but with particular Chinese characteristics. It is crucial in almost all social and business transactions.

suggested above, this has been accompanied by huge increases in wage and salary differences and attendant diversity of job security and access to social services. Finally, we must add into this mix of changes the emergence of a wide range of new jobs as the economy has diversified and modernised, with these new jobs demanding a similarly wide range of new skills, both specific and general.

It is important to stress the relative novelty of this labour market, emerging as it has within a single generation. This means that there is little experience of its mode of operation and young people entering it for the first time may have few family (or other) sources of experience and advice on which to draw. One of the important elements of this study, therefore, was to explore our young subjects' perceptions of the nature of the labour market in China and its mode of operation, as a preliminary to understanding how they planned to engage with it.

A further feature of social life that has significant implications for the labour market and which is a 'leftover' from an earlier era is that of the residency permit, or hukou, system. All individuals must be registered as residents of a particular city, town or village and it is through this registration system that they have access to services such as healthcare and schooling. In the past it was a powerful means of controlling mobility and preventing mass emigration from countryside to town, as seen in developing countries elsewhere. Nowadays, however, when mass migration to the cities to meet the new demand for labour is not just encouraged but an essential economic requirement, the hukou system has undergone some revision and may be more flexibly applied than in the past [4]; but it remains in existence and can be an important consideration when looking for work – without a hukou for the place where the work exists, employment is legally impossible.

This paper focuses on highly educated young people's engagement with the labour market and in this respect it is important to note changes that have taken place in the higher education system in China over the last ten to fifteen years. Here we can only identify the key features that are of greatest relevance to our study but higher education in China has been transformed in almost all aspects. Of particular significance is the – possibly globally unprecedented – growth in enrolments. For example, the gross enrolment ratio for undergraduate students has increased from 9.8% in 1998 to 24.2% in 2009 [5]. The gross enrolment ratio in Shanghai has been above 50% since 2002 and was 60% in 2009, the highest of any city/region in China [6].

Consequences of the expansion of higher education at a rate even greater than that of economic expansion have included the increased significance of higher education as a positional good [7], the emergence of graduate unemployment and the increased stratification of esteem among universities. The last of these three is partly a spin-off from increased competition for places but also reflects elements of government policy to develop a core of 'World-Class Universities' via the '211 Project' and '985 Project'. It is perhaps no surprise that the first scheme for the global ranking of universities emerged from Shanghai Jiao Tong University, along with the proliferation of world university rankings in the past few years.

The overall effect of these changes in the economy, employment and education has been to make the strategic management of one's entry into the labour market and the intensified competition to be experienced there more important than ever. But we shall also argue that, in a time of significant

rapid change, such as that experienced in China in recent years, elements of continuity with older social and cultural values and practices not only remain but are important for the individual's capacity to cope with that change.

Shanghai presents us with the extremes of the impacts of modernisation and globalisation in China², including the emergence of new social strata linked to educational opportunity, while retaining elements of deeply-rooted cultural traditions, including attitudes to education and social relationships. The city's economic history and its present development goals reveal the municipal government's emphasis on promoting a knowledge-based economy and encouraging its citizens to develop appropriate knowledge and skills for its development strategy. With these changes to the economic structure, along with the response to rapid technological and scientific changes and the task of hosting the 2010 World Expo, increasing number of new types of jobs and skill demand are emerged in the labour market. These promising prospects of the Shanghai labour market attract not only Shanghai residents but also people from other parts of the country and overseas to seek employment opportunities in the city.

To integrate the above contextual information with this research, we make the point that individuals receive two clear messages in terms of constructing and managing their employability in the current Chinese context. On the one hand, the economic boom is producing an increasing number of 'good' jobs. If one invests in one's education and training, one may secure one of these positions. On the other hand, individuals are expected to take full responsibility for their own employability in the changing world of work. How do young people understand and engage with the labour market? What factors do they perceive as contributing to occupational success in a rapidly changing context? How far are these perceptions influencing people's decision-making in participating in and their valuing of education and training? These questions form the focus of the empirical component of this paper.

3. THE CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK: THE DUALITY OF EMPLOYABILITY

Hillage and Pollard provide a 'common sense' definition of employability as 'the capability to gain initial employment, to maintain employment and to obtain new employment if required' [8]. In their work on how university graduates managed their employability in the competition for managerial jobs in large multi-national companies, however, Brown and Hesketh [1] propose both an absolute and a relative dimension. One's employability not only depends on whether one accumulates the knowledge, skills and attitudes to meet specific job requirements but also depends on how one stands relative to others within a hierarchy of job seekers, and how one deploys one's assets to ensure a dominant position in that hierarchy [8][1]. As an almost synonymous term, Brown and Hesketh use 'personal capital', which is socially constructed in

² Shanghai is the major financial and industrial centre of China. According to the municipal government statistics in 2008, Shanghai enjoys a population of 13.8 million, with a negative growth rate of -0.10% [6]. With less than 1.3% of the Chinese population and 0.06% of its geographical land, the city has achieved double figures in the GDP annual growth rate since 1992 and is responsible for a share of the national GDP that is disproportionately large for its population.

terms of four components: 'hard' and 'soft currencies', narratives of employability and 'self'.

These absolute and relative components of employability reflect two distinct theoretical perspectives on the relationships between education, jobs and rewards in the knowledge-based economy: a consensus perspective and one based on positional competition or conflict. From the consensus position, the absolute dimension of employability refers to individual achievement in terms of knowledge and technical skills, which ensure that individuals have the right skill sets to match the requirements of employers. In the 'knowledge wars' the talents and achievements of individuals become the source of individual and national prosperity and become essential to winning a global competition for jobs [1]. This absolute dimension of employability can be questioned due to its optimistic interpretation of this global competition. It ignores the fact that the supply of knowledge work does not always match the available jobs. It also ignores the fact that the power of individuals and social groups is differentially distributed in the labour market. Employable candidates may not have equal access to job opportunities, which leaves them unable to find suitable work. That is to say, being employable does not equate to being employed (*ibid*). Focusing on the structure of occupational opportunity, Brown and Hesketh redefine the notion of individual 'employability' in positional conflict terms as 'the relative chances of getting and maintaining different kinds of employment' (*ibid*, p.25).

Locating our study in this broader theoretical perspective leads us to bring in the further concepts of social and cultural capital, which we are concerned to interpret in the specific Chinese context, through concepts such as *guanxi* and *xin tai*, which have been loosely interpreted as 'social capital' and 'attitude' but carry their own particular Chinese meanings and modes of operation.

4. METHODOLOGY

The data employed in this paper come from two related research studies of how young people in one Chinese city, Shanghai, are responding to these structural changes and attempting to engage with the labour market. The first study was conducted between 2004 and 2006; the second drew on the experience of the first, was begun in 2010 and is continuing.

The first study combined an initial questionnaire intended for quantitative analysis, followed by in-depth interviews, to yield qualitative data. Practical considerations of distribution of the questionnaire meant that it was given to an opportunity sample of students and non-students who were all participating in a Shanghai Government-run skills improvement programme. The purpose was to establish the range and patterns of perceptions of aspects of opportunity and challenge in the world of work and skills development. This informed the interview schedule construction and the interview data receives most attention here. The interview sample was selected to include a range of factors identified in the questionnaire as potentially influential on experiences, attitudes and perceptions: students and those employed; different levels of education; those from elite and non-elite institutions; and Shanghai residents and non-residents (as defined by their *hukou*).

A total of 265 useable completed questionnaires were returned - 100 from university students and 165 from employed young people - and 90% of the sample was aged under 30 years. Analysis provided a descriptive overview of the individuals' perceptions of labour market competition. It also enabled us to

identify and classify possible themes and foci for further qualitative investigation and to identify an interviewee sample. The semi-structured interviews made it possible for the researchers to get closer to the respondents, to understand their social positions, to see how they subjectively identify and locate themselves in society, particularly in relation to employment and education, and ultimately to construe their agentic action in the broader social context [9], [10], [11], [12]. The interviews were transcribed but not translated from Chinese except to provide quotes for presentation, so as to reduce loss of original meaning. Cross-case analysis and narrative analysis were adopted. The former located distinct themes across interviews and compared and synthesized views from different groups of people. Narrative analysis of the cases created a holistic picture and understanding of the ways in which individuals make sense of their lives within a changing socio-historical context [13].

The second study is on-going and, so far, is much smaller in scale. All the respondents are participating in the same Government-run skills improvement programme as those in the first study but are also students from a single, high-ranking, research-focussed university. This was done specifically to investigate further an observation from the first study that the status of the university they attended has an impact on students' perceptions of their employability and influenced their approach to the labour market. Data come exclusively from in-depth interviews with students from different degree programmes and to-date only seven such interviews have been carried out. Through this study we are also interested to explore whether there is any indication of change over the time between the two studies in the knowledge, attitudes and behaviours of young graduates about to enter the labour market. We are aware that the nature of the second study means that any comparisons with the first study must be treated with caution, as indicative and requiring further investigation, rather than conclusive.

In the following sections, the findings of the first study will be presented in some detail as the study and the analysis are complete. Second study data will be presented more briefly to indicate where we are finding significant differences or where the data adds further detail or insight to those from the first study.

5. FIRST STUDY FINDINGS

The novelty of the labour market in China has accentuated the role and awareness of 'risk' in people's lives, which in turn has influenced individuals' perceptions and understanding of learning. Risk implies two meanings: opportunities and uncertainties. All the participants are highly aware of the social and economic changes taking place in Shanghai and China respectively. They see these changes as having expanded opportunity in the labour market, in terms of more educational opportunities to improve their personal skills and knowledge, and more job opportunities for autonomous development and choice of employers. On the other hand, a more pessimistic view of 'risk' is expressed. The marketised economy and the new mechanisms of 'competition' make participants aware that uncertainty unavoidably coexists with opportunity.

Individuals realize that they stand on their own in the competition, with no one to rely on for information, making it difficult to predict outcomes and adding to a sense of uncertainty about the future. The respondents used words such as 'pressured', 'complicated', 'horrible', 'frightening', 'cruel' about the ferocious competition in the labour market. All the

changes in Shanghai challenge people's ontological security system [14] and lead to a degree of existential anxiety, as individuals find their previous knowledge about seeking a job is inadequate or inaccurate in current society. To rebuild their security system and to regain their confidence, individuals as knowledgeable agents search for information and deploy different coping strategies. This involves gaining an understanding of and construing the structural forces within which individuals were living and understanding the extent of the agency they can exercise.

There is a perceived 'frame of reference' [15] of employability composition and self-identity information, not only influenced by structural factors but also shaped by and blended with personal experience, friends' and family's advice and information from the media. Individual accounts of the factors that constituted their employability and played roles in the labour market competition were analysed in terms of Brown and Hesketh's 'personal capital' [1]. 'Hard currencies' were identified as professional skills and knowledge, educational capital (education degree level and educational institutional level), work experience, the hukou system and social networks; the 'soft currencies' included soft skills, ethics and 'xin tai'.

-- Professional skills and knowledge were considered the basis for personal achievement at work or study. People were seeking to distinguish themselves from each other by deepening and reinforcing their knowledge of their subjects and fields; by so doing, they could enjoy extra advantages in the labour market. The interviewees also realized the enhanced possibilities for lifelong learning arising from technological innovations offer opportunities for them to improve their professional skills and knowledge.

-- Educational qualifications were considered as significant for people's position in the labour market competition, especially for new entrants, as a brick to knock down the barrier or gate to the labour market. The competition for credentials was perceived to occur at two levels, intra-qualification (different degree levels) and inter-qualification competition (non-/elite university degrees). Not surprisingly, higher-degree holders and elite-university-degree holders were perceived to have more advantages in employment.

Qualifications were considered subject to devaluation in the context of higher education expansion, making their 'real' value difficult to predict. The student interviewees emphasized more than their working counterparts the role of qualifications in gaining employment. While the students emphasized all sorts of qualifications they had obtained, the older interviewees took their longer work experience as offering an advantage over their younger counterparts. Those from elite universities revealed a confidence in their degrees, as did those with foreign degrees; the non-elite universities students tended to show less confidence in terms of competing in the labour market with their educational credentials. However, it was reiterated by all the interviewees that qualifications only got one into the competition, and real success depended on demonstrating one's skills and knowledge.

-- Working experience was considered to be essential for personal success in the labour market competition. It was commonly perceived that academic credentials and work experience were complementary and some respondents had developed a 'calculus of equivalence' between length of work experience and different levels of qualifications. While one could master relevant theories through academic degree study, the respondents perceived work experience as enabling people

to 'grow up' in terms of professional skill and knowledge, as indicating their interpersonal skills and as denoting their level of social experience and social contacts, thereby contributing to their stock of social capital.

-- 'Guanxi' capital included two aspects of 'family background'. First, taken in a positive way, 'family background' referred to a family's socio-economic status, that is, whether the parents were professionals, intellectuals, etc. Second, in a negative way, 'family background' was related to guanxi or social connections, which could increase a person's chance of success. Guanxi could, therefore, be seen to contain elements of both cultural and social capital but since these concepts take on meanings and manifest themselves in ways that may be specific to Chinese society, we are wary of simply discussing guanxi in Western 'equivalent terms' [16][17].

-- Hukou, the Shanghai citizen identification system, was ranked the second least important factor in competition in the Shanghai labour market. While describing hukou as playing a protective role in employment, the respondents (89.2%) agreed that Shanghai citizens were facing more and more challenges and competition from people from other parts of the country. In the context of higher education expansion, the hukou system was only perceived to screen over-supply of undergraduate degree holders.

The 'soft currencies' included soft skills, ethics and 'xin tai':

-- Soft skills were considered as essential for personal success, especially due to the changing nature of work. Particular emphasis was placed on teamwork, communication skills, problem-solving skills, creativity, logical thinking, and self-judgement skills. Three routes to improving one's soft skills were recognised: doing social work during formal studies, training through a full-time job and promoting skills through participating in lifelong learning. The interviewees identified formal education itself as an opportunity contributing to the development of soft skills through, for example, communicating and working together with peers and teachers.

-- The ethical issues referred to were hard work, modesty, responsibility, reliability and being active at work. They were seen as aspects of Chinese culture and were considered to be critical elements to personal success in the labour market. These qualities were considered as a form of ethics and morality and can be related to the interviewees' basic ontological security system. No matter what changes were taking place in society, people had confidence and trust in certain traditions, cultural traits and ideologies.

-- 'Xin tai', as a form of Emotional Quotient (EQ) was rated as highly important. Only two of the interviewees directly identified EQ as a 'professional' term, but others referred to relevant elements, such as self-adjustment and 'psychological quality'. People needed to be emotionally well-prepared for the competition, frustration, uncertainty and risk that characterise the current labour market.

Although Brown and Hesketh's employability concept was found to be useful, this must be considered as just part of a wider process amongst these young people of their reflexive construction of 'self'. Realising that a range of structural factors influence how the labour market competition works, individuals apply this 'frame of reference' to measure their own employability, to evaluate their standing in the employment competition and to contribute to their sense of risk and uncertainty. Different personal histories and social experiences generate different social positions and resources.

Individuals identify their advantages and disadvantages over others and, accordingly, design strategies for standing out in the competition. Three general strategies are identified to cope with the labour market competition, to develop their employability and to rebuild their basic security system.

The first coping strategy is to be self-responsible and self-reliant. While individuals enjoy more freedom and space to exercise their agency in the new social sphere, they also have more responsibility for themselves. Rather than being protected by a job-for-life system, individuals realize that their lives become a continuous process of decision making, that they need to be the centre of this process and must be responsible for the consequences of their decisions and actions.

The second coping strategy is to seek positional advantages while improving substantial personal skills and knowledge in their employability construction. Reflecting Brown and Hesketh's 'duality of employability' [1], individuals not only need to obtain innate capabilities and make greater efforts in their professional achievement, but must also possess the right skills and knowledge to meet the employers' specific demands and to demonstrate their individuality.

The third coping strategy is to study hard, work hard and be modest. If the first two coping strategies are thought of as discursive consciousness and individuals' reflexive action in the new socio-economic condition, this third can be understood as practical consciousness and drawing on deeply-ingrained cultural knowledge [18]. To study hard and work hard provide a sense of ontological security for individuals to deal with changes and uncertainties and improve their confidence.

6. EDUCATION, TRAINING AND QUALIFICATION

The above analysis leads to further discussion of the nature and role of human capital in relation to the employment 'battle' and with respect to education, training and qualification. The research findings reflect a strong sense of credentialism along with a weak technocratic view among the individual respondents. Education and training are considered as a ritualistic process of gathering qualifications in the Chinese education system; and qualifications are considered as limited paper currency to be exchanged for life chances.

First, qualification has become a pre-requisite for entering into the employment competition, particularly in the context of higher education expansion. Credentials are considered as a 'promisary note' for those in the lower echelons of society to have the opportunity for upward mobility in Chinese society [19]. However, in the context of higher education expansion and the economic development, the increasing number of university degree holders and jobs in relatively short supply makes the qualifications no longer a life insurance of individuals' places in employment as they were before the socio-economic reform in China; rather they are entrance tickets or 'cultural-capital passports' [20] into the competition. Hence, the requirement of bachelor degrees did not necessarily mean the skill and knowledge level demanded for this job. The individuals failed to perceive the role of qualifications in terms of enhancing productivity, or rather the intrinsic value of the educational experiences and qualifications was not recognised by the individuals.

Second, the individuals hold a view that educational qualifications are just pieces of paper, rather than representations of skills. The research suggests the crux of

these viewpoints lay in the individuals' lack of trust and confidence in Chinese education and training. To the interviewees, Chinese education and training, especially in the tertiary education sector, was characterised as theory-laden, rote learning and out-of-date course content. In the global knowledge economy, the teaching and learning in Chinese universities widened the gap between the skills and knowledge required in the real world of work and those students learned at university. This view further reinforced their perceptions of the ritualistic role of education and training in China and their doubt over the validity of credentials in terms of measuring people's employability. To them, work experience which was accumulated at a 'real' workplace provided them with 'real' skills and knowledge.

As qualifications were considered as not equally indicating the holders' possession of skills and knowledge, it is difficult to tell who has the skills and knowledge appropriate to a particular job and who would do a better job. In the context of higher education expansion and credential inflation, it is difficult to stand out from the crowd by possessing only a university degree. Respondents believed it is important that there are 'markers' of the differential value ascribed to particular credentials. Therefore, the different education and training experiences behind each qualification are considered as a form of obtaining positional advantage to open up one's life chances. These positional advantage elements of educational qualifications are signalled by educational institutional reputation and institution locality.

Third, related to the above point, the individuals also believe that the role of educational qualifications to help them to enter the labour market competition is limited. Echoing the finding that employability is a multi-factorial notion, there is a common belief that once individuals' other personal qualities, particularly their professional knowledge and skills, have been proved through their work experience, they will not necessarily need the credential protection. Hence, the value of a qualification gradually tends to zero with the increase of work experience. Here, again, the importance of work experience is emphasized. Being confronting with real situations, problems and questions is more useful and more significant to the development of knowledge and skills.

To sum up, our respondents did not deny the significance of obtaining various qualifications as positional goods in the labour market competition. In the response to the research questions stated earlier, we have shown that individuals are increasingly exerting their agency and engaging in negotiation between personal and social experience in this late modern society, by means such as planning their employability construction and making choices about their learning. Nevertheless, individuals' actions are still to some extent influenced and constrained by socio-economic structures. The individuals realise that before they can exert their agency and make decisions on what, how, when and where to learn so as to develop their employability, their life chances have been structured or determined to some extent, such as the level and reputation of the educational degrees held, the length of work experience, and their geographical origins (hukou). Looking through all the data, therefore, we conclude that this research shows that a coherent theoretical framework of integrating both human capital theory and positional conflict theory is needed to fully understand the individuals' engagement in the labour market.

7. ELABORATIONS FROM THE SECOND STUDY

The students in the second study were much better informed about the workings of the labour market than those in the study of five years earlier. We cannot tell whether this was a function of the passage of time or whether it reflects the elite nature of the university in the second study. Certainly, these students feared the labour market competition less than was generally observed earlier. This expressed confidence about their position in the competition and this was clearly attributed to the reputational capital of their university. There was also, however, a greater awareness of the intricacies of the labour market in terms of the relative supply and demand for different subject qualifications: mechanical engineering students, for example, were aware that demand exceeded supply in their field, enhancing their confidence yet further.

The students also argued, however, that the advantage that they had from attending this university was based on more than reputation. Firstly, they commented on the quality of the programmes and their experience, which they felt really did enhance their academic/professional and interpersonal skills. This contrasted with the often disparaging comments by some students in the earlier study who regarded their university courses as little more than a qualification-gathering experience. Secondly, the students recognized the influence of their peers, pointing out that there was an atmosphere of hard work and engagement throughout the student body. They noted how the use of resources and opportunities that the university offered to enhance their employability was maximized. Internship was given as an example here. Internship experience is not required for any of the programmes but students recognised its value as a source of work experience and reported being inspired by classmates to apply for such experience together.

An interesting overall effect of these experiences was the generation of a sense of gratitude to their student predecessors for establishing a reputation amongst employers and a sense of responsibility towards junior students to ensure that this reputation was maintained. It should be noted, however, that although these comments arose in the context of an interview about employability, the students saw their experience as being something much more than this. They talked of having a strong sense of identity with their university, that membership of the university had become an important part of their own identity, of their sense of self. To a significant extent, therefore, their construction of their own employability and enhancement of their chances in the labour market were seen as just a part of a larger project of self-development. This construction of the self contributes to their advantage in the labour market but is also of much greater personal significance.

A further, final point that emerges from these later studies relates to the perceived impact of the recent economic crisis. Although China in general and Shanghai in particular may not have been so badly affected by this as other parts of the world, its impact was felt in the employment market. In particular, there may be a new suspicion of the multi-national corporations emerging. It remains agreed that MNCs may provide a better work environment and opportunities for self-development, and students at an elite university such as this one recognize that they would be among the first choice for MNC employment. It is now suspected, however, that MNCs are more subject to the vagaries of the global economy and, as a result, may offer weaker job security than their Chinese counterparts. At the same time, however, these students are

looking forward and hope that global economic recovery will offer them greater opportunities than those available to graduates of two years ago.

8. CONCLUSION

This paper is concerned with how the individuals constructed their employability and what role education, training and qualifications play in this process. The findings suggest that individuals, as knowledgeable agents, reflect on the rapid socio-economic changes in contemporary society and are highly aware of a strong sense of self-responsibility to develop and manage their own employability, so as to increase their life chances in the labour market. It is also confirmed that employability is a multi-faceted notion, consisting of a series of hard and soft currencies. For example, hard currencies include educational capital (the value of credentials was widely acknowledged) and work experience (which brought about 'real' skill development and self-fulfillment). In addition, certain structural or policy factors, such as the hukou system, to some extent play a role in deciding people's standing in the competition. The soft currencies are considered to be personal and interpersonal skills, and the capacity to adjust and develop oneself in a changing social and economic context. A close reading of the interviews leads to the argument that different people, with different histories, social backgrounds and experiences and possessing different social positions and resources, have the ability to identify what their advantages and disadvantages (relative to others) are in line with their 'frame of reference', and accordingly design their strategies to make themselves stand out in the labour market competition. This process can be seen as part of a reflexive project of 'self'. We could argue that the individual actors increasingly gained space for exerting their agency in this late modern society [14]. However, their actions are not totally free; or rather, the individuals are not totally empowered. Their actions are still constrained by certain social and cultural factors and values. It can be suggested that individual action derives from the interaction between subjective self-identity and objective social conditions in which the person has lived and is living [21].

This study is part of a larger and on-going research programme into the relationship between education and social change in contemporary China. Studies of the transition from education to work have largely been Western in origin. There also has been some research on graduate students' employability conducted in China, mostly identifying the meaning of employability, largely using quantitative approaches. It is noted that the graduate students' employment situation has deteriorated in recent years in China; for example, only 37% of last year's graduating students in Shanghai had found their first employment by the end of this March [22]. This poor employment situation is also accompanied by the changing social status of university graduates, from knowledge workers to a marginalised group [23]. From both a methodological perspective (in its use of qualitative techniques) and the developing nature of this research topic, the research programme presented in this paper will have immediate value in developing the literature on global/national war for talent from an emerging economy as well as suggesting practical implications for examining learning policies in China.

REFERENCES

1. Brown, P. and Hesketh, A. (2004). *The Mismanagement of Talent: Employability and Jobs in the Knowledge Economy*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

2. Coady, D.P. and Wang, L. (2000). 'Incentives, allocation and labour market reforms during transition: the case of urban China 1986-1990'. *Applied Economics*, vol.32, pp.511-526.
3. Knight, J. and Song, L. (2005). *Towards a Labour Market in China*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
4. Qiu, W.; Wen, D. and Ding, X. (2004). 'A discussion of graduates' competitiveness for employment' ('Cong Qiu zhi yu Qixin Kan Gaoxiao Biyesheng Jingzhenli'). *Economics of Education Research (Beida)* vol.2(2). <http://www.gse.pku.edu.cn/beidaEER>.
5. Ministry of Education, China (2009). *Education Statistics*. Retrieved from <http://www.moe.gov.cn/edoas/website18/level2.jsp?tablename=1020>.
6. Shanghai Statistics (2009). *Basic Statistics*. Retrieved from <http://www.stats-sh.gov.cn>.
7. Hirsch, F. (1977). *Social Limits to Growth*. London, Routledge and Kegan Paul.
8. Hillage, J. and Pollard, E. (1998). *Employability: Developing a Framework for Policy Analysis*. Department for Education and Employment (DfEE) Research report, No. RR85. London: DfEE.
9. Cohen, L., Manion, L., Morrison, K. (2002). *Research Methods in Education*. London, Routledge.
10. Bryman, A. (2001). *Social Research Methods*. Oxford, Oxford University Press.
11. Coffield, F. (1999). *Why's the Beer always Stronger up North? Studies of Lifelong Learning in Europe*. Bristol, the Policy Press.
12. Gorard, S. and G. Rees (2002). *Creating a Learning Society? Learning Careers and Policies for Lifelong Learning*. Bristol, the Policy Press.
13. Chase, S.E. (2005). 'Narrative inquiry: multiple lenses, approaches, voices', in N.K. Denzin and Y.S. Lincoln *Handbook of qualitative Research* (3rd ed.). Thousand Oaks: Sage.
14. Giddens, A. (1984). *The Constitution of Society: Outline of the Theory of Structuration*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
15. Brown, P. (1987). *Education, Unemployment and Labour Markets*. London: Falmer.
16. Gold, T., Guthrie, D. & Wank, D. (Eds.) (2002). *Social Connections in China: Institutions, Culture, and the Changing Nature of Guanxi*. Cambridge, Cambridge University Press.
17. Huang, Q.H. (2003). *Social Capital in the West and China*. Working Paper WP03/03, Business School, Manchester Metropolitan University.
18. Giddens, A. (1991) *Modernity and Self-identity: Self and Society in the Late Modern Age*. California: Stanford University Press.
19. Bian, Y.J. (2002). 'Chinese social stratification and social mobility'. *Annual Review of Sociology*, vol.28, pp.91-116.
20. Warmington, P. (2003). 'You need a qualification for everything these days': The impact of work, welfare and disaffection upon the aspirations of access to higher education students. *British Journal of Sociology of Education*, 24(1), pp.95-108.
21. Hodkinson, R. and Sparkes, A.C. (1997) 'Careership: a sociological theory of career decision-making'. *British Journal of Sociology of Education*, vol.18(1), pp.29-44.
22. Han, X.Y. (2010). 'Shanghai university graduates' employment rate only reaches 37%' ('Shanghai 2010 jie Biyesheng Qianyuely 37%'). *Oriental Morning Post*, April 5th 2010. Retrieved from <http://sh.sina.com.cn/news/2010-04-05/0330139161.html>.
23. Lian, S. (2009). 'Ant Tribes' - What do Chinese College Graduates Have in Common with Ants ('Yi Zu - Daxue Biyesheng Jujucun Shilu'). Guangxi: Guangxi Normal University Press.