POST-GRADUATE EMPLOYMENT TRANSITIONS IN AN INTERNATIONAL CONTEXT: A CASE STUDY OF CHINESE STUDENTS IN THE UK

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ABSTRACT: This paper presents a multiple case study of the construction of personal employability by Chinese students at a UK university. It draws on the work of Brown and Hesketh to frame notions of employability and that of Margaret Archer to understand how these students use their powers of reflexivity to engage with an unfamiliar context of uncertainty and rapid change. Its concern with students' engagement with the international and Chinese labour markets from their own perspectives provides a complementary contrast to those studies that have focused on the structural features of such markets. We show how students participate as active agents in the construction of their employability and in making decisions about their future careers. Of particular interest is the way in which these students treat the relationships between Chinese and global labour markets in the planning of their own futures. Using a longitudinal approach, the study follows and analyses changes in the perceptions of the students and shows how these arise from reflection on their own experiences. The study also identifies cultural continuities in this reflection, based on the prior experiences and world-views that the students draw on in their navigation through unfamiliar contexts.

1. INTRODUCTION: GLOBAL MARKETS, GLOBAL MOBILITY?

The expansion of the global mobility of university students is one of the most remarkable phenomena in higher education over the last decade or so. It is tempting to see this expansion as one of the 'global flows' that Appadurai [1] first popularised as a means of defining the process of globalisation. To do this invites questions about the interconnectedness of this particular 'flow' and others, to look for relationships between the global mobility of higher education students and other features – other flows - of contemporary globalisation. Marginson and Sawir [2] have suggested an analytical model for doing just this and examine its potential in a case study of just two institutions. Our initial aim in the research that informs this paper was somewhat more modest in that it focused on just two flows within one of Appadurai's 'scapes' or dimensions of globalisation (ibid), the mobility of higher education students and the mobility of skilled labour, both being elements of Appadurai's 'ethnoscape'. Interest in this aim came from our work on the motivations and experiences of international students in the UK [3] and the work of Brown and Hesketh [4] on young people's transitions to the labour market in the UK, which informed a small scale study of such transitions in China [5].

Specific contextual factors – global, British and Chinese – also focussed our interest in the employment aspirations, plans and strategies of Chinese students in the UK. From both the national data and our own diverse experiences, we are well aware of the huge growth in the number of Chinese students at British universities. Overseas educational experience had historically been perceived as offering an advantage in the Chinese labour market while at the same time a large number of Chinese students had also stayed on to work in the host country after graduation, most notably in the USA. The host country benefitted from this pool of new talent while individual Chinese may have seen it either as further opportunity to enhance their experience and their advantage on return to China or as offering new life horizons abroad. At the same time as this expansion of overseas Chinese enrolment has been taking place, however, there has also been an explosive expansion in university enrolment in China itself and a sustained period of rapid economic growth and associated job opportunities. Taken together, these developments have impacts on the Chinese labour market that are complex and often contradictory, through the simultaneous expansion of opportunity and intensification of competition. Meanwhile, we are informed, a global 'War for Talent' has broken out [6] that is global in its reach and increases massively the individual and corporate gains for the winners. In the UK, such perceptions led the British government to offer working visa incentives to the most talented overseas students to take up employment on completion of their studies in high-skilled and skill-shortage fields, only for these to be withdrawn as the economy contracted and political pressures to protect home employment mounted.

The complex national and global employment situations for the highly educated have been analysed from policy and macro-economic and sociological perspectives (see for example, Brown et al [7] for a very recent and critical account) but our interests are much more centred on how individuals perceive and manage the complex employment situation they face. This is in part informed by our interest in the theorisation of the relationship between individual and society, between agency and structure. Here, we are particularly interested in the potential offered by the critical realist theoretical position proposed by Archer [8], [9], particularly in its applicability to aspects of education [10]. Our attention therefore turned to examining how individual Chinese students in the UK interpret the employment opportunities available to them and how they see and intend to take advantage of their educational experience abroad as they engage with labour markets. The study we report on here is small-scale and exploratory and it is our intention to increase the scale and scope of our research, building on the insights we have gained.

2. AIM AND OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

The aim of this study is to investigate – using an intensive multiple case study approach - how Chinese postgraduate students at a research-intensive university in the UK perceive and plan to engage with international and Chinese labour

markets through construction of their personal employability. The specific objectives are to explore

• How these students perceive their future employment prospects;

• How they construct their personal employability in relation to their employment aspirations;

• The role that they perceive their UK experience plays in constructing their employability;

• How they employ their powers of individual reflexivity and agency to actively construct their employability in response to their experiences;

• Whether there are distinctive cultural influences on their construction of their 'employable self'.

Ten years or more ago, the common pattern for Chinese students overseas was to stay on to work in the host country. Between 1978 and 2001, for example, only around 14% of Chinese students in the USA returned to work in China. In the UK and Europe the proportion was higher, but still less than 50% of Chinese students went back to work in their home country [11]. Since that time, however, both the global and the Chinese labour market prospects for graduates have changed. The number of students studying overseas has increased considerably, increasing competition for jobs in the receiving country. Similarly, a massive expansion of higher education enrolments in China has led to fiercer labour market competition and graduate unemployment there [12], [13]. To these changes must be added the recent global economic downturn and its impact on labour markets.

Our study therefore aims to explore how the Chinese students in our sample respond to these structural forces, how they interpret them in terms of their meaning for their own futures and how they are seen to present or deny opportunities. We are interested in the personal and cultural resources on which the students draw during this process. By adopting a longitudinal approach we aim to identify any changes that take place in the students' views, aspirations and plans and to examine how these changes came about.

3. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORKS

For our conceptualisation of employability, we draw substantially on Brown and Hesketh's theorisation of UK students' engagement with the labour market through an analysis focusing on constructions of personal employability [4]. We also make a comparison with the work of Wang and Lowe [5] on students from Chinese universities entering directly into the Chinese high-skills labour market. They identified the importance of certain cultural continuities that helped participants cope with a new era of change, risk and uncertainty, providing them with a sense of 'ontological security' as a basis on which to engage with the reflexive project of the 'self' [14]. We ask the question here, what resources the students draw on when away from their home culture to establish a sense of ontological security, if indeed they succeed in doing so.

We have briefly mentioned some of the structural conditions that these students face in contemplating their future career paths but our concern is to understand the students' construction of their employability from their own perspectives. In this, our study provides a complementary contrast with that of, for example, Lauder et al [15] and Brown and Tannok [16]. To meet our purpose, we find the theoretical

position offered by Margaret Archer's work to be particularly powerful [8][9]. Archer distinguishes between the existence of structural and cultural properties and subjects' responses to them. She recognises personal reflexivity as the human mediating power between structure and agency, defining it as 'the regular exercise of the mental ability … to consider themselves in relation to their (social) context and vice versa' [9, p.4]. People can 'design and determine their responses to the structured circumstances in which they found themselves, in the light of what they personally care about most' [9, p.11].The pursuit of any social practice entails interplay between the causal powers of subjects themselves (agency) and those of relevant structural and cultural properties (structure). By employing Archer's theoretical framework and recognising reflexivity as a distinct human power this research makes the students active rather than passive agents, who can exercise some governance in their own lives, in a context of uncertainty and rapid change.

4. METHODS AND DATA SOURCES

The research on which we report was an intensive, small-scale study to explore the field, preparatory to develop our understanding of the issues and the diversity of student positions and to refine our conceptualisation. This is to be followed in the near future by a more extensive piece of work that will include a quantitative survey to investigate the generalisability of our findings. The first phase is significant in its own right, however, in terms of providing the necessary conceptual depth and theoretical framework for any subsequent research.

We focus on taught postgraduate (Masters) students as these are more immediately concerned with job-seeking than undergraduates. Our study was restricted to a single high-reputation university, partly for practical reasons but also to eliminate university status as a variable at this stage, feeling that it is better dealt with in the quantitative phase. We identified 23 students to represent a range of disciplines and both genders. Each of these was given an individual semi-structured interview shortly after beginning their course and a second interview close to the end of the course. (In the UK, a taught post-graduate course lasts just one year.) Several students took part in further interviews, within and beyond the one year of their studies. These were chosen on somewhat opportunistic and pragmatic grounds, such as their availability.

The initial interview asked for individual background data, then explored reasons for studying in the UK and at that university, the student's employment aspirations, their understanding of the labour market and how they were developing their own employability. We were concerned throughout to explore origins of and influences on each individual's ideas; explicit questions on these were included but the interviewees were also encouraged to place all responses in their wider life contexts. The follow-up interview focused on their experiences in the UK and subsequent developments in their plans and activities to achieve them.

All interviews were recorded and then transcribed. The interviews were conducted in Mandarin Chinese and analysis was carried out using the untranslated transcripts, to avoid loss or compromise of meaning in translation. Transcripts were read thoroughly to enhance familiarity with their content before formal analysis of the responses took place.

Analysis was based on a combination of coding categories identified in the literature and categories which emerged from

the data themselves. The former were guided by the core constructs of Brown and Hesketh's account of personally employability, particularly those of 'soft' and 'hard' skills and of 'strategies' in the marketing of the self to potential employers. The need to go beyond these categories, however, was important for our aims of looking for possible cultural differences from the UK work and of seeking to place employability formation in the wider contexts of the students' life stories.

5. FINDINGS: SOME GENERAL PATTERNS

Although some of the students' reasons for coming to study in the UK can be directly linked to enhancing their employability, for many the linkage is indirect or implied. There is an awareness of credential inflation in China that makes a Masters degree almost essential for seeking employment that these university graduates would consider worthwhile. Some are sceptical about a UK Masters degree offering them any advantage over the Chinese equivalent, while some do feel they have learned more than they might have done in China. Thus, in terms of their employability, there was some disagreement on the extent to which the UK degree gave them more subject- or job-specific 'hard skills' compared to an equivalent course in China. Similarly, many feel the employability enhancement afforded by simply possessing an overseas qualification itself, rather than the Chinese equivalent, can no longer be taken for granted. A common attraction, however, is that the UK course lasts only one year and thus saves time compared to taking it in China, and the overall cost is less than it would be in the USA, which is also seen as having more examinations than the UK in its Masters courses.

More important than the degree itself for enhancing their employability is the personal development arising from the experience of studying overseas. The students see the experience as increasing their self-confidence and problem-solving skills, which they believe will contribute to their future career opportunities. Similarly important for many is the opportunity to improve their English language competence, which is seen to be important to many potential employers, especially the foreign-owned companies in China that they tend to see as preferred employers. But they also spoke of the benefit they expected to gain from 'engaging with the difference' of interacting with people from different parts of the world, which in turn would help them to 'think differently'.

Unlike those in Bai's study [17] – from which he deduced there is a fundamental change of values taking place among Chinese youth - these students tend not to rate a high salary as the most attractive feature of a job. They express a preference for a good working environment and the opportunity to develop their personal skills and attributes. Although the latter are often described in instrumental terms as assisting them in their future career moves, there may also be an element here of the more traditional value placed on self-development for its own sake. In this respect they also see the construction of their employability as a continuing process, with the early opportunities for self-development contributing to their careers in the longer term.

Most of the students desire, in the longer term at least, to return to work in China, for reasons that include the wish to be near their parents and friends and the 'better social life' available there. On their arrival, however, many do plan to gain a few years' work experience in the UK first, as a way of enhancing their employability on return, and some express an interest in working in other parts of the world. Their experiences in the UK and better understanding of the situation ultimately tend to lead most of them to accept these plans as unrealistic. They are aware of difficulties in obtaining employment in the UK, either because of the subject they are studying or because of the current economic situation, but they are also aware of the fierceness of the competition they will face back in China. They commonly see little point taking work in the UK that will not add experience relevant to their long-term aspirations and decide that it is better to return to China and gain experience there.

There is widespread recognition that women face particular difficulties from the social and family pressures to have a family, while still wishing to build their own professional career. The female students are still young enough not to have to face this difficulty right away but they are aware that it is looming and that they will need family support if they are to achieve both their career aspirations and raise a family, as expected.

6. FINDINGS: INDIVIDUAL CASES

Whereas the previous section suggests some general tendencies within the group, it is important to recognise the variety of experiences and backgrounds amongst these students and how these influence their decision making about their own futures. In focusing exclusively on the more generalisable patterns there is a danger of reducing individuals to cultural stereotypes and, in doing so, to over emphasise structural forces, thus missing the role of reflection and personal agency in the course of their lives. To grasp the latter fully requires in-depth treatment of each individual case, for which we do not have space here. We shall therefore identify salient features of the experiences of just some of the individuals in our study to give an indication of the diversity and to indicate the processes at work at the level of individual agency.

One of the features of social transactions in Chinese society that has been widely observed and commented on is 'guanxi', commonly interpreted as 'social capital' or 'social networks', although some commentators have argued that such a translation misses its particular Chinese characteristics and significance [18][19]. One thing which distinguishes individuals in this study from each other is the degree of guanxi that they can draw on. Student A (female), for example, reported that, thanks to her parents' contacts, she would be going back to China to take up a position in the administration of a university near her home. Her understanding of the labour market in China, based on her own family's position, was that there is no need actively to seek employment; a job is simply found by mobilising one's (or, more usually, one's family's) contacts. This, she believed, is the 'way it is done' nowadays.

'There aren't many kids who have to look for jobs themselves nowadays in China, are there? Particularly for people like us who were born after the 1980's. At least, no people I know who have to do that. It will all be arranged by their families or they just take up their own family's business' (Interview 13 -2)

In contrast, student B (male) possessed little personal guanxi and his job-seeking was more of a very carefully and rationally planned programme, requiring considerable personal investment of effort. The only source he could draw on was an ex-school-friend whom he asked to get information for him about opportunities in the fields that interested him. He then had to contact employers, answer advertisements and 'sell' himself through his own efforts. Employers were targetted

according to what extent they match his own aspiration, skill, qualification and experience.

'On my list, some I will need some extra effort and luck to get, which I see as pushing my boundary but would be ideal to get; some will be the baseline employers, which I'm pretty confident to get in but won't be so challenging. But I keep them as a safe bet in case I don't get in any of those in the first category' (Interview 1-2)

In this sense, student B could be seen as fitting Brown and Hesketh's model of the 'purist' in his approach to his employability – constructing his employability in terms of his own personal skills and qualifications and trusting in the integrity of the labour market. Student A, on the other hand, could be described as a 'player', in Brown and Hesketh's terms, although the 'game' that she played is very much a Chinese one. The 'purist' model was more common amongst these students who generally believed one's own knowledge and skills are the most important after all in competing in the job market. (There was, however, a perception amongst our respondents that there is a significant difference between the public and private sectors in terms of the importance of guanxi in getting a job.)

Student C (male) was also confident of getting a job – a civil service position – on his return to China, thanks to his family contacts. He was clear from the very beginning that his purpose in coming to the UK was to obtain the MA that would meet the formal requirements for the post and he had never considered staying on to work in the UK. Any further work experience in the UK would have contributed nothing to his employability and spending just one year on obtaining the qualification was an efficient use of time and money. This contrasts with several other students who came to the UK with some sort of aspiration (often only broadly articulated) to stay on after graduation but who then returned either because of disappointment with the life offered by the UK or because they were unable to find a job after all.

Rather unusually for this group, Student D (male) found that his experience in the UK led him to want to stay. He preferred what he saw as a 'more relaxed' lifestyle offered by the UK and looked for employment. In this he was unsuccessful and reluctantly gave up the attempt and returned to China, where at the time of last contact with him he remained unemployed.

Student E (female), for example, always expected to go back to China eventually but felt that her employability there would be enhanced if she had work experience in the UK. She applied for a wide range of jobs, simply to get this greater experience but was always (at the time of writing) unsuccessful. She blamed this lack of success partly on her own language difficulties but also on the potential employers' perception of the added work-permit difficulties that they would face if they employed her. E continued to look for useful experience but set herself a definite time limit, after which she would return to China.

In the above cases, the students arrived with at least a broad plan of their future and used the time in the UK to help them – more or less successfully – to fulfil this plan. For other students, however, events and experiences while in the UK led them to re-appraise their aspirations and plans. Student F (female), recognising the intense competition and credential inflation in China, saw the British MA as a way to improve her employability. Unlike most of the other students in our sample, she could not rely on her family to meet the costs of her studies and she worked for two years in the UK to raise the necessary capital, intending to return to China to get a better job on completion. On taking her course, however, she found she was so interested in her studies that she decided to continue with a doctorate, interestingly indicative of intrinsic motivation to seek knowledge rather than extrinsic or instrumental motivation related to getting a job. This intrinsic interest has been powerful enough to drive her to overcome the difficulties she has faced so far. She now faces a set of new decisions about her future, not least of which is how to obtain the necessary funding.

For students G (female) and H (male) it was a personal relationship that led to a reappraisal of plans. While she was in the UK, G fell in love with a young Chinese man who was studying for a PhD. She was confident she could get a job in her field quite easily if she returned to China but decided to wait for her boyfriend to finish has degree. She applied for jobs in the UK but was unsuccessful and this presented her with a dilemma. She was afraid that a two year gap in her CV might jeopardise her otherwise quite high chance of getting a good job on her eventual return to China; on the other hand she was not confident that her relationship with her boyfriend would survive if she went back to China immediately and he remained in the UK. In the end she chose to go back to China with the hope that her relationship with her boyfriend will survive.

Student H similarly fell in love but with an English woman and they plan to marry. Two aspects of his situation present him with a different set of options to those faced by G, however. Soon after his arrival, H had decided that he had 'found what I want of a life here after I came to the UK'. His new relationship compounded this wish to stay, so he applied for jobs in the UK but was unsuccessful. Once again he saw this as being due to a combination of his own language problems and the 'structural' impediments presented by the work-permit system. He hopes, however, that he will eventually be successful. Unlike student G, he sees less urgency in getting a job because he is from a well-off background and has sufficient financial resources at hand.

7. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The above accounts of individual experiences are presented with little analysis. The purpose in doing this is to illustrate the diversity of intentions, experiences and responses within the broader patterns suggested earlier. In doing this we wish to show how different individuals interact in different ways with social structural features and attempt to 'navigate' through them towards their own aspirational ends that in turn are affected by these features and by the events and contingencies of daily life. In doing so, they reflect on their situation and the options available to them, drawing on their distinct individual and family resources to attempt to 'make their way through the world' [9] with varying degrees of success and varying needs to reconsider and reflect anew. Though sharing a largely common structural and cultural landscape they are able, through their human powers of refection, to exert individual agency with more or less efficacy and in doing so to ensure that the outcomes for themselves are individually different and not rigidly structurally pre-determined.

The overall patterns in our data reveal that these students do in general see their overseas study as contributing to their employability. They recognise the need for a higher degree in the competitive labour market conditions in China but to a considerable extent they see the international experience rather than the international nature of the qualification as offering

them a particular advantage. Obtaining a Masters degree in the UK is quicker than getting one in China or many other countries and cheaper than the USA, but the qualification itself is just a qualification, not carrying any extra employability advantage because it is from overseas. (We do not know from this study whether this belief is shared by those attending the most elite UK or other country institutions; a wider follow-up study is planned to explore this and other issues.) Studying overseas does, these students believe, enhance their employability but it does so through the experiences and challenges involved in learning to be independent in an alien society.

It is also clear that the majority of our students did not see overseas study as a means of entering an international labour market. Most wished to return to work in China. Short-term employment experience in the UK might enhance their employability back at home but in practice few opportunities exist to gain such experience. Those who did make serious attempts to find long-term employment in the UK were usually driven to do so by a lifestyle choice rather than a desire to enter the global labour market.

Our study began with – and retains – a focus on the notion of the personal construction of employability. The more we have attempted to address this, however, the more we are aware that this cannot be maintained as an isolated focus. For the young people in this study, employment and employability are just one aspect of their lives, of their journey through the world. To isolate it from the rest of their 'construction of the self' simply impoverishes the understanding that we wished to obtain.

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