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The Anthropology of Chinese Transnational Educational Migration

Anders Sybrandt HANSEN and Stig THØGERSEN

The contemporary world is experiencing massive transnational population movements under the banner of higher education. This is in no small part due to the People's Republic of China (PRC). Beginning in the late 1970s, PRC policies have actively encouraged young Chinese to go abroad to study as part of their higher education. Since then, the state has increasingly relinquished control over educational migration, turning instead to creating incentives for academic “talents” in key fields to either return to China or serve Chinese interests while living abroad (Liu 2014; Xiang and Shen 2009; Zweig, Fung, and Han 2008). Concurrent with this political relaxation, average Chinese incomes have risen dramatically, and higher education has grown gradually more integrated at a global level. The result has been remarkable. For some years now, China has been the largest global source of transnational students. In the year 2000 China sent approximately 40,000 students abroad. In 2008 this figure had risen to 180,000; in 2014 it reached 460,000 (National Bureau of Statistics 2014: table 21-10; Ministry of Education 2015). According to UNESCO estimates, there were a total of 712,000 PRC nationals studying outside China at the tertiary level in 2012 (UNESCO 2014). The increase in outwardly mobile students is sharp and the absolute count is high. Consequently, transnational educational migration can be expected to shape not only the future of countless individuals but also the future of Chinese society both economically and socio-culturally.

To explore the causes and consequences of Chinese educational migration, in March 2014 we hosted a conference at Aarhus University under the heading “Chinese Students Abroad: Reflections, Strategies and Impacts of a Global Generation.”¹ Six of the seven original

1 The conference was generously supported by the Aarhus University Research Foundation and the Carlsberg Foundation. We want to thank all conference participants for their constructive input and feedback. Revised versions of other papers from the conference addressing the challenges of intercultural integration in higher education and the global education hierarchy will appear in *Learning and Teaching*, 8, 3, December 2015.

research articles presented in this issue (by Heidi Ross and Yajing Chen, Cora Xu, Anni Kajanus, Jamie Coates, Stig Thøgersen, and Anders Hansen) were presented in early forms at this conference. The final article, by Herby Lai, complements the others by adding fascinating insights into how Chinese students in Japan negotiate the strained political relationship between the two countries in their everyday lives.

This topical issue of *The Journal of Current Chinese Affairs* takes a specifically anthropological approach to the phenomenon of Chinese transnational educational migration. This means that our work begins at the level of the concrete experience of actual people: The presented articles are based on longitudinal interview studies and/or ethnographic fieldwork in mainland China, Denmark, England, Finland, Hong Kong, Japan, and the United States. By way of long-term personal engagements with their respective informants, the authors bring to light the diverse experiences of young Chinese going abroad to study, ranging from elite university students to migrants on student visas working in low-level, service-sector jobs. From this diversity of cases, important dimensions of difference in the composition and experiences of various informant groups become clear. Gender, socio-economic background, family expectations, and future job prospects are shown to shape the transnational experience, as does the life environment and the ethno-cultural makeup of the destination country.

In spite of these differences, we believe the case studies also have an essential quality in common: Their engagement with the experiences and reflections of students abroad offer particularly exciting windows into not only the generation currently coming of age but also Chinese society in general. This is not because the circumstances of young Chinese studying abroad are typical of their generation. In fact, when we approach student numbers from a different angle, it is apparent that transnationally mobile students make up only a very small proportion of their age group. UNESCO figures for 2012 place the outbound mobility ratio of Chinese students in tertiary education at 2.1 per cent, corresponding to 0.6 per cent of the entire tertiary education age group (UNESCO 2014). In other words, going abroad to study is not a “typical” experience of this generation in any statistical sense. We nonetheless claim that the distinctive position as a socio-cultural outsider that transnational educational migration places

migrants in makes their experiences and reflections particularly relevant for understanding the ambitions and struggles of their generation.

When travelling abroad to live for a shorter or longer period, migrants enter new life environments, and for many young Chinese this entails the novel experiences of living on their own and acting as the primary manager of their own daily activities. The social conventions and cultural expectations they come across in the new environment are far from self-evident to them, and so they are induced to reflect upon – and perhaps leave behind – many of their familiar practices and routines.

As a way of responding to an unfamiliar life environment, migrants are compelled to compare the familiar and the unfamiliar in ways both intellectual and emotional. In this sense, the foreign life environment urges the migrant to adopt a culturally reflective and self-reflective stance. The unfamiliar is approached from a standpoint in the familiar, but the familiar is also disturbed by the apprehension of the unfamiliar: with sufficient distance, accustomed life loses its former self-evidence and becomes an object of reflection (e.g. Rabinow 1997: 152–155). To the extent that we as researchers are able to engage our informants in conversations about this process, we become privy to their reflections on formerly tacit cultural understandings. For example, Cora Xu's article in this issue reveals the tacit assumptions surrounding talent ideology in China as mediated through her informants' reflections. In a similar fashion, Anders Hansen's article uncovers tacit expectations about the "correct" deployment of time in contemporary China. In each case, we get to know these unspoken cultural assumptions through their breakdown in an unfamiliar context.

More Than Just a Diploma

As students come to rethink fundamental aspects of their lives, studying abroad becomes much more than simply a way of boosting their CVs. In several of the articles in this issue, the reader will come across a claim put forward by our informants that their stays abroad have profoundly changed their lives. One dimension of this claim has to do with life opportunities: mobility, as Simon Marginson writes, alters your "space of possibles" (Marginson 2014: 10).

Study abroad, it is frequently claimed, grants access to global academic standards, and overseas experience is held to be important in the eyes of prospective employers. Successful educational migration is therefore often understood in the framework of cultural capital accumulation. When we keep in mind the highly stratified and intensely competitive nature of Chinese society, it makes good sense that young Chinese should be both ambitious about getting ahead and anxious about falling behind (Yan 2013). It would nonetheless be a mistake to understand the potential life changes brought about by transnational educational migration solely in terms of its economic rationality. In contemporary China, education in general, and study abroad in particular, calls for major financial investments, and in many cases there is little hope that these investments will pay off (e.g. Xiang and Shen 2009). Accordingly, Andrew Kipnis has argued that higher education should be understood less as a means to an end and more as an object of desire in itself (Kipnis 2011a). The articles in this issue show that something similar is the case for study abroad.

A second dimension to the students' claim that going abroad can be life-changing is broadly ethical in the sense that it concerns perceptions of the self, ways of life, and life purposes. Changes of this order were frequently put forward by our informants as matters of maturation, of self-development, or simply of personal change. Furthermore, the claim that study abroad is a potentially life-changing event is voiced not only by students abroad. On the contrary, it has become a widely shared assumption among Chinese coming of age today, and successful migration inspires more migration (Bal and Willems 2014; Fong 2011). This is significant because the strong imaginative link between study abroad and the promise of life change has made for a situation in which the decision to study abroad is often fuelled by the desire for life change – as opposed to it existing only as an accidental “by-product” of a rational project of accumulating cultural capital abroad. The end result is that the migrant going abroad often expects in advance to undergo profound personal change, and this expectation is usually shared by peers and family (Fong 2011; Thøgersen 2012). Such change takes time, and we believe that the articles in this issue show that long-term ethnographic methods are particularly well suited to capture this important dimension of educational migration.

Being Chinese; Going Abroad

As discussed in the above, migrants' socio-cultural position as outsiders often leads to a heightened reflexivity and changes in individual outlooks. But identity is never a purely individual problem (e.g. Jenkins 1996). This is significant for Chinese students abroad because they face social environments in which they are often understood primarily in terms of their group membership as Chinese. Prior to the arrival of the individual migrant to his or her foreign destination, the national, cultural, and ethnic categories that the migrant is seen to embody have already been imbued with certain characteristics by the inhabitants of the destination country. Accordingly, Chinese abroad are often treated as representative of China and of "Chinese-ness," so their actions and behaviour are apprehended as "typically Chinese."

Current political affairs add to long-term local understandings with the result that being Chinese means different things in different times to different people within and across foreign destinations. In some cases, Chinese abroad feel that they are expected to conform to the stereotypical imagination of the local majority culture. In other cases, they are held to account for the viewpoints and policies of the PRC government and the Chinese Communist Party. There is no guarantee that the ensuing intercultural identity negotiation will lead to a harmonious resolution or a cosmopolitan meeting of the minds (e.g. Hail 2015; Hughes 2006).

The articles in this issue show that different destinations provoke different identity concerns. Jamie Coates and Herby Lai, in their articles, show how national-level political animosities between China and Japan are navigated in the everyday lives of Chinese migrants in Japan. Cora Xu's article details the particularly troublesome identity negotiations of mainland Chinese students in higher education in Hong Kong during the politically sensitive time of the Occupy Central movement. Finally, Heidi Ross and Yajing Chen's article details a case from an American university. The Chinese community in this locality has been so adept at organising Chinese student affairs that there is a growing concern that it is becoming increasingly difficult and unnecessary for Chinese students to pursue intercultural exchange, an otherwise central purpose of transnational education.

In the same way that "Chinese-ness" is a symbolic construct that carries different meanings for different people, different destination countries carry different meanings for Chinese going abroad. None-

theless, Vanessa Fong has convincingly argued that “abroad” (国外, *guowai*) is a fundamental category in the imagination of young Chinese. In her extensive study of transnational educational migration from Northeast China in the early 2000s, Fong finds that migratory aspirations were overwhelmingly phrased in a binary language of China versus abroad. In her informants’ reflections prior to setting out, “abroad” was virtually always compared favourably to China, and particularly so for the case of higher education (Fong 2011).

To fully appreciate the meaning of this finding, we need to establish two things: First, in this context, the term “abroad” is shorthand for “developed countries,” or, more precisely, for the United States, the United Kingdom, Canada, Western European nations, Australia, New Zealand, Japan, South Korea, and Singapore. Second, the infatuation with going abroad is embroiled in developmental thought: it is both the official political line and a matter of shared everyday knowledge that China is a developing country, and that learning from developed nations will assist China on its route to becoming developed.

There are historical reasons for the prevalence of development discourse in the PRC, but it is also a living tradition in education and party-state ideology today. For the case of higher education, the link between “developed country” didactics, academic norms and standards, and student development is hotly debated under the heading of “quality education” (素质教育, *suzhi jiaoyu*) (Anagnost 2004; Kipnis 2011a, 2011b; Murphy 2004; Woronov 2008, 2011). In a forthcoming issue of *Learning and Teaching* (8, 3 (2015)), whose theme is Chinese transnational students and the global education hierarchy, we address the transnational dimension of this topic. We argue that the disposition to study abroad should be understood in relation to an imagined global education hierarchy. This hierarchy has at least four institutional and cultural supports: 1) tuition fees and admission requirements, 2) university ranking tables, 3) the global dominance of the English language, and 4) cultural place imaginaries – what Xin Liu calls “moral geography” (Hansen and Thøgersen 2015; cf. Liu 2000: 6; Marginson 2006).

By “moral geography,” we reference the fact that nations, regions, and places on the global map are symbolically ordered in various ways as possessing different qualities. In contemporary China, we find that the moral geographical imagination is particularly strong,

and this has important consequences for how we should understand Chinese transnational educational migration. The prevalence of development discourse both entices Chinese students to go abroad and provides them with culturally acceptable ways of accounting for their ambition to set out from China. In this way, development discourse not only encourages educational migration but also props up the expectation that education abroad is more creative and rewarding, and that it allows for more critical thinking. Today, most Chinese students going abroad consequently carry with them the specific expectation that foreign education is superior to Chinese education, but also the more general expectation that “developed countries” are – in some way or other – superior to China.

Concurrent with the rise of China as a global superpower, and in part due to intensive state funding of key institutions, shifts in the relative positions of Chinese and foreign universities are underway. Not every diploma from abroad holds the kind of appeal it did ten or fifteen years ago, and top Chinese universities are making their way into the top 100 in the global university ranking tables. To what extent these minor shifts in the global education hierarchy foreshadow major shifts in the moral geographical imagination remains an open question. What would it take for “abroad” to lose its allure? For now, educational migration is still on the rise, enticing young Chinese to set out with the promise of changing their lives.

Featured Articles

In this topical issue, we present seven research articles on Chinese transnational educational migration. There are many shared topics and the articles could be subdivided in a number of ways. We have chosen to group the articles under two headings: *Transforming Lives* and *Integration and Segregation Abroad*. The first section carries four articles that share a fundamental concern with how lives are reimagined in the course of transnational educational migration and the ways in which unfamiliar social environments and ways of life impact the lives of Chinese students abroad and affect their future aspirations.

Transforming Lives

We begin on China's doorstep, so to speak, with Cora Xu's discussion of how mainland Chinese students cope with the widespread anti-mainlandisation discourse they come across in Hong Kong. The students approach Hong Kong mainly as "a point of transit in their overall life plan" and hope that their experiences there will turn them into international citizens, but they cannot escape the negative connotations of their identity as "mainlanders." In response, they construct an image of themselves as competitive winners who are geographically mobile and free of political prejudice. They distinguish themselves from what they have come to see as arrogant and quite parochial locals by claiming membership in an elite of global talents.

Anders Hansen's article presents the case of how another group of Chinese elite students, much further away from home, were prompted by their experiences in Denmark to reconsider the way they spend their time. In China, they used to invest essentially all of their waking hours in preparing for exams and other purposeful activities that would enable them to advance step by step towards a successful career. In Denmark, they suddenly found themselves with empty time on their hands. Hansen analyses restlessness (浮躁, *fuzao*) as the emotional downside to the currently prevailing ethics of striving, and shows how empty time inspired some of the students to imagine a future outside the regime of endless striving that has shaped the aspirations of their generation.

Based on survey research, Anni Kajanus's article outlines the factors that generally motivate young Chinese to study abroad and discusses how the socio-economic position of the students' families defines their options in the global education market. She then turns to the very different experiences of two Chinese student-migrants in the United Kingdom and shows how their position within various "geographies of power" influences the way studying abroad forms their lives. Kajanus's article draws particular attention to the roles of gender and parent-child relations in shaping individual destinies.

Stig Thøgersen's article follows a group of prospective Chinese preschool teachers before, during, and after their year abroad and shows how they come to identify with many of the values behind Danish preschool education, such as individual freedom, children's rights, equality, and creativity. Studying abroad created in many of them a sense of mission and reinforced their wish to contribute to

the reform of their own professional field. Upon their return to China, however, they entered the institutional hierarchy on the bottom rung and were forced to realise that established procedures and practices are difficult to change.

Integration and Segregation Abroad

In the second section, we present three articles that share a fundamental concern with the complexities of intercultural life that young Chinese encounter abroad. These articles address how ethno-cultural group dynamics affect the sense of solidarity and discord between guests and hosts, and how ethno-cultural difference may be exaggerated, downplayed, circumvented, or transcended.

We begin in Japan with Jamie Coates's study of Chinese student-migrants whose social position is quite different from that of the elite students interviewed by Cora Xu in Hong Kong. Working in low-pay, service-sector jobs and living in small dormitory rooms in Tokyo, many student-workers feel isolated and marginalised due to negative Japanese attitudes towards China and Chinese immigration, but in contrast to Xu's informants they are not in a position to turn this into a feeling of superiority. By way of Coates's phenomenologically rich, close-up depiction of how he and his interlocutors experience the city of Tokyo, we come to understand why they prefer to remain "unseen" rather than seek recognition.

Yajing Chen and Heidi Ross discover yet another pattern of intercultural relations in their study of Chinese students in a university in the American Midwest. Drawing on theories of ethnic enclaves, Ross and Chen argue that there are very good reasons for Chinese students to rely heavily on their own co-ethnic networks and organisations. These networks are often seen as a symptom of Chinese students' isolation from "mainstream" campus culture, but the article shows that they actually help the students cope with their new life, provide them with practical assistance and useful information, and to a certain extent even promote their engagement with an internationalised and culturally diverse American university.

In the final article, we return to Japan with Herby Lai's study of how Chinese students navigate the tense political relations between their home country and their hosts. Beginning with a discussion of cosmopolitanism, the article illustrates several different coping methods that Chinese students employ to try to separate themselves from

stereotypes and assigned positions. In contrast to the “angry youth” railing against Japan on the Chinese internet, Lai’s informants are shown to reconsider their own identity as Chinese and to include their personal experiences with Japanese culture and Japanese people in their reflections.

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