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This is an author produced version of a paper published in

International Journal of Learning (ISSN 1447-9494)

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Citation Details

Citation for the version of the work held in 'OpenAIR@RGU':

Citation for the publisher's version:

About the Author(s)

Dr Yvonne Turner
Teaching Fellow
Newcastle University Business School
University of Newcastle upon Tyne
Newcastle NE1 7RU
    UK

Yvonne.turner@ncl.ac.uk

Phone: +44 191 222 8575; Fax +44 191 222 6838

Dr Yvonne Turner has worked in a range of HE settings in the UK and China. She currently holds a Newcastle University Teaching Fellowship, funded to explore the impacts of internationalization on teaching and learning at the university.

'So how was it for you?' Evaluating the transnational education experience, five years on.

Main Description

This paper explores the experiences of a group of Chinese people who graduated with UK Business degrees in the late 1990s. It presents data about their perceptions of the influence of their studies on their ensuing lives and work. The paper briefly reviews literature about the changing role of education in China, commenting on developments following late twentieth century reforms. It also reflects on the practical management, teaching and learning issues inherent in transnational educational partnerships. The primary research draws on material from a longitudinal study begun in 1998/9 and ongoing. The research data is presented as excerpts from oral histories, where participants discuss their experiences in education and work and the implications of their educational choices on personal identity. The main conclusions are that: the impacts of transnational education on men and women in China may differ; graduates value aspects of the learning experience extrinsic to the subject of study more than disciplinary knowledge over time; structural issues in China affect both the motivation to study on and utility of overseas degrees after graduation; and that the transnational experience impacts on cultural and personal identity in ways that may influence graduates' integration into the mainstream of Chinese society.

Short Description

Using data from a longitudinal study in China, this paper evaluates the role of trans-national projects within the context of international Higher Education.

Keywords

Transnational
Higher Education
China
International

'So How Was It For You?': Evaluating The Transnational Education Experience, Five Years On.

Introduction: the internationalization of Higher Education

The face of Higher Education (HE) has been changing dramatically in the past twenty years as the impacts of globalization have been taking effect. Locally-defined educational systems and structures, often state-controlled and funded, have begun to extend a further reach and to explore modes and locales for delivery that are entirely new (Angus, 2004). The discourse of the 'internationalization of HE' has captured much of this activity, particularly in Anglophone countries such as Australia and the UK. Tertiary providers in these countries are increasingly engaging with a broader cultural range of people within their communities than before and attempting to internationalize both curriculum and research at an unprecedented pace, particularly through the export of programmes around the world (Bennell and Pearce, 2003). HE Internationalization is neither a well-understood nor a stable phenomenon, however, and a variety of positions on the continuum exist from the symbolic to the transformative (Bartell, 2003). The most common characteristics of internationalization ventures can be seen through changes in the composition of: Staff, Programmes and Students (Welch, 2002), particularly in the latter two. In the UK, for example, the majority of universities have engaged in active overseas student recruitment facilitated by Marketing and 'International Offices', have developed new programmes to cater for large numbers of overseas students - particularly one-year taught Master's degrees in vocational subjects such as Business Studies - and have embarked on a range of collaborations and alliances with education providers in many countries (Humfrey, 1999).

While responding to the rhetoric of globalization, the motivation for this international expansion is often pragmatically characterized by a revenue-generation objective, as traditional modes of central government funding have decreased (Watson, 2002). Indeed, commentators have linked the internationalization phenomenon with entrepreneurial / managerialist agendas in HE, increasing commercialism and the emergence of for-profit Higher Education, even among public or quasi-public sector providers (Morey, 2004). Such developments underline a profound shift in emphasis in both the organization and the orientation of HE in recent years and have injected a level of turbulence into the shaping of HE policy and provision that is also new.

Within this explosion of 'international' initiatives in UK universities, for example, the particular expressions of internationalization take a range of forms. The most dominant evidence of some element of internationalization is the presence of large numbers of overseas students in university communities. Certainly the main thrust both of recruitment activity and government policy in Britain has been on overseas students coming directly to study to the UK, bringing with them both useful economic and cultural contributions. A literature describing the experiences of such cross-border, 'overseas' students in the UK has consequently flourished in recent years, establishing a canon of pedagogical, sociological and managerialist research (including, McNamara and Harris, 1997; Ryan, 2000; Devos, 2003).

At the same time, more novel forms of internationalization have also been emerging, which are less well documented in the literature. These include distance and open learning projects, where students may travel to the UK for short period of time or study mainly through asynchronous technologically-mediated means; and of advanced standing - so-called 2+1 degrees - where students study within an institutions in their home

country for part of the degree and then complete their studies in mainstream programmes in Britain. Transnational educational (TNE) projects also figure in this panoply and are among the most novel of new forms of collaboration in which HE institutions have been engaging. Such projects involve the directly-transacted delivery of award-bearing programmes in participating students' home countries, usually by a mixture of home and UK-based academics who travel to the host country for either short- or long-term teaching assignments. These programmes contrast with many of the more conventional forms of international education delivery in that student cohorts tend to be mono- rather than multi-cultural; staff teaching on the programme are likely to come from a highly international academic community; students remain resident in their own local contexts and may continue with their pre-existing social lives and activities; students study in a conventional class-room based synchronous teaching and learning environment but within an educational context which is 'foreign'; and the language medium for instruction is a second-language for both students and some faculty members. Organizationally, these projects also represent complex international partnerships, involving diplomatic sensitivities negotiated with host governments to permit the award of foreign degrees on host country soil. As such they provide a strikingly different form of HE provision from many of the other modes of international cooperation and programming that exist and which have been better documented in the literature.

This paper explores the experiences of a group of people who graduated with UK Bachelor degrees in Business in the late 1990s from such a transnational partnership, delivered in the People's Republic of China. The paper represents a mid-way report of emerging findings from a project begun in 1998/99, which is ongoing. It presents data about graduates' perceptions of the influence of their transnational studies on their ensuing lives and work over approximately five years after graduation and reflects on the practical management, teaching and learning issues inherent in transnational educational partnerships. The research data is presented as excerpts from oral histories, where participants discuss their experiences in education and work and the implications of their educational choices on personal identity.

The context: Education reform in China

The HE environment in mainland China is changing very fast. Education has traditionally been prized in Chinese society but has always existed as an elitist system, supporting established class, ethnic and gender-based social patterns over hundreds of years (Cleverly, 1994; He, 1998). Following on from market reforms begun in the late 1970s, however, the Chinese government began to expand and broaden educational provision as a means of increasing access and universalizing primary education across the country. Tertiary education, in particular, suffered - especially during the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976) - from limited investment and a poverty of trained academics. Contemporary state-supported HE has not been able to keep pace with increasing national demand for a skilled, graduate workforce. As a result, from 1980 the Chinese government permitted limited non-state education provision, beginning with technical and vocational education programmes and broadening out into more general education progressively in the 1990s (Henze, 1984; Borgonjon and Vanhonacker, 1994). In an increasingly deregulated HE environment in China in the late 1990s and early 2000s, therefore, a huge range of institutions, conferring degrees of highly varying quality, have begun to emerge. During this period, the government also began to permit international education providers to establish a presence in China, either through direct recruitment activities or through institutional partnerships, academic exchange programmes and, increasingly, in-country delivery arrangements. Transnational education projects have begun to play a more significant part within the complex pattern of educational

development, and have established a trend that looks set to continue (Doorbar, 2004; Liston, 2004).

Overseas education

The demand for 'overseas' education in China is very high. As the government eased travel restrictions during the 1990s, flows of students seeking international educational credentials increased dramatically. This trend is particularly strong among postgraduate and research students, and has been characterized by relatively low return rates, prompting concerns about 'brain drain' from China (Yan, 1998). The fashion for overseas qualifications is not new, however, and mirrors a trend set during the early republican years of the twentieth century when many of China's revolutionary leaders travelled overseas for higher education (Pepper, 1996).   Lack of domestic provision is not the only reason, therefore, for today's outflow of students into overseas universities. Commentators have reported a range of factors influencing prospective students' choices, including a perceived 'overseas graduate premium' resulting in better salary and employment prospects on return to China (returnees are '*du jin' 'dipped in gold'* according to popular late twentieth century belief); improved social and class mobility; the acquisition of English language skills, regarded as useful in obtaining employment and consequent opportunities to enhance employability with international firms; improved opportunities to move and obtain work in China's major urban centres; and a general social culture of credentialism, where educational qualifications are more socially valued than practical vocational skill (Huang, 1997; Zweig et al, 2004) . Advantages also exist for groups of people who have traditionally been disadvantaged in obtaining access to domestic HE - women and ethnic minorities, for example (Turner and Acker, 2002).

At the same time, concerns have also emerged about the perceived benefits of an overseas education for returnees (Zweig et al, 2004). Historically, Chinese society has shown considerable ambivalence to overseas returnees and an overseas education has as frequently invited political persecution and social disadvantage as readily as advantage. Issues of limited cross-cultural relevance of Anglo-European course content also exist, especially where international providers do not modify curricula to meet the needs of international students (MacKinnon, 1998; Sanderson, 2004). Overall, however, in spite of such limitations, the demand for 'overseas' credentials seems set to continue and to develop increasing sophistication in the range and style of provision in the future.

Transnational Education (TNE)

Within this pattern, TNE is increasingly playing a part as numerous in-country partnerships develop in China. At the same time, the regulatory environment for such projects continues to evolve and remains ambiguous. Transnational projects can suffer from a lack of distinctive quality assurance, even where they appear to be validated by a reputable international education provider, a pattern reflected elsewhere in Asia. The British Council's recent survey of transnational projects across Asia identified a number of particular issues (Doorbar, 2004). The study found that students seeking TNE were primarily motivated by career enhancement opportunities, were often mature students or had often failed to obtain a place in the local university system and were financially unable to afford to go and study overseas. As such, they constituted a different group from those typically recruited directly to overseas institutions. The study also found that TNE projects suffered from less strong recognition for the degree awards than either domestic or overseas provision, even where the validating institution was itself a recognized education provider; that the general experience was not comparable with either the domestic mainstream or study overseas in a number of ways, such as

language environment, and strength of faculty; and that local employers did not recognize or understand the nature of the degree study as well as a domestic or overseas degree. In general, both employer groups and students expressed reservations about a narrow profit-making emphasis within such projects and were concerned about the overall value for money of the programmes of study. It is clear, therefore, that TNE projects pose particular challenges to institutions embarking on them, especially in securing their status and managing the quality of educational experience. In the Chinese context, these issues appear compounded by the complexities of what are often public-private partnerships, where public universities from overseas countries are engaging in quasi-commercial partnerships with the emerging domestic private education sector and where the legal and business context remains highly dynamic.

In spite of the structural and organizational issues surrounding TNE in general, it is clear that this style of HE provides something distinctive for a particular student constituency and possesses a number of useful teaching and learning characteristics (Naidoo, 2004). During their development, TNE projects have tended to focus 'towards the needs of working life' (Tynjala et al, 2003. p.149), emphasizing those vocational and applied subjects which have experienced acute under-provision in China since marketization in the 1980s. In addition, the British Council's study also identified benefits that parallel those that have given private sector commercial colleges in the USA their success: convenience, accessibility, high quality / low cost; clear customer focus and practical career-centred teaching in much of the programmes that (Morey, 2004). Perhaps the key advantages to students studying in a TNE programme are flexibility and familiarity. TNE programmes often allow both part- and full-time study, attractive to mature students, and those with family commitments that would prevent them from going to study full-time overseas. Additionally, the teaching and learning environment can be adapted to the specific needs of the mono-cultural cohort, as can academic support and programme delivery systems (Naidoo, 2004). In addition, studies documenting the experience of overseas students in the UK account for the significant academic impacts of the learning transition that they must undergo as they learn to cope in a new educational and social environment, especially in intensive one-year Master's programmes (Turner, 2002). In some cases, both the intensity of the study and cultural adaptations can be very great and overwhelm the academic context of the experience. Within TNE, however, the emphasis of adjustment and students' focus is more clearly fixed on subject of study and academic style rather than the simultaneous need to cope with an entirely new social culture. This has obvious potential to impact positively on academic performance.

Linked into the reduction of negative culture shock effects, TNE study facilitates routine and immediate inter-cultural cross-referencing, as students move day-to-day from an international teaching and learning environment into their own home context (Turner and Acker, 2002). They are able to foreground their personal experience, therefore, with the potential for more focused, accessible reflective and experiential learning than might be possible in 'overseas' contexts. Students can also maintain existing professional networks and have a clear, up-to-date understanding of the employment dynamics of their own context -- particularly important in China, where maintaining '*guanxi*' connections *('relationships'* - personal informal networks which govern much professional and personal life and mobility) is important.

Conclusion

In the context of international HE, TNE is becoming more important and can make particular contributions in environments such as China, where under-provision in key

vocational and applied subjects remains acute and where government policy continues to encourage international exchange to underpin economic development. International HE in China as a whole continues to influence and facilitate the pace of change taking place in the country. Beneficiaries of international education, both overseas and TNE, have a powerful role in bringing international knowledge and skills, technology, goods and services into China, as well as personal connections and business contacts (Zweig et al, 2004). TNE remains characterized by ambiguity across Asia and in particular in China, however. Regulatory uncertainties, quality assurance issues, problems in achieving degree recognition, and partnership difficulties, as public and private sectors attempt to work together in a very dynamic environment, all contribute to the uncertain status of such projects. Nonetheless increasing numbers of students have been participating in TNE for the past decade in China. Within the context of wider structural and policy debates about the relevance of TNE, therefore, developing some understanding of student experiences and the personal impacts of study in such projects has a place in shaping a literature about this aspect of international HE. Such a focus forms the empirical discussion within this paper.

The project

The data for this paper draws from a small-scale longitudinal life-history research project. It began in China in 1998/99 and is ongoing (with a projected ten-year duration). At its conception, it involved thirty-one Business-studies graduates (graduating between 1997 and 2000), who participated in a UK BA franchised degree, delivered in a private HE college in China. The study began its life as a piece of action research conducted by two academics - a British Business lecturer from the validating university and an Anglo-American English Language lecturer employed by the college in China - to explore China's recent education history, as experienced by participants, and the impact of cross-cultural education on the students at the college. It has continued in successive years with the original exploration, but, of necessity, has begun to embrace wider sociological themes than its original pedagogical focus - though a concern with the impacts of international education remains at its core. The main driving force for the continuation of the project has been the willingness of the participants and the richness of the stories they have shared with us over the years.

The project aims to develop longitudinal case studies, discussing the participants' lives and careers and exploring the ongoing influence of international education on their subsequent personal and professional development. Collectively, the study group represented the first contemporary generation of Chinese people to participate in such a distinctive type of private / international HE in the Chinese mainland. Coming from all over the country, they were either children of early post-reform entrepreneurs or self-made entrepreneurs themselves and, unusually in China, therefore, mature students. They symbolized a new class of people emerging in contemporary China, and were active participants in the country's rapid urbanized economic development. The full results of the first tranche of data collection are reported elsewhere (Turner and Acker 2002). The results reported here represent emerging findings from mid-way through the anticipated study period.

Research design

As noted above, the project adopted life-history-type methods. The key over-arching research themes are:

♦ What are the impacts of participation in a transnational degree programme on participants' lives and employment choices over a notional ten-year period?

♦ How do participants characterize the contribution of their education to shaping their lives and how has this view evolved over time?

Initial data collection took place in 1998/99 over a period of about six months, during which participants shared stories about their lives, education and aspirations for the future. These conversations lasted from about one-and-a-half to three hours. Further, shorted data collection exercises (lasting approximately forty-five minutes to one-and-a-half hours) took place in April 2000, December 2002, and April 2004. No data were collected in 2003, owing to access restrictions to China caused by the SARS outbreak in Asia. Interviews were carried out mainly in English, which had been the language of instruction at the college, supplemented with Mandarin Chinese for clarification or to probe specific cultural constructs more deeply. Data from the project was transcribed, thematically encoded and analysed to generate individual and collective accounts.

Results and discussion

The data obtained from the study were wide-ranging, covering discussions about participants' general life choices and experiences, relationships with family and significant others, descriptions of decisions about employment and commentary about contemporary Chinese society and work. This paper focuses on those areas of the discussions relating to participants' reflections on the way in which their education had influenced life and employment choices in the five-to-seven years since their graduation and a retrospective evaluation of the contribution of the degree. The presentation of the results follows a thematic account, drawing out excerpts from the interview transcripts to highlight and illuminate particular points or issues.

Sample attrition

Over the course of the project, some of the initial study participants were lost. To some extent, this was inevitable. The group was highly mobile compared to many people in China and, after 1999, both researchers left the country and were resident in the UK, revisiting for short research trips. As noted above, participants had originally come to the college in Beijing from all over the country. After graduation, some had returned to their home regions or gone to seek work in other major cities in China. Others had permanently migrated to different countries – one to Singapore and one to Taiwan, for example – and others had gone overseas at some point for further study or for work, with ten going to Anglophone countries for Master's study of at least one year (the majority to the UK).

Over the course of the six years from 1999-2005, a core group of sixteen participants emerged, who contributed to data collection consistently, supplemented by less regular meetings and telephone and email contacts with the majority of the rest of the group. Of the original thirty-one, eight people dropped out completely after the first data collection exercise. Such attrition has clear implications for the generalisability of the study. Nonetheless, the quantity and richness of the remaining longitudinal data provides useful insights into the perceptions and beliefs of the core group, and illuminates a number of phenomena of interest within parts of contemporary Chinese society.

The participants

In tracing the general life patterns and development of participants in the study, a number of themes emerged. Within the core group of participants, eleven women took part and five men. The women participants were aged between eighteen and thirty-six at the commencement of the project in 1998/99. Of the core women participants, one was

married, with a child, and ten were single. Over the ensuing course of data collection, another woman got married and none had children. Male participants were aged between twenty-one and thirty. None were married. During the six years following the first tranche of data collection, one got married, and none had children. Discussion about participants' domestic and employment experiences are discussed elsewhere (Turner and Acker, 2002; Turner, 2004)

Education

After the completion of the initial degrees that provided the first impetus for the project, five women and two men from the core group went on to pursue additional postgraduate degrees in Business Management related areas, all in the UK. The most common programme of study was a general Master's degree in Business (either MBA or MA International Business). One woman and one man (outside the core group of participants) also proceeded onwards to Ph.D. study in Britain and one within the core group obtained work as a research assistant in a UK university following successful completion of a Master's degree. In general, women participants showed a higher level of interest in postgraduate degrees than their male counterparts, with more women than men undertaking postgraduate study, both in the core and wider groups. In large part, the women accounted for this by the emancipatory and 'modern' benefits achieved through their first degree studies, a wish to continue to live and study within a more inclusive environment than that which they felt they could find at home and a need to continue to credentialize in order to compete as women in the Chinese workplace.

The contribution of a 'foreign' degree to participants' lives

The project groups' life-patterns resonated with a number of the discussion points drawn out in the contextual literature. Initially participants showed themselves to be highly motivated towards international tertiary education as a way of improving their access to high quality work, particularly in international companies. A definite series of themes emerged from the interview transcripts over time, as participants reflected on the contribution of their degree studies to the evolution of their lives. Throughout, these patterns clustered around gender-based themes, rather than age or region of origin considerations. For example, the women universally chose to study outside indigenous HE because they accounted that: 'they want to change their life' (ZW, 2004). Part of this process of emancipation and change was found in language. For example, their post-graduation work experience utilized their English language skills extensively, whereas the majority of male participants remained in Mandarin-dominant organizations. Men's reported motivations to study for a foreign degree were also more focused on vocational ambition than any emancipatory striving, particularly aiming to enhance their money-earning capabilities. Nonetheless, over the duration of the study, male participants enjoyed work with higher status overall than the women and changed jobs less frequently. Respective wage-earning differentials were less clear – men were less willing than women to disclose this information – but seemed less marked than status differences. In the first three years after graduation, participants reported wide-ranging salaries in the region of RMB 3,000 - 10,000 per calendar month, working in a range of major cities across China. These wage levels varied further over time, dependant primarily on employing organization rather than job title or responsibilities. Self-employed participants (three for at least some period after graduation) tended not to disclose salary information.

Influenced in part by such financial considerations, when reflecting back on the contribution to their lives of their UK degree studies, few men credited the experience as

life-changing especially when balancing graduation salaries against the initial cost of the degree:

> In my experience my degree doesn't help me. When I was interviewed by [the company I work for], okay they think my English is good, but it didn't help me a lot. I think the most important thing is I was working very hard. (CH, 2001)

Indeed some of them discounted the value of the degree or reflected that it had made a negative contribution as they looked back in 2004:

> In a foreign company for you to hire me, my degree is pretty important and my experience is pretty important. In a Chinese company, OK, degree and experience may be important but what is most important is the relationship. Say two people want this job and I have a relationship within someone. It is very easy for me to get this job and I can stay there and keep it for much longer than you. (WH, 2004)

In contrast, the majority of women noted the degree's power in shaping their sense of individualism and ambition:

> At that time [during my degree] I was learning a lot about life... My family, my mother and my brother said, 'It is nice. It is worth it for you, it is worth it to support you…' They think I have changed in a positive way. It is what they said, that I have changed in mainly the character and the attitude toward life. (MQ, 2001)

One of the reasons for this divergence in estimating the 'value' of the degree was the lack of formal government recognition the programme had received as an 'overseas' degree and a general lack of understanding and mistrust of transnational programmes by employers – both issues identified in the British Council's pan-Asian study of TNE (Doorbar, 2004). Overall, male participants showed a focus on the extrinsic value of the degree, on credentialism and the ability to find a better-paying, higher-status job. While the women also identified such values as important, they were also significantly affected by a reflective focus on the value of the learning style and the way it had shaped their subsequent relationships and interpersonal behaviour both in the workplace and outside.

TNE, overseas study and curriculum

Over time, as the government eased travel restrictions in the late 1990s and 2000s and more and more Chinese people were seeking to go and study overseas, all participants regarded their degree as less useful than they had originally believed when they undertook participation in the project and discussed a general decline of the 'overseas degree premium' in the Chinese employment market:

> Now Chinese people, their thought is changing. They think if you do not have enough knowledge, you cannot have a good position in the society…Within the society. Because you know many Chinese are trying to finish their studies overseas, so if you don't have it, you … It is just like in Hong Kong, if you can speak very good English and you have an overseas degree, then you can find a better job. (LMM, 2001)

In this case, participants felt themselves to be doubly disadvantaged. Not only had they achieved only a first degree and not a Master's but also the degree had been awarded in China and they had not obtained the benefit of a year living overseas (in spite of the cost and convenience advantages that had originally attracted them and their families to the programme). They reported that employers were confused about what their degree was and, for the most part, it was disregarded in employment discussions. This was particularly the case throughout the study when participants discussed the disciplinary content of the degree. For them, an academic Business Studies agenda with a very Anglo-European focus, while symbolizing something of a contemporary reality about the nature of international trade, did not have any relevance to the conditions which governed their routine working lives in China:

> You think you got this good foreign degree but it's a different culture. No matter where you go, a joint venture or Chinese company, the relationships are different. Whether you can do a good job [or not] the relationship matters more. Your degree and experience are not that important, just forget it. (WH, 2004)

Group and team-working, styles of decision-making and theoretical assumptions which underpinned the degree curriculum were variously characterized and contemptuously debunked over the working years that followed graduation by both men and women. In particular, participants were critical of the models of management and decision-making style which had characterized their degree studies and which bore no relation to the behaviours or styles of Chinese or other Asian mangers that they encountered at work:

> I think [there] is a general Chinese way of doing things…In a foreign company they always calculate the work load and they can get a very correct result, what these people should do and after a period of time what he had done. But in Chinese way, they just give out work and they don't check all the time. Then if some problem appears, they just try to find what is wrong. It is totally different. (LMM, 2001)

In terms of curriculum content, therefore, participants felt the degree had conferred little of value. Nonetheless, paradoxically, they also accounted the academic shaping of the degree programme as responsible for many of their personal choices. The key benefit conferred by the degree was its English language teaching medium. Participants regarded an ability to use English as very important, even for those who were working in primarily Chinese companies (mainly men). Nonetheless, the majority of participants, especially women, found it difficult to remain for long in domestic firms and the reasons they accounted for this was that the teaching style, underpinned by models of interpersonal behaviour which they felt were distinctively 'western', had inculcated a set of behaviours in them which made it hard to work in the domestic interpersonal and managerial dynamic. At first, this sense was expressed through notions of the superiority of working relationships and, particularly management style in western firms. Over time, however, it was moderated into a more complex assessment of the cultural differences between 'Chinese' and 'foreign' or 'international' companies and an expressed preference to work in the latter rather than the former. As noted above, this assessment was discussed most profoundly by the women, who seemed to enjoy the opportunity to engage in more assertive and authoritative behaviours than they felt possible in domestically-managed firms:

> I would die if I have to work in a [Chinese] company because the culture is so different. Even if it is a big company, the big boss is *really* the big boss. If he does not nod, nobody dares to nod…To me it is much more suitable to work in an international company than a Chinese one, especially a Chinese privately owned one.' (WLJ, 2004)

Some went further and even began to question their cultural identity as a result of the impact of the interpersonal and interactive style of the degree, with profound implications for the ease which they experienced in their daily lives (Turner, 2004).

Nonetheless, within work, the decline in the 'overseas graduate premium' is something that clearly preoccupied many of the participants and prompted them to undertake further, postgraduate study overseas during the years after graduation. All the participants were focused on the intensity of competition in Chinese society and in the job market and the need to renew credentials on a regular basis to keep ahead:

> Women have to be very quick, very intelligent, or has you know, they would like you to have quite good education in terms of the school or something because it is… when people mention you they can introduce you like, "hi, this is [name deleted] from Harvard University or from Cornell. (SS, 2001)

Only one of the core participants was seriously exploring opportunities to leave China permanently, though four others had explored spontaneous possibilities, such as through marriage or obtaining visas that would allow them to stay in the UK after obtaining their Master's degrees.

Conclusion

At this point in the study, the results emerging from the stories reveal a complex and counterintuitive set of beliefs about and assessments of the contribution of the degree they undertook in the 1990s to the participants ensuing lives. The majority have considerable ambivalence about its power to energize and shape their careers and experience. In the main, the key benefits that they are describing include: immersion in an English language environment; an opportunity to understand how international business operates and, consequently, to work within it with some success; a teaching and learning style that was emancipatory - mainly for women - but which also challenged their ability to live and work within the realities of China's existing social and employment dynamic.

The key disadvantages lay in the inherent status of the degree. For participants in this study, TNE seems to be regarded as something of a disreputable hybrid, neither traditional domestic HE, nor fully-fledged overseas education. In large part, this stemmed from the lack of formal government recognition that the government conferred on the qualification but also lay in the underlying suspicion with which employers regarded the credentials. Fairly quickly, the cachet of the degree faded, as increasing numbers of Chinese people went overseas to undertake Master's degrees and returned to compete with the study participants. Far more of the men were disillusioned and angry about the degree and the time it had 'wasted' than women, not regarding the intrinsic contribution of the study very highly. For the women on the other hand, the intrinsic value of the study inherent in the programme brought greater individualism and self-determination which was something they valued. For many this was strongly countered, however, by turbulence in their personal lives as they found it difficult to meet marriage partners and to

balance both the social and employment expectations held by family and friends with their own increasing individualism. Overall the most powerful sense to emerge from participants' recollections and stories is one of disappointment and of expectations not met. To some degree this is inevitable, perhaps, and the result of both the context and timing of the studies they undertook as well as the continuing degree of acceleration that is evident in China's economy and society. Nonetheless there are some clear indicators here about the ways in which partners in transnational projects might strive to mange student expectations, develop awareness of the status of the degree and work to maintain continuing contact with alumni over time in order to increase both the absolute value of future generations of students of the programme and also to continue to support graduates as they continue to confront the personal intricacies of inter-cultural living and learning.

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