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This document is the Accepted Version [AM]

**Citation:**

CHENG, Ming and LIU, Dian (2021). Employment and academic and social integration: the experiences of overseas Chinese students and scholars. Chinese Education & Society, 54 (3-4), 91-94. [Article]

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**Employment and Academic and Social Integration: The Experiences of Overseas Chinese Students and Scholars**

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## **Employment and Academic and Social Integration: The Experiences of Overseas Chinese Students and Scholars**

The number of Chinese students studying abroad keeps increasing. 622,100 Chinese students studied at universities abroad in 2018 (Textor 2020). There is growing interest in studying these international students from a variety of perspectives, including the economic benefits to host countries (Phillimore & Koshy 2010), educational mobility (Cheng 2021), intercultural communication (Yu & Moskal 2019), academic and social adaptation (Gu 2016), and curriculum internationalisation (Cheng et al. 2016). The experiences of Chinese students returning ‘home’ have also attracted attention with a focus on identity changes (Wang 2020) and life and work in China (Gill 2010).

This Special Issue aims to discuss new research and trends in the academic and social experiences of international Chinese students and scholars, and provide a forum for investigating and reporting on the social and cultural challenges they have experienced abroad. The five papers in this collection draw on empirical research and address five key aspects of international higher education, primarily in the UK, Europe, and Australia, as well as the experiences of graduates back in China after international study. These aspects are critical thinking skills, health and wellbeing, employment, international career development, and academic and social integration. The authors of these contributions consider effects on Chinese students and scholars at both the level of policies and practicalities.

These aspects matter because they affect the lived experiences of individual students, as the papers in this issue demonstrate. For instance, critical thinking is a compulsory graduate attribute expected of all students at universities in the UK, but these skills are not always effectively imparted to Chinese students. Concerns for wellbeing are now more openly discussed at universities, but the health of international students is rarely addressed. Increasing the employability of graduates is high on the agenda for many higher education providers and

policymakers, and employment experience abroad is vitally important for many graduates' careers, but the actual experiences of Chinese students studying abroad has hardly been considered. Traditionally, international career development has been a key motivator for Chinese students to study abroad, but China has recently instituted national policies intended to retain or regain its academic talents that acquire international experience. Finally, many international students continue to face difficulties in integrating both academically and socially. A better understanding of these five themes would improve the abilities of western universities to attract, retain, and support Chinese students and scholars as well as lead to general improvements of internationalisation in higher education.

### **Critical thinking**

The concept and practice of developing critical thinking is discussed in the article by Weici Zhong and Ming Cheng. Their paper argues that there has been limited research on how Chinese students understand and develop critical thinking skills during their studies in the UK, even though critical thinking is a key graduate attribute in British higher education. Drawing on an interview-based study with Chinese students studying at a university in England, this paper points out that developing critical thinking is not an easy task and that stereotyping Chinese students as lacking in critical thinking increases their vulnerability. They show that Chinese MA students are at a disadvantage in a one-year programme because support for developing critical thinking skills is minimal. The authors suggest that lecturers play a key role in developing Chinese students' critical thinking skills, and propose using group discussion and questioning approaches, increasing student English language proficiency, and providing clear guidance to enable these students to develop critical thinking skills.

### **Health and wellbeing**

Chinese international students often face high levels of pressure to adjust to different

educational systems and perform well academically, and this pressure can affect their health and wellbeing. Bonnie Pang, Lisa Perrone, and Jason Wong's study examines the health-related experiences of Chinese students studying in Australia. This cohort of students expressed a holistic view of physical health and named several factors as relevant to their overall wellbeing, including psychological wellbeing, food culture, air quality and environmental influence, medical expenses, sense of belonging, and pace of life.

There is a prevalent view in Australian social media that China has conservative attitudes about sex and sexual orientation, and Chinese international students are often presented as lacking education and being conservative about sexual matters. However, although Chinese students in this study did not see themselves as part of Western 'sexual liberation', they talked openly about sexual health knowledge, had liberal views of LGBT issues, and used dating apps.

### **Employment experiences**

Despite the increasing number of Chinese students studying abroad, little is known about their employment experiences. One paper in this Special Issue focuses on Chinese international students' employment experiences in Australia, while another focuses on Chinese female PhD graduate's job searches in Europe.

Bonnie Pang, Lisa Perrone, and Jason Wong's ethnographic study shows that Chinese students take up part-time or short-term work during their studies in Australia due to economic need or a desire to learn about Australian culture, improve their English skills, and gain professional experience. However, when they take cash-in-hand jobs, they become a vulnerable workforce, and being paid less than the minimum wage is common.

Being marginalised at work is not a unique experience in Australia. Dian Liu's empirical research reveals that challenges and hidden barriers are equally strong for Chinese students studying in Europe. She investigates the experiences of Chinese female PhD graduates

who are searching for jobs in Europe, using the theory of Othering (Weis 1995). Othering is a process that serves to mark and name those thought to be different from oneself. The study reveals that these graduates encountered Othering practices which subtly exclude them as both cultural outsiders and academic novices in the cross-cultural job scenario. Three types of Othering are identified: Racialized Othering, Linguistic Othering, and Social Othering, which function jointly, hindering the job search of the overseas PhD graduates.

### **International career development**

According to the National Bureau of Statistics of China, the percentage of Chinese students who return to work in China after international studies has risen from 47% in 2009 to 78% in 2018. While work back in China has been made more attractive by the country's increasing economic prosperity, there are other factors than have pushed students to return, including difficulties obtaining visas, discrimination, limited access to work experience, and challenges in finding ideal jobs abroad.

Fei Fan and Xuanchen Liu's paper explores how institutional recruitment policies are used to attract international talents to have their academic careers in China. They focus on the "Double First-class Initiative" in China, fully supported by national policies and state subsidies. That Initiative intends to enable institutions of higher education to build a first-class academic community. The paper explores the recruitment policies of one such institution involved with the Initiative and how it has affected overseas graduates who become early-career researchers. The findings provide important insights for Chinese returnees who are interested in developing their academic careers as well as for those researching higher education policy in China.

### **Academic and social integration**

Integrating into a university is a key challenge that Chinese students face during their studies abroad. Angela Christidis' paper discusses the relationship between academic and social

integration among Chinese students in the UK. Her research shows that academic and social integration are positively correlated and that cultural attitudes and language barriers are important factors that influence the ability of Chinese students to integrate. Her paper argues that intercultural competence needs to be included as an intentional learning outcome and that institutions should develop policies that value cultural diversity and provide a platform for all students to experience and understand different cultures.

This paper increases our understanding of Chinese international students' academic performances, well-being, and sociocultural adaptations by identifying a range of key factors that influence their academic success and participation in social and academic activities. Although centred on the UK experience, the suggestion offered is potentially of interest for colleagues at many higher education institutions internationally.

## **Conclusion**

This Special Issue provides varied empirical perspectives on the international experiences of Chinese students and scholars in the UK, Europe, Australia, and the factors that attract them back to China after study abroad. This research collection suggests that academic and social integration, health and wellbeing, appropriate work experiences, and access to international careers remain challenges for Chinese students studying abroad. Though the long-term impact of state policies to attract Chinese graduates back to work in China has yet to be seen, the potential for significant changes in the choices available to these students after graduation suggests that western universities need to address these issues, if they want to remain competitive in the global market.

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