

Factors Influencing Career Experiences of Selected Chinese Faculty Employed at an American Research Extensive University

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Whereas research related to the experience of faculty of color is increasing, few attentions have been focused on Chinese faculty's career experience in the US. This study examined career experiences of 16 Chinese faculty members across different disciplines, ranks and genders at a studied research extensive university in Texas, US. The study used a qualitative research design with in-depth interviews, observations and document reviews as the major tools for data collection and adopted constant comparative methods for data analysis. Drawing the research data directly from Chinese faculty members, the study identifies factors which influence Chinese faculty decisions to apply for, accept and remain in faculty positions, challenges as well as support when seeking promotion, tenure and recognition. Major findings concluded that factors, such as traditional Chinese culture, family influence and the ability to access American academic freedom, advanced research environments, flexibility and job security have significant influences in determining Chinese faculty's decisions to work within academia in the US. Additionally, Chinese faculty tended to regard individual barriers (e.g., challenges in mastery of English language, a lack of teaching experience, no undergraduate educational background in the US, an unfamiliarity with the American culture and insufficient communications skills in general) rather than institutionalized barriers (e.g., occupational discrimination, stereotypes and prejudice) as primary factors that impeded their professional development. Furthermore, Chinese women faculty's experienced racial and gender issues in their lives and faced more challenges than their male counterparts in developing their careers in the US.

Keywords: Chinese faculty, Asian American, career experiences, faculty development, faculty of color, qualitative research, qualitative studies

Introduction

With the open door policies implemented by China in 1978, and the US new immigration policies after World War II, the number of Chinese students and scholars coming to pursue career-related graduate study and employment in the US has increased dramatically. For those who choose to stay in the US after obtaining their

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doctoral degrees, many become faculty members in higher education institutions.

The existing study related to Chinese faculty on American campuses proffers that Chinese faculty experience marginalities working in the academy in the US (Seagren & Wang, 1994). Contributing to this marginality may be American students' lack of understanding of multicultural and diversity issues, and lack of acceptance of Chinese faculty. In addition, inadequate English proficiency, two different instructional cultures and lack of knowledge and understanding of interpersonal norms and strategies in the US create challenges and marginalities for Chinese faculty in their professional development (Seagren & Wang, 1994). After more than a decade, do these concerns continue to apply to Chinese faculty in the US contemporarily? Do Chinese faculty members experience racial/ethnic related issues and occupational barriers similar to other faculty of color in seeking tenure, promotion and recognition within the academy? The purpose of this reported study was twofold: (1) to identify and describe factors which influence Chinese faculty's decisions to apply, accept and remain in faculty positions at a selected research extensive university in Texas, US; and (2) to determine the challenges and support that Chinese faculty have experienced with respect to promotion, tenure and recognition at the selected university.

To address the purpose of the study, four research questions were used to guide the data collection and analysis. Within the selected research extensive university in Texas, US:

- (1) What factors do Chinese faculty members consider important in influencing their decisions to apply for and accept faculty positions?
- (2) What support do Chinese faculty members receive as they seek promotion, tenure and recognition?
- (3) What challenges do Chinese faculty members face as they seek promotion, tenure and recognition?
- (4) What factors do Chinese faculty members consider important in influencing their decisions to remain in faculty positions?

This study, as an investigation of the career experiences of Chinese faculty in the US, may have particular social significance, since there are many Chinese students and scholars who have come to the US to pursue graduate studies and have chosen to stay here in the academia field. This study may also provide information useful to higher education administrators in making personnel decisions related to the recruitment and retention of Chinese faculty. Moreover, this study may contribute to the scarce literature regarding the career paths of faculty of color, especially Chinese faculty in the US.

Literature Review

The status of faculty of color, which often refers to faculty members of African American, Chicana/o/Puerto Rican/other Latina/o, American Indian and Asian/Pacific American, has been a concern in American higher education for many decades (Antonio, 2002). One of the major issues, in particular, is the lack of recruitment and retention of faculty of color across the US (Johnsrud & Sadao, 1998). Although many universities and colleges are under pressure to recruit more faculty of color, recruiting them is not enough to obtain diversity and ensure a quality of education. Developing, supporting and retaining faculty of color after recruitment should also be considered as a priority during their career development. Many studies revealed that a continuing deep racial and ethnic bias and gender stratification still exist in tenure and promotion practices and policies for faculty of color; and that many faculty of color are devaluated or undervalued in the academy (Stanley, 2006a, 2006b; Turner & Myers, 2000; Villalpando & Bernal, 2002), even though higher education continues to proclaim neutrality and objectivity in its reward system (Villalpando & Bernal, 2002). Overt and

covert racism, sexism, tokenism and isolation are experienced by many faculty of color (Alfred, 2001; Bower, 2002; Stanley, 2006a, 2006b). Discrimination, which is subtle most of the time, appears across many areas of the academy, such as teaching, research, service and overall experiences of faculty of color in higher education. Women faculty of color face additional challenges, including discrimination related to gender as well as race (Stanley, 2006a; Turner, 2002).

Although descriptive data related to the experience of faculty of color are increasing, few theories have been applied to faculty of color career experiences (Johnsrud & Sadao, 1998; Stanley, 2006a). National trend data for the career experiences of faculty of color are limited and an understanding of faculty of color career experiences remains incomplete (Bower, 2002). Among the few studies on Asian American faculty, scholars reported that like any other minority group, Asian Americans encounter daily challenges, such as racial discrimination, feelings of otherness and isolation in their work place. In the meantime, they suffer harm from the image of their success story as a whole group and have to deal with the perception of the “model minority” who have overcome racial discrimination and do not need assistance in higher education institutions (Hune, 2006; Nakanishi, 1993). Asian American women experience more difficulties and biases than their male counterparts do in the academy. They are far from being a complete “model minority” in the high ranks of professorates and high level administrators across American colleges and universities. Asian Americans view themselves as a minority group that needs help and has legitimate concerns about access and equality (Hune, 2006).

Some studies on Chinese or Chinese American life experiences indicated that Chinese cultures and family influence play important roles in academic achievement, attainment and career development (Leong & Chou, 1994; Pearce & Lin, 2007). In addition, Chinese most likely blame themselves first rather than the institution or society when they experience difficulties or failures; because, in Chinese culture, each individual should take responsibility to determine his/her destiny (Wu, 2001). Therefore, as Leong and Chou emphasized (1994), “Chinese value is blamed for lack of success, with minimal blame on White society” (p. 156). However, few studies have been conducted on the career experiences of Chinese or Chinese American faculty in the US.

The only case study focusing on Chinese faculty at American campuses was conducted by Alan Seagren and Han HuaWang almost 15 years ago in 1994. Through ethnographic interviews with five professors (all males) with Chinese surnames, Seagren and Wang (1994) identified Chinese professors’ marginalities on an American campus. One reason was that the conflict between the Chinese and American instructional cultures sometime causes frustration and dissatisfaction for both students and Chinese professors and consequently creates marginality for Chinese faculty members. Additionally, Chinese professors’ lack of knowledge and understanding of interpersonal norms and strategies in the US also generated marginality for those who often feel uncertainty or are uncomfortable about how to build relationships with colleagues. Furthermore, with English as their second language, Chinese faculties were often impeded in fully understanding and expressing themselves. The Chinese faculty participants in the study also reported that they sometimes received discrimination and they felt isolated from their American colleagues.

Seagren and Wang (1994) stated that experiencing the marginality on an American campus does not necessarily mean that Chinese professors are not happy about their careers. In fact, Chinese professors are happy about working in a university setting which can allow them to work with academic freedom, advance knowledge, have flexibility, enjoy Constitutionally guaranteed human rights, utilize advanced research facilities, have decent salaries and communicate with scholars around the world. Thus, being considered marginal men

does not necessarily point to a disadvantage for Chinese professors. This marginality may be viewed as a challenge that Chinese professors can take as an opportunity to develop strategies to cope with the marginal social situations based on their bicultural knowledge and experiences.

Other than the one study on Chinese faculty career experiences on an American university, virtually no research has been identified as conducted on first-generation Chinese faculty who obtained at least a bachelor degree from China and a doctoral degree or postdoctoral training from the US and then chose to work in academe in the US. Consequently, there is a void in research relating to Chinese faculty career experiences. Exploring the factors that influence the career experiences including the process of recruitment, tenure and promotion, and retention of Chinese faculty will contribute to the scant research regarding Chinese faculty's career experiences in the US.

Methodology

Qualitative research methods were adopted in this study. Many scholars have called for the use of qualitative research to help us increase our understanding of the human experience (Maykut & Morehouse, 1994). Because the focus of this study was to understand the career experiences of Chinese faculty at colleges and universities in the US, the most suitable approach selected for this study was the qualitative research design using an in-depth interviewing method. Basically guided by Lincoln and Guba (1985), qualitative inquiry (naturalistic inquiry) used in this study was primarily exploratory and descriptive, as it is rich in detail and description, and provided a methodology to explore a deeper understanding of the participants' lived experiences in a particular context, without looking for generalizations.

Participants and Instrumentation

The population for this study was selected Chinese faculty members across various academic disciplines and different genders from an American research extensive university in Texas, US. Selected Chinese faculty members were all born in China, received at least a bachelor's education in China, pursued their doctoral degree or postdoctoral training in the US, and then chose a faculty position as their career in the US. Additionally, selected Chinese faculty members were all holding a full-time, tenure-tracked or tenured position at the studied university in Texas when they participated in the study.

Purposive sampling was used in the study to define the population and choose participants from the directory of the research extensive university in Texas, US. Purposive sampling is not a random method of choosing respondents. It begins with the assumption that context is critical, and then purposely selects a sample (respondent or event) that is expected to provide rich information. By using this method, the researcher could maximize her ability to devise grounded theory that takes adequate account of location conditions and local values (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). In addition, initial respondents were interviewed and asked to suggest other potential respondents, thus, creating a loop of purposive "snowball" sampling that identified participants who otherwise might have been neglected (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Sixteen Chinese faculty members from different disciplines, ranks and genders at the research extensive university in Texas were selected and agreed to participate in the study (see Table 1).

This study used the researcher herself as the primary data-gathering instrument. The researcher developed an interview protocol and presented to the participants in order to frame the most relevant questions related to the purpose of the study. According to Lincoln and Guba (1985), naturalistic inquiry's design is emergent but

not fully predictable as the meaning is determined by complex context with the existence of multiple constructed realities and the interaction among the researcher and respondents and the context. The design “must unfold, cascade, roll and emerge” (p. 209). Besides, the data gathering process interweaves with the data analysis process (Spradley, 1979). Thus, the investigator carried out a much more open-ended approach with profound tacit knowledge so that the interview protocol constantly changed as a consequence of analyses of previous interviews and as the result of emergent research design. Consequently, the researcher utilized the original interview protocol as a baseline set of questions, but flexibly interacted with respondents, analyzed the collected data in a timely manner and then made the revision of the interview protocol as needed. Throughout the process, the interview questions were expanded and revised to become more and more focused, provide more clarity and obtain more detailed answers.

Table 1

Demographic Information of the Participants

| Participants | Age | Gender | Rank | Field | Number of years in the university |
|--------------|-----|--------|---------------------|--|-----------------------------------|
| 1 | 42 | Male | Professor | Science | 11 |
| 2 | 52 | Male | Professor | Liberal arts | 10 |
| 3 | 52 | Male | Associate professor | Liberal arts | 10 |
| 4 | 53 | Male | Professor | Engineering | 18 |
| 5 | 56 | Male | Professor | Science | 21 |
| 6 | 50 | Male | Associate professor | Veterinary medicine and biomedical science | 7 |
| 7 | 45 | Male | Professor | Science | 11 |
| 8 | 35 | Female | Professor | Science | 9 |
| 9 | 45 | Female | Assistant professor | Veterinary medicine and biomedical science | 2 |
| 10 | 52 | Male | Professor | Liberal arts | 21 |
| 11 | 38 | Male | Associate professor | Engineering | 7 |
| 12 | 48 | Male | Professor | Science | 18 |
| 13 | 47 | Female | Associate professor | Social science | 12 |
| 14 | 45 | Female | Associate professor | Health science | 7 |
| 15 | 43 | Male | Assistant professor | Engineering | 4 |
| 16 | 45 | Male | Associate professor | Science | 7 |

Data Collection and Analysis

The researcher used several qualitative methods to collect data, including in-depth interviews with the respondents, observations of the respondents during the interviews and analysis of records and documents over the period of study. Interviews were guided by an interview protocol as mentioned earlier. Most interviews lasted an hour and a half, while a few lasted more than two hours and one continued for over four hours. Interviews were all audio-taped as was indicated in the consent form and agreed to by each respondent. All taped interview responses were transcribed into an electronic document within 24 hours after the interview. Most interviews were carried out in Chinese (Mandarin), or mixed Chinese primarily with English spoken occasionally. Two interviews were conducted in English. Detailed field notes of each interview were kept as the form of reflexive journals, including the researcher’s experiences during the study, description of the respondents and interviews’ natural settings, length of interviews and the nonverbal cues, such as particular gestures, suddenly increased or lowered voices, long pauses, and other body language. Documents and records

(e.g., participants' curriculum vita, institutional policies and procedures for faculty, etc.) were used to help the researcher better understand each participant's unique background and career path, and better interpret the data under the context wherein they live and work.

The researcher analyzed the gathered data with the constant comparative method. It included unitizing, categorizing and developing and identifying themes and patterns (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Throughout the constant comparison process, the researcher developed and identified emerging patterns and themes thoroughly.

Major Findings and Discussions

Factors Influencing Participants' Decisions to Apply for Faculty Positions

Participants all spoke of how determined they were to choose the academy as their careers and reported that there were various factors that influenced their decisions to apply for faculty positions in the US. First, participants demonstrated a high level of intrinsic interest in doing research and expressed that they could only accomplish their career goals by working in the academy. In addition, faculty careers in the US provided certain social and economic forms of security, which allowed them not to worry about their living situation (e.g., housing). A lack of financial security was one reason that drove these participants away from China. Second, the attraction of academic freedom and their desire of teaching influenced participants' decision to choose the academy as their career. Third, Chinese culture, especially Confucian philosophy, had great impact on participants' decisions when applying for faculty positions in the US. According to Confucius, those who use their brains rule, while those who use their brawn will be ruled. Therefore, throughout Chinese history, people who have performed physical work have always been looked down upon, while those who performed intellectual work have always been highly respected. Consequently, Chinese parents oftentimes place high expectations on their children, encouraging them to achieve academic excellence. As a result, parental expectations and heavy Confucian influence strongly affected participants' decisions to select the academy as their careers. These findings support the literature that stated that culture and faculty influence both play important roles in Chinese people's academic achievement and career decisions (Leong & Chou, 1994; Pearce & Lin, 2007).

During the interviews, participants in this study identified individual barriers and institutionalized barriers associated with their job search within the academy in the US. Individual barriers were described as their inadequate command of English, a lack of teaching experience and undergraduate educational background from an American university, and unfamiliarity with American culture. Institutionalized barriers were described as occupational discrimination, racism, prejudice, stereotypes and unequal treatment, all of which could hinder their career opportunities related to the job search process. Overwhelmingly, the majority of participants tended to consider individual barriers as the major factor that would impede them during their career search. They were inclined to blame themselves first if they were not offered a good position. Compared to individual barriers, institutionalized barriers received relatively few attentions from these participants. The researcher could sense that participants were reluctant to share overt and detailed information about discrimination, and tended to avoid such topics. They disliked labeling any of their experiences as discrimination. This finding is consistent with literature that asserts that Asian Americans who are the least ethnically identified would tend to perceive and experience the least amount of occupational discrimination because they tended to believe that their lack of success was because of an individual lack of ability and effort, not discrimination (Leong & Chou,

1994).

Support Participants Received

Participants reported that the support they received when seeking tenure, promotion and recognition at this university included institutional support (e.g., reduced teaching load, research funds/grants, flexible time, etc.) and collegial support from inside and outside their departments. It was noteworthy that some participants emphasized that they did not think they had to receive much support from their department, college or the institution when seeking tenure or promotion. They indicated that everyone should have a clear perception and career goals, and need to focus their efforts and work hard to accomplish the goals. Participants continued to demonstrate their strong beliefs in qualities of personal effort, such as persistence, hard work and determination to achieve career success. Accordingly, they tended to blame themselves rather than criticize others such as institutionalized racism or unequal policies creating unfair occupational disadvantages. Thus, findings continue to support the literature that stated that Asian Americans perceive the least amount of occupational discrimination, because they are inclined to believe that their occupational difficulties result from an individual lack of ability and not from discrimination (Leong & Chou, 1994). In general, most participants held a strong faith in personal effort as a means to achieving their career goals. It helped the researcher further understand the reason why during the interviews participants frequently emphasized improving their qualifications through hard work.

Although many participants reported that they received support in obtaining recognition at the studied university, quite a few claimed that they did not feel they were fully recognized by their departments, colleges or the institutions though they had done enough good work across all areas of teaching, research and service to deserve more recognition. Some participants indicated that some issues (e.g., salary) of rewarding faculty were associated with institutional policies or politics. One female Chinese associate professor in the study used “marginal man” to describe her feeling of working at this university although she had been there for more than 10 years. This finding draws upon the existing literature that reported that faculty of color use “marginality”, “isolation” and “invisibility” to describe their work environment and campus climate, as well as their experiences with academic life (Alfred, 2001; Niemann, 1999; Sadao, 2003; Stanley, 2006a, 2006b; Turner, 2003). Particularly, this mentality reflects an earlier report regarding Chinese faculty members’ marginality on American campuses and their feelings of being marginal men (Seagren & Wang, 1994).

Not surprisingly, those participants who reported dissatisfaction with the recognition they had received did not blame their departments, colleges or the institutions, but instead looked to their own behaviors for an explanation. They indicated that they were not aggressive and did not want to involve themselves in departmental politics. This again asserted that participants were likely to believe in personal effort and characteristics of hard work in their professional development and achievement. It also implied that certain political issues might be perceived to be involved in the faculty rewarding system at this university.

Challenges Participants Experienced

Participants reported that cultural differences, language barriers, and lack of teaching experience in the US were major factors that might impede their career success. Students sometimes challenged their authority, credibility and validity for teaching in the classroom. Some students resisted listening to the course contents related to multicultural and diversity issues.

Although 15 out of 16 participants reported that they had not experienced discrimination in person while

working at the studied university, they believed that cultural differences always existed between them and their white counterparts. Moreover, many indicated that they had witnessed subtle discriminations against other Chinese faculty members at this university during the recruiting process or at research seminars. They emphasized that discrimination was subtle and although they did not have evidence to prove, they oftentimes felt it.

Strikingly, one female Chinese faculty member provided rich narratives regarding what she experienced and overtly expressed her feelings of isolation, subtle discrimination and unequal treatment in her professional development at this university. She mentioned that it was more difficult and challenging for her to recruit American students and get tenured. She oftentimes felt powerless, hopeless and helpless when being challenged by male colleagues and white students. Even though she had worked at this university over 10 years, she continued to feel uncomfortable in this work environment. Most of the time during faculty meetings, she expressed that she felt she was a minority and that few people heard her voice. Like other participants, this female Chinese faculty member also emphasized that her experiences of discrimination were subtle and sometimes invisible. These findings are consistent with the literature that discrimination, which is usually subtle these days, is still frequently experienced by faculty of color (Alfred, 2001; Bower, 2002; Niemann, 1999; Stanley, 2006a, 2006b). Findings also support many scholars' assertions that like other minorities, Asian Americans encounter racism, discrimination, isolation (Chun, 1995; Hune, 1998) and marginalization (Seagren & Wang, 1994) in colleges and universities.

Many participants indicated that women faculty members are still underrepresented in the academy, although many universities are under pressure to recruit more women faculty. They reported that Chinese women faculty, especially those working in the engineering fields, faced more difficulties and greater challenges when seeking tenure and promotion at the studied university. Additionally, like any women faculty, Chinese women faculty members experienced challenges regarding balancing their families and careers in academics where policies and practices were still favorable to men. Women, especially those with children, realized that their work and family responsibilities often conflict, and tended to drop out of the academy or delay their tenure pursuit because of family. Reports also indicated that Chinese women faculty members often could not tell whether these challenges were because of their gender or ethnicity.

Factors Influencing Participants' Decisions to Remain in Faculty Positions

Participants reported factors that influenced their decisions to remain working in the academy, including overall job satisfaction, accessibility of academic freedom, advanced knowledge and research facilities and family reasons. Findings from the study are consistent with the existing literature about Chinese professors' experiences on an American campus (Seagren & Wang, 1994).

With regard to the question why they did not find a faculty position in China, many responded that they had become US citizens and it was not easy to move the entire family back to China. They also stated that the academic freedom system had not been well established in the higher education system of China, which made them hesitant to return to China. In addition, participants indicated that human relationships/networking (*Guanxi*) played an important role in one's career development in China, and they did not like dealing with it. Participants, however, expressed they had seen tremendous improvements in Chinese higher education. Many had worked closely with universities in China for years and believed that they could make more of a difference in the academic development of China while working in the US.

Conclusions, Implementations and Recommendations

Conclusions

The researcher drew the following conclusions based on the findings of this study.

First, traditional Chinese culture, especially Confucian philosophy, has a significant influence in determining Chinese people's decisions to pursue advanced study and academic positions in both China and the US education has always been held in high regard, and achievement and success are always emphasized.

Second, Chinese faculty members are happy about working in the academy in the US, because they have the ability to access American academic freedom, advanced knowledge and research environment, and have a flexible schedule and job security.

Third, Chinese faculty may face greater challenges in their career development because of individual barriers (e.g., lack of teaching and undergraduate educational background in the US, English as a second language and unfamiliarity with American culture) and institutional barriers (occupational discrimination, racism and stereotypes). However, they tend to consider individual barriers rather than institutionalized barriers as the primary factor that might impede their career development, because their mentality is to believe that their lack of success results from a lack of personal effort (e.g., hard work, persistence and determination).

Fourth, Chinese faculty members sometimes feel marginalized and isolated by racism, and placed into a category of otherness in the academic workplace because discrimination, that is often subtle, is experienced or witnessed by many participants. These feelings, in turn, become challenges that may impede their professional development. Consequently, the perception of considering Asian Americans, including the Chinese, as "model minorities" who have overcome racial discrimination and do not need assistance, is not validated in this study. In addition, Chinese women faculty members face more challenges in developing their career and pursuing tenure, promotion and recognition because of the interlocking of racial and gender stereotypes, and the balance of their family and career obligations.

Implications for Practice

Some implications for practice for administrators and policy-makers were drawn upon the findings of this study. Administrators should implement, monitor and strengthen employment equity policies and programs to ensure that Chinese faculty members, as well as other faculty of color, receive equal opportunities in the hiring, promotion and tenure process. They should also develop strategies to demystify the popular stereotypes about Chinese faculty's capabilities and experiences as a "model minority" in the academy. Furthermore, they should provide specific assistance and support for Chinese faculty, as well as other faculty of color, because these groups continue to experience subtle occupational discrimination, isolation, marginalization and feelings of otherness in the academic workplace. Chinese higher education administrators in China should establish and implement policies that enhance academic freedom for faculty's development at Chinese universities and colleges. Establishing a peer review system might be a good strategy to enhance and ensure high quality research in China.

Recommendations for Further Study

Because of the nature of qualitative research methods used for data collection and analysis, the findings of this study may not be generalized and applied to the whole body of Chinese faculty in other higher education institutions in the US. The researcher has provided some recommendations for additional study for consideration. For example, further study should be conducted on Chinese faculty in a broader group (full-time

and part-time, first generation immigrants and American-born Chinese, other groups of faculty of color) at other research education institutions (research universities, non-research universities and colleges) using different research methods (quantitative or mix of qualitative and quantitative), in order to accomplish more accurate comparisons and transferability related to this specific group's career experiences.

As many Chinese choose academe as their career paths in the US after obtaining doctoral degrees and in light of the scant research regarding Chinese faculty career experiences in the US, it gives rise to the urgency of more research to better understand this groups' attitudes, beliefs and career development experiences including the process of recruitment, tenure, promotion and retention. By exploring and investigating Chinese faculty's career experiences in the US in this study, it is hoped that some light has been shed on the understanding of what support and challenges enhance or impede their career development in the academy. In addition, it is hoped that the findings of this study can inform administrative decision-making to improve the quality of life and career progression for Chinese faculty as well as other groups of faculty of color.

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