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Studying Abroad: A Case Study of Chinese International Mobility

Abstract

This paper discusses the topic of educational mobility among students from China. The main aim of the paper is to analyse the reasons why Chinese youth migrate and to indicate the direction of their migration. The paper contains qualitative analysis of UNESCO and OECD educational reports and of Chinese government documents, as well as statements by Chinese students on online forums (an analysis of online statements and comments was taken), in which they indicate the motives for their migration. Two main categories of travel motives have been distinguished. The first category is directly linked with the prospect of gaining human capital, and the second with trends in consumerism.

Keywords: comparative education, international student mobility, Chinese international students, higher education

Introduction

For many years, the sociology of education and of migration has been interested in this phenomenon, researching its reach and range (King & Raghuram, 2013). Educational mobility, in particular in the Chinese context, has taken on a previously unseen importance in recent years. Young, mobile Chinese students have become part of everyday reality at many universities and are currently the largest group of migrating students in the world (OECD, 2014). Over the course of the last decade, educational mobility, intensively heralded as early as the 1960s, has become an irreversible fact. OECD (2014) predicts that in 2025, the number of migrating students will be as high as 8 million. Currently, students from Asia constitute the largest group of educational migrants, since as many 53% of global educational migration is made up of young people from China, India and Korea (OECD, 2014). I would like to emphasise that the order in which these countries are mentioned is not coincidental. China is an exceptional country, in which educational mobility takes place on a wide scale and is very popular among the young population.

Theoretical considerations

To obtain a full picture, it is important to indicate the main global causes of educational mobility. According to Kehm and Teichler (2007), global educational mobility is one of the results of the internationalisation of higher education. According to Giddens (1984), the increase in the percentage of migrating students is a response to the process of globalisation and is part of the free flow of human capital. The highly-developed counties (and for several years now, also developing countries) have long been interested in educational migrants, who constitute a source of additional economic income for universities. By introducing students from

abroad, they ease the negative effects of the shortage of students in the domestic market, and for many universities, as Janet Napolitano, President of the University of California system, wrote in an open letter to the university community in October 2016, this is a kind of Hobson's choice (Saul, 2016). Student mobility is also linked with employment mobility and the phenomena of brain drain and brain gain. It is a response to the growing need for a talented, young future labour force. Studies on the community of migrating students (for example by Rosenzweig et al., 2006) have shown that international students, compared to local graduates, are "higher quality" potential employees. They are highly motivated to work, are characterised by a wide range of soft skills as well as invaluable intercultural competence which is indispensable in the global marketplace (Parey & Waldinger, 2011).

It does not really need to be argued that China is becoming a global leader. The Chinese influence in economic capital, culture and social capital is palpable and clearly visible. China is making every effort to make Chinese human capital as productive as possible, and so many activities promoting international skills and abilities are being gradually introduced (Mankowska, 2017, p. 127). The best example of promoting these skills is the "National Outline for Medium and Long-Term Education Reform and Development (2010-2020)" programme, announced in 2010 and currently being implemented, in which China called for an increase in the scale of educational mobility of its citizens.

Chinese students have long been part of the academic community of many universities in the world. After their return, they suppose to build stronger country with their knowledge. One example is Deng Xiaoping himself, leader of the People's Republic of China from 1978 to 1989. The first wave of study abroad was linked with the introduction of economic reforms in 1987 and opening up further the idea of meritocracy in education (Liu, 2013). The real migration boom began in 2001, which according to Yue (2013) was linked with the growth in the country's GDP, which is strongly correlated with Chinese students studying abroad. In this way, at the macro level, it can be said that the growth in educational migration is conditioned by economic factors.

Data regarding the increasing number of Chinese students at European universities are worth analysing. Sources show that the mobility of Chinese students in 2010, compared to 2000, had increased six-fold and moreover, taking into consideration the intensive cooperation of the EU with China in the area of student mobility, the upward trend continues (GHK Consulting & Renmin University, 2011). In 2016, the Ministry of Education of China (MoE, 2015), in its education report, the so-called "Blue Book", states that the main destinations of educational migration were countries such as Great Britain (42.52%), the United States (18.83%), Australia (10.41%), France (4.24%), South Korea (3.26%), Japan (3.04%), Germany (2.40%), Russia (1.65%) and Canada (1.19%). Currently, the main orientation toward English-speaking countries is dictated by the high level of knowledge of English in China. It should be added here that among the educational travel destinations of Chinese students, there are also the best Polish universities such as Adam Mickiewicz University in Poznań, the University of Warsaw, or the Jagiellonian University.

The majority of young Chinese students are in undergraduate or second-cycle studies (MoE, 2015). Most take up first-cycle studies. A large portion study under

terms outlined in individual agreements, or in special programmes organised only for international students, especially in countries in which English is not the primary language of instruction (MoE, 2015). The greater part of Chinese students are women.

In Chinese educational migration, not only are departures important, but also returns. China makes every effort to ensure that young, well-educated people return the country of their ancestors and, with a view to tradition, help to build the economic power of the country. The government has introduced various strategies and programmes designed to counter the brain drain effect. Wang, Wong and Sun (2006), among the most important strategies to encourage people to return, list in first place the granting of educational immigrants with a foreign degree. Those who return to the country can also count on additional employment rights as well as subsidies for their children's education in the future. For young people there are also business incubators as well as special tax allowances (Wang, Wong & Sun, 2006).

Data and method

In light of the facts presented above, the topic of educational migration gains new significance. The main intent of this paper is to analyse individual motives for educational migration among young Chinese students. In order to identify these motives, I undertook an analysis of online statements and comments by young Chinese students to press and scientific articles and on online forums (quora.com, in sum 78 statements and comments), which described their motives for educational migration. Statistical data were gathered for the purpose of this paper from the scientific literature, official reports of the Ministry of Education of China (2015) and of OECD (2014), popular science literature as well as stories from the daily press (for example: *Global Times Published*, 2016/6/19, titled: Why some Chinese families are spending a fortune on sending their children to international schools?). While my qualitative sample selected from forum answers may introduce potential biases, I do not claim to have achieved a representative sample, but rather one that helps illustrate some possible ways in which individuals make sense of my key factors. The students' answers were selected randomly, whereby the keyword was opinion about study abroad. About half of the students were already graduates, another half were currently studying. The study did not distinguish by gender, although I should indicate that the majority of statements were written by women. The vast majority of analysed statements were by students in or graduates from English-speaking countries (mainly the United States, Great Britain, and Australia). The analysed statements were studied in regard to the motive for educational migration.

Results

It was perceptible in the analysis of the online statements that the main motive for studying abroad was the desire to ensure better employment conditions for oneself in the future or employment in a particular position. Many stated that their choice of institution was mainly oriented toward the prestige of the educational institution. They use the Shanghai list of the best universities so that their degree would be "[...] prestigious enough". On the forum there are also statements which

say that after completing their studies, the best option is to remain abroad, the Chinese market is not able to offer employment appropriate for the qualifications they have earned. In their statements, young Chinese students pointed out that the degree earned abroad guaranteed them upon return better paid employment in their home country, but not necessarily in accordance with the skills they acquired. Another part of the respondents wrote that when returning to China with a foreign degree, one can count on additional benefits from the government: lower taxes, educational subsidies for children, various business incubators. I would add that these Chinese young people were very well-versed in this matter.

Another group indicated that study abroad provides them with additional language and cultural skills, as well as life experience. Many emphasised that study abroad, combined with Chinese cultural capital, gives them a uniquely well-rounded experience (“[...] East vs. West, Asian and Western, totalitarian vs. Western, liberal democratic system, Confucianism vs. Judeo-Christianity, Chinese vs. English, a developing country vs. one with a high GDP”), which will surely be appreciated in the global labour market (here concrete names of organisations and companies appear – to quote one forum participant: “AIIB, IMF, World Bank, UN, etc.”) and will be useful “[...] in engineering products/services for the global market”. Moreover, knowledge about China, a state in which the economy and industry are developing at an unprecedented speed, as well as understanding of American standards and expectations, will be a lucrative combination for business.

Another part of the forum community emphasises that tuition fees are a significant factor in their choice. In the students’ view, at many universities, tuition and costs of living are not significantly higher than at universities in China. Many admit that their parents take out loans to educate their children abroad. Moreover, parents see their children travelling abroad as a kind of leave abroad. Some statements on the forum show how educational migration is the first step toward emigration for the entire family. This gives new significance to Chinese educational migrants.

From student statements it also emerges that some, in making their choice of where to migrate to, focused on the need for adventure or followed the social fashion for study abroad. This is shown in comments like “I had been waiting to realise my ‘American Dream’”, or “My girlfriend studied abroad – she said it’s worth it, because it’s also an adventure” or “Such studies aren’t for everyone, only select people study abroad”.

Students emphasised that study abroad gives them the opportunity to participate in a new academic culture, one in which freedom of thought and opinion prevails, which makes it different from Chinese educational culture. On the forums, such statements appeared as “Here [implying studying abroad] you can say what you think”, “Once you leave Chinese school, you won’t ever want to go back” or “It takes a while until you learn to say what you think”.

It is also a fact that the intense competition in the education market fosters migration by young Chinese students. In one of the analysed statements, a forum participant using the pseudonym Haojin Xu writes, “Many young Chinese people after the gaokao exam have no chance to get into the top Chinese universities, especially those from very highly populated areas. The best Chinese universities have a limited number of spaces, which are often not sufficient for even the very

best". The forum participant poses a rhetorical question, "So what choice is there?", answering "None. If you have very good gaokao results, it's better to graduate from an American college, than to go to a Chinese university other than a top one". It emerges from the statement that study abroad is the second choice for the best students. Of course, it is one reserved for a particular social group.

It can also be concluded from the voices on the forum that the one-child policy directly contributed to the popularisation of educational mobility. This is not a new phenomenon, because Chinese parents place a tremendous amount of hope in their only-children and are happy to invest in their child's cultural capital. They are convinced that education at the right level is a sort of lift that in future will advance the child to another social class, as can be seen for instance in the statement of a 39-year-old Chinese mother on the Global Times site who has chosen an international school for her daughter from the very first years of her education. The woman says "It was quite a dilemma for me and my husband. After consideration at length, we both decided that compared to a traditional Chinese school, the international school is in another category. This choice means that we will stay with international education to the end. That is the future" (Li, 2016). This is the case particularly for middle-class families. Many parents are aware that the competitive, test-oriented, traditional encyclopaedic Chinese school does not provide the appropriate skills for the global labour market, and so the choice becomes clear: educational migration. In fact, many Chinese families decide to send their children to the United States or Canada already at the secondary school level.

Discussion

In this study, I have focused mainly on understanding the motives of young Chinese students to study abroad. The analysis of statements made by forum participants also refers to the current debate over global educational mobility.

The existing literature describes how most educational migration is stimulated by the increase in competition at Chinese universities and in the Chinese labour market (e.g. Findlay et al., 2012).

In analysing the statements of Chinese international students, two main categories of motives for their study abroad can be discerned. The first category is directly linked with the prospect of gaining human capital. Migration is considered as a prospective investment in oneself, whereby the decision to relocate to another country is to increase one's personal attractiveness on the labour market in the future, and simultaneously increase the income to be anticipated. It may be said that study abroad and earning a foreign degree is a particular kind of response to the global competition for talent.

The second category is linked with trends in consumerism and is not motivated by career concerns. Students do not take into consideration the personal benefits that arise from earning a particular degree but do consider such qualities as the attractiveness of a country as a travel destination, the most popular destination chosen by their immediate peers, the decisions of friends, or the prevailing fashion for study abroad or also the desire the experience an adventure.

It should also be mentioned that aside from individual motivations for migration, there are also non-individual ones dictated by global changes, the country's economy, policies, cultural traditions or also social organisation.

From the point of view of a university employee, I can say that as hosts and coordinators of student educational mobility, we are inadvertently becoming creators of new cultural capital. Institutions of higher education create and propagate a new culture, building mutual understanding between the sending and the receiving countries. On a daily basis, they adopt strategies for managing cultural differences and create new ones, their own. The inadvertent participants in the phenomenon of educational mobility, the local students, are confronted with new challenges, they are often forced to learn how to make use of their intercultural competence or are compelled to acquire it in the first place. Young migrating students, focused on achieving their goal, a degree, motivated to struggle/study, are often unbeatable rivals. It is not without reason that Chinese students are called “studying machines” or “student robots” by local students, as they can study 18 hours a day. Their academic day begins and ends at the university library.

Conclusion

It is certain that this “parachute generation” of Chinese young people will grow to an ever-larger scale and will change its dynamics. The most serious social consequence might be a new identity of those who come back to the country of origin. Those students who came back, are coming not only with international diploma, but also with international values and norms.

It is also certain that migrating Chinese students, but not only, will need to be treated appropriately at host universities. This is a group of “non-traditional” students, whose needs and expectations (perhaps demands?) are different than those that international exchange students have. I believe that it is justified and necessary to learn about the educational experience of young Chinese students, so that work with this different cultural group will be easier and more effective. This is a topic which requires more detailed analysis and constitutes a fascinating area for research.

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