

## **Analysing the transformational effects of UK higher education on Chinese female students**

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### **Summary**

Large scale teaching of international student cohorts is highly significant for HEI's both culturally and financially. However, successful pedagogical integration of such students needs careful attention. HESA data (HESA, 2013) shows that China far surpasses any other non-EU country of origin of students in the UK, with 83,790 students in 2012-13 rising by 6% year on year, whereas students from India fell by 25% to 22,385.

This research examines why Chinese students seek to undertake UK postgraduate education and considers the effects of education upon them individually, in a transitional sense. The backdrop of traditional gender views is explored, especially modern challenges faced by female Chinese students which permeate their educational experiences and their personal sense of relative value.

Pedagogically, UK HE has traditionally taught unsurprisingly from a Western perspective. However, this type of teaching may not be addressing the particular needs of female Chinese students. This research aims to understand the experiences of educational transition through individual narratives.

### **Literature**

Mathieu (2009) discusses disrupting influences. Disruption surely occurs when an international student leaves their home country, becomes a short-term educational migrant in the UK and seeks to adapt to the new educational regime and way of life. Culture shock has been extensively discussed, such as the 'U curve' of international adjustment (Black et. al. 1991), as have cultural differentials (Hofstede, Schein 2010, GLOBE). These are important. However, gender challenges faced by female Chinese students are far more specific in nature and have resonance in historical and geographical contexts.

Li Bin, Chinese Director of national population and planning commission, stated the gender ratio at birth as 118.08 males to 100 females in 2010 (Xinhuanet, 2011), compared with 105 in the UK. The 1979 one-child policy limited population growth of Han Chinese in urbanised districts. Poverty has been alleviated for so many Chinese (Yao, 2000), but the shortage of females was not predicted.

Turner (2006) suggested that Chinese females seek international education to better themselves and reduce prejudice at home. She discusses how a wife traditionally lives in her husband's home, thus financially depriving her own parents of income. Hence sons are preferred. Cooke (2003) discusses discrimination against women leaders in China, explaining how just 20% of government employees in China were

women and how traditional mores, particularly the three 'obediences' to father, husband and son, were important.

Woodhams et al (2009) found almost 40% of 301 Chinese job advertisements were discriminatory, with preferred marital status in 16%, mostly requiring unmarried women. Hughes and Maurer-Fazio (2002) suggest marriage had detrimental effects on female Chinese salaries, yet education resulted in smaller male-female wage differentials, thus perhaps explaining postgraduate studies in the UK:

'In traditional Confucian thought women were subordinate to men- they were viewed as lowly and weak beings destined to serve others. Such beliefs continue to exert a good deal of influence in Chinese society.' (2002:137-8)

However, they do concede that The Communist Party has tried hard to promote equality in modern China.

### **Methodology**

Data was gathered using fine-grained qualitative techniques in two phases, at the end of one academic year (2011-12) and longitudinally throughout 2012-13. This approach enabled the researchers to focus on the changing attitudes of individual students over time during their UK educational experience. Data collection took the form of focus groups and semi-structured interviews. The thirteen participants (11 female and 2 male) were all of Chinese nationality, studying for a Masters programme in a Russell Group Management School. Their words were transcribed and thematic analysis was used to identify the main themes using an inductive approach. Primary themes were identified and underlying meanings were sought. Data immersion occurred, by re-reading the entire transcripts on numerous occasions, as well as re-listening to the audio.

### **Findings and analysis**

Key gender themes emerged, such as filial piety, respect for authority, marital expectations, the one child policy and the idea of the 'Little Empress'. Female students were keen to live up to parental expectations. They clearly had respect for their extended families which was exhibited in 'good behaviour' whilst in the UK and definite aims to obey the guidelines of their parents. This seemed to convey the power distance in Hofstede's (2001, 2010) work which expects respect for authority from Chinese nationals. One student, for example, had been told by her father not to enter a pub whilst here and she had obeyed his wishes assiduously.

Intense familial pressure was present and high educational attainment was expected, especially as families had made financial sacrifices. The females in the study intended to establish a career quickly on their return and then to 'marry well' by 28 to a husband of their own choosing rather than their parents. There was evidence of a stronger individual self and less emphasis on the collective. However, male leadership was expected:

'I think in the group work, a leader is very important and we have a boy in our group and so we are lucky we have a boy in our team' (Maggie)

Male child preference was often poignant:

'...people prefer to have a boy. When I was born, my father was ill and sometimes I joke with him and say, you were ill because you wanted to have a boy. When I fight with my father it can be lonely because I don't have a brother or sister.' (Sherry)

International education resulted in student transformation:

'I had still always been with my parents so they made all the decisions for me. Now I can make all my decisions. Before, I couldn't understand my fathers' actions. I felt like a bird that couldn't fly.' (Zoe)

### **Conclusions**

The one child policy had the unintended consequence of gender imbalance. This could have had a de-stabilising impact upon females, yet UK postgraduate education has enabled these students to grow in confidence whilst here and flourish both interpersonally and educationally. They have enhanced employability and marriage partner selection. Yet their transformed 'self' may be a challenge as they return.