

Introduction: Chinese overseas students' integration and engagement in host societies

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Since the beginning of the 21st century, we have witnessed an astonishing growth in the number of Chinese students going abroad, from 39,898 in 2000 to 459,800 in 2014 (Xinhua 2015). Recent statistics show important new trends in this massive educational migration. First, students tend to go abroad at a younger age, as discussed in Jia Gao's article in this issue. In 2005-2006, 76 per cent of the Chinese students going to the United States entered graduate programs, but in 2012-2013 the rate was down to 44 per cent (China Education Online, 2014). Rather than starting their university career at home, students now tend to go abroad already for their undergraduate studies, or even for attending senior high school. And the trend towards students leaving their home country at an earlier age may well continue. An expert quoted by the CCTV recently expected to see an "explosive growth" in the number of Chinese students going to Australia to attend junior high school (year 7 to 9) after education at this level had been made accessible to foreign students (CCTV 2015). Second, we see an increasing number of graduates from overseas universities returning to China, from a mere 9,121 in year 2000 to 353,500 in 2013 (China Education Online, 2014). However, while the Chinese state actively encourages foreign-trained talents to return to the motherland it also emphasizes that graduates can "serve the nation" without necessarily "returning to the nation". The main aim of the government is to have highly qualified Chinese with foreign credentials facilitating China's transition to a knowledge economy through their participation in international science and technology networks regardless of whether they physically reside in China or abroad (Zweig, Fung and Han 2008).

The combination of these two trends – younger students and less rigid boundaries between going back and staying abroad – will have an impact on the relationship between Chinese overseas students and local communities in host countries. Younger students can be expected to be more open and malleable and to engage more actively in the non-academic social and cultural activities characteristic of teenage life. At the same time, however, more flexible mobility patterns mean that studying overseas will not necessarily constitute a clearly demarcated phase in the lives of the present generation of Chinese. Many will rather regard and experience educational migration as a recurring option in personal and professional biographies that may involve repeated shifts between different cultures and geographical locations. We do not know what the compounded effects of these changes will be, but we

evidently need a deeper understanding of students' integration in host societies, on and off campus, because the social networks they establish during their studies abroad periods will be decisive for their ability to link China to the rest of the world in their later careers.

We use the word integration here to refer to processes involving students' effective communication and interaction with a broad range of groups and individuals in the host country, both on campus and in the wider community. Following the rapid growth of the Chinese international student population in the past decade, it is commonly recognized that lack of integration is a challenging issue, which not only impedes students' learning and academic development abroad but also has a negative impact on their opportunities to gain work experience. The blame for failed integration is routinely placed on the shoulders of the students themselves. In the words of Yajing Chen and Heidi Ross: "All too often, administrators and media outlets have fallen back on staid stereotypes – the meek, quiet, or standoffish Chinese student unwilling to integrate into the 'rest' of campus life" (Chen and Ross 2015:177). Such stereotyped images and assumptions need to be questioned. As demonstrated by the research of Chen and Ross, as well as by Julia Carnine's article in this issue, mono-ethnic Chinese student enclaves have, in fact, much to offer their members in terms of information and practical and moral support and may function as a useful link between individual students and their host institutions (Chen and Ross 2015; Ross and Chen 2015).

While students' integration on campus is an important issue, it is obvious that many types of social capital can only be gained through participation in local social life. A recent survey of entrepreneurs who had returned to China with degrees from abroad showed the importance of such off-campus experiences. Remarkably, only half of the respondents felt that their overseas experience had all in all been "worth it", a result which in itself indicates that the integration of international students needs rethinking. Furthermore, among the advantages of studying abroad the entrepreneurs particularly emphasized factors that are clearly related to networking with and integration into host country business life, such as "gaining partnerships with foreign talents and companies", "building up relationships with foreign industries", and familiarity with the needs of consumers abroad (CCG 2015). It is therefore problematic that most studies of Chinese students' integration neglect their connections to the wider community outside university.

Chinese students appear to realize that integration in host societies is a crucial issue. Education International Corporation Group (EIC), a Chinese international student agency, recently released a report based upon a questionnaire survey of 20,735 students from twenty

large Chinese cities who intended to go abroad. The report shows that when imagining potential difficulties overseas, 38.2 per cent worried about their integration into the host society, which was an even higher proportion than those who feared language barriers (36 per cent) or academic difficulties (35.9 per cent), two factors that are often identified as the major obstacles for Chinese students overseas (EIC 2015). Students' concerns about their general social integration partly reflect that many of them expect their studies abroad to bring them more than just a fancy foreign diploma. Leaving China is also seen as a personally transformative experience that will make them more mature and more respected among their peers (Thøgersen 2012). This is not just a Chinese phenomenon. According to Deardorff, de Wit and Hayl it is a general trend that students who go abroad "[i]ncreasingly ... are seeking other intercultural and international experiences, such as those involving internships, research, volunteerism, and service learning abroad (Deardorff, de Wit and Hayl 2012:460). A salient question thus arises if we want to see a qualitative upgrade of Chinese students' experiences abroad: How can providers of higher education, international student recruiters, local governments, and civil society organisers provide better opportunities for Chinese students to understand and integrate into host societies – and not just into academia?

Local communities may play a key role here as they can offer opportunities for Chinese students to gain work experience through internships and paid or unpaid jobs, which is at the top of their needs list. As internships offer opportunities for observing social practices they can give students a deeper understanding of cultural and social values in the host country that may otherwise remain hidden or appear abstract to them (Hansen and Thøgersen 2015; Thøgersen 2015). Equally important, contacts to local society enable both Chinese students and citizens of the host country to enhance mutual respect and learn to cooperate across perceived cultural differences. We know that Chinese international students make huge contributions to the budgets of institutions of higher education and to local economies. What we know little about, however, is the social and cultural impact of their presence and the role of local communities, including ethnic Chinese communities, in supporting and facilitating students' personal and professional development and integration.

For these reasons, the focus of this themed issue is on students' integration and local engagement in host societies, denoting the interconnections and interactions between Chinese students and local groups within and particularly outside of university campuses. In the remaining part of this introduction we want to contextualize the articles by outlining some relevant debates on the integration of international students and discuss some perspectives that we believe can be helpful for analyzing and understanding Chinese students' local engagement. Finally, we present the five individual articles.

The integration and local engagement of international students

The attention paid to students' integration and local engagement in this issue reflects the fact that present discussions on the internationalization/globalization of higher education are moving beyond the traditional focus on acculturation. Acculturation theories can be highly useful for understanding some aspects of the experiences and strategies of migrants. One of the most frequently applied frameworks in acculturation studies is that of Berry (1997, 2005), who analysed different strategies among new immigrants, including international students, and summarized them under four main categories: 1) assimilation (full adoption of the cultural norms of the dominant group without preservation of one's heritage culture); 2) separation (total rejection of the dominant host culture in favour of preserving one's heritage culture); 3) integration (adoption of the cultural norms of the dominant host culture while maintaining one's heritage culture); and 4) marginalization (rejection of both one's heritage culture and the dominant host culture). This approach can help us understand international students' mental barriers against integration and explain the diverse impact of migration on their psychological well-being and academic progress at both individual and group levels. However, the model seems insufficient for analyzing how students approach the constantly changing realities of a globalized labour and education market. Some graduates may, of course, become more or less permanent immigrants surrounded by a more or less clearly defined 'dominant host culture', but as discussed above it is more likely that their careers will place them in a wide range of shifting multicultural contexts in a series of different geographical locations.

In this situation it is relevant to look for new conceptual frameworks that can better grasp the situation of today's international students. The concept of global competences can be useful in this context. It draws attention to how interconnections and interactions between international students and the wider community can be instrumental in developing their knowledge, skills, and attitudes. According to Tillman (2012:200), the types of global competences that employers particularly ask for are, 1) domain knowledge; 2) cognitive, social and personal skills, including "working effectively in groups with colleagues of different backgrounds"; 3) prior work experience and on-the-job-training; and 4) cross-cultural competence. Several of these competencies are best developed off campus, which places business leaders as the:

...new actors, who have been increasingly vocal about the direction of international education as they seek to recruit talent to meet the needs of their global workforce. They are more engaged because there is uncertainty about whether academic

institutions, acting alone, can adequately prepare students for dynamic changes taking place in the global workforce (Tillman 2012:192).

The global competence approach thus acknowledges the fact that today's students want to achieve "flexible citizenship in the developed world" and that they are much less likely than earlier generations to settle down with a permanent job in one locality or organization (Fong 2011). Along the same lines, Montgomery (2013) suggests an increased focus on "multiliteracy" in the design of a future curriculum for a globalised world, which involves breaking down boundaries between university and community. Such an approach calls for "... a change in the relation between university and community, from making the community 'come to you', to going out to the community" (Kress 2000; quoted in Montgomery *et al.* 2013:177). This highlights the urgent need for partnerships between higher education institutions and off-campus communities, organisations and enterprises, partnerships that would be to the mutual benefit of both international students and local economies.

A key question thus arises: how should higher education institutions respond to the common demand from both international students and the industrial sector for a closer integration of studies and work? This may involve some structural and mental adjustments within the universities. Hudzik and Stohl (2012) argue against the view that we will see the emergence of a two-tier structure in which top-tier universities will be globally engaged while those in the lower tier will be more closely connected to local communities. In their view, "... as... higher education will more generally internationalize, a continuum of global-local engagement seems the more likely outcome rather than two polar extremes. Just as the forces of globalization play out in but are also mediated by the local context, higher education also faces the challenges of being *both* globally engaged and locally useful" (Hudzik and Stohl 2012:65). Seen in this perspective, even elite universities must think of local, off-campus institutions as potential training grounds for their students, not least for their international students to whom encounters with local workplace cultures is even more essential than is the case for domestic students who have better opportunities for developing other types of off-campus connections through part-time jobs, family relations, etc.

International students, on their part, may contribute to the transformation of their host institutions. Sutton *et al.* (2012:152) outlines two approaches to international partnerships between institutions of higher education, transactional and transformational. The former refers to a process where "[t]he individuals who travel from one institution to another are changed as a result of the exchange, but the institutions themselves remain largely separate and unaffected", while the latter, in contrast, "... change or transform entire departments, offices, and institutions, through the generation of common goals, projects, and products".

Maybe programs designed for integrating international students in local communities can help bridging the general gap between universities and the wider society?

It is evident that many higher education researchers recognize the necessity of bringing local communities into the internationalisation of higher education in general, and of making them active participants in the integration of international students in particular. To treat integration solely as a process of foreign students' intercultural learning, adaptation to campus life, and adoption of the cultural norms of the host country would be a too narrow approach. The academic literature reflects a growing awareness that International student integration cannot be achieved without the development of new partnerships between globally oriented universities and local communities and that such partnerships may never be established and developed unless universities adjust their missions and structure to reflect the needs of both international students and stakeholders in the wider community.

These conclusions point to a number of issues that need to be addressed by researchers: Which institutional arrangements can give international students access to the resources and opportunities available in local communities? How can the highly heterogeneous group of international students best be mobilised to participate in and contribute to community projects? What is the relationship between international students and diasporic communities, and how could such ethnic relationships be utilized to integrate international students in local communities to the mutual benefit of students and local residents?

In particular, we want to emphasize three focus points or dimensions that are often ignored in research on Chinese overseas students, but which we believe can help us understand and interpret the dynamics of their integration experience:

Institutional arrangements in host institutions. How do receiving universities make their various resources and partnerships available for international students in order to facilitate their participation in and contribution to the local labour market and to community projects? This question is particularly relevant in regard to Chinese students, who come from an educational system where independent initiatives and self-organisation are rarely encouraged. The receiving institutions need to inform about the opportunities for participation offered by the wider community, but they must also inform students about the relevance of off-campus activities for their studies and careers.

Organizational openings for students' participation in local social activities. Host universities are not the only relevant actors in the integration process. Local enterprises and civil society organisations, on and off campus, are crucial for offering Chinese students access to activities that can lead to their meaningful social engagement. As an illustration of this point,

Lisong Liu's article in this issue demonstrates how religious organizations have played a role in the integration of Chinese students in the United States. At a more general level, many Chinese students, particularly those grown up in the PRC, are used to and prefer collective activities where they can be part of an organized group so a broad range of opportunities for organized participation in social life is a key issue.

Links between different Chinese groups. How are the relations between Chinese students from different countries and regions, such as the People's Republic, Hong Kong, Singapore, Taiwan, and Southeast Asia? The host society, including non-Chinese fellow students, will often perceive students who identify themselves as ethnic Chinese as one homogenous group although they come from very different educational and political systems. The complex relationship between different Chinese groups on campus offers a platform to examine what Chinese identity means to the young generation, including the effects of local engagement on their identity. Students' relations to local Chinese communities outside campus are also important, as emphasized in the articles by Jia Gao and Bin Wu in this issue. Chinese students may face some of the same challenges as local Chinese residents in terms of integration, but there are certainly also differences due to, among other factors, the time horizon for their residence in the host country, their level of education, and their positions in the social hierarchy.

We believe that research focusing on these three dimensions of Chinese students' study abroad experience can contribute to our understanding of the internationalisation of higher education as well as to discussion about what terms such as migration and diaspora mean in a globalized world.

Presentation of the five research articles

The five articles in this themed issue deal with five countries that are all among the top seven destinations for Chinese international students (UNESCO 2014). Lisong Liu writes on the United States (the most popular destination country), Jia Gao on Australia (no. 3), Bin Wu on the United Kingdom (no. 4), Gang Li on Canada (no. 6), and Julia Carnine on France (no. 7).¹ Besides providing outlines of Chinese educational migration to these countries, each article focuses on particular aspects of Chinese students' integration and engagement.

Jia Gao's article challenges the stereotyped image of the new generation of Chinese students as lazy and spoiled. His multi-methods study explores the links between students and ethnic Chinese communities in Australia and shows how students draw on the

resources of co-ethnic groups when they try to enter the local job market or want to start up new entrepreneurial enterprises. In this way Gao's article demonstrates how established Chinese migrants and communities in Australia play a significant role in creating opportunities for the students and therefore should be taken into serious consideration in analyses of Chinese students' integration and engagement. A close contact to co-ethnic groups is not necessarily a symptom of cultural isolation or lack of integration, argues Gao. Chinese overseas communities should be seen as part of the host society, not as an element external to it.

In his survey of Chinese students and local communities in Nottingham, UK, Bin Wu also finds that important links exist between the two groups, although probably not quite as strong as in the Australian case. The statistical information presented in Wu's article shows that educational migration has contributed significantly to the growth of Chinese communities in England. Students also contribute to the transformation of existing Chinese communities. However, neither "Chinese students" nor "Chinese communities" can be treated as homogenous groups. Based on a social network analysis that includes students from the PRC, Hong Kong and Singapore, Wu shows how social and cultural differentiation based on citizenship, place of origin, and dialect contributes to the formation of social relationships.

Social networks are also the focus of Julia Carnine's article on Chinese students in France, the only non-Anglophone country presented in this issue. Based on a quantitative mapping of students' networks as well as on qualitative interviews, Carnine's findings tend to confirm a recurrent theme in the literature on international students: their tendency to isolate themselves in co-ethnic enclaves. As Carnine explains, "international friendships rarely occur spontaneously, but rather they arise in response to students' specific goals and interests." However, rather than explaining mono-ethnic networks as an effect of cultural uniqueness and Chinese cultural norms the article demonstrates some of the social mechanisms behind this phenomenon, including institutional arrangements that impede integration. In contrast to Gao and Wu, Carnine finds little interaction between Chinese students and diaspora communities, a difference that may partly be explained by the limited size of the Chinese community in Toulouse where Carnine carried out her survey.

The two final articles discuss how students' interactions with host societies can change their way of thinking about fundamental political and existential issues. Gang Li's paper on Chinese students in Canada focuses on their political socialization, an aspect often ignored in the academic literature. Based on in-depth interviews with Chinese social science students, Gang Li finds that his informants tended to become more politically knowledgeable during the time they spent abroad and that they developed quite nuanced perceptions of

how democracy works. In the context of this themed issue it is particularly interesting to note that this sensitivity was shaped not only by their academic studies but to a large extent also by their observation of and participation in social practices in local communities. Gang Li's findings about the mutually reinforcing influence of on- and off-campus learning further demonstrates the need for students' integration in the wider community.

Finally, Lisong Liu's article looks at the contacts between Christian organizations and Chinese students in the United States. Liu outlines how this relationship has developed with the changing generations of Chinese students and gives a detailed account of both the strategies of the religious organizations and the highly varied responses of the students. Drawing on a broad range of historical sources, interviews, and ethnographic observations the article paints a nuanced picture of how religious organizations can create a social space for immigrants in their new environment. At the same time, the article also provides insights into social, cultural, and generational stratification processes in the Chinese community in North America.

We hope that the readers of *Journal of Chinese Overseas* will enjoy the varied research approaches and rich empirical material presented in these articles and will be inspired to include Chinese international students in their future reflections on Chinese communities overseas.

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¹ The remaining countries in top seven are Japan (no. 2) and South Korea (no. 5).