



PHD

The role of knowledge in the identity formation of Chinese graduates from UK and Chinese universities working in IT and Law in China

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**The role of knowledge in the identity formation of Chinese
graduates from UK and Chinese universities working in
IT and Law in China**

Jie Gao

A thesis submitted for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

University of Bath

Department of Education

July 2022

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This is our thesis, our stories, our journeys and our torches to pass on.

Abstract

More than 80 percent of Overseas educated Chinese graduates return to China every year, and the number of returnees has reached 1 million in 2021. To attract more Chinese students to return, the Chinese government are constantly publishing and renewing attraction policies on both national and local levels. Industries are also providing positions that prioritise returnees with higher salaries. However, these differences in treatment have caused heightened disparities between returnees and domestic graduates and induced growing disappointment from employers. This thesis aims to develop an understanding of individual experience and the process of transnational knowledge application. It focuses on how UK educated returnees and Chinese domestic graduates from the field of IT and law perceive, acquire and apply knowledge in the Chinese workplace. To do so, data were collected from 43 participants using life grid interviews and informal follow-up interviews. Through data analysis and evaluation, I developed a theoretical model named youki. I conceptualise participants' process of knowledge perception, knowledge acquisition, knowledge application and identity formation through their experience from education to employment with the consideration of contextual factors. The model of youki generates a holistic view of the complex and transformative journey individuals go through, namely the continuous acquisition, reconstruction and reformation of knowledge, and how individuals form their identities by knowledge application or navigate their application of knowledge according to their identities. The findings from this thesis indicate 3 factors that influence an individual's journey: the planned career path constructed with the information they gain or provided to them, the structural changes in their industry, and the interaction and dynamic between knowledge application and their social and professional identity.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

For overseas returnees and students, these past few years have been a difficult and challenging time. As a UK graduate who has classmates and friends in almost every western country, I witnessed my friends in the US talking about which US city they wanted to work in, whereas my friends here in the UK talked about whether they should stay in their hometown or relocate to other tier 1 cities. They were fearless and full of hope. In the first few years after their undergraduate education, they asked me: when are you coming back, where do you want to go, and which company do you want to work for? For some of my friends, it has been almost a decade since their graduation, and sometimes they would call me on a late Wednesday afternoon. I would ask them why they were still up late in the night, knowing the answer might be that they had just left the company. They would ask me how I am doing in the UK, and after some awkward chitchat, they would concede that it might not be so bad to stay in the UK. Some of them were top of their class, went home with an outstanding first-class honours degree, and joined the alumni chatroom asking whether anyone had connections to international or overseas companies, and rushing to add “Just asking – I am doing fine in XX – just thinking about a change of environment...” without anyone asking. With more and more hints and signs, it became clear that something had happened at work, and it was related to their education. Through my primary and secondary education in China, one of the phrases most frequently used by teachers and parents in attempt to motivate us is: “knowledge changes destiny, education forges future”. (知識改變命運，學習成就未來。) As a kid I never thought too much into what this phrase entails, not with all the homework and endless exams. But as I progressed onto higher education, conducted comparative research on vocational education systems for my master’s degree and seeing my friends returned to China with hope and smile and now filled with anxieties and worries for their future, I cannot stop wondering: does knowledge really changes destiny? Does education really forge future? Is overseas education really worth it if graduates will return to China eventually?

Because of these question without an answer, I resorted to conducting my own research – a path that I did not imagine I would step on. I want to explore how do Chinese returning graduates perceive their education and how do they apply western acquired knowledge in Chinese context. Previous research on transnational knowledge application rarely focuses on individuals themselves. Within various fields of research, studies on transnational knowledge application were conducted through different lens. In some research within the fields of management and education, knowledge is perceived as a transferrable content, and these studies centred around the venue of knowledge transfer, namely education institutions and industries. For studies that concerns the recontextualization of knowledge, knowledge itself and influencing contexts. Theories such as Asia as method and their Japanese adaption regional development studies or Thai adaption Home as method focus on the society and

knowledge that can be generated from said society. To answer my question, I need to conduct research that centres on individuals and their process of transnational knowledge application from western university to Chinese workplace in order to gain the subjective perceptions of Chinese returnees.

Furthermore, as some previous studies on transnational knowledge application were not designed to centre around individuals and their processes, it is difficult to draw insights from these studies on whether the obstacles described in these studies unique to returnees and their knowledge or are those obstacles exist in Chinese context in general. In order to capture the specificity of returnees' experience, it is important to understand the Chinese context where returnees are situated in, including attraction policies that encourage and incentivise overseas Chinese graduates to return, the current situation of labour market and the situation and perceptions from domestic graduates as returnees' competitors and colleagues.

Even when individuals and their processes of transnational knowledge application are considered in the research, their research objectives are often centred on something other than individuals. For example, within research on Knowledge transfer, how individual apply transnational knowledge is studied to understand how transnational knowledge can be codified or how can transnational company maximise their performance. For studies concerning recontextualization, knowledge itself is at the centre of the research: how is knowledge recontextualised by individuals and which contexts were included in the processes. Regarding regional development studies, process of transnational knowledge application was studied to optimise the integration for the development of the societies where both domestic and overseas individuals can be a part of.

A brief introduction to my research

This study aims to understand how knowledge is perceived, acquired and applied by UK educated Chinese returnees and domestic educated graduates and how knowledge influences their lives. I wanted to explore whether previous educational and social experiences and choices would have an influence on the current perception and application of knowledge in the Chinese context of participants who were now in work, so I adapted the life grid interview that allows me to collect biographical data in relation to specific areas and experiences over an extended period. Events and experiences that participants perceived to be related to their education and work were considered important. The life grid interviews involved a collaborative approach. Participants were asked to narrate events and experiences regarding their education and employment, such as the choices they made and the rationale for these choices. I would then ask participants about their perception of these events and experiences according to life stages and layers of context. Life stages range from primary education to their current position and any potential future plans; and while I have situated a few layers of context in the form, such as family, region, classmate/colleague and workplace, participants

were encouraged to freely determine and add new layers of context as they saw fit. As an example, quite a few participants placed some of the events in the layer of city/policy, because they argued that although these events were decided by the family, they were initially prompted by changes in policies. I asked participants to further reflect on these events and experiences throughout the research and evaluate whether or not they still agreed with the rationale underpinning their initial decisions. For example, when they decided to pursue overseas education, some participants perceived this choice as a compromise because they believed that graduating from a Chinese university would enhance their career progression if they worked for the Chinese government. Although these participants still believe this is the case, they are now less motivated to work in government branches and they no longer perceive overseas education as a compromise.

Such an approach allowed participants to have greater control over how their data would be understood and interpreted. Furthermore, I was able to build stronger and more extended relationships with my participants due to the external context in which data collection took place. Most of the data collection took place during the early stage of the global pandemic, and consequently, the life grid interviews took a significant amount of time to finish; most of the interviews were conducted across multiple occasions spanning over days or even weeks. With the stronger sense of control and extended relationships, participants indicated that they felt more open towards me and became more candid about their thoughts and feelings. This candidness and reflection greatly enriched my data; it also generated findings that I did not anticipate.

The most significant unexpected finding is my participants' concern about, or fixation towards their identity. While the issue of stereotyping and labelling of returnees is a main theme across the whole data set, as participants became more personal and open in their communication, they started to express more about how they felt and even described how they utilised these stereotypes and labels. They argued that with Chinese society becoming more and more polarised in terms of social, cultural and political stances, the magnitude and influence of stereotypes and labelling are, according to some participants, "almost like the beginning of a second cultural revolution". Consequently, it was asserted by most participants, that their perceived identities are significantly influenced by their behaviours, their choice of words, even their attire, anything that can be an indication of their 'three view' (三观, world view, values and view of life). With consideration of this phenomenon, how participants applied their knowledge, or how their application of knowledge is presented and perceived, would have significant influence on their perceived social or professional identity. Furthermore, most participants argued that Chinese society is changing rapidly with unpredictable direction, speed or goal, so there is no standardised or stable set of criteria determining what label certain behaviours or choices would be associated with. Under such circumstances, participants would need to closely perceive the social, cultural and political changes and reflect and adjust constantly on their own behaviours if they cared about their perceived identity.

While the polarised and rapidly changing Chinese society described by participants acts as a significant external factor in their identity formation, there are also significant internal factors which influence their identity formation, and these are perhaps more significant for conscious active formation of identity. It was especially apparent among UK educated participants that when they returned and worked in a Chinese workplace, they started to realise the subtle and unconscious changes they had adapted from their education. These could be either the social or cultural components embedded in the taught knowledge or the system and process of learning, but UK educated participants would realise that their education had become a part of who they are, and was even quite different from who they thought they were. One simple example is as follows. UK educated participants have, to various degrees, formed the habit of using emails for more official communication, and due to the different norms and protocols in the various organisations participants work in, they kept or discarded such habits. However, even for participants who no longer use email for official communication, they kept the embedded concept of separating official and casual communication and/or having a traceable chain of communication. To some participants, this even developed into the clear separation of private life and work life, a characteristic that is argued to be both uncommon and not well accepted in Chinese workplaces. Prompted by these findings from UK educated participants, through more critical analysis and further ongoing discussion with Chinese educated participants enabled by the fragmented interview process mentioned earlier, I was able to find similar influences and changes in Chinese educated participants from their higher education.

It was clear to me that to my participants' knowledge and their educational experience are not merely something they apply and utilise, but also something they internalise, and this influences who they are, how they think and how they perceive and interact with the society. Therefore, I needed to construct a theory that can incorporate these early findings into the theoretical framework I had and help me to collect and evaluate subsequent data more comprehensively and critically.

Youki and its integration into my research

I first came across the concept of youki when I was reading about a Japanese rugby player who incorporated his experience of kendo (a Japanese traditional martial art/sport) into playing rugby; the seemingly unrelated fragments and pieces of experience came together and formed his unique style of play and personal traits. When some of the conversations with the participants reminded me of this story, I did some further research and realised that the concept of youki explained by Kurata is very suitable for my research. The word Youki (揚棄) is a Japanese translation of the German word Aufheben, with a slightly different interpretation and definition of the word and the related philosophy originally proposed by Hegel. Compared with other Japanese interpretations of Aufheben, which focus more on the abstract aspect of dialectics, Kurata's interpretations of youki emphasise more the potential conflict of different ideologies within individuals, and how learning and applying knowledge

should be based on who they are, not what the knowledge and learning entails. In his book, Kurata (1953) exemplified this idea with the education and training of a doctor. During the Meiji period¹, a student learning or applying western medicine could be misunderstood and criticized as disapproving of traditional medicine or even Japanese culture in general. Kurata argued that choosing western medicine does not necessarily mean an individual's full embracement of this knowledge and its embedded western culture. A doctor should not treat a patient because their education and training teach them to do so, but because they understand and accept the value of saving lives from their education of becoming a doctor. A doctor should also subjectively determine which knowledge is applicable in any given situation, instead of blindly applying western or Japanese knowledge. Therefore, learning western medicine should neither imply a student has abandoned Japanese culture, nor should it mean that the student would only use knowledge and skills from western medicine as a doctor. This concept is very fitting for my research as it focuses on the transformation of individuals through learning.

Based on the aforementioned unexpected findings and further research, I constructed the notion of the youki of transnational knowledge, a theory that conceptualises individuals' journeys of learning as a key process of identity formation through exploring subjective perceptions of external influences and internal reflection. It considers various layers of contexts such as regional, professional and organisational contexts and their influence on knowledge and identity. By applying this theory and utilising its visualised model (this is presented and discussed in greater detail in chapter 8), my participants and I were able to approach questions more critically and comprehensively, generating findings that are not only meaningful to me as a researcher, but also to my participants for their personal growth and clearer understandings of themselves.

To briefly summarise the structure of this thesis, in Chapter 2 I explain the contextual background for which returnees and domestic educated graduates situate in and expand on the previous, current and future research in relation to transnational knowledge application. I also discuss the structure of youki with a visualised model to illustrate the rationale for its structure. Chapter 3 illustrates the theoretical framework I used to construct the overarching research questions, the design of this research and the methodological consideration and choices I made. It also explains why IT and law graduates were chosen for this study and the approach for data analysis. Chapter 4 to chapter 7 are data analysis chapters that demonstrate participants' individual understandings and process of perceiving, acquiring and applying knowledge in workplace from higher education to employment in China. Chapter 8 presents the conception of youki of transnational knowledge, namely the continuous acquisition, reconstruction and reformation of knowledge and the influence knowledge can have on identity formation. It exemplifies how youki can be used to understand the individual process of knowledge

¹ the context of Meiji period is described in greater detail in chapter 2,

perception, acquisition and application and identity formation with the aid of a visualised model of youki. Chapter 9 conclude how the research questions are addressed, the implications this study and its findings can have and ideas for future research.

Chapter 2: Context and literature review

This chapter discusses the contextual backgrounds of returnees in China and research that relates to returnees and transnational knowledge application. With increasing number of overseas graduates returning to China and the introduction of policies that prioritise returnees and differentiate domestic graduates, the first section of this chapter unpacks the influence attraction policies can have, the current labour market and the competition returnees and domestic graduates. The second section of this chapter further expands on research in relation to returnees and transnational knowledge application, what their findings entail and how they guide my study.

2.1 Returnees: background and situation

I begin with a discussion of how Chinese returnees, like those in Law and ICT that are an important focus of my empirical work, have always been acknowledged by the government as one of the most important components in establishing a “great victory for China in the new era”, the latest goal of the Chinese Communist Party (19th National Congress of the Chinese Communist Party, 2017). Overall, the policies do not segregate the industries at a national level so it is important to understand more broadly how the various policies indicate that the Chinese government intends to attract, maintain and maximise the acclaimed benefits of overseas returnees. In addition, there are lesser policies for home educated students attracting them. Various industries have also expressed significant interest in employing returnees either in cooperation with local and national governments or for their own benefits by explicitly favouring overseas educated returnees in the labour market. As a current or prospective overseas educated returnee, all of these policies and appeals paint a seemingly optimistic “glorious” prospect for returning to China. However, existing research and data portray a different picture, where returnees’ objective situation and subjective feedback reflected a lack of satisfaction from returnees in various aspects. In the following section, I will illustrate why governments and industries place an emphasis on attracting returnees in the broadest sense and across key industries and the methods they use to attract them, and then proceed to explore the reality of the situation for returnees and their views about their own positions and prospects. There is insufficient literature to enable a meaningful focus on just law and ICT or particular companies.

2.1.1 Governments and industries: civil war for returnees

The importance of overseas educated returnees for the development and advancement of China is a concept that has been repeatedly modified and fortified by the Chinese government. The most recent example is President Xi's speech at the Central Committee Conference of Talents (中央人才工作会议). Xi emphasised that maintaining and ensuring international exchange and communication of talents are as important as building China's own education system, where both Chinese educated and overseas educated Chinese can fully express their potential and abilities (2021). This is coherent with Xi's speech at the Unified Frontline Conference in 2015 where he said, "returnees are [an] important component of the talents needed in China, we should encourage overseas education and return". From 1978 to 2018, the accumulative number of Chinese individuals who have pursued overseas education has surpassed 5.8 million; 84.5 percent of overseas educated Chinese (around 3.6 million people) returned to China after their education. According to data published in March 2021 by the Chinese Ministry of Education, in 2017 the number of Chinese pursuing overseas education surpassed 600,000 for the first time, reaching sixty-six thousand in 2018; fifty-two thousand graduates returned in 2018, representing an 8.1 percent increase from 2017. This growth and the related changes are being closely observed and reacted by the government and industries.

Attraction policies

Recognising the importance of returnees and their growth in numbers, national and local governments are publishing and modifying attraction policies to maximise their appeal to current and prospective returnees. While policies have been introduced at both national and local levels, analysis of the policy documents reveals differences in the target audience. In general, national level attraction policies focus on the top level, state of the art talents that can potentially make significant discoveries and advancements in various STEM fields. Named the "Hundred Talents Project", the "Thousand Talents Plan" and the "High-End Foreign Experts Project", these national level policies tend to recruit a few world-renowned individuals. The vast majority of current and prospective returnees are targeted more by local governments.

While some of the biggest cities or provinces in China have their own adapted versions of national policies such as the "Shanghai Thousand Talents Plan" or the "Hundred Talents Plan of Hebei province" to attract high-end experts that can either be Chinese or foreign nationals, most of their efforts focus on attracting Chinese returnees that have been educated by prestige overseas institutions. Alongside the changing situation and number of returnees, local policies have been very responsive and adaptive as to whom they seek to attract and what types of offer or incentives they would be

attracted by. As one of the earliest types of attraction policy, Shenzhen's Peacock Project was initially designed to engage highly educated or experienced research scholars in 2010: class A applicants consisted of Nobel prize winners or winners of similar internationally renowned awards, class B of individuals who had been working in innovative projects recognised by the government, and class C of individuals who had been working in overseas research institutions for more than two years and in Shenzhen for research related work for more than three years. At that point, according to the officials, the Peacock Project was intended to be a more flexible and less specific research-oriented project for scholars with versatile research directions and abilities. (Shenzhen Municipal Central Committee, 2011). In other words, the Peacock Project was originally designed to attract high-end talent that did not prefer or meet the conditions required by the Thousand Talents Plan or the Hundred Talents Plan. Beijing had two similar projects called the "Overseas Intelligence Plan" and the "Great Mind[s] Gather in Beijing Plan" that appear to aim for the same target group of talent.

When Shenzhen implemented their attraction policies in 2010, other big cities followed its lead and introduced and implemented some forms of attraction policies. However, at this point, only a few cities had comprehensively packaged policies similar to the Peacock Project. Most of the cities merely introduced an adaptation of the national policies and many overseas Chinese students were not aware of these policies (Zhang et al., 2015). While these local policies did not appeal to or target the majority of returnees at the time, rapid and substantial changes occurred in around 2015. Although scholars that research the global economy or macro economy tend to argue that the rapid changes in attraction policies were aimed at combatting global brain-drain (Mao and Zheng, 2021; Sun and Zhang, 2017; Fang, 2021), some researchers believe there were other more significant motives for cities to enhance their overall appeal and, to some extent, start the process of domestic competition for overseas educated returnees.

While high-end talents are essential for breakthrough advancements in cutting edge scientific areas, from a short to midterm economic perspective, a relatively large number of undergraduate-level returnees is much more beneficial than a handful of high-end talents. This is especially the case in less developed areas, for example, where He et al (2014) argued that attracting and maintaining a certain number of returnees can significantly improve a region's ability to attract investment and enhance the quality of economic growth, and foster a sustainable and resistant economic ecosystem that can better withstand structural changes and challenges. Similarly, Li et al (2014) urged local governments in mid-western areas to greatly expand their attraction policies to broaden the number of returnees in average businesses instead of only appealing to management level. They argued that the mid-western area is the "main benefited area" of economic development through a gradient descent system. Mid-western area's ability to receive these benefits, however, is limited by their business and economic structure which can only be swiftly and expediently enhanced by employing enough overseas educated returnees to match the knowledge and abilities utilized by companies in more developed

areas. For a more detailed analysis of a similar argument, Tang et al (2014) suggested that the number of returnees would directly influence the ability to understand and utilise current and future advanced technologies and knowledge and that the “bucket effect” applies to local economic development. The bucket effect can be illustrated as the level of water a bucket, made of wooden planks, can hold as determined by the shortest board of wood, and if the number of returnees – represented by the board of wood – is not big enough, it cannot hold the water – namely imported technology and knowledge – to the level of other (larger) boards. While these studies did not provide sufficient evidence to support this correlation between the number of returnees and local economic development, Li (2014) and Cao (2014) argue that most of the policy proposals from that time were built upon similar arguments, and some directly referenced the aforementioned research. Even the so-called “second wave” attraction policies that came out in 2017 are thought to be designed based on similar ideas and arguments (Sun and Sun, 2020; Li and Sun, 2020). In terms of the renewed and recently developed policies, one of the most significant changes is their new focus on maintaining and keeping attracted talents on a wider scale. (Li and Sun, 2020; Li, 2014; Cao, 2014; Sun and Sun, 2020; Tang et al., 2014)

Changes induced by attraction policies

Miu (2016) explains that the one of the more significant and to some extent surprising characteristics expressed by local governments and their policies is the “competitiveness” towards tier 1 cities. In terms of political and administrative objectives, it is not uncommon for tier 1 cities or province capitals to take leading roles and have surrounding cities provide supplementary support. For example, to help with the economic transformation of Guangzhou, Foshan built transport infrastructures that better connected the two cities and provided housing and civil service benefits for people who work in Guangzhou but live in Foshan. However, when it comes to talent attraction policies, some tier 1.5 or tier 2 cities demonstrate great ambitions, with some providing even better incentives than the tier 1 cities in their area.

Lin (2018) argued that possibly as part of the policies to fit its status as one of the Experiential cities for Neo Urbanisation (国家新型城镇化综合试点), Jinan city published one of the most incentivising attraction policies in the Shandong province. Qingdao, the financial centre of Shandong province, offers 500/800/1200 CNY per month for bachelor’s, master’s and PhD graduates, and Jinan city provides 700/1000/1500 CNY to graduates. While Jinan does not offer the same one-off incentives as Qingdao (100,000/150,000 CNY for master/PhD graduates), Jinan does offer the same amount of reduction for master’s and PhD graduates buying their first property in Jinan. Furthermore, Jinan provides five thousand “talent apartments” per year that can be rent or bought with a 20 percent discount for graduates who have secure employment in Jinan.

Based on the latest demographic and research data on returnees, Hangzhou is one of the more successful cities in terms of attraction. According to Zhang et al (2020), Hangzhou is one of the very few cities that make their attraction policies significantly effective because the policies were designed based on a realistic assessment of graduates' needs. Zhang et al argued that local government understand that while the relocation and concentration of technology companies are its biggest advantage, the relatively low salary for new employees makes Hangzhou easy to attract graduates but hard to retain them. Therefore, the 2018 version of attraction policies focused on providing housing benefits in addition to the 10,000/30,000/50,000 CNY one-off incentives for graduates at the bachelor's, master's and PhD levels. For graduates who have been employed by local companies, similar to Jinan, Hangzhou provides apartments that prioritise graduates for renting and buying with discounts, but these apartments are limited in number (for example, Jinan provides 5000 per year, and Shenzhen provides 10,000 per year although more than 50,000 graduates aim to find employment in Shenzhen). For graduates who cannot secure these apartments, Hangzhou provides 10,000 CNY a year regardless of degrees for three years, and if these graduates' earnings are still lower than Hangzhou's average per capita disposable income, they can apply to receive 10,000 CNY for three more years.

Qingdao, Hangzhou, Nanjiang, Zhengzhou, Xi'an and Chengdu were the first cities to offer residency and settlement incentives. While city residency/registration systems are not uncommon in other countries, China's Hukou system is unique in terms of its linkage of residency with pensions, school enrolment, medical insurance and the rights to buy property and apply for a vehicle licence plate. This system significantly hinders individuals' ability and willingness to permanently relocate to a city other than that of their birthplace, and this is the intended effect especially for already crowded tier 1 cities. Typically, for anyone who wants to change their hukou to Beijing or Shanghai, they need to pay social insurance (similar to national insurance in the UK) for seven consecutive years in Beijing or Shanghai. For anyone applying for sponsored hukou in Beijing, they either need to be married to a holder of Beijing hukou for more than ten years and over the age of forty-five themselves, or one of their parents is a holder of Beijing hukou and owns property in Beijing. While other cities' requirements are relatively easier to meet, they still require two consecutive years of social insurance.

As an indication of how residency is positioned and emphasised in attraction policies, Nanjing, Zhengzhou, Xi'an and Chengdu use residency as one of the major points of attraction as a ground-breaking rule. For the first time in contemporary China, an individual can relocate and gain Hukou in these four cities without acquiring local employment as a precondition. All they need is a graduation certificate, and in the case of Nanjing, a certificate of advanced technician can also be used to gain Hukou. Nanjing even provides 1000 CNY for anyone coming to Nanjing for a job interview. While not enough longitudinal demographic data is available to examine the effectiveness of these local attraction policies, the latest modification to Shanghai's policy might demonstrate the fierceness of

the talent competition. On 9 June 2022, without any prior indication, Shanghai's government published new rules about returnee residency. As discussed earlier, Shanghai was one of the toughest cities in China in which to gain residency, but now, graduates from the top fifty universities can apply for Shanghai hukou as soon as they have been employed by a local company, and graduates from the top fifty to one hundred universities can apply after paying social insurance for six consecutive months. At the time of writing, there had been no official clarification as to what ranking would be applicable for this policy, but it nevertheless illustrates that even Shanghai is eager to gain an advantage in this competition for talents.

“Aggressive” and “conservative” local policies

As the latest addition or modification to local attraction policies, some cities have either added professional fields of “rapidly needed talents” (急需人才) that are prioritised within the attraction policies and corresponding perks, or they have limited applicants to professionals from certain fields. For example, Tianjin gives priority to professionals from the fields of aerospace, renewable energy and biomedicine; and while returnees from other professions are welcomed, only professionals from these designated fields are eligible to apply for a free three-bedroom apartment provided by the government. Chen (2021) analysed the reasons why certain professions or industries were selected for specific cities, in an attempt to understand whether national and local governments made reasonable and realistic choices. Correlation

In Chen's (2021) argument, while some cities are criticised for being too “conservative” by prioritising professionals needed for well-established industries in those cities, concerns are also raised about cities that are too “aggressive” and prioritise professionals or industries that lack the appropriate infrastructure or suitable environment to develop. To further explain what this means, Wang's research on Tangshan's current attraction policy provides a useful example. Wang (2020) argues that for centuries Tangshan used its geographical advantage to develop heavy industries such as mining and construction, therefore it is reasonable and realistic for Tangshan to prioritise professionals that specialise in environmentally friendly production and semi-automation. Tangshan also included logistics and international trading as priority professions and industries, because Tangshan port is one of the biggest modern ports in China and serves as an effective transport route to different areas of China. With enough long-term investment and supporting businesses, it does have the potential become a significant trading hub for China. However, with no established company or related incubator in the area, attracting professionals in the field of biochemistry is neither reasonable nor realistic.

In the worst-case scenario, if Tangshan follows in the footsteps of other cities in granting Hukou without requiring local employment, it is possible that returnees in the field of biochemistry could become stuck with a “restraining” residency. Imagine graduate A went to the US and studied biomedicine. Upon their return, graduate A found out that Tangshan is offering substantial incentives for overseas educated returnees in the field of biochemistry and biomedicine. Without sufficient understanding of the other cities that prioritise biomedicine in their policies and being unable to meet the standards set by Beijing who also prioritise biomedicine but at professorial level, graduate A decides to relocate to Tangshan. If Tangshan retains employment in local businesses as a precondition, graduate A will discover that there are only a few companies that are loosely related to biomedicine and are probably not looking for new employees. However, if Tangshan discards employment as the precondition for hukou application, there is the possibility that graduate A would obtain Tangshan residency, find out there are no suitable employment opportunities in Tangshan, and lose the opportunity to relocate to Suzhou or Tianjin through attraction policies where established biochemistry and biomedicine industry parks and incubators are located.

Huang et al’s (2021) research on destination of return warned of such a possibility. Their research suggests that with an increasing number of cities adding or prioritising “rapidly needed talents”, the selection and inclusion of professional fields influences choice of return destination. They disagree with other research that suggests prospective students choose their subjects based on their hometown’s policy but argue that local policies have significant influence in how returnees choose destination of return. Huang et al’s (2021) data suggest that if both a tier 1 city and the hometown prioritise the returnee’s profession, the returnee is more likely to return to the hometown, especially when the hometown is a tier 1.5 or tier 2 city. However, Huang et al’s (2021) interviews also indicate that returnees assume there are relevant industries in their hometown, otherwise local governments would not ask for professionals in that field. Similar findings are presented by Liu et al (2020), suggesting that returnees, especially graduates without that did not have work experience, have unrealistic expectations regarding the size and stage of development of the emerging industries that they work in. These authors criticised that some returnees have misunderstood the principle of rapidly needed talents: returnees are not introduced to benefit from these fields but to build these fields, returnees should be “planting the trees, not to pick the ripened fruit” (Huang et al, 2021).

While these studies conclude by warning prospective returnees to carefully plan ahead and aim to “make [the] motherland great”, more attention could be paid to the care and nurturing of individual graduates, rather than national development as a grand goal. Regardless of their interpretation of returnees’ expectations and attitudes, these studies present examples of cases where cities have implemented attraction policies that appeal to specific professionals without the necessary business environment for these professionals to work in. Despite local governments’ intentions and vision, from the perspective of relocated returnees, it is fair to say that such aggressive policymaking results

in returnees being misinformed and misguided in making education and employment related decisions. (Miu, 2016; Lin, 2018; Zhang et al., 2020; Wang, 2020; Z. Chen, 2021; Huang et al., 2021; CCG, 2017; CCG, 2021; CCG, 2022)

Explicit favouring in the labour market

While local governments are implementing and changing their attraction policies, an increasing number of industries are publishing “returnee prioritised (海归优先)” positions on recruitment platforms. According to Center for China and Globalisation’s (CCG) 2020 report, more than 53 percent of returnees use recruitment platforms/apps to seek employment, with fewer returnees applying directly to an individual company (this decreased from 22 percent in 2018 to 11 percent in 2019) or being introduced through a family or friend (from 19 percent in 2018 to 16 percent in 2019). Zhilian is one of the biggest recruitment platforms in China and has collaborated with various Chinese ministries to provide an analytical report on issues relating to employment and the labour market. In their 2021 returnee employment report (Research, 2022), they collected and analysed data on “returnee prioritised” positions. With regards to the average proposed monthly salary, returnee prioritised positions averaged at 11,739 CNY in 2019 and 13,719 CNY in 2021 and the overall average proposed salary was 8,536 CNY in 2019 and 9,364 CNY in 2021. In terms of both growth rate and growth amount, returnee prioritised position (1,980 CNY, 16 percent growth) far exceeds the overall position (828 CNY, 9.7 percent growth). Regarding proportion, in the field of education/crafts and creatives, 34.9 percent of positions posted on recruitment platforms (including other platforms) were returnee prioritised in 2021, and IT/communication/internet ranked second with 19.3 percent of returnee prioritised positions. Interestingly, while 58.3 percent of returnee prioritised positions were posted by privately owned companies and only 4.8 percent were posted by state-owned companies, CCG’s 2021 research suggests that only 23.4 percent of returnees were employed by privately owned companies and 46.9 percent of returnees were employed by “in-system institution (体制内)”, namely public institutions and state-owned companies. In terms of location, tier 1 cities still ranked the highest with 44.5 percent of prioritised positions, but tier 1.5 cities/neo tier 1 cities followed closely with 34.4 percent.

While the significant difference in salaries and proportion of returnee prioritised positions is encouraging news for current and prospective returnees, this explicit favouring of returnees caused a severe backlash among domestic graduates. Although the pay gap is an obvious cause of frustration, Zhang et al (2021) argue that having a significant number of positions that prioritise returnees will further induce psychological disparities between returnees and domestic graduates. They assert that despite the actual reasons behind the prioritises set by businesses, they are nonetheless perceived by domestic graduates as systematic discrimination. He (2019) illustrates how in a relatively large company, returnees recruited for prioritised positions would be excluded in office politics and group

formation even by other returnees who were not employed for prioritised positions. Similar to the argument made by He (2019), Jiang and Zeng (2018) argue that non-high-level managerial returnees or non-high-end research returnees are one of the components of a mass machine like any other domestically educated employee. They also argue that, returnee prioritised positions are essentially an adaptation of the attraction policies, and it is reasonable for companies to use such an adaptation if they are recruiting core research and development employees or creative-type small-scale businesses; however, in the case of normal positions in relatively big companies, having returnee prioritised positions can significantly damage teamwork and morale for the whole company.

In their research on career paths, Zhong et al (2020) point out that rather than debating the proportion of returnee prioritised positions, more attention should be paid to the positions that are prioritised for returnees and the implications of this for the career paths of domestic graduates. Through their research, in the field of IT and automotive manufacture, returnee prioritised positions are located either in respective companies' core product teams or in "promising positions advantageous for climbing the career ladder". Hong and Zhao (2020) also observe that some companies tend to allocate creative-essential and minor leadership positions as returnee prioritised. While it would be reasonable for relatively large and experienced companies to do so based on their experience of working with returnees, Hong and Zhao (2020) argue that some younger and smaller, or traditionally "xenophobic" companies, companies that tend to discriminate returnees and foreign nationals, do not have sufficient rationale to risk putting some of their core positions as returnee prioritised on recruitment platforms. Through comparative analysis, Ko et al (2020) suggest that some companies would lower the requirements for returnee prioritised positions in comparison with similar positions without priorities and argue that these positions were de facto returnee exclusive. According to their investigative research, in rare cases where no returnee applied, domestic graduates were rejected even before interview, and employers that posted those positions refused to comment on why applications from domestic graduates were not considered. While Ko et al (2020) argue that these kinds of situations rarely happen today (two out of fifty-three cases were tracked), they believe the findings that Chou (2012) and Tang et al (2014) presented are still pertinent today. Chou argues that between 1997 and 2002, various state-owned companies were privatised by former government officials, and their experience of "technology introduction" from the west and overseas technician training/communication with western partners during the 1990s greatly enhanced their perception of western knowledge as more advanced and irreplaceable. Similarly, Tang et al (2014) suggest that companies who cooperated and traded with foreign businesses in the 1990s overestimated the uniqueness of returnees, with some business owners still believing that domestically educated employees can never fully understand the demands of and interactions with foreign companies, despite their certified English language skills. Both Chou's (2012) and Tang et al's (2014) studies

suggest that these companies would reserve certain positions to returnees or foreign nationals only, as they are believed to have a full understanding of the western context.

Though Chinese higher education institutions do not simply or directly prioritise returnees for the recruitment of academic positions, it is argued that overseas educated PhD graduates can be much more advantaged than domestically educated PhD graduates in gaining academic employment in Chinese higher education institutions. Apart from the relatively subtle preferences such as “overseas educational background preferred” or “sincere welcome to overseas educated candidates”, Chen (2022) indicates that some institutions are bluntly overweighting overseas degrees, to the extent that an overseas master’s degree is equivalent to a domestic doctorate degree. Based on the feedback from domestic counterparts, Chen (2022) suggests that such bias towards overseas degrees has caused significant resentment among domestic academic staff, not only towards institutions, but towards returnees as well. Domestic academic staffs do not believe there is any evidence, especially prior to employment, to justify the favouring of overseas educated staff and they ask the question, “why should a ‘foreigner’ be better than me?” (Chen, 2022, p.38). Similar quotes were presented in Zhang’s (2021) research, where a domestic PhD graduate found that his job was “stolen” by a returnee. The position they were competing for was research associate in Chinese history, and the domestic PhD graduate reported feeling confused as to why they think a non-foreigner would be more appropriate. Furthermore, while the more competitive institutions do not necessarily state that returnees are preferred or prioritised in their advertisements, around half of the 985² project universities exclusively ask for graduates from top 100 ranking universities. As there are only a handful of Chinese universities ranked in the top 100 on QS, which is the ranking specified in some advertisements as the reference, such requirements prioritise returnees/foreign graduates without explicitly saying so (Fischer, 2021; Marini and Xu, 2021). (Research, 2022; Hong and Zhao, 2020; Zhong et al., 2020; Ko et al., 2020)

2.1.2 The current situation of returnees

Evident in the policies implemented by national and local governments, explicit favouring by businesses and industries as illustrated through their recruitment advertisements and in the subtle yet distinctive requirements from Chinese higher education institutions, would make it appear as though returnees are welcomed back on all fronts. The rather wide range of choice of residency and initial living costs for relocation taken care of by governments through attraction policies, the prioritised positions in the job market greatly enhance the opportunity for returnees to acquire satisfying jobs

² The 985 project was established by the Ministry of Education and aimed to build internationally first tier universities in China. It is loosely used by people in China to describe and define the top Chinese universities.

swiftly, and some universities even “upgrade” returnees’ degrees as a form of attraction. However, as shown in both official reports and independent research, these seemingly optimistic prospects did not turn out so great for returnees. This section will discuss the experiences of returnees upon their return, their current statuses and their perceptions of returning and working in China.

Mixed signals

Drawing upon data collected by the Center for China and Globalisation (CCG), Chen and Liu (2020) attempted to analyse the issues affecting returnees’ employment statuses. Their research focuses on what they define as “merging returnees”, namely overseas educated Chinese individuals who have returned within the last five years and are deemed to be still in the phase of adjusting and re-merging into the Chinese context and workplace. Among 2000 participants, more than 60 percent have worked for less than three years since their return, 27 percent have worked for one to three years, and 37 percent have less than one year of work experience. According to this research, more than 60 percent of participants ranked ‘reunion with friends and families’, ‘China has better economic development’ and ‘nostalgic/affectionate of Chinese culture and lifestyle’ as the primary reason for return: only 20 percent believed that their reason for return was driven by the ‘dividing political situation and unfavourable policies in other countries’ and an ‘uncomfortable difference in ideologies and values’.

However, this result seems to contradict some of the previous research on returnee intention, especially among academic and scholars in educational institutions in the west who have returned to China. Based on survey data collected from overseas educated academic staff in 50 universities, Zhao et al (2020) argue that the more productive and innovative returnees tend to echo a greater sense of belonging with the values and ideologies expressed by Chinese universities. Zhao et al (2020) suggest that the values and ideologies expressed by universities can enhance a sense of belonging among those returnees who recognised and agreed with such values and ideologies and therefore improve productivity, innovation and the self-evaluation of such returnees. However, the more significant finding of this research is that in the case of a mismatch of values and ideologies, returnees are likely to be driven away from universities and “re-return (再归海)”, namely return to their destination of education and aim to find a workplace or larger context with matching values and ideologies (Zhao et al, 2020, p.12). In Sun and Zhang’s (2018) research, age, institution status and current employment status are significant factors in deciding whether or not a highly educated overseas Chinese scholar, that is an individual who finished their PhD in an overseas institution, or a Chinese educated PhD graduate who is working in an overseas institution to be specific, would want to return to China. To analyse the effectiveness of the “thousand youth talent” project, their quantitative data suggests that for overseas educated Chinese, the younger they are the more likely they are willing to return, while it is opposite for Chinese who acquired their PhD in China. In the case of younger China educated PhD

graduates, they express a very weak intention to return based on gaps between income, social status and career/academic progression. More senior participants worried less about pay grade and progression, but the difference in organisational structure and management style serves as a significant discouragement for them. However, while not directly opposed to the different results of these previous research findings, Chen and Liu (2020) specifically point out that the changing geopolitical situation and ongoing diplomatic conflicts affect how overseas educated Chinese graduates consider their intention to return or stay. (Jiang and Zeng, 2018; Zhao et al., 2020; Chen and Liu, 2020)

Major-job mismatch

When the number of returnees suddenly jumped from a 100,000 in 2009 to almost 300,000 in 2012, Chinese academics raised the alarm concerning an existing issue in the Chinese job market: the major-job mismatch or major-to-employment mismatch. In his research on knowledge transfer of US college graduates, Robst (2007; 2008) organised reasons for mismatch into two categories: supply related reasons and demand related reasons. Supply related reasons mostly consist of personal considerations for accepting mismatch jobs whereas demand related reasons have more to do with context, such as the lack of compatible jobs or barriers to acquiring compatible jobs due to discrimination. Hong et al (2013) argue that domestic Chinese graduates generally choose mismatch jobs due to supply related reasons, the most common being that the security and benefits of jobs in government offices or state-owned companies outweigh the benefits of finding a major matching job. However, returnees were more likely to accept mismatch jobs due to demand related reasons unless they were from Guangzhou, Shanghai, and Beijing, when Shenzhen was not yet a tier 1 city and attraction policies did not support residency relocation. From the perspective of willingness, Zhang (2014) and Chen (2015) suggest that domestic graduates and returnees were significantly different in terms of their willingness to accept mismatch jobs. Due to different systems of secondary education and higher education institution enrolment, overseas educated Chinese graduates were more likely to choose a subject due to subjective preference whereas domestic graduates were more likely to choose a subject due to objective availability. Therefore, both authors argue that returnees are more likely to feel “attached” or “proud” of their professions if accepting a job which matches their educational background and suffer more damage in pride and the feeling of compromise when accepting mismatch jobs.

According to government data and the CCG’s research in 2021, using the scale of “very match[ed]” to “complete mismatch”, only 34 percent of participants held positive opinions about their major-job match (CCG, 2021). However, recent studies indicate that the current situation is now significantly different to that portrayed in earlier studies. Hong et al (2013) Zhang (2014) and Chen (2015) were all describing the reasons why domestic or overseas educated graduates accepted mismatching jobs, indicating that despite their willingness and consideration, these graduates understood that the jobs

they took did not match their education/profession. However, in more recent studies, graduates tend to find out about the mismatch after their employment. In their research, Zhou (2020) established that in larger businesses, returnees were normally hired for slightly higher positions than their domestic counterparts. However, these returnees are not necessarily higher in the hierarchy and, in reality, their work often represents various forms of liaison, “just a fancy translator” according to one of their case studies (Zhou, 2020. p.14). While technically their job title and job description match their degree and discipline (mostly management related degrees in Zhou’s (2020) research), the work required does not utilise their knowledge in management. On the other hand, Chiang (2021) suggest that among high-end technology/specialist manufacturing companies, an increasing number of job interviews were conducted by engineers/technicians in charge of the to-be-filled position instead of HR personnel. According to these companies, even when individuals have studied the same subjects, at the same universities but at different times, individuals with the same degree can still have different types of professional knowledge within a specific discipline. Therefore, more of these “professional to professional” recruitment interviews can be found among professional-centred firms such as auditing firms and law firms (All China Lawyers Association, 2021) or highly specialised companies such as biotechnology companies and semiconductor manufacturers (Tsai, 2022. p.118).

In Chinese higher education institutions, although returnees do not report mismatch, Qian (2020) and Hsieh (2021) argue that returnees are being “misused”. According to the arguments made by both Jiang et al (2020) and Zhu (2022), pre-employment productivity and perceived productivity have a significant influence on returnees’ ability to acquire academic positions in selective universities. Productivity is normally based on the number of papers published and the reputation of the journals in which papers are published, productivity is not merely an entry benchmark as some returnees might have misunderstood. Qian (2020) suggests that some returnees think academic productivity is used by selective universities only to assess their academic knowledge, especially when the position they are employed for is, at least on paper, teaching oriented instead of research oriented. Therefore, when implicit or even explicit pressure or requirements to publish are made, these returnees felt tricked as the requirements were not disclosed during recruitment or misused because they prefer or are more accomplished in teaching. Hsieh (2021) argued that even when returnees prefer research over teaching, Chinese universities do not have the environment for returnees to maintain their productivity. As demonstrated in the latest regulations from 20 Chinese universities, Hsieh argued that shortened appraisal periods (the shortest is three months and the longest one year) discourage researchers from conducting meaningful but time-consuming studies and extra work content (some universities ask each academic staff member to take the side position of class teacher) further reducing the time and energy needed to conduct research and publish papers, thereby working against the very reason these returnees were hired, notwithstanding the debate about whether it is right or wrong to focus so heavily on publications.

Suen and Ng (2021) have observed a phenomenon among ambitious second tier universities that to some extent can be seen as a form of mismatch or misuse of returnees. In 2016, project 985 and project 211 were officially finished and the combined/reorganised “Double First-Class University Plan” was simultaneously announced (General Office of the State Council of the People’s Republic of China, 2016). The document stated that the first round of selection would take place in 2017 and the committee would assess and select a university for inclusion every five years. Suen and Ng (2021) found that in 2016, during the estimated period for assessment and selection, some second-tier universities produced extremely attractive recruitment advertisements (a one million CNY annual salary plus free luxury accommodation) for returnee prioritised positions. These recruitment advertisements all have thin and vague job descriptions, and further investigation showed that in two of those universities employed returnees had suspiciously little workload: in university A, employed returnees only teach five hours a week, and in university B, employed returnees had their own laboratory with no clear indication about what they were working on. However, these universities subsequently released these returnees from the positions – quite friendly, judged by a few trackable individuals and their following employment that would need decent reference – after one year. Alongside similar advertisements from the same group of universities in 2021, the estimated period of assessment for the second round of the “Double First Class University Plan”, Suen and Ng (2021) suggested that these universities employed returnees just to meet the standard for assessment and selection, and while some returnees did benefit from these arrangements, it is unclear whether returnees were aware of such an arrangement and whether all returnees employed by these universities during those periods would benefit.. (Sun and Zhang, 2018; Hong et al., 2013; Zhang, 2014; Zhou, 2020; Tsai, 2022; Qian, 2020; Hsieh, 2021; L. Chiang, 2021; W. Chiang, 2021; Zhu, 2022; Suen and Ng, 2021)

Disappointed employers

While returnees were unhappy with major-job mismatch and salary (19 percent answered far lower than the expectation and 44 percent answered lower than the expectation; CCG, 2020), some researchers have expressed concerns that employers are also very unhappy with returnee employees, to the extent that some employers claimed they would not hire returnees in the future or plan to set up a “returnee management/education department”. (Wen, 2022. p.47)

Though employers displayed various forms of and reasons for dissatisfaction due to different positions, they more or less converged on the same issue: returnees are not grounded (不接地气). This phrase can be quite vague and implies different meanings in various scenarios. Across different studies, Chinese researchers tend to define it as “failure to express actions and [a] mindset that [are] coherent [with the] general Chinese context” (Chen and Liao, 2020. p.54). While some scholars argue that this phrase is most commonly used as an excuse to criticize returnee employees instead of being a

real reflection of their performance (Bao, 2016; Wei, 2020), some also assert that the rapidly popularized use of the phrase represents the development and embeddedness of new/niche social norms. (Bao, n.d.; Wei, 2020; Chen and Liao, 2020; Wen, 2022)

Zheng (2020) argued that while the US is experiencing the conflict of conservative and liberal ideologies explicitly, China is experiencing a similar process but in a more subtle, and to some extent, unconscious form. Zheng (2020) suggests that being conservative has become the new social norm, and that the liberal or non-conservative position taken by some returnees collides with this new social norm. Through this research, Zheng (2020) suggests that this kind of collision is most common when returnees are employed in managing positions or in a family business. A similar argument is proposed by Zhuo (2021) in his attempt to analyse the paradox that exists in many companies. In his argument, while parents or employers hire returnees or send their children overseas with the aim of “modernizing/upgrading” their operation, employers and parents do not then actually accept the changes or methods proposed by their children or returnee employees. Even in failing businesses, Zhou (2021) observed that 60 percent of his sample refused to adapt to the proposed solutions.

To address the more general population of returnees, Chen (2021) argues that although workforce involution (内卷)³ has become normalized and accepted by the public, returnees tend to take strong stance against it. According to their research, over 90 percent of returnees claimed that they would not accept voluntary overtime (without pay) or voluntary salary reduction just because everyone else was doing so. While some returnees said they would do so to maintain employment, the majority stated that they would not stay in companies that force them to do this. Based on similar data and questionnaire about social events, Wang (2021) argued that while domestic graduates focus on doing what is “normal”, returnees tend to do what they think is “right”, even when normal is, as is not uncommon, not what would be deemed as right. (Zheng, 2020; Zhuo, 2021; Wang, 2021; J. Chen, 2021)

Capability to absorb

Within their past annual reports, the CCG has consistently argued for five years in a row that a “return boom” (海归潮) is gaining momentum as the combined effort of overseas push factors and domestic pull factors in China. In their 2020 report, the CCG claimed that even though European and North American countries are recovering from economic crisis, there are limited increases in employment and labour market availability. In combination with a tightening of immigration policies in these countries, overseas educated Chinese graduates are experiencing difficulties in seeking satisfying employment and advancing their career prospects. This political and economic situation is pushing

³ 内卷 loosely refers to the vicious competition among employees that resulted in employees doing the more work without getting a raise.

overseas educated Chinese graduates to return to China. On the other hand, as argued by the CCG, China has: stable economic development; a vast range of employment opportunities provided by “industrial transformation and promotion” of traditional industries and government approved and assisted emerging industries; and attraction policies and corresponding services that encourage overseas educated Chinese graduates to return to China (CCG, 2022). While some research, to certain extent, validates the argument provided by the CCG, there is a growing trend to advocate for a more comprehensive and realistic consideration of China’s capability to absorb returnees, in particular whether cities and industries located in those cities can provide appealing positions to attract returnees and economic incentives to retain returnees in these cities and industries.

Through their empirical research, Yang and Chen (2017) advised various levels of government to carefully consider the knowledge spillover effect and fully analyse the capability to accept and “absorb” returnees either at city or province level. Undertaking analysis of government documents and policy articles, they argued that the proclaimed benefit of attracting returnees is loosely conceptualised through the theoretical framework of MAR spillover and Jacobs spillover. Similar to the definition provided by Gerald (2001), these theories suggest the proximity of companies affects how knowledge is shared and transferred by individuals and stimulates innovation, development and growth in their respective companies. While the MAR spillover considers proximity of companies within the same industry, the Jacobs spillover considers the proximity of companies from various industries. Therefore, under this framework, by attracting returnees with advanced knowledge and skills to work in companies within a concentrated area, through knowledge spillover, proximate companies can also benefit from the advanced knowledge brought by these returnees. Yang and Chen (2017) suggest that this is the theoretical evidence for the rapid establishment of numerous industry parks and business incubators all over China in the most recent decade and how some attraction policies offer extra incentives for specific businesses.

Incubator However, Yang and Chen’s (2017) empirical research indicates that knowledge spillover does not happen naturally, as the government assumed. They argue that there are threshold numbers of returnees for spillover to happen and be effective, therefore any specific areas need to have the capabilities to absorb such numbers of returnees. This argument is further supported by Wang and Chang (2020), who suggest that the capability to absorb would directly influence whether spillover can positively affect economic growth or not. While Li (2022) and Wen and Chen (2022) further analyse the optimal diversity and mode of concentration of industry needed for spillover to be effective, some scholars choose to focus on unpacking the concept of absorption capability and reconsidering how attraction policies should be designed. Based on research on new entrepreneur businesses, Zhang and Wu (2020) state that while overseas educated returnees are effective in promoting innovation and growth, the effectiveness is correlated with, possibly bound by their respective position in the management hierarchy, arguing that the higher the returnees’ position, the

more likely it is that they would promote innovation. A similar argument was made by Li et al (2017) and their consideration of the promotion of social responsibility and ethics. This research found that returnees need to be in a high management position to be influential. Geographically, Yang and Chen (2017) indicate that the knowledge spillover effect is relatively more significant in developed areas such as the provinces of Guangdong (where Guangzhou and Shenzhen are located) and Zhenjiang (where Shanghai, Suzhou and Hangzhou are located) and much less significant in the Eastern, Middle and Western areas of China. Through their mixed method research of policy documents and interviews, Zhang et al (2021) suggest that the attraction policies published by the Shanxi government did not target the returnees needed for the region considering the biased industry structure in Shanxi, and that the policies were not designed on either the financial situation of local government or the actual needs of prospective returnees. Bo et al (2022) demonstrate that since Liaoning province is aiming for industry reformation, attraction policies should be tailored to returnees that are needed for such reformation. Non-specific attraction policies, or attraction policies that overlook other aspects of development are an ineffective use of resources. In the current Chinese context, efforts made by local governments and industries are essential to ensure that potential returnees are able to find jobs that can deliver benefits for the area, for both the industries and the returnees themselves. (Wen and Chen, 2022; Li, 2022; Wang and Chang, 2020; Yang and Chen, 2017; Bo et al., 2022; Zhang et al., 2021; Zhang and Wu, 2020)

2.1.3 Summary

Through national and local attraction policies, and their ongoing modification and addition, it is clear both national and local governments in China are determined to encourage returnees. They are trying to be considerate and focus on what the returnees want, providing residency, initial financial support and comprehensive incentives for emerging industries. Industries and education institutions are also expressing their encouragement of returnees with higher salaries, prioritised recruitment practices and “free upgrades” for overseas degrees. However, while these incentives look promising on the surface, there are issues in relation to implementation and mixed perceptions of their value and effectiveness from various stakeholders.

Firstly, while the more recent attraction policies promote targeted attraction for returnees with specific professions, the aggressive or conservative design of such policies can potentially misguide professional returnees, risking their chances of finding suitable employment. Local governments are clearly determined to win the talent civil war, but they need to foster a substantial economic and industrial environment for their targeted industries to grow and eventually be able to absorb and benefit from the attracted returnees. In terms of industries and businesses, their priorities and preferential offers toward returnees provide benefits for returnees. Yet, as I have illustrated in the

literature, when companies use returnees as “glorified translators” or reject their knowledge because they are “not grounded”, the priorities and preferential offers may well be highly disadvantageous for returnees.

Therefore, understanding more about how returnees perform in the Chinese workplace, whether there is significant mismatch among returnees and in what ways returnees differ to their domestically educated counterparts, could provide significant insights for policy design and recruitment advertisement, benefiting governments, businesses, returnees and domestic graduates alike. These questions are linked to one issue: transnational knowledge application.

2.2 Research relating to transnational knowledge application

In this section I explore the various reasons and different perspectives that have emerged from the extensive studies of, transnational knowledge application. This literature is important in underpinning the rationale for my research and its value. Since the early 1990s, alongside the expansion of transnational companies, numerous studies have been conducted on knowledge transfer with regards to establishing factories or company branches in China aimed at recreating their domestic success. Focusing on knowledge itself, scholars from the fields of linguistics, education and sociology have researched the re-contextualisation of knowledge in the Chinese context. In relation to the re-introduction of returnees, the focus on the impact of the knowledge they could bring, and Asia as method and its Japanese adaptation, have provided valuable theoretical and empirical discussions. In this section, I will present the relevant research in these fields and illustrate how these research findings and theories inform my theoretical framework.

2.2.1 Transnational knowledge transfer

In the early 21st century, research concerning knowledge in a globalised context focused heavily on aspects of business. In relation to technology, a significant number of studies have explored how transnational, trans-continent knowledge transfer can benefit technological advancement and development for innovation and production (Yli-Renko et al., 2001; Wang et al., 2009; Lunnan and Haugland, 2008; Liu et al., 2010). Concerning management and cooperation, the ways in which global and domestic market shares, company growth and position can be enhanced through transnational knowledge transfer has been widely studied (Varghese, 2008; Zhou et al., 2018; Squire

et al., 2009). Financially, profitability, productivity and the satisfaction of global consumers have been debated in the context of a global talent pool (Siler et al., 2003; Easterby-Smith et al., 2008; Inkpen and Tsang, 2005; Tsang et al., 2004). However, while these scholars all use the term knowledge transfer, it is defined and constructed differently across various studies and arguments.

The tangled web of knowledge transfer

The basic principle of knowledge transfer is rather straightforward: knowledge gained in context A being applied or shared in context B. In research that leans towards finance and management, context A would be the original company, and context B would be the domestic or overseas branches. On the other hand, research that is concerned with educational outcomes and curriculum design would designate higher education institutions as context A, and employment workplaces as context B. As the latter studies have gained recognition, the role of individuals has become essential to theoretical discussions and debates. A more comprehensive framework was developed by Lockett et al (2008), where institutions are the venues of interpretation, individuals the agents of dissemination and the (destination) workplace the context for application. Various adaptations of knowledge transfer are based on a similar model.

Inspired by studies that showcased some of the unexpected and unflavoursome results of transnational knowledge transfer, some scholars called for a shift in attention towards cultural embeddedness and difference, to understand the influence of both contexts and the underlying reasons for unwillingness to transfer or accept transferred knowledge (Javidan et al., 2005; Lyles and Salk, 2007; Kachra and White, 2008; Van Wijk et al., 2008). These scholars emphasised that learning, from institutions to individuals, is as important as transfer, from individuals to workplace, in understanding knowledge sharing in cross-border scenarios. They argued that learning is a subjective experience and process, therefore while knowledge is conceptualised as packaged content, each individual would bear their knowledge in personalised forms and shapes instead of in an objective unified form as designed in the curriculum. Riding the wave of rethinking the traditional construction of west and east, these scholars also argued for a closer examination of countries of origin and started to challenge some of the biased conceptions of knowledge transfer where they were considered as one-sided, one-way systems (Meng et al., 2016; Schwarzer et al., 2016; Wang et al., 2009; Buckley et al., 2009). Furthermore, they asserted that through application or sharing among colleagues, the bearers of knowledge would go through the processes of selection and codification in accordance with the context for application or sharing, and that these processes would influence the bearers of knowledge as well.

When researching the dynamics of transnational and trans-organizational knowledge transfer between what they would term transferor and recipient, some scholars pointed out that the complexity of the dynamics potentially lies beyond the closed workplace scenario. Some argued that for recipients,

learning is a process that is formed and structured by previously acquired knowledge and experience of knowledge acquisition, and that new learning does not simply pile up on top of existing knowledge, as suggest by some scholars before the spike of research on knowledge transfer (Inkpen, 2000; Inkpen, 2008; Van Wijk et al., 2008; Easterby-Smith et al., 2008; Ho and Wang, 2015; Buckley et al., 2009).

However, some of these scholars viewed knowledge transfer as a model mainly used by business and financial research, and perceive contexts and factors outside of workplace environment as supplementary and complementary dimensions for studying knowledge transfer. With the growing trend of internationalisation in higher education, knowledge transfer was adopted by some social science researchers as a tool to understand the mobility of prospective students, faculty, and programmes and disciplinary knowledge. A few researchers who are mainly concerned with the long-term mobility of faculty noticed that – though their research mostly studied the outcome of mobility either for countries or institutions as hosting and sending bodies – unexpected identity issues emerged among long-term mobile faculty members or researchers. In their research, despite supposed similarities or differences (either from one European country to another European country or to the US and Asian countries) in terms of social and cultural context, the knowledge faculty members bear or the knowledge they were to transfer became their “identity anchor” or “cultural markers” that formed their identity in an increasingly culturally/boundary ambiguous world (Brooks and Waters, 2011; Leung and Waters, 2017; Coey, 2018; van Oorschot, 2014; Bilecen and Faist, 2015; Jöns, 2018; Behle, 2014; Kim, 2010; Lerner, 2015; Mihut et al., 2016; Huang et al., 2014; Storme et al., 2017).

An increasing number of researchers observed that the characteristics of the transferor might be the answer to understanding the inconsistent results of knowledge transfer, and some researchers proceeded to explore the workplace-related dimensions of transferor and recipient, in particular in relation to seniority, age and diversity of experience (Suseno and Ratten, 2007; Dhanaraj et al., 2004; Thuc Anh et al., 2006; Didisse et al., 2018; Pak et al., 2015; Kwan and Cheung, 2006; Park et al., 2015; Becerra et al., 2008). Though providing insightful results in understanding how these dimensions relate to company performance, subjective perceptions and reflections were not illustrated because individuals were not the focus of these studies. Moreover, though there are a significant number of knowledge transfer or mobility studies that adopt qualitative methods, their focus mainly concerns individual performance or how these individuals facilitate knowledge sharing between either two companies or a company and the institution. Individuals themselves have rarely been the centre of the research. In the context of these research gaps, many researchers have called for an exploration of the subjective perceptions and conceptions of professionals in a globalised context, where boundaries of knowledge are no longer confined by companies and institutions, but instead become pools of knowledge where individuals acquire and apply differently and accordingly (Boussebaa, 2020; Boussebaa and Tienari, 2021; Greenwood et al., 2010; Boussebaa and Brown, 2017; Muzio et al.,

2013; Muzio et al., 2011; Faulconbridge and Muzio, 2012; Kirkpatrick et al., 2021; Seabrooke, 2014; Seabrooke and Tsingou, 2014).

An example: journalism in the US and in Japan

To further illustrate the meaning of pools of knowledge where individuals scope and pour differently and accordingly, the differences in journalism I provide an example based on Japan and the US. In 2009, the American reporter Jake Adelstein published his memoir *Tokyo Vice*. The book is about his experience as the first non-Japanese reporter to work for one of the largest and most influential newspapers in Japan, the Yomiuri Shimbun. Though the authenticity of the book's content is highly controversial, it nevertheless highlights the differences in conceptualising the role and reach of a reporter in varied contexts.

In his earlier career in Yomiuri Shimbun, Adelstein paints a picture that is imaginable for both American and Japanese people: as the first foreigner in a conservative, traditional company in an arguably xenophobic country, he was outcast, sidelined and discriminated against for doing what others dared not to do. However, as discussed by Inoue (2016) and Yamaguchi (2012), the definition and conceptualisation of a reporter can be very different between countries. Inoue (2016) explained that, if professions can be broken down into different skills and processes, a reporter's role in the US would consist of the skills of fieldwork (interviewing, television reporting), information gathering, analysis and subjective evaluation/perception. In Japan, however, the job of a reporter is to gather and verify information, and analyse and organise it into easily digestible points, so that the audience can comprehend a current event in under a minute. With this difference in mind, what Adelstein allegedly did (investigate the Yakuza and their connections), is not what a reporter (記者) would do in Japan.

Instead, Adelstein's approach would be considered to be the job of an investigation reporter (取材記者) in Japan. Therefore, if we are to imagine that the pool of knowledge for a reporter contains the knowledge of information collection, analysis and evaluation, then working as a reporter in the US would require the individual to scope all three components from the pool, yet if working as a reporter in Japan, the individual should only scope the information collection and analysis parts from the pool.

(Yamaguchi, 2012; Inoue, 2016)

2.2.2 Recontextualization

Based on the philosophy that knowledge is generated, constructed and distributed under specific contexts and is therefore influenced by them, the interaction and exchange of people, philosophies and

even texts across different socio-cultural contexts are believed to generate new meaning and diversify the understandings of the knowledge they bear. Hence, knowledge decontextualised from the point of knowledge production and recontextualised in a new one is usually transformed to greater or lesser degrees (Hordern, 2016; Bernstein, 2000; Huang, 2010; Amatani and Tanaka, 2019).

The definition and inclusion of context

It might seem redundant to emphasise the importance of context in a field of study termed recontextualization, but scholars perceive and focus on various conceptions of context in their research. However, context is not straightforward as it can be very narrowly or specifically defined. For example, there are more widely used aspects of context that are included in research such as the socio-cultural and political contexts or sometimes more narrower and specific conceptualisations of context such as academic communities and individuals, these are understood as targeted contexts. In research regarding recontextualization in professional and vocational learning, scholars have called for the establishment of an authentic context that contains realistic profession-related complexities, professional knowledge and an environment in which related skills can be applied. Similarly, research concerning the recontextualization of profession/occupation-specific curricula and teaching advocates for the inclusion of profession/occupation-related realistic problems and purposes of professional/occupational practices in the recontextualization process (Villarroel et al., 2018; Hordern, 2016; Taylor and Luitel, 2019; Radović et al., 2021; Roach et al., 2018).

For studies that take a more macro perspective, factors such as different local or international laws and regulations that were not necessarily framed by professional and disciplinary communities are used to draw out the limitation of recontextualization (Hordern, 2016; Lim and Apple, 2018; Hong et al., 2015; Wu et al., 2016; Jatuporn, 2018). Within studies more deeply related to recontextualization across different cultural/political entities, however, the conception and framing of context are more diversified. When researching intercultural learning by international students, as a mode of knowledge transfer, many scholars naturally see the host country as the targeted context. Some argue that interaction with local native speakers and culturally significant sites and concepts are the most important tasks for achieving meaningful intercultural learning, even going so far as identifying a lack of local friendship by overseas students a “failure”. (Cadd, 2012; Cubillos and Ilvento, 2018; Baker, 2015; Çiftçi and Karaman, 2018).

However, from a pragmatic standpoint and based on an analysis of these studies, some suggest that other international students, from the same country or not, act as an essential contextual influence in raising cultural awareness and learning outcomes for international students. (Kubota, 2016a; Csizér and Kontra, 2012; Schartner, 2016; Jackson and Ho, 2018; Jackson, 2020; Shiveley and Misco, 2015; Koyanagi, 2018; Beaven and Golubeva, 2016; Messelink et al., 2015) Compared with students from

the host country. Kubota (2016) and Schartner (2016) observed that communications and interactions with other international students were more meaningful for the students in their studies. In addition to the more explicit benefits, such as the fact that it is more accessible and easier to establish regular communication and interaction (Csizer and Kontra, 2012), other international students are considered to be an extra layer of context for more profound reasons. Schartner (2016) argues that due to shared unfamiliarity with the host culture and language, interaction within international students, especially when they are from various countries, generates a more complex and interactive socialisation that evolves from bilingual, intercultural interaction by engaging with “targeted” individuals and contexts, to multilingual and cross-cultural (or a series of intercultural) interactions by engaging with targeted and surrounding individuals and contexts alike. Emphasising that overseas education and fully relocated immigration should be understood and studied differently and separately, Jackson (2020) and Baker (2016) argue that targeted context should not be the sole focus, either from a research standpoint or a curriculum design standpoint. Setting aside efficiency on learning the targeted language and culture, in comparison, intercultural and multilingual interactions are held to be better for generating cultural awareness and a clearer and wider view of globalisation, and to some extent enhancing open-mindedness (Shiveley and Misco, 2015; Koyanagi, 2018). Furthermore, some research, either based on their results or limitations, suggests that inclusion of surrounding contexts (international students) as well as targeted contexts (the host country) can potentially help researchers to understand how individuals reflect and construct identity before, during and after their education (Jackson, 2020; Messelink et al., 2015; Beaven and Golubeva, 2016; Yonezawa et al., 2017; Gardner-McTaggart, 2016; Kubota, 2016b; Schartner, 2016)

The need for continuous recontextualization: an example from TNHE

As one of the earliest and largest Transnational Higher Education (TNHE) institutions in China, University of Nottingham’s Ningbo campus is very proud of their localised curriculum specially designed for the Chinese context. Even though some scholars were not particularly optimistic about recontextualising a very “British” curriculum, the end result was widely appraised among Chinese scholars. Zhang (2011) discussed the ways in which translated professional jargon and academic writing can sometimes be difficult to understand or comprehend due to the direct approach of translation. For example, informed consent is directly translated as 知情同意, which is hard for Chinese students to comprehend intuitively without extensive understanding. Through recontextualizing the texts, structure and delivery of the curriculum, Zhang argued that in comparison, Ningbo campus offers a much more friendly curriculum without compromising on its western origin. Similarly, Zhou (2012) describes how Ningbo campus’s curriculum reaches a decent balance between its western roots and its Chinese appropriateness, meaning that graduates from Ningbo campus had

the least need for readjustment during overseas exchange programmes or employment. Its success was recognised by local and national governments as well, evidenced in its award as an exemplary TNHE and granting approval for setting up the first primary school managed by TNHE in China (2015). However, partly due to the increasing conflict between China and western countries and changes in social perception, what was once an accepted and appraised contextualised curriculum is now being questioned and criticised. Alongside other TNHEs in China, Geng and Zhang (2021) evaluated the current components of political ideology embedded in TNHE's curricula as insufficient. Political ideology is a compulsory unit for every university in China, and while TNHEs cannot remove this unit from the curriculum, they have limited leniency on proportion and delivery. Geng and Zhang (2021) have cautioned that prospective students should be aware of the "Pan-ideologicalisation" (the overall implicit implementation of ideology) in TNHEs' curricula and have suggested that stricter rules and regulations should be applied to teaching political ideology in TNHEs (Geng and Zhang, 2021, p.33). Similar arguments are made by Wen (2021), who advocates that more attention should be paid to the core of the curriculum and foreign teachers, to ensure that they teach and nurture Chinese students in the right way and with the right mindset. Xu (2022) also proposes that school counsellors should pay closer attention to students' mindsets and potential changes in TNHEs due to "stress caused by conflicts of opinion in [the] post-pandemic era" (Xu, 2022, p. 122).

As demonstrated in these recent studies, despite the initial perceived success, recontextualization should be a continuous process instead of a one-time procedure. As China is still changing relatively rapidly, constant and continuous recontextualization of knowledge would be necessary for successful application, that is, if successful application is the desired outcome. (Zhang, 2011; Xu, 2022; Zhou, 2012; Geng and Zhang, 2021)

2.3 Asia as method: Japanese adaptation of *Aufheben*

As outlined by Chen Kuan-Hsing (2010), "Asia as method" is a theory aimed at the reconceptualization of knowledge for Asia and as involving the production that is rooted in and generated from within Asian culture. Loosely basing his ideas on the decolonisation of knowledge and the de-imperialisation of knowledge, Chen Kuan-Hsing (2010) argues that the current global systems of knowledge production, generate significant structural limitations for producing socially and culturally just knowledge in the Asian context. Western values and dominances from the processes of colonisation and imperialization are seen as embedded in the knowledge itself and as resulting in the colonisation of the mind (Chen, 2010).

While some Asian researchers in education and sociology recognise the value and insight of Chen's (2010) conceptualisation and its potential to generate new knowledge and reform social structure, this theory is yet to be adopted in much research. The level of decolonisation encouraged by Chen is

intellectually challenging (Takayama, 2014), demands a wide range of collaboration (Zhang, 2015) and, realistically, will require more than one generation of scholars to achieve it (Chen and Kenway, 2016). To conceptualise through the lens of transnational knowledge application, if knowledge transfer is about selecting and codifying the appropriate existing knowledge for the context, and recontextualization is about modifying and reforming existing knowledge according to the context, then Asia as Method would imply that there is custom-made knowledge for the context. While it could be the optimal solution, Asia as method is not as practical as other theories and practices. However, Chen (2010) also suggests that this will not necessarily involve completely new concepts and knowledge but that they would be adapted through a complex process of knowledge production. As a pragmatic adaptation or re-imagination to Asia as method, regional development studies envision the integration of knowledge in an integrated society.

Kurata's Youki: embracement of both worlds

揚棄(youki), also used interchangeably by Japanese scholars as 止揚(shiyou), is a concept mainly derived from Hegel's philosophy of Aufheben. The definition of youki can be loosely translated as advancement and development through the internal succession of positive aspects and discardment of negative or unnecessary aspects. (Tosaka, 1930)

When US battleships arrived at Edo Bay in 1853 with the request of a trade treaty and undisguised display of firepower that far exceeded Japanese technology at that time, some conservative Japanese lords feared for the unavoidable consequence of colonisation. Some of the more liberal lords who had experienced or in contact with the western world, however, believed Japan should take the initiative should they want to avoid colonisation. Kawano (1964) explain that lords and politicians at that time believed that colonisation can only take place between advanced and modernised country and less developed less advanced country. Therefore, a wise solution would be to rapidly modernise and reform Japan in a way that Japanese people see fit by actively absorbing western knowledge and combining it with Japanese knowledge and culture. Supported by the later established Meiji government, western philosophies poured into Japan alongside weapons and knowledges, sparking discussion and differing perspectives among academics across the country, even reaching China around late 19th century to early 20th century.⁴ However, Mitani (2021) and Tanaga (2001) argue that the some Japanese academics and politicians were too eager to introduce western knowledge and philosophies into Japan, and such aggressive approach and unnatural pace of introduction without much process of selection sparked extensive philosophical debates regarding how to understand,

⁴ 揚棄(youki) was one of the earliest Japanese-made Chinese words (Wasei-kango) that was reverse imported into China. Many Chinese phrases or words used in modern Chinese were originally combined and used in Japan from the Meiji restoration period onwards, such as philosophy 哲學 (哲 is wisdom and 学 is studies), police 警察 and phone 電話 (电 is electricity and 话 is word, conversation).

interpret, accept and adapt these western knowledge and technologies. Prior to the Meiji restoration, Japanese society was shaped by Edo Neo Confucianism for more than five centuries, and contemporary scholars argue that it was, and still is, one of the core philosophies of Japan because it inspired the creation of Yamato spirit and Bushido (Code of warriors) (Mitani, 2021; Tanaga, 2001; Tosaka, 1930; Okada, 2008; Tsuchida, 2014). For supporters of Edo Neo Confucianism and scholars who opposed the ‘western intrusion’, this philosophy was deemed to be the guardian of Japanese culture and knowledge and was believed play a role in preventing the infusion of Christianity into Japan (Endo, 2005; McNally, 2015; Odakura, 2011). On the other hand, people who welcomed western knowledge and technology were eager to demonstrate their reception and acceptance, wanting to be Europeanised themselves and more widely in society, to the extent that some academics criticized their behaviour and philosophies as “book supremacism” (書物至上主義) (Mauchi, 2019, p. 11) or “book dependentism” (書物依頼主義) (Iwashita, 2015, p.79), namely an overemphasis on the correctness and absolute superiority of western books.

At the time, in the context of conflicting debates with contradictory ideologies, and as both critique and suggestion, Hyakuzō Kurata (倉田 百三), an influential writer who specialised in religious youth subjects, redefined youki in his book “Students and Reading” (1953). Simultaneously, various other scholars advocated shiyou/youki as a guideline for perceiving and acquiring western knowledge for individual and social development and advancement, yet Kurata looked at youki from a slightly different rationale. He wrote that it is “lazy” to learn without contrasting new knowledge and underlying ideology with existing ones. Using examples of professional knowledge, he asked his students to think about the moral issues associated with medical knowledge, the social and justice issues with law knowledge and national/international issues with military knowledge. Without understanding and acceptance of associated ideology, a person’s judgement, action and reaction would not be coherent and self-initiated. If one practices medical knowledge without knowing what it means to be a doctor – what they should stand for, why they are doing what they do and how they want to do it – that individual is no better than the people who adopt book suprematism and book dependentism. Unlike scholars who advocated shiyo and youki for advancement and development in terms of knowledge, Kurata emphasised youki for the acknowledgement of self-identity, character construction and life orientation, whereas knowledge and books should be considered as nutrients, mirrors for reflection and bridges for connecting people’s thoughts. This idea of youki relates to learning outside knowledge (western) and inside knowledge (eastern) objectively and separately, and youki subjectively and unitedly. The modern adaptation of youki or shiyo in the form of regional development studies applies the same ideology in geographical area instead of the individual, perceiving overseas educated Japanese returnees as outside knowledge, and requiring the cooperation of returnees and locally educated Japanese to form collectively acceptable and representative forms of knowledge for specific professions. Two of the more promising projects that draw upon this approach

are the collaborative generation of “neo agriculture” in Shizuoka province and transnational sustainable fishery in Hokkaido.

The rejuvenation of the ageing city: the case of Hokkaido

Similar to many developed countries, Japan is experiencing demographic challenges including the concentration of youth in big cities and an ageing population in smaller cities. However, inspired by research that suggests returnees and foreigners prefer smaller cities for their slower pace of life (Shido, 2004) and richer cultural embeddedness and conservation (Toyama, 2008), Tokai University’s Sapporo campus initiated one of their first projects regarding the integration of knowledge and society. Initially the projects were about establishing infrastructure and an environment which could facilitate knowledge integration with relocated foreigners and semi-retired returnees.⁵ Cities in the province of Hokkaido that collaborated with Tokai University were some of the earliest cities in Japan to implement hometown tax (故郷税), where residents living in urban areas can redirect their tax to their hometown in exchange for local commodities or a tax reduction. When designing local commodities for hometown taxpayers, researchers from Tokai University, local communities and returnees/foreigners managed to collaborate and produce some of the most unique and regionally representative products on the market to date (Sato and Johnson, 2021). Their ideas of bringing together modern thinking with traditional values, while prioritising regional identity over economic efficiency, formed the basic principle of a new field of regional development studies (地域創造学科)⁶ and one which is believed to hold the potential to be one of the most important disciplines for Japan in the future (Litaka et al., 2021; Yamashita, 2021; Katoh, 2021)

As a rather young field of study, it does not have a sizeable number of studies and discussion to support its validity and theoretical robustness. However, it does provide new possibilities and insights for embracing knowledge and people on a globalised scale. It envisions an integrated form of society where foreigners and returnees do not need to “fit in” but are co-creators of society. Foreign knowledge and people would not be treated as “Aliens”⁷, but as the cornerstones and building blocks of future society. As more foreign knowledge and individuals participate in the establishment of this new society, it then becomes easier for additional knowledge and globalised citizens to enter and take part in this constantly developing society (Yoshimoto, 2021; Hirota, 2021). These studies provide

⁵ Returnees in their thirties or forties willing to rebuild their hometown through investment or by relocating their businesses. [possibly here you could write Returnees aged between 30 and 50 years]

⁶ The course was first introduced in April 2022 for postgraduates only.

⁷ In official documents and signs (such as airports), foreigners are called Aliens and Gaijin (外人, meaning outsiders) socially. Miyoshima (2018) and Matsutake (2020) believe that such a translation implicitly excludes foreigners from fully integrating in and contributing to Japanese society.

insights on how different systems of knowledge can be integrated as a process of collective identity formation.

2.4 Theoretical adaptations

Based on Kurata's (1953) ideology and the aforementioned theories and my own research data, I go on to propose my own conception – the youki of transnational knowledge – to describe what I believe I saw in my data: namely, the continuous acquisition, deconstruction and reformation of knowledge from both domestic and overseas sources that informs and is formed by the application of knowledge in specific contexts and their influence on the construction of individual identities. This approach looks at the contextual influences and differences that individuals experience prior to and during education and employment, the knowledge they then choose or are required to apply in the workplace, and how these choices influence their use of knowledge and the construction of identity, or how they choose or are compelled to apply knowledge based on the identity they want, or that perceived as important/necessary by employer, clients, colleagues, friends and families.

From a practical perspective, the original idea of youki was described as an action and process that, either actively and consciously or passively and unconsciously, reforms and reconstructs individual's or society's knowledge for a more holistic self (Tosaka, 1930; Katoh, 2021; Kurata, 1953). Much like how participants 'youki-ed' their acquired knowledge with the consideration of Chinese contexts and identity, my theory, the youki of transnational knowledge, 'youki-ed' existing research and theories with the consideration of my research question and collected data. The youki of transnational knowledge, centred around Kurata's idea of youki, describes the internalisation and application of overseas knowledge and domestic knowledge as part of the process of identity formation, and in turn knowledge application is guided by individual's process of identity formation. However, as participants argued that the current Chinese context is very similar to the polarised and hawkish situation portrayed by some studies (Byun et al., 2021; Pang et al., 2021; Gueorguiev, 2022), some of the participants' actions were not only guided by their identity, but were also limited or forced by perceived stereotypes about identity or the identity they want to be perceived as. They felt the need to adapt certain behaviours or express certain ideologies to either maintain their identity or alter their identity. For example, if a participant is trying to clearly express their identity as an overseas returnee, they frequently adopt English words in their daily communications – this is perceived to be a stereotypical action of overseas returnees; at the same time, a returnee would not want to be seen eating street food, as the stereotype of an overseas returnee reflects the idea that they only dine at fancy western restaurants. Being seen eating street food might result in others doubting their

authenticity as an overseas returnee. Thus, stereotypes are double-edged swords that can quickly build up or dismantle a person's perceived identity.

Based on the argument put forward by participants and demonstrated in the fragmented follow-up interviews which are described in chapter 8, their own identities perceived by participants' employers, family members or the society in general could be relatively stereotypical, a phenomenon that is similar to that described by Goffman's theory of dramaturgy (1951).

This adapted version of youki is then incorporated with theories related to knowledge structure and recontextualization. Loosely based on Bernstein's theory on knowledge structure (1999) and various theories on reformation and reconstruction of knowledge for transnational application (Burgers and Touburg, 2013; Pak et al., 2015; Chinchilla-Rodríguez et al., 2012), the youki of transnational knowledge considers an individual's reformation and reconstruction of their knowledge through their perception, acquisition and application of knowledge. Utilising biographical data, the youki of transnational knowledge is able to explore the long-term influence of certain factors and the process and development of knowledge perception, acquisition and application as it becomes integrated into individuals' ways of being and their identity. Hence, knowledge acquisition and transfer are not just an end result distinctive from the student. The youki of transnational knowledge can provide insights into the part of the process of identity formation that integrates education and knowledge encountered throughout someone's journey as a domestic student or an overseas student returned as domestic professional.

Building on the organisational influences discussed in various studies (Meng et al., 2016; Saarela et al., 2015; Walsh, 2015), the youki of transnational knowledge takes into account these different layers of context and their influence on knowledge and identity. In terms of the understanding of knowledge, compared to some of the theories on knowledge transfer, the youki of transnational knowledge focuses more on the differences between the knowledge structure of what is seemingly the same profession/occupation, and the contextual factors that have contributed to these differences.

With regards to context, I agree with Jackson (2020), Baker (2019) and Koyanagi (2018) that contexts are multi-layered, are culturally and politically embedded and should not be pre-determined solely by researchers. However, it should be emphasised that in this theory, layers of context are determined by participants subjectively instead of objectively as some of the studies would suggest, as it relates to how participants perceive that their identity is influenced and formed. Such subjective determination of context provides insight into the detail and rationale of identity formation.

Chapter 3: Methodology

This research adopts a comparative case study approach, focusing on four groups of individuals: UK educated IT employees, Chinese educated IT employees, UK educated law employees and Chinese educated law employees who are currently working in China. When conducting research relating to professions, as I was, one needs to consider the rapid but diversified economic development across these professions and industries and the variation of this in different regions of China. Therefore, like others before me, I found that qualitative research needs professionals as participants because they need to have profession-specific or industry-specific knowledge, skills and experience (Stening and Zhang, 2007; Zhou and Nunes, 2013). In addition, as I was exploring the complexity of learned knowledge and the processes involved in using that knowledge in work-based settings, it was apparent that individuals' experiences were complex, and clarification and further discussion were needed to gain greater clarity and accuracy from them. Consequently, conducting qualitative research in China that involves a particular industry or profession requires a contextualised methodology that is culturally sensitive, industrial/professional-sensitive and era-sensitive (Hsiung, 2015). The data consists of 43 life grid interviews, a method which is described below, and follow-up interviews through an adapted method of the semi-structured interview. The data was then inductively coded using a thematic analysis approach under the overarching theoretical framework. This chapter aims to explain the research approach, theoretical considerations and methodological design.

3.1 Research approach

My research concerns a comparison of Chinese graduates from UK and Chinese universities, focusing on the subjective perspectives of how their experiences of education affect their application of knowledge in employment and career development in the Chinese employment context.

Epistemologically, this research adopts the constructivist perspective, arguing that learning of knowledge involves cultural and social interactions of individuals and communities. Prior experience, understandings and changes of context continuously influence how individuals learn and re-learn their acquired knowledge (Fosnot, 2013; Chuang, 2021; Huang, 2002). Therefore, methodologically, this research aims to generate personal perceptions and interpretations of knowledge and how these develop across cultural, historical and situational contexts.

3.1.1 Theoretical perspective and framework

The question that emerged from my personal experience, and that inspired me to develop this research is: “What happens to UK educated Chinese returnees when they return home and enter the workplace?” This question also informed my master’s research on global talent mobility and knowledge transfer. However, following this research and further reading, I realised that my interest lies in individuals and their perception and interpretation of knowledge; undertaking research in this area has changed my own perspective on the meaning of transnational knowledge application and how should research and think about it. Following Crotty’s (1998) interpretation, epistemologically this research adopts a constructivist approach that suggests meanings are constructed and perceived individually and socially (Troudi, 2010). Thus, as defined in this research, meanings are contingent upon experience and interactions, and the meanings generated here are based upon participants’ and my own experiences and thoughts, and the interactions between participants and with myself, framed by chosen theoretical adaptations and research questions. Consequently, they could be interpreted differently by others. An interpretivist approach was suitable for my methodology as I aimed to generate interpretations based upon the considerations of participants’ contextual situations and influences. As explained above in the section on theoretical adaptations, the centre of my theoretical framework is Kurata’s ideology of knowledge construction, *youki*, underpinned by the concept of recontextualization and the concepts and ideas around different forms of knowledge which originated from Bernstein (2000), Winch (2013) and Asia as method originally proposed by Kuan-Hsing Chen (2012). Some theories of knowledge transfer bear the ideologies that suggest knowledge is objectively created and can therefore be carried and transferred, which contradicts the perspective and approach adopted in this research. However, transnational research findings that call for further comparative research into different disciplines and educational backgrounds and their respective impact on knowledge application is echoed in this research. Through the lens of adapted theories of recontextualization, the influence of personal situation and differences of professional structural context can be captured in generating individually recontextualised forms of knowledge as well as the process of recontextualization across two professions and educational backgrounds. Theoretical and methodological considerations for adapted versions of Asia as method, such as regional development studies in Japan, have also helped to frame the research questions and methods used in this research.

3.1.2 Research questions

This research aims to develop an understanding of the value of UK and Chinese undergraduate education for those now working in the law and ICT fields of employment in China. It has sought to develop these insights by comparing: a) the subjective perspectives of Chinese graduates who have studied in the UK and China on their choice of educational trajectory; b) their experience of education

and learning whilst at university; c) their views on how this education affected their choice of employment and their career development: and, d) their understanding of how they have applied and developed knowledge. In line with the theoretical approach outlined in Chapter 2 and the notion of Youki involved, this approach is designed to gain a more holistic understanding of the process of transnational knowledge application as a feature of human and career development. These were the questions guiding my research.

1. What factors influenced participants' educational choices with regard to deciding to study in the UK or China and in choosing their degrees and how did they view their choices (then and retrospectively)?
2. What were participants' perspectives on the experience of learning at their universities and how did they value the knowledge they acquired (then and retrospectively)?
3. What factors influenced the choices they made in seeking employment. How do they feel about the choices they made?
4. How do participants understand and apply their acquired knowledge?
 - a. How did participants perceive their acquired knowledge upon returning?
 - b. How did participants seek employment?
 - c. How do participants apply their knowledge? d. From participants' perspectives, what are the obstacles to applying knowledge and what factors shape these obstacles?
5. How does application of knowledge influence participants as individuals and professionals?
 - a. How do participants position themselves in the Chinese context professionally and socially?
 - b. How do participants' positions influence their application of knowledge?
 - c. How does participants' application of knowledge influence their position?
 - d. What are participants' expectations, visions and plans for the future?

3.2 Research design and data collection

With regard to methods for comparative research, various scholars have warned about the creation of unnecessary boundaries. In the case of my research, these relate to national and professional boundaries. These scholars argue that the adoption of a comparative approach for transnational

research might, unconsciously and prematurely, follow the variable-oriented ideology of analysis to generate a simplified “compare and contrast” result.

The notion of variable-oriented comparative study is not problematic per se, but for qualitative research it bears the risk of separating the variables which emerge from the individual, and all other variables associated with that individual, eventually negating the analysis of the individual as a whole. (Babbie, 2021; Falzon, 2012). Under such an analysis, variables are more likely to be associated with the broader boundaries of research subjects, namely countries and professions, instead of individuals themselves. For example, without a comprehensive understanding of the participants, one possible variable for contextual adjustment, “ability to socialise”, could be “locked” in association with educational background, “Chinese education grooms these types of abilities,” or professional characteristics, “compared to IT participants, lawyer participants would understandably have more chance to socialise”. Furthermore, such an analysis might eliminate possibilities for more detailed intranational analysis in the case of transnational comparison, or intra-professional analysis in the case of trans-professional comparison (Bartlett and Vavrus, 2017; Phillips and Schweisfurth, 2021). Though some methodologists believe cases should be bounded either by time, activities or context (Chan and Chan, 2015; Levitt et al., 2018; Rihoux, 2013), qualitative researchers argue that it would be unwise to pre-set a boundary or boundaries that could limit the understandings of influences across boundaries. They believe circumstantial and contextual understandings and their changes when carried across various “sites” and time would have significant value in generating information and knowledge regarding contextualised transformation (Kirchherr and Charles, 2018; Reddy, 2015). Based on these discussions, scholars such as Carney (2009, 2012), Maxwell (2013) and Bray et al. (2014) suggest the use of anthropological-like methods to achieve ‘tracing’ instead of ‘looking at’ individuals for a more comprehensive and interconnected analysis. (Liu and Bray, 2020; Mangset et al., 2017)

To avoid these aforementioned issues, a data collection method that enables “tracing”, and an inductive method for data analysis that avoids unnecessary boundaries, are both needed for this research. Among other potential ethnographic approaches and methods such as multi-sited ethnography and longitudinal interviews, I suggest that the combination of life grid interviews and follow-up semi-structured interviews for my data collection, and thematic analysis for data analysis, are the most appropriate and realistic choices for my research.

3.2.1 Life grids

Since this research aims to explore the influence of historical as well as current situations, narrative-based retrospective and biographical data and corresponding data collection methods are essential. The life grid is adopted for this research to meet these methodological aims. Initially used by some scholars to collect historical information (Green et al., 1996; Blane et al., 1999; Holland et al., 2000), life grids have since been used by scholars in education, medicine and psychology to collect narrative-based data that aims to explore individual behaviours, decision-making processes and experiences (Rowland et al., n.d.; Abbas et al., 2013; Crawford and Wilkinson, 2019; Bell, 2005; Ballal et al., 2020; Baldwin et al., 2019). To explore a method that collects retrospective data, Berney and Blane (2003) exemplified the advantages of life grids through a study of dementia among a UK population over the age of 60.

	<u>External</u>	<u>Family</u>	<u>Residential</u>	<u>Occupational</u>
1925			6 Oak Street, N16	
	General strike	Brother born		
1935				
	War starts	Sister married		Messenger, Newell's
			Army- various residences	Army- Private
1945	War ends			
		Married	42 Chapel Terrace, N16	Turner, Armstrong's
		Son born	10 Effra Road, N16	Foreman, Armstrong's
1955	Suez crisis			
		Father died		Manager, Jenner's
		Daughter born	15 Ascot Drive, W10	
	Kennedy shot	Mother died		
1965				Self-employed

Figure 1: Berney and Blane's life grid for dementia

As shown in Figure 1, the Y axis lists the timeline, and the X axis lists the different aspects of life. While conventional methods such as life history interviews do provide rich and narrative-based data,

they can be time consuming, lacking in focus and richness of data, and reliant on the researchers' interviewing skills and technique (Blane, 1996; Lapan et al., 2012; Walster, 2011; Abbas and Mclean, n.d.). Compared with other methods that collect historical data, life grids focus on the specific aspects of life that are related to the research question, an approach that is more practical without losing data. As illustrated in Figure 1, Berney and Blane were able to see if interviewees could recall key moments of their life, and each interview only lasted around 15 minutes. In terms of seeking specific retrospective data, Berney and Blane (2003) believe that the life grid is better than other methods in that it aids recall without bias. Furthermore, as the life grid is typically filled in by the interviewer and interviewee together, it facilitates discussion and interaction between them and generates better interviewee engagement and relationship building (Ballal et al., 2020; Crawford and Wilkinson, 2019), and in Berney and Blane's case helped them to ask difficult questions such as those about war and death.

Based on my research questions and theoretical framework, the life grid used in this research was adapted from the version development by Abbas et al. (2013). Figure 2 shows the template of my life grid sheet.

Part.1 Life Grid

	family	Micro geo soci	Macro geo soci	education	work	Social/leisu re/personal relation
Pre school						
Primary school						
Middle						
high						
Potential 2.5						
undergrad						
Before master						
Master/Ph D						
Upon return						
current						

Part.2 Daily routine

Figure 2: Life grid sheet template

One of the key features and advantages of the life grid is the collaborative mapping and filling of the grids by researchers and participants. By deciding the separation of timeline and categories of contextual dimensions collaboratively, stages of change and development can be better understood and analysed by participants as they might not have considered it as thoroughly and cognitively before, and historical events can be allocated and associated with specific contexts (Kolar et al., 2015; Schubring et al., 2019). Kolar et al.'s (2015) research asked participants to generate timelines using their own preferences, and three patterns emerged: the list-like timeline, the continuous timeline and some adopted a hybrid version of the two. The list-like timeline generated chronologically specific information and interconnections and presented clearer indications of their chronic-situated feelings, namely the feelings they experienced in that specific time instead of a current interpretation of feelings through a retrospective lens. For example, when recalling the incident of dropping an ice cream at the age of five, a chronic-situated feeling would mean that the individual would substitute themselves to their five-year-old mindset and recollect what they would feel instead of interpret what

their feelings would be from the current mindset. These researchers argue that the list-like timeline is, to some extent, better suited to enquiring about time and event-specific recollections, despite what their current thoughts and feelings are about those times and events, whereas the continuous timeline is more appropriate for generating individual analyses based on participants' current mindsets.

However, some scholars have argued that the collection of retrospective data raises the issue of bias and inaccuracy (Holland et al., 2000; Baldwin et al., 2019; Parry et al., 1999), and some methodological research studies even specific tendencies towards bias (Colombo et al., 2020). As a potential solution to tackle recall bias and individual bias, Schubring et al. (2014, 2019) showcased how to minimise the effect of bias by setting out categories of situational/contextual dimension. In their argument, individuals might have a false sense of correlation regarding their past health status with their behaviour. For example, a participant could believe that their enhanced sleep quality was attributable to a certain supplement they took at the time, but by setting out research-oriented dimensions, researchers can establish more scientifically sound correlations, such as an increased workout routine or changes in work that generated less stress.

Similar to the modifications adopted by Kolar et al. (2015) and Schubring et al. (2014, 2019), my adaptation of the life grid utilises a list-like timeline and research-oriented dimensions that were co-created with participants of this research. As shown in Appendix 1 (the original life grid) and Appendix 2 (the modified life grid), the timeline is initially separated by different stages of education. However, throughout the interviews and adopting participants' suggestions, milestones such as "2.5/alternative education", "placement/internship" and "upon return" were added. Among both the UK educated and Chinese educated participants, eight undertook a foundation course and A level patch course⁸ either in China or in the UK, which gave them initial feelings about what a "British" education experience might be like, and became a factor in determining their views about what could be learned in a UK university and whether or not they would like to attend a UK university. The milestones "placement/internship" and "upon return" were added following suggestions from the first five participants. They proposed that placement and internship were the first time they had attempted to apply their knowledge and noticed what gaps needed to be filled. This represents the participants' initial, first-hand understanding of what knowledge is worthy of acquisition. For UK educated participants, "upon return" is the time when they started to question their overall knowledge and skillset, determining whether they needed further education before returning and exploring what additional knowledge was acquirable from a postgraduate degree.

Some researchers argue that one of the most significant benefits of using life grids or similar qualitative tools is the ability to collect sensitive or "blind spot" data. By filling the paper, writing on

⁸ A summer camp type of course that allows participants to briefly experience an A level curriculum, pedagogy and examination, with some including mock interviews for UK universities.

boards or selecting prepared keywords, difficult events or previously unthought of events can be drawn out more easily. In Sexton and Bauermeisters' (2021) research, potentially sensitive topics regarding sexuality and sexual orientation were discussed frankly. They suggest that the life grid tool provided more control for the participants, allowing them to discuss these issues in their own pace and with comfort. Similarly, the use of prepared pictures and writing instead of talking eased participants into confronting or managing sensitive issues. Furthermore, some suggest that by switching the focus away from participants themselves to tasks, such as selecting pictures that match their physical condition instead of stating their own physical condition, or writing down their detailed daily consumption instead of asking about an eating disorder diagnosis, researchers can gain more focused and specific information rather than limited information due to participants' reluctance to talk about embarrassing or unpleasant topics (Orr and Phoenix, 2015; Papathomas and Lavalley, 2006).

In my own research, although no extra tools such as pictures were used, the benefits of life grid were significantly validated as my participants felt comfortable to talk candidly about their failures, disappointments and compromises. With the list-like timeline design, participants confirmed that they were able to talk about their past failures with relative ease, because for example, "I can talk about the mistakes [the] 20-year-old me made, not the mistakes I make [now] ... it is less shameful and not that embarrassing this way" (The dragon slayer, Overseas IT). However, since the data collection phrase took place during the Covid-19 pandemic, face-to-face interviews were not possible to conduct and the benefits generated by co-writing were potentially compromised. The interviews mostly took place through online meeting venues including WeChat, QQ, Zoom and Google Meet. None of the interviews were finished in one sitting due to time zone differences and continual interruptions during the early stages of working from home. For all participants, however, I managed to utilise Google Docs or shared access to Microsoft word to co-write the life grids with them in multiple sittings, or at least in the last life grid interview with each participant.

Even though no face-to-face interviewing was undertaken, it was fortunate that the life grid interview itself can be very useful for establishing a friendly participant-researcher relationship. Some researchers suggest that due to relatively long exposure, the nature of mutual collaboration and sufficient control on the participant's side, researchers and participants can understand and see each other as warm, amiable figures rather than cold, distance individuals in an one off encounter, generating a welcoming environment that can be especially helpful for research with marginalised or cautious/sensitive groups, namely groups of individuals that are sensitive to issues of privacy and potential personal harm (Abbas et al., 2013; Crawford and Wilkinson, 2019; Monico et al., 2020; Sexton Topper and Bauermeister, 2021). Half of my participants are lawyers, and though they are not all vigilant in nature, due to the potential sensitivity of information in their current work, some were very careful about what to share and my research ethics. Through multiple instances of contact, either as interviews or informal conversation, most of them became very trusting of my handling of sensitive

information about their current work and assurances of anonymity. The friendships I established with my participants also significantly enhanced the practicality and significance of the follow-up interviews, which in turn were essential to understanding knowledge application with regard to their respective professions.

3.2.2 Follow-up semi-structured interviews

For research that explores the influence of events on the individual, especially in the case where the influence is more continuous than one-off in nature, informal and sequential interviews are preferred over formal and singular interviews. For example, in their research on Chinese students in Japan and their perceptions of social position after various experiences, Coates (2015a, 2019) and Coates et al. (2018) argue that interviews should be informal and sequential for two reasons. The first reason is that influences from these experiences are ongoing: participants are constantly constructing and reconstructing their conceptions and perceptions as events develop, therefore the influence of changing events and environments on younger individuals who are still developing their perceptions of the world and the society in which they live cannot be captured in a single interview. Secondly, as some of the answers sought were perceived by his Chinese participants as political stance defining and identity-related (do they see themselves as accepted by and accepting of Japanese society and ideologies), participants had been too cautious and withdrawn within formal and singular interviews. Conversely, in informal and sequential settings, where participants understood that they were not giving definitive answers that could be used to define their political stance or identity, participants were much more comfortable talking about their current feelings and thoughts. Similar theoretical underpinnings and practices can be found in research conducted in Hong Kong around 2014 and 2019, where in the event of long-lasting and unpredictable social and structural changes, similar methods were adopted to trace and track developments in individual perceptions and conceptions (Jackson et al., 2017; Ho, Jackson and Lam, 2018; Chow et al., 2020; Niedbalski, 2020; Gondwe, 2020; Ho, Jackson and Kong, 2018; Zhang and Gu, 2022a). In these studies, alongside informal and sequential interviews, online forum/group chat ethnography (Dyrel and Poppi, 2021) and graffiti as proxy for communication (Richards, 2020) were adopted as alternative methods in the collection of qualitative data. (Coates, 2019b; Coates, 2015b; Coates, 2015a; Coates, 2019a; Mostafanezhad et al., 2018)

Though different in nature, social and industrial changes in China are very much ongoing and significant enough to justify the use of informal and sequential interviewing, as proposed by the aforementioned research. As explained in the contextual background in this thesis, various forms of

sequential and unpredictable events affect personal and professional life in this unique moment in time. As of May 2022, lockdowns were still taking place in various cities in China for pandemic containment purposes, in addition to conflicts between China and various countries over trading and diplomatic issues that generate both internal and external influences. With regard to industry and professions, recent developments such as new rules for game publishing permits and restrictions on lawyers' contingency fees are drastically changing professional prospects and influencing how participants perceive and apply professional knowledge. Informal and sequential interviews allowed me to capture how participants' perceptions and practices adapt to these ongoing changes.

One of the greatest challenges encountered in this research design was working outside the disciplines and professions that I am familiar with and have relevant knowledge about. Since this research involves knowledge acquisition and knowledge application in professional settings, a significant proportion of the data collected through the life grids contains jargon, industry phenomena and events. Thus, the follow-up interviews served an additional purpose enabling participants to clarify any potential misunderstandings I might have had after my own research of the jargon and events mentioned in the life grids. Using a similar type of informal and sequential interviews, Brumann (2012, 2020) faced different issues in his research. Instead of profession-related misunderstandings and the need for clarification, his research had culture-related misunderstandings and clarificatory requirements as his study concerns resident identity and perceptions about the direction of development in Kyoto city. As one of the most historically and culturally important cities in Japan, Kyoto citizens are often labelled as arrogant and conservative people that relay and depend on the city's past glory, and the city of Kyoto is stereotyped by other Japanese to hold on to their existing structure such as the geisha district and denies any development. Brumann adopted a method used by Takeyama (2011) that loosely translates as distance focus groups (Brumann, 2012; Brumann, 2020). Initially Takeyama (2011) aimed to conduct focus groups among women in mizu shobai (the water trade, a purposely vague term that includes but is not limited to bars, strip clubs and paid companions), but due to considerations of anonymity and the extra time needed to analyse psychological meanings within participants' responses, Takeyama (2011) asked participants to explain and interpret quotes from other participants to generate a more comprehensive and accurate understanding of industry-specific phenomena. Adopting this method, Brumann (2020) engaged with participants in various industries in Kyoto and generated consensus on the cultural understandings and rationales behind self-identity as Kyotojin (Kyoto-er, similar to how a citizen in New York can be different from people who identify themselves as New Yorkers) and ways of imagining and envisaging the city. As the pandemic has significantly affected fieldwork for many researchers, Dales et al. (2021) conducted focus groups in a similar fashion due to restrictions on group gathering and an inability to find times suitable for all participants as they were adjusting to working from home. However, they found that this alternative method generated deeper discussions about the definition of

intimacy and uncovered negative perceptions about the conceptualisation of “good” intimacy, a finding they believe might not have surfaced through their original method (Dales et al., 2021). Other research that adopts a similar method was based upon different rationales. Gagne’s (2018;2020) research required the use of focus groups due to the design and theoretical framework of their research project, but the power dynamics between participants, namely employers and employees would have potentially endangered the amount and trustworthiness of the data collected through a normal focus group with such participants. Through non-simultaneous focus groups, where the researcher acted as medium through which to pass information and discussion between participants, Gagne was able to gain different perspectives on the same event without risking ethical issues and sincerity. Regarding research on young gay Chinese immigrants in Canada, Huang and Fang (2019) adopted a similar method to generate understandings about the intersectional identities of their participants(Huang and Fang, 2019).

The issues raised in the aforementioned research are also core issues that I needed to address in my research: personal unfamiliarity with professional knowledge and industry-specific phenomena, ethical considerations of anonymity and sensitive information, restrictions due to legal reasons and geographical distance, potential power dynamics between participants as employers and employees or as competitors, and the intersectional nature of participants’ identities. Orthodox semi-structured interviews and focus groups cannot address these issues, but informal sequential interviews that act as distance focus groups can mitigate the negative influences and, in practice, generate comprehensive understandings as well as unexpected findings. All of my participants work in top tier companies and firms in China, but the companies and firms they work for have different industrial positions. With regard to the same event or phenomenon, what one participant understood as an industry/profession norm or social/national norm might provide new perspectives to participants in other firms or cities. As a simple example, among participants from Guangdong or Zhejiang province, they share the basic social understanding that birthday party participants share the costs to treat the individual whose birthday it is; participants from Northern parts of China, however, believe that the polite thing to do is let the birthday individual pay for the party as an expression of generosity, a privilege for their birthday. Professionally, the gaming industry is accustomed to splitting the payment in a few instalments, whereas other IT industries identified a one-off payment at the beginning as the gold standard for all IT-related businesses. These different perspectives when presented and commented upon by each other, prompt participants to rethink norms and standards, and to some extent, reconceptualise their personal and professional life and identity.

3.3 Selection of university discipline and profession: sampling

Identifying and selecting the appropriate disciplines and professions for data collection and locating suitable participants were an essential part of my research design. As discussed in the literature review, more recent research in transnational knowledge transfer has called for a reconceptualization of knowledge application and has further suggested looking into knowledge structure in relation to cultural embeddedness. In addition, drawing upon research on the recontextualization of professional knowledge, and limited research on cooperative development in Japan, this research should include both “universal” disciplines and professions that has vertical knowledge structures, and are perceived to have insignificant levels of cultural embeddedness; and “context-bound” disciplines and professions that have horizontal knowledge structures and are perceived to have significant levels of cultural embeddedness. Though many disciplines and professions meet these criteria, IT and law were chosen for this research due to the supply of Chinese overseas returnees who have studied these disciplines and demand in the Chinese labour market for professionals from these backgrounds.

3.3.1 Choice of discipline and professions

Based on previous research on transnational knowledge transfer and the current Chinese context, there were three reasons for choosing IT and Law in this research: perceived transferability, popularity and practicality. Perceived transferability concerns the types of discipline that have been identified in previous studies as easier or more difficult to apply internationally; popularity concerns which disciplines the Chinese government and respective industries are incentivising students to study and are actually chosen by a significant number of Chinese students; and practicality concerns the number of disciplines and participants per discipline needed for my sample, how difficult it would be to find the necessary participants, and the ethical implications that might be associated with the discipline.

Perceived transferability

With regards to perceived transferability, previous studies have provided extensive yet inconclusive arguments about which disciplines have greater international transferability. As illustrated in Chapter 2, various studies on transnational knowledge transfer build on the hypothesis that natural science and applied science would be easier to transfer, and social science and context-bound disciplines such as Law and non-clinical psychology would be harder to transfer. While different in explanation, the rationales behind these hypotheses are similar in their essence. Disciplines that have a vertical knowledge structure and clear progression system, such as maths, are thought to be more internationally transferable. Here, one learns addition and subtraction before learning multiplication

and division; and since the building blocks, the ‘subtractions’ and ‘divisions’ in the world of science are universal, so too is the final, built knowledge, which means it is therefore internationally transferable. While these hypotheses are theoretically reasonable, various studies have noticed some small but previously deemed insignificant differences in knowledge structure, which might have a bigger than expected impact (Bathelt et al., n.d.; Burgers and Touburg, 2013; Bou-Llusar and Segarra-Ciprés, 2006). For example, in my previous research (2016), in some of the automobile engineering courses provided by UK universities, engine design is not a compulsory unit. If we envision knowledge structure as a tree, engine design is a branch instead of part of the trunk. In China, however, the study of engine design is a compulsory requirement for being accredited as an advanced automobile engineer, where engine design is considered as an essential part of the corresponding knowledge structure. Some disciplines that have been studied extensively either by scholars from the field of knowledge transfer or scholars from within these disciplines. These include for example disciplines such as engineering and medicine – seemingly easily transferable disciplines – and management and marketing – seemingly difficult disciplines to transfer. However, while similar in popularity, IT and Law are two of the disciplines that have yet to be explored in terms of transferability and difference in knowledge structures.

Popularity

As discussed in the literature review, the Chinese government and respective industries are providing significant incentives to attract overseas graduates from specific disciplines. Alongside aerospace technology and environmental science/agriculture, IT is one of the most frequently listed disciplines to qualify for local attraction policies and sits alongside media, education and banking as one of the disciplines that has the highest ‘overseas graduate premium’ (海归红利)⁹. Information technology, often known as computing or computer science as a discipline, is relatively more inclusive and diverse than law. While there are various definitions and separations debated in the industry and academic communities, my research uses the definition provided by ACM (Association for Computing Machinery) to include five computer science disciplines: computer engineering, computer science, information systems, information technology and software engineering. With regard to the proportion of Chinese students returning with an IT degree, however, it is not as straightforward as it is for law degrees. Though the five disciplines of IT are understood as a unified discipline or a combination of disciplines, data collected by the CCG (Centre for China and Globalisation) and the national database were categorised based on the Chinese bachelor’s degree system. Returnees who studied software engineering and computer engineering were counted as returnees with engineering

⁹ How much more an overseas graduate can earn more than a domestic graduate for the same/similar position.

(工学) degrees, whereas students in other IT disciplines were mostly counted as returnees with science (理学) degrees; for a few interdisciplinary courses, such as information technology and project management provided by the University of Manchester, Chinese students graduating with this degree would be counted as returnees with management degrees. Though the proportion of returnees who studied IT specifically cannot be easily accounted for, since management (26.7 percent in 2020, same year for the following two), science (15.7 percent) and engineering (14.9 percent) have been in the top five degrees of returnees for the past ten years, it is safe to say that the percentage of overseas Chinese students who studied IT is not small in number.

Another set of data that indirectly validates the significant number of Chinese returnees who studied IT and showcases their importance is the data from the labour market. According to the annual report published by the Chinese Ministry of Education in 2021, 11.1 percent of returnees were employed by IT/technology companies, ranking third behind public institutions (28.2%) and finance related organisations (17.4%). As this report did not specify how many of them have IT degrees or are employed in an IT related position, I went back to the data provided by the Zhilian Zhaopin, a human resources company that provides an employment platform, headhunting business and big data research in cooperation with the Chinese Ministry of Education and the Ministry of Human Resources and Social Security. As mentioned above in the contextual background, employers can specify to prioritise or limit to only taking applications from overseas returnees on their posts on employment platforms and in headhunting sections. According to Zhilian, 19.3 percent of the posts that prioritise overseas returnees were from IT related industries with a 16.9 percent annual increase ratio. With regard to professional positions, two IT related positions were in the top 20 ranking, both with more than a 50 percent increase ratio and lawyer/legal service ranked 14 with a 48.2 percent increase ratio.

In comparison, within disciplines that are neither listed to qualify for local attraction policies nor enjoy significant overseas graduate premium on the labour market, alongside psychology and politics/international relations, according to the national database of returnees (Chinese Ministry of Education, 2021), law is one of the fastest growing disciplines of choice among Chinese students in overseas destinations. In 2005, the number of Chinese students studying Law in overseas destinations was so insignificant that it was calculated as part of literature studies. However, by 2015, law students accounted for 2.3 percent of all overseas Chinese students, just behind medicine; by 2020, the percentage of law students had surpassed the percentage of medicine students and reached 5.5 percent.

Practicality

As discussed above, considering perceived transferability and popularity, there are various disciplines that are suitable for this study, such as media, aerospace engineering and banking. However, when attempting to find participants who studied these disciplines, several issues surfaced, most significantly the issue of access. While I was able to find decent number of UK educated professionals in aerospace engineering (8) and environmental science (13), they were forbidden to speak to a ‘foreign researcher/journalist’ on ‘official matters’ due to unexplained national security reasons. Similar situations took place when I tried to find participants in actuarial science, as some researchers argue that while actuarial science is a branch of maths, the real work of actuaries needs to take significant account of social and cultural factors (Huang and Browne, 2017; Xie et al., 2020; Yu et al., 2020) and an actuary is one of the highest paid and most in-demand jobs in China. However, as most actuaries I contacted either work in state-owned entities that forbid interview participation or currently work in overseas companies, I could not find enough actuary participants for this particular study. With regards to politics/international relations and media, a few of the people I contacted had similar trouble as they work for the government or in state-owned entities¹⁰, and another issue was that they no longer work, or have not worked, in a discipline-related profession or position. As I wanted to find participants from the same disciplines that graduated at different times and have worked in China for different lengths of time, and ideally in various types of businesses, I needed 15 participants from each discipline: considering the realistic timeframe for data collection and the complexity of data analysis, I decided to choose 2 disciplines, IT and Law, and have 22 and 21 participants respectively.

Location and type of workplace

With regard to their employment destination in terms of location and type of employment, most returnees chose tier 1, or “neo tier 1” cities in China. While the original trio of tier 1 cities, namely Guangzhou, Beijing and Shanghai are still considered to be the most developed cities in China, Shenzhen and Hangzhou are joining them to be the most popular destination of employment for both Chinese educated and overseas educated graduates. In combination, the neo tier 1 cities attracted more than 70 percent of returnees to seek employment in these five cities and around 65 percent of returnees succeeded. In relation to the companies they seek employment from, the CCG (2019, 2020) pointed out that most returnees (72 percent in 2019 and 83 percent in 2018) would seek employment from “head companies” (头部企业, referring to companies that are leading or influential in their

¹⁰ State-owned media such as China Central Television are technically neither a government branch nor a state-owned business; sometimes they are translated as public institutions, but because they are different from other public institutions such as schools and hospitals, some argue that state-owned entities would be a more appropriate translation.

respective industries) during the first months and move on to more “realistic and fitting” companies if they were unable to find satisfying positions in the head companies.

3.3.2 Sampling

Based on the comparative nature of this research, targeted sampling and snowball sampling techniques were used to acquire participants from four groups: law and IT professionals who studied in UK universities that currently work in China, and their counterparts, law and IT professionals who studied in Chinese universities that currently work in firms and companies that on the same level as returnee participants. I intended to seek participants who are working in or have worked for respective “head companies” for more than a year, with variation in the types of companies such as privately owned, state-owned and international companies. Furthermore, as discussed in the literature review, distance from graduation, namely how many years have passed since the individual graduated, or seniority in industry could also influence the fluidity and effectiveness of transnational knowledge application (Behle, 2017; Behle and Tzanakou, 2014; Deena Ingham, 2016; Zhao et al., 2021; Zhang and Gu, 2022b), and ideally, I wanted to find participants of differing ages and with variation in their seniority.

Participants were sought through four channels: formal/informal alumni circles, local/country-specific returnee associations¹¹, personal connections and introduction through other participants. In total, 43 consenting participants were interviewed. They included 11 Chinese university educated IT professionals, 10 Chinese university educated law professionals, 11 UK university educated law professionals and 11 UK university educated IT professionals. All participants work or have worked in “head companies”. Among the 21 law participants, 15 work in “red circle” firms, 5 work in award-winning local firms and 1 had worked in two red circle firms for 31 years in total before his retirement. Similarly for the IT participants, all of them are currently working or have worked in head companies in respective industries for more than a year, while some of the companies they currently work for are not identified as head companies or that particular industry is yet to have leading companies, these companies are renowned in their industries as validated by other participants. Head companies is a semi-official list, so when government have not state which companies are head companies, I need to rely on professionals in that industry to validate whether those companies would have the same level of influence and importance as head companies in other IT fields.

¹¹ For example, in Guangzhou there is the Guangzhou returnee association established and managed by the Chinese Ministry of Civil Affairs, the Europe alumni association created and run by individuals, and the Western returned scholar association which is jointly managed with the Chinese united front work department.

With regard to distance from graduation, participants were categorised into four groups for analytical purposes: graduated 1 to 5 years ago, 5 to 10 years ago, 10 to 15 years ago and more than 15 years ago. There are 7 participants in the 1 to 5 years group, 21 in the 5 to 10 years group, 8 in the 10 to 15 years group and 7 in the over 15 years group. Participants were assigned pseudonyms based upon my interpretation of their characteristics and were informed about this process for the purposes of thesis presentation and intercommunication between participants. Six participants changed their pseudonym to one of personal preference.

3.4 Data analysis

The following section describes how the collected data was analysed thematically using a hybrid approach and my thoughts on conducting and presenting research in a multilingual situation.

3.4.1 Thematic analysis

In order to comprehensively understand and interpret the data, a hybrid approach to thematic analysis was adopted. Thematic analysis is commonly used to analyse qualitative data across a range of academic fields (Braun and Clarke, 2014; Braun et al., 2019; Clarke and Braun, 2018). In research that aims to interpret phenomena and events, thematic analysis enables researchers to find recurring meanings across data from various sources and generate patterns that capture information correlated to the research questions. These patterns are not mere summaries of collected data, but rather “themes” of overlapping meaning between data and research focus (Vaismoradi et al., 2013). Despite the varied approaches, thematic analysis generally involves the generation of codes, namely words or sentences that capture the essence or significance of partial data. Codes can be generated from within the data itself as suggested by grounded theory (also known as inductive coding), or it can be generated under an epistemologically informed theoretical framework (known as deductive code). However, it is important to point out that inductive codes should not be confused with or assumed to be semantic codes, namely codes that summarise the more explicit meanings of data; similarly, deductive codes are not automatically equivalent to latent codes, namely codes that are more implicit and generated beyond what is said and done (Saldaña, 2016; DeCuir-Gunby et al., 2011; Byrne, 2021).

Though there are various approaches to conducting thematic analysis, since this type of analysis is arguably a constructivist-epistemological approach, it can be and should be a relatively flexible method and not fully bound and informed by theory (Braun and Clarke, 2019; Xu and Zammit, 2020). Both inductive coding and deductive coding were used in this research to make full use of the benefits and potential of thematic analysis. The combination of inductive coding and deductive coding facilitated an exploration of the richness of the qualitative data, while minimising the risk of focusing entirely on the recurrence of codes and separating them from their interactive contexts and correlation with other codes.

3.4.2 Process of analysis

After providing a detailed explanation of my research and gaining informed consent, all participants were first interviewed with the life grid method, generating on average two hours of recording for each participant. The life grid forms were filled in on a shared access document, and additional verbal comments were transcribed and added to the document. After the completion of life grid interviews, several informal follow-up interviews were conducted to check for misunderstanding and provide clarity on some professional jargon and events. Documents were then imported into MAXQDA for the first phase of analysis, where preliminary or prototype codes were generated inductively. No specific themes were generated at that point to avoid creating narratives based on researcher subjectivity rather than that of the participants (Xu and Zammit, 2020). Based on the initial induced codes and life grid interview data, tailored follow-up interviews were conducted with 42 participants, ranging from ten- or five-minute interviews to two-hour-long interviews. The data was then transcribed, imported into MAXQDA and familiarised. Initial sets of inductive and deductive codes were then generated and prepared for the first phase of theme generation. Since the interviews covered a range of concepts and perceptions, I initially used my research questions and life grid dimensions to temporarily house the codes (see Figure 5) and as a proxy for themes and subthemes at this stage.

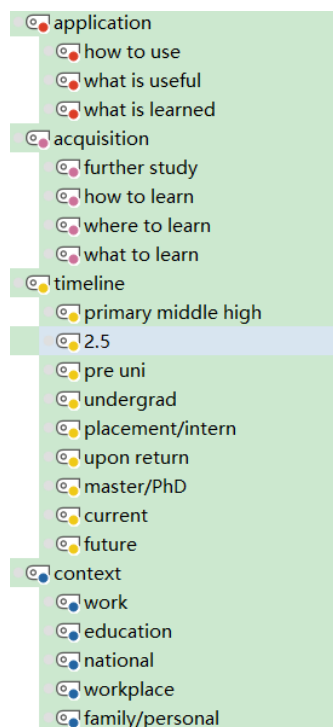


Figure 5: initial sets of codes

These codes and temporary themes and subthemes were then examined without necessarily aiming to answer the research questions. A second round of themes were then generated that were connected and formed a coherent narrative. Codes that were not included were not discarded at this stage and were instead reviewed alongside the second round of themes. This process involved checking the consistency and richness of the data against each theme and ascertaining whether or not they were reflective of the whole dataset. The final themes and subthemes are shown in Figure 6.

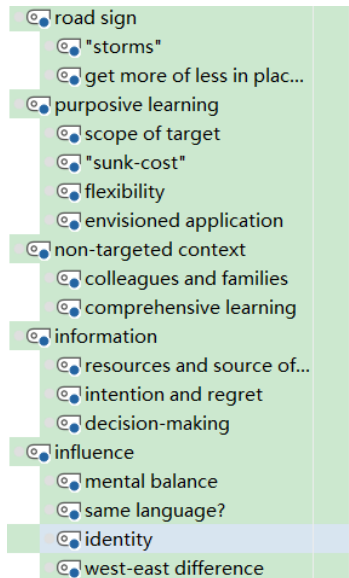


Figure 6: Themes and subthemes

3.5 Ethical considerations

The most significant ethical challenge I encountered while conducting and presenting this thesis was to guarantee anonymity to participants. Although I assigned pseudonyms, as mentioned above, and avoided the use of names and cities of their current employment, the biographical details and description of experienced events could potentially reveal their identities due to their industrial contexts. As will be discussed in the data analysis, law firms are in general small in terms of number of employees and close to each other due to frequent business encounters. Furthermore, due to strong classification in the discipline of law, and consequently, significantly separated teams of operation, descriptions of participants' previous and current cases could narrow down the identity to a very limited range. IT industries are much larger in terms of personnel, but similarly, due to the case-based work pattern, any mention of specific cases could be revealing to industry insiders.

As suggested by examiners in the viva I was going to use a form of vignettes, short descriptions of the participants to provide greater detail about who they are. As these would provide more comprehensive context to their quotes and discussions, vignettes have the potential to significantly enrich the data and the findings. 30 out of 43 participants found this idea meaningful to better tell their stories and agreed

to doing it initially, but after a few attempts and discussions, the participants and I found it extremely difficult to find a good balance between providing significant information and maintaining anonymity. For example, to further emphasise the influence of social and cultural context of a participant's quote about the cultural difference between their hometown and their current workplace, their vignette should include where they are from and where they are now; while this information in itself does not raise any issues, it can result in an identification issue when combined with the information included in some of their quotes in other sections. To test how revealing short descriptions can be, 4 participants requested that I carry out an experiment, so I compiled a list of their vignettes and quotes that I have used in this thesis. With their agreement, the lists were sent to each other, and they were asked if they could tell which law firm the participants worked in. Surprisingly, not only could they tell which law firm they worked for; some could even identify the specific branch or team they worked in within a few minutes of reading the list. They argue that one of the most common ways for lawyers to continuously learn and develop is to study cases, so for anyone who is working at a top tier law firm, especially younger lawyers who are still building up their network, they would be able to identify firms and teams, and even be able to name that individual if provided with this level of detail and description. The situation with IT participants is somewhat similar. As is discussed in chapter 8, IT participants, or IT professionals working in top companies in China, operate within a very small circle, and any further description of the participants can significantly endanger anonymity. After discussion, 12 participants believed the only way to include vignettes is to significantly redact or delete existing quotes. However, quotes used in this thesis have already been redacted and a significant amount of meaningful, illustrative quotes were not selected due to ethical reasons.

To avoid participant identification, the quotes and biographical details used in this thesis were checked and approved by participants. Quotes and details that were either not checked or were deemed to be too revealing by participants were removed from the thesis. Participants were also guaranteed the right to review and remove any part of the draft that they found inappropriate. As I have mentioned above, both Law and IT have a significant proportion of case-based work, therefore various details in quotes have been removed or redacted. While such an approach avoided ethical issues, it has also reduced the illustrative intent of quotes to various degrees. For example, when one of the female IT participants talked about the 'bro' culture in the company she works for, when combined with the mission statement and some of the incidents that happened in that company, the magnitude and severity of the issue can be significantly reinforced. However, as some of the work she described indicates that she is employed in a specific department, naming the company would directly pinpoint her identity.

As for other forms of loss of data, mainly these were related to ongoing cases and off-the-record parts. During data collection, almost all participants talked about the ongoing cases they had in hand. However, as some of the cases were either classified at that point or were not legally allowed to be

discussed in public, I can only use quotes related to these cases if the cases are declassified or published by the time this thesis is finished. Unfortunately, due to the ongoing Covid-19 situation in China, the progression of these cases has been much slower than participants initially anticipated, and therefore they are unable to be presented in this thesis. With regards to off-the-record parts of data, during data collection, for some of their experiences to make sense, participants had mentioned either personal information or specific thoughts on certain issues. However, due to the sensitivity of this personal information and self-censorship of their thoughts, these participants required or preferred that these data be off the record. For example, without specifying which participant, they talked about their dissatisfaction with the Chinese government and are thinking about foreign citizenship; this participant said that while it is okay to use this quote, I cannot specify pseudonym and therefore I am unable to link it to other quotes they made and illustrate the overall contextual influence and impact on their identity formation.

One unexpected challenge that I faced when writing this thesis was the issue of coherent translation. Interviews were conducted mostly in Chinese, and while I as a Chinese researcher had no difficulty understanding the words and messages participants conveyed, meanings could be misunderstood as quotes were translated to English in the thesis. With consent from Chinese educated participants, translated and rephrased quotes from both Chinese educated participants and UK educated participants were reviewed by UK educated participants to ensure the correct translation and interpretation of meaning.

Chapter 4: Participants' initial perceptions of transnational knowledge application

As discussed above, based on the theoretical framework and collected data, I propose my conceptualisation, the *youki* of transnational knowledge, namely the continuous acquisition, deconstruction and reformation of knowledge from both domestic and overseas sources that informs and is formed by the application of knowledge in specific contexts and the formation of individual identity.

In this research, participants' experiences and perceptions prior to higher education provided individual roadmaps for me as a researcher to understand their subsequent decisions in relationship to knowledge acquisition and struggles in knowledge application. Their intention to return significantly influenced whether they wanted to acquire "western applicable" knowledge or "China recognised" knowledge, and the information they used for decision making shaped what they perceived as acquisition-worthy knowledge, eventually affecting how they would perceive their acquired knowledge during employment. In essence, the data presented and analysed in this chapter will showcase whether or not participants have thought about transnational knowledge application, their initial perceptions of it, and how they made decisions based on these perceptions.

4.1 Intention to return

For overseas educated participants, their intention to return and planned timeline to return significantly influence their general directions for knowledge acquisition. These directions covered a vast range of meanings, from the level of education they should obtain (undergraduate or postgraduate), to which or what type of knowledge participants perceived as applicable or recognised in respective contexts in terms of space and time. However, China educated participants perceived directions for knowledge acquisition influenced their decision for choosing between overseas education and domestic education. The interview discussions illustrated in the following section demonstrated that, though not as comprehensive as their later thoughts, participants had intuitively and shallowly considered the potential implications of transnational knowledge application and made their decisions accordingly, either before or after their decisions to pursue overseas or domestic education.

The recognition of knowledge

Out of the 22 UK educated participants, 21 expressed the idea that they had thought about what will happen after graduation prior to their departure, and their initial plans can be roughly categorised into three types: decided to return with no exact plans about when to return (8); decided to return with relatively detailed plans about when to return (9) and undecided whether to return or not at the beginning of their higher education (4). Participants who had decided to return were, at least before they their arrival in UK, determined that they would return to China eventually. Despite their actual choices upon graduation, some participants had very specific plans of returning. While these participants shared the strong intention to return, there were divergent ideas about when would be the “ideal” stage/status for return. Their considerations, in this regard, can be understood as different perceptions of what UK-originated knowledge is appropriate or applicable in the Chinese context.

Due to an increase in the number of returnees, fierce competition and employer expectations in the Chinese labour market, some participants believes that master’s level might be the new standard for returnees. Fifteen UK educated participants had expressed their initial concern in this regard, as illustrated in the following data:

“...I wasn’t sure whether I should return after my undergrad or grind through a [master’s] as well... I wasn’t sure whether undergrad is enough or not to get a good job.” (The bearded gamer, Overseas IT)

“Without [a master’s] you don’t have any competitive edge, and it is kind of worse for returnees as some people think undergrad returnees are 镀金混子 (use overseas education to gold-plate their résumé without learning anything).” (The calligrapher, Overseas Law)

Represented by the above quotes, some UK educated participants were uncertain about whether an undergraduate degree would be enough for employment; however, this opinion is mostly held by younger participants, and the comparatively more senior participants believed that the situation and perceptions were quite different when they graduated:

“...it is all about competition and proportion... Back then, there weren’t so many university graduates, overseas or domestic. Back then, being a university graduate itself [was] a social status, a social class on its own.” (The Afro, Domestic IT)

“...even if sometimes we would prefer a Colombia (one of the top law schools in the US) undergrad over a Peking (the Oxbridge equivalent in China) [master’s] for an entry level position, a Colombia undergrad cannot compete with a Wuhan (one of the renowned law schools in China) law PhD, and there are more and more domestic masters and PhDs applying for entry level jobs.” (Mother Teresa, Overseas Law)

As mentioned by Mother Teresa in her quotes, compared with UK educated participants, domestic educated participants had no doubt or hesitation about the necessity of master's degree for the current labour market in China. Apart from three domestic educated IT participants who were in their late thirties, all domestic educated participants under the age of thirty took a master's course straight after their undergraduate education, and five domestic educated participants had completed their full time or part time postgraduate education a few years after they were employed. However, for some UK educated participants, concerns about postgraduate education were more related to the rather unique system in the UK:

“When I was researching for master's every post on Zhihu (a Q&A platform in China) is saying how UK's master's is very 水 (water, meaning something that is very weak and has little value) ...it doesn't matter what I think, what matters is what HR think of it.” (The journalist, Overseas IT)

Participants believe that this perception is mostly explained by the length of the course, because a master's degree in China would normally take 3 years (2 years or 30 months for some courses). While nine participants (3 domestic educated and 6 UK educated) believed that a UK master's degree is fast and efficient, fifteen participants, as exemplified in the quotes from the journalist, argued that despite their own favourable views, some Chinese employers or HR view UK master's degrees as insufficient in terms of content and/or quality without having a comprehensive understanding of their structure. Their argument is rather simple:

“...they simply don't believe you can learn much in only a year. It might sound childish but some employers I talked to believe that recognising UK's master's courses would mean that they recognise the knowledge an individual can learn in the UK in a year is equivalent to the knowledge an individual... spend[s] three years [learning] in China.” (The whistle-blower, Domestic IT)

“...I talked to the HR in XX (a national level state-owned company) and I was surprised that for [an] HR he didn't know that UK master's do not have summer holidays and how packed the courses can be, he kind of assumed that master's courses in the UK would have all the holidays as undergrad courses and disparaging about how much a student can learn in eight months.” (Old England, Overseas Law)

While based on false assumptions due to a lack of understanding about UK master's degrees, these participant conversations indicate that knowledge acquired from a UK's master's degree might be not fully recognised and accepted by Chinese employers or HR personnel. However, within the general law industry, law firms might be the exception. In retrospect, some UK educated law participants now think that their earlier concern was not necessary. This is partly due to the fact that an LLM (Master

of Law) course normally takes two years, and partly due to the belief that law firms, especially those that regularly seek returnees, have better knowledge of the quality and content of overseas education:

“Big, or relatively big law firms perfectly understand what LLM and JD (one of the US law degrees) are, they wouldn't see LLM as 水 course.” (The farmer, Domestic Law)

“...if you want to get a job in companies' compliance or [a] law department, there are chances that they might prefer US degrees as there are indeed stereotypes against UK degrees but that won't be a problem for big, or even normal law firms.” (The calligrapher, Overseas Law)

As demonstrated by these quotes and the discussion about selection of university in a later section, as law firms employ more lawyers who graduated from these courses themselves, the firms are seen to have a sufficient understanding of these courses and recognise the professional knowledge and teaching quality that is included. However, as mentioned above, some participants only discovered this recognition after they had been employed. Among UK educated law participants, five were informed by mainstream lawyers through networks and family connections and therefore did not worry about the recognition of UK postgraduate education in China. For the other six UK educated law participants and nine UK educated IT participants, recognition of knowledge acquired from a UK master's degree was a significant concern for deciding when to return.

Perceived benefits of overseas work experience

Another factor participants considered when deciding on their plans to return is overseas work experience. This consideration includes the necessity or benefit of obtaining overseas work experience and the possibility of securing overseas work experience. When UK educated participants talked about work experience in the UK, seeking UK employment with or without the intention to return to China has significant differences in terms of priority, criteria, and perspectives for selection. For participants who have a strong intention to return, the reputation and size of the company is more important than career progression prospects. For UK educated participants who were not certain about returning, they would consider what this company/position meant for their future if they decided to stay in the UK.

The necessity or benefit of overseas work experience was discussed in two aspects: the credentials it generates and the content of the experience. UK educated IT participants' opinion, especially prior to the start of university, mainly focused on the credentials and how their résumé could be enhanced by their experience:

“...it would be ideal if I can get a job in Samsung or Microsoft...work for 5 years and then return/transfer (and work at their Chinese sub companies).” (The shot caller, Overseas IT)

UK educated IT participants who had decided to return but had no specific plan about when to return, generally possess similar thoughts to the shot caller, believing that overseas work experience in an international and/or well-known company can significantly improve their employability when they return to China, and getting into these companies is more important than the fitness of the job itself, as explained by the minimalist:

“...imagine an investment bank, even though they should be getting a job as an analyst, these kids are willing to do salesman’s work if they can get into that company, slightly...blindly believe in the power of the brand itself.” (The minimalist, Overseas IT)

UK educated IT participants who had decided to return with a specific plan thought that overseas work experience had limited advantages in seeking employment, either believing they needed to reach a certain level of seniority for the experience to be meaningful, or that there are other things more valuable for a résumé than work experience. For example, the wanderer and the colourful one said that their plans were to return after working for three to five years/before thirty years old, and the 955 guy and the family pride said that they would return after reaching level 14 in Huawei or “section in charge” (代理, an official job title for Samsung) in Samsung.

Though not necessarily related to their intention to return, it is worth noting that the perceived benefit of overseas work experience for seeking employment in China might be linked to the year of graduation. UK educated IT participants who strongly believed that work experience would be beneficial all graduated within the last five years, whereas UK educated IT participants that expressed doubts about the benefits graduated more than five years ago. Though there are some research findings and official data that suggest that overseas work experience is becoming more important or more valuable in the labour market or to the government, the interviews rarely show participants had obtained this information from research or official sources. Instead, one of the most frequently reported sources of information is the website Zhihu. Zhihu is a Q & A platform similar to Yahoo Answer, and the interviews clearly indicate that the personal experiences shared by users have directly and indirectly shaped the younger participants’ perspectives. The influence of Zhihu will be discussed at a later point in this chapter.

Another factor that influenced participants that were certain about returning to make a specific plan or not is the potential benefits that overseas work experience can bring to their work in China, namely the content of their experience. One of the considerations for return planning mentioned by all UK

educated participants is the nature of the workflow/structure. Both IT and law participants knew or thought that, compared with other professions, their work would be to some extent more case-based, and the accumulation of cases can be seen and used as an alternative format of résumé, a portfolio. However, some participants believed that cases are context-bound and therefore portfolio building should be based on a plan to return.

Eight participants argued that since they would return anyway, the earlier they return, the earlier they can start building up their Chinese case portfolio. This argument is best presented by the bearded gamer:

“In [the] gaming industry what projects you have worked on will directly impact your next salary, so the best route would be return as soon as you can, use the haigui (overseas returnee) status to get into places like NetEase, work on a few projects and then jump to big individual studios.” (The bearded gamer, Overseas IT)

Even though he admitted that, in retrospect, his thoughts were a bit naive, the principal ideas were not proven wrong in the current industry. His belief centres upon the idea that when comparing an overseas returnee with five years of overseas work experience with a domestic graduate with five years of domestic work experience, a newly graduated returnee would have more of an advantage in the labour market versus a newly graduated domestic student. He went on to say that the benefit of “advanced western knowledge” is most apparent at 秋招 (an autumn recruitment fair, which normally takes place in September and only opens to students graduating that summer; UK master’s graduates can participate in spring recruitment that takes place around January or February). Seven participants displayed similar ideas, expressed through a different perspective:

“If I want to get a job in the UK, I am just a normal graduate same as all the other local graduates, but if I return, I am the haigui (the returnee).” (The gentleman, Overseas Law)

The core ideas within this argument are twofold: the belief that Chinese graduates do not possess any competitive edge in the UK labour market and the belief that the haigui (returnee) status is still privileged in China. These beliefs were cited by all participants as their initial thoughts, though there are changes in the degree and direction of their views as they undertake education and employment.

Returning to the argument provided by the bearded gamer, though not explicitly mentioned in the selected quote, another point he mentioned is the belief or assumption that overseas work experience is not recognised in China, more specifically in the gaming industry. He asserts that due to differences in target audiences and industrial norms, having work at overseas companies (especially operating companies rather than production companies) can be “toxic” both in terms of seeking employment and job performance. As illustrated by some researchers, though applicability is debatable, experience

and knowledge from the global west are highly recognised by the global south (Gunter and Raghuram, 2018). However, some researchers point out that when studying knowledge transfer, researchers should not treat an industry or a general field of expertise as the same. In the case of the IT industry, knowledge transfer can be vastly different in, for example, a software development company to that found in an infrastructure building company (Zahedi et al., 2016). Exploring how the bearded gamer obtained information and how he perceives knowledge transfer in both his previous and current employment might help to shape the direction of future research on transnational knowledge application and will be discussed in Chapters 5 and 6.

In contrast to IT participants, law participants in general believe the content of overseas work experience can be significantly valuable if they stay and work in overseas workplace for an extensive length of time. For law participants that wanted to return within five or ten years after graduation, however, the downside brought by procedural reasons outweighs the potential benefit:

“When you come back as a newly grad you can tag along your shifu (supervisor, instructor or mentor) and work on big influential cases, but if you work in the UK for a few years and return as a normal lawyer your situation would be really awkward.” (The gentleman, Overseas Law)

To fully understand what this quote implies, I should first explain the rather unique career pathway of lawyers. Graduating from a law degree does not equate to admission to practice law, and different countries have their own processes and systems. After passing the national judicial examination, law graduates must be registered under a law firm and assigned to a certified supervisor for a year of apprenticeship (or pupillage in the UK). Therefore, five UK educated law participants all claimed that participating in an apprenticeship in China could help them to establish and accumulate “case source”¹² and gain a head start compared with finishing pupillage in the UK and working in China without a Shifu.

Hesitation and consideration

Compared with participants who intended to return, undecided participants mentioned additional aspects of consideration and planning: potential changes and doubts about information. A common theme that appeared in all four interviews is, despite the provided information, official or otherwise,

¹² A managerial approach used by most law firms. Lawyer A brought in a case, even if eventually A do not handle the case themselves, A would be counted as the “case source” and receive a percentage of earnings from this case. When applying for promotion, some firms use the amount of “case source” as part of the contribution to the firm. For both financial and career prospect consideration, a lawyer would want to accumulate as many case source as possible.

they were not sure how the bigger context would change. Drawing on some of the previous examples, they were not fully confident about the future:

“Finance was THE hottest subjects for overseas Chinese students, and there [was so much] propaganda about reaching life peaks with a finance degree but look at how hard it is for finance graduates to find even a decent job...I just can’t be sure that won’t happen to IT, it is on the same path now.” (The preparer, Overseas IT)

Some researchers (see for example, Yonezawa et al., 2016) had cautioned that the promotion of STEM subjects for overseas education at a government level can be problematic for the labour market and graduates as the supply and demand system is much more complicated than some officials might believe. Seven UK educated IT participants expressed concern regarding the future of the industry due to its induced popularity in China by the government. Some researchers have even suggested that unnatural and rapid market change can cause overseas Chinese graduates to postpone their return, matching the concerns detailed by these participants (Zhu and Gao, 2016). Based on similar ideas, some participants were worried about the development of specific segments of the industry and they themselves felt their predictions affected their intention to return:

“I applied for university weeks after the PS4 incident, so I couldn’t make up my mind to return until I can confirm what the future for [the] gaming industry in China is.”
(The dragon slayer, Overseas IT)

The PS4 incident that is referred to here took place in 2015. In 2014, the PlayStation 4 console was officially confirmed to be on sale in China and both Sony and the Chinese government “hinted” that it would not apply regional restrictions¹³; however, since February 2015, the Chinese version of the PS4 can no longer add an overseas PSN (PlayStation Network) account through normal means. This incident, as some participants concurred, shattered their confidence in the industry’s future, and some continue to worry that the government will pull the plug on the gaming industry, even though the full gaming industry was only opened up in 2013.¹⁴ This fear of or lack of trust in a “tampered with” industry environment is expressed by all IT participants throughout different sections of the interviews, despite whether they had decided to return or not, and it is shared by some law participants as well:

¹³ The Chinese version of the Microsoft Xbox can only run censored versions of selected games; PlayStation and Nintendo consoles were not allowed to be sold legally in China.

¹⁴ In 2000, China banned all production, sale and promotion of gaming consoles for domestic use.

“I wanted to become an environmental lawyer from the beginning, so my plan was to study environment protection related courses in university, but then I heard the rumours of the reform¹⁵ and changed to study law.” (The vegan, Overseas Law)

Due to changing nature of the industry, Mother Teresa (Overseas Law), a managing partner at one of China’s largest law firms, said that law firms and auditing firms were seeking talents from all fields of expertise, and used to provide free training and lessons for them to prepare for the national judicial exam. However, this reform to some extent limited access to law firms for non-law graduates. Even as a policymaking consultant, Mother Teresa was surprised by the sudden changes in exam participation requirements.

4.2 Educational choices

As illustrated in the previous section, the intention to return to China did prompt UK educated participants to consider what would be recognised, accepted and applicable in China. However, as exemplified in the participants’ quotes, such considerations require a range of aspects of information and insights from professionals in respective industries. This section will explore participants’ educational choices and what information was used to make these choices. With the consideration of what would be recognised, accepted and applicable in China, this section will showcase how did participants make their educational choices.

Priorities when choosing

In general, both overseas educated and domestic educated participants mentioned that they make decisions based on the quality of education. However, the conception of the quality of education can vary among participants. Based on these different conceptions, participants’ perspectives can be categorised into three groups: the ‘context matters’ group, the ‘school matters’ group and the ‘course/faculty matter’ group.

As mentioned above, some researchers assert that Chinese students who choose the UK as their destination for overseas education do not tend to see overseas education as a means of immigration; however, participants in this research indicated that despite not seeing overseas education as a means of immigration, this does not mean that prospective students neglect context, but that they care about

¹⁵ Since 2018, the national judicial examination has only been open to graduates from listed law related courses; prior to that, any graduates with a bachelor’s degree could participate in the exam.

context from a different perspective. Moreover, some research suggests that for overseas students who have considered staying in the destination country, context is considered from a personal perspective: whether they like the cultural or social environment and whether they can imagine themselves living and working in that country (Levatino, 2017; Huang and Turner, 2018). For students who have considered returning to their home country, some researchers argue that they too have included context in the decision-making process, but from an external or macro perspective, namely how will the identity of returnees from a certain country be perceived in their home country and in their home labour market (Devadason, 2017; Yang, 2017). As an example, one quantitative study indicated that compared with UK and Canadian graduates, US graduates struggle to find a suitable job and satisfying salaries in China because of their general social image (Zhu and Gao, 2016). And as mentioned in the last section, a UK master's degree can be seen as 水 (water, meaning lack of content and depth), yet due to the number of colleges in the US and lack of familiarities of naming habits and differences in translation, US undergraduate degrees can also be deemed as 水 and sometimes being misunderstood. In China, higher education institutions are translated to university, and education institutions that provide vocational education or two-year diploma course are translated to college. Therefore, while higher education institutions in the US can name themselves as university, academy or college, employers or HR might misunderstand a US college as a vocational education institution instead of a higher education institution. In my study, both overseas and domestic educated participants have expressed ideas that are consistent with these studies. Six participants clearly indicated that context is the main consideration that led them to decide on the UK as the destination for education. Out of these six participants, five were females and it was concerns about security that seemed to matter the most:

“I know it might sound a bit too much like [a] stereotype but at that time the US [was] almost equal to school shooting, it just feels horrifying, there is no way my parents will send me to the US and not worry.” (The drafter, Overseas IT)

This might be a relatively extreme quote, but it fully illustrates the kinds of concern that parents would have when choosing the destination of education for their children. Similarly, other participants have said that security concerns were one of the reasons why they hesitated about going to Manchester or London:

“...Personally, I would like to see it myself before judging, but my parents keep saying it is better safe than sorry... They were very persistent about avoiding Manchester and they were so...proud, when the Manchester bombing happened (2017) and they thought they [had made] the right call.” (The vegan, Overseas Law)

“...the only thing that made them hesitate about going to London is the underground bombing [a] couple [of] years before my arrival, and it took me months to persuade them. I even had to lie about the location of my school.” (The collector, Overseas IT)

As demonstrated in these quotes, while context of destination does influence their process of decision-making, the parents of participants had stronger concerns and tended to focus on particular incidents, whereas participants themselves cared more about the overall context and potential gains. When asked about the benefits or advantages of overseas education, both overseas and domestic educated participants believed that learning and mastering English/a second language was a significant benefit. However, law and IT participants perceived the importance of English differently.

From individual perspectives, participants held the view that one of the most significant benefits of the overseas context, in comparison to participation in a transnational higher education institution in China, is the natural, original environment for English learning, and five participants mentioned mastering a “local accent” as a major benefit. However, seeing this as one of the most significant benefits had driven participants to make different decisions based on various understandings of the importance of English language ability. As explained by the lone wolf, who graduated from The University of Electronic Science and Technology of China (UESTC), one of the most prestigious universities in technology, having good English ability is not so appealing to some IT workers:

“When it comes to programming, we use English based command line anyway. There [are] no translation related issues, and my targeted position (IT engineering) never requires me to directly communicate to foreigners, so I don’t think for me being able to speak English is important as long as I can use the language.” (The lone wolf, Domestic IT)

Although there is debate about whether coding language should be seen as English or simply as command that exceeds language among both participants and the IT industry in general, only two of the overseas participants in this research who had chosen chose IT mentioned learning English as one of the reasons for overseas education. To some extent, considering other parts of the interview data, it would be pertinent to suggest that some participants choose IT because it is one of the core subjects in overseas education in general, however, comparatively IT does not require strong language skills. This is similar to Chiang’s (2017) argument that one of the reasons Asian students tend to choose STEM related subjects is the relatively low level of English that is required.

For participants who care about learning English, context, especially the macro-national context, was vital to their decision-making considerations. With the rise and growing popularity of transnational higher education institutions (TNHEs), Twenty-seven participants had, to differing degrees, considered TNHE as one of their options, and the rest did not consider these due to practical reasons, for example, the dragon slayer started his undergraduate education prior to the establishment of

TNHE in China. Furthermore, seven participants expressed doubts about the English learning environment in TNHEs located in China:

“...Eventually I went out because I think if you want to properly learn English and be able to use it you still need to live in an English-speaking country, Ningbo Nottingham is still in Ningbo, not Nottingham.” (Savile Row, Overseas Law)

“Ningbo Nottingham was my parents’ “first choice” if we decide not to go out, and we actually visit there... Yes all the teachers were British or westerners but all the students were Chinese. How much English would you speak when all your classmates are Chinese? How much would my English skill actually improve?” (The minimalist, Overseas IT)

These quotes echo the arguments made by Kubota (2016) and Schartner (2016) that context is multi-layered, indicates that some participants considered surrounding layers of context such as classmates and interactions in addition to the narrower targeted context, namely classrooms and institutions in this context.

School over subject

Among the participants that focused on the reputation and social recognition of institutions, TNHEs have additional issues. As most of the TNHEs are established as joint institutions, participants were worried about how they would be perceived on the labour market:

“I did consider NYU Shanghai. I even went to the open day, but no one could answer me whether I will be treated as an NYU graduate or a Huadong normal university (the Chinese partner institutions that co-manage NYU Shanghai) graduates. Would I get the benefits from both or the downsides from both?” (The camera man, Overseas Law)

“...my case was better, at least both names are present (XJTLU contains both XJU and the University of Liverpool), but my then classmate was considering Duke Kunshan university, which could be quite troubling if she wants to stay in China (Duke Kunshan is Duke university and the University of Wuhan, a 985/211 university in China) and you cannot rely on HR knowing it by default.” (The handwriting guy, Domestic Law)

While TNHEs are generally co-established by selective universities in China, the names of these universities are not always visible in the name of the TNHEs, and participants worried they would lose the benefits of being a graduate from selective universities.

Another concern raised by these participants is the uncertainty or worry of the quality of education provided by these TNHE institutions, or more specifically, would the education they receive in these TNHEs be similar or different to the respective original institutions. Different TNHE institutions adopt different approaches when it comes to designing the curriculum design and pedagogy. Not knowing whether the course is being localised, or not knowing whether they would prefer a localised course or not, caused six participants hesitant to choose a TNHE:

“I found it weird, the whole reason I would consider overseas education, or these joint schools is to get the advanced western knowledge, so why would I want to learn the localised version?” (The collector, Domestic IT)”

“I think it highly depends on whether you know you want to stay or go out; for someone who is more leaning to go out, studying in a TNHE cannot bring too much advantage and not too good as an insurance move.” (The failsafe man, Domestic IT)

Similar to what the failsafe man called insurance move, six overseas educated participants mentioned they had considered TNHEs as they could be the middle ground between domestic education and overseas education. This is an issue mostly bought up by younger participants, based on the idea that China is, in their perspectives, slowly closing the doors for the rest of the world, and the rest of the world is rejecting China and Chinese as well. For the off chance that returnees or western knowledge as a whole start to get rejected in China, and countries like the US completely deny their entry, TNHEs’ “half-blood” identity could ensure students to have a place to return to.

Sixteen participants did not necessarily place an emphasis on school as the top priority for choosing, and because they did not care about or did not possess strong intentions towards specific courses/subjects, institutions became the top priority through comparison. Out of these sixteen participants, fourteen were IT participants and two were domestic educated law participants. According to the IT participants, the lack of clarity on the nature of IT was an important reason for the lack of emphasis on courses/subjects:

“Let’s be honest, I have no idea, or wrong idea, about what computer science is about. We have all heard of IT before, right? But (at that point) I had never thought about the exact definition of it. I thought computer science is just a type of IT or a formal name of IT, never thought to figure out what it is.” (The wanderer, Overseas IT)

In comparison, both overseas and domestic law participants generally had a clearer understanding of what law is, and almost half of them (10/21) have family members that work in a related line of business, potentially influencing them to place more emphasis on courses and even faculty members over institutions. As illustrated in the section above, law graduate participants were much clearer

about what they wanted to learn, so their decision-making process included significant amounts of information regarding specific courses provided by respective institutions. This does not mean that they neglected institutions in general, rather that they but would first refine their search criteria to institutions that provide law related courses instead of searching for institutions, and then look for the courses that interested them. In comparison, only these ten law participants mentioned that they had visited university websites and browses through the units and modules provided by each course. As explained by the participants, this is related to the way in which a lawyer's career prospects are highly connected to the content of the course they choose:

“...I can't speak for every overseas educated lawyer, but I think most of us wanted to do transnational/international arbitration... Universities such as XXX [does] not have arbitration even as optional modules.” (The badge carrier, Overseas Law)

“I don't want to rule out becoming a judge as an option, but XXX [does] not include law history and criminology, which will make doing a PhD or becoming a criminal court judge very different.” (The vegan, Overseas Law)

In comparison, law participants had much more information on what certain courses would lead for their career prospect in the Chinese context, and such information had significantly influenced their choices and subsequent employment.

4.3 Sources of information

As discussed above, participants had different priorities when choosing higher education, and this can be evident in what information is used and how information is used when making decisions. As discussed above, the data I collected indicate that participants' educational choices were informed and contain considerations of the Chinese context in general and specific industrial context. However, as exemplified by participants' quotes, such considerations would require various aspects of information and insights from professionals in respective industries. This section will explore what information was used to make their choices, where and how did participants gain access for such information.

Formal sources

One of the most frequently mentioned formal sources of information is the university rankings. All overseas educated participants mentioned that they had used one or more of these ranking tables: Times Higher Education ranking, Guardian ranking and the QS ranking. Comparing both groups, law

participants only looked at overall ranking whereas IT participants also checked individual indicators such as the industry income indicator or employer reputation indicator. Law participants looked at subject ranking over institution ranking whereas IT participants mostly looked at institution ranking, and older participants primarily only looked at UK (The Times or The Guardian) ranking whereas younger participants looked at both UK and world ranking.

One of the most significant differences in terms of response occurred when participants were asked “Are there any specific indicators you check in rankings?”. This question was not in the original life grid and semi-structured interview and was instead inspired by the preparer (Overseas IT) who was my fifth participant. During the life grid interview, the preparer explained in great detail how she utilised the data provided by rankings:

“...I mostly used both QS and The Times together. (Interviewer: To compare the rank?) No, the reason why I use both together is QS has the employer reputation indicator and The Times has the industry income indicator. The combination of these two indicators shows a clearer picture for what I can expect after graduation.”

After this the life grid interview with the preparer, I included the question regarding ranking indicators in later life grid interviews and asked this question to participants one to four in follow up semi-structured interviews. When asked about indicators, most IT participants showed a very clear understanding of the concept and ten mentioned they had checked either or both the employer reputation indicator and the industry income indicator in the respective rankings. Four of the eleven overseas educated IT participants had even researched how these indicators are calculated:

“...yes, I did check those indicators, I checked the...industry salary? Average salary? But somehow, they show you a score instead of money, so I had to check out how the score is calculated.” (The 955 guy, Overseas IT)

“...at that time, back then I [had] considered staying in the UK so I checked the employer reputation indicator, and when I returned, I put alma mater’s employer reputation score on my résumé as an extra appeal point, haha.” (The journalist, Overseas IT) As described by the journalist, the employer reputation indicator is mostly checked by participants who were not sure if they would return, and participants that were determined to return to China did not check this particular indicator. I contacted some of the interviewees to ask them if they could remember why participants did not check this indicator. Though none could provide a rationale, the colourful one gave her opinion on this matter:

“...even if they included Chinese or transnational companies in their data and I knew they include it, I would not fully trust it, just like I wouldn’t trust a Brit’s opinion/review on Chinese food.” (The colourful one, Overseas IT)

Perhaps this lack of trust on the accuracy and validity of the employer indicator in the Chinese context suggests a psychological barrier in terms of transnational knowledge application, one which is similar to the way in which in other contexts, western knowledge is deemed to be the more advanced knowledge suggesting a psychological boost transnational knowledge application. These psychological factors, or perhaps some form of “stereotyping”, and the potential impact on participants’ experience about transnational knowledge application will be discussed further in the chapter six and seven.

On the other hand, UK educated law participants responded completely differently when asked about indicators. The camera man’s response represents the thoughts shared by eight other UK educated law participants:

“...what do you mean indicators? (Interviewer provides a brief explanation) Oh so like scoring criteria? I know they must have some quantified/numerical criteria, but I never bothered to check out the details.” (The camera man, Overseas Law)

The other 3 UK educated law participants are/were more aware of these indicators either back at this point or they learned about it afterwards, mentioning that these indicators were not considered in the decision-making process. Instead, a heavy emphasis was placed on subject-based ranking. As discussed in the section above, in general, law participants were very clear about what subject they wanted to study and therefore they tended to start their search with subject-based ranking. Throughout the interviews, this process was either suggested by overseas education agencies or a parent/family friend who is working in the law industry. These two semi-informal sources provided two slightly different rationales for searching subject-based rankings: high ranking universities do not necessarily provide good law courses and universities that provide good law courses do not necessarily rank high in the overall tables:

“...that uncle (family friend, a lawyer) told me that even though Warwick ranks higher than Bristol, at least in China, [a] lawyer from Warwick is worthless and [a] lawyer from Bristol can easily get into any law firm in China.” (The American dream, Overseas Law)

“...I was a bit confused when the agency showed me their recommendation as they put Durham and Aberdeen in the same group as LSE and Manchester. They (Durham and Aberdeen) were ranked almost 200 whereas LSE and Manchester were in the top 50 (both ranking in QS), but then they explained to me how literature art/social science-heavy schools can be a bit disadvantaged because of how the ranking systems are structured, and professional-centric industries tend to ignore overall ranking[s].” (The gavel wielder, Overseas Law)

Due to the clearer direction in terms of subject and future career path, law participants tended to conduct comparatively more targeted and comprehensive information gathering. It is worth noting that none of the participant, domestic or overseas educated, mentioned or utilised the Shanghai Jiao Tong ranking, and 11 participants were not aware of its existence. Judging from later dialogues regarding employment, this lack of awareness and usage of this particular ranking table could be influenced by the content of other formal sources of information: company employment requirements and talent attraction policies.

Among UK educated participants, nearly all participants who had graduated within the last five years (10 out of 11) said that they had either checked the employability of their chosen institutions or checked the requirements of their preferred company/industry and used the requirements as selection criteria:

“...My first and second choice institutions were ranked top 10 in Law, but their QS ranks were not high enough, so I kinda knew law and compliance department[s] in state-owned companies [were] out of my range.” (Old England, Overseas Law)

“When I decided what types of businesses I wanted to join after graduation, I checked a few companies to see what range of institutions are eligible and I applied [to] the ones in the range.” (The 955¹⁶ guy, Overseas Law)

Whether or not they had a clear plan to return, 19 out of 22 overseas educated participants indicated that they wanted to know what kinds of employment they would be able to acquire if they did return. The emergence of the use of ranking tables by governments and companies in recent years has arguably provided more information for younger generations to make such evaluations, compared with overseas graduates who returned in the early part of the 21st century. students who would consider overseas education. The toy guy, co-founder of one of the rising star companies in their business, described the use of ranking tables as a disliked but necessary practice:

“...the problem is, for graduate level jobs you will, you WILL receive thousands of applicants, and with the more professional jobs you will have too few choices, and to think that we are already a boutique-type company¹⁷... we had no choice but to use some blunt selection tool like ranking tables for entry level jobs.” (The toy guy, Overseas IT)

¹⁶ Since 2019, Chinese workers have used a numerical system to describe their working condition, for example, a 996 represents working hours from 9am to 9pm for 6 days a week (a “norm” among the younger generation); a 955 is 9am to 5pm, 5 days a week (an “ideal” or “humane” working condition).

¹⁷ A shared belief among IT participants is that big tech companies tend to attract younger graduates and boutique companies tend to attract people with craftsmanship.

Drawing upon the data from the other interviews, it would seem that the rapid growth of competition is driving the use of ranking tables in industries, which therefore might have a stronger impact on new returnees than older returnees in employment seeking. However, older returnees are not free from the impact of the use of ranking tables. As explained in the literature review chapter, most tier 1 cities have their own talent attraction policies, and following policy updates, ranking tables can now be found in some policies as part of the criteria. For returnees who want to join the government (定向选调生), provinces such as Guangdong, Shandong and Henan require applicants to have graduated from QS top 100 institutions; and some cities have a wider range of rankings, for example Hangzhou uses The Times, QS and the Jiao Tong system. For civilian/business attraction, Chengdu was the first city to use ranking tables as part of the criteria, asking for top 100 institution graduates using the QS, The Times, the Jiao Tong and USNEWS tables. These newly formed barriers could have a significant impact on the mobility of older returnees; and in June 2021, some policies had not stated whether they accepted ranking at the time of graduation or require current ranking.

Domestic educated participants on the other hand, took a completely different approach. Among 21 domestic educated participants, 10 had viewed ranking tables at some point during the application period. However, rankings were used when considering overseas education, and none of the 21 participants used ranking tables when deciding to apply for Chinese universities. Domestic educated participants mainly use two formal sources of information: acceptance score benchmarks and 985/211 project listings. Though not explicitly stated, based on the way it is described, acceptance score benchmark ranking seems to be used in the same way as university ranking in other parts of the world:

“...previously, university A and university B always had similar benchmarks, but in 2012 university B’s benchmark was 20 points higher than university A, almost reaching Tsinghua level.” (The collector, Domestic IT)

For readers more familiar with the British system, this equates to a situation where a university with a minimum A level requirement of AAA ranks “higher” than a university with a minimum A level requirement of ABB. In combination with this, domestic educated participants also use the listings of 985/211 projects. Higher education in China is a differentiated system of many types of institutions based on funding bodies and licences. Public funding from the central government is allocated mainly on the basis of merit, aimed at creating world class universities. Project-based funding initiatives reinforce this tendency and arguably enlarge the gaps between universities (Altbach, 2009). The ‘211’ and ‘985’ projects are the government’s strategies to support research universities and to fund the elite sector of the system. According to figures released by the Ministry of Education in 2014, 39 institutions in total, received more than 60 percent of their research funds from financial allocations while non-participating HEIs, more than 2600 institutions, received less than 40 percent (Xinhuanet,

14 November 2014). Even though 211 and 985 projects were officially merged into the double first-class university plan in 2017, people continue to use the 985 and 211 listing to determine whether an institution is elite/prestigious. In general, domestic educated participants use benchmarking to see which 985/211 universities they can apply for and then choose subjects, as illustrated by the whistle-blower:

“...I performed very well in the gaokao (Chinese national college entrance examination), my score reached the benchmark of [name] university and even enough to apply for computer science in XX university.” (The whistle-blower, Domestic IT)

However, for domestic educated participants, if they can barely reach the bottom of the benchmark, they would prefer institutions with lower benchmarks for a wider range of subject choices. Though named differently, such as “trap subject” or “mine subject”, all domestic educated participants have subjects they wanted to avoid, even if they can access a better university:

“...with my score even if I can get into XX university, I will probably end up in biomaterials. It sounds like a hot subject that can lead to environmental protection, but it is actually about urban greening and gardening. I can get into any subject I want if I go to XXX university.” (The endangered spices, Domestic Law)

To develop a better understanding of this process, an analogy is useful: student A scores 653 in 2019’s Gaokao and if A wishes to study at Wuhan University, a 985/211 university, A can only choose between civil engineering, electrical engineering and urban planning. Conversely, if A wants to study at Xiamen University, which is also a 985/211 university, A can choose any of the available subjects.

Informal sources

Due to social ideology unique to China and the Confucius influence, education and choice of education is to some extent not solely managed by individuals, but also their family and surrounding society (Fan, 2011; He, 2016; Chan and Chan, 2015). The combined influences of family, friends and external social and cultural contexts such as cities and provinces, this combined impacting party can be found to shape every participant to some degree. In more simple terms, scholars believe that selection bias/survivorship bias may have caused Chinese people to confuse isolated and individual experiences with generalised and objective facts (Li, 2004,2007; Shu, 2017; Mao, 2013). Some scholars argue that this effect could be caused by the Chinese tendency to neglect or minimise social and cultural differences within a country (Heckman, 2015; Xiaowan, 2014; Zheng, 2003). This tendency can be applied to China, where people from different areas are assumed to be the same; or to

other countries such as the US, where experiences in one state are assumed to be applicable to all other states.

China is a geographically large and culturally enriched country, but due to its size, differences in development and proximity to other entities, China is culturally diverse without people necessarily noticing. When it comes to overseas education, countries of destination and subject choices could be affected by these diverse, embedded cultural and social influences. Here, some separation of explanation is required. Due to different progress or direction in economic development, the reputation or image of other countries varies greatly between the southern and northern parts of China. Guangdong was one of the earliest provinces to adopt the ‘‘Open Up Policy’’ and greatly benefited from the international trade. It is not uncommon for people from Guangdong to have relatives in countries such as Canada and Australia, mitigating the sense of loneliness and unfamiliarity for prospective students. Furthermore, since Cantonese is used by both Guangdong and Hong Kong citizens, a saying has been formed to illustrate the friendly environment a Cantonese speaker may encounter in Canada: ‘‘Even a grandma can live easily in Vancouver if she speaks Cantonese’’. People from the northern part of China, however, perceive Canada or Australia as a destination for overseas education differently. According to research conducted by one of the largest overseas education agencies in China, the overseas education boom did not happen in the northern part of China until 2010, and by then, schools that ‘‘lack education quality and focus on profiting from Chinese students’’ were starting to surface in destinations such as Australia and Canada (Xindongfang, 2013; 2014). There were even lists of ‘‘notorious’’ schools on various Chinese websites, with users sharing their unpleasant individual experiences and describing the treatment that Chinese students will face if they go there. Today, Australia is referred to as 土澳 by Chinese people, a word that can be loosely translated to ‘‘unrefined, backwards Australia’’ (Australian Broadcasting Corporation, 2017).

This neglect of area differences can also be applied to destination countries. Many destination countries have regional differences in terms of social or cultural context and this affects the experience an individual will gain from studying and living in that region. However, some research argues that because the Chinese government emphasises policy and media unity, Chinese people are relatively insensitive to diversity and tend to generalise matters and experiences (Sutherland, 2019; Garside, 2021). Therefore, it is common to see Chinese students generalise an experience gained in Texas as the same as one in New York, or an experience gained in Manchester as the same as one gained in Bath (Garside, 2021; Mattis et al., 2019). This neglect of regional difference is most significant in racism related issues. Because of the political paradigm in the US, racism or xenophobic behaviour are not uncommon in certain cities or even states. It is reasonable for Chinese people that have faced unfair or racist treatment to voice their concerns, however their choice of description of the perpetrators can be troubling. Some scholars believe that overused phrases such as ‘‘the Americans’’, instead of a narrower directional description such as ‘‘the kids from my high school’’, is worsening the

overall image of US citizens, whereas positive experience is often described with fuller details and understood as individual isolated incidents (bad experiences are deemed as the norm and good experiences are deemed as isolated incidents) (Stanley, 2011). As demonstrated by Borjas et al. (2020), in an overseas education introduction event in China, a speaker from a high school in Canada used their experience of racism in Texas to illustrate that “Canada is much better than the US” in terms of racism. The same principle applies to Chinese students in the UK. Although slightly different from the US context, Adamson (2020) suggests that economic and historical developments play more important roles than political paradigms in constructing behaviour towards foreigners. Consistent with Adamson, Chiang’s (2019) research illustrates that it is more common to encounter individuals who are hostile against the wider definition of Asians, and He et al. (2020) argue that during the Covid-19 outbreak, the difference in attitudes towards Asians became significantly apparent across the UK. Drawing upon my personal experience, I encountered a few unfriendly individuals in Manchester in the year that I spent there, but I have not encountered any racism related incidents in Bath for ten years. For overseas students who did not travel much in the UK, it is more or less reasonable for them to construct an image of the UK as a whole based on what they see in the city in which they live, but at the same time, it is problematic that they illustrate objective description using subjective experience.

Combined with relatively tighter family and social relationships and discipline-driven parent-children’s relationships in China (Wu et al., 2020), this selection bias caused by the neglect of regional difference can spread with significant speed and reach. Based on the interviews I conducted, decisions regarding choices of higher education are significantly influenced by information acquired or provided by families and network. The most frequently mentioned influence from families and network is the supposed success or failure of overseas education.

“My sister (9 years older than the participant) went to man uni (The University of Manchester). It was thought to be one of the best [unis] in [the] UK, but as you know, she’s still bouncing around future-less jobs...we don’t say it in front of her, but that really made us (parents and participants) question about going abroad and I ended up not going.” (Reservoir girl, Domestic IT)

This view of perceived personal success or a failed overseas education experience from people around them to some extent shaped the perception or expectation of overseas education for 30 participants (out of a total of 43). For overseas educated participants, it seems to be the case that, at least during the persuasion period, families and network strongly associates career success with education and education alone:

“...my mom keeps saying that all the architects in her department [are] returnees from Kings College and never mentioned their personal endeavour.” (The minimalist, Overseas IT)

“...back then, quite a few family friend’s children just returned, and they were either struggling to find a job that fits their returnee status or not advancing fast enough or high enough in their job for us (participant and her parents) to see the benefit of overseas education.” (The older sister, Domestic Law)

A similar argument concerning how perspectives and images are being formed by proximate relatives and friends can also be made from another angle:

“...I checked The Times ranking and QS ranking, they all showed A (top 20 in The Times) uni with much higher ranking, but all my parents’ friend[s] keep saying B uni (around 40 in The Times) is more famous, it must be a better school, it took me months to convince my parents.” (The journalist, Overseas IT)

The same challenge is mentioned by domestic educated participants as well, but with less room for participants to negotiate with family members:

“...my parents decided I would go to Northwest University of Political Science and Law, but back then I was very concerned with their decision, the so-called “five school four department (五院四系)¹⁸” was ancient history and Northwest is the only one not in 985/211.” (Sparta, Domestic Law)

Even though Sparta and other participants confirmed that Northwest is still one of the best and highly recognised universities in law, especially in terms of academic results and influence (although there are some claims that in terms of practice, lawyers trained by Northwest are not as well recognised as the other top law school), Sparta and some other China educated participants were not aware of the level of recognition Northwest has until they started seeking employment and the information gathered by Sparta did not provide enough evidence to support his parents’ decision. As for the reason why he did not fully trust his parents’ decision, he described how his parents work in government positions that have regular but limited contact with lawyers. He thought that was not sufficient to make an educated decision on the choice of university.

Similar to the experience of Sparta, out of 21 domestic educated participants, 7 participants’ decisions were made following suggestions provided by families and network, 3 participants said that their parents made the decision despite attempts to resist or alter the plans, and only 3 participants clearly stated that their decisions were completely made by themselves. In comparison, among the overseas educated participants, though not directly pointed out, it is clear that most of them made the final

¹⁸ An 1980s/1990s concept of the best law schools and law departments in China. Today, most schools have either been renamed or merged with other universities, and they are all 985/211 universities, with the exception of west north.

decision themselves. In the case of overseas educated participants, MIC seems to merely provide “soft” suggestions.

Zhihu and other platforms: “authoritative”

With the rapid development of the internet and various online communities, the aforementioned selection bias started to impact with a wider reach and stronger magnitude. As explained above, Zhihu is a site similar to Yahoo Answer, and is arguably the 21st century cyber version of families and network. Picture 1 is a typical question and answer page on Zhihu, asking “What is it like studying at the University of Bath?”.



Picture 1:

This question can be answered either from subjective or objective perspectives, but as shown in Picture 2, some individual experience is described as objective fact. In this text, the answerer listed the pros and cons for living in school accommodation:

- 第一年学校给你提供宿舍是很幸运的事情！我听周围的同学在为第二年找房子找得好痛的时候很庆幸自己在12月的时候就定好了。 It is very lucky that the university provide accommodation at the first year! I lived in Quads during my freshman year.
- 大一的时候住的是Quads。
主要感受是：
舍友/厨房卫生看人品
外国人很爱来Quads开趴
住在厨房旁边隔音很差
呆在宿舍太闷
独立浴室
每一两个月有人来打扫卫生
各种从国内带过去的电器要藏好。 (因为不达标) 如果要查房是会被没收的。

There is cleaning service every one to two month.
Electrical appliances brought from China need to be put out of sight (becasue they are not compliant with safety regulations) or they will be confiscated.

Picture 2

However, when it comes to choosing universities there are a large range of information sources, and Zhihu is one source that did not seem to impact upon participants too much. The main aspects that Zhihu seems to have significant influence upon are information regarding industries and suggestions for career prospects. 34 (out of 43) participants had searched Zhihu to catch a glimpse of how their future might look like should they choose a specific subject:

“...my family works in traditional industry and so [do] all our family friends, my parents and I honestly did not know what it is like working in an IT industry, and back then there weren't even the 996 stereotypes. Zhihu was the only place where I [could] find some information.” (The filial son, Domestic IT)

Even for participants that already benefit from networks and connections, Zhihu can still provide valuable information:

“...even though my uncle is a lawyer, he and the firm he works for [do] not do criminal law at all, he has no idea what it is like to be a criminal lawyer, so I had to rely on Zhihu.” (The badge carrier, Overseas Law)

However, due to the unique system used by Zhihu, the trustworthiness of the information shown on Zhihu can be problematic.

律师的真实收入到底如何? How much do lawyers earn?

工作几年了? 法本非法本? 执业几年? 在一线二线城市? 做刑事民事? 有什么需要注意的? 求成功经验失败教训

关注问题

写回答

邀请回答

好问题 3

添加评论

分享

收起



登录后你可以

不限量看优质回答

私信答主深度交流

精彩内容一键收藏

登录

查看全部 8 个回答



Mark

我专八海归, 拿到了法考证, 专门做涉外律师, 年入百万进军

发布于 02-17

I passed the Test of English Majors Grade Eight and obtained legal Professional Qualification Certificate. I mainly focus on foreign affairs and am going to have annal income of 1,000,000 yuan.

赞同



合肥律师苏义飞

安徽金亚太律师事务所 合伙人律师

104 人赞同了该回答

For example, a lawyer earn 1,000,000 yuan, he will have about 500,000 yuan after paying tax.

举个例子说吧, 一个律师创收100万, 扣除律所管理费10%左右、营业税6%、个人所得税35%, 剩下就是他拿到手的收入。律师办案需要成本。差旅费。人情费等没有扣除。

Picture 3

Picture 3 is a Zhihu webpage with the question “What is the real income of lawyers?”. As shown in the picture, the second answerer has a blue badge with a white tick in it: this means that this user’s identity is verified. In his answer, he said that on average a lawyer generates one million CNY. After deducting a 10 percent management fee for the firm, 6 percent in cooperation tax and 35 percent in personal income tax, the remaining amount is annual income. According to his answer, an average

lawyer will earn around 500,000 Chinese yuan a year. However, another research shows a different story.



Figure 3 and 4: Lawyer average income in Shenzhen (left) and Beijing (right)

These figures are provided by the Lawyer, Judge and Prosecutor Union in 2018, showing the average income of lawyers in Beijing, Shenzhen, Guangzhou and Shanghai in 2017. Shanghai, Shenzhen and Guangzhou had samples of more than 2000 each and Beijing had a sample size of five thousand: these data reveal a number that is nowhere near what this lawyer is claiming in his answer. It is very much possible that all the lawyers in the firm he works for are extremely successful and indeed earn CNY 500,000 a year, but without specifying the context, people seeing this post might be misled by his answer as he is a verified user.

On the one hand, Zhihu is one the few sources where people can find specific information, mitigating the gap between well networked individuals and XX individuals, to some extent providing agency to individuals with limited resources. On the other hand, the possibility of damage caused by misleading information is significant. During the pre-university stage, when choosing their destination, there are various sources of information available, so the impact of Zhihu does not seem too severe, but in the studying and pre-return stages, the more worrying impacts of Zhihu become visible.

4.4 Summary

In Summary, participants did include potential implications of transnational knowledge application for their considerations of higher education. However, while UK educated participants thought about the implications of transnational knowledge application after they have decided to pursue overseas education, the potential implications of transnational knowledge application were part of the reason why China educated participants chose to stay in China for their higher education. As presented in this chapter, various historical, social and cultural contexts had influenced how participants made their decisions. Participants conceptualised and perceived these contexts based on information gathered by themselves from different sources. However, while some information was gathered from credible

sources such as university rankings, informal sources such as Zhihu platform and family network seems to have more significant influence on participants. These seemingly in-depth, intimate or “authoritative” informal sources of information not only influenced participants’ decision on higher education, but also affect how participants conceived their career prospect and progression, timing and frequency of self-reflection and flexibility in terms of individual and professional identity.

Chapter 5: Studying/university life

As discussed in the literature review, knowledge transfer, especially in a transnational context can be much more complex than some scholars have described. Therefore, in order to comprehensively comprehend how participants went through knowledge internalisation and eventually understand how they apply their knowledge, it was essential for me to first explore their processes of knowledge acquisition. To do so, I needed to investigate what they expected to get in universities, how they perceived knowledge, and how and what they thought they had learned. Furthermore, if they had considered knowledge application in China whilst attending university, it would be important to explore what they viewed as acquirable and acquisition-worthy for the Chinese context, how they evaluated this, and what they had done to initiate and improve the process of knowledge application.

5.1 Expectations and reality

During the first year of university, overseas educated participants recalled experiencing various degrees of what they believed to be “cultural shock”. Throughout the analysis, I observed that their experiences are significantly related to their educational backgrounds. There are three types of education background among overseas educated participants, and they are: UK based A level/IB, China based A level and Chinese high school education.

Adaptation and adjustment

In comparison, participants who had gained an A level in the UK felt the least shock when they started their university education. They are more familiar with UK educational norms and had reasonable expectations about what university education would be like. Some of the shock experienced by these participants were more institution-specific rather than about the UK higher education system generally:

“...we had something called LSE 101 or LSE 100 in the first year, and...it was so obvious that we weren’t treated like students, more like future researchers.” (The gavel wielder, Overseas Law)

LSE 100 is a compulsory unit for all undergraduate students at LSE and their aim is to introduce and encourage research by conducting group research projects based on popular issues. For example, according to the LSE homepage, students enrolling in September 2021 will conduct group research on artificial intelligence (AI). The gavel wielder felt that being positioned as a researcher at an early

stage greatly enhanced his engagement in and adjustment towards the UK higher education style, an effect that has also been evidenced in other research. A study conducted by Tian and Lowe (2013) found that formative feedback helped to minimise the Confucius influence and assisted Chinese students in adapting to the UK education environment more rapidly and readily. They argue that formative feedback provides more frequent and detail-rich communication and such method of communication counters the “Confucian doctrine” without endangering the “Chineseness” of Chinese students (Tian and Lowe, 2013). The wanderer expressed a similar feeling induced by another method of communication used by his teacher:

“...we heard of the use of Wechat (a social media app popularised in China, similar to WhatsApp) in the University of Bolton, and we ask[ed] our teacher if he is willing to try it as well, and at least for me it works so much better than email, because I don’t need to be very formal, and it made me feel a more equal relationship between my teacher and me.” (The wanderer, Overseas IT)

The use of Wechat at the University of Bolton is actually part of the research project conducted by Cowley et al. According to their findings, this type of communication style and frequency has a positive correlation with Chinese students’ engagement, performance and motivation (Cowley et al., 2017). Other research suggests that Wechat plays an important role in Chinese universities, in some cases even works as part of the digital infrastructure (Mao, 2015; Gan, 2016). However, my interviews with domestic educated students did not highlight the use of Wechat as a factor for improving engagement, performance and motivation. What I can agree with, based on my interviews with UK educated participants, is the argument that the use of a frequent and interactive communication style can potentially help the process of adaptation and adjustment for Chinese students in UK universities.

For participants graduating from UK A level institutions, adaptation and adjustment to the UK education system and style was not a theme that was apparent in their interviews. In general, these 13 participants with UK based A level experience had a rather peaceful first year of university with regards to education. Their significant memories were mostly related to social or daily life:

“...I didn’t stay in university accommodation in the first year and I was swamped with all the little things like setting up broadband and figuring out when to take out the trash.” (The 955 guy, Overseas IT)

“...my A level school was in a tiny town with like 3 Chinese in total, and when I got to XX it was a bit weird seeing so many Chinese and [I] joined a Chinese society in a UK university.” (The gentleman, Overseas Law)

In follow-up interviews, I asked whether they had experienced significant shock in terms of education style and content, and most of them did not seem to recall any major difficulties:

“...oh yes, I had that LSE 100 as well... (Interviewer: Were you surprised that they asked you to do research in the first year?) I wouldn’t say surprised at all, maybe a bit that we were mixed (across subjects and course).” (The badge carrier, Overseas Law)

“(Interviewer: Did you feel like you needed to adapt and adjust your learning style going from A level to UK university?) ...yes, a bit, but...for me it was more like extend the style from A level, not getting a new one.” (The camera man, Overseas Law)

On this particular topic, all other overseas educated participants with an A level background answered with the same idea as the camera man:

“... (comparing to A level) I read more, and I need deeper understanding of a topic, but that’s it; I am not doing anything I hadn’t done before. It was like riding a bike in [a] plain field and riding a bike uphill with rain, it is a bit more but not different in essence.” (The preparer, Overseas IT)

The other 9 overseas educated participants who finished their secondary education in China have different significant memories. For 4 of them, the first year abroad was new and shocking in many ways, but how education is carried out was specifically mentioned. For example, all 4 of these participants expressed how surprised they were when they realised that they did not have a full timetable:

“...I thought there was something wrong with the system. I kept checking my blackboard page (a virtual learning environment) and I even emailed my course coordinator saying there must be something wrong with my calendar.” (The G men, Overseas Law)

Even though some participants were aware of the differences in timetable density, they were still surprised by the extent of their “freedom”:

“...I knew I wouldn’t have a packed timetable like the ones we have in China, but I didn’t expect it to be as little as 26 hours a week.” (The wanderer, Overseas IT)

This newfound “freedom” was not necessarily a positive change for them. Surprised or not, 3 participants were uncomfortable with this freedom, as represented by the Savile Row:

“I was so lost for the first...3 months, first semester I suppose. I was doing 14 hours a day in my final year of high school and in year one I had 14 hours a week.” (Savile Row, Overseas Law)

Some participants showed different thoughts when comparing their schedule not to their high school life, but to their friends:

“...among my friends I had the highest number of lessons and lab sessions. I was envious, very envious in the first year, but in year 2 and 3 I felt much better because I didn’t have to worry about my time management that much?” (The family pride, Overseas IT)

An individual’s adjustment to timetabling is not exclusive to overseas educated participants: similar comments can be found among domestic educated participants because Chinese universities do not practice a full timetable either:

“...it was so weird to go from 7am to 10pm every day to only a few hours a day. I was spacing out in my dorm room and did nothing.” (Golden glasses, Domestic Law)

This adjustment and adaptation with regards to the timetable appears to be similar to research focusing on teacher-led teaching models and student-centred teaching models. Within the domain of comparative education, several researchers suggest that the “hollowness” felt by Chinese students induced by the relatively empty timetable indicates the lack of a sufficient model for student-centred teaching within secondary education in China (Henze et al., 2012; Huang, 2007; Qiang, 2003; Tsegay, 2019; Zegergish et al., 2018). Some argue that this could potentially link to lack of transition and acknowledgement (Chan and Lo, 2008; Yang, 2015) whilst some believe this can be improved through the means of communication and tools utilised by teachers. In their research, Lau and Chen (2013) assert that compared with Hong Kong, mainland China’s secondary education system does not diversify middle school and high school to provide an environment that helps students to transition from instruction-led learning, which is common in middle school in both Hong Kong and Beijing, to self-regulated learning, which is dominant in higher education across greater China. To further explore this issue, Wang et al. suggest that tools of instruction can make significant impact to counter the inequity caused by large class size (on average 52 students in middle school compared with 16.7 in the US) and ultimately improve student performance and encourage self-regulated learning. From a different perspective, Bernet (2019) and Shieh (2014) argue that Chinese students were not familiar with setting (micro) goals and plans that prompt self-regulated learning. Based on the interviews I conducted, Bernet and Shieh’s argument seems to match with some of my participants’ experiences, which will be expanded further in the following section.

Another issue relating to adjustment and adaptation raised by all participants is how the assessment is structured, or more specifically, all forms of assessment on top of an end-of-year final assessment. Similar to the A level system in the UK, in high school Chinese students only have final examination at the end of the academic year. However, universities in both China and the UK have various methods and structure of assessments which presents new challenges for participants in different ways. In terms of teaching and learning, 13 out of 22 IT participants believed it changed how they study:

“...we had separate exams after each chapter and they all accounted for the final result we get, so essentially, I had to learn each chapter individually instead of the whole year as a stage.” (The dragon slayer, Overseas IT)

“...what I really don’t like is chopping the year/grade into small tests, I needed to learn in fragments.” (The bearded gamer, Overseas IT)

For domestic educated participants, their main concern was the confusion caused by unclear standards:

“...I never quite know how the mark was calculated...well I know it contains attendance and “daily performance”, but that’s such a vague term...” (The collector, Domestic IT)

“...we were quite stressful for that because we did not have [many] small tests, so it all depends on performance in lessons and interaction.” (The farmer, Domestic Law)

Through my own investigation, it appears that Chinese universities can be a little vague on how assessment is structured and calculated. For example, the Northwest University of Political Science and Law stated that:

“Section 3, article 22: overall course result is constructed with daily result and final exam result. For compulsory units, daily result should not exceed 30% of the overall result and for optional units, daily result should not exceed 50% of the overall result. Daily result includes class discussion, answering questions, finishing homework, taking notes and attendance check etc. ...” (Student management regulation, 2017)

No documents were found on how teachers should quantify these criteria and awarding marks for activities such as taking notes can potentially limit the learning style of students. Overseas law graduates were the only group that did not mention this issue, so I asked them in the follow-up interviews, and they reported that they did not feel it was too severe:

“...well, we did have essay form assignments, but...they were more like extended exams really.” (The vegan, Overseas Law)

“...if I have to say whether there are any differences [they] would be change from taking notes to writing essay drafts, but it was not that different, at least I did not feel like that big a difference.” (The G men, Overseas Law)

“Head start”

Among overseas educated participants, different education backgrounds are believed to hold various benefits during their undergraduate studies. These benefits are argued to be study-related, and employment-related. In this section I will focus on the study-related part and discuss the employment-related part in a subsequent section.

For participants who attended Chinese high school education, their friends with an A level background were seemingly better at the time and effort management and had a more comprehensive understanding of the world and society in general. 4 participants viewed this in comparative terms, as the drafter explains:

“...we were “unleashed” from China. For most of us (Chinese students) this [was] probably the very first time we live[d] truly independently, and we were not able to control ourselves from all the gaming and drinking, but [friends with A level background] were able to (control themselves).” (The colourful one, Overseas IT)

Initially, I understood this as work-life balance, where Chinese students who had been through A levels had experience in managing their own time. Though 10 participants agreed with my analysis, the major benefit perceived by China educated participants has more to do with managing the order and priority of work:

“...it is a simply scheduling issue. What we used to have is a fully packed and managed schedule. You have lessons in the daytime, you go to the shadow classes, and you go home and complete homework, all the subjects. Now is different: you may or may not have class on Monday morning, what do you do? Which homework do you do first? You may not understand this, but we didn’t have priority (during Chinese high school), but back then we need[ed] to understand the difficulty of each homework, check the deadline and then sort out a whole schedule. It took me a whole year to be able to do it, but they (Chinese students who did A level) were able to sort it out instantly.” (Old England, Overseas Law)

In the first instance I thought that the black letter referred to efficiency and engagement, but other participants highlighted the issue from another angle:

“...let’s explain it through cooking: we are making a tomato sauce pasta today. I could have slice[d] the tomato while frying the garlic and start boiling the water needed to cook the pasta, but...at least [in] the first few weeks we (Chinese educated students) were just standing there while frying the garlic, then the tomato, then the water, then the pasta. You (A level students) can finish the whole plate in 15 minutes, but we will take 45 minutes and the pasta might be soggy or the tomato might be cold.” (The gavel wielder, Overseas Law)

For anyone who is not so familiar with culinary procedure, the shot caller’s (OI9) explanation might be easier to understand:

“...imagine a production line, we are more used to work on one thing then move to the next one...not that we were unable to multi-task, but we didn’t think of it in the first place.”

Combining the opinions provided by 7 participants, I summarise “head start” as having the initiative to analyse and arrange tasks, especially during the first year of university. However, if this is viewed from an outcome of efficiency or quality, through analysis and follow-up interviews with some of the 7 participants, it becomes clear that their feelings of envy lie elsewhere. 5 of them agreed that it relates to having the initiative to individually customise a schedule for work, rather than following the order given by teachers, as the following demonstrates:

“...for example, on 1st of October I received an assignment A due in late December, on 1st of November I received an assignment B due in early December and [in] late November I received an assignment C due in 2 weeks. What I would have done back then is to complete in the order of A, B and C, as the order I received them; but my roommate back then [who had] graduated from an A level school, she would check which lecture is needed for completing each assignment, how much time is needed for each assignment and make plan[s] according to that.” (The wanderer, Overseas IT)

It is worth noting, however, that this is about initiative and not about ability: it is not about an inability to analyse but is simply not having the idea to do so. As a Chinese researcher myself, I initially fell for the stereotype and thought that Chinese education cultivated the instinct to follow orders, but my participants see it differently:

“...I must agree that there are indeed a lot of Chinese students [who] are just following orders, but at least in my case, it is because the fully packed schedule didn’t give me any room to make personal management and arrangement.” (The bearded gamer, Overseas IT)

Most of the participants indicated that they were able to make individual arrangement[s] in the second and third years. By this point, it came naturally and was no longer an exclusive ability held by A level educated participants, hence the title of this section, a “head start”.

Another example of a head start is mainly mentioned by UK educated law participants and a few UK educated IT participants; however, only one UK educated IT participant saw it as a benefit. I summarise this benefit as an understanding of the world and society. The reason why this benefit needs to be summarised, rather than given a clear definition or name is because the benefit itself is described in various ways by different participants, but they all point to the same issue:

“...it was very obvious when [our] teacher started using news or “well-known” social issues as examples. Most classmates at least know or have heard of these news or debates, but we were completely lost.” (The gentleman, Overseas Law)

“...like, one of the things I now [feel] ashamed of is how little attention I paid to the outside world. When we played mock front-part service, I [could] never play the customer because I knew nothing about the norms or situation of businesses in various industries.” (The cameraman, Overseas Law)

When asked about this benefit, UK educated law participants with A level experience did not perceive a significant gap between them and their classmates with Chinese high school education:

“...if I have to say, I would say some of them didn’t follow [the] news actively, but even so, I don’t think that made a big difference back then.” (Savile Row, Overseas Law)

I repeated this quote to the following UK educated law participants with Chinese education backgrounds, and one of the examples provided by the vegan illustrates the benefit from a realistic standpoint:

“...one of my most vivid memories from university is about this...it was my second-year criminal law exam, I got low 60s and one of my best friends got high 70s, so I [begged] him to show me the marked paper: on top of the theoretical part of analysis and evaluation, he used the example of a Japanese politician [who had committed suicide] in [the] early 90s to showcase the changes and involvement of politics in law making. That was the very moment I understand what “书到用时方恨少 (It is only when it comes time to apply knowledge that you regret not acquiring enough of it)” means.” (The vegan, Overseas Law)

On this issue, UK educated law participants generally agreed that a comprehensive understanding of the world and society is an important aspect of knowledge, whereas four China educated law

participants argued that, to some extent, it is even more important than professional knowledge. On the other hand, both UK and China educated IT participants, despite their secondary education background, hold a different opinion:

“I think for us the changes in the world are definitely not as important as changes in the industry...I might follow industry news, but I don’t think follow[ing] normal news is any help to my work.” (The dragon slayer, Overseas IT)

This quote is very representative in terms of how IT participants perceive this issue. Perhaps comparatively speaking, the profession and practice of law have more in connection with the wider context of society and changes in industry beyond law:

“Law [is] basically services, so it is a crucial part of our jobs to know the entity receiving our services. Based on ones’ profession and speciality, one must know the changes in their service area.” (Mother Teresa, Overseas Law)

As to how long-lasting this benefit can be, China educated law participants believe that it depends on Chinese high school educated participants and themselves:

“...it comes down to how fast [you] can... be pick up this habit, exactly like (getting used to using) email. If you pick up the habit of reading news daily fast, then they (people with A level/overseas experience) hold no advantage against you; but if you cannot make it a natural part of your life, they will always be ahead.”

As pointed out in this quote, almost all (37) participants believed that the habits or norms cultivated at university stage cannot be simply shaken off and thus have a significant impact on their career prospects, either for good or for bad. In combining these perspectives, as overseas educated participants with or without an A level background, both believe that the “head start” held by students with an A level background is only significant in the first year: students who have developed and adapted to the UK education system should carry forward these same characteristics into their employment in China.

Teaching and learning

Participants with experience of the China-based A level system thought that they possessed a decent understanding of the UK education system or “style” as described by the journalist (Overseas IT), and turned out to be more surprised than participants with a normal Chinese high school education since they did not have much clear or little expectations or assumptions:

“I kind of imagined lessons like the ones I see in American movies. It turned out so different from it and even more different from a Chinese lesson, but I really liked it... many of them (Chinese friends) spent a whole year...fully adjust[ing] to it.” (The shot caller, Overseas IT)

China-based A level participants, on the other hand, thought that their A level experience provided them with sufficient insight into how education works in the UK:

“I was so embarrassed; I gave advice to many other Chinese freshmen based on my A level experience in Shanghai, but it turned out to be completely different.” (The American dream, Overseas Law)

“...I self-learned some of the materials on the Moodle (with the way taught by their Chinese A level teacher) but when I actually had the lessons, I realised that’s how it should be taught and that’s how it should be learned.” (The preparer, Overseas IT)

This quote brings out an issue that exists in many of the interviews: participants’ envisioned or preferred method of teaching and learning versus how knowledge is delivered and received in an UK university. To start with, 15 overseas educated participants (out of 22) mentioned that they were more used to a top-down approach to teaching instead of the more interactive approach in the UK. Especially among law participants, 7 out of 11 specifically spoke of the class sizes being generally smaller than they expected. Six saw this as a good thing:

“... especially seminars, we had...5?6 people in one group... it did take some time to get used to, but it was very helpful for me to ask questions and sort out knowledge point (知识点).” (The badge carrier, Overseas Law)

However, the other nine participants did not find smaller classes helpful:

“... we had around 15 people in our lab section... I know in theory a more active classroom can be more helpful but that cannot apply to [everyone], especially I got nervous when I am forced to speak up, not to mention in English. I don’t need to discuss to be able to learn, right?” (The 955 guy, Overseas IT)

This n issue was also raised or recognised by 15 (out of 21) law participants, as exemplified in the following quote:

“...it is not like I don’t like discussion and interaction, but I would prefer them to happen after class. Any in-class discussion or interaction will cause me to miss my notes.” (The G men, Overseas Law)

In similar discussions in the interviews, two trends surfaced: the breakdown of knowledge into individual points and the separation of taking lessons and learning. As a Chinese person myself, I am aware of and familiar with the concept of “knowledge point”. But to ensure clarity and objectivity, I asked participants who had mentioned this concept how would they define it. A few were taken aback by the question and unable to provide a logical answer, and one showed me the notes from their recent self-development course, which coincided with the definition given by Sparta:

“Knowledge point is a piece of information you just have to memorise that [is], quite honestly, mostly for the sake of exams.” (Sparta, Domestic Law)

By using examples that agree with this definition, the iron rice bowl guy explained what he thinks a knowledge point is:

“Knowledge point... like a math formula, a date, place and names of a historical event, or a poet, a physical property of an iron particle.” (Tesla mania, Domestic Law)

This conception and definition of knowledge point provides part of the reason why participants separate taking lessons and learning. During a discussion on the structure of knowledge, the gentlemen (OL3) complained about its supposed “vagueness”:

“...one of the things that I really don’t like (about studying in the UK) is that teachers never put knowledge point on their PowerPoint and readings. I have to highlight/mark (划) them myself.”

After that exchange, I asked all the subsequent participants for their views on PowerPoint use by teachers and what they would want teachers to have done. Out of my expectation, 6 (out of the remaining 8) overseas educated participants agreed that, to some extent, PowerPoint and other materials are too “vague” for studying. The camera man explained this further:

“... like, let’s say the PowerPoint of law history, it would have points such as the establishment of XX law or the reform of blah-blah-blah, but then the teacher will say when did that happen and what case that was; [that is] the information that should be put on the PowerPoint.” (The cameraman, Overseas Law)

This remained a confusing issue for me until my first interview with one of the domestic educated law participants. Normally I would not interrupt participants when they were talking fluently according to the life grid; but when wig girl (Domestic Law) joked about how many paid lessons she went through before she realised the lessons on Bilibili (a Chinese website similar to YouTube) were the best, I had to stop her and ask what she meant. Apparently, it is commonplace for law students in China to use paid or free online lessons for “studying”. According to their preferred career path and teaching style,

they can select from a range of platforms that specialise in university-level law lessons. I confirmed this statement with other domestic law participants and despite their platform preferences, they all agreed that online lessons are an essential part of their study. When talking about what she regretted in retrospect, Tesla mania (Domestic Law) hinted at their perceptions of lessons and learning:

“...one of the things I really regret is not getting used to typing instead of writing for notes. I couldn’t recognise my handwriting so I couldn’t study afterwards... basically I didn’t learn anything from those lessons.”

Eventually, it was Savile Row who fully explained their perceptions to me:

“... Lessons are like...index, are lists of knowledge points that you should learn, and then you go on and study those knowledge points.” (Savile Row, Overseas Law)

From another angle, the minimalist explained this situation in terms of efficiency:

“...teachers don’t have time to explain everything in class. They go through all the knowledge points that you need to know and then the teachers in after-class institutions would explain in detail.” (The minimalist, Overseas IT)

By analysing potential correlation and follow-up semi-structured interviews, it might be the case that this tendency to break teaching into knowledge points and the separation of lessons and studying is related to whether or not they have attended after-school institutions. It is also important to understand that these after-school institutions are not the same as extra curriculum institutions, they teach the same curriculum with more comprehensive detail and are more exam-focused. These institutions are very popular in Japan and South Korea as well, and are called “cram schools” or “shadow lessons” by some scholars. The interview data, and some of the follow-up interview data demonstrates that participants who do not possess this tendency either left China before high school or went through high school when after-school institutions were not as popular; or, as described by the older sister (Domestic Law), “critical for anyone who wants to get into a good university.” Personally, even though I studied in a Chinese high school for one year, after-school institutions were not popular in my local area. At that point, we just heard rumours that almost everyone in HeNan province went to these institutions. I contacted my high school friends and asked them whether after-school institutions were popular in the more intense years of high school after I left. They suggested that perhaps a handful of people had personal tutors for some of the subjects, but that full-scale attendance in after-school institutions did not happen in the area in which I grew up. Full-scale attendance refers to attending lessons for all compulsory subjects. According to friends with younger siblings, the normalisation of full-scale attendance in after-school institutions happened in Guangzhou between 2010 and 2012. A news story in 2012 pointed out that an estimated 80 percent of primary and secondary students in Guangzhou were regularly attending after-school institutions

(<https://learning.sohu.com/20120524/n343964870.shtml>). However, this does not fully explain why university students are taking regular off-campus lessons. As discussed above, these after-school/cram/shadow lessons are very popular in Japan and South Korea as well, but some brief research reveals that there are not many similar platforms in South Korea or Japan, nor can I find evidence of the existence of these lessons taking place in higher education. One possible answer provided by in this research data is linked to the teaching materials used in Chinese universities and course structure.

However, it is possible that the situation might change drastically in 2022. On the evening of 24 July 2021, a statement was released by the Ministry of Education on behalf of the General Office of the Chinese Communist Party, a department normally responsible for administrative work for the central office of the party. This statement announced the release of a new policy specifically aimed at after-school education institutions, banning these institutions from profiting and “capitalising on education”. The statement claims to place strict limitations on the operating times, location, content and employable personnel of these institutions. In response, on 26 July 2021, the Monday after the late Saturday release of the statement, Xindongfang, one of the oldest and largest after-school education institutions, announced their new plan for summer camp, a 45-day cruise ship camp, potentially bypassing the new policy by staying at sea, even though the detail of the policy is yet to be released.

Shanghai cancelled English as one of the three compulsory lessons for primary school students. Commentators have different opinions on the effect of such a policy. Some argue that this will encourage parents to send students to overseas education at an earlier stage, whilst some believe this will create an extra barrier to overseas education. If such a policy is implemented and achieves its intended purpose, students who are now in primary school and middle school might be ideal candidates for future research in order to understand the different impacts of shadow school.

Teaching materials

When reflecting upon future planning and direction, the coffee addict (Domestic Law) said it was difficult to decide which law to take in his second year, and I asked whether their choices were limited by those that were selected in the first year. His answer surprised me: “... no we don’t do profession lesson (专业课) in the first year, we did foundation lessons like Chinese, English and principles of Marxism...we did have subject-specific foundation lessons. For us [these] were history of law, principle of law and constitution, but they were very vague, like an introduction.” IT participants present a similar or even worse situation: their first-year units included Chinese and maths, only 2 out of 11 had basic coding lessons in the first year and they graduated from the same university. This

matches Savile Row's belief that lessons are like index; however, Savile Row graduated from a UK university, and her interviews reveal that she did not experience a similar course structure. Through the analysis, I have come to suspect that Zhihu played an essential role in cascading this ideology. 8 out of 22 overseas educated participants and 16 out of 21 domestic participants searched for "advice on first year as law/IT university student" or "things law/IT students should know" on Zhihu. When asked in follow-up interviews, the 5 domestic educated participants that did not conduct this search explained either that Zhihu was not as popular then or that they sought advice from other sources. However, even though these participants did not take advice on methods of learning, along with other participants, they did consider or even follow advice on other aspects.

5.2 Universalness and translation

When participants talked about the second and third years of university, perhaps because they had adapted and adjusted more to the style of education, they started to focus on the content of knowledge. Their discussions mainly focused on their doubts and opinions about improvement of the content, but from my perspective, these discussions also indicate that they had thought about knowledge application in the Chinese context, whether in terms of knowledge conversion from institution to workplace or conversion from the UK context to the Chinese context. As discussed in the literature review, within the field of institution to industry knowledge transfer, the use of case studies is believed to be one of the most effective educational tools to induce efficient knowledge transfer, alongside placements and the debatable non-random team structure/assignment. However, the effectiveness of case study use in the transnational context is not yet fully researched. Furthermore, the significance of teacher with work experience is mainly discussed in the context of Japan and Germany, two countries that have comprehensive and mature occasional education systems. Under a UK-China transnational context, the following section discusses how participants perceive these arguments and their thoughts on what could prompt transnational application knowledge.

Limitation of knowledge taught

A common theme raised by all participants is the insufficiency or limitations of knowledge taught in university; however, UK and Chinese university educated participants have different views on what is needed to improve their understanding of the knowledge that is taught. In general, UK university educated participants wanted more diversity or more specific cases in their teaching and Chinese university educated participants wanted teachers with practical experience on related subjects. Readers might notice that I use "wanted" in the preceding sentence: since the interviews were conducted one to eleven years after their graduation, participants described how they felt and thought

back then, and I also asked them what they now think about those views, either in the first or follow-up interviews.

As mentioned above, in general, UK university educated participants wanted greater diversity in the case studies or practical examples used for teaching. Though participants themselves do not necessarily realise this, in my opinion, this appeal derives from their concerns about knowledge transfer. Out of 22 UK university educated interviews, 17 participants had at some point mentioned that they wanted diversity due to considerations relating to working outside of the UK. Mainly appearing in dialogues about group projects and large case studies, participants started to question the applicability of knowledge taught in these context-specific real-life examples:

“...back than my thought was, yes this is good, but I want to go back to China, how applicable is that?” (The OG, Overseas Law)

However, without me needing to ask, the calligrapher continued the conversation with his thoughts on cases and examples used in teaching:

“Following that three-month-long project, we had quite a few in the remaining academic year, and in the final year we had whole units like family law and human rights law surrounding one big case...now I think of it, [it] is the details in big cases that helps me in my work, not necessarily the context.”

This idea that rich, detailed cases are more beneficial than context-appropriate cases is agreed with and mentioned by 5 other UK educated law participants, despite their thoughts whilst at university:

“...but if you ask me now, the “world-wide cases” used specifically catered for us international students are not as meaningful as some of the more...local? Small cases? That have more details. Those details turned out to be the key to understand[ing] the rationale and it was very helpful for the first couple years of work.” (The gavel wielder, Overseas Law)

UK educated IT participants, on the other hand, believe the need for diversity is essential both in retrospect and in the present day:

“...don’t get me wrong, I think it is great to use local cases to help us understand, but some of the cases used in my opinion [are] very London-bounded. It (knowledge/method applied) might not extend to the whole UK, let alone the world.” (The journalist, Overseas IT)

“...the most important thing I learned in these years is, standards, norms and expectations are highly influenced by [the wider] environment, and this was already obvious when I worked in the UK.” (The bearded gamer, Overseas IT)

And the diversity that is requested by UK educated IT participants is not solely limited to context, but also extends to their related potential career paths. Among 8 UK educated IT participants who had not determined which career path they would take prior to their graduation, 6 mentioned that they would like to have more career specific content and cases/examples:

“...I remember not knowing what I can do, not what I should do but what I can do, till like, the second half of my final year. Not that I did not know what career is possible for computer science, but exactly how the knowledge can be applied in each scenario.” (The colourful one, Overseas IT)

“...back then I knew computer science [could] lead to game develop[ment] and design, but [wasn't] sure exactly how until I had my placement, and that did not feel right.” (The bearded gamer, Overseas IT)

However, when these participants were asked whether they now think university should have more career specific content, their thoughts were not firm:

“...depends on how those content and cases are implemented I guess, there [is] the attract[ive] part and [the] super annoying part of work that are equally important. If you don't show the whole picture, you might confuse people, but showing the whole picture might mean not enough detail and depth needed to understand what you might get if you go down that road.” (The shot caller, Overseas IT)

“...but now I don't think university should tell them too much. Every year we will have some intern, domestic and overseas educated alike, come to our place and, how should I put it, assume too much about what we do and how we do. Not that they are wrong, but, like they think Persona is just another Pokémon game¹⁹.” (The preparer, Overseas IT)

Interestingly, the 3 UK educated IT participants who had decided on the career path they were going to take have the same stance with regards to career-related content and cases in their courses:

“...I was invited to showcase a project we were working on in XX university (a 985/211 university in China), and I said you should master graphic-related skills if you want to join a game design company, and a few weeks later, Unreal Engine 5 was published and suddenly scripting is more important than graphic mapping.” (The toy guy, Overseas IT)

¹⁹ This is not an easily understood metaphor but to anyone who has play these two games this is as amazing as a metaphor can be.

Even though the toy guy contacted me after the release of Unreal Engine 5 and wanted to correct his statement regarding scripting over graphic mapping, arguably the principle still applies: the linkage between certain types of knowledge and specific careers can change due to technological development or even legal requirements, therefore learning something solely for the pursuit of a specific career might not be the best idea. In addition to the UK-China transfer of knowledge, and contrary to how some participants described the strength of their intention to return, consideration of potential opportunities for work outside of China was significant in 5 of the participants' dialogues:

“...what worried me was, although the course is about understanding both legal systems (his course is in law and Hong Kong Law), many of the cases used [are] in the position of a British lawyer/law firm working with a lawyer or company in Hong Kong. It is too one-sided.” (The uninhabited one, Overseas Law)

“...the thing is, this is nothing like what I have heard working in the US is like; especially in my field (CISSP²⁰) where the majority is in the US, real life cases from the US might be more helpful.” (The wanderer, Overseas IT)

Even though Hong Kong is part of China, due to its linked but separated legal system, practising law in Hong Kong requires a separate licence and qualifications, and vice versa for a Hong Kong lawyer wanting to practise law in China. In the US, each state has their own legal examination and non-interchangeable licence to practise law. In the field of IT, the same principle can be applied to specific areas. For example, the wanderer holds a CISSP certification that is recognised worldwide; however, if he took the CISP exam, which is the Chinese equivalent of the CISSP, the preferred choice for state-owned businesses or a government branch in China, he will have difficulty being recognised in other countries and areas. Therefore, in terms of knowledge transfer, Hong Kong and states in the US should be considered as individual entities due to their systematic barriers. With regards to whether participants agreed with their in-retrospect comments or not, none of my participants have worked in areas outside of the UK and China, therefore this can only be answered in future research.

Chinese university educated IT participants wanted more for their university education. As well as their appeals for more real-life examples, some also mentioned that they wanted teachers who have real life practice. Even though both UK educated and Chinese educated participants wanted more practical examples, the rationale for this and their exact requirements are quite different. The rationale for more practical examples derives from a general belief by Chinese university participants that the curriculum is too vague in Chinese universities. In slight contrast to what UK educated participants wanted, Chinese university educated participants wanted more universal and “big” cases.

²⁰ Certified Information Systems Security Professional.

In coherence with the earlier discussion regarding teaching materials, 17 out of 21 Chinese university educated participants suggested that the Chinese university curriculum is too vague and lacks specificity and focus. For 13 of them, they were unhappy about the paucity of profession-related units in the first year:

“...my older brother (even though her older brother is two years her senior, for systemic reasons they started university in the same year) was already learning property law [whilst] I was taking compulsory “contemporary economy and politics” units.” (The endangered species, Domestic Law)

“...I know maths is important, it is absolutely essential for us, but I need to know how to combine maths into building databases, not just [an] expansion of high school maths.” (The memory palace, Domestic IT)

In their current perspectives, they now understand that these units are the foundation for profession-related units in the second and third years, but some still contend that the correlation should be more clearly pointed out:

“...by [the] third or fourth year, I kind of realised that okay, they were all building up [to] the more complicated professional units, but they should let us know so we know why we learned those things, you know, give us purposes and aims.” (The whistle-blower, Domestic IT)

“...it was like, boom, all the units I had in my first and second years were pieces of a puzzle and when they [were] suddenly placed on the puzzle board it made perfect sense, but I did not even know there [was] a puzzle board.” (The businessman, Domestic Law)

These comparatively positive voices, however, only came from 5 participants, and the rest of the 21 Chinese university educated participants currently still agree with their original thoughts. Six even claim that Chinese university education offers very little help in building their professional knowledge and ability. Their arguments focus on one shared comment, the lack of practical experience of their teachers:

“I understand that being able to teach law well does not necessarily require the teacher to be good lawyer themselves, but to teach units like “lawyer and notary practice” they should at least get a lawyer as a guest lecturer...” (Tesla mania, Domestic Law)

“...I always thought a good coder will not be a good teacher, but a good teacher should at least code before. In one of the lab sections, I asked [if I should] reframe

that line, and by the way he types, it was so obvious that he [had] not typed over 100 lines in his life.” (The onmyoji, Domestic IT)

The example provided by the onmyoji could be a highly subjective and isolated case, but overall, 11 Chinese university educated participants provided examples of their teachers not having practical experience; not necessarily experience as a lawyer or engineer/programmer, but experience with practising core abilities in the related professions, as simple as typing lines of code.

As for the materials used in teaching, UK university educated participants wanted diversified and detail-rich examples and cases, which was quite opposite to what the Chinese university educated participants wanted. In general, Chinese educated participants preferred “big” cases and examples. To be more specific, Chinese law participants wanted influential cases involving big companies:

“...I remember in our competition law lessons we all wanted the case of Tencent v. Qihoo. It was the first big anti-monopoly in the new OTC market since the [publication] of the new law, and it [had] all the twists and turns you can imagine in an IT anti-monopoly case.” (Sparta, Domestic Law)

“...from the top 10 cases announced by the supreme court, the teacher used case No.5, but that only went up to the city level, case No.6 went up to the province level which can definitely be more suitable.” (Golden glasses, Domestic Law)

Out of 10 Chinese university educated law participants, only 2 did not mention that they wanted “big” cases. Combining the appeals made by these 8 participants, I believe that their conception of “big” cases refers to cases involving high-level entities, for example, province-level government bodies and national/international companies; multiple articles, preferably relatively and important new articles; relatively heavy sentences; and most importantly, cases reported by top-tier mainstream media. Overall, this would equate to an “all-in-one” package of cases within a specific field of law. To ascertain whether they felt their opinions were still reasonable and applicable, I asked these and other law participants, both UK and Chinese university educated, in follow-up interviews. Within their answers, instead of education background, it seems that length of working experience has a greater influence. For participants who have worked for less than five years, apart from two that think it does not matter what the university teaches, the other three participants hold a similar idea:

“...in my opinion, these “all-in-one” cases should not be used as teaching materials but should be used as exam questions, to see if students can break down and sort out the complexity, which is essentially what one will be doing in actual work.” (The coffee addict, Domestic Law)

“...Considering actually working as a lawyer, I would say the best way to teach is to use small but focused, detail-rich cases to illustrate knowledge application, then use

big cases as training materials, sort of like you don't build abs with sit-ups, you test the strength of your abs with sit-ups." (The G men, Overseas Law)

Two law participants who have worked for more than 5 years disagreed with the use of "big" cases, referencing their experiences as mentors for interns:

"I kind of agree with that guy (Interviewer repeated the G men's comment to her), but the thing is, these...all-in-one cases? Normally involve lawyer using some unique, strange (清奇) methods and tools due to the abnormal nature of these cases. Kids read and learn about these cases, and suddenly they just have to use really uncommon methods or clauses to handle some really basic cases. You have no idea how hard it is to keep their foot on the ground." (The older sister, Domestic Law)

"...The thing about high profile cases is, they are too unique to be learning material. If you are a vet, will you learn from treating a...liger (a hybrid between lion and tiger)? No, you learn from treating dogs and cats, because that is what you will actually be doing in work, not treating liger." (The OG, Overseas Law)

Other law participants with more than 5 years of work experience in general agreed with the calligrapher, but were divided on the older sister's opinion. Some argued that creativity or flexibility is also even more important than standardised, basic application of knowledge:

"...I would say depends on what kind of law firm or which city you work in. If you work in a finance-focus[ed] law firm in Shanghai, yes using standardised procedure will significantly improve your productivity; but if you work in a...multinational law firm that handles...let's say logistics, you need to have lawyers [whose] legal knowledge is bound by articles (你需要对法律的理解不被条文限制的律师来办事)." (Sparta, Domestic Law)

"The danger of using... [a] 'foot on the ground' approach too often is that they will start to fit current cases into previous cases, and they will start to have unconscious tags to oversimplify or categorise cases. We actually have a blacklist of schools where teachers will teach that way, [thinking] it will help their students to be more effective but in fact [it] just makes them really mediocre." (The OG, Overseas Law)

Though not necessarily phrased in the same way, these 14 law participants who have worked for more than 5 years are exactly split into two sides: 7 either agreed or mentioned similar ideas to the older sister, arguing that "all-in-one" cases are bad for students as they promote unorthodox procedures, and to some extent, concurring that small cases are the most suitable for learning the practice of law. The other 7 did not disagree that the daily practice of lawyers mainly involves small and standard cases,

but they did disagree that all-in-one cases are a bad influence. Moreover, they certainly did not agree that small cases are the most suitable for learning as they might “tie specific methods to vague, general case types, the worst kind of laziness in the field of law and can cause the worst fallout due to mismatch[ed] methods” (The vegan, Overseas Law). There is a not too significant correlation between these two sides and the characteristics of participants; participants siding with the older sister are either currently working or have previously worked in the so-called “city-focus” (the farmer, Domestic Law) law firms. The 2 law participants with more than 10 years of experience agreed with the older sister to some extent, however, their reasoning emerges from a different perspective. The downside of using all-in-one cases, in their opinion, is the lack of explanation for linkage:

“...the reason why complex and multi-stage cases [are] not suitable for learning is, certain decisions are made with the consideration of overall winning, not necessarily just that particular part, so if you try to analyse the use of [a] certain article or certain defence strategy without knowing their overall objectives, you can completely misunderstand the rationale for certain choices and actions.” (The farmer, Domestic Law)

In explaining the same idea, Mother Teresa used an example of a case she worked on:

“...when we were working on the third trial, a lawyer was transferred to our team, so we needed to catch him up...regarding the result and rationale for the first trial. He thought what we did (they lost that trial on purpose) was about to speed things up; but in fact, we did it to change the nature of the third and fourth trial. The loss of the first trial changed the third and fourth from criminal trial to commercial trial, from jail time to fine. With the misunderstanding of the purpose of the first trial, all the strategies he had on third and fourth trial [were] completely wrong.” (Mother Teresa, Overseas Law)

As she continues to recount, use of all-in-one cases as teaching materials sometimes lack the “big picture” part of the consideration, and therefore diminish the benefits of the case study, the understanding of rationale and method behind implementation and the application of knowledge.

5.3 Placements, exchange programmes and competitions

This part of the thesis focuses on out of school activities that are believed to be beneficial for successful and efficient knowledge transfer. Participants mainly engage in three types of activities: placements, exchange programmes and competitions. These activities normally take place in the later

part of their undergraduate education and in general have stronger direct links with seeking and acquiring employment. Firstly, I want to talk about exchanges and competitions because these two types of activities are voluntary, whereas for some participants, placements were part of their courses.

Competitions

Due to the growing popularity of competitions and policy support from the government, in 2021, 22 out of 57 national competitions held at collegial level were IT related. According to interviewees, participation in competitions is a necessity for “ambitious, aspiring students”:

“...let’s just say that if IT top university students haven’t participated in any competition by the third year, people will naturally think they are here for citizenship.” (The 955 guy, Overseas IT)

“...even our class teacher cared more about competitions than exams. That’s how important it is to us.” (The Afro, Domestic IT)

It has not been possible to locate research that supports these comments on the significance of competition, but 17 out of 22 IT participants has taken part in at least one competition, and some were still doing so at the time of interviewing. In terms of the rationale for participating in competitions, their answers are mostly related to employment:

“...both coding and information security competitions are mainly in the form of solving issues: a very direct way to test one’s ability. I don’t know about others but in my field, coding really covers 90 percent of the work.” (The lone wolf, Domestic IT)

“...I think unlike other jobs, 码农 (code farmers, a nickname for coding-related jobs) doesn’t do much in terms of diversity, we just code. We code for different companies, different products, but it is just coding to us.” (The journalist, Overseas IT)

The toy guy, an employer and active competition participant to this day, only partially agrees with these comments:

“...for most of my employees yes, their core ability is really simple, all the different language, all the different platforms [are] just coding and programming in different formats; but if you can only code you can never become team leader, let alone project leader or run your own studio.” (The toy guy, Overseas IT)

The toy guy believes that the advantage gained by winning competitions is indeed significant, but not to the extent that it supersedes other aspects. Other employers and mid-level managers, however, disagree with the toy guy:

“...personally, I believe [the] IT industry is unique solely because unlike any other businesses, you cannot bring in someone without IT knowledge into management; it has to come up internally, so for employment, especially lower end positions, their core ability is essentially the only thing that matters. Therefore, fortunately, or unfortunately, competitions are one of the best ways to see if they are qualified or not.” (The dragon slayer, Overseas IT)

“...depending on the position needed, requirements can vary. For [a] junior programmer in a cyber security company, some guy with two years working experience in...McAfee might only have a small chance [of] outrunning someone who has just graduated but has won an ACM-ICPC competition. Work experience only matters at the higher level.” (The bearded gamer, Overseas IT)

This attitude that values competition over experience can also be found in other interviews:

“...I have thought about getting a job in [the] UK. I won the UKIEPC award just before my graduation so I can pretty much get into any UK IT company I want, but since I need to go back anyway, I wondered how much more benefit overseas work experience can get me on top of my award.” (The colourful one, Overseas IT)²¹

Law participants, on the other hand, mostly see competition entry as a way to practice and familiarise themselves with actual work. It is important to clarify here that technically none of the law participants used the precise word “competition” in the interviews. They used the term “moot court”, in essence, a mock court proceeding. In some of the follow-up interviews they corrected my use of competition, because in some cases, especially in internal, small-scale moot courts within their school, losing or winning does not necessarily count towards their assessments. There are widely recognised national or international competitions for moot court, but none of the participants has engaged in these events. Therefore, for most of the law participants, the meaning of practice is much wider than winning and losing or as credentials for employment seeking. For both Chinese and UK educated law participants, moot court is mostly about understanding diversity and honing their skills. In terms of understanding the meaning of diversity, the businessman believes it is about the difference in position that court implied:

²¹ Just to explain further, with the UKIEPC award if he goes back to China immediately, he can, for example, get into Sony with 300K CHN annually, would an added work experience get him more than 300K a year.

“...for the most part of my career, I do corporate-related cases, and for civil cases you are essentially against other lawyers, but for criminal court or administrative (行政诉讼) court, you are essentially fighting against the government. And for me it was quite different in terms of how to address, how to defend and even how to communicate. If I didn't have – what I hugely despised back in university days – [an] extensive amount of moot court in criminal trials, I would not be able to take charge of lots of big cases for the company [I work for].” (Domestic Law)

This idea is further supported by 4 other Chinese university educated participants, however most of them expressed this through regret, as shown in this example from the older sister:

“Arbitration, criminal and civil are three types of court that consider three parts of law, yes, but most importantly [it] is about three types of position opposition...like, arbitration is high versus low 上克下, criminal is low versus high 下克上, and civil/financial is equal, but that's the thing that we didn't quite understand during university even though it had been hinted [at] by the trainers.” (Domestic Law)

Even Golden glasses, who was aware of the “true meaning” of different moot courts, questioned the effectiveness of these practices:

“...I knew all along that it is about relative positions, counter perspectives, but I don't think it actually works when plaintiffs and defendants are played by students. After all, it is about forging/building one's leverage, but that doesn't work when two are simply acting out a script.” (Golden glasses, Domestic Law)

Conversely, UK university educated participants expressed less concern about understanding the dynamics between plaintiff and defendant, and more about practising “people skills” or “story telling”:

“...the way I see it there [are] two parts in “building up a case”: the first part is [the] objective side, evidence examination, article interpretation and past verdict studies etc.; these are the things you learn in class. And then [there] is the subjective part: narrative building, storytelling. That's the part that can only be practised through moot court or mock trial...it is like you can practise presentation or speech yourself as much as you can, but without actually doing it in front of a bunch of people, the effectiveness of practice is limited.” (Savile Row, Overseas Law)

This idea of practising narrative building is also mentioned by Old England, where he further explained the importance of moot court and mock trial during university:

“...for some cases, as a lawyer, on top of objective evidence, you are trying to create a narrative that suggests your client or your opponent is logically plausible or implausible to do such [a] thing, like, it is logically implausible for a millionaire to spend two months planning and take action to embezzle 4 000 yuan. For some cases, it is about establishing emotional plausibility or implausibility; yes, a millionaire is logically not likely to spend that much time and effort for such [a] small amount of money, but what if the account is his high school first love? ...okay it doesn't make too much sense but you get my point, right? So, the point about moot court or mock trial is, you can use it to grasp the line, what people think. Maybe you think 4 000 yuan is too little in your logic, but [a] judge or jurors might think otherwise; or how much would people think reaches the “logically plausible” line? The more moot court you do, the better grasp you will have.” (Old England, Overseas Law)

An alternative to this argument was presented by the older sister (Domestic Law) and golden glasses (Domestic Law), in general, UK educated law participants are more inclined to concur with Old England (Overseas Law) and believe that practice is meaningful. When asked about why they think there is a difference in perceived effectiveness, the OG (Overseas Law) argues that it relates to the targeted learning from different perspectives:

“...in my opinion, there are two types of learning: one is you learn and practice 90 percent on your own, and 10 percent real-life experience to perfect it; the second one is you need to experience it, and then learn from it, you simply cannot learn from imagination. What this quote (the older sister) described, is exactly the second one.”

Contrary to the OG's argument, the farmer believes that this is concerned with the limitations of moot court/mock trial implementation:

“...I can say with confidence that it is about the design of these events. Organisers/sponsors have focused on using realistic materials for these moot courts, but it is about getting real people. From time to time, whenever my friends from the (Chinese equivalent of) district attorney's office or [a] big client visit us, I will ask them to practise with my new mentee, just 10/15 minutes of practice with...real official personnel is much more useful than weeks of moot court/mock trial.” (Domestic Law)

Exchange programmes

Apart from two UK educated participants, exchange programmes were only mentioned by Chinese educated participants in both Law and IT. Most of these exchange programmes last for one summer,

ranging from two weeks to three months, with the exception of one case of a one-year long exchange programme. I am aware of the existence of 2+2 or 2+1 exchange programmes that are gaining popularity among Chinese and UK universities, however, none of my participants participated in these exchange programmes (also termed joint course/double degree by some institutions). Therefore, in this thesis, exchange programme refers only to short courses that some might understand as summer camp. Potentially, due to the heavy promotion of STEM subjects or natural barrier of legal systems, upon research exchange programmes for law are generally more restricted in terms of qualification and availability; IT related programmes, on the other hand, are more widely available and have fewer requirements. This is reflected in my interviews, where law participants frequently mentioned the difficulties and length of time spent trying to get a place for these programmes, whereas IT participants neither mentioned these in the interviews nor could remember any in the follow-up interviews. In relation to their experiences of exchange programmes, it was only the UK educated law participants who went to Hong Kong who found this experience meaningful and worthy of recommendation:

“...after all, my degree was in law and Hong Kong Law, so I thought an exchange to the University of Hong Kong might be useful if I want to work in Hong Kong, but it turned out much more helpful than I thought, because firstly their society was built on a western system with Asian-ness within them, so their interpretation is more digestible for me than the teaching I get from the UK, and secondly there were Chinese exchange students as well, they bring the ideas from...more authentic Chinese perspectives. The benefit of that exchange programme helped me all the way though my first couple years of working in Shenzhen.” (The uninhibited one, Overseas Law)

Unfortunately, the other 3 law participants who had participated in exchange programmes did not recount the same positive experiences. All 3 thought that the experience could have been better, but that external factors got in the way:

“...we went to Soochow University. It has one of the best law schools in Taiwan and their professors are world class scholars. One of the textbooks used in China was written by one of the professors...but we were kind of isolated, we did not have much time and chance to talk to teachers and classmates...one of us went back for a proper one-year exchange and he said it was [a] completely different experience.” (Wig girl, Domestic Law)

The other two comments, in my opinion, are highly subjective and might draw unnecessary attention, therefore I decided not to use them here; however, the attitudes and ideology represented by those

comments have a significant influence on the process and success of transnational knowledge transfer, thus it is pertinent to describe their meaning.

IT participants, on the other hand, generally had a much more pleasant experience in exchange programmes. A few participants did refer to some unpleasant experiences, but they were not academic related, and were mostly about living in an unfamiliar environment:

“...everything is so big here! The place next to our accommodation have pancakes the size of my head, and...I ate them all. I gained 13 jin (6.5 kg) in those 2 weeks.”

(The filial son, Domestic IT)

“...I was absolutely stunned by the number of motorcycles here, like hundreds of motorcycles rushed by, inches away, when walking in the streets...” (The failsafe man, Domestic IT)

Most of them believed that their exchange experience was meaningful in terms of learning and generate deeper understanding of what they had learn in their original university. Five out of six IT participants who participated in exchange programme mentioned the benefit of different perspectives:

“...I was a bit annoyed when I had a unit that I already took as optional in China, I thought it would be a waste of time, but I was very surprised by how differently a topic can be taught by different teachers.” (The failsafe man, Domestic IT)

The filial son was very surprised by how the entire concept can be different:

“...like, the basic logics are completely different; in China we were taught to use many lines of codes to cover all sorts of potential patterns, but in the US, they teach us “simple is the best”, basically to use versatile and flexible coding, as short as possible.” (The filial son, Domestic IT)

The whistle-blower mentioned the same idea but not about logic, more about preferred outcome:

“...the idea is, when we build an infrastructure, we want a product that is easy to add [a] new function; in Taiwan or [the] US, they want a product that is easy to debug and fix. Therefore, with different end goals, you will naturally have different approaches.”

(Domestic IT)

When asked whether they still agree with their initial thoughts, all 6 argued that it depends on whether or not it is purely academic speaking or not:

“...from the point of self-development and building knowledge, yes, definitely, my exchange experience was infinitely helpful; but not so much on school and work.”

(The whistle-blower, Domestic IT)

“...regarding whether I still believe [the] exchange programme opened my eyes and mind, yes. But is having [an] open mind and open eyes a good thing in here? Debatable. At least for me it just creates confusion and frustration.” (The fail-safe man, Domestic IT)

This point of view is further explained by the allrounder:

“...the thing is, you learn new things, you learn new ways of thinking, but that’s not the way you were taught to think and that’s not the thing you were allowed/told to learn. I learned this the hard way. For my final exam (I code with simplicity but [it] meets all the criteria), but my teacher’s comment was ‘does not have the supposed complexity’. At that point I thought, then what was the point of all the exchange programme?” (Domestic IT)

Interviews with Chinese educated IT participants regarding exchange programmes drew out an intriguing point of view: it almost seems like they believe for the same or similar topic, teacher should teach the same thing in the same way. However, since the analysis is structured in the same order as the interview, the section detailing IT participants’ data on teachers is located several sections above. In most of the interviews, this part of the conversation featured approximately 10 to 15 minutes after the part where some IT participants talked about wanting different teachers. I did not notice the controversy in that moment, but I managed to ask 3 Chinese university educated IT participants (one of which did not participate in an exchange programme) whether they thought teachers teaching the same topic should teach it in the same way, and if so, why they would want a different teacher:

“...I don’t think they should but that’s what they do...I am not sure about other universities, but within a university within the same department, all the teachers will teach the same course in the same way because the content and narrative is set by the teaching and researching committee (教研组)...well, I guess it depends on how you define teacher? We got a CISSP to give us lectures twice a week before our CISSP examination in our final year with some master students, but we didn’t see him as teacher.” (The allrounder, Domestic IT)

“...I think so especially now, because no matter where we go to school, all my colleagues and I have the same habits, make the same mistakes...I don’t know how to explain it to you, but it is obvious [we] were taught the same thing in the same way...

That's exactly why we want teachers who have been a programmer, not someone trained from a normal university²²." (The whistle-blower, Domestic IT)

"I don't think it, I know it. One easy way to prove it is, you can go check out the online courses and they all teach the same curriculum. Of course, they might teach differently, but the content will be the same... As I have said, I want teachers to at least have coded before. Can you trust someone who has never sliced a piece of meat to teach you how to cook?" (The onmyoji, D111)

Though not necessarily described in the same way or due to the same reason, many participants, whether they were educated in China or the UK, or in IT or law, or whilst at university or work, have all experienced some form of "singular correct answer" in China, that is, there is only one way to do things, one way to think and one way to go. This issue is highly politicised and, as a Chinese person myself, I can see it coming and growing rapidly in China. However, I had not realised it had existed for so long. The political implications of this issue are something I am not willing to discuss, however the implications for transnational knowledge transfer are discussed further in Section 5.4.2. Furthermore, from this point participants, especially Chinese university educated participants started to talk about the separation of theoretical knowledge from practical knowledge. The separation of theoretical knowledge from practical knowledge is a major part of knowledge transfer analysis and discussion and takes up a significant proportion in my research. However, the discussion regarding this separation in the working part of the interview derives from their personal experience, whereas here, it comes from their perspectives about their teachers.

Placements and internships

Out of 43 participants, 37 of them had participated in some form of placement, such as a compulsory placement year, summer placement, informal part-time placement/internship or what some IT participants called "mercenary" jobs. Even when all of the Chinese educated participants are taken out of consideration, this proportion is still much higher than what HEPI (Higher Education Policy Institute, 2019) estimated, which was only 8.9 percent. Especially among law participants, 20 out of 21 had participated in a placement.

In comparison, IT participants are in general less specific in terms of placement timing, selection of company and the purpose of participation. Regarding purpose and motivation, 9 out of 16 undertook

²² In China, normal university is designed specifically to educate and train teachers, with the new policy in 2015 non normal university graduates can participate in the teacher qualification exam but it was not allowed before that.

or chose a course with a placement year because of credentials and the benefit for employment seeking:

“...one of the reasons I chose XX university is because they have links with some rather unique companies in my field and that industry experience year would be, and turned out to be, extremely valuable for me in the labour market.” (The 955 guy, Overseas IT)

“...honestly back then I should have listened to [name] (the bearded gamer, Overseas IT) and taken [the] placement in a smaller but more friendly studio. I ended up going to XX thinking that would look great on my résumé, but I didn’t learn anything. We were merely errand boys.” (The whistle-blower, Domestic IT)

The other 7 did it without very clear reasons:

“...back then my parents did not want me to sit around and do nothing for the whole summer, so I followed a friend and worked as [an] intern at XX for 2 months.” (The family pride, Overseas IT)

“...my support tutor²³ asked me what I will be doing in the summer. I said, I don’t know’, and she suggested [that I] take a placement...” (The memory palace, Domestic IT)

In comparison, law participants are more specific in terms of the destination and types of experience acquired. For destination, domestic university educated participants and UK educated participants are slightly different in their specification. Even though most were rather determined about the city they wanted to go to, comparatively speaking, domestic participants were more inclined to take a placement at the court and UK educated participants were more inclined to take a placement at a law firm:

“...eventually I interned at XX law firm...I am not saying it was bad, I was very lucky to get a placement at XX, but my ideal place for placement is Shanghai court, ideally branch one²⁴.” (The handwriting guy, Domestic Law)

²³ A support tutor (大学辅导员) is someone who helps students with daily life or administrative issues in a Chinese university.

²⁴ There are three branches that cover different areas/districts: branch one covers the more “popular”, sought-after areas of Shanghai.

“I was the centre of envy because I got THE placement in Beijing supreme court. I was the Xth batch²⁵, and considering the amount of people taken, it was the top prize of all law placements.” (The endangered species, Domestic Law)

As to why court was prioritised over a law firm, the opinions were diverse as well. More senior participants believed it was about different conceptions of career pathway:

“... in the UK or US, one of the progression pathways is lawyer/prosecutor then judge, but in China it is more common to see experienced judges change course to become lawyers. With established experience and authority gained as judges, they will normally become senior partners immediately with strong connections in the legal and government systems.” (The OG, Overseas Law)

“...to some extent the progression or prospects in a court are much clearer and more fluent than in a law firm. In a law firm, it is about your overall profitability, and that can be significantly influenced by external environment, the economy and even luck; working in a court, as long as you do your job properly, you will have [a] decent chance to progress normally.” (The farmer, Domestic Law)

However, participants that agreed with these comments are all in the position of management or higher, and only one of them had taken a law-specific/law-only²⁶ placement before²⁷. Younger participants, or more specifically participants with less than ten years of work experience, were more coherent about why court was the better choice for placement:

“...the thing for consideration is about reach. In a law firm, as intern, you will have very limited access to some of the most important cases or core business. You will end up doing repetitive work for most of the time. Placement in court is much different, the...richness of work you do there will be almost the same as actually working there.” (Wig girl, Domestic Law)

“...as experience goes, court placements offer much more comprehensive experience. Law firms, in general, unavoidably lean towards specific fields, or have very strong departments, so students will have to choose whether to apply to a highly competitive firm/department or to apply for a less popular firm or department. Court placements

²⁵ Beijing supreme court placement started in 2016 and only around 50 people were selected per batch; furthermore, all names and associated institutions were published; therefore, for ethical considerations, the number of batches is redacted.

²⁶ Placements that are highly related to law and have previously only been available to law students, even though now, the trend for law firms to hire or open internships to non-law graduates is growing.

²⁷ Fun fact: banks were one of the “go-to” choices of placement and work for law graduates in the 1990s and 3 of the participants, who graduated from different schools in different years, had worked at the same bank branch at some point.

are different: most of them take a rotation approach, so in 5, 6 months' time you will normally rotate through a few sections, get to know different law in practice, and that is why we were recommended to take court placement early so we will know what units to take in [the] later parts of university.” (Tesla mania, Domestic Law)

Similar to Tesla mania's experience, Chinese university educated participants had received advice from teachers or support tutors on when to take a placement and why, and the advice they received was highly coherent in terms of timing and slightly different in terms of type of destination:

“...the ideal situation is court placement in the first year's summer and law firm placement in [the] last year's summer. You will want to go to busy court, because then you will rotate faster, and not so busy law firm, [then] you will be tutored better.” (The businessman, Domestic Law)

“...I was advised to take [a] placement in Shenzhen Gongming court in my first year's summer because it was quieter... and take placement in XX law firm because it is one of the biggest in Shenzhen...” (Golden glasses, Domestic Law)

For UK educated law participants who wanted to or were advised to take a placement in China, the advice they received from their family friends included both branches of advice, as shown above. The only possible correlation between both UK and Chinese educated law participants, though not significant enough, is that participants who had studied or wanted to go to Shanghai tended to receive advice similar to the businessman's; and participants who had studied or wanted to go to Beijing or Shenzhen tended to receive advice similar to golden glasses' account. I consulted with the senior participants and asked them for their comments on these different forms of advice. They all sided with one perspective and were confused about the other, though it is possible to discern some general logic within their explanations about preferred advice: for students who are clear about what field of law they want to do, they will give the advice received by the businessman; for students who are less clear about what field they wish to do, they will give the advice received by golden glasses. And the reason for this division is due to different beliefs: through their experiences, 4 of them believe that newly graduated lawyers do not know specifically what they want to do, and 2 of them believe that though undefined, newly graduated lawyers at least know what they are interested in. This diversity in understanding might help to explain how and why participants are treated differently in terms of acceptance in the early stages of employment. This issue will be further explored in Section 5.4.1.

As discussed above, in comparison, IT participants care less about timing and destination of placement. Only 2 IT participants mentioned that they would prefer to take a placement closer to their graduation:

“...back then, I wanted to take [a] placement in the fourth year so I could go straight from intern to official employee, but now I know it is not that simple...” (Reservoir girl, Domestic IT)

In terms of destination, there are two types of preference among IT participants: one is the city of placement and the other, the size of the business. UK educated participants generally care more about the city of placement, as it relates to the respective returnee attraction policies:

“...For IT-related graduates, the first choice would definitely be Hangzhou and Shenzhen, simply because they have the best attraction policies due to some of the biggest tech companies [being located] in these two cities. Quite naturally, all the IT Chinese I knew will take placement in these two cities to get a vibe of [what] living and working there are like.” (The journalist, Overseas IT)

“...back then, Shenzhen was THE choice for placement and return, because it was the first and only city to offer attraction policies for returnees, and since Huawei and Tenet were based in Shenzhen, any IT returnees that cared about career would not hesitate to go to Shenzhen for placement and employment.” (The colourful one, Overseas IT)

In the early stages, most attraction policies tended to favour STEM-related subjects, therefore law participants were either unaware of or unfamiliar with these policies, or certainly unaffected by them. For similar reasons, most attraction policies to this day only apply to overseas returnees, thus Chinese educated IT participants who are unaffected by these policies place greater emphasis on and consideration of companies:

“...well, it was placement. Honestly, I did not care that much...maybe getting into a big company?” (The memory palace, Domestic IT)

“...for seeking placement, the only thing that matters is reputation, it can either be a big company or a well-respected company within a specific field... I will probably give the same advice [to] any current IT students.” (“Gen Hoshino”, Domestic IT)

The reason why IT participants care much more about credentials could be related to their experience. As demonstrated by the whistle-blower above, 15 out of 17 IT participants who did a placement felt that they did not learn anything useful during the placement:

“...we were not even coding for most of the time. We were like...babysitters for formal employees: go get the food delivery downstairs or being showed off about how good someone’s code was are all we did in those three months.” (The collector, Domestic IT)

In comparison, law participants generally believed that placements are a great time to learn and digest what they have learned. Even the 3 participants that had bad experiences believed that this was a matter of bad luck or a bad choice:

“... I did get into XX law firm, but I got assigned to the...quite frankly the B team. I would have learned so much more if I had joined one of the A teams.” (The camera man, Overseas Law)

“...if I had been more confident, I might [have been] able to get into a better law firm, but back then I was the only one [who] applied for a local (UK) firm and I wasn’t sure if they would take a Chinese [student] or not.” (The badge carrier, Overseas Law)

This difference in experience significantly influences confidence building during participants’ early stages of employment. Eight law participants reflected that the experience of placement helped them to gain confidence and more self-assured of their professional identity:

“...thanks to the placement, I knew exactly what to do next. I didn’t need to wait for confirmation or direction, I knew what I was doing, and I knew if I did a good job or not. Especially when another guy joined two weeks after me, he was so confused, and I ended [up] helping him and guiding him for the first few months. That was such a confidence boost for a country girl in a big city big law firm.” (The endangered species, Domestic Law)

“...at first it was not so obvious, but once we left the training centre and got assigned to different team, my court placement experience really shined. It was very clear that other newly grads only took placement in law firms and therefore they did not realise [that] courts do things differently and they should think differently because of different positions.” (The gavel wielder, Overseas Law)

Nine other law participants, though not necessarily describing their placement experiences as a positive bonus, viewed placements as a way of eliminating negative outcomes and believed that their experiences helped them to avoid detours in the early stages of their careers:

“...the way I see placement is an experience of trial and error before the real thing. You make all the stupid mistakes during placement so you don’t make it as a formal lawyer, and that is crucial because any error made as a formal lawyer could mean life or death for your clients.” (The vegan, Overseas Law)

“...you know the story of Thomas Edison, right? ‘I didn’t fail, I just found 1 000 materials that don’t work.’ That is exactly how I felt about my experience of

placement... And more importantly, I developed the sense to know what might fail before I attempted it, and that has saved me so much pointless time and effort.” (The handwriting guy, Domestic Law)

It is unclear why IT and law participants have such different views and experiences of placement, yet based on law participants’ perspectives, a good placement experience seems to enhance initial knowledge transfer, regardless of overseas or not. However, for law participants, UK educated participants seemed to be more likely to get “ideal” or “fitting” placements, whereas Chinese educated participants were more likely to be compromised in terms of destination. Participants that to some extent are compromised are slightly more inclined with the “less detour” perspectives. The hypothesis that a more “fitting” or “ideal” placement could generate a more substantial “confidence boost” is a suitable topic for future research.

Language with different understanding

A common theme that appeared in discussions of all three types of activity is the issue of translation. This not only includes the issue of communication, but also includes the mismatch of translation across areas with seemingly similar cultures and languages, in particular, how Taiwan, Hong Kong and Mainland China, three Chinese speaking entities, face difficulties communicating within the same field of expertise. As background to the use of language in these entities, the official language in Mainland China is Mandarin and simplified Chinese in writing; in Taiwan, it is Mandarin and traditional Chinese writing; and in Hong Kong, it is Cantonese with the majority of the population able to listen and speak basic Mandarin and use and read traditional Chinese writing.

During this part of the interviews, my personal experience and assumptions almost endangered this particular proportion of the data collection. Upon reflection, as a Chinese person who grew up watching Hong Kong’s and Taiwan’s TV shows due to geographical proximity, I had not realised how difficult it might be for people familiar with traditional Chinese writing to read simplified Chinese and vice versa. Furthermore, in my encounters with people from Hong Kong, I noticed that we use different slang and choice of characters (for example, go to class is 上课 in Mainland China and 上堂 in Hong Kong) but I did not think that the difference was significant enough for either side to misunderstand the other. I was very fortunate that some participants noticed my misunderstanding and explained in fuller detail. One participant explicated how a difference in small detail can cause a sizeable misunderstanding in communication:

“...for the first couple days of placement, I was told to watch how they work, and at some point, I asked one of the employees what was that tool, and he said, “I use (用) this one”. So naturally I thought this kind of tool was purchasable and he used a

specific one, but weeks later, I realised in Taiwan the character 用 can be used in different ways, and what he meant was ‘I built/made this myself’.” (The family pride, Overseas IT)

Old England, with acknowledgment of these potential differences, took another approach:

“...we kind of knew this will be the case so the most practical, not the best, solution was to communicate in English, the language that we truly mutually use.” (Old England, Overseas Law)

One participant explained that even if communication was not the issue, a difference in detail could influence the expression:

“...you can read traditional Chinese right? So, both 歷 and 曆 is written as 历 in simplified Chinese, but 歷 can only be used in 歷史 (history, experience) and 曆 is 日曆 (calendar). Since we don’t have that difference, I didn’t know the separation in usage, can you imagine the embarrassment of being pointed out 錯別字 (similar to writing career when you meant Korea because they have the same pronunciation? A kind of grammatical mistake that is only reasonable in primary school) in university? And there are so many combined simplified Chinese characters that are supposed to be two different characters in traditional Chinese characters...” (Savile Row, Overseas Law)

Although the issue of language only appears during the university stage and is only experienced by a few participants, barriers to knowledge transfer caused by differences within a seemingly unified context are nonetheless significant and caused greater issues for more participants during employment. Therefore, it is important to raise this particular issue, despite the significance of influence at this stage.

Chapter 6: Returning and seeking employment

This chapter discusses how participants perceived their acquired knowledge after their graduation, whether these perceptions were influenced by their experience of seeking employment and how their perceptions changed and why. It illustrates how participants determined the layers of context that would influence them, what their perceptions were of these layers of context and corresponding influence, and how they developed their decisions based on previous information and new understandings of the contexts.

6.1 Change of heart?

This section begins with some background information about the status of participants prior to their return to China for UK educated participants or prior to their employment seeking for Chinese educated participants. Within my participants, more than half had taken postgraduate courses. For IT participants, 11 out of 22 had undertaken postgraduate study, and 7 were UK educated participants. Six UK educated participants stayed in the UK for their postgraduate study, and 1 went to the US. Two of the Chinese educated participants also went to the US, whereas the other 2 Chinese educated participants did postgraduate study in China. For law participants, 15 out of 21 participants took postgraduate courses straight after their undergraduate courses, with 3 more taking postgraduate courses after they had returned to China (1 in Hong Kong and 3 in the US). For the 6 Chinese educated participants, only 1 stayed in China for postgraduate study, and the rest of them went to the UK, the US and Hong Kong. Prior to their return, 4 IT UK educated participants and 3 law UK educated participants had worked in areas outside of China. It is worth mentioning that this background information should not be considered to be representative. Due to the design of this research, participants are mostly drawn from top 10 law firms or top 100 IT related businesses²⁸ in China; comparatively speaking, they are more “elite” than average IT and law graduates. As mentioned above in the section on intention to return, prior to their higher education, participants had briefly expressed their intention and vision for what they wanted to do after graduation. This part will focus on whether they have changed their minds and their perceptions of returning to China for work.

²⁸ There are industry journals and magazines that rank law firms based on various criteria, but for the IT industry, due to the diversity of types of business that currently exist and the new ones that are emerging, there are only lists based on capital and employment size.

For UK educated participants who returned straight after education, IT participants were more optimistic about returning, mostly because of the rarity of their specific qualifications:

“...back then there were...less than 100 Certified Information Systems Security Professionals (CISPP) in China. I had no doubt about getting a decent job in China; the question was just about how decent the pay and welfare would be.” (The wanderer, Overseas IT)

“...back then China had [a] much more unbalanced labour market (for example, too many front-end developers and not enough back-end developers) so we were the highly demanded ones.” (The shot caller, Overseas IT)

In comparison, UK educated Law participants were more worried about returning based on their placement experience and advice from alumnus. Out of 8 participants, 6 expressed their worries, as the following data demonstrates:

“...One of the most important things I learned from my placements is that team leader really matters for newly returned lawyers...not that about how good they are, but their background; working under a domestic graduated lawyer is completely different from working under someone who graduated or has worked in a foreign firm.” (The vegan, Overseas Law)

“I took [a] placement in XX law firm, and I quite liked it, but one of [the well-] known senior alumni went there as well and she had a horrible time, it really confused me, did something change in those 2 years or?” (The American dream, Overseas Law)

In addition to these concerns, female participants, both UK educated or Chinese educated, were worried about a potential glass ceiling in law firms:

“...there are, how to put it, rumours, hearsay, about some firms [that are] more friendly or unfriendly towards female lawyers, and we wanted to make sure we can get into the friendly ones.” (The uninhibited one, Overseas Law)

“...I got offered at XX firm but at the Beijing office...well, the reason why I wanted to go to the Shanghai office is because all the successful female lawyers were in Shanghai office, so at least you know you would not have too [many] barriers there.” (The coffee addict, Domestic Law)

However, the female participants also agreed that at that point, as long as they were able to get into their ideal firm or office, they need not worry too much.

Though not a few had overseas work experience prior to their return, their thoughts were intriguing as they had completely opposite ideas:

“...being what we called a “bay area coder” is kind of the dream of all coders but I needed to go back for my parents and my wife, and I was really panicking with all the stories I had heard about working in China. I thought I could never get used to that kind of work style, especially [because] I had the good ones in the US [in] my 20s.” (The journalist, Overseas IT)

“...just before I returned, I was working with XX company, so I have been communicating a lot with the developers and management in China, and the only thing I felt was...difference in routine, difference in style, difference in conception of many things. So, when I was headhunted with a huge paycheck, I was thinking more about coping with work culture than paycheck.” (The dragon slayer, Overseas IT)

Law participants with work experience, on the other hand, were more assured about returning to China:

“...the best thing about having worked in Hong Kong is, you can compare that experience with the placement experience and realise what part of the work is law specific, what part is court-culture specific and what part is local culture specific. With that in mind, I know that as long as I join one of the international firms, I should be good. Not necessarily the big ones, but the international ones.” (Savile Row, Overseas Law)

When asked to reflect on their thoughts, their opinions were diverse. In general, IT participants felt that they had misunderstood the real situation in the Chinese labour market:

“...even [to] this day, certain jobs are still short, but what I didn’t think about is, these are not shortages, these are absences...the difference is, you used to have something, now you need more, in this scenario you know what to do with these things because you had them before; absence is, in theory you know you need that, but you are not quite sure how it works or how to use it. That’s what happened with back-end developers. They knew they needed them since lots of companies moves their databases back to China and stopped outsourcing their management, how they used to outsource it to an entire company, so they don’t know how much to pay or how to manage back-end developers in a separate department.” (The shot caller, Overseas IT)

“...the first thing I realised was, the management had zero experience with us. The first company [that] headhunted me did not know what rank they should give me for

that position and even asked me how many people they should hire in that department. That was when I realised demand in the labour market does not necessarily mean advantage in the labour market.” (The filial son, Domestic IT)

Law participants generally still believe they had the right concerns back then, but some think those concerns were over emphasised or wrongly placed:

“...there are indeed glass ceilings for females but not the same as the western ones, it is much more Chinese culture specific ones. So, it is a little bit pointless trying to get into [a] specific firm or office. Sometimes even the female lawyers will be the ones enforcing those ceilings on you because they were once victims.” (The uninhibited one, Overseas Law)

“Teams and lead lawyers indeed matter but, getting to know a lawyer and their team takes time and interaction. Your impression of them before you actually join that team could be very wrong, therefore worrying too much about it would be pointless and even bad for you.” (Tesla mania, Domestic Law)

As presented in this section, in the early stages of returning to China, participants had different perceptions about the layers of context that would influence them, ranging from China as a whole, to respective industries and the types of company they wanted to work for. With further reflection, participants acknowledged that their perceptions of context were not comprehensive enough, and started to realise the difference in knowledge structure – a realisation that kept developing as their work became more expansive.

6.2 The labour market: advantages and unintended traps

In comparison, law participants, either China educated or UK educated, had much more straightforward experiences of employment seeking. None of the law participants had taken part in any type of employment fair after graduation, and a small number had participated during university when seeking placement. Out of 21 law participants, 17 spent less than 3 months seeking a satisfying job offer. If the time is calculated in terms of receiving any job offer after the start of employment seeking, 20 law participants received their first offer within the first two weeks. By comparison, IT participants spent significantly longer amounts of time seeking job offers with an acceptable package, with for example 16 out of 22 IT participants spending more than 4 months seeking a satisfying job offer. As to why law participants seem to find it easier to obtain suitable offers, law interviewees now

working at management level believe that a law graduate's résumé provides more information than one might assume:

"...if your participants all take placements at top 30 firms, then the length of placement is very revealing. Nowadays, all the top firms work in smaller teams, so every position matters. If someone interned for your mom for more than 5 months then we know that kid is good, otherwise they will be thrown to [the] administration team or liaison team." (The coffee addict, Domestic Law)

"...every once in a while, there will be a super intern that many of us like, and he will be "booked" even before graduation. A few years ago, one of our managing partners booked an intern that did [a] placement in his teams for 4 years in a row, and when that kid's master's or PhD viva went wrong because of his supervisor, the managing partner helped him transfer to another university, found him a supervisor and pretty much guided him [to] speed-run the final year." (Mother Teresa, Overseas Law)

From a job seeker's perspective, some participants believe it is easier for law graduates to find a satisfying job because of the system and industry norms:

"...maybe at some point you will want to choose should I stay in a law firm or should I go work at the court or should I work in a company's law department, but these options are only available once you fulfil the apprenticeship in a law firm and get your lawyer license; for new graduates, especially if they graduate from good universities, the issue will only be which red circle²⁹ firm you want to go [to]." (The camera man, Overseas Law)

"...by the time you graduate, you would have either interned in a few places or interned in a firm for a few times, therefore for many of us, we already know where we wanted to go before our graduation." (Wig girl, Domestic Law)

Given the benefits of placements for job seeking, Chinese educated participants seem to have more of an advantage. They did not necessarily undertake more placements, but they were more flexible because none of the UK educated participants undertook winter placements, whereas 6 Chinese educated participants did. Furthermore, Chinese educated participants demonstrate more diversity in terms of the types of firms that they interned in. An unofficial categorisation of law firms is both acknowledged and used by 20 law participants, which separates China-based firms from internationally-based firms, and comprehensive firms (综合所) from speciality firms (精品所). Most UK educated participants interned and eventually worked at China-based speciality firms, whereas

²⁹ A semi-official list of top law firms in China.

Chinese educated participants are much more diverse in terms of both placement and employment. With an understanding of this categorisation, I subsequently asked some UK educated law participants if there was a preference towards China-based firms, and if so, why:

“...you cannot think of an internationally-based firm as a normal international company. Most internationally-based firms only have an administrative office in China, whereas most of the red circle firms have either joint offices or specialised overseas departments that might be closer to what you might think [of] as internationally-based firms.” (The old England, Overseas Law)

“...For example, a UK-based firm can handle the US part of the case; they need local lawyers with strong connections to the Chinese system to handle the Chinese part. The exception would be someone [who] used to work at their home office and transferred to the Chinese office because they are Chinese.” (The badge carrier, Overseas Law)

In comparison, IT participants did not believe or experience the benefits brought about by placements. When asked about whether they would be inclined to apply for companies in which they have had internships, most IT participants even found the question intriguing:

“...huh? Why would I do that? (Interviewer explained that law participants tend to do so) Wow, they must have a really good time doing placement then?” (The lone wolf, Domestic IT)

“...if I wanted to work in that company I would do their graduate scheme then, and I would have taken placement in [an]other place.” (The 955 guy, Overseas IT)

IT participants explained that companies like Microsoft and Samsung, or specialised companies such as Mercedes F1 branch, have graduate schemes or internship programmes that generally take in new graduates to participate as semi-employees. In the participants’ perspectives, these programmes are completely different and separate to the student phrase “causal” placement. As agreed by all IT participants that have less than 5 years of work experience, the benefits of placement predominantly lie in seeking the “right” job:

“...although, one of the things senior alumni told us is to watch how they work closely, how does the routine go.” (The preparer, Overseas IT)

“...Zhihu was filled with answers, like the benefit of internship is understanding particular coverage of work for certain jobs in a company, then you will know if you should apply for that company or not when you graduate.” (Reservoir girl, Domestic IT)

Different conceptions of position and job description

As documented above, there are comprehensive law firms and speciality law firms, and even though they both recruit lawyers without specifications, participants believe there are subtle differences in what positions they want to fill. According to 15 out of 21 participants, it is rather straightforward:

“...just as how it is called, comprehensive firms want lawyers that can fit in most scenarios, an allrounder; speciality firms want lawyers [who] do better in specific fields. (like, criminal law or labour law?) That as well, but also someone who is especially good at court or someone who is especially good at making threat analysis. Different aspects of utilizing or interpreting [the] law, I would say.” (Sparta, Domestic Law)

“...in a way, comprehensive firms want someone who is willing to try anything, and speciality firms want someone who is driven to work in a specific field. So, during interviews or placement, if you showed that you are not particularly passionate about a certain field, you will be disputed in a speciality firm and beloved in a comprehensive firm.” (Mother Teresa, Overseas Law)

IT participants, on the other hand, depicted a very different story. One common issue raised by IT participants as both employers and employees is the inconsistency of position in terms of both structure and description. Although some argue that it is China-specific, and some argue that it is IT industry-specific, IT participants nonetheless agree that the power structure between IT-related jobs is unstructured or un-unified in China:

“...basically, what front-end developers do is design and construct websites, and back-end developers are the one building the database and the scripts for running those websites...imagine back-end are house builders and front-end are designers and decorators. Should a house be built then decorated or should a house be designed and then built accordingly? Both methods can work but companies run differently and individuals work differently without necessarily realising or accepting that there are other methods. You need to find the companies that work in the way that you can accept.” (The shot caller, Overseas IT)

“...the main thing you need to find out is what is the chain of command within the company you want to join. For infrastructure building we need to leave ports for adding function, but should the API engineer tell me what port to leave, or should API engineer work based on the ports I have left? There is no industry norm about it,

and it will end up as reasons to fight or become weapons in the blame game.” (The Afro, Domestic IT)

IT participants who believe this is specific to China are either working or have worked in the IT departments of large companies instead of IT-related technology companies:

“...in the US or Japan, there are more individual IT companies or studios, so when a studio received a product order from the clients, front end and back end can discuss and come up with the best way to work in order to produce what the clients want.” (The minimalist, Overseas IT)

“...for example, you want to add the comment function on your website, logically the right way would be tell the back end to add this module in the database and then the front end can make the user see this comment section; but in [a] Chinese company, when the management level does not know enough about IT, they will tell the front end to do it, and then the back end would have to do it based on what the front end did, and it normally ends [up] with bugs and fights and pointing fingers because the front end was in charge the second they were asked by the managers.” (The onmyoji, Domestic IT)

Participants with more experience tend to view this issue as industry-specific:

“...ten years ago, there are just programmers who are better at HTML, so they are tasked with building the web interface; programmers [who are] better at Ruby are tasked with scripting the database. They used to work as a team, but now they’ve got new names, front end and back end are separated. Of course there is no structure because these are new things, and structure building needs time.” (The toy guy, Overseas IT)

This argument is also used by some participants to illustrate the issue of job titling and description:

“...in the UK, what I learned as IT operation is separately titled as 运维 and 运营 in some Chinese companies, but somehow in many companies their titles in English are both ITOM (IT operation management), exactly what they would have been called in the UK. So, who should do what part, decided by whom? That’s how chaos started.” (The journalist, Overseas IT)

This argument about job title and description is supported by 7 out of 11 UK educated participants, whereas Chinese educated participants understand that there are inconsistencies, but that the situation is improving, especially in speciality companies:

“...when you go to job searching sites there are positions for UI designer. In many places, [this] is part of what [the] front end should do. There are product manager [positions], but [when] I look at the job description I see back-end development. That is why many studios are interviewing employees based on skills. It is the simplest way for both employers and employees.” (The failsafe man, Domestic IT)

However, IT participants had mixed feelings about interviewing base on skills.

Presentation of acquired knowledge

By comparing the job seeking experiences of younger and more senior IT participants, it appears that employee seeking has been leaning towards skill-based assessment in the last five years:

“...I don’t know about other fields, but in web development, it was really straightforward: if you know HTML, CSS and JavaScript, you will be taken into the front-end team; if you know Python, Ruby and PHP, you are back end. If you can use Node.js as a front end or fullstack as a back end, you will have the chance to be considered as team leader.” (The allrounder, Domestic IT)

This trend is heavily supported by 4 of the Chinese educated participants, who believe it represents the “fairness” of the IT industry:

“...I think this is the most direct way to award efforts. You take extra lessons, you can use extra language and tools, so you get better jobs. This is how society should run.” (“Gen Hoshino”, Domestic IT)

However, 8 UK educated participants suggest that this approach over emphasises usage of skills and undermines the understanding and knowledge behind using a certain language or tool:

“...they just ask which engines can you use? Somehow, the more engines, the more platforms it can cross, the better (certain engines only run on consoles and some on mobile phones). But that’s like asking can you drive both small cars and trucks? Yes, but being able to drive a truck doesn’t mean they can drive one through a narrow ally.” (The dragon slayer, Overseas IT)

“...being able to use a language does not mean they understand a language, but understandings are hard to illustrate or express in normal situations. Essentially, we cannot find the next Steven Jobs within a pile of programmers by watching their normal work.” (The toy guy, Overseas IT)

Although some participants were not especially happy about the contemporary interview and selection process, some believed that it surpasses their own experiences in the early 2000s:

“...during the interview we were asked to write the base code for a plugin, but my speciality is in infrastructure...I asked, ‘Can I write the port for plugin since that will be part of the infrastructure?’, but they think you shouldn’t pick the position in a team, you should follow your assignment.” (The collector, Domestic IT)

“...as part of the group participants, we were asked to make the basis models and interaction act for the characters and scenes with the script they gave us, but modelling is part coding, part art and part combined effort of a team of long time working together and intense communication.” (The bearded gamer, Overseas IT)

When asked about similar experiences of recruitment methods and changes in recruitment trends, 2 Chinese educated participants shared similar stories:

“...we were asked to write down law-related abilities and perform certain mock tasks during the interview, but...in my opinion, law knowledge is something rather difficult to put into the form of abilities or skills.” (The businessman, Domestic Law)

“...it was only in a few firms and for a brief period of time some firms did try to recruit through the Big 4 way³⁰...in my opinion, it was such an epic failure for both employers and employees.” (The farmer, Domestic Law)

Moreover, although they did not have first-hand experience of this themselves, 3 other Chinese educated participants and 2 UK educated participants had heard of the abovementioned situations and knew of the existence of senior alumni passing down or selling documents informing them about the mock tasks, in a similar way to the experiences of accounting students trying to apply to the Big 4.

By looking at the changes in recruitment processes, these discussions, especially the ones regarding the IT industry, match the skills-based model of transnational knowledge transfer developed by Ladinsky (2018). However, unlike this theory, these changes are not exclusive to the transnational scenario. By comparing UK educated participants and Chinese educated participants, UK educated participants showed stronger intentions to explore how the application of knowledge can be adjusted to specific contexts and expressed more reflections based on their placement experience. Furthermore, as explained in the literature review, Castro et al. (2016) suggest that mobile graduates will be the ones initiating the breakdown of knowledge into competitive-gaining skills; yet in these interview

³⁰ The “Big 4 way” refers to how the four big accounting firms, PwC, DTT, KPMG and EY, use a series of quizzes and group tasks during recruitment.

discussions, it was employers who seemed to be initiating the changes, not necessarily the job seeking employees. However, in comparison, IT participants showed a clearer realisation of difference in knowledge structure.

Summary

This chapter illustrates the early stages of participants' return to China and their experience of seeking employment. The emphasis of this chapter is the changes and developments of their perceptions regarding the Chinese context and the early signs of the long-term influence of planned career path. Before their return, participants with clearly planned career paths relied on their previous knowledge of the context, and to some extent, neglected potential changes the context might have. When seeking employment, we can see that participants started to narrow down the context, slowly switching from objectively perceiving the national and regional context to subjectively perceiving organisational and personal context.

Chapter 7: Working in China

This chapter presents the processes in which through closer examination and recognition of subjectively perceived contexts, participants critically reflected on their previous perception of knowledge, reforming and reconstructing their knowledge for context-adjusted application. Through these processes, we can explore the stage at which participants start to realise the cultures embedded in their acquired knowledge and their process of either accepting or denying these embedded cultures. When asked about the process of returning to China and working there, participants, both UK educated or Chinese educated, were more aware of the existence of these processes as contrary to some research. Within the interviews, there were numerous references to what they called “knowledge conversion”. The term “知识转化 (knowledge conversion)” was used frequently, by 31 (out of 43) participants. This is also the term utilised in official Chinese documents that advocate the return of overseas students or seek to attract foreign workers to find employment in China. Loosely based on the knowledge conversion model proposed by Nonaka and Takeuchi (1995), the Chinese version of the term is used and defined slightly differently. As this term has been translated into knowledge transfer on some occasions, it bears a similar definition: to convert/transfer foreign knowledge (or in some cases use “advanced western knowledge” directly) into Chinese workplace application. Adopted in policy documents such as the “Thousand Talents Plan”, a policy aimed at attracting top scholars worldwide to work in China, knowledge conversion is described as a major priority for the “realisation of revolution in productivity and innovation”. Knowledge conversion is also described by these participants as the essential process for productive, meaningful work and personal development. At first glance, some participants used this term in a similar way to knowledge transfer or recontextualization; however, the process, rationale and underpinning thought described by participants are somewhat unexplainable through the framework of knowledge transfer or recontextualization. Contrary to that suggested in some research, these processes were acknowledged and initiated mostly by the participants themselves and decontextualised to some extent. For example, participants are less concerned about how knowledge should be transferred or what needs to be “extracted” from the context, and are more concerned about why they should “convert” and to what degree. For 5 UK educated participants and 3 Chinese educated participants, this relates to the core reason for seeking an overseas education:

“...if we were to fully localise what we learned from [the] western world, what is the point of going overseas in the first place? This is not Qing dynasty (大清亡了), there is no lockdown on the country anymore, we have internet now, we don’t need to carry back textbooks. The western context, the teaching, the learning, is exactly why we need to go out.” (The G men, Overseas Law)

“...as an employer, I think I can represent many other employers [in saying] that there are differences between hiring foreigners, returnees and people who did overseas postgrad. If we want pure western knowledge and mindset, I will hire a foreigner; we I just want the western knowledge and latest technology, I will send one of the Qinghua/Beida (Tsinghua University and Peking University, the Chinese equivalent of Oxbridge) kids to a US postgrad. People who did undergrad in overseas, though of course not everyone, possess something unique to them. And that’s why I hire them.” (The memory palace, Domestic IT)

These participants believe that the value of overseas education is the “partially converted” version of knowledge instead of a fully converted or original version of knowledge. They also hold the opinion that according to different meso-/micro-level contexts, there are optimal levels or degrees of professional knowledge conversion. In the case of IT participants who hold this belief, the optimal level can even be set on smaller sections of professional knowledge:

“...within the industry, you need to be less “localised” if you specialise in AI, but more “localised” if you specialise in data security because of the direction of development and expectation.” (The 955 guy, Overseas IT)

In agreement with the notion of optimal level and difference within a general field of expertise, 17 participants argued that although optimal level is influenced by context, it is more significantly determined by individuals. They believed that identity and personal values play a much greater role than the objective contexts. As some explained, conversion is not only about ability but is also about willingness:

“...I see the returnees and I see two parts of conversion: the ability to convert and the willingness to convert. And for the majority of time, it will come down to the willingness instead of the ability.” (Sparta, Domestic Law)

“...your personality, your field of expertise, your timing of returning, your age and location of settling are all inter-connected to how you should adapt. Your alumni in the same company may adapt differently; you in another company may adapt differently as well.” (The colourful one, Overseas IT)

Unlike most participants, in the colourful one’s quote she uses the word adapt (适应) instead of localise or convert. This intended substitution was a statement to her:

“...a lot of posts on Zhihu (a website similar to yahoo answer/reddit) talked about optimisation based on productivity, appraisal, but that could be tiring and quite frankly unfitting. For me, adapting is the degree I can do without hurting me as a person.”

In the same way as the colourful one, 5 participants felt emotionally uncomfortable when trying to “convert”. They argued that the level of conversion should be determined by the emotional capacity and acceptance of individuals. Not necessarily based on emotional and mental issues, a further 13 UK educated participants were at some point concerned by the separation of the objective and subjective optimal levels of “conversion” due to considerations of professionalism and social identity.

As presented by these quotes, the issues of external expectations, social acceptance and self-realisation underpinned the processes and goals of their “conversion”, not only in terms of returnees as bearers of western knowledge, but also in terms of Chinese individuals who are trying to “truly return” (The family pride, Overseas IT) to their homeland. These discussions about whether to ‘convert’, ‘localise’ or ‘adapt’ show that participants were becoming aware of the culture embedded in knowledge and reflecting on how they should present and utilise their knowledge.

7.1 Deconstruction of knowledge

The farmer, though categorised as a Chinese educated participant in my research due to his undergraduate study in China, spent an exceptional length of time in the US for further education and work. His ideas about knowledge breakdown might represent the most fitting explanation of why knowledge should be broken down and to what extent:

“(…in the first few years after returning to China from his PhD in the US) ...do you know to shoot a gun? You know how in the spy movies, the protagonist runs and shoots with both hands? After I learned how to shoot from my right hand, the first thing I did was to learn to shoot with my left hand, dreaming of a dual gun wielding scene...however, I noticed halfway through that, when you learn to shoot with your right hand, your stance, your position and even the eye you use is designed for you to shoot with your right hand; so in order to shoot with both hands at once, you either master the skill so it becomes natural to you, or you break down the knowledge and skills into smaller components and pick the essential ones to compose a new, costume-made set of knowledge and skills for effective ‘dual gun wielding’.” (The farmer, Domestic Law)

One of the issues that urged participants to consider the breakdown of knowledge is the seemingly concrete association of knowledge with other concepts, either as a particular theory, task or other type of knowledge. Though, various groups of participants do express interests in different issues. In comparison, younger participants or participants who oversee younger employees were more

concerned about the association of knowledge with other knowledge or skills; law participants in general were concerned by the association of knowledge with a particular task or type of work, and IT participants were significantly affected by the association of knowledge and theory.

Necessity and purpose of breakdown

One of the most common themes illustrated by participants regarding their early experiences of work is the gap between theory and practice. This proposed gap seems to be consistent with some of the literature which describes “school” knowledge as too academic or theoretical, resulting in the need for it to be “externally transferred” (reference) or “context-added” (reference) for practice. Especially among Chinese educated participants, comments regarding knowledge taught at university being too ideal were given by 3 Chinese educated IT participants and 4 Chinese educated law participants:

“...when I first started working, I realised the things I learned in university are too ‘pretty’ ...in university you learn to do things properly, in full, ensure every detail is correct, but they are not that necessary, or you don’t have enough time or effort to do it that ‘pretty’.” (The failsafe man, Domestic IT)

“...the way I see it, there are ‘rituals’ surrounding the core, useful procedures. Did you learn to drive here or in the UK? Do you know that in [a] practical test here (China), during reversing when you turn your head to look through the back window, you also need to put your right hand (in China, the driver’s seat is on the left) on the passenger seat? I understand that’s kind of the proof that you are truly turning, but it does not mean you cannot see the back without the hand.” (The handwriting guy, Domestic Law)

These participants argued that the skills and abilities directly derived from school-taught knowledge are more specifically bind by procedures, sequences and generalisation. This means that such skills and abilities can only be applied in an “ideal” situation; they are unable to fit most realistic scenarios. To this end, the low level of knowledge conversion is caused by the nature of the knowledge. However, some participants with more diverse experience argued for the necessity of knowledge that is both rigorous and comprehensive or “in full”:

“...I was in military school so I had to do military training as well as normal study. I was trained to be paratrooper and in descending training we needed to shout out orders, like “1 second 2 second 3 second...check parachute, look left right up down, lift your leg”, and I found it really stupid to shout out these things until my first air drill. When I dropped down the zip line, my mind was absolutely blank and I shouted out those words, did those things without my brain working....what I am trying to say

is, you learned it the proper way, do it the proper way, and then as you are more experienced, you can go a bit freestyle but that's because you already know the essentials, the core idea." (The allrounder, Domestic IT)

"...an issue we had with some new recruits is they all tried to make their workflow leaner. Their intention [was] good: they wanted to improve their productivity and impress us as soon as possible, I can understand that, but they did not assess what part [could] be skipped in different contexts or situations...let's say you learn the full warm-up routine. Yes, you can skip some parts but that is limited to, for example, if you only want to work on your lower body, you can skip the upper body part of the warm-up, but you cannot skip the lower body warm-up in this scenario." (The gavel wielder, Overseas Law)

The allrounder argued that conversion is a form of context-specific reduction, and that reduction can only happen once you have mastered the original form of skills and abilities to the degree that you can perform these subconsciously or instinctively. Similarly, the gavel wielder understands conversion as a form of reduction but argues that meaningful reduction requires an appreciation of what is being reduced and what is left. Conversion as a form of reduction was agreed upon and referred to by another 5 participants, and these 7 participants believed that learning "in full" is both meaningful and necessary. The 7 participants are all over the age of 40 and currently hold or have held management positions. The other 4 participants currently in (or previously in) management positions have different arguments. The OG (Overseas Law) explained this, using his experiences as a lecturer:

"...one thing I noticed when I was teaching in XX university is that students seem to confuse theoretical with ideal. Communism is ideal, democracy is theoretical, that's a good explanation that I wanted to use but cannot use due to reasons you would understand. Theoretical needs addition to be practical, ideal needs subtraction to be practical, so that's what I am seeing in law firms – new kids doing subtraction when they should be doing addition."

Some participants believed that knowledge and associated skills taught at universities are constructed under an ideal context, that these knowledges and skills are in a "full form" and aimed at generalisation. However, the OG asserted that knowledge taught at university is context-less, and that learners should patch applying context to such knowledge to create applicable knowledge and skills in specific circumstances. In order to do this, the OG suggests "tearing knowledge apart" for precise context patching. This view is shared by the collector (Domestic IT) and he further explained why, in his words, "chopping up" knowledge is needed for context patching:

"...let's say you drive a Tesla, and you want to maximise your mileage with a full battery. Yes, you can utilise regenerative braking to charge your battery, and if you

are driving a long journey and you are on a highway, driving in an optimal speed is much more efficient and safer than braking now and then. If you are driving in an urban scenario, then utilising braking is...obviously better.”

As discussed by 3 other IT participants, they believe that the means and purpose need to be separated; maximising battery is the purpose, regenerative braking is one of the means for this purpose, but the means should neither be bound to one purpose, nor should the purpose be limited to a few means. The reason he advocates for this separation is related to his experience as a guest lecturer:

“...when I was teaching machine learning, all students cared about is...learning how to use Scikit-learn, Tensorflow and Pytorch - not to learn [this] software per se... you can learn how to use [this] software without learning what they are.”

This argument that in the field of IT, knowledge is taught as a means to achieve certain purposes, is also mentioned by the shot caller (Overseas IT):

“...the way I run [a] workshop is, XX software has this function, that function, and what we can use it for; but they learned it as, now we have a XX issue to handle or we need to build a XX, so we use XX software. That way of teaching and learning bind knowledge with a specific usage, putting a standard correct answer to a question that can be dealt with by various methods. That is why I need to run these workshops to “break free” knowledge to answer specific questions.”

For participants, the question of how to best apply knowledge in a specific context has different answers. As indicated by these quotes, some believed in the need for reduction according to context; some believed in patching to context; and others believed in the need to separate means and purpose. Despite these differences in direction, the method for achieving these ideas is the same. Participants use various ways to describe this action or method – “chopping up”, “tearing apart” or “breaking free” – but the core ideas remain the same. I summarise them as the breakdown of knowledge.

Association and separation of knowledge

For younger participants and participants that oversee younger employees full-time or have done so at some point, the separation of knowledge that is seemingly associated with other knowledge or skills can cost them years, even decades; interestingly, younger participants thought that overseas returnees are able to perform such separation more quickly and effectively, whereas participants who oversee younger employees reflect on this differently. Together, 24 participants from across all groups acknowledged that to some extent, Chinese educated employees have trouble separating knowledge

from other knowledge and skills with flexibility. As mentioned mostly by law participants, adhering too much to a particular task performance sequence hinders the productivity of younger employees:

“...in my experience when we have new domestic graduates in our team, at least for the first six months we have to clearly express the order we want things to be done [in], otherwise they will do it in the ideal order...as a bad example, we should fill in [a] timesheet before we start overtime, but normally we will work first then fill [it] in, avoiding endless revisiting of [amounts] and names.” (The coffee addict, Domestic Law)

Moreover, four younger Chinese educated law participants confirmed that Chinese education makes individuals too “intuitive” and prevents them from analysing what is truly important or urgent:

“...someone was arrested and wanted us to bail him out, but we could not do that immediately since he was not [an official client]. So naturally I started drafting the application for [a] visit, the contract, and then the bail documents; my colleague, a returnee, stopped me and said our priority is to get him out, so she contacted his wife, signed a document saying we were her legal representatives, and bailed him out two hours later on behalf of his wife. If we went with my way, he would have stayed in jail for at least 2 more days.” (Golden glasses, Domestic Law)

Though not able to provide examples, 3 IT participants shared this viewpoint and believed that employers favour overseas returnees as a consequence of this:

“...their work, or their way of work is...lean, and in comparison, our (domestic graduates) workflow and products are always a bit more abundant, most of the time in a bad way [because] of that.” (Reservoir girl, Domestic IT)

Though envied by Chinese educated participants, this style of flexibility is not thought highly of by participants who oversee younger employees:

“...in a way returnees are indeed more 醒目 (loosely translates to ‘smart’) and kind of pick up what we mean more clearly, but sometimes they ‘smartass’ and wrongly interpret what we mean, go and do things without our consent and mess things up.” (The onmyoji, Domestic IT)

Two law participants even see this flexibility as a downfall:

“...certain sequences are there for a reason, especially in the business of law. Getting things done should not sacrifice legitimacy...like, checking your mirror before changing lane should not be discarded just because you are more experienced at driving.” (Mother Teresa, Overseas Law)

“...being efficient is good, but accuracy should be the eternal default. I have seen many promising young men [who] didn’t truly think before they improvised and became a habit of theirs forever and [could] never be trusted for important cases ever again.” (The farmer, Domestic Law)

According to both participants who oversee younger employees and more senior participants, flexible application of knowledge should not occur too generally; rather it should occur more specifically, especially in the association of knowledge with tasks. Both IT and law participants believed that their industries are more inclined to work on a case-by-case basis in comparison with other professions, making the association more obvious:

“...especially for new guys, a good mentor/supervisor should help them jump out of the knowledge-task cage. (Interviewer: What do you mean?) Well for example Golang (Go Language, a coding language developed by Google) is now THE most popular language for building a cloud server because [of] its balance of stability and flexibility, but that does not mean Java or PHP are washed out. For customers that value stability over flexibility, we still think Java or Care better choices. In terms of knowledge needed for a particular task, overseas educated employees are often obsessed with the “best”, domestic educated employees are obsessed with the “most general/common”, where they really should think about the better suited ones.” (The toy guy, Overseas IT)

“...somehow, I do not know whether it is about how things are taught nowadays, new kids are heavily bound by using [the] latest techniques. But for most of the time, most advanced does not means most suitable; it should almost consider what is most relevant instead of what is most advanced.” (“Gen Hoshino”, Domestic IT)

Similar issues were raised by 9 of the law participants, claiming younger employees cannot separate knowledge from a particular type of case, or set of knowledge and skills associated with certain cases or law:

“...performing a task can imply the use of various [types of] knowledge, but they (newly graduated recruits) kind of pack those knowledges and skills into a...package of some sort... They saw me analyse our client’s asset portfolio (in a finance case) using techniques they thought belong to criminal law cases only, but in my mind, what knowledge I apply is dependent on what principle is needed in each case, not what area that case falls in, is not an issue of experience but...I don’t know how to put it, core finding, principle finding ability?” (The American dream, Overseas Law)

Drawing from a similar point, the camera man (Overseas Law) demonstrates that in an hourly rate business, an inability to break down knowledge could drive up a client's cost by up to six times what it should be:

“...let's say today we run a compliance check on a company that electroplate water faucets. My approach would be checking their water pollution indicators, confirming the numbers are the same with the government database, scanning the suppliers' names with known lawsuits, done, all within 20 billable hours. But some of my colleagues...they first do the checks needed for an electroplating process, and then do the checks for each one of companies in the production chain-line.³¹ It might not sound different to you, but their method would take up to 130 billable hours because of all the back and forth with government and agencies. Think about McDonalds: I want a Big Mac, chicken nuggets and a coffee, so I order those three things as individual items; what they do is...order a Big Mac meal, a chicken nugget meal and a breakfast meal that includes coffee. If unfortunately, it is after 11am, they would just give up the coffee or wait till morning.” (The camera man, Overseas Law)

Presenting a heavily critical point of view, law participants believed that this issue can have a serious effect on performance, but that it can be improved and resolved over time. On the other hand, IT participants argued that this issue has less of an effect in hindering performance, but a more serious residual effect on young employees' careers. Eight IT participants, including both younger and more senior participants, asserted that if “break down” does not happen in the first few years of employment, it might never happen:

“...if the conversion does not happen...or should I say start to happen after two years of working, it would be substantially harder for it to ever happen...your beliefs, styles would start to form and finalise. That's what almost happened to me, what happened to a lot of my friends.” (The colourful one, Overseas IT)

For more senior participants, this belief contributed to part of the reason why they want to hire returnees with overseas work experience:

“...we asked for returnees with work experience not because of their experience per se, we are not necessarily looking for ‘veterans’ – sometimes we do seek veterans but those are for specific reasons, for example, when we want to design a racecar game, we would get someone who has done it before to know which physical engine to choose or how to render high-speed lighting reflection – we ask for overseas

³¹ The new environmental law in China states that final product manufacturers are also responsible for any offences committed by downstream manufacturers. For example, a car manufacturer would also be responsible for any pollution made by the tyre manufacturer.

experienced people because they can separate knowledge, method and purpose of a given task. With people with overseas work experience, that's almost always the case." (The onmyoji, Domestic IT)

Moreover, concerning the underlying reason as to why people with overseas work experience are deemed capable of knowledge breakdown, both IT and law participants suggest that this difference is the result of different types and natures of businesses, that is, overseas businesses are generally the ones that induce breakdown:

"...I think in the business of law, the best way for young lawyers to start breakdown is to work in a place that has sufficient guidance without too much control or restraint; I don't know about other places, but at least in Beijing, not many law firms can provide this type of balance and atmosphere. In my knowledge, Shanghai and Hong Kong have more of these firms, the more European-style firms should I say." (The uninhabited one, Overseas Law)

"...third party studios or independent companies are perfect for newly graduates, but unfortunately, we don't have many of them in China, especially compared to Japan or the US." (The filial son, Domestic IT)

To summarise, this section illustrates the early stages of career in which participants start to reflect on their previous perception of knowledge, giving consideration to their own thoughts and mindset during their acquisition of knowledge, and start to reflect on the knowledge structure through an understanding of the relationship between theory and practice and the potential conflict between culture embedded in knowledge and culture embedded in current context. These discussions show that participants were developing a more detailed understanding of their acquired knowledge, and a more detailed and personal understanding of the context they were in, and were attempting to integrate these processes. Furthermore, at this stage participants started to show preferences towards the context they thought would be better suited to them.

7.2 Recognition of context at the meso and micro levels

As explored in the knowledge framework chapter, when considering the application of knowledge, context is one of the most frequently discussed theoretical factors. However, in most cases, context is considered objectively, to some extent neglecting the idea that context can be perceived differently by individuals and that individuals are accepted and embraced by context in various ways. The following

section investigates how participants recognise and perceive the context in terms of the areas they are in, the companies they work at, and the social/cultural influences associated with these contexts.

Access and advancement in the workplace

One of the pressing issues that participants and I as the researcher wanted to discuss was the issue of gender inequality and discrimination and regional differences in these. In general, China has maternity leave policies that people are allegedly very proud of (female worker labour protection, labour law, 2012)³². However, Human Rights Watch (HRW) argues that maternity leave policies bring about discrimination in the labour market both implicitly and even explicitly (2021). In their report, single and unmarried females are called “ticking time bomb[s] that will explode twice”, and some companies even explicitly indicate that they will only hire men. As a personal reflection, I recalled a conversation between my mother, a senior lawyer, and her new recruits who were mainly female: “...get married, have kids, and then full throttle on your work. That’s the only way you will have access to big cases”. That was 10 years ago, and it still seems to be the case now. However, why is this social issue pertinent here? In the opinion of some participants, this issue is particularly significant among so-called “golden collar worker” professionals and is influenced by regional differences in ways that participants did not anticipate.

In China, accountants, lawyers and doctors are viewed as the staples of golden collar work and they have also been the top three most popular careers for overseas Chinese people for 3 decades (Zhang, 2020). However, these professions also suffer the most from gender discrimination. Some scholars argue that the relatively long maternity is especially damaging to the highly skilled workforce (li, 2016). In the field of law, the reason behind gender discrimination, according to 4 of the participants, is the common company structure found in this profession:

“...if you work in the legal department of some companies, it wouldn’t be too bad but in law firms this is a big issue. Normally a team will have 1 or 2 lead lawyers and 3 to 5 lawyers, no more than 10 people in a team. In this size, [the] absence of 1 [person] is significant in many ways.” (The endangered species, Domestic Law)

“...as single female choices are kind of limited, you can only join [a] highly specialised team where the 6-month absence of 1 [person] will not hinder the overall progress of cases too much. But in a comprehensive team, if they can only hire 1

³² Standard: 98 days with full pay, For female age 23 and above, extra 30 days (extra 60 days pre-2015), 15 days for every children after the first child (eg. The third child will grant 98+30+15+15=158 days), 7 days for father with full pay. If both are single child, 135-180 days extension. No overtime is allowed within first year of labour. All parental leave period needs to be included for calculation of seniority and retirement related accumulation.

[person] to handle the environmental law, it wouldn't be me.” (The vegan, Overseas Law)

At first, I understood this to mean the difference between speciality firms and comprehensive firms as explained above, but further analysis suggests that the meaning is much narrower:

“...even within speciality firms, there are more general teams and more specialised teams. Think about a law firm that specialises in finance: some teams might normally handle companies going public; therefore, they need [an] environmental lawyer, [a] tax lawyer and [a] company law lawyer; [they] will also have some teams specialises in auditing, every lawyer in that team will be audit law lawyers.” (Mother Teresa, Overseas Law)

However, though they agreed about the existence of gender discrimination in law businesses, some more senior law participants had slightly differing opinions about what stages the discrimination takes effect:

“...to be very honest, yes, we will hesitate with someone who is married but does not have children yet, but we are very happy to hire single lady, simply because they are going to stay single for a very long time in our experience.” (Mother Teresa, Overseas Law)

In Mother Teresa's experience, none of the single female lawyers in her firm, or who she knew, have been married in the last five years. Law firms are very happy to hire them, since there is “...no risk of having a baby as they are all single,” she confirms. Some other more senior law participants explained in more detail why single individuals, not necessarily women, are more ideal for law firms:

“...one thing that many people don't necessarily realise is, [being a] lawyer is a job with [a] high mobility requirement. (Interviewer: They jump between firms a lot?) No, no, actual mobility. Especially in big, national level firms, you will spend at least a week per month on the road. If you have a family, especially for females, that can be troubling and some of them are either unwilling to take more demanding cases or...they break up or divorce. Single or not, in some way, determines whether you can work on the big cases or not.” (The farmer, Domestic Law)

Similar points are made by 6 other law participants, namely that gender discrimination is not such a significant issue in terms of initial recruitment but in access to advancement and participation. Wig girl (Domestic Law) had seen this form of discrimination in action:

“...our team is quite big so we have group A and group B, and ever since a lawyer in group B is pregnant, they only get assigned smaller cases because it is generally shorter; all the cases that will need more than 3 months got assigned to us.”

“...in comparison to other business, [the] law industry is especially sensitive with the vacancy caused by pregnancy because of the confidentiality issue. We cannot simply transfer some lawyers in from other teams for a few months and transfer them back, unless that few months covers just a case perfectly.” (The uninhibited one, Overseas Law)

Although they agree on the issue of business ethics and need for confidentiality, other participants believed this issue was rather rare and only applied to a few particular firms that handle criminal cases or substantial mergers that require the highest level of confidentiality. In their opinion, the more significant influencing factor in the level of discrimination is location, but not in the way they expected:

“...yes, that kind of situation (exclusion due to confidentiality) exists, but only when you are like two months due, or the case is really special. Mostly I will say it is about which city you are in, or which level of cities. One of the thing younger alumni ask a lot is whether working in top firms in tier 1 cities is better but [it] is the opposite. The cognitive gap (that females should and will have children) is not as big as people would like and the competition is much bigger.” (The older sister, Domestic Law)

This argument is widely presented by younger participants, namely that law firms in tier 1 cities are more “open minded” regarding gender and would be less likely to assume that women will cause vacancies due to labour and raising child. However, more senior law participants thought that this argument was too naive and would recommend otherwise:

“...my recommendation for my female students, especially if their hometown is not in Beijing or any other tier 1 cities, is to first work in their local law firms, ideally local branches of top law firms, and then transfer to [a] tier 1 city branch or headquarters if they want.” (The OG, Overseas Law)

The farmer (Domestic Law) and Mother Teresa (Overseas Law) both agreed that competition is less fierce in tier 2 and 3 cities, suggesting that branch firms in particular provide a starting point with greater access and a more inclusive environment, with the opportunity to move up to a larger platform. However, this recommendation is specified only for domestic educated female lawyers:

“...the general belief, or phenomenon is, there are two types of female law returnees: either they have long-term boyfriends since their education and will be married and push for having babies really soon or they strongly defy stale Chinese traditions such

as motherhood [as a] women's natural job and even sexuality. For the first type, they will normally finish the whole getting married and having children period fairly fast, their vacancy will happen in their early stage of career; the second type will have no vacancy at all, but perhaps some form of instability, in terms of mental health or availability, in their mid-40s where they should be in a position that can afford to spend more time [on] their personal life. Either way, when hiring female, returnees are the more stable option.” (Mother Teresa, Overseas Law)

“...I must say emotionally I don't agree with this but, the assumption is overseas returnees are less likely to find someone once they are employed, a “safer bet” from...HR's perspective...well this is based on data gathered and to some extent shared by HR in top firms in China, an implicit consensus among them.” (The farmer, Domestic Law)

The opinion that female returnees will either marry and have children relatively quickly or defy this pattern is stereotypical but also, according to some participants, objectively true. Tesla mania had her undergraduate education in China, but since she did her master's in Canada, she is considered a returnee (to some extent), and she decided to lean into the stereotype:

“...I am a lesbian, I have short hair, I prefer pants [to] skirts, I drive a Tesla. In some way, I am the embodiment of [the] stereotype against female law returnees, and since there is no point of arguing with them, I took full advantage of that. I took jobs that they [would] normally hesitate to assign to women, and I get the “politically correct” perks at lots of things.” (Tesla mania, Domestic Law)

Tesla mania argued that especially in law firms, management is very keen to express gender equality and “political correctness”, such as measures to ensure an equal number of male and female juniors and senior partners since the 2017 scandal. In 2017, a Zhihu user posted information that a particular top tier law firm in China had a very unbalanced number of male and female partners in all of their branches. This resulted in a heated debate among lawyers and other professionals. Five law participants and even 3 IT participants recalled that debate, arguing that lawyers, as one of the most progressive groups, should promote leadership in advancing women's position in society. However, some participants suggested that the promotion of equality is only surface-level, exemplified in some experiences resembling Tesla mania's comment that there are jobs that employers will “...normally hesitate to assign to women”:

“...in our team XX, a female lawyer is the only one with construction knowledge, so she is kind of the essential one for compliance inspection, but my team leader, a 58-year-old man, does not want her [on] business trips because he thinks it is ‘not safe’

for her to go out. We are not going to [a] warzone or anything, but somehow, she is treated like a 5-year-old little girl.” (The camera man, Overseas Law)

“...indeed, some lawyers do not want to bring female colleagues on business trips. [They] either think that female lawyers will be harassed by clients, or they will feel uncomfortable on drinking tables or [in] some...special clubs. But funnily enough, they never ask them, they decide for them that they will not like it.” (The businessman, Domestic Law)

Participants believed that women raised and educated in China are deemed to be more associated with traditional Chinese values, whereas returnees, no matter how long or short the overseas experience, are more connected with western values, a stereotype that overseas participants are not necessarily happy with, but in most cases benefitted them significantly. In regard to regional differences, even though some participants had heard stories about different stereotypes and treatment, all participants currently work in law firms located in tier 1 cities, namely Beijing, Shanghai, Shenzhen and Guangzhou. None of them have personal experience of what the situation is really like in law firms in tier 2 or 3 cities. In comparison and at first glance, the situation in the field of IT seems better at the first glance:

“...I do not think or [feel that] women are discriminated in getting good IT jobs. Back when I started university there were rumours that women are belittled in the industry, but, at least I do not see that at all in all three companies I worked for.” (Reservoir girl, Domestic IT)

“...you are kidding, right? Every single IT company will not hesitate to hire women, either for company image or for morale. As long as they meet the criteria and have the required ability, to some extent they have hidden advantage because they are female.” (The colourful one, Overseas IT)

Similar to the situation in the law industry, and as argued by law participants, younger IT participants believed that the IT industry is also trying to present a gender equal workplace environment. More senior IT participants suggested that an increase in the number of female employees can be greatly beneficial for the whole company or department:

“...you might think this is bias or stereotype but, in my experience, female employees are the ones that make sure a project does not go into a dead-end or hit an unnecessary wall. For some reason IT engineers can be very...how should I put it, straight forward like a rhino, and women were the ones to say, hey, stop and think for a second. Honestly, maybe some big companies care about image and promote

equality, but for us it is more about progression and [the] benefits they can bring.”
(The toy guy, Overseas IT)

“...now, in my knowledge almost every team in our company has at least one female employee. Granted, comparatively, teams in our companies have more people but still it shows progression. Especially in IT, women in a team are like, lubricant. They enable communication within a team is...sane. Normal. Sensible. You have no idea how confusing some coders can be. For most of the time, we just go straight to the women in each team to understand what they are doing and what problems they are facing.” (The onmyoji, Domestic IT)

Including the toy guy and the onmyoji, 5 IT participants were very positive about the value of women in IT and felt that there is no visible gender discrimination in IT. They acknowledged that vacancy caused by maternity leave is not a dealbreaker for women in the IT industry. However, some younger IT participants believed that the lack of discrimination in access was precisely because there is implicit inequality in terms of position and advancement:

“...the reason why maternity leave does not matter that much to IT companies is [because] few women hold key or essential positions in IT companies, and since they are not crucial in their work, their absences are naturally neglectable.” (The collector, Domestic IT)

“...yes, there are more and more females in IT now. I think we have at least 30 percent females in our company, but look at XX (a Taiwanese company known as “the eastern Disney” for their excellence in animation) – women there are directors, action coordinators and producers. What about us? Women are customer services, the ones who go to meetings and the ones that got showed on cameras to express how good we are doing in gender equality.” (The preparer, Overseas IT)

Six IT participants expressed concerns that even though women do not suffer discrimination during recruitment, they are not properly respected and treated as professionals, working in easily replaceable positions, hence the seemingly causal atmosphere for consideration of maternity leave. In addition, other IT participants argued that in some sectors of IT, women are respected and treated as professionals, but not necessarily in ways that women would fully embrace:

“...one trend that no one likes is [that] management will naturally choose women as team leaders for female oriented products. We got a case to design a modern compact car [which] targets younger females, and my boss chose one of the women in our department to be the team leader. The thing is, she is [a] renderer, not a designer. In every meeting, [the] boss asked her what [she thinks] but she does not design, how

would she know? Rumours say bosses were very unhappy with the work she did on that case but that's because you put a renderer [in] the position of a designer." (The minimalist, Overseas IT)

"...I don't necessarily think that women are not respected for their professionalism in IT, but it is clear that they do not believe you can be professional and be "women" at the same time. They kind of expect women in IT to be like characters in the TV show "the Big Bang Theory", and the second you put on decent make up and high heels, you just magically lost all your IT knowledge and abilities." (Reservoir girl, Domestic IT)

Among IT participants, 11 felt that in general, women can apply their knowledge in the workplace without too many barriers. Yet within this group, 6 IT participants argued that stereotypes and expectations based on gender form significant barriers for women in applying their knowledge to areas they want or in ways they want. Interestingly, one argument that is used by participants to illustrate how gender discrimination affects knowledge application is the same one that is used by several participants to explain why they think gender discrimination does not exist in the industry:

"...I think comparing to other industries, IT in general change more rapidly. There are new technologies, new applications and new problems every day, so dropping from the "frontline" for a few months can really impact your overall grasp of the situation and knowledge application. Essentially, management does not believe women will be putting [in] enough energy to keep up nor will they take extra time to catch up after giving birth." (The colourful one, Overseas IT)

"...the thing is, the world of IT changes in a really fast path, the optimal solution from last week can be garbage this week, so [if] you are pregnant or take a vacation to have some "me" time or family time, you will get dropped. If you want to keep your position, you need to keep connected. This is the ultimate equality, men and women are the same on this matter." (The lone wolf, Domestic IT)

The argument that IT changes rapidly and therefore discourages time spent on personal life is only mentioned by 4 IT participants. However, a further 16 IT participants agreed with this point in the follow-up interviews. Thus, overall these 20 IT participants agreed that new technologies emerge quickly but that much of the newer technology does not immediately replace the current technology. Therefore, 5 participants reflected that any ongoing, short-term project or case would not be affected by new technology. The remaining 7 argued that their work rarely involves isolated, individual cases, and that it is not uncommon to change technology halfway through a mid-term project:

“...what people don’t necessarily understand is, software is to some extent limited by hardware; at the same time the choice of hardware is partially dependent on the ability to construct software. Some of my friends sometimes ask me why XX (phone manufacturer) didn’t use the latest chip or the latest camera. It is mostly because we had yet to build up the optimal or customised algorithm for that particular part, so there is no point [using] it just because it is the latest one. Just like you would not get the new phone simply because it is launched, you get the new phone because your old one is getting slow, or you are into photography and the new one gets the best camera.” (The wanderer, Overseas IT)

“...I think it depends on what kind of thing you do. For example, for front-end developers, their work can be divided into stages, so if you see each stage as an individual project, then you will not change anything mid project; but if you perceive all the stages combined as a whole, then it is likely that you will use different things or more advanced things halfway through.” (The minimalist, Overseas IT)

Although these 12 participants had different opinions on whether new technology would affect their current work, it is mostly because they work in different sectors of the IT industry that have various timeframes of work. Participants that agreed with the wanderer normally work in the gaming industry or for manufacturers such as phones and cars, where their products have clear generational differences. Participants who leaned more towards the minimalist’s point of view usually work in internet companies or the service sector where their work is more continuous in nature. The 955 guy is a unique case because he works for Tesla, and Tesla as a car manufacturer does not have the same generational distinction. For example, all of the Toyota RAV4 vehicles made prior to 2019 look the same, have the same parts and the same system, and the Toyota RAV4 2019 version is an overall combined, upgraded version of the old car. Tesla, on the other hand, introduce minor changes immediately for both software and hardware. The other 8 participants argued that when considering the impact of new technology on the discouragement of personal time and space, the main focus should not be whether the new technology is applied. Instead, these participants believed that it relates more to understanding and catching up with the development of the industry in general:

“...we don’t use the latest technology immediately per se. What we normally do is we will try out the new thing in a sandbox (an isolated simulation environment) with a current or earlier copy to see if the new thing fits or not, then decide if we want to switch or not. For example, the Unreal Engine 5 came up, most of the studios that use Unreal Engine 4 will sandbox their current project to see if Engine 5 will do better or not. Even if they do not switch on this project, it is very likely they will use it for the

next project, and guess who will be in the next project? The ones who have participated in the sandbox.” (The onmyoji, Domestic IT)

“...when something new comes out, for the first couple months, even years, it is only a vision of what...is coming. Not following the update or learning to use it normally would not affect your work in a few months. But by the time it is workable, and well accepted by the industry, while you are learning it, something else will come out, and the time you spend learning the first one is the time for others to start [to familiarise] with the second one.” (The failsafe man, Domestic IT)

These 8 participants believed that although it was not necessary to become 社畜 (a company slave) and spend all your time on it, in order to “keep up” it would be essential to commit to a little bit of extra time on a daily basis. Furthermore, in their view, any time spent away from the frontline would prove very difficult to regain if the path of new technology is indeed this fast. On 25 November 2021, Zhejiang province, where one of the most IT business-concentrated cities – Hangzhou – is located, introduced a new maternity leave policy. Maternity leave for the first child was extended by 60 days to a total of 158 days, and for second and third children, there was an extension of 90 days, bringing it to a total of 188 days. Within three years of childbirth, both parents will have 10 days of companion vacation, and if there is only one child and parents are over the age of 60, they will receive 5 days of companion vacation. The policy also clearly stated that all leave and vacation should be paid with 100 percent of salary and bonuses, and welfare should not be excluded. Everything is paid by, as the document specifically states, the employers. On the same day, Shanghai issued the same policy. Furthermore, limitations have been removed for having three children. For example, if A has a child from his previous marriage, under the old policy he will only benefit for the next two children; but under the new policy, the number of children in a marriage will not include children from previous marriage for both sides. It was also announced that policies that will encourage three children for each family are expected very soon. It is not hard to imagine that under this new policy and the overall policy climate, women will continue to be treated as “ticking time bombs”, that will now blow up three times and with greater magnitude.

Hierarchy, composition and position

Most of the IT participants pointed out this is not about interacting with clients or family and friends; though some find it is hard to bear, it is reasonable and forgivable that clients or family and friends do not have a sufficient understanding of IT and therefore say and do inappropriate or unreasonable things. However, many complain about internal interaction:

“...I understand that a client would not know how hard it is to design and build a system, so it is understandable for them to ask can it be completed in two weeks; however, a salesman or correspondent that agrees to that deadline is not understandable. They should either know it themselves or talk to us first to know that it is simply impossible, and honestly, they should know that given they work in an IT company!” (The whistle-blower, Domestic IT)

“...I used to work for a joint venture car manufacturer before joining Tesla, and my problem with that company is they don’t have professionals in their management. I am a system and application engineer, but my supervisor asked me to do things that an electrical engineer should do. I have heard of worse things in state-owned businesses.” (The 955 guy, Overseas IT)

Similarly, 14 IT participants mentioned that they had experienced the assignment of unsuitable work. It is either “out of range”, such as the work described by the whistle-blower with an unrealistic deadline or a shortfall in team members, or, as described by the 955 guy, work that requires the “wrong sets of knowledge and skills”. Some argued that the second example occurs more often, and is difficult to avoid, especially in large companies:

“...for people not from an IT background it is quite hard to [distinguish] between different types of IT and exactly your field of expertise, and even though we might have similar foundations, we work very differently and in most cases, [it is] not interchangeable at all...imagine chefs, a Chinese chef and a French chef might have the same level of abilities like chopping, same level of knowledge like nutrition and chemical reactions, but you cannot ask the Chinese chef to cook French dishes just because they have the common knowledge and skills.” (The journalist, Overseas IT)

“...the problem is, in big companies that have people from other professions, us having accurate titles and positions is absolutely crucial. I work in XX (a well-known global tech company) and I am a CISSP and yet my title is still “security specialist” and people will ask me to help them reset passwords.” (The lone wolf, Domestic IT)

According to other IT participants, a CISSP (Certified Information Systems Security Professional) is gaining greater importance in China with the increased emphasis on information security in the last two years. Some participants referred to this as “a fast-track ticket to CIO or CTO” or “a guarantee for senior management” with the highest earning potential in the field of IT. However, as argued by the lone wolf and another 3 participants, acknowledgement of and respect towards the role are lacking:

“...I must say many senior managements in big companies to some extent understand how valuable that certificate is but do not quite understand how “heavy” it is. To

them you are just an engineer with a rather rare certificate. It is like, you hire an architect just because they have the certificate to sign the papers, not because of their design and creativity.” (The Afro, Domestic IT)

“...in big companies, you can see two trends: either they do the same thing under different titles, or the entire department has the same title, just different levels of salary. These trends confuse management to assign work and confuse employees to feel respected and motivated...like, if you are a professor in your university, but the dean called you a lecturer and assign first year lectures to you. You may not care what you are called or who you teach but you will worry that the dean does not respect your expertise.” (The shot caller, Overseas IT)

In particular, as asserted by senior participants and Chinese educated IT participants, in big companies that have clear and layered hierarchies, a lack of title and accurate position can professionals’ motivation and productivity due to the erroneously placed chain of command. The journalist (OI6) referred to the issue of confusing titles during the discussion on job interviews and further argued that the same principle should be used when changing jobs:

“...(IT operation management is called 运维 or 运营 by different companies) – that is why either you are looking for new jobs or being headhunted, it is important to see if the title matches the job description. I have seen job postings that seemingly ask for a front-end developer, but if you look closely or actually talk to them, you realise they are looking for a back-end developer. It is a clear indicator that those companies are run by non-IT professionals that cannot be bothered to ask, and joining those companies is a waste of time and waste of your knowledge.” (The journalist, Overseas IT)

“...what I told younger alumni is, join a company that truly understands what you are capable of and what you should be doing. If you only want to join a big company but get placed in a wrong position, the things you think you do right will be deemed as wrong, things they think are right might seem absurd to you. Human resources in the field of IT are much more delicate than most people think and unfortunately not many companies have corresponding professionals in their HR department.” (“Gen Hoshino”, Domestic IT)

In comparison, the issue of title was not referred to by law participants, and when asked in the follow-up interviews, none of the law participants found it worthy of concern. In general, apart from lawyers specialising in US law where each state has their own licensing body, lawyers do not hold a separate certificate that allows for or indicates that they work in a particular field of law. As mentioned earlier,

for a period of time non-law graduates were highly sought after in speciality law firms, but with the tightened entry requirements for the lawyer examination, law participants are no longer very optimistic about non-law graduates joining law firms in the future. Furthermore, law firms in general have flatter hierarchies and a clearer division of teams and specialities: it would be unlikely for lawyers working in a reputable law firm to be assigned cases that they are not familiar with or are uncomfortable with. However, the issue of position is frequently mentioned by law participants who currently work in or have worked in companies in a similar way, namely relating to the significance of poor internal and external interaction and lack of motivation. In general, participants believed that working in legal affairs departments in companies equates to “softer” work than that found in law firms:

“...most companies that have a legal affairs department are normally big and influential companies that focus on a few particular businesses, so working in those departments means one will frequently and probably only interact with a handful of government officials in a specific field. Now, if you are a lawyer handling a case, you would not necessarily mind defeating or sternly negotiating with them, but as a company lawyer you should maintain a long-term relationship with them. Essentially case handling lawyers should play bad cop and you should play good cop.” (Golden glasses, Domestic IT)

“...in most scenarios, being a company lawyer would mean being ‘stationary’ in terms of what you do and who you deal with. Especially in China, the issue for any company lawyer will be, how reasonable your boss is and how negotiable your local officials are. Let’s say some entrepreneurs in China are...not very used to playing exactly by the rules. One of my clients bought a mansion in the UK and he wanted to build an outbuilding, a shed on the property. I told him that he will need planning permission to do that in the UK. Eventually, because the shed was already built when he files the permission to build it, the council ordered him to take it down, plant the trees back and then apply again. This example perfectly illustrates how some Chinese businessmen handle the law. If you are his lawyer, you gave him advice, he didn’t listen, that’s his fault; but if you are his employee, he will say ‘Why didn’t you stop me?’ and you need to clean it up.” (The OG, Overseas Law)

Similar to the story narrated by the OG, the farmer and Mother Teresa presented an interesting argument: when working for a company, the identity of the lawyer is weakened, and the identity of the employee is strengthened. In their argument, these dynamics can be applied and change the interaction between a lawyer and business owner into employer and employee, instead of individual and a consulting professional; lawyer and government officials as representative of government and

representative of a business instead of two (technically) equal parties of a law dispute. For law participants, the undesired interaction and lack of motivation that stems from working in a company is only partially derived from a lack of understanding between non-professional colleagues and their counterparts. Three other participants reflected on their experience of not being respected for their knowledge because they did not work for a law firm:

“...I worked for an investment bank for a while as [an] analyst. The whole point of hiring me is to predict company value change due to legislature movement, for example, when new articles were published to tighten air pollution, I assessed which companies are mostly likely to be affected and by how much. At least a dozen times when I handed out my analysis, they said they will verify my interpretation of the policies with a law firm. Why did they hire me if they did not believe my expertise?” (The handwriting guy, Domestic Law)

“...I worked in an anti-money laundering compliance department for a few months. Normally these departments will be filled with law graduates and finance graduates, and we should be respected equally where they look for monetary anomalies and we look for legal compliance. But in many cases, managers make judgements based on their analysis, and ours were used only as supplementary materials.” (Old England, Overseas Law)

Seven other law participants believed that lawyers working in companies are indeed being belittled as “lawyers” per se, but that the situation is not as severe as the description provided by the other three. Eight law participants, on the other hand, suggested that this is because they do not perceive their position correctly:

“...the core difference between working in firms and working in companies is the direction of sensitivity. As a lawyer, you need to be sensitive towards facts, details, interpretation and presentation, how to apply your knowledge in the current case; working in a company, on the other hand, is about being sensitive about the trend, potential changes in policies and government, how knowledge might need to be applied in the future.” (The farmer, Domestic Law)

“...let’s assume you work in a car manufacturer. Your job will then be analysing would there [could] be changes in pollution policy, chain responsibility policy, rights to sale policy, and should [the] company act prior to the changes or wait for the checks. Then, you hire lawyers to handle the cases and the checks. It is like being [a] player or the coach in a sports team.” (The businessman, Domestic Law)

The other 6 law participants, who were all educated in the UK, held the same ideas as the farmer and the businessmen: a lawyer does not necessarily only mean a wielder of law, it can only mean a manager of law. In a similar way to the example used by the businessman, several other participants expanded the coach and player analogy:

“...it is like, a good coach does not need to be a good player themselves...” (Savile Row, Overseas Law)

“...think about songs, there [is a] singer, composer and lyrics writer. They are all good at music but in different aspects.” (The badge carrier, Overseas Law)

These UK educated law participants perceived working in companies and in law firms as different ways or different directions in which to apply the same knowledge. As to why only UK educated participants have these perspectives, UK educated law participants and senior law participants offered similar arguments. Three UK educated law participants argued that this was because they were taught differently:

“...we had exchange students from XX university, and they were very surprised we had “what you should do as in-house consultant” and “what you should do as case approached lawyer” types of teaching and exam questions. Like, in some way they were taught as future lawyers only, not [as] someone who can do all sorts of jobs that involve law.” (The uninhibited one, Overseas Law)

Presented with the quote from the uninhibited one, the farmer explained that it is related to context and development:

“...the reason why some Chinese universities do not teach from [the] other perspective is simply because [of a] different mindset and therefore the formed environment. Think of legal issues as illness, and lawyer as doctor. In the western world, businesses are used to having in-house lawyers, like you would do [an] annual health check and have [a] family doctor. Chinese businesses prefer to go to the doctors only when they have a serious illness. In this scenario, naturally, since people don't need or want [a] family doctor, medical school will not have the course of family doctor because it is not popular.”

These senior law participants and UK educated participants argued that, because the application of knowledge is so different in nature, working in a company without having the right mindset is itself a type of “non-professional” behaviour (The coffee addict), “just as absurd as a football coach subbing himself in as striker”. (The OG, Overseas Law)

Fourteen participants explained that having “non-professional” colleagues and employers is quite common in large domestic companies and state-owned businesses; those participants who felt that this had reached an unbearable level either went to international companies or studios/firms. As discussed in the literature review, several scholars suggest that overseas educated returnees will favour internationally-based companies; yet as is evident in my interviews, although UK educated participants did have a higher regard for international companies and studios, they did not or would not see them as the absolute first choice for current or future employment.

Local or global?

Compared with domestic educated participants, UK educated participants are in general more flexible in terms of location: they are less insistent on staying in their hometown or city of their alma mater, and more significantly shaped by the “fame” of their employer:

“...most of my friends from university have the same problem after returning: we were pressured to get into well-known and big companies. It is almost like you need to get into big companies to prove that going overseas was worth it.” (The family pride, Overseas IT)

“...back when I [had] just returned to China, getting into BAT (Baidu, Alibaba, Tencent) was like, a proof that you are one of the “good” returnees, you were a good student. My cousin got into ByteDance (the company that established TikTok) when he returned. He was in the team that eventually made TikTok, but everyone around his parents were asking did he flunk in the US or what, otherwise he shouldn’t be in such a small company. Six months later, he couldn’t stand all the nagging anymore and went to a state-owned investment bank.” (The minimalist, Overseas IT)

All overseas participants, whether IT or law, have expressed that they underestimated the influence of families and surroundings on seeking employment, or to be more specific, the type of employment they “should” seek from the perspectives of their families and surroundings’. With regards to fame of size of company, law participants generally had a more favourable experience since law firms generate less publicity than large companies or technology companies. However, most of them still endured pressure in different ways. For 10 law participants, the pressure was tethered to location:

“...they kind of assume that big firms are only located in Beijing, Shanghai, Guangzhou and Shenzhen. Even [when] I got into [a] top firm’s local branch they will still ask ‘Can’t you get into their headquarters?’” (The older sister, Domestic Law)

“...there was lots of gossip ever since I went back to XX (her hometown, a decent tier 2 city) instead of going to the top 4 cities. My mom was trying to be nice and soft and did not ask directly, but essentially what she is asking is why are you still here.” (The vegan, Overseas Law)

The situation might be deteriorating for lawyers who are very specialised in one area. Since 2015, local firms, which mainly used to be comprehensive firms that handle versatile legal issues, are switching to highly specialised firms, and some participants believed that the 2021 ALB award was the turning point. The ALB award is one of the most influential law awards in China, and for the first time, in 2021, red circle firms were no longer the winners:

“...normally firm A³³ will win 15 awards, firm B will win 10 to 15 and C, D and E will win 7 or 8 each; this year, A won 3. All the other red circle firms won 1 or none. Just 2 years, the whole industry just turned upside down.” (The coffee addict, Domestic Law)

“...‘the old five’ lose tragically and firms like F are the big winners. They might be the new kings in law.” (The camera man, Overseas Law)

The aforementioned law firm F is neither a comprehensive firm nor a speciality firm. They generally have four to five branches in one or two of the tier 1 cities and the rest are located in tier 2 cities. They tend not to have international collaboration or branches. What they do with those branches might be what changes the game:

“...think about Suzhou, that’s where all the tech giants are located, so you can imagine lots of firms or branches in Suzhou focus on handling IT clients. What F and others do, is to turn from serving particular clientele, to handling particular issues...For example, F’s branch in Suzhou, mainly do/specialise in intellectual property related cases, and some other firms focus on finance and mainly do government grant qualifications. They now do much narrower field of expertise in an area that has endless requests for it.” (The gavel wielder, Overseas Law)

Some law participants, and even IT participants, suggest that this trend will develop more rapidly than is currently anticipated:

“...you know Detroit, the city of motor? In a city with strong inclination towards a specific industry, service businesses surrounding each sector of that industry will naturally emerge. Essentially what we are seeing right out is what Detroit went

³³ These 5 firms (A, B, C, D and E) are the so-called traditional red circle firms. There is a new list of red circle firms that includes 8 firms (including the 5 traditional firms).

through in the 80s or 90s. The only difference is, Detroit might be a coincidence, but China is deliberately building these specific industry-focused cities.” (Sparta, Domestic Law)

“...what we are seeing in Shanghai now is, a virtuous circle that suits us better is forming. Since there is a high concentration of financial institutions here, there are now IT studios that build and maintain servers, there are studios that design and make internal and external applications and, of course, my studio that delivers [the] best security systems and monitoring. With the emergence and maturity of these studios, those banks no longer need their own IT department, and we get to work in [an] environment that we feel much more comfortable [in].” (The wanderer, Overseas IT)

“...I think the whole IT industry is getting more professional but interdisciplinary at the same time. For example, in Shandong province, almost all of the studios specialise in pipeline monitoring and transport logic tracking systems because of all the paper manufacturers in that area. A “one-does-all” company or in-house IT department might not be favourable in the future.” (The preparer, Overseas IT)

Even though only 4 IT participants highlighted this development trend, 11 participants were subsequently asked about it in the follow-up interviews. With the exception of 3 participants who disagreed that this was a national development goal, 8 concurred that they had witnessed this development and that they were satisfied with its direction. . The 3 sceptical participants were in favour of its development but were unsure as to whether the IT service sector has enough studio coverage to establish this as a healthy and sustainable market for various industries:

“...(Interviewer presents the quotes from the wanderer and the preparer) Yes indeed, these things are happening, but you can already see there probably is only one or two studios for websites or applications in Shandong because paper manufacturers don’t need user interaction for customers since they do b2b (business to business) instead of b2c (business to consumer) like financial institutions. So even if there are thirty cities in China heavily focusing on a specific industry, some cities might have five fields of IT service or product studios and some cities might only have one or two.”

That said, participants would still like to see more studios established in China to enhance the professional environment. Law participants, on the other hand, have mixed feelings about this trend, whether in terms of the possibility or the outcome.

Two UK educated law participants thought that cities that heavily focus on a specific industry will not exceed double digits due to the difficulties in relocating businesses from across the country to a specific city, not without extremely strong incentives. Twelve law participants believed that this was

not an impossibility: with the use of reasonable incentives and heavy limitations on where these businesses originally located combine, mass relocation is achievable, as demonstrated by a real-life example:

“...in the southern area, the ceramics industry was packed in Foshan city, but with the new tightened air and water pollution policy changes in Guangdong province and incentives for ceramics manufacturers in Chaozhou city, [the] ceramics industry in Chaozhou reached hundred billion Chinese yuan size in 2020. That massive relocation or [what] some see as movement of capital happened in 3 years’ time.”
(The G men, Overseas Law)

“...since 2015, there are now 22 industry parks and business incubators built and up and running in Suzhou. Not 22 businesses – 22 parks and incubators. At least 1 law firm was introduced or even invited into those parks, and with these parks filling up, more firms are now thinking to move in. Every time we came back from a business trip, something new got built.” (Savile Row, Overseas Law)

Participants, in particular those who work in top law firms that have many branches, have confirmed the information or rumours that many cities are following this trend, though 5 participants thought that the outcome might not be positive for every city. Among the 12 who are convinced by this trend, precisely half view it as beneficial and half do not. Including the 2 who thought that the trend will not happen, and the 7 who felt it was too early to make a judgement, 13 had positive views and 8 were against it. The latter group maintained that the trend would limit mobility and choices:

“...if this trend expands to a certain level, lawyers who specialised in a specific field might have to go to specific cities. We already see lawyers in the field of information having to choose between Hangzhou or Shenzhen and lawyers in the field of finance will pretty much have to go to Shanghai or Xi’an.” (The endangered species, Domestic Law)

“...it might will boil down to choosing cities with the field you want to work in or choose the field based on where you want to live. I don’t buy the argument that this will dilute competition, the competition will just change from getting into red circles to lawyers in the same field trying to get into a few firms in specific cities. The competition can even get worse.” (Mother Teresa, Overseas Law)

Mother Teresa suggested that some individuals in the law industry are now advocating that this trend will attract elites and returnees to cities other than Beijing, Shanghai, Guangzhou and Shenzhen, equalising the target locations for graduates and therefore easing overheated competition. Yet this argument is not well accepted by these 8 participants. For those who view this change as beneficial,

their main argument is as follows: the narrower the field of expertise, the better the chances and advantages that they (mostly UK educated participants and younger participants) will have in the future:

“...comparatively speaking I think we (returnees) are narrower in nature...for example, A and B are both lawyers that specialised in finance, but A is narrower into optimising preferential policies... (Interviewer: Why [do] you think returnees are narrower in nature?) Either because of course structure or personal motivation...I do think that because we were guided and encouraged to dig deep into our interest and passion, we tended to study narrower. This could be a bad thing 10 years ago, but this new trend makes it truly shine.” (The gavel wielder, Overseas Law)

“...to me this is the one of the most important reasons to stay in China. With this new trend, I can work toward doing husbandry pollution in highly specialised firms in inner Mongolia, which was not possible before. Now there are 3 firms that focus on husbandry pollution in China, and I believe more will come.” (The vegan, Overseas Law)

For many younger UK educated law participants, this trend represents an opportunity for them to fulfil their passion, their reason for being a lawyer, a perspective that is rarely mentioned by Chinese educated participants. When asked in follow-up interviews, younger Chinese educated participants argued that it concerned timing and proportion, not that they did not have a passion or personal goal:

“...in my experience, only about half of the people that chose law is for the monetary prospective and half is truly about wanting justice and [a] peaceful society. Not that I don’t want to achieve personal goals, it is just in my mind this is something I should do...to get to a certain position and have the authority and freedom to pursue them.” (Wig girl, Domestic Law)

“...I did not bring it up specifically because I am already pursuing my goal...I am the lucky few, my pursuit is the more realistic one in the current context so I don’t need to compromise, the only difficulty might just be...adjusting my expectations?” (Tesla mania, Domestic Law)

What Tesla mania called a “realistic pursuit” is a useful way of explaining why some returnees are positive about this trend – it relates to why some fields of law are sarcastically termed “original sin” by the lawyers in those fields.

Career prospects and advancement

The majority of law firms have “grade point” or “distribution point” systems, a variation of the lockstep system widely used in the US and the UK. As an example, law firm A has 3 equity partners: each has 30 points, 30 points and 40 points respectively, amounting to 100 points in total. In a given year, the profit is divided by the total number of points and distributed accordingly. If firm A makes 200 000 CNY in total, each point will be worth 200 CNY, and a partner with 30 points will gain 6 000 CNY in dividends. A competent lawyer who works adequately will be able to apply for equity partnership in about 6 or 7 years. Once an application is successful, they will be assigned a point and increase according to their contribution. However, in most scenarios, “working adequately” and contribution is not necessarily calculated by how well a case is handled; it is predominantly calculated by the profit that is brought in. In this context, a hierarchy of fields of law is naturally formed based on the respective average margin of profit:

“...that is what makes people hesitate about choosing fields like environmental protection, employment dispute or DV. With the same amount of time and effort, people working on a merger case can bring in 300 000 just as [a] team member with a small proportion; people working on an environmental protection violation case, can probably only bring in 100 000 as a case leader.” (The vegan, Overseas Law)

“...even within environmental law, doing pollution and compliance cases are much, much more profitable than doing violation and public cases. So how would lawyers feel when their work is underappreciated, seen as the “lesser field”?” (Mother Teresa, Overseas Law)

This is probably the only point that all law participants agreed on: in the context of the widely-used distribution point system in China, knowledge about a specific field of law is assigned with a financial property, with different weights either for firms or for lawyers. In the current system, lawyers specialising in fields with less financial weight will, to some extent, have to choose between financial and social prospects or pursuing their goals. As wig girl said in the previous section, some believed their goal was pursuable once they reached a certain level and position, but 5 law participants argued that the practicality of this philosophy is questionable:

“...by getting to a certain level and position, you gain seniority, authority and accumulation of knowledge, but those things are bound within your field of expertise – if you become [a] high-level equity partner in a top firm as a merger lawyer, everyone’s respect towards you will [be] the respect for your expertise in merger. Why would they respect you as a, let’s say human rights lawyer?” (The businessman, Domestic Law)

“...switching lanes is a risky and painful path, even if your targeted lane is blooming. It is lucky for those who wanted to protect the environment, China happens to pay

more attention to environmental protection and those who switch lanes, given that they learn fast enough and hard enough, can still be in a position to have both financial and personal gain; but if your goal is in human rights, we currently don't have the ground and needed attention for it to be achievable, and anyone pursuing that from a high point is most likely to be kicked out of equity partnership because of low or even zero income." (The OG, Overseas Law)

Excluding "switching lane" due to change of personal goal or external factors, switching lane itself is mostly caused by financial property enforced by the points system. With the development and reformation of law and alleged proximity to western law, there have been discussions with regards to changing the points system or reform the contribution calculation. One of the most influential factors in the discussion is the possible introduction of a pro bono requirement. Pro bono law services are a system mainly used in the US that ask law firms or individual lawyers to have mandatory or recommended hours of work freely provided to people who are poor or underserved. Therefore, law firms are discussing the possibility of calculating not according to profit, but according to overall contribution:

"...For example, if lawyer A did 20 hours or [a] pro bono job, completed the required quota enforced on the firm, then other lawyers can do their work undistracted, therefore lawyer A should get a share of [the] other lawyers' work." (The handwriting guy, Domestic Law)

However, the discussion has stalled because lawyers and officials thought that this proposal might be too vague and difficult to implement. The rise of specialised local firms, on the other hand, provides another potential solution for the inequalities in career advancement. Ten law participants suggested that since a specialised local firm is filled with people from the same field, there would not be a natural difference in the financial property that influences advancement:

"...in a firm that has a merger team, a company law team and an administrative law team, three young lawyers that join these three teams respectively will have [a] huge income gap in ten years. A in merger team will [have] made equity partner 3 years ago and now earns 100 a year; B in company team might just [make] equity lawyer now and earn 6,70 a year; C in administrative team will still be a while from making partner and earn 30 a year. But if C is in a firm in Xi'an city that specialises in administrative law, they will have made equity partner and earn around 50 a year." (The farmer, Domestic Law)

"...is a simple math question: when you bring in half a million a year and others bring in 2, 5 or 10 million, of course you will not to be picked first for partner. But if

in a firm where everyone brings in similar amounts, you will be considered for other things like level of completion etc.” (The uninhibited one, Overseas Law)

Though optimistic about facilitating advancement equality, these 10 law participants agreed with the other 7 law participants that the rise of specialised local firms cannot solve the core issue: unequal natural financial property enforced on fields of law. They thought that this issue could not be resolved internally within the law industry, but that changes are needed on a larger scale:

“...one of the best examples is environmental law. The rise of [the] environmental lawyer (in terms of position, status and earning) is due to one simple reason: significantly increased penalty. When you will be fined one hundred thousand yuan for polluting the water, you will hesitate to pay a lawyer eighty thousand yuan to solve this; but now you will be fined one million and criminal charges on management level, you will be more than happy to pay half a million, even more than a million to avoid jail time.” (Mother Teresa, Overseas Law)

“...in many ways, how much a lawyer can charge is greatly influenced by the alternative cost; what will happen if I do not get a lawyer? How much will that cost me? And that only depends on the law articles. Therefore, for issues that have similar levels of social impact there could be different levels of penalty attached. Naturally, lawyers working in fields that pay less will eventually question themselves, how much is my knowledge worth to this society? Am I and my knowledge truly needed?” (Sparta, Domestic Law)

In comparison, IT participants believed that within IT, there is not much variability in terms of financial or developmental potential across the different fields; that said, IT participants were greatly divided on the direction of development, and this can be explained by how they define professionalism in their field:

“...no matter what our titles are, at the core we are coders, so the ability to write codes that do what we want them to do is the only thing that defines us as professionals.” (The memory palace, Domestic IT)

This quote represents 9 out of 11 domestic educated IT participants and 3 UK educated participants, who all thought that the core of professionalism is to hone their skills, sharpen their knives and be the best at what they do:

“...do you know [how] the autopilot system works on a Tesla? Just 8 cameras, a chip that handles single tasks really, really fast and [a] huge amount of accumulated data. When BMW and others are trying to use V2V (vehicle to vehicle) or V2I (vehicle to infrastructure) through 5G and use chips to do multi-task calculation with numerous

sources of information, Tesla just stick to the basics and be the most “professional” as the result.” (The 955 guy, Overseas IT)

Some participants, including 7 UK educated participants and 1 domestic educated participant, argued that though being good at what you do is important for most professionals, in the realm of IT, things are slightly different, and people should think more comprehensively:

“...imagine I am a knight, I practised and studied so hard that eventually I can slay [the] dragon, but there is no dragon in this world. I would rather be able to slay lions and tigers and use my knowledge to train and manage a legion that can slay thousands of lions and tigers to protect all the villages.” (The dragon slayer, Overseas IT)

The dragon slayer, along with 7 other participants, believed that professionalism should be separated from enthusiasm; as an IT enthusiast, they can hone their skill to whatever extent they like, but as professionals they should consider what is applicable and most importantly, what is needed:

“...in my opinion, we should consider the nature of the work we do. In terms of writing codes there is no stroke of genius, is a sequence of...to some extent repetitive but definitely not mundane work... It is like writing a novel. Every sentence itself is not hard to write, but you need to make sure sentences tell a reasonable, understandable story when put together. One or two really amazing sentences cannot save the book if other parts are rubbish.” (The minimalist, Overseas IT)

“...if you have specialist certificates like CISSP and oracles, or your work is in research and development then sure, you should focus on your specialist knowledge and skills, but otherwise by your fifth or sixth year, you should start to think about project management or general management.” (The shot caller, Overseas IT)

In line with their argument that one of the disadvantages of working in companies is having non-professionals as employers, these 8 participants believe that especially in IT, professionals need to be able to understand what each employee is doing and what the team is doing and make meaningful arrangements. On the understanding of professionalism, law participants have a very different idea and vision. In general, law participants believed that lawyers need to pick a field early and “just dig into that field and become an expert” (Old England, Overseas Law). However, they have different ideas about how large or specific a field should be. Seven law participants believed the accumulated experience, knowledge and understanding gained by working in a specific field are exclusive to that particular field. Though they have a different formula for the proportion, the amount or proportion of accumulated knowledge and experience that can be shared internally is neglectable:

“...for example, if you worked a merger case, I would say 40 percent of knowledge and experience you get from this case can be applied to other merger cases, 30

percent can be applied to other types of financial cases, and the 30 percent that can be applied to any other law cases is pretty much operational duties like, drafting documents or something.” (Golden glasses, Domestic Law)

“...if we look at cases with billable hours, in a case with 100 hours, around 3 times 3 hours (3 people, each working for 3 hours) are spent on office matters, document filing and communications. This is the same for almost all cases. Then around 3 to 4 times 5, total of 15 to 20 hours, is spent on research and document checking; these hours are in common with cases from the same law segment. The rest will all be field trip examination and analysis, perhaps a few more hours for follow-up research. So now you are handling a land purchase evaluation in province A: if you have done a land acquisition evaluation in province A before, you can save 20 to 25 hours; if you have done a building acquisition in province A or land acquisition in province B, you can probably save 10 to 15 hours; but if you have not done any acquisition before, you are not much better than a new graduate.” (The businessman, Domestic Law)

Seventeen law participants agreed that the examples used by golden glasses and the businessman are more or less realistic, and further explained that this is because in practise, law articles are very specific and detailed in terms of coverage and application:

“...the field of expertise in law is much more detailed than some people, even some lawyers, thought. Within air pollution, a lawyer who normally represents chemical industries might not do well when representing car manufacturers since industries only have production pollution, but car manufacturers have licence and registration³⁴, exhaust examination and exhaust monitoring on top of production pollution...you will definitely learn faster and easier to understand the general principle and tactic if they fall in the same bigger field, but there are small gaps between cases in exactly the same specific field, medium size gaps between cases in a bigger field and huge, I really mean huge, gaps between cases from different bigger fields.” (The American dream, Overseas Law)

“...for example, for an environmental protection compliance check, it can vary significantly across industries or even within [an] industry. Let’s say you helped a paper production company conduct a compliance check, and you then get another compliance case from a different paper production company that makes printer paper or writing paper. You go there and this company B makes paper packaging used by amazon; therefore, compared to company A, they need to do additional checks for

³⁴ In China, hybrid and electric cars have a designated green plate.

recyclability. Company C does the exact same thing as company A, but A is located near ocean and C is located near river, so it would need different water pollution indicators and requirements. And speaking of water pollution, standards for the allowed changed pH level are different across different production processes such as pickling and steelmaking within a steel mill.” (Mother Teresa, Overseas Law)

Based on these significantly differentiated processes and methods of practising law, 7 participants argued that lawyers need to focus on a specific, narrow field to enhance career prospects, but the other 10 participants thought otherwise. They asserted that difference in practice is not the same as difference in knowledge:

“...if we use environmental law as [an] example, I can agree that water pollution and air pollution are slightly separate sub-fields, but I cannot agree that the difference between pollution in car manufacturing and in chemical industries is game-changing. Do you play Lego? Some of the new Lego have motors and lights in the set. Sure it is slightly different to build...Lego with those parts, but you just need to be a bit more careful and maybe make some small mistakes; you are not switching to build Gundam (Japanese plastic model).” (The coffee addict, Domestic Law)

Three law participants were impartial about whether difference in practice means difference in knowledge, but they disagreed with claiming expertise in narrower fields due to practical reasons:

“...if you browse through [the] homepage of the top firms or even any firms, you will find “M&A expert”, “compliance expert” or “maritime law expert”, but you will not find “transnational merger expert”, “pollution expert” or “domestic harbour expert”. There is nothing bad about narrowing down to a specific field as a professional, but as a lawyer, by claiming those titles you are relying on your clients to fully understand what their issue is. (Interviewer: What do you mean?) When companies are sued of course they will know what they are sued for, but sometimes companies get lawyers for precautionary reasons and what they thought [was] security or fire safety regulation could turn out to be pollution related.” (Sparta, Domestic Law)

“...there are experts that are famous in a specific narrow field, let’s say lawyer A is famous for helping [a] tech company go public in the Hong Kong stock exchange. But normally how they get there is, they started as a finance lawyer, helped a tech company go public in Hong Kong in [a] relatively fast and smooth process, then another tech company is planning to go public and finds lawyer A through research or recommendation. In a way it is not you that decides and defines your expertise, but what the market needs.” (The OG, Overseas Law)

These participants claimed that compared with many other professions and industries, lawyers and law firms are very passive in terms of getting work. Therefore, a limitation on their stated expertise is unwise, especially in a large firm. From the perspective of obtaining a job and augmenting reputation, even the 7 participants who believed that lawyers should focus on narrow fields also concurred that establishing themselves in a narrow field would not be very beneficial:

“...you misunderstood, what I meant is, I want to become a criminal law lawyer that specialises in public safety cases, not a public safety specialist...I am good at public safety cases, but that does not mean I can only do public safety cases; if I only do that, I could have saved 3 years from my undergraduate course.” (The gavel wielder, Overseas Law)

“...academically you can be as narrow as you want, but as lawyers in law firms that is not good externally or internally. Clients might think their case is out of your expertise, and colleagues might hesitate to refer cases to you. We want to dig deep on what we like, but that should not cost wasting everything else we learned.” (The American dream, Overseas Law)

Based on the belief that law knowledge is heavily segregated by fields and sub-fields, as discussed above, these law participants argued that by announcing and practising in a narrow field, lawyers would only use a fragment of their acquired knowledge, potentially wasting other parts of their amassed knowledge. This is the reason why some participants did not like this trend in China, and why some participants later argued that continuous study needs to focus on a field to avoid learning “not un-useful, but simply un-appliable” knowledge (The endangered species, Domestic Law). 18 law participants, despite their differences in conception and attitude, asserted that professional knowledge has a high “scrap rate”, a belief also shared by 12 IT participants.

The discussions presented in this section illustrate how participants locate and define the layers of context that influenced their perception of knowledge and application of knowledge. As part of this process, participants gained a better understanding of the structure of their acquired knowledge and the lack of or different understanding of knowledge structure in the relative layer of context. As a comparison, while UK educated participants with strong industry connections and clearer career planning deconstruct their acquired knowledge faster, their deconstruction seems to be much less comprehensive than other participants; and while Chinese educated Law participants who had strong industry connections and clearly planned career paths took significantly longer time over this process, they also tended to be the most comprehensive in terms of deconstruction of acquired knowledge. However, Chinese educated Law participants were also the group that had the hardest time when reforming and reconstructing knowledge for application. By incorporating their subjective perception

of context, the next section explains how participants reform and reconstruct the knowledge they thought they should or could apply.

7.3 Reformation and addition of knowledge for contextualised application

In recognising the external structures formed by the meso- and micro-level contexts, participants took different approaches in applying their knowledge within the structures formed by the specific contexts in which they operate. Some participants carefully reform and adjust their knowledge and skill sets according to the structure; some believe the structure is not as tight and concrete as others might think and use “tricks” and “gimmicks” to apply their knowledge; and some, understanding that it could be painful and ineffective, decided to apply knowledge in their own way despite the context and structure.

“Scrapped” knowledge: waste or recyclable?

In participants’ understandings, or perhaps my translation is not accurate, 损耗率 (scrap rate) means the percentage of parts discarded or trimmed away for the making and presenting of a final product or practice. For example, butchers remove the uneven or unwanted parts of a cow to produce cuts of beef we see on the counter. In the context of knowledge application in law in China, participants are referring to knowledge that has no applicable scenario either situationally or permanently. Through their correction, participants emphasised that they are not referring to knowledge that is not practical or too theoretical. For example, if a lawyer mainly takes company law cases, then some fields that frequently interact with company law such as financial law are likely to have applicable scenario; but fields such as criminal law that rarely interact with company law will not have much applicability, thus to the participants, their criminal law knowledge is “scrapped”. As discussed above, law participants extent agree to some extent that law knowledge can be segregated by the specific field they practise in, therefore some proportion of scrapped knowledge is inevitable. The level of scrapped knowledge, according to 12 law participants, depends upon the availability and popularity of their targeted fields. In the case of less popular or less populated fields, the issue relates to timing and luck:

“...for some rather niche fields it is really about luck. Maybe a slot in one of the top teams in your targeted field is available right before you apply, maybe that slot will

emerge one or two years after you have already joined another firm or another team. Will you go if you need to start over in that firm? ...I would say, around half of the lawyers are working in fields they specialised in during education.” (Golden glasses, Domestic Law)

“...me and other younger lawyers in our teams are very lucky. We graduated in a time where environmental law was not popular at all, so we did not have much trouble getting into an environmental law team. But since environmental law is gaining significance and popularity, more and more students are taking this field without thinking [about] availability. There is literally no slot left for all the new graduates and soon-to-be graduates in environmental law in top Shenzhen firms.” (The vegan, Overseas Law)

Though “no slot left” is a rather extreme comment, some participants believed that the norm of having small teams limits the entry of new lawyers into fields that are gaining popularity but are not yet substantial enough:

“...I think the big difference is, no matter how successful a lawyer is, their team will stay the size of 5 to 7 people, and it is not common for them to just add or swap one in. So, if there are not enough senior lawyers switching to that field and building new teams, the numbers of lawyer practising in a specific field would not have big changes no matter how popular it gets.” (The businessman, Domestic Law)

“...in my team (big data and artificial intelligence), only 1 out of 6 learned about this in uni. With new law in the making, we predict there will be a wave of AI and data protection specialised lawyers in the next five years, but as far as I can tell, there are less than 30 senior lawyers practising this law in our city. By then, how many of these new lawyers can find a job in this field?” (The G men, Overseas Law)

To these 12 participants, practising law itself already has a high scrap rate because the different fields of law can be very varied in terms of knowledge and application. In addition to this, as speciality firms generally work in relatively small teams, even field-specific knowledge can be scrapped if they are not fortunate enough to find slots in corresponding teams. However, 7 law participants provided an alternative narrative, arguing that knowledge is not scrapped, but just waiting to be “recycled”:

“...in comparison, Chinese laws are still very much in development and advancement. For example, for lawyers that practice compliance law, scrapped labour law and union law were incorporated in 2015, and it is very likely that scrapped administrative law will be incorporated next year as [the] huji (household origin) system might be introduced in employment regulations. What you thought as

scrapped knowledge can be recycled into your essential knowledge in [the] blink of an eye.”

“...even if we don’t discuss the possibility to switch field, things can change rather fast in Chinese law and therefore change what knowledge is needed. With the additions in environmental law and administrative penalty law in 2016, environmental lawyers need to recycle their criminal law knowledge, corporation lawyers need to recycle their administration law and construction and land lawyers need to recycle their environmental law. And to some extent, what will be recycled in each field is very predictable.” (The handwriting guy, Domestic Law)

These 7 law participants believed that since new laws and policies are introduced in China every few months, sometimes even weeks, it is impossible for knowledge of field A to be scrapped by lawyers practising in field B indefinitely. However, a fast-changing macro environment is exactly the reason why some IT participants had to unwillingly scrap some of their knowledge. According to all 8 IT participants that work in development-side positions, this changing environment is chipping away chunks of knowledge for application and academic development:

“...since 2019, blood and other gore imagery or effects cannot be used in games or replaced with green “puff”, and to game developers and engine, software developers, it means a lot. It means that we are no longer allowed to develop light reflection and physical interaction regarding blood. It means we are no longer allowed to develop texture rendering technology to create believable zombies. Maybe today I can still develop reflection and interaction for race cars, develop texture for animal models, but who knows when will that be banned? We do not have the confidence to invest in developmental technologies anymore, not even in semiconductors and chips, things that the government encourages us to do.” (The dragon slayer, Overseas IT)

“...because of the P2P thunderstorm, P2P platform is, in reality, banned from establishment in 2017 or 2018. People think, shame, let’s move to the next big thing, blockchain; any trading and mining of crypto currencies was banned in 2019. And now, Metaverse is the new boom, but it is so obvious that investors, researchers and students are hesitant to join in, because we simply do not know how long it can survive in China.” (The whistle-blower, Domestic IT)

In general, IT participants and a few law participants that were aware of these events and following the changes say they can understand why the bans were enforced, but to these 8 participants, it is the “collateral damage” and the unforeseeable nature of these changes that worry them most. They believe that technology itself is not sinister, and that bans should be enforced on wrongful users or at least on specific parts of technology instead of a whole section:

“...I understand that lots of people lost their life savings during the P2P thunderstorm, but Ponzi schemes can be made using lots of different instruments, P2P itself is innocent. They should put tougher restrictions on activities that have scam potential, but not ban [the] instruments used in those scams. With that logic, they can avoid all scams by banning banks!” (The wanderer, Overseas IT)

“...of course, we know crypto currency is just one of the applications of blockchain, but a) blockchain mining affects many other applications and to some extent affects the underlying technologies of blockchain as a whole; b) we understand blockchain and crypto currency as technology and application, but other people do not necessarily understand the difference. Without public understanding or clarification from authorities, the entire blockchain technology is de facto forbidden because of [a] ban on crypto currency trading and mining.” (The memory palace, Domestic IT)

“Tricks” and “gimmicks”

Some law participants mentioned that their Chinese clients preferred ways of working that seemingly limit the participants application and presentation of knowledge:

“...normally can only give rectification suggestions after a full, thorough compliance check, but Chinese companies generally do not like big, 100+ billable hour checks, so our hands are tied. There is a Chinese saying: 巧妇难为无米之炊 (a good wife cannot cook when there is no rice). Without properly understanding their situation, I cannot give meaningful and accurate suggestions – ended up they see me as useless.” (The uninhibited one, Overseas Law)

“...(during the first few years after returning and while he did not have a licence to practise law in China) every once in a while, I would have to work with Chinese companies for consultation, but they always wanted to set a timeframe and overall price even before basic explanation of the situation or details of case...” (Old England, Overseas Law)

These types of situations were referred to by almost all overseas educated law participants, which seems very similar to what overseas educated IT participants faced with the agile model of software development. However, most of the overseas law participants learned the “tricks” and “gimmicks” to handle these downsides very swiftly.

As further explained by Old England, he learned to deal with Chinese clients not through changing them, but by changing how he operates:

“...but my colleagues told me that, unlike international companies or western companies, Chinese companies do not necessarily aim for a perfect solution. They need a timely and workable plan to start with even if it is rough and full of bugs. What I am used to is to give [a] solution that solves issues A, B and C; now I know what I need to do is to give a plan that can solve A, and if B or C emerges, please come see me again.” (Old England, Overseas Law)

Similarly, 5 law participants with overseas work experience discussed how they changed the way cases were constructed:

“...in [the] UK’s firms it is kind of deemed unprofessional to have hidden fees or more than 30 percent, 40 percent of extra hours over the original estimate, so we were used to planning ahead and making sure all potential work will be covered in the estimate. But for Chinese companies, they generally do not like big inclusive bills as they think we would over-claim billable hours; however, they do not mind breaking what we see as a singular case as several individual but connected cases.” (Savile Row, Overseas Law)

“...think about getting a new phone plan. International companies want to get leases, so they get the whole package. Chinese companies like to use it as [a] pay as you go plan, where they can choose additional services when needed. Some foreign lawyers or returnees might think Chinese companies are cheap, but if we look at like a one-year or three-year period, Chinese companies are very likely to pay more, they just get more...situational requests rather than standardised services.” (Sparta, Domestic Law)

The opposite situation is frequently reported by domestic educated participants who were not familiar with handling foreign clients. They realised that foreign clients have a different vision, different preferences and different ways of communication, when compared with more familiar Chinese clients:

“...the first time we encountered a US-based company, they did not understand our proposal at all – to them, we focused on things that have no significance and missed all the important issues. That was as clear as [a] cultural shock can be – we offered fastest solve despite the cost, they don’t mind the time but wanted minimal penalty. We offered imminent patches, but they wanted avoidance of similar incidents in the future. This is partially due to their lack of understanding of the context, [and] partially because we did not know what they wanted and therefore did not explain our rationale.” (The older sister, Domestic Law)

“...the first time we worked with XX (a multinational company trying to establish their first Chinese branch) [it] was chaotic. After our foreign affairs team freed up and came to our rescue, we realised the dynamics between lawyers and clients are very different in China and the US. For the US companies, lawyers are “in the loop” at the very least during the case; but for Chinese companies, to some extent, lawyers from law firms are always considered outsiders. So, how information is exchanged, how decisions or directions are made are completely different.” (Wig girl, Domestic Law)

In a similar way to overseas educated law participants, domestic law participants quickly learned the optimal way to deal with foreign clients. In general, law participants recognised the differences in ideology and preferred methodology between Chinese entities and foreign entities and have a decent grasp on how to appropriately approach cases with Chinese or foreign entities. However, knowing the “right” thing to do does not mean they think it is the “best” thing to do. Eleven participants indicated that they were not particular happy with the difference in methods, with some eventually avoiding unfamiliar territories ever since. Similar to what Savile Row refers to as breaking singular cases into individual but connected cases, the badge carrier explained how the Chinese approach challenges his professionalism:

“...I understood that Chinese clients, especially state-owned companies prefer we work with a step-by-step fashion, but I thought it would be like, chopping a paper into different chapters. However, in reality it was like...do you watch detective TV shows? You know how they gather evidence and eventually find their suspect based on all the evidence they have? That is how we normally work, linear and with comprehension. But with a step-by-step fashion, it is like accusing a suspect with only one or two pieces of evidence, because you are not sure which step would be the final step. To me this is not professional at all.” (The badge carrier, Overseas Law)

“...let’s say, a company is sued for building [an] unauthorised plant and two construction workers were hurt. In the UK, the first step would be to discuss a preferred outcome, which part is a “must-win”, which part can be compromised, which part needs to be dealt with immediately and which part can hold a bit. In that way, we would have a general guidance and road plan. With the Chinese companies, sometimes it is “see how far we can go”; maybe they will be happy once the administrative penalty is waived for the unauthorised building and straight out pay the compensation to the workers, maybe they will deal with the compensation and then decide on the administrative penalty. But these two cases are interconnected, and the reason why they cannot waive the penalty is because by compensating the workers, they indirectly admitted they had wrongdoing during the construction. In my

opinion, it is unwise to work without a big picture.” (The uninhibited one, Overseas Law)

In line with these quotes, 7 law participants, one of whom was domestic educated, argued that the Chinese preferred method of work limits the overall outcome and to some extent forces them to give inconclusive results that might affect their reputation. This is very similar to the arguments made by the IT participants who were unhappy with the use of the agile development method. However, certain counter arguments made by 6 law participants are not presented among the IT participants. These law participants argued that particularly in the business of law, linear and interconnective planning is not realistic and could even be harmful:

“...it is reasonable to have an overall budget or price to handle a complex case, but it is stupid to have a preferred “end game” for it. You are essentially relying on [an] unpredictable outcome of case A to affect your approach with case B. Let’s assume Tesla is sued for product defect and subsequent investigation into the production plant; we need to handle the defect case first, so we will have [a] verdict on whether it is an unrelated malfunction, a material/assembling fault or [a] design flaw. With the verdict, we can then determine what route to take next. You will fail if you assume you will get a material fault and be absolutely unprepared for [an] assembly line fault.” (Tesla mania, Domestic Law)

“...especially because cases can be interconnected, they should be treated individually. Research on each case contains research on all the other related cases, and that was my problem working with foreign companies. I understand that they have more stable legal environment overseas, but with everything changing rather rapidly in China, one case can turn into two/three cases because of new law and new policies, three can turn into one and A can turn into B. For a really extreme example, an industry plant sale and plan to repurpose into a shopping mall can be a land law case in early 2015, a company registration law issue in late 2015 and an environmental law issue in early 2016.” (The farmer, Domestic Law)

Though not easily discernible in the quotes, these 11 participants showed various degrees of dislike towards alternative methods of work, believing that they are not the most effective approach from their respective professional standpoints. This might explain why these opposing methods are respectively referred to as “tricks” and “gimmicks” that they adopt purely for business purposes. Some participants, for example, tend to choose corresponding clients: 3 overseas educated participants tried their hardest to only take cases from foreign companies, and 4 domestic educated participants only took cases from Chinese companies. Similarly, IT participants identified industrial trends and norms that they are not particularly satisfied or familiar with, and use “tricks” and

“gimmicks” to ensure their performance. In comparison, the tricks and gimmicks adopted by IT participants are more stage-specific: the ones used during the joining/hand-over stage, the ones used during the “occupying” stage and those used in the “branding”/“exiting” stage.

Foul play and fair play

Unlike the law participants, the IT participants explained that it was very common for them to take over and continue work on something that their predecessors already started; however, their experiences are highly diverted, as indicated by their description of the experience: “heritage” and “stepdad-ing”. To offer a more thorough explanation, 14 IT participants posited that contrary to common belief, coding is just like writing: personal style is highly significant and to some extent unavoidable:

“...not necessarily in the format of coding or use of language per se, but coding is very personalised in terms of logic and word choices...for example, your daily commute is about getting from location A to location B within a timeframe. Logic A is taking buses because it is cheaper and can avoid overcrowding, or taking [the] subway because it is more punctual and involves less walking...two workable and reasonable but different sets [of] logic...” (The journalist, Overseas IT)

“...let’s use the example of Super Mario. The programmer that made Super Mario 1 used the word “jump” to describe the movement, and when the programmer of Super Mario 2 uses the original program to develop the sequel and coded ‘hop if blah-blah-blah’, the code won’t work because the program recognises jump, not hop.” (The bearded gamer, Overseas IT)

These 14 participants argued that taking over someone’s code requires a significant amount of time and effort to study and understand their predecessor’s logic and preferences for the finished product to be workable. The other 7 IT participants recognised that novel programs do not require consistency in terms of style and concurred that some effort is inevitable when taking over. For 8 participants who were educated overseas or have overseas work experience, the responsibility mainly lies with predecessors and employers:

“...for us (overseas returnees in the company he works for) we always assume that we will have some time to do pair programming with the predecessors for at least a few days before we fully take over. That’s pretty much the standard procedure in the US or South Korea, but in reality, what we normally faced is a manager called me out, took me to an empty seat, and gave me two weeks to familiarise with the module I need to work on from now.” (The preparer, Overseas IT)

“...what I always do, and I have asked all my team members to do, is to leave sufficient annotations, update/discussion logs either on Slack or on Source Insight to help future and current team members to understand why that thing is there and what it is for. I had my fair share of reading a code and thinking ‘What is this for? What does this do? Where does this lead?’ in my career.” (The Afro, Domestic IT)

Annotation and logs are tools that are used by programmers to explain what has changed and why such changes are made. They aim to help readers understand the logic and preferences used by previous programmers. Similarly, pair programming can have the same effect in a more direct approach by having two people working on the same code: either one writes/one watches, or one writes/one tests. According to some IT participants, this method is mostly associated with the agile development model, the preferred model adapted by Chinese companies; and the pair programming method is much less favoured by Chinese companies. These 8 participants explained that pair programming is useful for familiarising with each other’s coding logic and preferences, thereby enhancing efficiency, but some participants explained that within the Chinese context, pair programming is believed to reduce efficiency:

“...despite the fact that it helps newcomers and team members to better understand each other, from management’s perspective it is just putting two people on a job that, again in their perspective, can be done by one.” (The lone wolf, Domestic IT)

“...if you think about it, understanding logics and preferences does not necessarily benefit management: by not understanding you will come up with a ‘buggy’ product that requires a lot of maintenance and updates, but as long as the product is bad enough for a refund, more maintenance and updates equal higher profit. It is you, the programmer, [who needs] to maintain and update the tangled, messed up programme because you didn’t have time to fully understand the logic and preferences and code accordingly.” (The collector, Domestic IT)

In this context, some participants found corresponding predecessors and asked for pair programming or annotations in private, converting what they felt should be standard procedure into “tricks” and “gimmicks” because of the lack of support and availability from management and predecessors. And that is why, for participants who have successfully secured assistance from predecessors, taking over the work is classed as “heritage”, and for participants who failed to receive assistance, taking over is considered to be “stepdad-ing”. Though almost all IT participants have experienced taking over someone’s work when they first started working, only 7 experienced being the one who handed over. In their argument, ensuring a lack of annotations or unavailability to do pair programming, though not an ideal practice, are two of the tricks they adopt to “occupy” or “survive” in their business:

“...the trick some of us use is simple but effective...for example, if one of our customers is a Japanese restaurant and we are in charge of maintaining their website, one of the works we do is to make sure [that] when [a] consumer clicks on one of the taps, it goes to the right place. Assume they have the tap for 割烹 (loosely translating to fine dining), normally they will have 高级日料(Japanese fine dining) on the website and in the code, but we will switch it to kappou (English spelling of the word 割烹) or gepeng (English spelling of 割烹 when pronounced in Chinese) to...confuse, complicate things for any unwilling successors...it might sound like [an] excuse for [a] horrible practice but it is a win-win situation for programmers. Neither do we want to be replaced randomly nor do we want to suddenly take over someone’s work like a step dad.” (“Gen Hoshino”, Domestic IT)

Continuing with his example of hop and jump in games like Super Mario, the bearded gamer illustrated that a similar practice is rather observable in the gaming industry as well. These practices are adopted not only to ensure the survival of their career, but are also an unintended choice due to lack of standards and shared understandings across the industry:

“...the problem is, even when seeing the same event, different people would have various descriptions. So, when it comes to arranging and describing actions, people will naturally use different words: I might code it as the character runs to the left and slates the monster, [whereas] someone else might code it as the character dashes to the monster’s right side and chopped the monster. From the player’s perspective, the action presented would be almost identical, but the underlying description of logics is completely different. People, especially the ones who have only worked in one company or one team for too long, do not necessarily realise the gap between these fundamental differences in logics.” (The bearded gamer, Overseas IT)

The bearded gamer, supported by the onmyoji and the dragon slayer, believed that some people amplify this use of personalised word choice in the gaming industry to maintain their position – a behaviour that these 3 participants did not approve of but understand why some choose to do so:

“...for example, it is absolutely normal and reasonable to use the words “good, great and brilliant” instead of larger font or different colour of damage numbers as indicators (to show damage effectiveness), but when you use the word wring instead of squeeze or twist, or ‘bring, brang, brung’ instead of the more common ‘bring, brought, brought’”, we know you are doing it on purpose.” (The dragon slayer, Overseas IT)

“...in almost every game that has fighting parts, there will be formulas to calculate how much damage a character should take in specific scenarios, for example, X attacking Y would be $FCx=hx*(attx-defy)*fx$. In this formula, h is health, att is attack, def is defence and f is frequency: very standard, is more or less easily accessible for any game programmers. Some people, not many but definitely at least one in every company, will write something like $(YP+UP)/YA=PN$. He will then argue that YP is mYstic Power, UP is Ultimate skill point, YA is mYstic Armor and PN is Point number.” (The onmyoji, Domestic IT)

These participants believed that there is a fine line between tricks or gimmicks that help develop irreplaceability, and foul play that damages productivity, morale among teammates, or even the reputation of specific communities. Among domestic educated participants in both law and IT, 19 out of 21 reported hearing a version of “this is how we do it in XX (foreign countries of their education or previous work experience)”. Although some said that the majority of the time these quotes lead to better outcomes, on an emotional level, participants expressed unease, believing that they contain aspects of contempt and condescension. When asked in more detail, some claimed that such phrasing was used unconsciously, whereas 14 out of 22 overseas educated participants said these phrases were used and uttered on purpose.

Stereotypes: accept, against and exaggerate

The core rationale for using this type of is the shared belief that stereotypes against overseas returnees are persistent and impossible to reverse on a social level. They also believe that such stereotypes have regional differences, making it even more futile to counter because returnees tend to move or have moved more freely across regions of China, especially in national- and international-level companies. When the issue of stereotyping is circled back to domestic educated participants, 20 out of 21 participants suggested that in a company with a significant proportion of returnees, domestic graduates are also stereotyped – though some are positive stereotypes – even though 12 of these 20 participants do not and have not worked in a company where “returnees occupy [a] significant proportion” in their standards.

Among overseas educated participants, only 6 insisted that they would stay aware of and fight such stereotypes. They ensure that they do not present and behave in a way that reminds people of their overseas experience:

“...it is more or less fine in places like Hong Kong and Shanghai, but in other areas when you unconsciously mix in English words in your conversation or say things like

‘...oh, I used to drink/eat/see that a lot in the UK/US’, you will most certainly be deemed as [a] superficial and pretentious guy who likes to show off.” (The preparer, Overseas IT)

“...I wear loafers, so I am pretentious, I wear cologne, I am pretentious, I put on sunglasses – when they know I studied in the UK, somehow it is associated – I am pretentious. I am just so sick of all the little things they can [use to] pick on me.” (The uninhibited one, Overseas Law)

To some extent, 14 overseas educated participants have a lighter attitude towards stereotypes: they do not fight them or use them, and sometimes even enhance them. For 4 participants, stereotyping against them does not concern them and even helps them significantly in daily and social life. Interestingly, this includes one domestic educated participant who oversold her overseas master’s experience to benefit from the existence of stereotypes against returnees:

“...I am one of the more...explicit lesbians in the company, but I rarely get harassed for things like getting married and having children...I am not even the most tomboy looking one; normally (based on the way she looks) I will be unwillingly and unknowingly introduced to ten people by now (since she has been in the company for a few years now). However, since I very implicitly but very on purpose and carefully calculatedly mentioned [that] I have a girlfriend in Canada, and pointed out that she is white, they gave up on all the probing.” (Tesla mania, Domestic Law)

“...one of [the] good things about leaning in [to] the returnee identity is, people will not be too...invasive about my personal life. They will still ask when provided the opportunity, but they will generally stop after the initial response, especially when I respond in very western ways, they will keep me from ‘poisoning’ their friends’ daughter...this is probably the only time where the assumed ‘stubbornness’ of returnees is a positive thing.” (The family pride, Overseas IT)

This data might seem confusing to readers who are not too familiar with what several participants termed “Chinese meddling”. In my personal experience and with consensus from almost all participants, boundaries and privacies are not necessarily concepts associated with living in Chinese communities. . As illustrated by Tesla mania and the family pride, amplified or even exaggerated aspects of their returnee identity actually help to establish previously non-existent boundaries and privacies, with a price they are willing to pay. As an overseas educated Chinese individual, I am very aware of the practices commonly adopted by returnees to “cleanse” unwanted social activities; however, I did not know or expect that these amplifications and exaggerations are deployed or witnessed by participants in their work for the purposes of survival and advancement.

According to 5 overseas educated participants and four domestic educated participants in IT, versions of “this is how I do it in the XX” represent a powerful deterrent against shoulder surfing. In addition to peeking, in the field of IT, shoulder surfing also involves interruptive behaviours such as intervention and premature judgement. As explained by 15 IT participants, work-in-progress coding screens are normally packed with lines of code and further contextual codes to fully interpret the structural and operational meanings of the codes presented on the screen. Therefore, they argued that any comments made within five or ten minutes of watching are mostly irrelevant or incorrect. However, it is not uncommon for colleagues or management to shoulder surf regardless of the time needed for contemplation:

“...especially by someone who has participated in CTF or Hitcon (both are security/hacker-related types of conventions and competitions), they kind of over-value speed and just cannot help themselves to show-off when walking around the block and see some slightly complicated codes...in those situations, I just need to say ‘oh, this is how I was trained by NexGenT’ or ‘this is in accordance to the CISA compliance’ and they will shut up immediately.” (The 955 guy, Overseas IT)

“...it is just absurdly funny that the manager (from the previous workplace) can stand behind me for ten seconds and say ‘these are too clumsy’ and the next day say ‘this is too lean’...I think he just want to show that he knows better...I just say, ‘this is how I learned to do it in XX’ (his alma mater in the UK) and he will just walk away.” (The colourful one, Overseas IT)

These 9 participants pointed out that the key is not to argue which is better or, but to spin the argument into two different domains of knowledge or knowledge application and establish their authority in the domain seemingly unknown to their counterparts. Interestingly, this is also precisely how the 4 domestic educated IT participants fence off annoying overseas educated colleagues:

“...some returnees, especially the younger ones who have won some competition, can be extremely overconfident and like to lecture people about how they do it in the “headquarters” of IT (typically referring to Silicon Valley in the US). The only way to silence those guys is to tell them, ‘Oh, of course your method/work is better, but the Chinese clients, since they are all hillbillies, they don’t appreciate the best things’ ...of course, you need to control your hunger for sarcasm and try to be sincere...” (The lone wolf, Domestic IT)

“...it can be tricky working with returnees, especially the ones who have worked in the tech giants in the US. From time to time, they can be unnecessarily stubborn in terms of deadline and service coverage, and an experienced manager would know that one of the best options is [to] reinforce the idea that this is the norm in China, even if

these things seem wrong to you. You need to convince them that they are not doing what they used to do in the US, they are doing something new...I normally explain as, you are not driving the same train on a new route, but driving the same train on different types of tracks, so naturally you need different manoeuvres and speed/brake instead of simply watching for turns and distance.” (The whistle-blower, Domestic IT)

Similar to the argument used by the whistle-blower, 11 other overseas educated participants from both law and IT were warned that their behaviours and judgements did not cohere with the Chinese norm, and were cautioned against becoming marginalised. Six participants took these warnings seriously and swiftly adjusted to the norms, but for the other five, this was in fact the planned outcome:

“...since I work in a diversified company, we have all kinds of clients, and they have [a] very different mindset on how much these types of service should cost and what we can do for them...by exaggerating my returnee-ness, they will never put me on projects with those stereotypical domestic clients, and I get to work on things with a more comfortable path and do things I am confident in...By building my character (人设) as the weirdo, I get to passively choose what I will work on.” (The minimalist, Overseas IT)

“...when I first started taking major roles in big projects, I portrayed an image of an aloof, stubborn, quirky guy, a believable image [of] a returnee in their mind...the reason why I did that is to better set up the infrastructure needed for a good game. When you need to present something every three months, you don’t have the time to properly build a set of configurations from scratch, so you tend to borrow the ones you used in previous games or similar games. But by being an asshole and saying, ‘you will see it when I say it is ready’, I can delay presentation for three to six months, just enough for my team to build the backbone...imagine, in a restaurant you say you have one hour but request them to send up a dish every 10 minutes. They have no choice but to send you 6 stir fry dishes, but if you say you can wait till the last 10 minutes to have all the dishes out, you can have stews, roasts, whatever you want.” (The bearded gamer, Overseas IT)

Several overseas educated IT participants explained they had contemplated using a practice similar to the one described by the bearded gamer, but they were concerned about whether they could achieve the desired outcome. In reality, they are more inclined to utilise a milder and safer approach, like the one used by the minimalist – provided that they fully assess the situation first. Upon reflection, the bearded gamer believed he was lucky that things went very well, but he also acknowledged that the reverse situation could be devastating.

In comparison, within their workplace, overseas educated law participants were much more comfortable in expressing their “returnee-ness” – not necessarily with exaggeration, but explicitly. In their view, this is because lawyers can be tightly connected to their alma maters:

“...in my knowledge, law firms in China are either heavily occupied by lawyers from one or a set of particular law schools, or lawyers are grouped into different factions based on their alma mater...therefore you not only need to actually graduate from that school, but you need to act as one of their alumni as well; for example, you need to express your pride, your identity as a graduate from the UK. You want your Hong Kong colleagues to instantly recognise you as one of them.” (Savile Row, Overseas Law)

“...it might sound a bit weird but the trust and respect for your professionalism is more or less directly related to your identity as an overseas educated returnee. If you are US educated, you need to show your US-ness for them to trust you as a good lawyer, and if you are UK educated, you need to show your British-ness for them to believe in you.” (Old England, Overseas Law)

Thirteen law participants from both domestic and overseas educated backgrounds suggested that the reason why identity is comparatively more important in China is because the occupation of lawyer is heavily interactive and authoritarian. This is needed, they argued, because of a general lack of basic law understanding in Chinese society. The authoritarian identity is constructed using imagery and stereotyping of the west, regardless of their realness. One participant illustrated this point with a story from before his education:

“...it was [at] a dinner with my parents’ friends, and they were talking about handling transnational trade issues, and one uncle said: ‘Never trust a returnee lawyer who will accept bargain on their price. Returnee lawyers are just like foreign lawyers, they have no human warmth/human touch (人情味) at all, so any returnee lawyer who would accept bargaining on their price must be a crook!’” (The camera man, Overseas Law)

Though this episode did not prevent the camera man from studying law, it did shape how he thought he should behave upon returning. Up until his last research interview, he was still hesitating about which type of lawyer he should be. With his consent, this story was shared with other law participants, and their responses were generally consistent:

“...this is indeed how many Chinese businessmen or government officials see us, but I don’t think it is a bad thing. This kind of belief stops them from bargaining with unreasonable offers and makes personal connection with us, but it also reinforces

their belief of our professionalism. They will question our understandings of [the] Chinese context, but they rarely contest our professional judgement.” (The American dream, Overseas Law)

“...I don’t know if this is true nationwide, but it is very true here (Xi’an), so what we normally do is a red face/white face (good cop/bad cop) play, where the returnee delivers the harsh news and price, and I went in as the good cop and soften the clients a bit. They will much more appreciate the accuracy of the harsh news and feel much more acceptable with the more reasonable price I then offer.” (The handwriting guy, Domestic Law)

Law participants from both domestic and overseas education backgrounds more or less agreed that from the clients’ perspective, an overseas educated lawyer who acts as a stereotypical overseas educated lawyer would be respected for their professional knowledge, even though there might be doubts about their human character and their understanding of the Chinese context. Three overseas educated law participants felt that these doubts were troubling in some types of case, but 5 domestic educated law participants said that they felt slightly envious of returnee colleagues from time to time:

“...in our firm, the ratio between returnee and local is about 7:3, and every once in a while, it could be very obvious that when clients say they want [a] ‘second opinion’, they actually mean they want one of the foreign trained lawyers. Somehow, they strongly believe that they are more professional and more integrity-bound than us.” (Sparta, Domestic Law)

“...I have worked in many different field offices and the difference in how returnee lawyers are perceived is much bigger than people might think. You have areas where local lawyers (domestic educated or the ones appearing to be domestic educated, typically judged by the expression of human touch/human warmth [人情味]) are much more trusted in relation to focusing more on client’s benefit, but especially in tier 1 cities, they tend to believe returnee lawyers...have pessimistic but more reliable prediction and strategies.” (The endangered species, Domestic Law)

This section presented the process in which participants adjust their knowledge based on their understanding, perception and prediction predicted idea of their subjectively defined context. Through reforming and reconstructing their knowledge for application, participants gained a clearer understanding of how their perceived identity affects their application of knowledge. Through utilising their identity to rationalise their application of knowledge, or applying knowledge based on how they were perceived and expected to act, the correlation between

identity and knowledge is presented. These discussions also show that in their respective contexts, social identity and professional identity were, to various extents, integrated and perceived simultaneously.

Summary

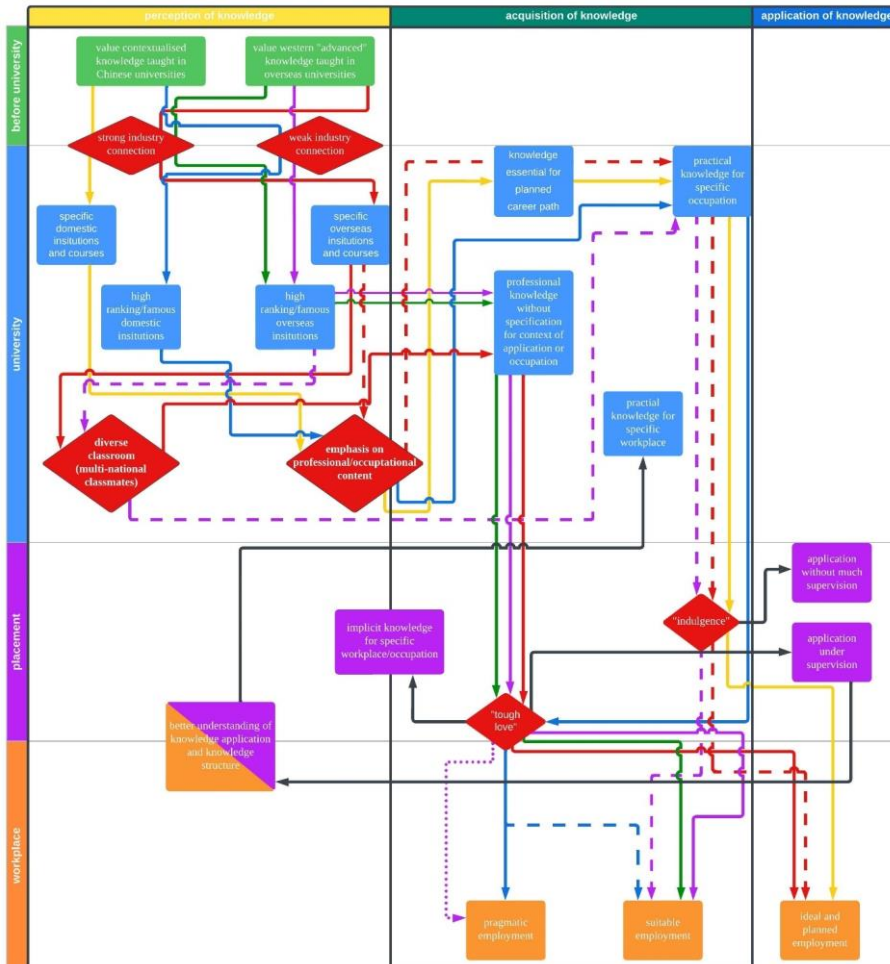
As demonstrated in the data chapters, throughout participants' journey from higher education to working in China, participants perceived, acquired and applied professional knowledge based on how they understand and interact with the overall Chinese context and specific industry context. Though the data was analysed and presented according to different stages of participants' life, participants' perception, acquisition and application of knowledge are interconnected. As discussed in this chapter, participants started out perceiving objective, abstract and singular context of China and moved towards perceiving the subjective, detailed and multi-layer contexts of China, their workplace, their personal life and their future development. This chapter also presents the ways in which participants reflect on the culture embedded in their acquired knowledge and their development in terms of understanding the different knowledge structures. As a result of these more subjective perceptions and understandings of context, and better understandings of knowledge, participants had clearer realisations of who they were perceived to be and what they should do, and what they want to be and to do. Through these realisations, individual experiences and/or industry-wide events, participants constantly re-perceived, re-acquired and re-applied knowledge in the Chinese context, and formed and continuously formed their social and professional identities. While this research primarily focuses on Chinese returnees, collected data suggests that China educated participants were also subjected to the influence of transnational knowledge. With the presence of increasing overseas educated colleagues, employers and clients, China educated participants were also influenced by transnational knowledge and their cultural embeddedness in terms of perception, acquisition and application of knowledge and subsequent formation of identities.

Chapter 8: Evaluation and research findings: the youki of transnational knowledge

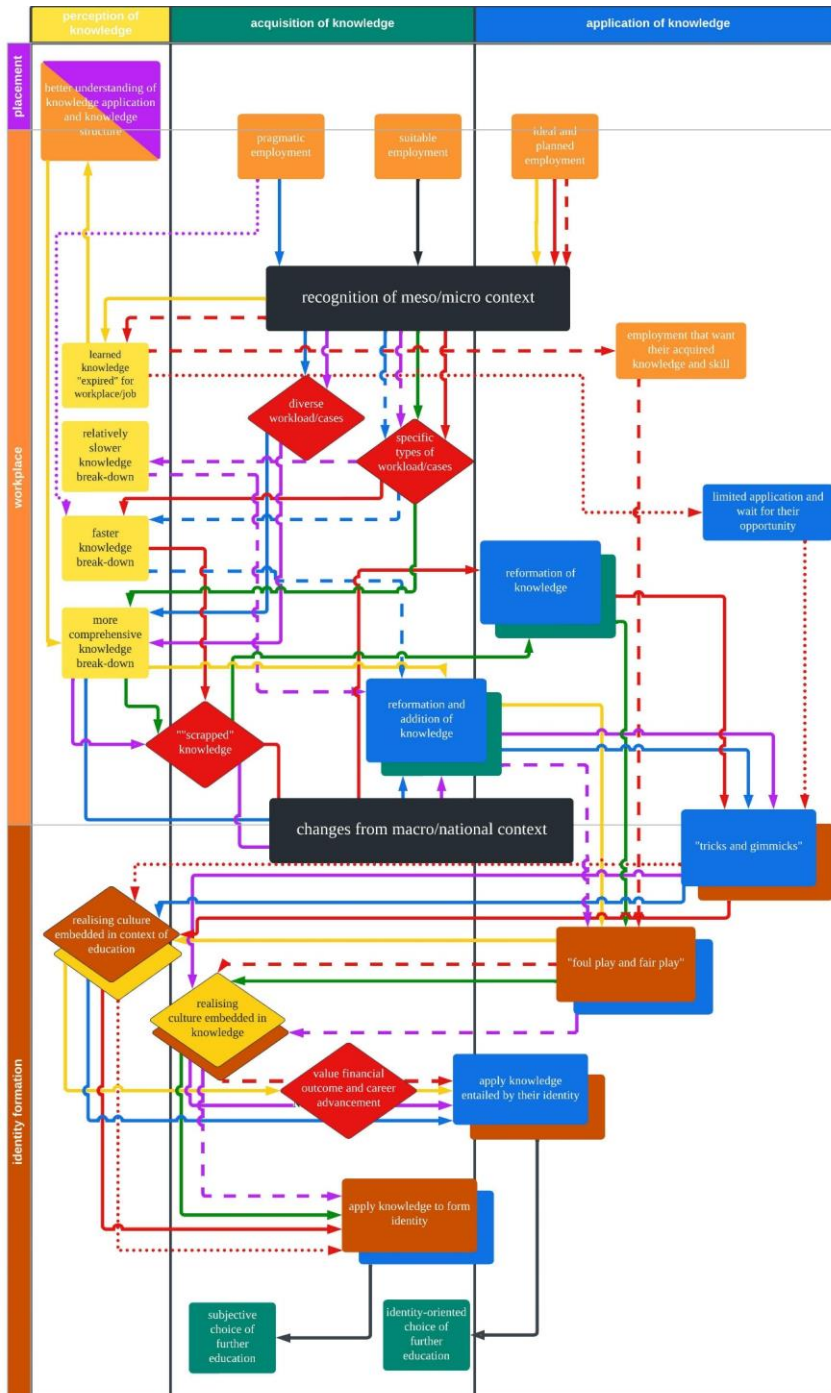
As discussed in the methodology chapter, these processes of continuous knowledge perception, acquisition and application and the impact these processes have on individual identity formation is conceptualised as the youki of transnational knowledge. This chapter illustrates how the findings from the data contribute to the conception and construction of this theory. Below is the visualisation of youki exemplified with the processes went through by participants.³⁵

³⁵ Or visit: https://lucid.app/lucidchart/6fbdfc9c-89c9-43cc-8b78-76635326e775/edit?viewport_loc=25%2C433%2C2560%2C1056%2Cd.gBwMWSC0lf&invitationId=inv_16154524-b2b4-4103-92f7-65b6cad656d8#

the youki of transnational knowledge



Picture 5: Visualisation of youki: education to employment



Picture 6: Visualisation of youki: working in China and identity

As visualised in the above model, collected and analysed data is organised into rows by different stages, namely before university, university, placement, workplace and identity in consistent to chapter 4 to 7. Columns are the aspects I want to explore, namely perception of knowledge, acquisition of knowledge, application of knowledge and formation of identity. In the theoretical model of youki, Identity formation is both a stage and an aspect; however, for presentation purposes, identity formation is not presented as a column in this visualised model. This chapter presents findings generated through evaluation emerged from each aspect.

8.1 information, career planning and the perception of knowledge

As presented in the data chapters, planned career paths had significant influence on participants throughout their journey from education to employment. To various degrees, it affects how participants perceive professional knowledge before and during education, what knowledge they should acquire and what workplace they seek. I have described the youki of transnational knowledge as a journey, and the planned career path serves as the navigation for this early but essential part of the journey. This section explains the construction of the planned career path, its short-term and long-term influence on participants and its role in the youki of transnational knowledge.

As mentioned in the literature review above, one of the most significant characteristics of Chinese students in the UK is the high return rate: to recap, in 2020, more than 80 percent of Chinese students graduated from UK universities returned to China and made up around 30 percent of all returned Chinese graduates. Combined with quantitative data about reasons for return, some scholars have concluded that students choose the UK as their destination because they have a strong intention to return. I have doubts about both the logic and the method by which this conclusion is drawn, and data from CCG also yields other questions. From CCG's 2019 data, only 14 percent of returnees believed that their profession has promising prospects and significant labour market demands in China, and 13 percent agreed that attraction policies are appealing. If returnees do have a strong intention to return prior to the start of their overseas education, this raises the following questions: are they aware of the professional situation in China, do they prioritise employment in their choice of university, discipline and course, and is it perhaps the case that returning is not a significant factor in their decision-making to begin with?

According to UK educated participants, rather than "choosing the UK because they intend to return", the more realistic rationale is that the UK is not a preferable choice for anyone considering potential immigration. Based on the consensus that it is harder to migrate to the UK than countries like Canada or Australia, the UK is supposedly only considered by people who want education. Out of 43

participants, including domestic educated participants who had thought about overseas education, only 2 viewed the UK as their sole option for overseas education. Since this research does not include UK graduates who have not returned to China, I cannot repudiate or confirm the statement about intention to return; however, based on the data, it is reasonable to suggest that return is one of the more likely options considered by participants. Therefore, it is appropriate to return to the first research question: do they include return as a factor for university, discipline and course choice?

What were choices based on?

Based on their initial intentions, participants can be categorised into three groups: group A that decided to return without an exact timeline; group B that decided to return with a specific timeline; and group C who had not yet decided whether they would return. Based on their responses, it is clear that participants from groups A and B heavily consider their corresponding careers when choosing universities, disciplines and courses. Comparing both groups, participants from group A were more straightforward: they emphasised university reputation, discipline status and course relevance in China as the main factors that influence their choices. Participants from group B were not necessarily hesitant but wanted to explore working in the UK as an option as well, therefore they had also included similar factors in the UK context. However, for participants who had a strong intention to return upon graduation, seeking employment in the UK was deemed as a way of “gaining leverage” or “stacking up chips (筹码, as in the context of casinos; some participants refer to as capital 资本 as well)” for the eventual return. For these participants, the Chinese context still had higher priority than the UK context in their decision-making.

What is interesting, however, is the source of the information that helps them to make decisions. Considering the origins of information, participants can be clearly separated into two groups: they either had or did not have strong industry connections. Out of 43 participants, 31 had strong connections in the industry where they were later employed in. To clarify, strong industry connections refer to participants having family members or close friends of their parents working in respective industries with a relatively successful career. For readers that are more familiar with the Chinese social context, they might interpret strong industry connections as Guanxi (关系) as I did initially. However, some participants pointed out while to some extent strong industry connections and Guanxi do overlap, there is one significant distinction:

“...Guanxi is more like a business partnership, a mutually beneficial relationship. I would go to someone I have Guanxi with for collaboration or business proposal, but I would not go to them for advice on education and future career planning. For these

life-altering decisions I need someone who will advise what is best for me, to give my suggestions and advice from the bottom of their heart.”

(The Family pride, Overseas IT)

Similar to the family pride, for 13 participants³⁶, having an existing industry connection ensured the availability of and access to relevant, trustworthy information which was crucial for them to feel secure in their choices:

“...now I think about it, it is horrifying to think how little I knew about the world and all sorts of jobs...my parents are both in academia, so it was lucky for me that my uncle in law works in XieCheng (a travel agency website) as a back-end engineer...”

(The filial son, Domestic IT)

“...my parents are lawyers, all their friends are lawyers, so my choices are either lawyer or banker (his parents work in financial law, dealing mostly with banks)...”

(The American dream, Overseas Law)

The remaining 12 participants who did not have industry connection mostly utilised websites such as Zhihu for information regarding the labour market and for various professions. In retrospect, participants from both group A and group B (all intended to return with different plans on timing) agreed that information gained from industry connections was more accurate on a more abstract level, whereas information gained from websites such as Zhihu was comparatively more reflective of reality and contained important details. Since most of the participants’ parents’ close friends or acquaintances were positioned in mid- to high-level roles in their respective professions, the pros and cons described by them were more or less specific for professionals at that level, and not necessarily applicable to the whole profession. Information from Zhihu on the other hand, though lacking in consistency and comprehensiveness, was useful for junior level positions.

This is clearly illustrated by participants’ responses about the early phase of returning to China, where participants with no industry connections prior to their education displayed more realistic expectations and appropriate preparations. Furthermore, though both industry connections and websites provided subjective information, it is clear that the subjective speculations from industry connections were more damaging than the subjective descriptions of workplaces and workflow derived from websites in terms of making appropriate choices. This is particularly the case in relation to the speculations about the gaming industry and environmental law development exemplified in the advice received by the vegan (Overseas Law) and the toy guy (Domestic IT) and caused negative impact for both participants. At the time, because these friends or acquaintances were mid- to high-level

³⁶ Four domestic law, five overseas law, three domestic IT and one overseas IT participants.

professionals, the information they supplied was believed to be authentic and insightful. However, for 25 participants who had received clear and strongly advocated advice that influenced their choice of course or optional units, in their reflective accounts, “inaccurate” was the mildest comment. Ranging from “he could not have guessed the new policy would come like that” to “they could not have been more wrong about the trend”, almost none of the specific speculations received by participants were accurate in retrospect. On balance, however, the speculations were wrong mostly due to the rapid and potentially unforeseeable changes that happened in China.

“Expiry date” of information

According to both the participants who had received this advice and the ones who had not, some of the speculations were reasonable and logical, and some were very plausible given the context but did not happen for unknown reasons. Nevertheless, when judged against the actual developments and changes, 15 participants felt that they did not choose knowledge suitable to the Chinese context because they took the advice; and 8 were thankful that they did not fully take the advice, therefore ending up with the “trendy” knowledge in high demand in China when they returned. In comparison, participants without industry connections turned out to be more flexible and were less mismatched in knowledge acquired and knowledge demanded from their respective industries when they returned.

In comparison, although participants who had received poor information and advice came from both domestic and overseas education backgrounds, the short-term negative influences within the first five years after graduation are significantly less for domestic educated participants. As indicated in the discussions about placement, internship and some follow-up employment, domestic educated participants had greater access to time-sensitive information or experienced the subtle changes that took place in their respective industries. Among UK educated participants, only 5 had taken more than 2 placements or internships in China or in a UK branch of a Chinese company throughout their undergraduate education, whereas all Chinese educated participants had taken, on average, 2.7 placements during this same period. Although the differences in frequency correlate with the length of undergraduate education (in general, three years in the UK and four years in China), the variations in semester arrangement might play a larger role here. It was quite common for Chinese educated participants to take a placement in the same company/court/firm over their summer and winter vacations, but UK educated participants needed to prepare for semester one examinations after their winter vacation, meaning that most did not take a winter placement.

Furthermore, in terms of gaining information and experiencing changes, having industry connections seems to cause negative effects in retrospect. This is especially significant for UK educated participants when they took or attempted to take placements in different cities. For participants who had no or little help from family friends, they normally aimed for placements either in the city of their

university or their hometown and prioritised gaining a placement over expanding their experience. Conversely, participants with strong connections aimed for expansive and diverse experiences. For example, the wanderer (Overseas IT) went to Huawei in Shenzhen and Wangyi in Hangzhou, and the family pride (Overseas IT) went to Tencent in Shenzhen and Baidu in Beijing. Due to ethical considerations, I cannot use examples of placements from UK educated law participants, but the same principle can be applied: they interned in different red circle law firms in Beijing, Shanghai, Shenzhen or Guangzhou, instead of the same firm or different branches of the same firm. When asked to reflect upon this, these participants believed that the diversity of experience was only helpful in polishing their résumé, which, since they have or had connections, was not needed at all. For participants who needed diversity to enhance their résumé, obtaining an internship and placement in an ideal company was extremely difficult and risky, considering the amount of time and effort needed to apply to and be interviewed by various companies.

“Indulgence” and “tough love”

An additional benefit, mainly experienced by participants with no access and connections, or by participants with multiple internships in the same place, was the depth and meaning of their placement and internship. The benefits of placement can be roughly categorised into promotion of positive effect and mitigation of negative effect, namely experiencing the application of knowledge and rectification of misunderstandings or lack of knowledge in a practical context (Reddy and Moores, 2011). The issue for participants with a network and connections, especially during short-term placement, is that employers and supervisors tend to treat them with privileges. To put it in the simplest terms, participants who were introduced or arranged into companies and firms did not get “yelled at”. Most of the time they were assigned with less workload and non-essential work, and in the event of any significant mishandling of work, they would be moved into another team or another department. Many either did not realise that had made a mistake, or they did not understand what had gone wrong, to the extent that 2 participants only realised years after the placements while managing interns themselves, that their move to a new department/team was because they had made a significant mistake. As the endangered species’ quote (Domestic Law) encapsulates, “...gosh that happened to me seven years ago and I thought I was promoted!” In contrast, domestic educated participants who found internships and placements by themselves were treated like other employees, even with the same levels of expectation. Though described as painful at the time, these treatments illustrate what they are expected to learn and be able to do:

“...she scolded me because I couldn’t do what she sees as basic things. I thought, ‘because I am a student, I haven’t learned that yet!’ But then, all [that] scolding kind

of tells me what I needed to learn in my following years.” (The older sister, Domestic Law)

Like the older sister, through their “tough love” placement experiences, 5 domestic educated participants gained a clear idea about what knowledge and skills were needed in the workplace. They also had much clearer goals in terms of the knowledge they deemed to be acquisition-worthy for employment. This difference in treatment is partially caused by the duration of the placement as well. Most UK educated participants spent one month during the summer on placement and internship, whereas it was not rare for domestic participants to spend more than three months over the summer and around one month over the winter. Given that both IT and law are case or team-structured types of work, placement duration significantly influences the position that is obtained. For example, it is not seen as ideal to place someone in a team that is working on a longer-term case, or to replace an intern after they have worked on a case for a month.

Summary

With regards to the youki of transnational knowledge, a planned career path determines how strongly one would understand professional knowledge with pre-set perceptions, and in turns affect the level of confrontation they might experience when placed in the Chinese context. As discussed in the data chapters and summarise in the above section, participants used the information they gathered to generate a planned career path; with strong industry connections and suggestions provided by these connections, some participants had very detailed and specific plans which significantly influence their choices of education and how they perceive knowledge taught at universities and knowledge gained in workplace. However, as most of the information provided to these participants ‘expired’ due to the rapidly changed Chinese context, participants with strong connections ended up with a planned career path that no longer fits the Chinese context. Under such a situation, participants who experienced ‘tough love’ placements had the chance to validate the information and suggestions they received, to check if there were ‘expired’ or not and make meaningful adjustments in understanding what knowledge is needed for their targeted employment. To some extent, the level of detail in their career path planning determines how soon participants will actively interact with the surrounding context, which in turns affect how early and how comprehensively participants perceive and formulate their identity.

8.2 Experience, context and acquisition of knowledge

This section explores how layers of context are determined and defined by participants, how they interact with the context, and how their subjective understanding of and interaction with the context affected their acquisition of knowledge. As mentioned in the theoretical adaptation, one of the considerations for future research advocated by scholars is the influence of social and cultural presuppositions and pre-existing ideologies in knowledge acquisition, understanding and application. It is generally conceptualised as the proximity of the educational context and learner's original context is directly correlated to the level of understanding and acceptance of knowledge being taught and acquired (Bennett, 2009; Tian and Lowe, 2013). If there are contradictions or the involvement of a different underlying logic, some suggest that the knowledge would be acquired in "isolation" and potentially devalued by individuals (Ho and Wang, 2015; Lehtomäki et al., 2016). However, these concepts and ideas are, to some extent, based on the assumption that individuals are infused with and stay consistent with the underlying logic and principles of their original context and culture.

In/significance of original context and culture

To exemplify the above argument, in most east Asian cultures, outdoor shoes cannot be worn inside the house, therefore for both architecture and interior design purposes, a space is left for a cabinet either in the entrance or just outside the entrance to the house. Under the theoretical assumption detailed in above section, any students originating from and growing up in east Asia would "isolate" the design ideologies that do not involve space for shoe cabinets, understanding it as a "western thing" and even potentially belittling it. However, this is only applicable to individuals who are familiar with and use shoe cabinets, and also fully accept and approve of the underlying principle that "outdoor shoes are dirty, therefore cannot be worn on a cleaned indoor floor". Therefore, technically, those individuals originating from and growing up in east Asia who do not think outdoor shoes are dirty or who do not prioritise indoor cleanliness, would not necessarily isolate or belittle designs that exclude shoe cabinet space. An example of this would be east Asians who, whether consciously or unconsciously, do not take off their shoes in hotel rooms. This adaptation of previously held theoretical assumptions is one of the core findings of this thesis: (i) individuals value and acquire knowledge based on personal adaptation of both origin and surrounding contexts and cultures, and (ii) that context and culture do not directly influence the acquisition and valuation of knowledge. Individuals who either fully or partially adapt contextual and cultural underlying ideologies and principles, as both teachers and learners, influence how the knowledge is perceived, how it is valued and how it is taught and learned.

"Loyalty", "facts" and "interpretations"

Though eventually both law and IT UK educated participants realised their “three views (三观, worldview, philosophy of life and values)” had influenced and were influenced by what knowledge to acquire and what knowledge was acquired, the majority of IT participants did not notice the difference until after their graduation, whereas law participants mostly realised the differences in underlying ideologies as early as the first semester of year one. Even before encountering the underlying ideologies and principles in respective professional knowledge, the design, inclusion and structure of the curriculum changed how some participants would perceive on what knowledge is acquirable or acquisition worthy. In the example of the LSE 100 unit, mentioned by 3 law participants, by explicitly defining them as both students and researchers, they were autonomously “almost like designing my own curriculum, pick and choose what I am interested and what I want to learn” (The gavel wielder). Even for the badge carrier – who was impartial about the LSE 100 – the existence of the unit in itself enabled him to think about what he wanted to learn instead of what is available in the curriculum.

As discussed in the section on adaptation and adjustment in the analysis, UK educated participants changed how they perceived the dynamics and relationships between teachers and students. However, this change, though agreed to be intuitive and reasonable, was not fully accepted by several participants despite their action. While fully engaged in interactions and using alternative methods of communication similar to those described by the wanderer (Overseas IT), for the 955 guy (Overseas IT) it was not a welcome part of his overseas education experience. He believes that clear hierarchical structures are the essential foundation of social ethics, that extensive engagement and interaction undermines sense of authority, and that “lines” would consequently be blurred: “...it is the same between teachers and students or between employers and employees, no matter how close you are there must be a line that cannot be crossed” (The 955 guy, Overseas IT). Following the 955 guy’s principle, students should learn what is taught by the teachers, and therefore acquirable and acquisition-worthy knowledge is only that taught by teachers. His ideology was and still is shared by many Chinese educated participants; some UK educated participants seemingly shared the same principle, but with a twist.

As mentioned in the teaching and learning section in the analysis, 15 UK educated participants said that they were more familiar with a top-down approach to teaching. Apart from 6 participants who happily adjusted to the more interactive and self-intuitive approach to learning, the other 9 remained “loyal” to the top-down approach; however, the subject of their loyalty is not towards the teachers (as the 955 guy discussed), but towards their respective curricula. When discussing what materials teachers used in their universities, UK educated law participants complained about the tendency for teachers to use subjective interpretation rather than fact-based teaching. To put this into context, Maritime law is a compulsory unit or part of commercial law. According both UK educated and Chinese educated law participants, when teaching taxation and import/export restrictions, both

Chinese and UK teachers will first explain how different countries determine the origin of the product. What follows, however, was deemed completely different by participants. In a Chinese university, what normally follows the basic explanation is the application: how it is enforced for sanction and treaties, and what one should do either as a lawyer or in law enforcement. This is what participants, both UK educated and Chinese educated, at least in retrospect understood as the objective part of the knowledge and the “true” content of the curriculum during their education. In UK universities, according to UK educated law participants, there was also discussion about the implications of such laws and the differences they would have on the political, social and diplomatic contexts. Similar topics exist in IT curricula and teaching. Even though most of the UK educated IT participants described it as a small and insignificant part of their course, these topics were framed as subjective interpretation, and “biased” and “contextual” teaching, which was not happily accepted by some UK educated participants.

Validation and confirmation from others

Before evaluating the differences between participants who were and were not content with what they viewed as “biased” and “contextual” teaching, I should first remind readers of theories that take the communities and interactions of other international students as a layer of non-targeted context. As discussed in the theoretical adaptation section, scholars such as Kubota (2015) and Schartner (2015) suggest that other international students influence research subjects to construct a more comprehensive understanding of the targeted context, worldview and general cultural awareness, which is partially consistent with one of the findings in this study. What I would add to this theoretical understanding, however, is that for influence to take place, a catalyst is needed that induces discussion and interaction between students with teachers, local students and other students. Based on my research, contradicting ideologies function as effective catalysts.

To illustrate what contradicting ideologies would look like, law participants have provided various examples. In essence, contemporary law curricula in Chinese and UK universities are very similar in structure: even though legal articles are different in their detail and some of the underlying principles in terms of design and system, the logics of knowledge are, in my opinion and agreed by 4 UK educated law participants, very similar. For example, in terms of criminal law, both systems have similar definitions and inclusion of crime, and are similar in their basic logic, namely a crime is committed, law enforcement finds the evidence and makes an arrest, and lawyers defend. However, beneath the similar logic, there are subtle underlying differences. Almost all UK educated law participants, and two Chinese educated law participants who had interned in Hong Kong, noticed something fundamentally different about how lawyers work criminal cases in China and the UK during internship. As part of teaching and case studies, UK educated participants were taught and

trained to closely examine the evidence put forward by the police and prosecutor, and look for potential wrongdoing or the integrity and strength of the evidence. In the case of Chinese educated participants, although they also take examination of evidence as the first step, the purpose and rationale of the action are completely different and relate to the need to understand the angle and scope and to analyse what else can be found and done. Angle and scope might sound confusing, so a simple example is useful here. With the help of the OG (Overseas Law), a mock case was designed for a panel that invited 4 overseas educated law participants and 3 Chinese educated law participants. An individual is accused of stealing, evidenced by camera footage showing that individual being the only one who had entered the store in a given period. For UK educated law participants, the first step would be to examine the logic and rationale of the evidence, for example, why is footage from that timeframe conclusive rather than circumstantial? Why is the possibility of it being an inside job ruled out? On the other hand, Chinese educated law participants would use financial records to prove that the individual would not need to steal and a psychiatric evaluation to prove that this individual does not suffer from either impulse control disorder³⁷ or “bored housewife³⁸” disorder. To non-professional eyes, these might appear to be different approaches, but they actually reveal the issue of authority. According to the OG and partially agreed with by 3 other senior law participants, this is because of differences in some basic definitions. In the US or UK, though different in wording, in general evidence includes that which proves or disproves a fact; in China, however, evidence itself must be objective fact. Under this logic, Chinese lawyers technically cannot challenge evidence when it is accepted as evidence because essentially it would be challenging the objective fact. In this sense, Chinese lawyers are not necessarily trained to critically judge the authority and integrity of governing officials. According to Old England (Overseas Law), this is a common issue in east Asia with different ramifications and underpinning reasons. In the legal world, Japan is renowned for its 99 percent conviction rate³⁹ in large part due to the belief that prosecutors would only put forward charges when they have airtight evidence; and in Thailand, the police are rumoured to be so corrupt that challenging evidence would be futile.

With the aforementioned issues of “loyalty” and authority in mind, let us return to year two, when most UK educated law participants had gone back to the UK after their summer internships⁴⁰ and had either worked on some minor criminal cases during their internship or had taken online Chinese law

³⁷ Actions like stealing can induce a sense of hype and pleasure.

³⁸ Because of the boredom and suppression associated with a traditional family role, housewives adopt behaviours such as theft, smoking and extramarital affairs to generate mental balance. This disorder is highly debated in Hong Kong and Japan, and to my knowledge has not yet been accepted by the professional community worldwide.

³⁹ The percentage of arrests leading to a guilty verdict, though debatable, is used by some communities to determine the successfulness of the policing and prosecution system.

⁴⁰ These are official recorded placements that are part of the requirement to acquire license to practice law in China.

lessons.⁴¹ At that point, knowledge about criminal law, evidence and its associated principle was acquired by participants in a form similar to what Ho and Wang (2015) described as “isolated”, where they were yet to be determined of value and acceptance by learners. After this juncture, participants illustrated three patterns of actions and internal processes. In terms of the first pattern, participants only discussed or interacted on this issue with teachers during class time, then assigned right or wrong to either ideology based on the coherence of these ideologies with their “three views” at the time. Savile Row, for example, had been in the UK for six years by this point. He embraced the ideology that one can critically perceive and react to the government and its commanding officers, and viewed the UK approach as the right one for a civilised society. The second pattern emerged from participants having discussions and interactions not only with teachers, but with other Chinese students from the same course or same subjects in other universities. Within this pattern, 5 UK educated participants and wig girl (a Chinese educated law participant who interned in Hong Kong) generated the idea of “western right and western wrong, eastern right and eastern wrong”, believing that the appropriate ideology and sequential actions should be situational. The most important element in the third pattern is international students from countries outside of China. To a certain extent, local students and teachers were understood by participants as naturally biased, whereas other international students were even described as the “voice of reason” by the camera man (Overseas Law) during discussions and interactions. These 5 participants, assigning the credit to their international classmates, did not and do not identify ideologies as either right or wrong, despite the original or situational context. Though all UK educated participants had classmates from multiple countries, all of these 5 participants attended universities in London, perhaps due to London exceed in mere numbers and proportion of international students. These three patterns can also be found in relation to smaller issues, for example, the continued use of “knowledge point” in studying was reinforced when UK educated participants found out that other Chinese students used the same strategy.

Summary

This section shows that even within similar situations, individuals would perceive, understand and be influenced by context differently and subjectively. As discussed in section 8.1, a planned career path affects how participants interact with context, and this recent section has attempted to illustrate the mechanism of such an effect. What knowledge would be considered as acquirable and acquisition-worthy is dependent on assigned authority, and the assignment of authority is influenced by the available and interacting contexts. From the beginning, for participants with resourceful families, authority was assigned to networks in choosing the “right” institution, the “right” courses and even

⁴¹ All Chinese educated law participants and 4 UK educated law participants who were determined to take the law examination in China took paid online lessons.

the “right” units and placements; for participants who did not have resourceful families, authority was assigned to websites such as Zhihu. As discussed in the analysis, there were other official and formal sources of information such as ranking tables and think tank reports, which were more accurate and appropriate for decision-making. However, contrary to my assumptions, participants were aware of these sources of information but chose not to use them. This was surprising given that participants agreed that ranking tables are believed to have significant weight in seeking employment and further education. Similar to the example of the shoe cabinet, these two points illustrate that the availability and acknowledgement of context does not necessarily equate to the actual influence of context. In this case, due to the perceived uniqueness of IT and law as more professionally-driven communities and industries than disciplines such as management or finance, participants chose informal and subjective information provided by connections as the context for interaction. Similarly, participants assigned authority to various bodies according to what and whom they interact with during their education. The more layers of context that participants interact with, the less likely they are to assign authority to the highest body. Looking back to the three patterns, participants who only interacted with teachers and Chinese online lessons/cases in the workplace would assign authority to the body that adheres most closely with their three views, in this case, either the teacher or the counterpart lesson’s underlying principle, and this consequently shaped what knowledge is perceived as acquisition worthy. Participants who additionally interacted with other Chinese students assigned authority to an abstracted ideology of curriculum or the respective national context. Participants who interacted with other international students or the 3 participants who took the LSE 100 unit, broke the boundary of thinking about the curriculum as the limit of what is acquirable and possess much more flexible ideas about what is acquisition worthy. For the latter group, the assignment of authority can be understood as either assigned to the global context or assigned to the globally mobile self.

8.3 Reconstruction and reformation of knowledge

This section explains how participants reflect on their acquired knowledge and how they consider their subjective perception of context, and the practical and emotional impact of the changes they had to make upon reflection. As discussed in the section on the deconstruction of knowledge, the majority of participants had trouble breaking “sets” of knowledge into smaller components. This issue, however, is partially caused by participants subjectively and prematurely perceiving and assigning knowledge with a specific purpose. Though China educated participants, or UK educated participants who have taken long-term or temporary teaching positions, argued that this is related to how Chinese universities design and structure practical skills and knowledge into their curriculum, this issue was

also raised as a serious barrier in their early careers by 7 UK educated participants. The common factor among these 7 participants is that they strictly followed their planned career path.

Purposive acquisition and vicissitudes of contexts

To explain what is meant by “strictly following” a planned career path, I draw upon the experience of the preparer (Overseas IT) as an example, with his consent. For ethical considerations, however, I will not name the university and companies he attended. His father was a senior manager at one of the top IT companies in China before the preparer started his education in a top 10 university in the UK. He studied courses and units related to machine learning because the company his father worked for was developing new search engine AI. For the first two years, he interned in that company and in one of the teams that was responsible for AI development. However, during his final year and master’s year, his father retired from the company and the company switched research direction to machine learning for autonomous driving. Upon return to China, his father still wanted him to go to the company he used to work for, arguing that research and development for an AI-powered search engine would definitely be re-prioritised as a key project for the company.

As implied by his pseudonym, the preparer spent the most time, calculation and effort out of all of the participants making preparations for employment and career advancement. His education, competition entries and placements were all a means of ensuring that he secured the envisaged position in that company; all of the knowledge, skills and practical experience he gained were specifically aimed at performing tasks needed for that position. Therefore, understandably, it was more difficult for the preparer to separate knowledge from its envisaged, even imagined, context and its associated purpose because it was learned by the preparer with a specific purpose and means of application in mind. Indeed, the case of the preparer is a rather extreme one, but similar scenarios can be found or described by more than 20 participants. The gavel wielder (Overseas Law) and the allrounder (Domestic IT) demonstrated an unnecessary reduction and simplification of knowledge and skills for the envisioned “lean and productive” means of application. The OG (Overseas Law) illustrated how some of his employees prematurely contextualised type of cases with standardised procedures and knowledge, whereas the collector (Domestic IT) and the shot caller (Overseas IT) argued that their employees utilised some very versatile software in ‘textbook’ ways, resulting in lack of divertive and flexible use of these tools and their embedded knowledge. It is a vicious circle of handling tasks with a subjectively limited pool of knowledge and acquiring new knowledge without the freedom and creativity to analyse its potential application. Some UK educated participants believed that this vicious circle is caused by the long-term influence of the Chinese education system and its advocated ideology of pedagogy and curriculum. Prior to data collection, as a Chinese person I had more or less the same assumption, and thought that the process of being drawn into the vicious circle would

depend on the duration and location of exposure to the Chinese education system.⁴² However, based on the qualitative data I collected, participants and their colleagues became enmeshed in the vicious circle for other reasons.

As I have alluded to above, participants with resourceful families were able to gain additional information for choosing courses, units, placements and employment. However, the end results reveal that this information was inaccurate and troublesome, although in most cases their family friends – the source of information – are not the ones to be blamed. As connected cases, the bearded gamer (Overseas IT) was the whistle-blower's (Domestic IT) family friend. The bearded gamer has worked in some of the leading companies and studios around the world, so his opinion was taken very seriously by the whistle-blower's family. Compared with the advice received by other participants, the bearded gamer gave very tailored advice, such as choosing Taiwan instead of the more common US as destination of education, and suggesting infrastructure programming as one of the choices of course with good prospects, instead of those recommended by many other participants' family friends. 5 IT participants agreed that, given the whistle-blower attended university in 2011, the comprehensiveness and flexibility of the bearded gamer's advice is unrivalled. However, as described by the whistle-blower and other IT participants, with the banning of all P2P platforms, and the reconstruction of government branches and both state-owned and private businesses, because of his rather unique educational background and the disciplinary characteristics of infrastructure programming, the whistle-blower has experienced many difficulties in seeking employment and advancing his career.

Summary

This section illustrates the long-term effect planned career paths had after participants had experienced and subjectively understand the context that would influence them. This process prompted participants to critically reflect on the knowledge they had acquired and the knowledge they now needed based on their professional identity. As discussed in the “scrapped” knowledge section, the law and IT industries have both suffered significant and, in some cases, unforeseen and unreasonable changes in knowledge structure. However, if we look at the changes mentioned by participants or identified through research, the differences and potential damage can be very significant. In comparison, changes in the law industry and discipline, though they can be unexpected, must take place under the existing framework of law and articles, therefore are in most cases restricted and related to existing structure. Furthermore, changes in the law are mostly additions or switches of

⁴² There were (partially) unjustified accounts of different levels of time and effort spent on education that would be deemed as reasonable in various areas of China. For example, Hubei and Shandong provinces are “notorious” for high school students having less than 5 hours of sleep a day, and their graduates are reportedly more “robotic” and “mindless”.

position, whereas in IT, changes happen in the form of deduction and replacement. For example, the inclusion of environmental evaluation into the essential processes of land trading adds new parts of environmental law into the knowledge structure and practice of a land law lawyer without devaluing or eliminating the importance of their existing knowledge and practical experience. In the context of IT, however, the legal restriction of blockchain in China, for example, renders knowledge of blockchain useless; and because of advancements in internet speed, new materials and cloud technology, traditional knowledge about file compression and encryption is now completely obsolete.

Furthermore, the law industry and the IT industry are very different in terms of professional structure. Lawyers require a significant amount of time to become fully trained and licensed but do not need any additional specialist diplomas or certificates, resulting in a smaller professional community but with flatter hierarchy in comparison to industries such as IT. Furthermore, though both law and IT work on a case-by-case basis, lawyers are considerably more exposed to the public and their clients. When these factors are combined, it becomes more difficult for companies or clients to replace lawyers and there is less unwanted reduction in payment due to competition.

With a higher resistance to change, when purposive acquired knowledge cannot be applied in the planned and targeted context, law participants still need to stringently and hastily adjust and reform their perceptions and understandings of this knowledge, but they can still apply it in the available context. IT participants, if facing the unfortunate situation in which the planned and targeted context no longer exists, must either relocate to a place where the targeted context exists or give up applying that particular part of their knowledge entirely.

In summary, because authorities influenced the types of knowledge that are acquirable and acquisition-worthy to an individual, this simultaneously implies the need for an ideal situation and application context for this knowledge to be “worthy”. The more resources a participant had, the more detailed their plan would be, the more influence structural changes would have on their initial application of knowledge, and eventually, the more difficult it would become for participants to reform and adjust knowledge to make it applicable to their current context.

8.4 Identity and the application of knowledge

This section explores the various dynamics between knowledge and identity, and the interconnected relationship between professional identity and social identity in the Chinese context. Reforming and adjusting knowledge to be fully applicable to the Chinese context proved to be very difficult for some participants, but contrary to my assumption, reform and adjustment in entirety were never goals for

many of my participants. One of the most unexpected but significant findings of this research is how participants use expression of knowledge to form their identities, or how their identities influence what and how knowledge is expressed.

8.4.1 Stereotypes: embracement and resistance

According to participants, stereotypes are simply unhidden and unavoidable in China, whether they are related to gender, educational background or regional origin. Unsurprisingly, several participants fought hard against stereotypes either in the workplace or within their family and some were impartial or chose to ignore them. However, 30 out of 43 participants partially or fully embraced, or even actively induced, stereotypical perceptions and interactions for their personal benefit and comfort.

Faking and masking

As discussed in chapter 7, gender stereotypes and discrimination have long-term and profound influences on professional females. As a systemic issue that greatly hinders their ability to fully apply their knowledge and gain maximum financial and professional advancement, participants took very different approaches to minimising the damage. Among the female participants under the age of 40, 2 were married and were either having or caring for children, but 4 female participants argued that they were less likely to get married and have children because of discrimination. They were either planning to relocate or willing to scarify career advancement for avoiding social and professional pressure. They are, using their words, uncomfortable with prioritising the professional self over the individual/emotional self. Interestingly, 2 other female participants used another stereotype to fight issues relating to gender discrimination. While Tesla mania (Domestic Law) intentionally expressed her homosexuality, the colourful one (Overseas IT) pretended to be homosexual.

As discussed in chapter 7, one of the reasons why women might not be promoted to important positions is the length of maternity leave and the absence it generates. However, children with unmarried parents, termed “illegitimate child” (非婚生子女) in China, can face various difficulties such as obtaining residency, receiving education or receiving health care. Since China currently does not allow same sex marriage, same sex couples are understood as DINKs (dual income, no kids). Under such situation, pretending to be lesbian could mislead employers into thinking the colourful one does not have the risk of childbirth and subsequent maternity leave. Furthermore, in a male-dominated industry, homosexual females are considered as “bros”, facilitating access to the inner circle and most importantly, according to the colourful one, greatly eliminating potential sexual

harassment even if located in tier 1 cities.⁴³ Moreover, in the opinion of the colourful one, her identity as an overseas returnee makes her homosexuality more convincing. Similar usage of the returnee identity can be found in the data from many of the participants in various aspects, with some even exaggerating perceived stereotypical behaviours to either make themselves more convincing or to acquire additional benefits. These behaviours are similar to what Goffman (1955) described as dramatic realisation in his theory of dramaturgy, where a specific aspect of identity is portrayed on purpose (Young et al., n.d.). Similarly, UK educated participants who did not want to be perceived through a stereotypical lens generated a mask of the domestic educated individual with sets of associated behaviours.

Regardless of the rationale, events and decisions involved, analysis of the current situation suggests that China meets some of the markers stated in some of the adaptive models of dramaturgical society. The stereotyping and labelling are forcing down accusation of directional stance on individuals, a phenomenon which persisted even decades after the cultural revolution when it originally started. Scholars such as Chen welcomed its systematic disappearance of such phenomenon in China (Chen, 2004; Chen, 2002), but following a series of events happening in or around China, it seems to have resurfaced and influences an increasing number of aspects of daily and professional life (Milani et al., n.d.; Zhang and Gu, 2022b). Though the scope of influence of the directional stance in current Chinese society requires further research, participants clearly pointed out that some of the faking and masking behaviours were cognitively guided by the avoidance or embracement of directional stances and their related perceptions.

8.4.2 Stance, identity and circle

As exemplified by the colourful one (Overseas IT), who pretended to be homosexual to gain acceptance from the majority of male colleagues, masks are created and put on to gain access to, acceptance by and the approval of professional or client communities. Though gender discrimination is a profound and serious issue, according to participants, the traits and characteristics needed to gain basic access to and acceptance by male professional communities are surprisingly simple: full or partial traits of “straight man cancer” (直男癌)⁴⁴ comprised of either familiarity with anime and video games for the IT industry or familiarity with wristwatches, sports cars and the economy for the law

⁴³ Some participants suggested or have witnessed that in smaller cities, older male managers do not believe in the existence of homosexuality and therefore can, pardon my language, “bang the inner women out”. In certain cases, some women suffer even more sexual harassment in terms of frequency and severity.

⁴⁴ In very rough terms, to some extent, this is similar to male chauvinism.

industry. However, gaining approval from the professional communities can be extremely difficult and compromising for some participants.

Access and approval

As discussed in the section on seeking employment, lawyers and law firms tend to value alma mater and alumni connections due to the assumption that alumni would have similar ideologies and professional principles based on shared experiences of curriculum and pedagogy. Therefore, as explained by some of the law participants, being alumni merely grants access and a basic level of acceptance into the circles, but a ‘YB’ (young boy) needs to express knowledge in ways that represents and showcases their ideologies and professional principles to gain approval from ‘OBs’ (old boys). According to the farmer (Domestic Law) and Mother Teresa (Overseas Law), in the Chinese context, the zone of inclusion of circles are slightly wider than their counterparts in the US or UK: the graduates from five political science and law (政法系) of universities form a singular circle; Tsinghua and Peking university graduates form a loose circle; the UK and Hong Kong universities’ graduates form a very tight circle; and graduates from the US have a more complicated process of circle formation. Technically, as argued by the coffee addict (Domestic Law), you can still join and gain approval from a US circle even if you graduate from a UK university, if your methods and results of past cases match their ideologies and principles. As demonstrated by the uninhibited one, who graduated from a UK university, his methods and overall principles of planning before working and cautious and conservative approach, while not well accepted by his employers, gained him recognition and recommendations from the circle that was mainly comprised of lawyers from Columbia and Yale. In a similar fashion, the toy guy (Overseas IT) introduced one of designers from a partnered company into his circle because that designer is very detail-oriented and prioritised specificity over general structure – traits highly valued by members of his circle. Unlike in the law industry, IT circles are not formed by alma mater or alumni, but rather are formed by shared employment history.

“...we (members of his close circle) were all employees of YY (one of the earliest internet companies in China) and we were all accustomed to the idea that product is at the core of the company’s value, so getting the product to a stage we are happy with is more important than anything. It was so hard for us to give an unfinished or prototype product to our client just for saving the deadline...that was why I set up my own company.” (The toy guy, Overseas IT)

Other senior IT participants expressed similar ideas about how their circles were established by former colleagues, but at their core, the rationale is the same as law circle formation: a recognition of

underlying principles and application of knowledge. The difference in these two industries is potentially caused by disciplinary pedagogy at the institutional level, however the data collected for this study is insufficient to answer this question. Future research that includes current students could assist in answering this question.

Summary

With their realisation of embedded culture in knowledge, both UK educated and Chinese educated participants fully acknowledged they were undergoing a process of social and professional identity formation. However, as indicated in this section, in the current Chinese context, social identity is strongly associated with professional identity, where changes in one will affect the other, forming a holistic, but more importantly inseparable identity. Due to differences in either previously planned or new career paths and different subjective perceptions of context, participants exemplified various dynamics of knowledge and identity. While some participants used application of knowledge to push for intended identity formation, some participants' application of knowledge was pushed by their perceived identity. For a few participants, their "masks" are genuine and unconsciously constructed based on their personal characteristics, education and experience. It is more common among participants, however, to construct masks based on intentional and selected behaviours to gain access to or distance themselves from a particular stance, or as a means to enter into or exit from specific circles. It might sound confusing to bring stance and circles into the same formula, but in coherence with the findings provided by Zhang and Gu (2022), contemporary Chinese society and the not-so-subtle changes in Chinese society are blurring the line between professional identity, personal identity and social acceptance.

As an example, Tom, is a lawyer who works in a law firm that has Hong Kong and Shenzhen branches. It was discovered that listens to music produced by Denise Ho, a lesbian singer who is considered to be leading member of the pro-Hong Kong independence camp. His action – merely listening to her music and being found out – would likely identify him as a supporter of independence for Hong Kong. If he does not immediately express his ignorance of Denise Ho's stance and identity, he would be rejected by his current employer, a proud patriot whose Hong Kong branch makes him very sensitive and cautious. In attempt to find employment in other law firms in Shenzhen, any law firms that have members from the same circle or law firms that mostly handle cases from state-owned businesses would likely deny his application for other made-up reasons, because of the rumour that Tom is a potential "traitor". In desperation, an olive branch would be handed out by a law firm in Hong Kong, acknowledging his "bravery" and open-mindedness, and assigning him to a case about discrimination towards a lesbian employee. This is a magnified hypothetical story that aims to illustrate the point that due to heightened sensitivity, behaviours can be prematurely and subjectively

interpreted as the expression of a specific stance, and therefore accepted or rejected by circles either to embrace promotional opportunities or mitigate unnecessary risks. Fully aware of this bizarre yet workable logic that navigate daily behaviours and associated knowledge application to professional identity, and vice versa, professional identity to guide their behaviour and knowledge application, participants carefully decide their actions based on the identities they want to be perceived as, or they are limited to act in the ways that their identities require.

Though participants claimed that various methods were the most effective in establishing identity and stance as discussed in chapter 7, I suggest that the use of language seems to be the quickest. The unconscious or conscious choice of translation for “stack” in IT (栈, only used by simplified Chinese speakers and areas; 堆, primarily used by traditional Chinese speakers and areas) had swiftly confirmed to colleagues of the family pride (Overseas IT) and the allrounder (Domestic IT) that they are outsiders; the older sister, a Chinese graduate, used DA (district attorney) instead of prosecutor, and it was suddenly presumed that she must have graduated from the US. In some of the more planned instances, Sparta (Domestic Law) over-used English in his meeting with a client, and as if by magic, his client stopped asking to consult with other lawyers and did not negotiate the price. On the other hand, the camera man (Overseas Law) had to restrain his use of English because his firm worked mostly with local companies and individual clients instead of international companies. The bearded gamer simply used a sterner tone to remind his supervisors that he is a “stone-headed” (stubborn) returnee and was granted an additional six months to finish his project. Though this use of language might not be applicable to Chinese employees in industries other than IT and law, the number of successful deception or misleading evident from the data is significant enough for me to consider how identity can be easily associated with choice of words and what it entails on consensus of the Chinese society.

Chapter 9: Conclusion

This concluding chapter returns to the research questions and discusses how the collected data and findings from this research answer these questions. This chapter also discuss what contributions and implications the data and findings can have for research and policy and suggests future research.

As mentioned in the introduction, this research was prompted by my friends' experience and subsequent doubt about the phrase 'knowledge changes destiny, education forges future.'¹(知识改变命运, 学习成就未来). While various studies and scholars are still researching the impact knowledge can have on individuals, industries or the whole country, government policy ensures that overseas graduates and Chinese graduates are clearly facing different futures. Due to the Chinese government's unwavering yet debatable faith in overseas educated returnees and their benefit for the development of China, returnees were enjoying privileges unreachable by domestic graduates. Various national or local attraction policies are providing financial incentives exclusively to returnees, civil service prioritises them through policies such as renting and buying government funded properties or prioritising them in applying for vehicle plate in cities with application restrictions. Most significantly, many local policies offer shorter or even instant residency relocation for returnees whereas domestic graduates need to work in local business for 2 to 5 years before they can apply. Aside from the government, industries are also bluntly expressing their favour towards returnees. According to the data provided by one of the biggest recruitment platforms, job positions that are exclusive to returnees or priorities returnees are growing at a rapid rate. In addition, in 2021 returnee prioritised positions' average salary are 16 percent higher than overall positions' average salary with some positions asking for lower qualification requirement for returnees than domestic graduates (Zhilian Research Centre, 2022). With such differences in treatment from government and industries, it is reasonable for domestic graduates to question the value of their education as well as the value of overseas education. While the differences in treatment might be a small issue in early 2000s as returnees only made up an insignificant proportion in the Chinese labour market, the problems caused by differences in treatment and some pragmatic adjustments to both policies and industry norms are becoming pressing issues in China due to the growing number of returnees. In 2021, more than 1 million overseas graduates returned to China, while competed with 9 million domestic graduates, 45.1 percent of job positions in tier 1 and new tier 1 cities were acquired by returnees (National Development and Reform Commission, 2021).

Such circumstance has inspired various research in relation to the value of education and especially the value of overseas education in Chinese workplace. While some research focuses on the objective value of overseas education, namely the benefit returnees can bring to companies or local/national economies and technological advancement, this research aims to develop an understanding of

graduates' subjective perception. I focus on exploring how and why UK and Chinese graduates made their choices of education and employment, how did they perceive and acquire knowledge, how did they apply knowledge in Chinese workplaces and how did the application of knowledge influence their perception and formation of their identity.

9.1 Addressing the research questions

With regards to factors that influenced participants' educational choices, participants' perceptions on what knowledge is need for Chinese workplace have the most significant impact on their choices between UK or Chinese higher education. Apart from a few participants who made their choices based on financial reasons, concerns about personal security and reluctant to leave their family, China educated participants believed China has unique social and cultural contexts that are distinct from or that even contradict western contexts. Therefore, only contextualised knowledge taught in Chinese universities and embedded implicit knowledge on how Chinese businesses and government operates are suitable for applying in Chinese workplace. This principle is further illustrated in how China educated participants perceive education provided by some Transnational Higher Education institutions (THNE) and their perception of their overseas educated colleagues' performance and adjustment. As discussed in chapter 4, while UK educated participants did not choose THNEs because they thought contextualised/localised curricula taught in THNEs lost the essence of western knowledge, China educated participants argued that THNEs and their western academic staffs in general cannot fully localise their curricula and pedagogy to provide knowledge suitable for Chinese workplace. Similarly, discussion in chapter 7 illustrated that some China educated participants or Chinese educated colleagues of UK educated participants tend to associate overseas educated employees' weak performance with the origin of acquired knowledge. The western origin of acquired knowledge was deemed as the reason why UK educated participants perform poorly without deeper understanding of how they perform as individuals.

Contrastingly, UK educated participants valued western knowledge, and believed that although there would be some obstacles, western knowledge can be applied in the Chinese context given they made the right choices. This brings out one of the most significant differences between UK educated participants and China educated participants. In comparison, UK educated participants were much more specific in terms of which institutions and degrees they wanted to pursue. With information and suggestions provided by families or family friends who work in IT or law, 16 out of 22 UK educated participants chose specific institutions or chose the highest-ranking institutions that provide a specific degree according to their planned career path. The differences between UK educated participants'

planned career paths are the level of details and specifications, and these differences have significant impact on how they perceive and acquire knowledge in university and during employment.

University, learning and placement

Whether a participant would value specific knowledge and how they value specific knowledge taught at university are significantly affected by how detailed or specific their planned career path was. While participants without a detailed or specific planned career path would consider whether the knowledge taught at universities can be applied to the Chinese context or not, they would not necessarily assign value to it. For participants with very detailed and specific planned career path, they perceived significant value on knowledge that they thought was essential for their career and made choices of optional unit or placement accordingly when available. Participants in general emphasised what they perceived as the practicality of knowledge. With the majority of jobs in both law and IT being case based in Chinese workplace, participants were keen on learning knowledge with the use of case studies and real-life application scenarios. To a certain extent, the more detailed career path a participant had, the more they would value practice centric knowledge over theoretical or philosophical knowledge. However, some of the participants changed their perception and valuation after their placement. As I discuss in chapter 5 and 8, some participants, especially those who had to find placement on their own, experienced what they would described as “tough love” placements. These participants in general did not have connections in their desired industries, so they did not have detailed and specific planned career path compared to participants who had strong industry connections. Due to the less fixed planned career path, these participants took placements either in various workplaces or different positions; and since they acquired placement through normal channel, they did not get special treatment and turned out gaining more insights and meaningful experience on realistic workplaces and the real challenges of knowledge application. The insights and experience gained in “tough love” placements also influenced how they perceived knowledge and its value in their education and after the placements, ranging from more in-depth understandings of knowledge and its potential application to their having a stronger recognition of knowledge structure. In retrospect, UK educated participants who did not have strong industry connections, believed that the renewed perception of knowledge has benefited them greatly for seeking employment, working and to some extent granted them more options in the future.

One factor that was mentioned by 8 UK educated participants were the diversity of classmates. As discussed in the literature review, Kubota (2016) and Schartner (2016) suggest that surrounding context, namely other international students, would influence how knowledge is perceived and learned by international students. Through these participants did not see the benefit of diverse classrooms at the time of education, in retrospect they believe the ‘unpleasant discussions’ they had

with other international and UK classmates have made them more open to multiple perspectives or that they can anticipate different perspectives more easily, an advantage most significant when dealing with overseas clients.

Seeking employment

In terms of seeking employment, most participants had brief idea, whereas 10 participants had rather specific ideas about what employment they wanted. Again, the level of specifications and preferences on seeking employment is tightly connected to their planned career path. Participants with relatively flexible or less detailed planned career path looked for employment within a specific range of companies. For example, most IT participants wanted to work for BAT⁴⁵ companies and most law participants wanted to work for Red Circle⁴⁶ law firms. While they had preferred employment in mind, they were happy about finding an employment that suited their overall plan. Aside from their planned career path, there are other factors participants considered, such as locations and initial salary. However only 1 participant prioritised finding employments in their hometown as the most important consideration, and initial salaries were only considered for positions within their intended range of companies. Another factor that had some influence on participants' decision making were timeframes. 20 participants mentioned that if they spent more than 3 months in finding a suitable employment, they would compromise and finding an acceptable employment as soon as possible. However, the validity of this statement is debatable as most of the participants found employment within the first month of their return to China, and 5 participants received job offer before their graduation.

Participants with specific career path, on the other hand, would for example wanted to work in ByteDance's (the company that created TikTok) office in Zhonghang plaza, Beijing, or a law participant would want to work in KWM's (one of the Red Circle law firm) Guangzhou office, ideally in Ms. Wu's team. To illustrate exactly how far participants can go to get their ideal employment, I asked for and acquired consent from the American Dream (Overseas Law) to use her experience as an example. With her mother being a criminal law court judge in one of the tier 1 cities in China, the American dream was nurtured and educated as a prospective lawyer since middle school. Her mother would use closed cases as teaching materials to illustrate what defending lawyers did and why, and how prosecutors would respond. She attended a high school that provides A Level course as she had already decided she would attend higher education in the UK. Her mother wanted her to work in [XX], a Red Circle firm that have one of its biggest offices in her hometown. Her mother wanted her

⁴⁵ Originally BAT stands for Baidu, Alibaba and Tencent, three of the biggest IT companies in China, but now it is more frequently use to refer all the big or famous IT related companies in China.

⁴⁶ An informal list of top law firms in China.

to work in [A]’s team, arguably the best team for IPO and M&A⁴⁷ in China back when she was only 17. A’s team was full at that time, so her mother arranged her placement in another office of the same law firm, in a team that frequently collaborate with A’s team. Her choice of university and optional units were all made based on the suggestions provided by her placement supervisor B a friend of her mother, two years before her placement in that firm. Her first placement was in her mother’s courtroom and spent all the following summer holidays B’s team. At the time of writing, she is now working in B’s team, specifically work as a liaison with A’s team, and waiting for someone in A’s team to leave.

Her experience is not much different from the other 9 participants who had specific planned career path, but to some extent she is the luckier one: she still has the chance to fulfil her planned path whereas some participants faced unexpected events that fundamentally changed their plan and their perception and application of knowledge.

Application of knowledge in Chinese context

With the vegan’s consent, I use her experience to demonstrate the impact structural events can have on participants capability to apply acquired knowledge in Chinese workplace. The vegan is a UK educated environmental lawyer currently working in a Red Circle firm’s office in a new tier 1 city. During her education, she specialised in pollution evaluation and had participated in one of the largest pollution related class-action lawsuit in China. Despite her objective to further develop her expertise in class-action lawsuit, she now needs to reconsider what she can do in the future and whether to stay in China or relocate elsewhere. In September 2021, Chinese Ministry of Justice published a new clause that restrict lawyers from offering contingency fee agreement. To recap, contingency fee agreement allows lawyers to ask for payment based on the outcome of the judgement instead of fixed price. For example, if a lawyer offers a contingency fee agreement with their client stating they will be paid 10 percent of the verdict, they will be paid 1 million if they manage to win the verdict for 10 million or receive no payment if they lose the case. While for most lawyers the ban on contingency fee would only means they would be less motivated to choose more aggressive approach that can gain risky but better outcome, this ban would have fundamental impact on lawyers that specialise in class-action lawsuit. One of the most significant meanings of contingency fee is for individuals with financial difficulties to have a fighting chance against big companies. In the US, contingency fee is most common among class-action lawsuits against pharmaceutical companies or companies that caused large scale pollution. Any individual victim might not have the resources, financial support or time to sue a multi-billion company and even if lawyers would take individual victim under

⁴⁷ IPO: initial public offering, basically means launching into the stock market. M&A: mergers and acquisition.

contingency fee agreement, a portion of winning in individual lawsuit would be too little for lawyers considering the amount of time and effort needed for investigation and lawsuit procedures. In these pharmaceutical damage or pollution cases, class-action lawsuit under contingency fee agreement ensures that individuals would not suffer any financial burden and class-action lawsuit with certain number of victims would provide justifiable earnings for lawyers⁴⁸. With the ban on contingency fee, the vegan can no longer take class-action lawsuit, a expertise she spent years on establishing and developing. As the vegan is the only participant influenced by the ban on contingency fee, I did not use her experience in chapter 7 and 8. Instead, I use gaming industry and publication permit as the example of how structural changes in Chinese context can influence knowledge application as all 8 IT participants who work in the gaming industry was affected on some level. Nevertheless, her experience remains to be the most profound example of devastating obstacles individual can face when applying knowledge in the Chinese context.

In terms of more common and less devastating obstacles, China educated participants and UK educated participants have significantly different experience and perceptions. In early stage of employment, China educated participants often realised their acquired knowledge is ‘packaged’ or ‘bound’, and they were unable to apply them freely. As discuss in chapter 7, while China educated participants would think they had acquired all the knowledge needed to perform well in their intended employment, they often later found themselves associate specific knowledge to a specific task or practice, and therefore did not intuitively comprehend the full or potential application of such knowledge. The timing of such realisation depends on what kind of task participants have handled since being employed. In general, participants that experienced diverse workload tend to undertake more comprehensive break-down of all of their acquired knowledge, whereas participants who mostly handle a specific type of cases would break-down knowledge needed for those specific types of cases.

UK educated participants in general had less problem in breaking down knowledge for more flexible application, partially due to the uncertainty they had upon returning to China. Compare to China educated participants, UK educated participants on average took less placement and spend less time in China, therefore most of them had some level of doubts about whether the knowledge they learned would be suitable for Chinese context or not. With such doubt in mind, they did not perceive strong association between specific knowledge to specific task, and often adopted the “Edison” approach (the journalist, Overseas IT), essentially the trial-and-error method to find the best practice. While they did not perceive their acquired knowledge as ‘packaged’ or ‘bound’, UK educated participants often found their knowledge to be insufficient for the Chinese context. As discussed in chapter 7 and 8, due to differences in profession/occupation construction and structural changes in industries, 17 out

⁴⁸ Class-action lawsuit would normally take 2 to 3 years and the amount of preparation needed for class-action lawsuit would not be much more or different from preparation needed for individual lawsuit.

22 UK educated participants had to acquire additional knowledge or ‘scrapped’ some of their acquired knowledge due to lack of usage for the current and future employment. For example, a lawyer who specialise in land law would need to ‘scrap’ their knowledge on criminal law and add new knowledge of environmental law to cope with the latest changes on land law and the needs from their clientele. With regards to the level of adding and scrapping of knowledge needed, participants who had detailed and specific planned career path were the most impacted few. Their detailed and specific career path that influenced what knowledge to acquire was built on information and suggestions provided to them prior to their higher education. Even though the providers of these information and suggestions were indeed successful practitioners in their respective field, some of the information and suggestions were very subjective and turned out to be wrong. Even with information and suggestions that were objective and reasonable in retrospect, the legal, social and industrial contexts in China went through rapid and overhauled changes in the past few years. Under such circumstances, even reasonable information and suggestions would have a short expiry date. As these participants made choices with regard to education and employment based on information and suggestions that were mostly expired by the time they graduated, 3 of them are currently seeking or consider seeking overseas employment which require much less scrapping and adding of knowledge. While other participants did not go through such severe crisis, the feeling and perception of possessing insufficient professional knowledge led to doubts about their professional identity.

Identity formation

Especially among UK educated participants who need to acquire additional knowledge for their current and future employment, the partial lack of professional knowledge made them question their professional identity in the Chinese context. Even for most of these participants the additional knowledge needed is not essential to their job, whenever they need to ask their colleagues “a dumb question” and being lightly laughed at, they would feel their professional identity being chipped away bit by bit. This type of situation would often reinforce their identity as returnees perceived by their employers and colleagues in a negative way. Similar situations were reported by China educated participants who work in companies where the majority of employees are returnees. Both China and UK educated participants believe that, based on the types of company they work for and regular clientele they encounter, employers and clients would have associate specific knowledge applied in specific way with the professional identity they should have. For example, while in law firms that mostly deal with local clients, an overseas educated lawyer should be very familiar with overseas laws despite their education background and do things strictly by the book. An overseas educated lawyer that works for a local law firm with international clients, on the other hand, should possess ‘Chinese characteristics’ in their practice as well as being able to fully anticipate international clients’ needs

and preference. Participants believe that in China, society perceive their professional and social identity through details in the application of knowledge that are deemed insignificant and irrelevant, to an extent that the occasional use of traditional Chinese characters can be perceived as participants' self-distancing from being perceived as 'Chinese people'. Such perception on identity and knowledge application have driven participants into two different directions for knowledge application and identity formation. Participants that value the importance of forming their own identity would not change how they would apply their knowledge and disregard what others would perceive them as. These participants understand that such stance might have negative impact on their career advancement, and they saw it as necessary sacrifice peaceful mind and happier life. Participants who value their current professional identity deeply would limit their application of knowledge in consistence with what their professional identity would entails to employers and clients.

9.2 Contributions, implications and future research

This thesis aims to develop an understanding of individual experience and process of transnational knowledge application. To do so, I develop a theoretical model call youki. The term youki originated in Japan during Meiji restoration, a time where western knowledge had taken Japan by storm. As a suggestion to how to perceive, acquire and apply knowledge and avoid being intellectually colonised, Kurata (1953) provided his interpretation of Hegel's *Aufheben* as youki (揚棄), an individual internalisation of knowledge from both influencing context and original context. Drawing on Kurata's idea of youki, I conceptualise participants' process of knowledge perception, knowledge acquisition, knowledge application and identity formation through their experience from education to employment with the consideration of contextual factors. The model of youki generates a holistic view on the complex and transformative journey individuals go through, namely the continuous acquisition, reconstruction and reformation of knowledge, and how individuals form their identities by knowledge application or navigate their application of knowledge according to their identities. Through youki I identify 3 factors that influence an individual's journey, which are the planned career path constructed with the information they gain or provided to them, the structural changes in their industry, and the interaction and dynamic between knowledge application and their social and professional identity. As suggested by the name, this theoretical model centres around youki, a conception developed for considering and dealing with colonisation. While it can be expanded further to consider decolonisation of curriculum, youki can be used as an approach to decolonise on individual/community level. As a decolonising practice, 'Theatre of the Oppressed' (Perry, 2012) facilitate individuals to reenact specific moments of their life, what they would see from these 'performance' and how would they generate new meanings and understandings. Similarly, youki is

generated from individual dialectically and inductively, and participants were able to perceive their transformation more clearly and navigate their future transformation.

Theoretical implications

The findings from this research can potentially provide new considerations for research on transnational knowledge transfer. As discussed in literature review, there are emerging studies in the field of knowledge transfer that focus on the unwillingness to transfer or accept transferred knowledge. By substituting the identity formation part of *youki* into this issue, dialogue and discussions from participants indicate that what is perceived as unwillingness could potentially be difference in individual objectives and goals. As I discuss in the above section regarding identity formation, participants who value the importance of forming their own identity would not necessarily change their application of knowledge in accordance with what they are told or thought they should do. From the perspective of knowledge transfer, such behaviour could be understood as unwilling to transfer or accept transferred knowledge that damage individuals' opportunity and ability to optimise their career advancement and overall company performance; but as I discuss in the above section, these participants are aware of such danger and for them it is a sacrifice they are willing to accept. Even for participants that value financial outcome and career advancement, they might not transfer or accept transferred knowledge if these acquisition and application can influence their current professional identity.

Furthermore, Meng et al (2016) and Schwarzer et al (2016) suggest that knowledge transfer, especially transnational knowledge transfer is not a one-way system but a circulation between venue, transferor and recipient. While they suggest that such circulation would influence the bearers of knowledge as transferor or recipient, as illustrate in the visualised model of *youki*, individuals would go through their own circulation of perception, acquisition and application of knowledge with influence from both inside and outside of the knowledge transfer circulation. For future research regarding the system of knowledge transfer, *youki* as a model of internal/individual circulation or the consideration of professional identity and social identity could potentially be meaningful addition to existing theories and research.

Implication on policy and future research regarding the Chinese context

While the significance and potential influence of attraction policies are discussed extensively in literature review, the collected data does not show significant influence in terms of decision making. They were well aware of the policies, with around half of them could immediately name and remember details of specific local policies during interviews. This is most apparent in interviews with

IT participants, almost all UK educated IT participants mentioned the Peacock Project in Shenzhen or the Seagull Project in Suzhou and the majority of China educated IT participants were aware that some cities in Zhejiang province will introduce attraction policies that include domestic graduates in the near future. However, none of the participants prioritised attraction policies in their decision-making process.

This is possibly due to the socioeconomic status of participants. Even though I did not ask question directly related to their socioeconomic status, the life grid and follow up interviews provide enough information to indicate that most participants came from wealthy families and did not prioritise undesired employment in a city with attraction policies over preferred employment in a city without attraction policies. Future research can expand on sample pools and explore whether attraction policies would have stronger influence on Overseas graduates with various family background.

Furthermore, as discuss in the literature review, many attraction policies have added lists of “rapidly needed talent (急需人才)” that would be prioritised in application and receive extra incentives.

However, most of the disciplines and professions included in these lists are STEM subjects and related professions. Even when attraction policies did not specify disciplines or professions, some or the condition or requirement presented were bias towards graduates from STEM subjects. For example, before the modification in 2016, the Peacock project would require applicants to gain a 5 year or longer employment from one of the verified companies to receive the incentives, and in 2012 the list of companies were mostly technology companies such as Huawei or Tencent. According to CCG’s data, in 2020 only 33.8 percent of returnees graduated from STEM subjects. While local policies need to consider the capacity to absorb and direction of development and therefore is more justifiable to focus on a smaller range of graduates, national policies should focus more on the overall situation of returnees and adjust future policies accordingly.

To further expand on the issue of discipline and profession, one of the most significant findings of this thesis is the influence structural changes can have on individuals. Law and IT industries both experience structural changes over the past year, but they are many more industries that have been subjected to substantial structural changes in China recently. In chapter 5 I briefly mention China has now banned shadow classes and extra curricula classes, and the impact this ban has on education industry is revealing slowly. Contrastingly, as mentioned above, STEM subjects especially biomedicine and aerospace engineering are appearing in many local attraction policies as ‘rapidly needed talent’. Research that adopts youki with participants from education and biomedicine/aerospace engineering can potentially further highlight the influence structural changes can have on individuals in China.

Empirical and methodological contribution

This thesis provides a nuanced interpretation of how information gathered before university can have profound influence in individuals' life. Throughout this thesis, the influence of planned career path is significant in every stage of their life. Looking at my data, the more detailed and specific participants' planned career path is, the more likely they would need to reform their acquired knowledge and re-acquire new knowledge to fit their current employment and industry. It indicates a lack of basic understandings of the industry and profession they want to work for and the lack of accessible information on these topics. For policy makers in China, the use of progression query (進路調査) and three-way meeting(三方面談) exemplified by Japanese high schools might provide the support needed for students to make educated choices for their higher education and future employment. Progression query and the follow up three-way meeting normally take place in the first or second year of high school in Japan. Students would fill the progression query form with three professions they would like to work as in the future, and teachers would then have meeting with the students and their parents to discuss what they need to do next to achieve their goal. China has a similar system called employment investigation (就业调查表), but it takes place in the final year of university and there is no follow up action to help and support students. With the use of progression query and three-way meetings at the stage of high school, students can potentially have a clearer idea about what they can do and how to achieve their goal, mitigating the presence of wishful thinking in decision making with regards to education and employment.

Furthermore, while returnees and their employment are studied extensively in China, the majority of studies focus on a particular stage, either returnees' education experience or employment in China. This thesis provides retrospective data that links returnees' education experience to their current employment and plans for their future. While this thesis cannot fill the gap of longitudinal studies in China, it does provide insights for research on current event and social changes. The combination of life grid interview and informal follow up interview provides a viable option for future research that aims to explore the issue of identity or the influence of ongoing event in China. From a more personal perspective, I would hope this research and its findings to be helpful for all current overseas Chinese students and returnees. By using the visualised model of youki presented in chapter 8, students and returnees can fill in their experience and expectations to conceptualise their own journey. It can also be used in collaboration with researchers, similar to how a life grid interview can be conducted.

Limitations and future research

As discussed in Chapter 3, due to ethical and practical considerations, I chose IT and Law as the disciplines for this study. While incorporated in the analysis and construction of my theory, a

significant amount of data cannot be presented in the thesis due to ethical reasons, and this therefore weakens the presentation of some of the arguments made in this thesis. Although some of this loss of data was due to participants' preferences and unexpected factors such as the delay of case progression caused by the pandemic, some of the loss of data could potentially be avoided. I mentioned above that participants could be identified by the information they provided due to the circumstance that both Law and IT professionals operate in relatively small circles, but this is further exacerbated by my selection of participants. The participants in this study have been purposely selected from top tier law firms and leading companies in IT, which makes the circle even smaller. If I had expanded my pool of prospective participants to all levels of business within these industries, potentially I might have been able to present more data without risking the exposure of their identity.

There are further limitations regarding my choice of Law and IT: while these two disciplines do meet my set criteria, there are other disciplines that meet the criteria as well. Even though I would not be able to find or conduct interviews with the same number of participants for those disciplines, a few more participants from disciplines such as media, medicine and engineering could potentially bring more depth to the analysis and evaluation of the data and provide more insight for future research.

Following this thought, one of the more obvious directions for future research would be to include more disciplines under the same or different criteria. Even with disciplines that have been previously studied, the changing context, disciplinary development and difference in research focus could provide new insights. While I chose the UK and China as the focus of this study due to my personal connections and experience, academically I am also interested in how US educated lawyers and IT workers could be studied through the youki of transnational knowledge as they were frequently mentioned by the participants in this study; and additionally, how UK educated Japanese and Korean workers would compare with their Domestic educated counterparts, since Japan and South Korea are also actively improving and adjusting their attraction policies.

In my opinion, this study captures China and the Chinese context during a very unique and turbulent time, where changes are happening rapidly both internally and externally. When some of the influencing contextual factors and events cease or become permanently changed, a study with the same design can be conducted to establish whether some of the findings from this study are persistent or only temporary.

9.3 Last remarks

Owing to the generosity of my friends and their introduced participants, I found out that unlike me, many participants, either educated in the UK or in China, had long-term plans about what they wanted to do, and therefore planned what they wanted to learn. These plans were made using the information provided by prominent and successful individuals in their respective fields – surely their insights must be enlightening, said participants with a wry smile. For the more fortunate participants, they had the chance to talk to these individuals in private, gaining more detailed information that would provide them with greater advantages, whereas other participants had to resort to websites such as Zhihu to go through every answer related to their preferred profession and tried to find the best route of education and employment. With a specific direction and plan, some of the participants were very clear about which unit they should choose and where they should intern: three to four years is not a long time, and they do not have the luxury of learning anything that is not valuable or worthy for their ideal job.

In comparison, participants that did not have the connections and resources for obtaining detailed information felt hesitant upon returning to China. Have I learned what is needed? Is my mindset correct? Would I be picked on because I don't fully agree with the death penalty? But after graduation and several years of work, both sides were a bit surprised. The more resourceful participants noticed that the promised professional and industry prospects had not yet come to fruition, if indeed they would happen at all; the less resourceful participants were delighted that some of the knowledge they had learned and had grappled with in terms of how to apply, turned out to be applicable in unexpected places. Ah, China, fickle like an ocean, with waves that can send you off on a voyage or drown you in the darkness. They were happy to continue learning and developing the specific fields or parts of knowledge that worked well for them. Meanwhile, the more resourceful participants were or are still troubled by whether to learn what is needed for the job they are doing, or keep advancing the knowledge and skills that they devoted numerous nights of study to but are yet to find a place to apply. UK educated participants who have worked for five or six years are generally in a more suitable company and position than their first job, and they seem to be more capable of focusing on and advancing their core knowledge and skills, whereas participants that know a workable sum of many fields of knowledge but struggle to apply them elsewhere are mostly graduates from Chinese universities.

Some participants were worried about the warning they received from older alumni: "It will be hard, but you must fit in to the Chinese context". Some of the more senior participants agreed with the statement, especially if you want to enjoy the benefits of both sides. But some of the younger participants are not so ambitious; they are clear about who and what they would like to be seen and thought as, and they act accordingly to find a sense of peace within. And some of the more senior participants, including a few of my age, were desperately holding on to the mask on their face without the chance to catch a breath.

I call these journeys “youki”, a map of how former overseas students think about what knowledge should be learned, what knowledge was learned, how the knowledge is applied in expected and unexpected places, and in expected and unexpected forms and shapes, and how the application is informed by, or informs, who they are. Hopefully this map can help current and future Chinese students, overseas or not, to think about who they want to be and how to be it.

I call these journeys “youki” because it sounds like bravery and courage in Chinese, 勇氣 (yongqi) . Said by way too many remarkable individuals, ‘bravery is not fearless, but to face it and conquer it because of something more important.’ Education is a long and dark road for everyone, a few torches here and there is all those others can provide. We shall not sit and be satisfied by the comfort of the dimming light from the torches, but must walk, crawl or roll into the darkness, wherever it leads, sloping or steep. May we all have bravery for our future.

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