

10 Accumulating and Utilizing Intellectual Capital: Chinese International Students' Post-Graduation Career Strategies

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Abstract

As the United States faces the crisis of recruiting and retaining Chinese international students, in this chapter, I investigate Chinese international students' post-graduation career challenges and strategies. Findings showed that while Chinese international students were confronted with obstacles in landing a job with visa sponsorship in the US, the competition to find employment was also intense in China. In responding to these career challenges, Chinese international students employed strategies including (a) maximizing or minimizing their stay in the US, (b) pursuing a higher-level US degree, and (c) seeking transnational careers. All of these strategies served to accumulate and utilize their intellectual capital for the best career outcomes. This study emphasized the importance for American higher education to better facilitate international students' post-graduation career success.

Keywords: career strategies, Chinese international students, intellectual capital, post-graduation, transnational careers

Introduction

While the United States has long benefited from the economic contributions, diverse cultural perspectives, and research and innovation capacities that international students bring, its ability to attract and retain these students became concerning even prior to the COVID-19 pandemic. The new international student enrollment has continuously declined since 2016/17, and the number of students from China – the biggest sending country – has flattened and even decreased at the undergraduate level after a decade of rapid growth (Institute of International Education, 2020). In the meantime, as a consequence of the China Initiative and a series of anti-China policies (e.g., shortened visa stay for specific high-tech majors, entry ban of students with military ties), scientists and scholars of Chinese descent, including Chinese graduate students, have considered leaving the country (Lee and Li, 2021).

While the tension of international student enrollment is under the spotlight, less attention has been paid on their post-graduation experiences (Tran et al., 2020). Although international students seem

to have the advantage of seeking employment in both host and home countries, they also faced many obstacles in navigating their career paths across different national contexts, such as a temporary work visa in the host country (Tran et al., 2020) and reintegrating to the home country (Hao and Welch, 2012). However, existing literature has rarely focused on how international students respond to these challenges and make their post-graduation career plans, which is an ongoing process of negotiating their academic credentials and professional experiences in the global job market. Illuminated by intellectual capital, this study aimed to uncover the post-graduation career challenges that Chinese students face in both host and home country and the strategies they employ to navigate their career paths to pursue their most desired career outcomes.

Literature Review

Most research on international students' post-graduation experiences focused on those who returned to their home countries. Researchers have documented the students' advantages as returnees. Through interviewing Chinese returnees and employers, a study indicated that study experiences in leading universities of Australia still had a positive influence on finding a job even though the Chinese labor market was becoming more competitive. Also, overseas study experience also equipped them with innovative ways of thinking and other professional skills that facilitate their career advancement in a longer term (Hao et al., 2016). In addition, another study indicated the Chinese returnees enjoyed the benefit of transferring *hukou*, the Chinese household registration. Those who returned had the flexibility to search jobs and settle in big cities, such as Beijing or Shanghai, where a new *hukou* was strictly controlled otherwise (Hao and Welch, 2012).

Meanwhile, studies also revealed the difficulties that international students experienced after returning to their home countries. Through interviews of 36 returnees in Singapore, Malaysia and Hong Kong who studied in New Zealand, a researcher found that these returnees faced the challenge of integrating their self-identity and overseas experiences to develop a new notion of home and sense of belonging, while making virtual or physical social connections would be a helpful approach to overcome such challenge (Butcher, 2004). For Chinese returnees in particular, a study found that employers usually held high expectations on returnees' language and professional skills (Hao and Welch, 2012). In addition, similar to Butcher's finding, Hao and Welch indicated that Chinese returnees lacked current local knowledge and experienced the difficulty in integrating their international experiences into local

Chinese culture. Beyond this, Zhu and Gao (2016) argued that the readjusting process for returnees could last from months to years, given their unrealistic expectations in food safety, housing and transportation. Although these inadaptation symptoms might be severe sometimes, most of the returnees did not take proactive steps to alleviate these problems. The authors suggested that returnees might not realize the problems or believe these problems could be self-cured.

Research that examines international students' experiences of seeking employment in host countries is relatively scarce. For example, a longitudinal study among 13 Chinese accounting students in Australia, identified the critical factors that influenced international students' employability in Australia (Blackmore et al., 2015). While a higher education degree itself, referred to as "institutionalized cultural capital" (p.8) by the author, was losing its value, English language proficiency was fundamental for students to develop cultural and social capital, as it was closely associated with their involvement in local communities and building social networks. Some forms of work experiences, such as internships, were helpful to improve students' competency in the Australian labor market. In addition, Permanent Residency is a symbolic capital that students desire in order to find employment.

Another example was also a study based in Australia (Tran, et al., 2020). The 485 visa, which allows international graduates to work in Australia for two to four years, left the international students less favored or untrusted by the employers given the visa's temporality and employers' misperception. In responding to these challenges, international students intentionally chose a more employable field, began job searching prior to the completion of their studies, stayed persistent, actively communicated about their visa status with employers, and participated in internships and placement programs to enhance their employability.

For the international students in the US, no known study has particularly investigated their post-graduation career experiences. However, some studies on international students' post-graduation mobility decision making provided relevant insights. Legal status was a major challenge for international students to seek employment in the US. For example, one study pointed out that international students were concerned with staying in the US after graduation due to the uncertainties of obtaining green cards (Han et al., 2015). Another study indicated that while Chinese students were likely to take advantage of the Optional Practical Training (OPT) program to explore work opportunities in the US, their future plan strongly depended on whether they could be sponsored or not (Yu, 2016). In students' own words, such a strategy was described as "I can't get a H-1B in the United States, I will consider going back to China." The OPT program allows international students

to work in a major-related field up to 12 months after graduation. Students who study in a STEM field could apply for another 48-month extension. However, to continue to work in the US, the students need a H-1B visa sponsored by their employer. Once a H-1B visa is approved, international students can work in the US for three years, which can be extended to a maximum of six years.

In sum, given the limited body of literature on international students' post-graduation experiences, especially in the host country, this study intends to focus on Chinese international students' career challenges in both the US and China. More importantly, this study aims to understand Chinese students' strategies to overcome those challenges.

Conceptual Framework

This study adopted the concept of intellectual capital, which refers to the “transferable human, cultural, and/or social capital due to translocal or transnational activities and connections” (Li et al., 2021, p. 6). According to these authors, international students accumulate intellectual capital through pursuing an academic degree and engaging in professional work overseas, which is called intellectual migration. Intellectual migration is driven by the acquisition, upgrading and/or use of intellectual capital. Specifically, international students obtain knowledge in their major field, enhance their cultural awareness of the host country, and develop local social networks to advance their careers or pursue upward social mobility. After they complete their studies, they may stay, return, and engage in onward migration (i.e., going to a third country beyond home and host country). Such migration decisions are based on where the students can best utilize and/or continue to accumulate their intellectual capital transferable across national borders.

Research Method

This study seeks to address the following two questions: What challenges or restrictions do Chinese students experience or perceive in finding employment in the US and China? What strategies do Chinese students employ to seek their most desired career outcomes? In order to answer these questions, I conducted semi-structured interviews among 15 Chinese international students at a four-year public research university in the Southwestern US between June and September 2019. I invited the participants through a previous research project in which 47 Chinese students participated in focus groups discussing their career needs while they were enrolled in 2017. I intentionally selected the students who had graduated by the time of the interview. Among the 15 participants, there

were seven female and eight male students. Nine obtained a bachelor's degree and six graduated with a master's degree from the university. Eleven students still stayed in the US including three students who were pursuing a higher-level degree. Each one-hour interview focused on the participant's post-graduation career experiences, mobility decisions or plans, as well as the rationales behind those decisions and plans. Seven interviews took place remotely – either over the phone or WeChat voice call – because those participants had moved to other states in the US or returned to China. This study was approved by the Institutional Review Board. Informed consent was obtained at the beginning of each interview. Pseudonyms were used throughout this chapter to ensure that the participants are not identifiable.

All the interviews were conducted in Mandarin Chinese and audio recorded. Later, I transcribed the recordings in Chinese and translated the quotes used in this chapter to English. I adopted the descriptive coding approach to code the data if it was related to career challenges or strategies (Saldana, 2016). Specifically, I used phrases to describe what students had experienced, such as “unexpected competition”, “H-1B lottery”, “added a STEM major”, etc. Later, themes emerged from those initial codes.

Results

Career Challenges in the US

Aligning with the findings of the previous research (Han et al., 2015; Yu, 2016), this study found that work visa sponsorship was the biggest barrier that hindered Chinese students' career prospects in the US. Given their student visa status, international students have fewer job opportunities compared to their domestic counterparts. Interview participants either experienced or anticipated the difficulty of finding employment. One student said:

They [employers] would ask you whether you were a Permanent Resident or US citizen. If you were not, they would not consider you at all. This is very common. Fifty percent of my job applications was rejected for this reason... I understand that they favor local people. I'm used to this. (Daniel, master's degree)

The challenge of maintaining legal status in the US did not end when one secured employment. Shen was a master's graduate who was working at a small company. Although her H-1B visa was approved at the time of the interview, her experience of filing for the visa made her realize that

she had low bargaining power in negotiating salary at work due to her foreign status, and thus, questioned her original decision of staying in the US:

I spent almost two months on the application in order to maintain my status...I had to negotiate with my employer about my salary increase, which would affect whether my H-1B could be approved or not... I felt exhausted and depressed because of the application. I didn't even want to go to work during those days... Sometimes I just think about returning. As long as I work hard, I can find a job that I like in China, and at least I don't need to worry about my status all the time. (Shen, master's degree)

While Shen was still in the US, Elizabeth had already returned as she foresaw many uncertainties before she could obtain Permanent Residency in the US, which echoes Han et al.'s (2015)'s findings. These uncertainties included whether she could win the H-1B lottery, whether she could successfully change a job on H-1B, whether the employer would be willing to file Permanent Residency for her, and how long it would take to become a Permanent Resident.

Although most of the interview participants demonstrated their ability to find employment in the US despite the visa barrier, they pointed out that Chinese students' career prospects in the US were often hindered by the lack of professional networks. Many interview participants intentionally built their professional networks through all possible occasions such as student organizations, job fairs and internships, a key component of accumulating and utilizing intellectual capital. For example, both Jeremy and Daniel were recommended by their intern supervisors for their full-time positions. When recalling their successful experiences of finding employment, Jeremy and Daniel emphasized the importance of networking. However, networking requires one to be socially integrated, like Jeremy said: "I know many good [Chinese] students, but they are afraid of, or not interested in interacting with local people, then this [finding a job] is not going to happen."

Career Challenges in China

While students' foreign status created a concrete obstacle for them to seek employment in the US, achieving professional success in China was also not easy. It took Ganson over six months after returning to secure his first job as he did not anticipate the high level of competition from other returnees:

At first, I thought finding a job in China shouldn't be a problem. I spent years in the US and I can speak English well. I didn't realize that so many people had a similar background until I returned. Given the overall economy [in China] is not the best at this moment, the competition for many positions is quite intense. (Ganson, bachelor's degree)

While having to compete with other returnees, Ganson and other participants also felt disadvantaged compared to local graduates as they were less familiar with the professional culture in China. As the students expected the job responsibilities to be openly and clearly communicated like in the US, they found that understanding the assumptions at workplaces in China was difficult. For example, it took Da some time to grasp the underlying meaning of her supervisor's words when she was interning in China:

The communications among employees are complicated... For example, my supervisor assigned me a task, and told me that it wasn't due in a hurry... I followed the instruction, but I realized that "not in a hurry" actually meant that I should have finished it within two days. I spent quite some time to understand all these as an intern. (Da, bachelor's degree)

Another challenge of working in China, which was indicated by almost all the participants, was lacking work-life balance. The large technology companies have normalized the overworking practice named 996, meaning working from 9am to 9pm for six days a week. Salem was asked whether he could accept 996 at his interview with such a company:

At that time, I had no idea about what 996 was. I asked them what a typical day was like. They told me that working hours were from 9am to 9pm. I thought I heard it wrong. Then they added, 9pm is probably early, usually people work until 11pm. I asked about the weekends, they said you need to work most Saturdays and sometimes Sundays too... The salary they offered was appealing, but I really didn't like the work culture. (Salem, bachelor's degree)

Salem eventually joined a company in the US, and many other participants did the same due to the fear of compromising their physical and mental health because of 996.

Post-Graduation Career Strategies

Although career was not the sole consideration when Chinese students made their post-graduation plans, most of the participants emphasized their priority of considering career opportunities. Shen said: “Staying in the US is not my ultimate goal. Eventually, I want to find a place where I can best utilize my knowledge regardless of which country I go to.” In order to pursue the best career outcomes, the interview participants strategically leveraged their intellectual capital and battled against the aforementioned challenges. Specifically, their strategies included (a) pursuing a higher-level US degree, (b) maximizing or minimizing their stay in the US, and (c) seeking transnational careers.

Maximizing or minimizing their stay in the US. This seemingly contradictory strategy demonstrated that intellectual capital could be better utilized only at certain levels. Mary had one-year working experience upon finishing her bachelor’s degree, then joined a master’s program as she had no luck with the H-1B lottery. She did not intend to return to China until she could work for another several more years in the US:

If I could work for three more years [after receiving my master’s degree], I would be less afraid of returning to China. By then, I should be able to work as a mid-level manager in China, and I would have less stress. (Mary, bachelor’s degree)

Mary’s perceived “stress” was not just about pressure to maintain financial well-being. A higher-level position could also mean having more power to protect her own leisure time. This example showed that some years of working in the US would lead to a good use of one’s intellectual capital.

With the same belief that one year of work experience in the US would be inadequate to grant students any noticeable advantages in the Chinese job market, Elizabeth, Sky and Ganson returned to China without fully utilizing their 12-month OPT. Elizabeth even had a full-time job at a world-renowned company before returning. Given that her major field did not qualify for a STEM OPT extension and she might be forced to leave after her one-year OPT ended, she chose to return early, start at an entry-level job and hope to be promoted sooner. If they delayed their return for a year or two, they would still have to start at an entry-level job in China once they returned. In that case, they could not fully utilize their intellectual capital accumulated in the US.

Pursuing a higher-level US degree. With the decreasing positional value of a US degree as a result of a growing population of returnees,

pursuing a higher-level degree from an American university became more of a strategy to extend their stay in the US rather than enhancing their competitiveness in the Chinese job market as Ma's (2020) study found. Chinese students not only perceived a graduate degree as a credential that signaled their qualifications to their future employers, but also an opportunity to continue to accumulate their intellectual capital in the US during and after their studies until it reaches a higher level.

Those students who obtained a bachelor's degree and were working in the US on OPT, such as Jeremy and Salem, indicated that applying for a master's program could be a backup plan to extend their stay in the US if they could not successfully obtain a H-1B visa. They could use Curriculum Practical Training (CPT) – a program that allows international students to work off-campus in a major-related job during their studies after the first academic year – to work, and then use the master's level OPT. In addition, pursuing a master's degree provided an opportunity to switch to a STEM major and become qualified for a potential three-year OPT. Kevin chose to major in Business Data Analytics over Finance because the latter was not classified as a STEM major. Overall, a higher-level degree led to additional years of working experience in the US, which would allow them to grow to be professional returnees who have a higher level of intellectual capital than student returnees (Li et al., 2021).

Seeking transnational careers. Chinese students who studied abroad tended to seek transnational careers. Working in a transnational setting allowed students to best utilize their intellectual capital developed overseas. For example, Sky returned to China and joined a local company that had close business ties with the US:

I like the fact that this job requires a lot of traveling, especially to the US. I don't want to waste my overseas educational experience, and I hope I can apply what I have learned through interacting with Americans. I would lose my advantage if I worked in a similar position as local graduates who study the same major. (Sky, bachelor's degree)

Similarly, Shen was also preparing for the Certified Public Accountant test in China while working in the US as an accountant:

I have booked my flight back to China for the CPA test in October... I want to work for both China and the US, which could be either working in China for the US or working in the US for China. For this reason, I need qualifications from both China and the US to find a job like this. (Shen, master's degree)

Consistent with Ma's (2020) findings, Chinese students sought to join multinational companies. They perceived these companies as ideal places to take advantage of their international backgrounds. More importantly, these companies provided a channel for international students to move more freely across different countries with less visa restrictions. With business footprints in various nations, such companies have established a structure that supports an easier conversion of their intellectual capital into positional value. Jeremy joined an American company that has international branches. He believed that the possibility of transferring to China or a third country branch would provide a safety net if he was not able to obtain the H-1B visa, or wanted to leave the US for personal reasons. In addition, a multinational company also paved the way for returnees to remigrate to the US. Ganson joined a US company based in China. He indicated: "The headquarter of the company that I'm working for is in San Francisco. If I perform well, there will be potential opportunities to be back to the US." Similarly, Elizabeth who was working at an American company in China envisioned her future to have multiple possibilities even beyond staying in China and remigrating to the US:

In the future, I want to join the US headquarter. If one intends to do so, it's possible... After I complete my current project, I'll speak with my supervisor and ask for advice. Or maybe I'll go to Beijing and work for their major customers, or I'll work directly in their manufacturing line, which could be in Xiamen, Shanghai, or Malaysia. I can also speak Japanese and we have major customers in Japan. Tokyo would be a great option too. (Elizabeth, master's degree)

Conclusions

This study found that Chinese international students faced career challenges in both the US and China. Maintaining legal status was the major barrier that impeded their professional success in the US. Restrictions associated with the OPT program and the H-1B visa not only affected international students' employability, but also made them feel powerless and uncertain in pursuing their career plans. In addition, while the participants in this study managed to develop valuable professional networks, they identified networking as a prevalent challenge for Chinese students to start their careers in the US. As for returning to China, students experienced or perceived fierce competition from their peer returnees. Meanwhile, they felt less familiar with the professional culture than local graduates, which showcased that the

intellectual capital they accumulated in the US might not fully transfer to China. Lastly, the overworking culture (i.e., 996) prevalently practiced by large technology companies added more challenges for them to adapt to working life in China.

To overcome these challenges, Chinese students strategically chose between maximizing their stay in the US and returning to China soon after graduation in order to convert their intellectual capital into the best career outcomes. Only one or two years of working experience in the US would not allow them to obtain noticeable advantages in China compared to fresh graduates. Those who intended to stay longer in the US perceived pursuing a high-level degree to extend their stay in the US so that they could continue to accumulate intellectual capital until it reached a high level. Lastly, Chinese students sought transnational careers, especially through multinational companies, which facilitated a channel for their employees to accumulate and utilize intellectual capital with fewer visa restrictions.

Implications

Since the Trump Administration, the anti-immigrant anti-China political rhetoric and relevant immigration policies have added barriers for international students seeking employment in the US. Anecdotal stories showed that COVID-19 pandemic has also exacerbated the challenges of finding employment in the US (e.g., Shen, 2020). The US is at risk losing a valuable talent source. In responding to the crisis of attracting and retaining international students, immigration policy makers and higher education administrators should provide opportunities for them to not only succeed academically but also thrive in their careers after graduation. It is unfortunate that higher education has focused more on international student enrollment, which leads to direct tuition revenue, but overlooked its responsibility in supporting international students to explore the long-term career and life path. Importantly, higher education institutions should be dedicated to provide life-cycle support, which begins from the first point of contact and continues after graduation (Glass et al., 2021).

Specifically, higher education institutions should ensure that international students can maximize their accumulation of intellectual capital through their academic training in the US, and also fully convert it to positional value in the global job market. To achieve this, universities should prepare all faculty and staff members to understand the visa restrictions that international students face, so that international students can be better advised on major choice and career development. Universities should offer on-campus volunteer and work opportunities and ease CPT applications for international students to obtain work

experience and develop professional networks during their studies. Also, universities should familiarize employers with international students' post-graduation visa status and actively connect them with international students. In addition, university career advising should be extended from the host country alone to a more transnational setting, in which advisors can strategically direct Chinese students to suitable transnational career paths. Lastly, higher education institutions should not only function as a surveilling body to ensure international students' immigration compliance, but also active advocators that push for more welcoming immigration policies which ease the pathway from student visa to Permanent Resident.

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