

**The Other Voices of International Higher Education: An Empirical Study of Students’
Perceptions of British University Education in China**

Mona Moufahim (corresponding author)

Durham Business School; Queen's Campus, Ebsworth Building, University Boulevard,
Thornaby, Stockton on Tees, TS17 6BH

Tel: +44 (0) 191 3349428; Email: Mona.Moufahim@durham.ac.uk

Ming Lim

University of Leicester School of Management; Ken Edwards Building University Road
Leicester LE1 7RH

Tel: +44 (0) 116 252 3999; Email: m.lim@le.ac.uk

Authors' Bio

Mona Moufahim is a lecturer in marketing at Durham University Business School. Her current research interests include religion, politics, consumption, marketing and identity. Her broad research interests include critical marketing, political marketing, Islamic marketing, organization studies. Her research has been published in *Consumption, Markets & Culture*, the *Journal of Marketing Management* and *Marketing Theory*.

Ming Lim is based at the University of Leicester School of Management, focusing on critical marketing, consumer marketing, international marketing and global brand management. Her research has been published in the *Journal of Marketing Management*, *Business Ethics: A European Review*, the *Journal of Industrial Marketing and Management* and most recently in the Routledge Handbook on Digital Consumption (2013) and the Wiley-Blackwell Encyclopedia of Consumption and Consumer Studies (2014).

Abstract

This article reports on research conducted with Chinese undergraduate and postgraduate students studying on a transnational higher education (TNE) programme operated by a prestigious British university in mainland China. We focus on the students' personal experiences and understandings of cultural, linguistic and pedagogical issues associated with immersion in a British education while in China. Our findings show that students generally regarded British education as culturally and pedagogically superior to ... - in sharp contrast with their previous experiences in, and/or perceptions of, Chinese tertiary institutions. Further, our findings point to a remarkably specific association students made between teaching in the Western mode and *being* Western (or Anglo-Saxon). Locating our findings within a globally hegemonic discourse on neo-colonial perspectives in higher education, we discuss how students' views were a striking instance of the 'colonisation of the mind' and discuss implications of this phenomenon for the internationalization of TNE.....

Keywords: transnational higher education, internationalisation, Chinese students, British universities, overseas campus, postcolonialism

Introduction

Internationalisation efforts by UK, US, Australian and European universities have intensified greatly over the last two decades (Altbach and Knight, 2007; Huang, 2007), playing a key role in shaping and transforming the higher education (HE) sector in many Asian countries (Altbach and Knight, 2007; Knight, 2006). From an economic, political and social point of view, HE has been key to raising individual standards of living and overall quality of life (Yang and Hsiao, 2006). Unsurprisingly, therefore, the demand for (higher) education in emerging markets is continuing to rise.

This demand is, arguably, greatest in China, currently the largest source of overseas students in the world (Wang, 2012). There has been a 27% increase in the number of Chinese students studying in Britain between 2010 and 2011, with over 90,000 of them engaged in various forms of education at present (British Council, 2011). Research has shown that Chinese students appear to be drawn to UK university education due to the ‘global reputation’ of its universities (Bennet and Kane, 2009; Bodycott, 2009) and the ‘UK university brand’ (Bennett and Ali-Choudury, 2009; Gray, et al., 2003; Binsardi and Ekwulugo, 2003), yet many issues remain to be investigated with regards to how this group adapts to, manages or otherwise perceive their experiences of getting a UK degree (Burnett and Gardner, 2006). Most studies in the field focus almost exclusively on Chinese students’ choices and experiences in English-speaking countries, e.g. the UK, Australia, New Zealand and the U.S. (Altbach, 2004; Sin, 2009; McMahon, 2011; Simpson et al., 2010; Fernandes, 2007; Burnett and Gardner, 2006; Edwards and Ran, 2006; Turner, 2006; Ridley, 2004) but there has been relatively little research to date on the educational and socio-cultural experiences of Chinese students who study at British university campuses located *outside* the

UK (with the notable exception of Leung and Waters, 2013). There is, however, a growing literature on international students' experiences of cultures other than their own, including Chinese students' experience of British universities (see [Spencer-Oatey and Xiong, 2006](#); [Gu and Schweisfurth, 2010](#); [Schweisfurth and Gu, 2009](#); [Gu, Schweisfurth and Day, 2010](#)).

The purpose of this research, therefore, is to explore the experiences of Chinese students studying business and management at a British university with a campus in mainland China. Our focus is on the central question, 'How do Chinese students studying at this university describe their experiences in terms of teaching quality, overall value of a British education?

While making no claims to generalisability we were particularly interested in the students' personal experiences and understandings of cultural, linguistic and pedagogical issues and challenges and how these influence their choice to study at a British university. These questions have topical and practical importance because, as described by dominant literatures in the field, the phenomenon of UK universities establishing campuses abroad is growing – with local students often offered the same programmes, teaching materials and methods as those provided to students studying in Britain.

This paper begins by examining the present cultural and political context for higher education in a globalised environment, positioning our argument within broad understandings of current debates around the neocolonial legacy of international HE. Next, we review students' TNE experiences and the neo-colonial context(s) of such experiences. We then discuss our data access and collection methods. We draw upon thematic analysis to frame students' views of the educational experience they are receiving. We conclude with a discussion of the

implications of the students' cultural understandings and preferences in relation to their British higher education experience.

Higher Education, Globalisation and the Neoliberal Agenda

Several factors combine to make China one of the leading markets in the world for international HE: its development from a system for elites to one consumed by ordinary citizens (Wu and Zheng, 2008). This trend has been driven, in turn, by rapid economic growth, a rising middle class as well as limited domestic capacity for students seeking quality higher education. The government's radical move from a state-funded to a free-market model of education in the 1990s has also fuelled the emergence of a commercial higher education sector (Wu and Zheng, 2008; Huang, 2007; Mok, 2000). According to Wu and Zheng (2008), another significant factor in the growth of student demand for foreign degrees is the fact that the Chinese do not regard China's higher education system as successful or of high-quality. China's Confucian heritage, with its emphasis on cultivation through higher education, further leads parents to seek out quality foreign education providers for their children (Wu and Zheng, 2008). Research has shown that Chinese students embark upon transnational higher education programmes in the hope of securing a better job upon graduation, thus enjoying a brighter future (Bodycott, 2009).

Taken together, these developments open up a space for foreign HE institutions to move into China. Currently, UK institutions deliver their programmes using a number of different models of cross-border collaborative partnerships, acquisitions and mergers with local HE providers, teaching centres for distance learning programmes, and branch campuses (Fang, 2011; Altbach and Knight, 2007).

Specifically, the globalization of higher education has been tied to the neoliberal agenda in terms that positions students as rational consumers (see Bolsmann and Miller, 2008). In these terms, students *qua* consumers seek to enhance individual prestige, economic value and a personal ‘brand’ that is desirable to employers in global markets. These ‘student-consumers’ are strongly motivated to acquire internationally competitive and globally-recognised credentials. Studying abroad in developed markets like the UK and the US is considered by many such students as the key to greater employability, better job prospects at home and a passport to ‘global’ job mobility. For example, there is a high status attached to overseas qualifications by employers in Malaysia (Rizvi, 2010) and Hong Kong’s and India’s overseas educated form an exclusive club, both symbolically and literally (see Brooks and Waters, 2009). The question arises as to whether, and how, a kind of imperialistic thinking lingers in how neo-liberal interests are promoted around the world since policymakers in the UK, U.S. and Australia have, for decades, constructed higher education not only as an investment in their people but also, increasingly, as a tool for boosting national economies in an age of globalised and commoditised capital (Rizvi and Lingard, 2009).

Issues in Students’ Experiences of Transnational Education (TNE)

Transnational education (TNE) encompasses a wide range of models. These models include, but are not limited to, students who travel overseas for an education, students who stay in their home countries for a qualification conferred by an overseas provider (sometimes in partnership with a local partner) as well as students who take online courses through distance learning (these may combine face-to-face with online provision). It is unsurprising, therefore,

that students' experiences of TNE are both diverse and complex (Pyvis and Chapman, 2004), depending on a number of factors: pedagogical, curricular, mode of delivery, perceived quality of faculty, if and how expectations are managed and so on.

It has been noted that pedagogical and curricular issues may reflect norms of individualism and modes of thought that do not chime with those of intercultural cohorts of students or even students who come from very similar cultural and economic backgrounds (Biggs, 1997; see Leask, 2001). Questions of the balance of power thus arise since lecturers from the teaching institution may or may not accept or facilitate curriculum that takes these factors into account (Dunne, 2009; Trahar and Hyland, 2011). Teaching and pedagogical adjustments made by institutions to accommodate such changes naturally cost time and money (Clifford, 2011). On the part of students, culture shock can occur when such adjustments are not made (Pyvis and Chapman, 2005).

The issue of acculturation is complicated by the fact that a British/U.S./Australian education is still perceived by many TNE students outside those contexts as conferring personal benefits, professional legitimacy and status as an 'international person' (Chapman and Pyvis, 2006, p. 236). In their acute and insightful paper on the limitations of TNE experiences of Hong Kong students studying for a British degree, Waters and Leung (2013) clearly mapped out the paradoxes inherent in such experiences. Given the long history of the British presence in Hong Kong, strong elements of the neo-colonial mindset persist. Even though the students were 'cynical about the lack of British or international element' in their education, they were still keen to take photographs with their British 'fly-in' lecturers on occasions like graduations (Waters and Leung, 2013). In the TNE programmes they undertook (Waters and Leung, 2013: 50), many of them exhibited outward compliance with the notion that they were getting a true 'British' education (with all the linguistic, social and

institutional capital that that was supposed to confer upon them) even though few were fooled into believing the whole show, so to speak.

Underpinning many of these debates around an ‘international’ curriculum and the development of international students as ‘global citizens’ is a notion – more often implicit rather than explicitly acknowledged – that Western norms of pedagogy and assessment are superior to non-Western ones. As noted by Rizvi (2006, p. 257), ‘education is ... a site where legacies of colonialism and the contemporary processes of globalisation intersect’. The TNE aspirations of students who desire the brand conferred by a British or U.S. or Australian education continue to drive the growth of TNE worldwide. Their individual and collective *experiences* of such education, on the other hand, are complex and involves debates over the West/non-West dualism in TNE; such debates and discourses influence how researchers construct notions of value, power, identity and globality. The colonial legacy and its civilizational mission of the backward ‘other’ in a number of contexts renders a closer examination of its symbolic, cultural and ideological dimensions.

The colonial legacy and neocolonialism in British TNE: implications for transnational education

Taking the argument further, the political economy at the heart of this globalised search for “Western” higher education has been observed as continuing to support ‘imperial’ interests (Bolsmann and Miller, 2008, 85). The theme of neo-colonialism has been researched in the context of education, more specifically how education itself operates as a form of neo-colonialism (see for example Bray, 1993; Thomas, 1993; Watson, 1994; Mulenga and Nyerere, 2001; Milligan, 2004; Wickens and Sandlin, 2007).

The provision of higher education to students from, and in, emerging markets can be understood as an extension of this colonial legacy (Bolsmann and Miller, 2008).

Over the last several years, the Middle East, Africa, and the Asia-Pacific have become big business for education exporters like the US, the UK, Germany and Australia (Altbach and Knight, 2007). The voice(s) of individuals and sub-groups which may have been marginalised, silenced or else simply not considered are also relevant in the context of British education. Given its long engagement with China, the Far East, India, Africa and the Caribbean, it would be a gross historical oversight not to acknowledge the deep and broad psychic, emotional and cultural ties which peoples of these countries continue to have with Britain and her exports, tangible or otherwise. While China has not, strictly speaking, experienced colonialism, its history in the 19th century allows us to conceptualize it as a “semi-colonial country” (Huang, 2003: 225). The high stakes involved are apparent in the role education has played in sustaining the power of the coloniser, shaping the mindset of the colonised into accepting the ‘superiority’ of the colonisers’ values, truth claims and knowledge production, and in contributing nowadays to the reproduction of a system of ideological and economic domination. Within the context of colonialism, the purpose of education was to provide the colonial administration with staff holding basic skills, dispositions and attitudes (Tikly, 2004). It inculcated a western way of thinking based on western forms of knowledge, the so-called ‘colonisation of the mind’ (Ngugi Wa Thiong’o, 1981; Nandy, 1997; in Tikly, 2004) or ‘servitude of the mind’ (Altbach, 1977).

The colonial mindset as adopted, and internalised by the ‘colonised’ will continue, as bluntly stated by Nguyen et al. (2009: 110), to situate them in the shadow of the West: “because their vision of educational development and standards of knowledge production are based on

western epistemological schema and theories that are deeply rooted in, and informed by, colonial thought” (Wallerstein, 1996; in Nguyen et al., 2009: 110).

From a broader ontological perspective, postcolonial theorists draw attention to the persistence of colonialism on an ideological level (Echtner and Prasad, 2003). While political colonialism is no longer in existence in most of the world, postcolonial scholars nevertheless recognize the power imbalances that still exist on economic and ideological levels between the West and the Rest (Caton and Almeida Santos, 2009: 193). Echtner and Prasad (2003) argue that the continuing Western control of most forms of discourse serves to define and maintain First World/Third World boundaries and power structures. Within this power structure, the former assumes a privileged, authoritative and central ideological position, marginalizing the latter to the peripheries (Mishra and Hodge 1991; Prasad 1997, p. 291; both in Echtner and Prasad 2003: 668).

Method

Data collection and analysis

In this section, we present findings from a study conducted over three weeks in April 2010 at the Chinese campus of a British university. Currently, the Business School there represents the biggest department on this campus. It offers undergraduate and postgraduate programmes in finance, accounting and management, international business, organisational behavior and marketing these are modeled upon the programmes offered in the UK, and students receive the degree awarded by the UK university. The university recruits students from all over China; however, the majority of students come from the affluent Zhejiang province where the campus is located.

This university adopts a 'branch campus' model for its overseas activities. Its staff live in China full-time. Most of them are either British or European Union nationals recruited directly to take up lecturing and research positions. A few lecturers are Chinese nationals educated in Western institutions. All administrative staff is Chinese. It should be noted that neither one of the authors was employed by the institution concerned at the time of the research. Data collected and presented here is part of a larger programme of fieldwork on British TNE in China (in particular on the so-called 'overseas branch campus' model). As former international students ourselves, and having taught abroad for British universities, we have experienced and resisted forms of neocolonialism that echo research we cite in the previous section.

After securing permission from the university's ethical committee, students from the Business School were approached to participate on this study on a voluntary basis. A total of 20 undergraduate and postgraduate students responded. Most participants gave the impression of welcoming the opportunity to give their views and were able to provide frank insights into their personal and cultural situation. Interviews were conducted in English. The participants were invited to respond to questions such as: why did you decide to study for a British degree in China? Why did you choose to study at this university? (and for postgraduate students): how would you compare your current studies with your previous experience at a Chinese university? The interview recording, lasting between 25 and 65 minutes, were anonymised and transcribed. After an initial analysis of the data, online questionnaires were used to supplement the interviews (as authors had returned to the UK). Twenty open-ended questionnaires were emailed to postgraduate students, randomly selected from the list of students registered in the Business School Masters programmes. Five students

responded. Given the depth of the interviews, and having reached theoretical saturation, we felt that this sample was sufficient for the purpose of our research.

We used thematic analysis to study our data. Thematic analysis is a method with which to code, sort and analyse data systematically with the aim of identifying common patterns, salient themes and sub-themes (e.g. Boyatzis, 1998; Attride-Stirling, 2001; Braun and Clarke, 2006). In some instances data were allocated multiple category codes to indicate the interrelationships between themes. Initially, data were coded separately by each of the authors and then findings were compared to ensure inter-coder agreement and validity (Braun and Clarke, 2006). The framing of each statement and its relationship to the whole text was an important determinant of how the data were finally coded. The findings reported below present a discussion of the identified themes and a selection of extracts, chosen for illustrative purposes. All quotes are verbatim and unedited.

Findings

Perceived benefits of a British education

Several interviewees were confident that they had to have English not only as a linguistic competency but as a passport to a successful career (and life, overall). One of them summed up the general sentiments expressed when she said:

“I want to practise my English. You know, English is very important and I want to be a successful business woman... so I must learn English very well so that I can communicate with other businessmen, and I also want to learn some major business knowledge... yes... and know western sort is different from Chinese sort, so

International Business major knowledge is different, and is very good". (B., Female, UG).

"Maybe some other universities they have English major but I think they are not practicing English in their daily life. So I think English is our advantage. (C., Female, UG)

The importance of English as a passport to success and good employment prospects was also stressed by most students. There was a strong awareness shown of the forces of globalisation and what would be required to be a 'winner' at the game. A British education in China is also considered a passport for going abroad (for further study, or employment):

"I think although it is expensive, the tuition, it is worth it for those who want to go abroad some day or for further study. I think [this school] provide us a better Western education system here. I think if they chose their undergraduate here for four years, I think it is very good for them to get prepared for going abroad. It is worth it" (F., Female, PG).

The importance of status is not to be overlooked in the choice of foreign education. This is well illustrated by the following comment:

"At the beginning I really lost confident about myself because I think studying in a Western university was difficult and a waste of money. I felt very tired. However, after two years, I am really proud now because my friends really admire my life and my study" (Y., Female, PG.).

The hardship endured and the expensive tuition were considered worth it, given the admiration of her friends. Our postgraduate respondents also expressed their prime concerns

with employability and the importance of getting the right kind of education. For the next respondents, for instance, achieving a distinctive profile is particularly important in order to get noticed by employers in the severely competitive Chinese employment market.

“Before I came here I expect myself to through the one year’s learning I can broaden my horizon and I can find a way to be independent learning, not only to learn here, but also after my masters graduation...now I so hope to get an international certificate quite different from the Chinese one”. (G., Female, PG)

“I think in [the school] what I most hear is not the textbook knowledge only but a kind of way to do critical jobs, and I’m the first one in there because you know facing a different new environment I can fit into that setting more quickly than the one who only stayed in Chinese universities.” (F., Female, PG)

“It is good for students to practice and actually use English in their daily life. [...] Future career opportunities are important for us to choose Western universities”(Y., Female, PG).

Mastering the English language ranks high among students’ concerns, along with a ‘better’ grasp of Western businesses practices, science and technologies, learnt ‘at the source’. Students also mentioned creativity, critical and analytical skills, presentation and communication skills as important benefits of a British higher education experience. The development of these skills was linked by our respondents to the pedagogical approach adopted by the teachers at the Business School.

The ‘British education experience’ in China

Methods and learning experience

Students found the British education radically ‘different’ to Chinese education because, they claim, it is ‘creative’ and ‘analytical’ (useful skills in a complex world):

“I found the education in China is much more common, and people, teachers, taught in the same way and there is lack of creativity. I think [the school] has given me a chance to improve my skills and analytical thinking. I find this is one of the most important things for me just solve the other problems. Not only from the books but also from the practice. I think it taught me a lot about the teamwork which is not most usually taught in other Chinese universities. Maybe Chinese universities, we can learn much more about theoretical knowledge but I think university is what that left to you when you go to the society. You can solve not only the problems you confront from the book but also the problems that you never met before and that requires analytical thinking”. (A., female, UG, emphasis added)

A similar description of the skills developed at the British university is given here:

“The second, I think, is open thought. I think western thought is more open and more flexible than Chinese thought and... you know... in some companies if they recruit some people, they give them training again, but I think with maybe these companies are foreign companies and... but I think if we students go there we don’t need the training and I think this saves them cost, so I think it’s at our advantage”. (B., Female UG, emphasis added)

There appears to be a sense among students of the perceived superiority of Western knowledge and pedagogy over the Chinese system:

“First I want to know how the UK education is because the UK education have a very good reputation. I want to know why it is good. And it’s really good. It is better than Chinese.” (J., Male, PG)

“Compared to Chinese education, Western universities are more flexible and interesting. Chinese universities are more rigid and boring. Students there are more like to work rather than study. But in western universities I feel I want to study, I can really learn something I like and it makes me happy. Also the tutors in Western universities are more like friends not traditional teachers who set rules. If there is a chance, I really would like to continue to study in next few years.”(Y., Female, PG)

On the teaching front, it should be noted that students remained relatively vague as to what made the ‘western style’ of teaching, or the ‘UK education better than the Chinese. They mentioned critical thinking, the relaxed and informal style of teaching, the opportunities for teamworking, and the emphasis on participation and student-teacher interaction. Interestingly, perception of the superiority of Western education tended to be based on the style and format of teaching, rather than on content (what some of them called “*western thought*”). Three characteristics of this ‘style’ were singled out as desirable attributes: teamwork, participation and critical thinking skills:

“I think maybe team working is very important. We always have groups and we study and talking together, and we share ideas and thoughts, so I think team working is very important to a company. [...] Other, I think maybe western thoughts, we study more

western thoughts and the companies [...] and in Chinese universities they maybe learn more about China, but we learn more about western countries and other countries, so we can compare China and other countries so I think it's another advantage". (B., Female, UG; emphasis added)

"We have a class called analytical thinking. I think it teaches us how to think critically and analytically, and I think Chinese students may lack the ability: we always just listen to teachers and we don't ... I think in this university, in classes we can interrupt the teachers, and we can ask them questions freely. So it may be all about the critical thinking. We can disagree with him and we can argue with him". (D., Female, UG).

The generally positive attributes of British education and the challenging and yet more desirable learning experience were put in sharp contrast with their previous experiences in the Chinese education system. Our respondents appeared to be critical of the Chinese education system overall.

"Judging from the most of research papers in business management done by Chinese 'researchers', it is not good. Because most of the content are just rephrasing the theories and do not provide any evidence that they have done researches, nor did most of them provide any suggested solutions to certain issues" (J., Female, PG).

"I would be more critical about current university education standards and situation in China. Education is industrialised, a majority of universities put profit at the first place rather than teaching and research; tutors and professors focus on earning money from outside the universities (like being consultants) thus often be absent in

campus and classes; students need not to pay a lot of attention on study and in many cases, if you build a good 'relationship' with tutors, you would not get disappointing marks (even if you rarely attend classes and hardly study). The government is making efforts to change such situation, but due to the large population size and many inherent problems, it seems hard to change current situation in short term” (W., Male, PG).

“The learning is only for passing the exam and reciting the answers” (Z., Male, PG)

This postgraduate student provides a more balanced view and points to the stratified nature of Chinese HE:

“Overall I think I am positive and confident about Chinese universities now but only the high-quality ones. For example, The University of Zhejiang, China, is a famous one in China now and it has high education standards including high level of teaching, high level of students' abilities and good reputation in China. As the government now more and more focuses on improving Chinese university education standards, and parents are now more and more willing to spend money on educating their children, there will be a bright future for Chinese education improvement. However, there are exceptions. Personally, I think relatively lower-level of universities in China have many drawbacks. Firstly, university teachers and students are less confident and less responsible for students' study. And government pays less attention to their development. Thirdly, the general atmosphere of these universities are worse than high-level universities. Therefore, they are criticized as lower education standards”.

(R., Female, PG)

This respondent expresses pride for the top universities in China (e.g. University of Zhejiang), and hope for China's future, with her mention of the government effort to improve quality of education. She does however paint a bleak portrait of the current situation in 'lower-level' universities. On a more personal level, several of our respondents shared unhappy memories of their time with Chinese teachers:

"I think normally because when we were in high school or even earlier still, teachers don't encourage us to speak out. They want us to sit back and listen and be quiet, no noise, something like that, and if you have a question: ok, you can come to the office and ask the teachers... so we get used to be silenced". (G., Female PG; emphasis added)

By saying that she had been 'silenced,' the student was giving voice to her perception that Chinese education was a much harsher, less enjoyable experience than the British one. Pedagogy has indeed a critical role to play in allowing the expression of the student voice, but also silencing alternatives. Disciplining ("*sit back and listen and be quiet*") played an important part in the class interactions, and in the relationship with the teacher that she experienced in the past. The conditions for expressing oneself, or here asking a question (and potentially disrupting the narrative presented by the tutor), are also regulated: students are allowed to ask question: "*and if you have a question ok*", but they have to do so in the teacher' office: "*you can come to the office*". The student is aware of the unsatisfying situation, as she blames her lack of ability to interact in her current postgraduate studies on the Chinese teachers: "*teachers don't encourage us to speak out*". Teachers from local Chinese school are compared to the ones in the Western institution, and held accountable for the 'lacking'. This silencing has a consequence in her ability to cope with the requirement to participate and to express her opinion in class. Another student echoed such view:

“I think that maybe because we are in that kind of education for so many years, so our ideas are not so wide than the international students”. (F., Female, PG).

There is a pejorative, distancing characterisation of Chinese education as *“that kind of education”*. She claims that *“our ideas”* (amalgamating all the Chinese students in this pronoun) are not adequate, denoting a clear preference for a supposedly adequate British education which inculcates *“wide”* ideas’. These antithetical perceptions of the two educational systems our respondents have experienced takes a more critical turn when students, unprompted by the interviewers, tackled more specifically their assessment of teaching staff at the Business School.

The ‘non-Chinese’ staff as critical to the overall UK educational experience

It emerged, during the final coding process, that the interviewees were convinced that ‘Western’ lecturers and professors were unqualifiedly superior to local professionals. It was noted that the students struggled with their own prejudices but succumbed ultimately to them. At the time of the interviews, rumours were spreading among the student body that there would be fewer foreign, ‘Western’ teachers in the school in the coming months and years and that they would be replaced by Chinese nationals. These rumours provoked a negative reaction from students:

“Yes, some students also make a prediction that in the near future maybe [the school] will recruit more and more Chinese teachers... even if they may study abroad and come back to teach [...] the teaching staff will be changed because our thinking mind is quite different from the foreign teachers. (I., Female, PG)

At one point, one interviewee even expressed fear at the thought that Chinese lecturers may appear to do the teaching:

“We just predict because, especially for the international business, we found that a lot of Chinese teachers, and some with very poor English oral, maybe they were very good at resources or something, but we don’t really like because they didn’t explain us a lot... and they maybe have very excellent PPT... but you know it’s quite different from what foreign teachers did. They explain a lot. So, we are afraid, maybe in the future, it’s actually a speaking English Chinese school, so we hope it will not come.”

(F., Female, PG; emphasis added)

When asked whether they would have chosen to study at this Western institution if the majority of the teachers were Chinese, the answer was unequivocal:

“No. Absolutely not. I would just go abroad, even the tuition is higher. What we come here, I think, most of us just want to experience the western style education ...not have a half... I hope there will be more western style teachers and that more Chinese students to experience how the western education style is, and whether they want to go abroad for further studies. I think for those students to go abroad it means the distinct [school] give them a good start for western education, and they appreciate, and then they choose to go abroad. Otherwise I don’t think that they will choose to go abroad”. (F., Female, PG)

The ethnic prejudice against Chinese lecturers was stark:

“Yes, we expected those [Western lecturers] very enthusiastically, and really western education style. We don’t like somehow maybe graduates here in China and go

abroad for PhD something and go back here teaching, that we don't accept". (G., Female, PG; emphasis added)

For some even Western-trained Chinese lecturers would not be 'acceptable' to these students unless they exhibited 'Western' traits:

"I think it's the western style I appreciate no matter where the tutor comes from. Even though [AB] is from Taiwan, his style is very funny and interesting and attracts my attention so he's kind of like... [western]" (I., Female, PG)

This reference to nationality appeared to cause discomfort to at least one of the participants in this group. She avoided directly mentioning the issue; she appeared to stop herself from saying it, and, after a few seconds' hesitation, moved on quickly to talk about the teacher's language skills:

"But I think it's not because of... but if he or she is really good, it's just or has a really good oral English, I think it's ok." (I., Female, PG)

The focus on the 'really good oral English' skills (one might assume that she refers to skills at a native speaker level) and not on the background of the teacher and his/her competencies in teaching specialist subjects is an interesting finding.

Discussion

We began our research with a sense of curiosity as to how Chinese students perceive and value their experiences of British university education. Broadly speaking our findings fall into two strands: 1) the perceived benefits attached to their British education, and 2) a more

specific discussion of their experience of the Business School in China. The perceived benefits, from the students' point of view, included greater employability, higher status and prestige, integration into the global knowledge economy, and the development of desirable skills such as critical and analytical thinking, teamworking and intercultural awareness. These findings confirm current research into international students' motivations for pursuing a foreign university qualification (see among others Rizvi, 2010; Bodycott, 2009; Brooks and Waters, 2009; Mazzarol and Soutar, 2001).

Our respondents described the experience of British education as challenging, but also enjoyable (especially in view of the rewards). At the same time, they expressed strong sentiments about the Chinese model of teaching and learning. Although a few praised Chinese universities, their praise tended to be reserved for 'top-tier' universities, such as Zhejiang University. The criticisms of Chinese HE voiced by our respondents echo those expressed in similar studies (see Bodycott, 2009).

The views expressed by our respondents about the cultural superiority of a 'British education' needs to be placed in the context of research that shows that learning, as much as teaching, is culturally constructed by students. The teaching and learning models used by British faculty in this instance were felt by the students to be 'innovative' and much more sophisticated and creative than the 'Chinese model.' It is striking that the students echo widely-held views that pervade international discourses about a 'Western' model of education: Nguyen et al. (2009) note in this context, for example, that 'Western' methods of teaching are perceived by policy-makers and funding agencies like the 'World Bank' and 'Asian Development Bank' to be 'fashionable and modern' (Nguyen et al., 2009, p. 112). This kind of 'education-economic growth discourse' (ibid., p. 112) is, by now, so well-entrenched that Asian students can – as

our findings show - reject their own cultural pedagogy as backward and unfit for the purpose of delivering the passport to global citizenship, to good jobs and critical thinking skills.

The strong emphasis the students place on getting a 'British education' despite their geographical and cultural distance from the UK is significant. Relatedly, three key insights have been generated as a result of our fieldwork. Firstly, the students clearly perceive the Western (British) education system to be superior to the Chinese system. The cultural and intellectual hierarchy set up thus points to the hegemonic appeal of Western knowledge and culture (see De Vita and Case, 2003). Secondly, the students felt that access to, and mastery of, Western knowledge would pave the way for 'a good life', defined in terms of career prospects, global mobility and the respect and admiration of their peers. Thirdly, the most striking finding was the insistence among some of our respondents that a high-quality higher education experience could only be delivered by a British/Western member of staff, a number of them went as far as to state that they would not stay at the university if the staff consisted mostly of Chinese lecturers: "*We don't like somehow maybe graduates here in China and go abroad for PhD something and go back here teaching, that we don't accept*". Even a foreign-educated Chinese teacher would not be 'acceptable'.

Interestingly, a member of the teaching staff of this business school told us, unprompted, that

"[...] on the staffing side it's very rich in terms of ethnic cultural heritage but it's not perceived by the students, often, as a good thing. Their expectations are that it's a British university, it should be British people speaking the Queen's English but that's not really.... I don't know where they get that from because it's not like that in the UK either".

When asked to elaborate, the interviewee added:

“Yeah, yeah. I mean, a lot of us [faculty] get this now in personal tutorials which is strangely interesting. It’s almost like some kind of weird form of racism going on where they’re not comfortable being taught by Chinese people, it’s quite interesting why that happens”.

As discussed earlier in this paper, the colonial legacy lingers on in the context of the internationalization of British HE (Bolsmann and Miller, 2008). Even though, as mentioned previously, China has not been colonized by Britain, our findings show that parallels can be drawn between the sentiments of our respondents and the postcolonial experiences of colonised peoples. These sentiments are what David and Okazaki (2006, 2) call the “colonial mentality (CM)”, a “psychological construct” that helps account for the cultural beliefs, values and assumptions held by a people in relation to the colonial power (whether past or present).

The theme of colonialism has been researched in the context of education, more specifically how education itself operates as a form of neo-colonialism (see for example Bray, 1993; Thomas, 1993; Watson, 1994; Mulenga, 2001; Milligan, 2004; Wickens and Sandlin, 2007). Here, postcolonial theory, in the broadest sense, provides a critical supplement to our analysis. It draws attention to the power structures which create a boundary between the West and the East through a series of hierarchical binary oppositions, where the former was represented as forward and advancing, with the latter thus being systematically constituted as backward and stagnant (or decaying) (in Echtner and Prasad, 2003). These representations express an ideology which claims the superiority of the Western world. Such ideology served

as justification for the exploration, exploitation, colonisation, and “civilization” of the East (Echtner and Prasad, 2003).

As noted earlier, researchers have noted that China’s experience of international HE has long involved the importation of Western models of academic learning (Huang, 2003). Our findings show that students’ still, in this day and age, assume that Western models are more advanced, more open, more flexible, more creative – better, in other words.

Conclusion

What emerged from the interviews and questionnaires was a significant theme: an almost uniformly positive view of the British educational model, accompanied by direct criticisms of the Chinese model of education and a strongly negative view of Chinese lecturers. While a neocolonial perspective on our key findings in this paper has, hopefully, proved illuminating, we recognise that a number of fruitful avenues for future research have emerged from our study.

A key issue identified from students’ comments point to a gap between their expectations of British education and what they experience. In other words, Chinese students still seem to equate ‘British’ with ‘Anglo-Saxon British’. The students did not seem aware of the multicultural diversity of British society today and indeed, the diverse and cosmopolitan make-up of teaching staff in British universities. It is interesting to note in this context that while the diversity of the student body on British campuses is often commented upon (often

positively rather than negatively), the same cannot be said of the diversity of academic and teaching staff .

Another question to be explored relates to the rhetoric of a global education and the reality of multiple local contexts where such ‘international’ curriculum is actually delivered. Marketing literature is rife with research addressing the discrepancy between consumer expectation of a product or a service and its actual consumption (see among many others Oliver, 1980; Bearden and Teel, 1983; Spreng et al. 1996). Such discrepancy is an important source of dissatisfaction. Policy makers and University managers should engage in effective perception and image management on what the educational ‘Brand UK’ stands for.

While institutions may extend their brand overseas, move staff and implement changes to their information and management structures in order to adapt to ‘local’ conditions, we have made the observation, from our own experience as former international students, that the internationalisation of curricula in TNE remains rare. As educators working for universities committed to the ‘internationalisation agenda’, we note that the internationalisation of the content of the course materials is, more often than not, rather thin on addressing theories, issues, and case studies outside of the UK, US, and Europe. Recent research reveals that very few programmes include “non-Western cultural issues and topics within courses” (Bennet and Kane, 2009: 365) and that “opportunities for truly collaborative and culturally appropriate course design are muted” (Smith, 2010: 803) (for exceptions see among others Trahar and Hyland (2011)). The question as to how students respond (or not) to such exclusions and omissions merits further research. On a deeper level, there is the question of whether students are aware, in the first place, that the education they are purchasing is

derived almost entirely from the sociocultural context of the awarding institution rather than to the countries' in which they are delivered.

A future study on the implications of these views for internationalisation programmes by British/US universities would be useful. Further research could also be done on how new models fusing both Asian as well as Western cultural perspectives would be beneficial in TNE programmes, lending weight to recent calls within the field for greater sensitivity to local contexts in which these programmes are delivered (Smith, 2010). The findings of our paper point to the importance of further research in this area.

Our respondents' strong preference for their current British educational experience – in contrast to their previous experience in Chinese institutions – is striking. Rightly or wrongly, the Anglo-American model of education is perceived to be much more academically relevant and commercially rewarding than its Chinese counterpart. The so-called 'rise of China' has apparently done nothing to dent the Chinese students' desire for Western education. These perceptions might well change as China's global economic, political and cultural influence continues to grow. Future research could, therefore, probe the contours of this trajectory as China continues to develop her own universities, research capacity, intellectual openness and innovation in a diverse number of economic sectors. Specifically, it would be interesting to discover how, and whether, China's so-called 'soft power' increases as the country absorbs its own intellectual class and as many more Chinese students return home to take up jobs and start businesses.

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