

## Family, Food, Nation, and Economy: Attachment to China and the Return (or Not) of Chinese Graduate Students in the Sciences and Engineering

Our project began with the anecdotal observation of a group member, Sasha, who noticed that more Chinese graduate students appear to be returning to China after they graduate than before. Thus, to get at the meanings that Chinese graduate students mobilize when making plans for after they graduate, we interviewed eight male students in the sciences and engineering. From these interviews we found that these students consider family, food, nation, and economy when making their decision. In particular, our interviews point to a greater openness towards returning to China as a result of its improved economy and living conditions. However, I argue that rather than interpret this as a situation where more students are returning to China simply because its economy has improved, it is instead the case that now that China's economy is similar to that of the United States, these graduate students are able to consider other factors when making plans for after they graduate.

### Research Background

#### China's "Reverse Brain Drain"

In support of our group member Sasha's anecdotal observation that more Chinese graduate students appear to be returning to China after they graduate, various news and journal articles have reported an increase in the number of Chinese students that are returning to China after studying abroad. As one news article plainly puts it, "A growing number of Chinese are returning to work at home after studying abroad thanks to the country's booming economic growth" (Y. Wang 2008). Another article reports that, according to the Ministry of Education, 44,000 Chinese students returned from study abroad in 2007, up 4.79 percent from 2006 (H. Wang 2008). Unfortunately, the same article reports that 144,000 Chinese went to study abroad in 2007, up 7.94 percent from 2006, which makes it difficult to discern the relationship between

the increased number of students returning to China and the increased number of Chinese students who are studying abroad.

In addition to reports on the number of Chinese students who have returned to China from study abroad, surveys have also shown a desire to return. For example, a 2000 article reports, "The latest official survey shows that 80 percent of Chinese students now studying abroad will return to their homeland to start a career" (80 Percent 2000). A 2004 article reports that 34.5 percent of the Chinese students studying abroad that they surveyed "wish to return as soon as they complete their study," while 54.1 percent "plan to return after gaining some work experience" (Most Chinese 2004).

Academic literature, treating this as an issue of "brain drain," reports similar information. Saxenian (2005:36), writing about both China and India, says, "This paper argues that the same individuals who left their home countries for better lifestyles abroad are now reversing the brain drain, transforming it into 'brain circulation' as they return home to establish business relationships or to start new companies while maintaining their social and professional ties to the United States." Zweig, Chung, and Vanhonacker (2006:468) say, "Technology is driving the reverse migration currently under way in China," where those who return to China with technological advancements after studying abroad are rewarded with better housing and faster promotions, among other enticements (Zweig, Chung, and Vanhonacker 2006:454).

### Neoliberal Chinese Subjects

Aside from the issue of Chinese students returning to China after studying abroad, recent literature has also detailed the effect that neoliberal capitalism has had on Chinese students. Hanser (2002:191-192) explains that, while "work was subject to extensive government control" in China from the 1950s to the 1970s, market reforms led to increased competition among

workers in the 1980s and 1990s. Hanser (2002:190) further explains that these market reforms led to the emergence of Chinese enterprising selves, that, following Rose, are predicated on autonomy, personal fulfillment, and choice. Hoffman (2006:552) adds further nuance to the Chinese enterprising self by arguing for the existence of patriotic professionals. These subjects, she argues, do embrace neoliberalism as enterprising selves, but also echo "Maoist demands for service to the nation and duty to one's fellow citizen[s]" (Hoffman 2006:560).

### Mode of Inquiry

To gain some insight into the meanings that Chinese graduate students mobilize when making plans for after they graduate, we decided to interview male graduate students in the sciences and engineering. We decided to interview graduate students in the sciences and engineering because we felt that these students would bare the most visible impact of neoliberal capitalism, given the close relationship that the sciences and engineering have with global capital. We also decided to focus on men after relatively stark gender differences with respect to "patriotic professionalism" appeared in our initial interviews of both male and female graduate students. In short, it appeared that the men we interviewed embraced "patriotic professionalism" to a greater degree than did the women, so we decided to focus on men to reduce incongruencies we would be unable to account for in such a limited set of data.

In all, we interviewed twelve students, but I only draw on eight of those interviews here. Two of the twelve interviews we conducted were of women, whom I excluded for reasons described above. The other two interviews that I exclude were of economics students, and I exclude them because they do not fit into our focus on the sciences and engineering. As I understand it, these interviews were the simple result of miscommunication among the members of my group and our research participants. The men we interviewed are identified using

pseudonyms, though Sarah's second interview and Sasha's first interview do not name their research participants, so I have named them "Jie" and "Yong" respectively.

In our interview questions (appendix A) we attempted to cover a broad range of issues. First, we asked our research participants about their plans for after graduation, to see what country they planned to reside in. Next, to discern the presence of neoliberal values, we asked our research participants whether they valued a high salary or personal fulfillment more, and whether they planned to start a business. We then asked our research participants if they thought it would be better for China if they were to return, to get a sense of their "patriotic professionalism." We also asked about the importance of "mundane" issues such as food, movies, television, books, and magazines, to discern the influence of cultural affinity; whether they thought they would be better off than their parents and whether they had any siblings, to get at their socioeconomic background; whether they planned to support their parents, to discern the influence of filial piety; and whether they had considered marriage, to get at any remaining factors related to their decision to return to China that we could think of.

### Research Results

Out of the eight male graduate students we interviewed, who were all in their first or second year here at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, all but one planned to return to China, though one other student seemed unsure about his plans. However, those who did plan to return to China did not necessarily plan to do so immediately. Before returning to China Dan, Matt, and Steve said they planned to work in the United States for three to five, five to ten, and one to two years, respectively. It is possible that the others who did not specify working in the United States for a set period of time before returning to China may have had similar plans.

One of the primary reasons these students gave for returning to China, which four research participants referred to as a factor in their plans, was family. For example, Dan said, "I think it is best to live with my family in the future." For many of these students, however, it was not simply that they wanted to be near their parents, but that they wanted to be near their parents so they could better care for them. Jie said he wanted to be close to his parents because they will need his support as they grow older. Similarly, when asked why he planned to return to China, Yong said, "The major reason is that I am the only child in my family, [and] when my parents get older I have a responsibility to take care of them." However, while Jun, the one student who did not plan to return to China, also planned to support his parents, he intended to bring his parents to the United States, so caring for one's parents does not necessarily require that one return to China.

Another important reason given for returning to China was culinary affinity. Jie said that China would be the best choice, because he is "familiar with the culture and especially the food." Dan said, "Life is not as good here as it is in China. The food here is terrible, so I am learning to cook." On the other hand, Jun, who did not plan to return, did not consider food to be important, saying, "Food I mainly cook by myself."

Yet another factor that these students considered was the contribution they would make to their nation, reflecting Hoffman's "patriotic professionals." When asked if he thought it would be better for China if he returned, Jie said, "Yeah, sure, I do." However, Jie asserted that he would have to develop himself as an individual before he would be able to contribute to China. Matt also considered the contribution he might make to China, but explicitly pointed out that this was second to his personal plans, saying, "I think the first thing for me is my plan, my own schedule, my own career path." James considered China too, but, like the others, it was not his

first consideration: "First, I will return for my parents, second, for China, and third for my girlfriend and I." Lastly, while Jun did not plan to return to China, he did plan to make yearly trips to China to teach courses for undergrad students. Steve also argued that it was possible for others to stay in the United States and still make a contribution to China. Thus, similar to family, a desire to contribute back to China did not necessitate a return to China.

Finally, China's economy also played a role in the plans the students made for after they graduate. Unfortunately, we did not make it a standard part of our instrument to ask all of the research participants whether they would still have returned to China even if its economy were not doing so well. So, for example, we only know that Chao said he would have returned to China for his family even if its economy was not getting better. We also only know that Steve said it would have been pointless to return to China if its economy were not so good, because then he would not be able to make a contribution to his country. However, our research participants' answers to our question about salary and interest were revealing. Four of our research participants said that they would rather find a job they were interested in with a moderate salary rather than take a job that they were not interested in with a high salary. This means that even moderate improvements in the salaries for jobs in China could have an incredible effect on the number of students who return from study abroad. The stance of these men, who privilege personal fulfillment above salary, also runs parallel to research on contemporary Chinese subjectivities more generally, which Rofel (2007:119) partially captures in one woman's quote who said, "[My mother's generation] would sacrifice for others before doing something for themselves. Our generation is more selfish." Of course, while this is complicated by the fact that we interviewed men and Rofel was speaking to women, it does

present an entry point for considering the incredibly complex way in which "selfishness" can operate, especially since many of the men we spoke to also plan to care for their parents.

### Discussion

In our research on the meanings that are mobilized by male Chinese grad students in the sciences and engineering when making plans for the future we have found that family, food, nation, and economy are all important points that they consider. However, knowing this, we are still presented with a relatively complex pattern of decisions. The vast majority of our research participants considered family to be an important component of their return to China, yet Jun planned to bring his parents to the United States. Our research participants also cited food as one of the motivations behind their return to China, yet Jun said he made his own food. Our research participants also drew attention to the contribution they planned to make to China as a component of their return to China, yet Jun planned to contribute to China while residing in the United States. Finally, our research participants faintly pointed to the importance of China's improved economy in their decision to return to China, yet this did not appear to be a concern for Jun. The only difference, then, between Jun and the others that might lead to them desiring to return to China while he did not appears to be a simple affinity for China, which they seemed to share though he did not.

I do argue, however, that the return of these students is predicated on improvements in China's economy (except, perhaps, for Chao). This is not to say, though, that students are returning to China in greater numbers simply because the economy is better. Instead, it is likely that improvements and expected growth in China's economy allow these students to reconsider values that they have long held and considered important, but were not their first priority, as shown by the emphasis they placed on family and food.

One other factor to consider is the university itself, though this is a difficult feat to perform. On the one hand, the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign exists as one nodal point in a vast network of private and national investments in the sciences and engineering, and global flows of capital. This makes it difficult to say, exactly, how the impact of this university differs from others. On the other hand, though, the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign was ranked 5th among graduate engineering programs in the 2008 Best Graduate Schools issue of U.S. News and World (Rankings 2008). Thus, it is possible that the mere ability of these students to be able to choose whether or not they return to China is somehow predicated on the options that are made available to them as a result of attending this university, similar to the "yompies," "young, outwardly mobile professionals," of Hong Kong, who consider themselves to be "global citizens" and rely on networks with other Asians that were "formed through the global networks of higher education," among other sites of interaction (Ong 2007:254).

Along similar lines, I am unable to identify whether or not the individuals we interviewed belong to a particular subgroup at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, which may have lent an additional bias to the data we collected. This is particularly relevant in light of recent tensions surrounding Tibet in China that appear to have caused tensions to emerge among Chinese students studying in the United States as well. Thus, future research on Chinese graduate students at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign could take up this issue, as well as conducting research on female graduate students in the sciences and engineering as well as Chinese graduate students in other disciplines.

### Conclusion

On the basis of the set of meanings that male graduate students in the sciences and engineering appear to mobilize, my preliminary conclusion is that there are at least two clusters

of these students, and possibly Chinese grad students in general -- those who have an attachment to China and those who do not. Now that the economic conditions between the United States and China are more similar, which are the only two choices our participants seemed to consider, male Chinese grad students in the sciences and engineering are open to consider more personal reasons for returning to China, such as family and food. This shows how considerations of the economy, when making future plans, relate to more "mundane pleasures." More than that, however, it means that these male Chinese grad students in the sciences and engineering can finally go home.

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## Appendix A: Interview Questions

1. How long have you been a student here at UIUC?
2. What are you studying?
3. How long have you been in the United States?
4. What do you plan to do after you graduate?
5. What city would you like to work in after you graduate?
6. Have you considered returning to China after you graduate?
7. Which kind of job is more important to you, one with a high salary or one that you enjoy?
8. Do you have any plans to start a business after you graduate?
9. Do you think it would be better for China if you return? Why? Why not? Does this influence your plans for after you graduate? How so?
10. How important are the kinds of food, movies, television, books, and magazines you will be able to access to your plans for after you graduate?
11. Do you think you will be better off than your parents were?
12. Do you plan to support your parents? Does this influence where you would like to work after you graduate? How important is it to live near your parents?
13. Do you have any siblings?
14. Have you considered whether you would like to get married? Does this influence your plans for after you graduate?