Chinese Educational Migration and Student-Teacher Mobilities
Palgrave Studies on Chinese Education in a Global Perspective

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Chinese Educational Migration and Student-Teacher Mobilities

Experiencing Otherness

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Introduction

Fred Dervin

‘China Angst’: Spirit of the Time?

In his recent book Who’s Afraid of the Big Bad Dragon? subtitled Why China Has the Best (and Worst) Education System in the World, Yong Zhao (2014) seems to share the current ‘China Angst’ or Changst described by Chu (2013), or the fear of the West and other parts of the world of losing influence to ‘mysterious’ China and being overtaken by her. By choosing such a title to deal with Chinese education, the author appears to follow a current trend in the ‘West’. As such, many volumes were recently published with the following titles, also revealing a ‘fear’ of China: China Shakes The World: The Rise of a Hungry Nation (Kynge, 2009); When China Rules The World: The End of the Western World and the Birth of a New Global Order (Jacques, 2012); Tiger Head, Snake Tails: China Today, How It Got There, and Where It Is Heading (Fenby, 2013). Politically, this is also felt in the way, for example, decision-makers talk about the Middle Kingdom. For example, at the 2014 Northern Future Forum organized in Finland, where prime ministers, business leaders, entrepreneurs and policy makers from 9 northern European countries ‘focus(ed) on how to foster equality, wellbeing and competitiveness under the current economic challenges’ (event website). British Prime Minister David Cameron ventured a questionable comparison between a new ‘imagined’ community that he had created (‘northern Europeans’), Russia and China:

Finally for me I think we are very rational northern Europeans...we come together and we talk about our problems, some of the difficulties that we have...I think we should also celebrate our successes and I think that one of the successes that we should celebrate is the
fact that I profoundly believe that societies like ours that are open, democratic and liberal and tolerant and disputatious and argumentative, we are more creative and more inventive than closed societies whether in China or in Russia or elsewhere.

This new kind of ethnocentrism (or ‘regiocentrism’) reflects some of the stereotypes about China that date back from at least the first Christian missionaries’ expeditions to the country (Griffiths, 2013, p. 5): China represents another (strange) world, a lesser world than ‘ours’ (Billetier, 2000, p. 9). Implicitly Cameron’s discourse could signal Chu’s Changst and divided Europe’s fear of losing its hegemony.

**China has awakened: is international education ready?**

The following quote about China is often attributed to Napoleon Bonaparte (1769–1821): ‘Let China sleep, for when she awakes, she will shake the world.’ China has now awakened; is she then shaking the world, and especially the world of education, the context of this volume? Although the influence of China is far from that of an earthquake yet, there are signs that tremors are already felt. First, the most important international benchmarks for education, the so-called PISA tests, have placed China on the world map for education. Shanghai took part in the 2012 tests and obtained the best results. Of course Shanghai is not China, but Beijing, Jiangsu and Guangdong (China’s most populated province) will also take part in the 2015 PISA studies. Second, China has started – like many other countries – to export her education. The Department for Education in England is currently recruiting mathematics teachers from Shanghai to give master classes in centres of excellence or ‘maths hubs’. In higher education, China is building a campus in Malaysia – the first branch of a Chinese university abroad. Xiamen University Malaysian campus will open in 2015. All the courses will be delivered in English.

Of course, when one thinks of China and education, one cannot but think of the hundreds of thousands of Chinese students and thousands of Chinese teachers and academic staff who populate university campuses around the world. Today’s figures are amazing. According to the Center for China & Globalization (2013), Chinese overseas students account for 14% of all international students in the world. More than 100,000 Chinese have studied abroad annually since 2002, with an increase at about 20% each year. In total, between 1978 and 2011, 2.25 million students were sent abroad. In 2012, 399,600 Chinese students went
to study abroad, which represents an increase of 17.65% from 2011 (Dervin, 2014). Needless to say, the omnipresence of these students on international campuses has an impact on students, staff, the economy, fields of study and research, personal and professional links within and outside universities, future relations with China, and so forth.

**Chinese students and staff abroad: a renewed form of methodological nationalism?**

‘I applaud China for sending their children abroad to continue their education.’ (Comment on the Genius Recruiter website, 2012)

Publishing a book about Chinese students and staff abroad might earn the editor of this volume the reputation of being a ‘methodological nationalist’. Current research on mobility and migration calls for a more transnational (see: post-national) approach. The editor and authors of this volume agree with Adam (2012, p. 1) that:

The nation state is no black box and its borders are certainly not impenetrable. Even if one accepts the nation state as a framework for the writing of history, one has to acknowledge as Ian Tyrell reminds his readers in his book *Transnational Nations*, that nations are made transnational. Nation states did not emerge in a vacuum but were the result of mutual exchanges and contacts across geographic lines that only later, with the introduction of passports, limiting definitions of citizenship, and the fortification of countries geographic borders, turned into fortified political borders.

By choosing ‘Chinese’ as a common denominator for the individuals who are under review in this volume, we agree that we remain within the ‘national straightjacket’ that Adam describes. Yet we believe that the characteristics, experiences, positions and contexts of mobile Chinese students and staff are so many and varied that they reflect willy-nilly the transnationality of the Chinese nation. China is an extremely diverse country of 1.3 billion inhabitants, comprising very different social, ethnic and linguistic groups. Students from Yining (northwest of China in the Mongolian Uplands), Qiqihar (in the north-eastern part of the country) or Nanning (southern China) may have very little in common with each other, even though they share a passport. But one does not even need to change regions; in Beijing for example, one can easily meet diverse people in a different district or even on a different street.