

Does Western knowledge flow into Chinese universities? A case study of Chinese returned academics and academic knowledge flows

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Abstract

From the outset of China's Reform and Opening up period in 1978 and until 2015, 2.2 million Chinese students returned to the country upon completion of their qualification abroad. Among these returnees are a large number of overseas-educated academics who have been enticed back to Chinese academia by the government and universities in order to facilitate China's competition in globalised higher education. Therefore, an investigation of the contributions of this cohort to the Chinese academic community is considered both timely and worthwhile. This paper draws on interview data collected as part of a doctoral research study. In particular, it examines the experience of one Chinese returned academic's engagement with knowledge flows. Detailed analysis of the interview accounts suggests that, on the one hand, the participant recognises the fundamental position of certain disciplinary knowledge. On the other hand, he opposes "borrowism", advocates critical appropriation of Western knowledge, and emphasises the need to re-contextualise exotic ideas and to incorporate these within Chinese knowledge. The analysis also highlights the significance of personal involvement in society to better understand and document local knowledge.

Keywords: academic mobility, returned academics, knowledge flows, borrowism, local knowledge

Flows of academics and academic knowledge

Appadurai (1996) highlights that in the era of globalisation, we live in "a world of flows", one which features the intensification of movements of capital, human resources and ideas. In the case of higher education, globalisation prompts continuous flows of international students and academics. Many previous research papers and government statistics¹ have documented the enormous number of students from less developed countries that enrol in the higher education

¹ See also <http://www.iie.org/Research-and-Publications/Open-Doors/Data>, <https://www.hesa.ac.uk/stats>, <https://internationaleducation.gov.au/research/Research-Snapshots/Documents/Enrolments%20by%20Nationality%202013.pdf>

sector in developed countries. However, in recent years, with remarkable economic development as well as the implementation of beneficial policies by the government of some developing countries, the number of students who have returned to their home country upon the completion of their qualification abroad has also dramatically soared.

Previously known as the largest international student export country, China is currently welcoming a greater number of students returning to their home country after overseas study. The deputy director of the Chinese Education Ministry's Overseas Students' Support Centre suggested that the strong Chinese economy and an appealing domestic job market are drawing back approximately 70% to 80% of students from abroad in recent years. A government report shows that in 2015, a record 409,100 Chinese students returned from overseas, bringing the total number of returnees since China's Reform and Opening Up (1978–2015) to 2.2 million².

Despite the intensive return of students and academics, the inferior position of Chinese universities is still commonly acknowledged. A recent empirical study interviewed some academics and revealed their recognition of a wide gap between China's best universities and world-class universities in advanced Western countries (Chen, 2015). To alleviate this challenge, the Chinese government has implemented policies to entice highly-educated returnees to homeland academia. The returned academics are therefore committed to bring back disciplinary knowledge, skills and advanced methods, in an attempt to upgrade China's academic level to an international standard.

The significant impacts made by returned scholars on China's academic development have been noted in previous studies, especially those concerning international collaboration and knowledge transformation (Choi and Lu, 2013; Jonkers, 2010; Welch and Hao, 2014). Drawing on these findings, this study aims at a more specific investigation into the engagement of returned academics with such knowledge transformation in a way that makes use of their knowledge of the world and demonstrates their ability to bridge the gap between China and the world (Meyer et al., 2001). Some detailed statements may be considered here; for instance, how returned academics perceive knowledge flows in the context of globalisation of higher education, and how they choose to disseminate and produce knowledge upon return. Before this study proceeds to explore these topics, it is useful to elaborate on the concepts of knowledge and knowledge flows.

In this study, knowledge refers to the academic-related information that the returned academics have acquired through education and experiences as well as academics' professional interpretation of such information. This concept can be both "materially manifest in the form of books and journals" and "culturally embedded in the manner of its expression" (Qi, 2014: 14). The concept of "knowledge flow" in this paper therefore indicates the movement of such knowledge, especially the flow manually achieved by returned academics in order to realise the transformation and reappearance of "certain concepts, theories and methods among distinct social and economic groups, geographic regions and cultural settings" (Qi, 2014; Kuhn, 2012; Moran and Keane, 2009).

Just as the review on academic mobility shows that the typical movement of academics is from the less developed countries to developed countries, the flow of knowledge seems to follow a reverse trajectory, where knowledge is introduced and perpetuated from the West to the East or other peripheral places. To explain this, McMahan (1992) underlines an inextricable relation between the flow of knowledge and political, economic, and cultural factors. She illustrates that due to the political and economic dominance of Western society, the academic community attached to it gains more legitimacy in dominating knowledge production and circulation. In a similar vein, Castells (1997: 412) also points out the cosmopolitan global elites' dominance of the "cultural world of flows".

2 <http://monitor.icef.com/2016/04/a-record-number-of-chinese-students-abroad-in-2015-but-growth-is-slowing/>

How do the developing academic communities survive the knowledge hegemony and meanwhile maintain local characteristics within the course of globalisation, known as an “intensification of consciousness of the world as a whole” (Robertson, 1992: 8)? Appadurai (1996: 4) discusses the relation between the global and local, suggesting “a space of contestation in which individuals and groups seek to annex the global into their own practices of the modern”. In other words, he argues that globalisation should be interpreted differently in different contexts, and therefore new kinds of localities could be produced. This notion has been applied by researchers to analyse the national and local engagements that characterise the internationalisation of Chinese higher education (Jokila, 2015; Schulte, 2012).

This study believes that the relationship between the global and the local should be regarded as a dialectic process in which the local is remade by the returned academics in interaction with the previous and ongoing global encounters (Schulte, 2012). Adhering to this belief, the current study examines the potentially more flexible trajectory of knowledge flows, which may no longer be confined to traveling from the West to the East only. Moreover, the role that these academics play in promoting such flows of knowledge and their attempts to maintain or generate local characteristics from imported knowledge will also be explored.

Research methods

The paper draws on data collected in a wider study of the Chinese academic returnees’ transnational and transcultural experiences as well as their perceptions of academic identity. Based on this research purpose, I have adopted a qualitative approach with semi-structured in-depth interviews, which entail a collection of rich and detailed information (Stake, 1994; Creswell, 2007). Nineteen early-career academics who acquired higher research degrees from English-speaking countries and then returned to work in a prestigious university in Beijing, China, were recruited as participants and individually interviewed. The choice of this research setting has been made not only because of geographic location—Beijing is the capital city and the political, economic, and cultural centre of China—but also because this university has an established status and influences China’s higher education.

The analysis to follow is derived from one participant’s interview account, which highlights a representative perception of the returned academics’ roles in knowledge flows. This participant, Young (a pseudonym), is currently working as an associate professor in the chosen university after obtaining his PhD degree in Economics and Politics three years ago from an American university. The interview embraced a range of topics regarding his educational experiences in both China and the United States, his perceptions of identity as a returned academic, and his teaching work that is expected to facilitate the globalisation and internationalisation of Chinese higher education.

A framework adapted from Bernstein’s approach is employed for analysing data. In this analytical framework there are two types of language of description representing respectively theoretical interpretations and empirical interpretations on the same issues (Bernstein, 2000). In this study, the theoretical perspectives encompass Appadurai’s ideas on globalisation and locality relationship, as well as the conceptualisation of identity construction and communication in the Information Age. These concepts and perspectives are considered to facilitate the analysis of interview data on the one hand, while on the other, they can be construed and modified according to the empirical evidence.

From a knowledge borrower to a critical thinker

The analysis first addresses the participant’s perceptions of the traditional or classic knowledge that is believed to have originated from the West. In the interview, Young is asked to account for his teaching practices and how he is influenced by his previous educational experiences both in China and in the US. He starts by recounting an overall view on Chinese university classrooms:

It has been a common practice in the Chinese academia to bring in and introduce Western theories and points of views, especially those originated from the United States. When a Chinese teacher teaches in a university classroom, he takes it for granted that he should start with a Western theory and then, maybe there is a chance for him to relate this theory to some of the Chinese problems.

His views accord with Appadurai's arguments regarding the hegemonic knowledge of the West. Arguing against the uneven positions of learning and knowing the world (Robertson, 2006), Appadurai (2000) suggests that "theory and method were seen as naturally metropolitan, modern and Western. The rest of the world was seen in the idiom of cases, events, examples, and test sites in relation to this stable location for the production or revision of theory" (pp. 4-5). In line with the statement, Young's explanation reveals a prevailing belief that higher education teachers, regardless of their origins, always regard Western theories as authentic, fundamental knowledge that they should use to initiate their teaching, and as useful resources to lead students into a new scholarly area.

However, Young, taking a more tolerant attitude towards this distinctive standing, tries to justify such common practice by using one example derived from his own subject area:

There must be a reason or two for a theory or a paradigm that is regarded as the mainstream of the academic discourse. And once it becomes the mainstream or norm of one discipline, its substantial inertia will make it stand still for a long time and not easy to be altered. Let me take Keynesianism as an example. This classic doctrine has had great influences in Economics studies for decades before neo-classicism or neo-Keynesianism came into being.

He attributes the established positions of academic knowledge and certain theories to the division of labour in academia and to other historic reasons. Also, he recognises the difficulties in changing such a situation. Meanwhile, consistent with the argument of Santos and Rodriguez-Gavarito (2005) that "the result of what counts as relevant knowledge" deserves more consideration, Young draws our attention to rethink introspection "identifying, validating or hierarchising ... western-based scientific knowledge" and valuing "other knowledges derived from practices, rationalities or cultural universes" (Santos and Rodriguez-Gavarito, 2005: 12). He turns the focus from whether to teach "must-learn" knowledge with potential Western orientation towards the actual practices that teachers adopt to disseminate the knowledge. Continuing his description of the situation in which teachers start their classes by presenting Western knowledge and introducing relevant Chinese issues now and then, he criticises (referring to some domestically educated teachers) the teachers' inactive role in drawing up a disseminating agenda:

However, in general, this teacher regards himself as an outsider of this academic discourse. What he employs in his class towards the knowledge is 'borrowism' which requires no critical thinking.

In this extract, "borrowism" is a nonce word used by the Chinese writer Lu Xun, which indicates that during the Republic of China era, people approached exotic knowledge with no selection or differentiation between "essence" and "scum". By using the term *borrowism*, Young points out a similar problem of university teachers: they employ limited critical thinking to the knowledge they disseminate in terms of whether it suits the Chinese local context. With Young's academic experiences of travelling between the cradle of well-established knowledge and the place where the knowledge is frequently adopted and strongly challenged, he recounts that

I'm more and more aware that we can't purely rely on Western concepts and its knowledge system without any criticism.

He constructs an identity of “critical thinker” in disseminating knowledge: to be a critical thinker, sensitivity to the Chinese context and practical issues is significant. Thus, his perception of being critical in interpreting and disseminating knowledge can be further extended to his appreciation and awareness of Chinese local issues.

To unpack how Young encourages exploring Chinese local knowledge, I first present Young’s comment on the widespread concerns of some academics studying Chinese issues:

It’s natural for academics in the Chinese context to take a Chinese local lens and propose research to solve domestic issues, no matter where they were educated, in the West or in China. I don’t think there’s a problem with this. The problems that are regarded important by Chinese academics may not mean the same to American ones, and vice versa. It’s not indicating the significance of the problem itself, instead these different views simply result from different stages of social development. America may have experienced what we are experiencing now and therefore their research focus has been altered to something else.

Because of its economic development, China is moving higher in the “international hierarchy”, which results in its negotiation and reconstruction of national identity. Acknowledging the ideas of Castells (2001), who suggested that China can “affirm itself as a nation and as a civilization rather than as an alternative social system” (p. 307), Young reports his increasing perceptions of viewing himself as a member of the nation and of his responsibility to solve national problems which aligns with this identification (Tajfel and Turner, 1986). As a result, the doubts about “Is studying Chinese issues too far from the mainstream?” or “Will anyone care about the study of Chinese local issues?” can be gradually dispelled, according to Young:

Having been witnessing the remarkable economic development in China, Western countries are becoming more interested in knowing about Chinese stories. They want to know how things are worked out in China.

Young’s following account provides a reference for his above-mentioned advocacy of being both critical and locally sensitive in disseminating knowledge. The constant development of Chinese society may have highlighted the inconsistencies, tensions, and even the clashes between the accepted, or Western, knowledge (and/or theories and paradigms) and the Chinese local demands and practices. Therefore, Young claims that he is motivated to undertake the re-contextualisation of Western knowledge and then incorporate indigenous interpretations and knowledge to explore Chinese issues and problems. His account corroborates well the paradigm of Appadurai (1996) concerning the reproduction of global with local characteristics, which has been formerly discussed in this study.

I always feel that the Chinese society is a very dynamic one. This characteristic is especially valuable to academics in disciplines of social sciences because the constant changes in the society provide us with inspirations, and therefore they provoke thinking to challenge and reconsider the existing theories.

In the final part of this paper the topic for discussion comes to how the incorporation of indigenous interpretations on knowledge can be achieved. With the potential for all communication to take place online in the Information Age as proposed by Castells (2001), the spread and dissemination of knowledge seems attainable via virtual methods; thus, the need for physical involvement is rapidly fading. However, in Young’s interview, he explains that the desire for real and personal immersion in the dynamically transforming society of China informed his decision to return to the country to pursue his academic career, a choice that challenges Castell’s assumption of the Information Age. Young perceives that:

I can observe closely the current changes of the society which stem from the Chinese tradition and its long history. In the age of Internet, though, I feel completely different between sitting in an American university to look for Chinese issues on my computer or mobile phone, and being personally immersed in the course of China's development.

According to Young, no matter how powerful virtual communication can become, in order to facilitate re-contextualising of Western knowledge and producing local knowledge, academics' involvement in, and experience of, real communities and cultures is still critical.

Concluding remarks

Similar to the multi-directions of academics' flows, knowledge flows achieved within the context of the academic community globalisation have also become more diverse. As suggested in the analysis of the interview account, while returning with Western knowledge, disseminating it to students, and applying it to their academic work, the returned academic also differentiates between *borrowism* and critical engagement in Western knowledge. Critical appropriation of Western knowledge, particularly Western theories and paradigms, refers to the re-contextualisation of ideas and the incorporation of these within Chinese knowledge to explore local issues and problems.

Admittedly, emerging knowledge with indigenous characteristics has limited power to shake or replace the dominant, or established, knowledge. However, the trend that is argued here is "the dominance of Western knowledge is much more likely to be challenged or even transformed and assimilated into local knowledge systems" (Qi, 2014: 31). Therefore, this paper concludes that, in order to develop and reinforce the diversification and localisation of knowledge, academics returning to developing countries should manage to instigate the emergence of knowledge power all over the globe. They also should advocate re-consideration and re-interpretation of existing knowledge by both the local and international academic communities.

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