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Chinese PhD in the Netherlands: an invisible scholar?

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21 maart 2018

Master student and research assistant Tung Tung Chan, originally from Malaysia, has conducted her research on the experience of Chinese PhDs in The Netherlands. Being the second largest group of international students and PhDs in the Netherlands, makes it an interesting research topic. Chan shares the findings of this study and contributes to the discussion PhDs in the Netherlands.

The Chinese government is actively pushing for a stronger knowledge economy. As part of this effort, Chinese academics are actively mobilized to spend their education or training abroad with financial support from the China Scholarship Council (CSC). CSC is a non-profit organisation embedded within the Chinese Ministry of Education, which provides scholarships for Chinese citizens to study abroad, and for foreigners to study in China. In 2017, CSC offered 32,500 study abroad funding places for Master and Doctoral education.

Before I delve into what Chinese academics are gaining from obtaining their doctoral education in the Netherlands, we must understand the Dutch PhD system to know what we are talking about. There are two PhD appointment types in the Netherlands: (1) internal PhD candidates known as 'assistant-in-training' (in Dutch: assistent-in-opleiding, AIO) who are employed by the university, and (2) external PhD candidates who are self-funded or receive scholarships through government, funding agencies or employers. CSC-funded PhDs are thus considered students and not employees of the university, as they do not receive salaries, benefits, and legal protection through collective labour agreements. For Dutch universities, external PhDs are an attractive source of knowledge labour as they are often in terms of wages, and they get a premium of 77.400 euros for every successful PhD completion from the Ministry of Education.

Since internal and external PhDs are different in circumstances, I am calling for equity-related policies to provide external PhDs with additional assistance and appropriate accommodations to make the playing field fairer. It is about time we inform ourselves about the realities and experiences of Chinese external doctoral candidates. Not only to help them to establish presence at the university and transition to a new academic environment, but also to improve the welcoming services of transnational academics in the Netherlands through the democratic principles of justice and equal opportunity.

Higher education institutions must be responsible for the cultivation of a mindset that supports growth and respects human differences through inclusive education. Inclusion means equal and equitable treatment for all people. At the heart of inclusive practices is pluralism and interconnectedness, which foster a diverse educational environment which yield many benefits such as different abilities, strengths, and perspectives. Thus, understanding the doctoral experiences of Chinese PhDs will be useful for the recruitment and full utilization of their intellectual and cultural competences for the Dutch knowledge economy.

I conducted a qualitative study on the doctoral journey of Chinese doctoral candidates funded by the Chinese Scholarship Council (CSC) at several Dutch universities. I interviewed 10 CSC PhD candidates, of which 6 females and 4 males in Mandarin to explore their personal and academic life in different disciplines. It is important to mention that PhD candidates in this study are either in/at the beginning stages or the end of their doctoral journey. Those who experienced difficulties or delay

in their PhD trajectory have overcome them at the time of our interview, while others have yet to experience them. The life stories of each participant were unique but have a few parallels.

The Netherlands is not my first choice

For 8 out of the 10 interviewees, the Netherlands was not their first country of choice when applying for their PhD. English-speaking countries such as US, UK, Australia, and Canada were often named as top countries for PhD destination. Even though the Netherlands may not be their first choice, all Chinese PhD candidates mentioned academic reputation of the institute or the supervisor as the primary reason of why they are here.

When being asked how did one end up here then? The answers were surprising: “There are no PhD application cost”; “I do not have to do a GRE or GMAT test”; “I was waiting for other offers, but the Dutch (Professor) was always the quickest in replying to my emails”; “The process of applying was simple and convenient, you only need to email the professor at the university to ask for PhD supervision, while other US and UK universities have a much longer and complicated admission process”.

Language barriers

All participants hail from various regions in China, have their local dialect as mother tongue and Mandarin as their second language. Furthermore 9 out of 10 interviewees have never been abroad prior coming to the Netherlands for their PhD. You can imagine that for these PhD candidates the English language becomes a challenge to master, let alone Dutch. All the Chinese PhDs I have met wished they would have spent more of their time learning Dutch, getting to know the culture, and making Dutch friends. But since research is their main priority, improving one’s English speaking and writing skills is thus considered more important.

All candidates admitted taking about 12 to 18 months to fully integrate to the Dutch academic system and get adjusted to living here. Many disclosed that other Chinese PhDs who couldn’t adapt within the period end up terminating their PhD or move to another university in another country to pursue their PhD. The stories of candidates who terminated their PhD trajectory are not known as there are no further information nor studies on them.

Lack sense of belonging

Since CSC-funded PhDs are externals at all Dutch universities, all interviewees only have research and no teaching duty. Everyone reported to have access to university facilities and resources, even though some did not have a designated work desk.

It can be difficult to establish your presence if you do not have a place in the institution, as one interviewee puts it: “I feel like a burden when I start asking questions, like I’m bothering someone”. Although Dutch universities are not deliberately excluding external PhDs from participation, the lack of institutional recognition of Chinese PhD candidates is detrimental to developing a sense of belonging. As a PhD candidate typically spend four years working at the university, the institution must officially welcome and recognise them as a contributing member of the university.

An interviewee complained: “I didn’t even know what I didn’t know. There were one or two leaflets about what I need to do to get registered in the city hall or get a bank account, but there was nothing about the university. How many faculties are there? How many departments? What does the university stand for? What do they expect from me? What are the resources available to me? Who can I contact for help besides my supervisor?” I believe this quote reflects the confusion experienced by most, if not all external PhDs in the Netherlands.

Politeness as weakness

“In China, we address our academic supervisor as our boss.” There is a huge hierarchical difference between the Chinese and the Dutch culture, and a PhD candidate explains the difficulty of bridging the gap of power distance: “I simply cannot address my Dutch supervisor by his first name, even though he asked me several times.”

Another interviewee was sensitive to this radical cultural transition and reflected: “During my first year of PhD here, I always apologise in advance for any mistake when sending my supervisor my writing. Apologising in advance is something we (Chinese) consider as polite. But here, it is interpreted as a weakness, that you do not have the confidence nor competences to be an academic.”

Teachers are someone whom you look up to and follow – is a sentiment deeply embedded in the Chinese culture and shapes the way Chinese PhDs interact with their supervisors. As one interviewee explained: “I don’t understand why my supervisor likes to answer a question with another question. When I asked should I do A or B, he asked me what I think. When I explained I would like to hear your expert opinion and that I will do whatever he decides, he asked me if I have considered option C, D, or E.”

It is thus important for both parties to clarify expectations in PhD supervision. For example, the supervisor might expect independent decision-making from the PhD candidate, and the candidate should be informed that any decision may be accepted if it is well justified. While this may seem obvious, the lack of explicit articulation has caused a lot of confusion and has wasted a lot of time.

Most interviewees feel like they are not up to the task of taking control and questioning the authority of their supervisor. Chinese PhDs are commonly stereotyped as shy, polite, and hardworking. While this may be true depending on the individual, self-doubt, language barriers and cultural differences undoubtedly play a part in reinforcing the stereotypes on Chinese PhDs. Speaking up is frowned upon in the Chinese culture as one is seen as deliberately causing the other to lose their ‘Mianzi’. (This Mandarin word is translated as to lose your face; or ‘gezichtsverlies’ in Dutch).

Chinese PhDs are thus very sensitive towards expressing their opinion publicly or explicitly as they do not want to embarrass others, even though others may interpret this as lack of critical thinking. As such, supervisors are responsible in being approachable, available, and active in making his or her expectations explicit to engage them and help them in making sense of the Dutch academic culture.

Fear of rejection

All interviewees have overcome many hurdles to be here and are very eager to be recognized intellectually in the Dutch academia. One interviewee recalled: “During my Master’s, my supervisor in China was very strict and my work was severely criticized. I thought if I can’t do well in this academic environment, perhaps I can do better elsewhere. I thought I should do my PhD abroad to know what I am worth.”

However, some have high expectations of themselves and suffer from anxiety, as another interviewee explained: “PhD is such a painful learning process, even though I enjoy it. [...] I was so afraid of making mistakes, and I look to my supervisors and colleagues for their advices and opinions, so I can be sure that I am on the right path. But after a year, I realised it is my responsibility to take decisions.”

Another interviewee suffered from uncertainty during the start of his PhD: “There were a lot of uncertainty in the first year because I do not know what the graduation criteria is and what do I exactly need to do to get my doctorate.” Language barrier was also cited as cause of anxiety: “I was

very anxious to interact with others, because my English speaking was not so good, and I also struggle to be polite and direct at the same time.”

When reflecting on their PhD trajectory, many interviewees told me that they have found self-confidence in their academic performance as a candidate who is about to receive her doctoral conferral mentioned: “The happiest memories of my PhD journey are when I receive good feedback on my work or when my article is accepted.” Another interviewee who is at the end of his PhD trajectory said: “My Dutch supervisor is very supportive, he made me feel like I could do it. I wouldn’t have made it without him.”

As many PhDs turn to research for self-actualisation and intellectual recognition, their social life may suffer consequently. A Chinese PhD candidate who was here for 2 years mentioned: “I usually just go from point A, my house to point B, the university. I did not join any social nor networking activities, and only see my house mates occasionally. I would advise any Chinese students to make Dutch friends. It’s difficult but I wished I have done it, participate in more social activities.” Interestingly, another Chinese PhD candidate who has just arrived was often invited by her Dutch colleagues to ‘borrels’ (informal social gatherings with alcohol) and said: “They were very funny, and I enjoy getting to know them.”

From the stories of 10 CSC-funded PhD candidates, it is clear that Dutch universities can do a better job in trying to engage with externally-funded Chinese PhDs. All interviewees struggle to establish their presence and make their voice heard in the institution in which they work. Chinese PhDs will certainly benefit from Greater inclusion in doctoral education will help to lessen and ultimately remove obstacles in achieving academic success because of one’s personal and social circumstances.

In 2016, University of Groningen has set a precedent by providing supplemental scholarship of 500 euros to CSC-funded PhDs, to ensure that they have at least 1700 euros net per month. Besides monetary support, universities should also focus on supporting social and emotional needs of foreign PhDs and cultivate educational integration through meaningful academic and social interactions. This means engaging both internal and external PhDs in all aspects of the doctoral education process, promoting collaboration, and providing opportunities for all to succeed within the institution.