



‘Settle Down’ or ‘Return Overseas’? A Reflexive Narrative of an International Chinese Doctoral Scholar’s (Re)adjustment Experiences in China

Kun Dai

INTRODUCTION

Among international students, the Chinese group is one of the largest cohorts in many countries, such as the United States, the United Kingdom, and Australia. Although Chinese international returnees’ experiences have been initially explored, as Jiang et al. (2020) suggested, limited studies have explicitly examined Chinese doctoral scholars’ employability and illustrated the trajectory of job acquisition as early-career researchers who may encounter a very competitive situation in both domestic and international job markets. (Similar concerns have been raised in other chapters, e.g. Skakni and Inouye, Hancock.) Against the background introduced

K. Dai (✉)

Department of Educational Administration and Policy, Faculty of Education,
The Chinese University of Hong Kong, Hong Kong, China
e-mail: kundai@cuhk.edu.hk

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above, I have attempted to analyse reflexively and illustrate my (re)adjustment and job acquisition experiences as an international doctoral scholar from an Australian university. Moreover, as Elliot et al. (2016) suggested, doctoral scholars not only learn scientific knowledge but also immerse in a process of acquiring ‘hidden treasure’, which may significantly influence learning experiences and academic development. Thus, ‘hidden curriculum’ that I experienced during my transitioning journey will be illustrated.

This reflexive narrative provides nuanced illustration of my job acquisition across different higher education (HE) job markets. This approach is a way of autobiographical storytelling. Specifically, I used Bourdieu’s concepts, field, habitus, and capital to interpret my experiences. The exploration of one’s individual experience in a reflexive approach is a way of self-assessment and self-reflection (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992).

The process of job acquisition may position me in different fields. The habitus and capital I gain may also influence my job acquisition. Bourdieu’s concepts could provide a systematic toolkit to explore the complex job acquisition experience in and across different job markets (fields) that have different logics of practice, which refers to norms and rules that people may follow in their everyday work and life in any field. The concept of field usually refers to a social space. For habitus, Bourdieu believes that it is the way that everyone has thought of as the embodiment and sedimentation of past experiences in different fields. Furthermore, according to Bourdieu (1986), there are various types of capital that could influence individuals’ behaviours, social mobility, and other everyday activities, typically including, cultural, economic, and social capital, which could be converted with each other. These concepts help me understand the way I adapted to navigate different rules and norms in cross-field movement and the influence of norms and rules on my development as an independent researcher in either hidden or apparent aspects.

The data are based on my research notes and diaries from 2018 to 2020. I wrote my experiences frequently as diaries in my personal online blog. The original purpose was to record my learning and research journey for my future reminiscence. To clarify the storyline, I recursively analysed this data both deductively, drawing on Bourdieu’s thinking tools and inductively, generating themes from the data, to identify the specific changes made as a Chinese doctoral scholar. This narrative is mainly based on my individual experiences rather than generalisable to other cases.

HIDDEN RULES IN THE JOB-HUNTING JOURNEY

After completing my doctoral study in late 2018, I prepared to start my new journey. Obtaining a doctoral degree from one of the top universities in Australia and publishing several research articles enhanced my confidence to find an academic job. However, in the process of job hunting, I noticed that the reality is not optimistic.

I applied to several positions in Australia; however, I always got rejections or no responses. When I communicated with other peers and academics, I felt that education and practices in Australia seemed to mainly focus on early childhood and school levels. Most job positions in Australia focus on school education, which is not my field.

Although I obtained my doctoral degree in Australia and studied with well-known scholars, it seems that my 'so-called' cultural/social capital in the Australian HE fields could not support me to find a suitable position. I did not give up and I tried to learn more about the context and usually went to seminars related to doctoral scholars' job search.

In a seminar about doctoral scholars' career development, the lecturer mentioned that beyond 50% of jobs in Australian academic market were based on social network. I felt that it is so difficult to find something here as I did not have such a strong network. I also realised that finding a job in market is much harder than learning in university. During the doctoral study, my goal was to graduate and get the degree. I thought that will be the end. However, everything just begins; getting the degree is the starting point rather than the end.

After having more understanding about these hidden rules in the Australian HE field, I noticed that the 'cultural capital' (e.g., a doctoral degree) I obtained may not be sufficient to help me to develop a career. Then, I started to search opportunities in China. Through searching and reviewing many recruiting advertisements, I found that although my backgrounds (e.g., qualification, publication, and age) met several universities' selection criteria, I still needed to have postdoctoral working experiences to apply for positions at reputed universities. Previously, holding an internationally recognised doctoral degree could help doctoral scholars to gain an academic position in China. However, nowadays, the job market has

become much more competitive, and the value of foreign degree may also be different in the current era.

Thus, I proposed to apply a research fellow programme offered by a national funding agency. However, I did need to have a host university and advisor to support the application. A senior academic that I met at a conference before from one of the top Chinese universities accepted my request to support the application. Compared to the Australian situation, I noticed that the cultural capital I acquired seemed to be much more recognised in the Chinese HE field, which aims to attract young Chinese doctoral scholars to work in China as a way of improving the internationalisation of HE and research production in the global academic field.

The programme only allows doctoral scholars from the top 100 foreign universities to apply. However, domestic scholars cannot apply for this fellowship. If I can get it, I can have a better salary package compared to many other postdocs.

Consequently, I was awarded and moved to the university. Although the cultural capital gained from my international learning journey supported me to secure the position that could bring more economic (e.g., high salary package), social (e.g., opportunities to build networks), and symbolic capitals (e.g., university reputation in the Chinese society), I encountered ‘misfits’ between the habitus that I gained from 10 years study in Australia and the new logic of practices in the Chinese HE field.

HIDDEN KNOWLEDGE TO (RE)SHAPE ACADEMIC HABITUS IN THE ‘HOME FIELD’

Notably, when I moved back to China, I also began the journey of (re)shaping academic habitus in the Chinese HE field. Theoretically, as a student who originally comes from China, I should not have had many issues in adjusting to the Chinese HE field. However, I encountered various challenges and barriers in the initial stage. On the one hand, I was not familiar with many academic policies, norms, and discourses.

Through communicating with some academics, I noticed that I seemed to have no idea about how to be an academic in China. When they talked about the developmental trajectory in the field, I even did not know what I should do and did not know many particular terms. It seems that I am an

outsider to the system. I did not have a clear understanding about 'the rules of the game'.

This experience could suggest that I was 'a fish out of water'. The lack of understanding about the logic of practices (both obvious and hidden rules) in the Chinese HE field negatively influenced my confidence even though I got the postdoctoral fellowship at a top Chinese university. Through learning from other colleagues, I smoothly became familiar with some of the rules of the game. In the Chinese HE research field, there are many 'hidden' logics of practices that significantly influence academics' development. The more I knew about the field and logics of practices, the more I felt stressed and struggled. Compared to others who studied in China or had strong social networks with domestic scholars, as a newcomer, I did need to explore the field in a more 'independent' way. Due to a lack of previous connections to significant others in the Chinese HE field, it seems that I did not have strong 'social capital' to support my (re) adjustment to the Chinese system.

On the other hand, I seemed to not have 'academic habitus' that makes me a 'fish in water'. It seems that the habitus that I developed in the Australian HE field mismatch the logic of practices in China. These issues could suggest that when a habitus enters an unfamiliar field, contradictions and uncertainty may emerge as a result of habitus-field misfit (Stahl et al., 2023; Reay, 2004). As I did not have enough research training in China, I did not have a suitable academic habitus in the Chinese HE field. To develop new habitus, I paid more attention to learn knowledge related to the Chinese HE field, for example, academic writing in Chinese. However, the focus on the Chinese field was not enough.

IN-BETWEENNESS THROUGH LEARNING HIDDEN KNOWLEDGE

Conducting educational research in the Chinese HE field potentially shaped me as an in-betweener who shifts between different academic fields. As mentioned above, I needed to develop a habitus that enabled a better 'fit' with the Chinese HE field.

Not only do I need to write research funding proposals in Chinese, but I also need to write some academic articles in Chinese. My advisor told me told that I should publish something in Chinese journals in order to establish

my domestic reputation; otherwise, I may not be well recognised by others. In China, if I only publish in English, it will be strange. However, publishing in China is also challenging for me. I need to be familiar with features of target journals and pick up writing skills as soon as possible.

Meanwhile, I still need to keep publishing in English to prepare for potential job-hunting pressure in the future. These ‘hidden knowledge’ in the Chinese HE field pushes me to adapt myself to working in any context. I could take advantage of the cultural capital gained from Australian learning experiences to engage in the international academic field. Meanwhile, I need to foster my Chinese academic habitus to fit into the Chinese system. Thus, I simultaneously conducted my research by following two logics of practice. Those micro shifts in everyday research life potentially position me between different academic fields, which could be seen as a way of developing an in-between, transnational, and cosmopolitan academic habitus: ‘For the future, I am still uncertain where I should go: working in China as a doctoral returnee (Hai Gui) or seeking opportunities back to overseas (Gui Hai).’ These experiences suggest that a mismatch between habitus and fields exists in the transnational movement, which also creates opportunities for me to strategically maintain and develop different capital. These complex shifts and changes may systematically shape a sense of in-betweenness—developing various senses of identity, agency, and belonging (Dai, 2020, 2022). Meanwhile, while I encountered various challenges and barriers in the journey, the exploration also allowed me to gain hidden knowledge as an international doctoral scholar (Elliot et al., 2016; Elliot et al., 2020). Such an in-betweenness may become a key capital for me to develop myself as an independent researcher familiar with both international and domestic ‘rules of the game’.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

This reflexive narrative provided a nuanced analysis of an international doctoral scholar’s trajectory of job-hunting journeys between so-called ‘home’ (e.g., Australia) and ‘host’ (e.g., China) contexts. It illustrated a case distinct from many previous studies focused on international scholars’ employment and (re)adjustment in either ‘home’ or ‘host’ countries. Drawing upon Bourdieu’s thinking tools, this narrative could reflect that international doctoral scholars may need to be familiar with different rules

of the game in either hidden or obvious aspects to navigate different academic contexts. (The same sentiment is expressed by Sakurai et al.) The author strategically shifted between different rules of the game and hidden curriculum to develop his academic career, which shaped a sense of in-betweenness. This sense could become an essential capital for international doctoral scholars to achieve academic development in the global context. Understanding the hidden curriculum and rules can contribute towards researcher independence in cross-system movement and career development.

Various unexpected issues emerged from 'reality' regarding his navigating journey between different HE job markets. The 'ideal imagination' did not meet the 'real needs' of the Australian academic job market. For more than 10 years, learning in Australia has equipped him with various capitals, including degrees and knowledge about the local context, which are essential for international scholars in Australia (see Pham et al., 2023). However, he seemed not to be familiar with the Australian academic job market's requirements and context. This issue means that he lacked enough understanding of hidden knowledge about the system. These experiences are consistent with previous findings mentioned by Blackmore et al. (2017) who suggested that understanding the labour market's rules is essential for international graduates to find a position in the host country. Moreover, the lack of enough 'social capital' in the Australian HE sub-field also hindered his possible employment. This finding could indicate that 'significant others' and social networks played essential roles in securing academic positions in Australia. In other words, whereas the scholar's sense of agency is crucial in navigating academic contexts either in the host country or at home, it is equally important to recognise the critical role that interdependence often plays in becoming successful in one's career progression.

In contrast, his cultural capital (e.g., an international doctoral degree and publications) was legitimised by the Chinese HE sub-field. In the past decades, China has been actively recruiting international academic returnees to internationalise the Chinese HE field through its economic capital, which is a way of imbricating with the global HE field. Such a logic of practice provides more opportunities for some scholars to develop their academic career. Meanwhile, the significant other (e.g., network with the senior scholar) played an essential role in his success in gaining the national postdoctoral fellowship. These findings reflect that the local networks and

individuals' academic performances significantly influenced returnees' employment (Pham & Saito, 2020; Xu, 2021).

However, the author encountered various 'reverse shocks' as a returnee who did not have local education and research experiences. Distinct from Ai (2019) and Xu (2021), the author gained his HE degrees in Australia. Many 'reversed shocks' experienced by those who had previous Chinese learning and research experiences seemed to be 'direct shocks' for him. While he is a 'Chinese' and a doctoral returnee, he appeared to be a 'foreigner' (or 'stranger') in the Chinese HE field. As a result, he needed to learn hidden rules and knowledge to progress his academic career. The (re) adjustment to the Chinese HE context was a tortuous process that progressively shaped his sense of in-betweenness. In this process, he potentially became an in-betweener who may shape an in-between habitus with multiple senses of identity, agency, and belonging. Understanding different hidden and obvious rules in different fields could be essential for some international doctoral scholars to become independent researchers who can move between different academic contexts (see Dai & Hardy, 2023).

These empirical insights could help prospective international doctoral scholars understand the 'realities' in different academic job markets. It is essential for those who aim to find a suitable position in academic fields to develop a rounded capital during their doctoral training. Meanwhile, it is also important to learn informal knowledge (e.g., job market features, policies, and rules) as 'hidden treasure', which significantly influences learning and future development (Elliot et al., 2016; Elliot et al., 2020). Such hidden curriculum could be an important platform for interdependence and subsequently researcher independence development. Universities may also need to provide more professional trainings for doctoral scholars who may need to work in different academic markets.

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