
Cultural Encounters between China and Britain: Key Factors in the Formation and Transfer of Ideas and Values

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Keywords: cultural exchange, education, identity, women

Abstract

This article focuses on cross-cultural perceptions and the processes by which ideas and values move between societies. It is based on focus groups, responses to questionnaires and interviews with 140 Chinese students, cultural workers and teachers. It shows how the experience of living in the UK can both alter prior expectations of the country as well as generating processes of critical reflection about the nature of both China and Western societies. The participants focused on the evaluation of educational systems, the understanding of rights, law and social obligations, and how these affected the current status of women. Social change does not result simply from exposure to new ideas but cross-cultural contacts and experience can be factors in the movement away from traditional structures in that they highlight alternative ways of understanding the self in relation to others and new possibilities for social life.

This article examines cross-cultural perceptions between China and Britain and how these are influenced by media representations and by other factors such as direct experience. It focuses on the conditions under which such understandings are formed and may change. A second key issue is how values and beliefs move between societies. How do we learn about cultural norms which are different from our own and what is effect of being exposed to these. Such culture transfer is widely acknowledged to occur. At a general level it is obvious that ideas move, but how, and what are the key triggers for change in belief at the level of the individual, remains largely to be explained. In terms of the relationship between China and the West, it is clear that there has been a process of interchange over hundreds of years. The values of the European Enlightenment ran in a particular fashion through different currents of Marxism as well as what the West would see as more democratic political forms. Both had a profound influence on world history, including that of China. The West, for its part, has had a long-term fascination with the society, art and culture of China. As a country, it was seen not simply as a potential market but as a powerful source of cultural innovation and

Westminster Papers in Communication and Culture © 2010 (University of Westminster, London), Vol. 7(1): 91-110. ISSN 1744-6708 (Print); 1744-6716 (Online)

movements such as Art Nouveau owed much to Chinese design and aesthetic sense. In discussing more recent developments in Chinese history some commentators have pointed to how Western concepts are modified and take on a new form in the different cultural contexts of China.¹

Barmé (1999: xiv), for example, has noticed the effects of policies of economic reform by which Western patterns of consumption have been adopted, but without corresponding notions of citizenship. Zweig et al. (2004) have shown how China's education and employment systems are now highly internationalized and have pointed to processes of technology transfer by which skills were used by returnees to target the domestic market. McGregor (2005: 228) has also noted some of the impacts of education abroad; he pointed out how the development of the Chinese telephone system and the struggle between the market and centralized planning was affected by a new generation of Chinese students who had learnt their marketing skills in the US.

It is assumed in such work that ideas move between societies, but there are very few attempts to analyse the process in detail. One key question is how perceptions and beliefs which are based on media representations may alter when the individual is exposed to direct contact (Philo, 1990). This study will go some way towards rectifying this by examining how such experience of a new culture may generate processes of critical reflection both about the new society and the one from which the individual has come. It must also be said that social change does not result simply from exposure to new ideas. In China the key factor is the extraordinary and rapid growth of new material and institutional structures. The development of the new market economy, the movement of millions of migrant workers and the mass employment of women in the new industries are among key elements in creating the potential for new developments in thought and action. These may occur without any obvious outside stimulus, as for example in the campaigns in the Chinese tabloid press over the rights of migrant workers (Zhang Zhi-an, 2006).

Nonetheless, one element of contemporary change in China is that, after a long period of being relatively closed to outside influence, it is now going through an intensive exposure to Western culture via films, TV, the Internet and through educational contact. There is an unprecedented movement of young people into Western educational institutions, with currently over 100,000 in the UK and the USA, plus many others in Japan, Australia and Europe. Many of these are the sons

¹ Wang Hui (2001) notes how the concept of 'science' constituted one of the main features of twentieth-century Chinese thought. It was used to supply an explanation for the 'inevitability' of socio-historical change, but he suggests that it still retained the systematic character of the rationalistic neo-Confucian world view. This combined the concept of natural investigation with heavenly (ethical) principles.

and daughters of elite and opinion-forming groups. He Li (2006), for example, argues that such people may occupy powerful positions on their return and serve as carriers of Western values. There is a growing interest in how such students respond to the education they receive, as well as how those from the West relate to studying in China (Wang and Liu, 2007). This article focuses on the experiences of people from China who have come to Britain and the impact of this on their understanding of the social culture of both countries. They were interviewed over a period of two years, between 2007 and 2009, in Britain and China.²

Sample and Methods

A total of 40 people took part in focus groups of 4–6 people and in individual interviews. The initial research sessions were usually followed up with subsequent meetings and supplementary questions which emerged from the focus group discussions or other interviews. Twenty-one of the subjects were postgraduates from UK Master's courses, plus a further eight postgraduates from universities in Shanghai and Ningbo. Six of these had not been to Britain and were interviewed for comparative purposes. Another six people had visited Britain to teach or for arts and cultural exchange. Five university administrators who organized international programmes were also interviewed to give professional comments on the responses. Finally, a further 120 Chinese postgraduates in Britain answered a questionnaire relating to how they valued higher education in Britain. The preliminary results were then presented and discussed at academic seminars in Glasgow University, UK and Fudan University, China, and the comments of a further four postgraduates have been included to clarify and illustrate specific points. This is primarily a qualitative research study and the purpose is to understand the process by which patterns of belief may be established, and what factors facilitate change. The sample is not large enough to make generalizations across a whole population, especially one the size of China; nevertheless, the detailed nature of the interviews and analysis does mean that some significant insights may be gained. For the first series of in-depth interviews, the participants who have visited Britain were asked the same six questions:

1. Before you came to Britain, what ideas did you have about what the country and the people would be like?
2. What were the sources of these ideas?
3. What differences did you find when you stayed in Britain, from what you had originally thought?

² The work draws upon research data gathered with the support of the State Innovative Institute for the study of Journalism, Communication and Media Society at Fudan University, China and from the British Council.

4. From what you saw in Britain, is there anything you would like to take back to China?
5. Is there anything you would not like to take back?
6. Did staying in Britain change your mind or how you behaved?

Those who had not been to Britain were asked the same, but with the omission of questions 3 to 6. The interviews were open-ended to allow for extended discussion and development of any points that were raised. They were not recorded because of the sensitivity of some participants to this. Written responses were given to the initial questions and the interviewer made detailed verbatim notes of what was said. These notes were then confirmed with the interviewees as being an accurate account. The interviews were conducted in English and quotes used are as spoken. Other theorists have written about the difficulty of eliciting sensitive information from interviewees on social practices which may be judged negatively (Yang, 2002). An important element of this method is to establish close contact. The intention is to produce a relaxed conversation – rather than to reply simply to a formal set of questions and responses, as when a questionnaire is distributed. The same interviewees were seen on several occasions and specific points were also followed up on the telephone and by email. It is crucial in this method to establish a level of confidence and trust. This is especially so in a situation where participants may be concerned with ‘losing face’ as a result of what is said. Some participants were clearly under instructions from parents not to say anything bad about Britain or China, or to be seen to be critical. One female graduate noted:

My dad would be very angry for me to say bad things about China. Everyone from China doesn't want to lose face for themselves or for their country. Research in China is very on the surface because people don't want to tell the truth to unfamiliar people.

Another comment made, with some laughter was: ‘My mother would kill me if she heard me say that about China.’ The point is that for the method to work, the participants must develop a strong commitment to the research and have a sense that all that matters is that the truth is told. In practice, the interviews and focus groups were free-flowing in that respondents could discuss anything they wished. They raised many issues spontaneously and often gave answers to one question as part of another. In practice, the responses fell into three main areas: (1) how British society was perceived before direct experiences of it, what were the sources of these perceptions and how they have changed; (2) were there any features of British society which the interviewees would wish to introduce to China or any they would definitely reject; and (3) had the experience of working, studying and living in Britain produced any changes in their own beliefs, values or attitudes?

The additional 120 Chinese postgraduates in Britain were chosen from 44 British universities and asked about their educational experiences in the UK and how these compared with their earlier education in China. They rated both systems on quality and had the opportunity to make other comments on significant differences in the ethos and practice of the two systems. They were asked to assess the quality of both British and Chinese education on a five-point scale (very good, good, satisfactory, poor, very poor) and were also invited to include any comments they wished to make.

In discussing the results I will look initially at issues of perception and the changes caused by direct contact. I will then examine the impacts of new cultural experience, focusing on points made about education, including evaluations made of Chinese and British systems, the understanding of rights, law and social obligations and, finally, how these affected views on the rights and current status of women in China.

Perceptions of Britain Before and After Direct Experience

For some young Chinese people in UK universities, the exposure to British culture can be relatively limited in that it is possible to study with other students who are mostly Chinese and to live and socialize with them. One interviewee described being in a large lecture as 'like being back in China'. Another described how her spoken English had got worse since being in Britain because she mainly spoke Chinese, while at home there had been frequent English lessons.

However, almost all of those who participated in these interviews and focus group described quite radical changes to their original perceptions of Britain caused by the actual experience of living in the UK. The views held before they arrived had been overwhelmingly positive. Over two-thirds had seen Britain as a country of gentleman and as 'gentle'. The traditional Briton wore a suit and carried an umbrella and perhaps even a top hat. The images came from school texts and also from the classic works of authors such as Jane Austen and Charles Dickens, which are well read in China. One described her image of Britain as: 'English gentleman and ladies, posh garden party, traditional English afternoon tea and the royal family.'

Books and school texts were cited by nearly two-third of the sample as the information source, while television and TV news were referred to by nearly half (the Internet was less than a fifth). Another key source for the information was relatives or friends, cited by over half, and this strong reliance on personal contact has been noted in other research (British Council Scotland, 2006). Only a small minority in this sample had seen Britain as a 'modern' or 'high-tech'. The extent to which the traditional images of Britain survived the actual experience of the UK

depended in part on where people went to live. Those who arrived in large urban conurbations had their expectations very swiftly changed. But an interviewee who went to the city of York described how it was just as he expected it to be until he left and went to Leeds:

It was almost the same as I thought – but more beautiful – very gentlemanly. A man in a car stopped to let me cross. Then I went to Leeds – it was rough and dirty. Girls danced on tables with no underwear – wore short skirts, were vulgar.

The greatest shock to the participants was the behaviour of young British people. Two-thirds of this sample named it as an issue, commenting for example: ‘Gentle country not true, too many drunk people, terrible young people everywhere.’ However, older people were seen as generally much more polite and helpful. Some were pleasantly surprised at the multiculturalism of British society. As one expressed it: ‘There is no British people but a community of different races and cultures.’ Another commented that: ‘It totally opened my eyes – the multi-culture society. I become more tolerant, more generous, because Britain is a more tolerant society.’

There were other areas of British life which caused participants to reflect critically on issues of cultural difference and to comment on the origins and social consequences of these.

British and Chinese Educational Systems

British education was spoken of very positively by about half of those who had actually studied in Britain. It was praised for its creativity, for its interactive methods and for its intellectual rigour. Not all British education was seen as meeting these standards and criticisms were made. But it was often seen as less hierarchical than education in China and more likely to generate critical and creative work among its students. It was suggested that Chinese education was based on a much more rigid acceptance of the word of the professor. A graduate offered this description of her Chinese education:

When I study in China, I have a textbook. The teacher gives lessons according to this textbook. In classes we listen to the teacher carefully and then we take notes and recite what the teacher taught and we pass the exam.

Another participant pointed to the consequences of such a teaching style in that it does not encourage creativity among students:

We can follow but not create. The style of education in China does not encourage creativity. We are encouraged just to recite from books for exams – but in Britain we have to write essays, do projects and presentations.

As he pointed out, there was an emphasis in Britain on the expression of his own opinions: 'I have to express my meanings and my own opinions – what I can do after I have learnt the theory, but in China our exams are on what is the theory.'

Some spoke of how in Britain students were given a 'learning ability' and taught a core of subjects which were studied. Others pointed to the value of critical discussion and to the rigorous use of data. Again, comparisons were made with China:

In Britain, every point should be proved. The British academic attitude respects data – in China people use their position as experts to speak and people will think they are right, but without having offered any proof.

This approach is now being challenged within China, partly because of the desire of some students and staff for more creative learning and discussion, but also because there is a growing concern that traditional structures may stifle innovative thought, with negative consequences for economic growth and social development. As Fong notes, in the 1990s education officials in China had begun to promote 'quality education', rather than rote learning for exams (2004: 122). But since academic success was measured by standardized test questions, the ability simply to memorize information from textbooks remained a priority in the system. The strongly hierarchical nature of Chinese education was still deeply felt by many participants. As one commented: 'In Britain, a student might say that the answer the teacher is giving is wrong – it will not happen in China.' Another made the point that in China the status of students comes largely from the professor who has taught them. He quoted a Chinese phrase: 'Praise the professor, praise the student.' But it followed that even where a professor had behaved badly, he might still escape criticism, because a lowering of his status would lower that of the students as well. Overall there was strong support for the British system. The responses of the 120 postgraduates who answered a questionnaire showed 62 percent rating it as 'good' or 'very good'. No-one in the sample rated it as 'poor' or 'very poor'. In comparison, 29 percent rated their education in China as 'good' or 'very good', while 20 percent rated it as 'poor' or 'very poor'. We should be cautious about making generalizations on the basis of such figures given the wide range of educational experience to which they refer and the potential for variations of quality within and between institutions. There may also be residual resistance to making criticisms of China and Britain, as well as to commenting negatively on the value of an education which has in practice cost the students and their families so much. But overall this does provide support for the conclusions of other scholars, such as Zweig et al. (2004), who showed how higher degrees gained abroad were perceived to be worth more than those gained in China in terms of technology transfer and other benefits.

In this study, there was more criticism of British education from the Chinese teachers who had taught in UK schools. They were very shocked by the negative attitudes and behaviour of some children in their classes. One described how the teachers had wanted to be friendly with the pupils, but they had not responded: 'Some of the kids were very badly behaved, very naughty –[one school]was a disaster ... every lesson was a painful experience.'

Another teacher spoke of an encounter with a pupil in a school dining room. The teacher looked quite young and was sitting alone. A boy from the school came and sat with her and started to speak. But as soon as he realised she was a teacher, he turned away. She was very disturbed by this and concluded that: 'There is not the same respect for teachers in Britain as there is in China.' This does point to an important cultural different between the two countries. In China, education has a history of being revered and even close to being worshipped, with temples devoted to scholarly pursuits. The absolute priority given to it by parents, together with its unquestioned status, means that relationship between teachers and pupils can be friendly and certainly not hostile. The Chinese teachers described how they would regularly attend meetings and 'get together' with past pupils, and how teachers would keep in contact and chat on MSN with students they had taught. In Britain, there are no temples to scholars. While higher education and much of primary and secondary schooling can be of good quality, there is still a large body of pupils who view school as an imposition. There is a long cultural tradition in Britain of seeing compulsory education as being a painful necessity or as just painful. The famous Pink Floyd lyric, 'We don't need no education, teacher leave those kids alone', has a resonance in British society, but apparently very little in China. There are of course some groups in Britain who value education either for its own sake or as a vehicle for career advancement. Classroom behaviour in private and 'middle-class' schools is likely to be better. Still, there is a degree of alienation and rejection among some British school children which the Chinese teachers and other graduates found quite shocking.

Social life, Rights and Law

For some participants, however, the most profound learning experiences came not from their former education but from their everyday experiences of living in a society with norms and expectations which were seen as being quite different from those in China. The features of British life most often referred to were the good quality of most interpersonal behaviour and the relaxed life of Britain. There were positive comments on the welfare system, on 'trusting' and 'giving' relationships, and the culture of public responsibility which was seen to exist. There was a sense that people in Britain were more secure and felt more able to enjoy themselves. Such perceptions are not necessarily an exact match to reality in British society,

which has its own share of problems, such as stress and mental health, plus issues such as family breakdown, alcohol and drug dependency. Some participants noted these, but nonetheless many pointed to what they saw as deeply rooted cultural differences between China and Britain in relation to personal anxiety:

In China, there is much more pressure on people. In Britain, people just go out and enjoy themselves. In China, people stay, worried about their life – about their job, their children, their marriage or their parents.

The most obvious reasons for higher levels of insecurity in China may be historical in that it has experienced periods of intense conflict and traumatic change. In living memory, people can recall war, famine and political upheaval. In addition, there is the current rapid transformation of the economy and the instabilities produced by the unleashing of the free market. One participant described her family's recollections of the famine (1958–62):

My father spoke to me of the years of famine – people just walking along fell down and died. They ate everything, mud, leaves, skin from the trees, insects. My grandmother told me people ate dead bodies.

Another description was of the impact of the Cultural Revolution on a family member:

My uncle was the principal of a senior school. He was forced to stop teaching. He was humiliated, he had to stand with a big hat with his head bowed, writing all the time about what he had done wrong. He was isolated in a single room in the cold winter with little food and no heating. After that he was half dead, he could never work again.

The free market can also be a major source of insecurity. A front-page article in the *China Daily* pointed to the effects on public services and health care:

According to a saying in rural China, once an ambulance siren wails, a pig is taken to market; once a hospital bed is slept in, a year of farming goes down the drain.... As China's economic system becomes more market-oriented and the role of the government as a provider of public services diminishes, the healthcare system – a core element of traditional Chinese socialism – is suffering. (17 October 2006)

The participants in this study made many references to the British system of state-organized welfare. There were very positive comments on the 'social support system', 'health care, free education', 'social welfare', 'care for the disabled' and 'pension funds'. Some pointed to the specific effects on older people and how they were enabled to live with dignity:

In Britain, people don't have to worry so much about when they grow old – because they have good benefits. People have dignity and look respectable when they are older.

The effect on personal confidence and optimism was made clear. As one put it: 'you can feel confident even when you are old', and another: 'Older people are fully engaged in life and full of hope.' There was a perception of stability and predictability in British life which came in part from welfare provision but also from systems of law, rights and regulatory frameworks. A participant noted these differences between Britain and China:

I think every Chinese student more or less notices the difference between regulations here [in Britain] and in China. Here, the regulations apply to most of the people. In China people can avoid rules and regulations through *guanxi*.

The reference to *guanxi* here is important and means essentially to use of personal relationships to gain advantages or exchange favours. In China, the weakness of some formal structures, combined with high levels of instability, has meant in general there is a much higher level of reliance on informal networks of support. As another participant put it: '*Guanxi* is a system of family, social, economic and political networks. It extends through every part of life in China.'

The family is the primary source of connections, through its extended links to other families, and these are then supplemented by connections made at school and university. As the same participant put it: 'Basically it is everyone you know.' Economic and political relationships also depend on informal networks, which extend beyond families. Some *guanxi* is simply networking, as it would be understood in the West. But it can also be used to circumvent and avoid regulations, or simply to speed through various formal permissions.³ To gain this support might involve gifts or owing a favour, which can be paid back later. So to set up a hotel, for example, could involve bringing various groups on side, such as local officials and police. There has been some academic debate over the nature and future of such relationships in China. As Yang (2002) argues, contemporary modernization theory can embody a teleology which assumes that *guanxi* will wither in the face of new commercial and legal regimes. It is certainly the case that a free market and an expanding economy can create pressures for the meritocratic recruitment of labour and the sourcing of key skills by employers. But the insecurities of the free market, especially when compounded by recession, may

³ As Gold et al. (2002: 15) remark, although the Chinese authorities have implemented regulations and laws, business practice can still see 'contracts' as a cage which appropriate *guanxi* can unlock. On the other hand, Hutton (2007) argues that China's growth will in the long run be hampered by the weakness of rational and accountable civic structures associated with the growth of Enlightenment values in the West.

intensify the use of traditional support networks by those seeking employment. It is possible that opposition to this could develop from those who are educated but do not have sufficient connections to acquire the positions to which they aspire. But there is little evidence of this in any organized form from these interviews and those who spoke of *guanxi* tended to do so in terms of its continuing central role in Chinese life.

One participant gave an extraordinary account of her attempts to enter the job market both with and without the use of her family connections. Her father was wealthy and powerful but after a bitter personal dispute with him she had left home and decided to seek employment in the west of China. She was well qualified, with two degrees, one from an English university. She describes the experience of being interviewed as a form of display with little real meaning or possibility of actually being employed:

I went to four interviews but I realized that it was a theatre, to make it look like the one who got the job is really strong and successful and has gone through the competition. But this candidate had been chosen before. They would be very proud in front of the rest of us because they knew. One even went into the top manager's office and didn't bother sitting with the rest of us. Then one night I got a phone call, a man said he could help me. He had heard I wanted a job in a university, but said it wasn't possible without connections. The positions were being sold and he would help me if I paid 20,000 yuan. This was for a low-grade position in a not good university.

She then recounted how her father and his friends persuaded her to return home. She eventually decided to accept his help and to try for independence after getting a job. She described the lengthy process of negotiating a 'golden' position in one of the top state-owned companies in China:

When I came back I heard there was one position in a top company but there were three candidates from very powerful families, including me. My father knew a top manager who was close to the HR [Human Resources] manager, and through this contact we had a banquet together. The HR manager promised to try to help but could not guarantee because of the other two families. My father offered a gift but it was not taken as the HR manager did not want to be seen to be taking money. These people have so much money they don't need more. At this level these things are about power and relationships not money.

As she points out, what is actually being negotiated are structures of power, and this is reflected in the final outcome:

We waited a long time and in the end the company created two more jobs so that each candidate got one and that satisfied all the top managers who were supporting different people.

This interviewee did not mean to suggest that all senior-level entry was decided by the use of privileged connections. In her company, in her own experience, she put the figure at about 80 percent, but practices are likely to vary between companies and regions, and in relation to whether the economy is contracting or expanding, the latter being likely to increase meritocratic recruitment.

Currently, it is clear that *guanxi* is still a feature of many areas of social activity. Another postgraduate described how it might relate to academic life or health care:

Even for academic entrance for Master's, PhD, everything, people are trying to get a relationship with the academic staff – any people who can help. So parents will phone and say 'Oh do you know this professor, what does he like, what could we give him as a present?' Also if you need an operation, people try to find a better doctor through *guanxi*.

She also commented that there were variations in quality and practice between different Chinese universities. Still another participant, who was a lecturer in a provincial university, described her life there:

It is very common for students to visit lecturers before examinations to give them *song li* [a present]. Lecturers often come up to me and say 'this student must pass and this one', because they have some complicated relationship with the family. If the students' relatives are powerful in the university, then teachers will be very pleased to help in this way, because you do a favour for the powerful person and maybe next time he can do a favour for you.

This is not to say that informal networks for favours and help are absent from British society. Such contacts are sometimes spoken of as being unfairly used to gain advantage (as in an 'old boy' network of people who have attended the same elite schools or universities). But the participants suggested that *guanxi* was a more profound and inescapable part of life in China. As still another put it: 'Without these supports, in China you are nothing.' This postgraduate was studying in Glasgow and described how the difference between Britain and China was very dramatically illustrated for her when she and her flatmates had a problem with their landlord. He had arrived one day without warning and shouted at them very angrily, saying they had to leave the flat immediately. He did not explain why, but they think it likely that he had a problem over permission for multiple-occupancy. The flatmates were very concerned as they had nowhere to go and were worried that a large deposit they had paid, would not be returned. They took advice on what to do and were told to say that they had seen a lawyer and would not move until the deposit was refunded. When the landlord returned, still very angry, they said that they were writing to the local council to complain about his behaviour.

The landlord's attitude suddenly changed. It was all a misunderstanding. Their deposit was returned. The students were astonished by this and said later that it would never have happened in China. The landlord there 'would laugh' and say he had more connections than they did:

When we said we would report him to the City Council, he changed a lot. In China if we said that, the landlord can maybe have a *guanxi* with the authorities. He would say, 'I know somebody in the authorities too.'

As her flatmate put it: 'In China, whether the tenants could get back their deposit would depend on the relative power of the tenants and the landlord, not on the power of the law.' Another participant commented separately on the legal system in China: 'If you are poor or with no connections, the law will be very, very strict. If you are rich or you got power in hand, then the law is nothing to you.'

In a further example a female teacher spoke of her personal life. She described how when she had gone through a divorce, her husband had attempted to use *guanxi*:

My husband tried to take away the property and to influence the judge – but it would not happen in England. Chinese people like to play games under the table!

The status of women in Chinese society, their relative power and rights were also the subject of much comment by the participants.

Rights of Women, Power and Status

It was pointed out that in China the position of women is less secure than in Britain, and many feel under very great pressure (usually from their mothers and other family members) to be married before the age of 30. One young woman described the change in attitude of her parents as she grew older. When she was young the focus was entirely on study:

When I was young my parents checked my marks, they said study all the time. I liked to buy new clothes, but my mother said that's bad, don't look in the mirror, you are wasting time.

This was replaced by a sudden concentration on her physical appearance:

When I was 20, they changed. They did not ask me about studies any more. They said, 'shopping, shopping', dress up, buy more beautiful clothes. When they arranged a date for me with a banker, I thought they were trying to sell me at the best price.

Her mother quoted a saying to her, 'Good work is not as good as a good husband.' There is another even more direct Chinese expression: 'A man of 30 is like a blossoming branch, a woman of 30 is like old bean shells' (literally, old bean curd waste). This participant also spoke of changes in Chinese society from the 1980s to the present. The new economic reforms produced an emphasis on what can be sold and who has the power to buy. In the free market beauty becomes once more a commodity. She contrasts this with the 'plain culture' which was advocated in her childhood:

There has been a change in culture. When I was 10, if you dressed plainly that would be ok. It was official – to work hard, dress and spend plainly, be economical. You always heard from broadcasts and textbooks 'the beauty of the heart is more important than the beauty of the face'. But then I found it was just a lie. People judge you by what you look like – you are what you wear. In the 1980s they tried to make woman not be a commodity, but then it went back even worse to the old way.

The insecurity of women is also related to differences in work opportunities and these too were spoken of as being affected by women's physical appearance. Another participant described this in relation to the careers of her classmates at a Chinese university:

It is much more difficult for girls to get jobs than boys. Eight of the boys in my class went to work in [universities]. But only two girls got jobs and that was in my university. But the girls' marks were mostly better than the boys. Many female students complain of this kind of thing. If you are good looking it's easier to get a job, so it's unfair.

She also pointed to her own experience of sexual harassment at work and how little could be done about it:

It is very difficult for women to survive in this world. My leader wanted to take advantage of me. This is very, very typical that leaders or bosses want to do this. If the woman says no then they may have to leave to find another job. There is no law to stop this.

Other academic work lends support to this view of the workplace in China. Jieyu Liu (2007), for example, studied factory work and showed how for women, promotion was linked to the giving of sexual favours and also that, in times of redundancy, women were more vulnerable to losing their jobs than men. This is one part of what she describes as a lifetimes experience of gender inequalities.

Some female participants were intensely aware of how their job opportunities would be affected by their age and personal attractiveness – what is referred to as ‘the beauty economy’ in China. There are, of course, strong elements of this in Western culture but it is significant that all of the comments about having dignity, confidence and optimism when old came from female participants. There was approval at the idea that women in Britain could go to university at the age of 40 or 50 to re-train to be teachers or to work in other professions. ‘There is nothing like this in China’, as one woman commented. This does not mean of course that there is no female advancement in China. There were very important reforms in the last century and feminists argued for women’s rights, including suffrage, but additionally for changes in inheritance, marriage and divorce laws (Edwards, 2008) It is also possible to note many individual cases of successful businesswomen. In addition, there are variations within the country. Shanghai women are thought of as being very independent and comments were made about how Shanghai men do the housework. But the participants pointed to trends which still held back the potential of women because of factors such as the beauty economy or the limits on female recruitment. These tendencies also exist in British society, though they are subject to public debate and controversy – as for example in the removal of Miss World style contests from British terrestrial television and in arguments over ‘glass ceilings’ on female promotion in work. Systems of law and regulation were seen by some as giving more protection in Britain and as ensuring individual rights.

There are clearly many factors intensifying this debate within China, for example the large number of women entering formal education plus the movement of many away from home and local communities to work in the expanding industry and commercial sectors. In the West, the ability of women to sell labour in a free market had a dramatic impact on their lives, albeit that continuing inequalities of gender may still be reflected in the conditions and salaries of the workplace. In China, these processes of radical material change have created a fertile ground for new critical ideas, and exposure to Western education and culture was explicitly named by participants as the source of some of these. One gave her reaction to a very serious family quarrel with her father,

My aunt said the family had treated me well, had paid for my MA and I should wait, let my father’s anger go out. It is a difference in culture, in China women must accept the position of the men, the power, but my English education changed me little by little, now I do not want to accept.

She also described the impact of Western films on how she re-thought the experience of her early life and what had been a very difficult childhood.

In Western films, if girls experience bad things in their childhood – being hurt by their family, they have the right to be angry. The films describe how the bad things influence their whole life and they shout and they are angry and the film shows this to be reasonable. But in China, people persuade you to forget, not to show the scar – to follow the general rules of the society, not to lose face, obey parents, be a good student, a good college and get married at 25. Before I met Western culture, the influence on me was from my family and people around me. The films showed me it was all right to admit my true inside feelings.

As Appadurai suggests, a globalized culture may promote some aspects of individualism. He also notes that a key impact of the media is that it presents ‘a rich, ever changing store of possible lives’ (1996:58) This is well illustrated in the comments of another postgraduate who noted how Western films had influenced discussions with her friends about the potential for their own lives and careers:

My friends and I sometimes discuss the lifestyle of Western women and we ask can we be like those women in the films. They can have their own career and they can be much independent. We thought Western women have less obligations than us – it seems they have many freedoms. But we also asked if this was a true picture.

In this case the participant had not left China and the question remains for her as to whether the images are correct. As we have seen, those who had lived in the West were better able to make informed judgments on this but could also find that the actual experience of the new culture provided additional powerful influences on beliefs and attitudes. The impacts of education, new cultural contacts and the rapidity of change in China can lead to something of a generation gap. Some described living what are effectively different lives, one in the city and another when they returned to the city of their family. One commented on the conflict when she visited the home of her husband’s parents for the Spring Festival:

My parents in law are so Chinese, they smile and say get into the car, but if you do they are very dissatisfied – because first I have to smile and say nice things to the grandmother and she has to get in the car first – and I must get to the car last as I am the daughter in law and I must stay in the kitchen and cook and cannot leave the kitchen if any other member of the family is in there – and I had a cold and felt bad and the kitchen in the countryside was very cold, but when I left for a moment, my mother in law called me back in. I cannot stand to be with these stupid people.

Such conflicts led her to re-think not only her own position but that of women in general in the future China.

Many people asked me whether I like my life at [university] I said 'yes' every time. They were surprised to this answer. Very soon [my family] will make me become an ordinary housewife like most my female colleagues who just care about their husbands and children. I don't mean that I want to be special but at least I think women should have their own ideals and pursuits. They should have their own space and world. They shouldn't just pin their hope on the success of their husbands or children.

Another described a more positive relationship with her family in which she was encouraged by her father to see education as a route to independence:

My father had said to me that I should be independent – that I should not be concerned just to find a man or a husband. But I did not really understand what he meant. When I came to Britain, it became clearer. I understood and I began to change my orientation from just to a family, to a future husband or to children – towards sometimes being good to myself.

Here we can see that the exposure to elements of Western culture and the lived experience of it affected not just beliefs about it, but, at a much more profound level, may influence the individuals' sense of self and identity.

Discussion and Conclusions

The key factors in social change in China are material and institutional and these have generated potentials for new systems of behaviour and thought within the society. Pressures for change may come from within, as for example in the status of women promoted by reform movements and at times by the Communist Party (Edwards, 2008) But an additional factor can be the impact of Western education and the increasing availability of Western cultural products. Educational contacts go back at least as far as the early twentieth century and, as Susanne Pepper (1996), shows Chinese education has been subject to repeated remodelling at different times, adapting versions of American, French and Soviet approaches. But a key difference in current educational movements is the sheer volume of young people who are now having direct experience of alternative systems. More importantly, it is clear that those who had lived and studied in the UK, had access to an extraordinary range of new ideas and experiences. Direct experience was an important factor since it enabled the critical evaluation of pre-existing beliefs about the West (including those derived from media sources) and could also have significant and unexpected impacts on how Chinese society was understood and valued. As Fong (2004: 4) notes, there is very little in the existing literature that examines the subjective experience of Chinese youth in relation to Western culture. There is still less which looks at the impacts of living and studying abroad. In her work on Chinese singletons (only

children), she points to the intense pressures on them in the competition for elite status in education and the job market. The major impact of this exposure to the cultural model of modernization was to foster an intense desire for 'First World' material affluence (Fong, 2004). She also undertook a participant observation of students who had left China to study in the West (Fong, 2006). Only a small minority could attain white-collar work and those who stay in the West remain culturally adrift and split between there and China. My interest was in the bulk of students who actually return and in a sense what they take back with them. Fong attributes the return largely to the absence of higher-paid work. This is so, but another pull factor is the networks of *guanxi* connections which students retained in China as a means of obtaining employment and which they did not possess in the West. She holds to the view that what Chinese youth abroad were attracted to was the 'prestige, geographical mobility and high standard of living' of the 'First World' (2006: 157). This is certainly correct, but my own study suggests that the exchange of ideas and values went beyond this to issues of welfare and individual rights, and particularly to the role and status of women in China. Some of the female participants in my study were critical of the 'beauty economy' and what they saw as the commodification of women, as well as the intense pressure to marry and conform to traditional roles in the family. Fong (2006: 166) emphasizes the adherence of most of her sample to existing 'cultural scripts', such as pre-marital chastity and that spouse-seeking is the primary purpose of dating. This is certainly the 'official' script and others, such as Evans (1997), have described how in the dominant discourse of the state, women's sexuality is regulated and marriage has been seen as the legitimate site for sexual relations. But what is said officially and what people do can be quite different. Prostitution, for example, is officially unacceptable but this contrasts sharply with the rapid growth of the sex industry in China (Farrer 1998). One of my interviewees, a university teacher, described how mass text messages were sent out by hotel chains asking for 'broad-minded women' and offering incomes many times greater than paid to her for teaching. Others of my interviewees were living with their partners but apparently adjusted their behaviour when returning to their home towns. One described how, in her undergraduate university in China, the student dormitories had been segregated. Her classmate had disguised herself as male and been smuggled in so that she could spend the night with her boyfriend. This was an action regarded as heroic by her friend. Another male participant commented that such behaviour was commonly known to happen in Chinese universities. The official cultural scripts certainly exist and many perhaps still abide by them. But I am not sure that they will remain unchallenged when faced with the combined influences of Western cultural models, the employment and education of women in China and abroad and the unintended consequences of the one-child policy. As Fong (2002) notes, one

effect of the last of these is that single female children do not face competition from brothers for educational investment. This increases their power to modify or reject gender norms which in the past worked against them. Each family has approximately a 50 percent chance of their child being female and if this is an only child there is a concentration of resources (for example, from two sets of grandparents). This increases the possibility of paying for the much-prized foreign study.

We can see the effect of this in figures for students from China in Glasgow University in 2007. In the total of 536, 60 percent are female. In comparison, for students from India 23 percent are female (total 205) and from Pakistan 14 percent are female (total 113). The figures reflect a national trend. In Britain as a whole in 2006, there were 14,995 female postgraduate students from China and 12,775 male (source Higher Education Statistics Agency). There is also some evidence that women are more likely to be grouped into subjects such as communications/media, whose graduates are likely to work in 'opinion-leading' professions, such as journalism, public relations and teaching. There is a growing constituency for social debate on the complex relation between a traditional woman's role, the pressure for marriage by what one of my interviewees called 'the hated age of 30' and the link between education, power and independence. Cross-cultural contact and educational experience are factors in the movement away from the traditional in that they offer alternative possibilities for social life and ways of understanding the self in relation to others. They also provide the possibility for re-thinking broader relationships of law, equality and opportunity and future directions for the society as a whole. The pressures for change in some of these areas are likely to accelerate at least in part as a result of the processes described here.

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