

# **CULTURAL TRANSFER**

## **The Impact of Direct Experience on Evaluations of British and Chinese Societies**

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## Contents

Main Points.....	4
Introduction, Sample, Methods.....	6
Results.....	9
1) Perceptions of Britain.....	9
Experience: Bad Behaviour, Drink Culture and Discrimination.....	9
2) What would you take back to China?.....	13
Good manners and the relaxed life.....	13
Guan-xi Culture.....	17
Educational Approaches.....	20
Equality and Open Media.....	23
3) Did staying in Britain change you?.....	24
Work and Leisure.....	24
Sexuality and Gay Culture.....	24
4) Educational Value and Quality.....	27
Conclusion.....	29
Recommendations.....	32
1) Buddy System/Integration of Accommodation and Leisure Activities.....	32
2) Interactive Website.....	32
References.....	33

## **Main Points**

- 1) This is a study of how beliefs and attitudes change when people encounter a new society. It is based on interviews with 35 Chinese students, teachers and cultural workers plus 5 British university administrators. A further sample of 120 students was taken later to ask about issues of educational quality which had been raised in the first set of interviews.
- 2) Before people came to Britain, beliefs about the country were generally overwhelmingly positive. Britain was seen as a country of 'gentle' people and gentlemen.
- 3) Many of these images came from classic authors such as Dickens and books such as *Pride and Prejudice* or characters such as Sherlock Holmes. Word of mouth from friends, parents and teachers was also a very important information source.
- 4) These great expectations were shattered when people lived in Britain. They were shocked especially at the behaviour of young people, who were seen as drunken and out of control, with the streets unsafe to walk in. Half of those who lived in Britain gave examples of discrimination, which sometimes included abuse and physical attacks.
- 5) Older people were seen as having better manners and there was a desire to take this culture back to China.
- 6) Other positive elements of British society were seen in its education system for its creativity and in health and welfare, as well as visual arts and design.
- 7) Students were most positive about small courses with close supervision. Large classes in management and business studies with mostly Chinese students were criticised as being 'like back in China'.
- 8) There was criticism that international students were being used simply as a fundraising opportunity and were being recruited 'just for the money'.
- 9) There was approval for Britain's law and regulatory systems and comparisons were made with the guan-xi culture of China by which people could 'walk around' regulations.
- 10) The experience of living in Britain led some to believe their own lifestyle should change – to relax and enjoy themselves, as they perceived the British to do.
- 11) There were also changes to how people viewed sexuality and gay culture – Britain was seen as an open and tolerant society.

- 12) The additional sample of 120 students taken to follow up questions of quality and value in education showed that: 69% of those interviewed believed the main reason British universities recruited Chinese students was to earn money from international fees. But 70% believed that the education received was good value for money. 62% rated British education as 'good' or 'very good' compared with 29% giving this rating for their education in China.
- 13) The large-scale movement of young people to foreign education is likely to have far-reaching consequences on the development of China – particularly in relation to the status of women.
- 14) These consequences may result partly from the intense focus on education in Chinese society and may also be an unintended effect of the one-child policy.

## **Introduction, Sample, Methods.**

This project investigates the changes which may occur in the perception and understanding when individuals encounter a society and culture which is different from their own. This encounter may be via media such as films, TV and books or it may be based on actual contact and the experience of living in the new culture. We focus here on the experiences of young Chinese people who have moved temporarily to Britain for purposes of study, work or cultural exchange. 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). A second is how much encounters may generate processes of critical reflection on the cultural norms and practices of the new society as well as about those of the society from which the individual has come. At the heart of this is the issue of how ideas, values and cultural expectations move between societies. The case of China is interesting, since it has gone through a period of being relatively closed to the outside world, but is now once again being exposed to a range of influences particularly from the west. At the same time a very large number of young Chinese, many of whom are the sons and daughters of elite and influential groups, are being trained and educated in Britain and the USA.<sup>1</sup> There is a growing interest in how these people respond to the education which they receive as well as how students from the west relate to studying in China (Wang and Liu 2007).

The transfer of ideas between societies has often been remarked upon by historians and social commentators, but there is very little research which examines such a process in detail. At a general level it is obvious that ideas move, but how and why (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. 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<sup>2</sup>. Barmé, for example comments on the consequences of economic reforms policies since the late 1970's; noting how under the party's aegis, comrades have become consumers without necessarily also developing into citizens. (1999: XIV). More specifically, McGregor notes how the foreign education of Chinese students influenced the development of China's telephone system and affected the struggle between central planning and the market.

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<sup>1</sup> Currently around 100,000 students a year in the UK and the US plus others elsewhere, including European countries, Japan and Russia. The total studying abroad is expected to reach 200,000 in the year 2010. (China Daily, 17.10.06).

<sup>2</sup> Wang Hui 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. (2001).

The objections of the planners were thwarted by:

“A group of young mainland Chinese who used the experience and knowledge they gained in the U.S. universities and at Bell Labs to start UT Starcom and spread technology across China that (had been) vetoed.” (2005:228)

These commentators all assume that ideas move between societies but do not examine in any detail the process by which individual or group encounters with new cultural systems stimulate possible changes in attitude or belief.

The current project is a pilot study which sets out to examine these issues by interviewing Chinese students, teachers and cultural workers who have left China to spend periods of time in Britain. A total of 40 people were interviewed. These included students from masters courses in the UK (16), to graduates who were now working back in China (5), as well as Arts and Theatre administrators who had visited Britain for purposes of cultural exchange (3). The sample also included teachers of Chinese who had worked in British schools for extended periods (3). There were also eight interviews conducted with postgraduates from universities in Shanghai and Ningbo. Six of these had never been to Britain and two had visited for brief periods. The purpose was to examine how their perceptions of Britain might differ from those who had had direct and more extended contact with the country. We also spoke with five professional university administrators who worked with international students in order to compare their experiences with findings in this study.

The sample was chosen so that the participants had collectively a range of experiences of contact with British culture and society. This is a pilot study so the numbers involved do not facilitate major generalizations to be made across whole populations. Nonetheless, the qualitative nature of the methods employed does mean that significant insights can be gained into possible ways in which patterns of belief and understanding are established or may change. The method used was in depth interviews and all the participants who had visited Britain were asked the same six questions. These were as follows:

- 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?**
- 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 and 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. 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 through e-mails. It is crucial in this method to establish a level of confidence and trust. This is especially so in a situation where they 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 were free-flowing and open-ended,. Respondents could discuss anything they wished. They raised many issues spontaneously and often gave answers to one question as part of another. For this reason, the answers given to each question are not tabulated individually in the results. Instead, the responses have been classified into three main conceptual areas:

- 1. Perceptions and understandings of Britain before/after direct contact and the sources of those beliefs.**
- 2. What features of British society, if any, would the participants like to take to China and what would they leave behind.**
- 3. Changes which may have occurred in personal attitudes or beliefs as a result of living and working in Britain.**

The following analysis focused largely on views expressed about culture and ways of living rather than artefacts or natural features (such as views that British buildings or scenery are attractive or the weather is good). We also found that in the course of these interviews, there were many comments made on the nature and quality of education in Britain and in China. To follow this up we took an additional sample of 120 Chinese students in British universities, and asked specific questions on these issues. The results of this are given in section 4. The results for the initial study follow hereafter.

## **Results:**

### **1) Perceptions of Britain**

The views held about Britain, before staying there, are overwhelmingly positive. More than two thirds of the sample saw it as a country of ‘gentlemen’ and as being ‘gentle’. The British were also seen as ‘polite’ and ‘kind’. About a third thought that Britain was ‘orderly’, ‘conservative’ and ‘traditional’ and perhaps a bit serious. But the British were seen as ‘proud’, ‘brave’, ‘independent’ and ‘well-educated’. Umbrellas, suits, walking sticks and even top hats came to some people’s minds. As one interviewee put it

‘English gentlemen and ladies, posh garden party, traditional English afternoon tea and the Royal family.’

There were occasional rueful qualifications of this, where it was noted that the British were also, ‘the barbarians who invaded us’, but the overwhelming view was positive. Only a small minority thought of Britain as ‘modern’ and ‘hi tech’. The traditional images, not surprisingly, came largely from classic books. Charles Dickens, Sherlock Holmes and Jane Austen all feature; *Pride and Prejudice* being a favourite. Nearly two thirds of the sample cite books and school texts as a source of information (while less than a fifth cite the internet). Television and TV news are also widely referred to (by nearly half of the sample). But, interestingly, over half counted close personal acquaintances such as teachers, friends or relatives as the source of their beliefs. Such a reliance on parents or friends for information and in decision making amongst international students has also been noted in other studies (British Council 2006). This indicates a potentially very powerful impact of information coming from word of mouth. This is very important since many Chinese people are currently moving to Britain to study and work and this number is predicted to increase. The transfer of information in this fashion is therefore likely to grow.

### **Experience: Bad Behaviour, Drink Culture and Discrimination**

The extent to which the original perceptions of Britain survive depends partly on where people travel to and live in the UK. Those who went to small country towns such as Durham, York, Bangor or Stirling did not experience, at least initially, any great dissonance with their expectations. In contrast, those who went to large urban conurbations were much more likely to be shocked by what they saw. One interviewee described his experience of initially living in York and then going to Leeds. His original expectations of Britain had been:

‘A very gentleman country, everyone says hello when they meet you – very quiet and peaceful, very old and slow.’

When he lived in York, this was all confirmed:

‘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 behaviour of British young people was the biggest shock to people's expectations. While older people were generally seen as polite, the young were widely thought to be drunken and out of control. Two thirds of the sample named this as an issue and there were many comments such as these:

'Gentle country not true, too many drunk people, terrible young people everywhere.'

'young people get drunk – the behaviour would be frightening'

'I hate the teenage people with little education, gathering around, holding booze, talking rubbish'

'bloody terrible young people – not so well educated, very rough – drunk culture.'

'fighting in the street, drunken hooligan'

'crime of youth, doing nothing, in the street threatening people'

There were comments on the fear which this created and how it limited movement, especially for women:

'Most of my female friends said they were afraid to go out at night, when it was dark in winter. In Leeds and Birmingham, the universities gave personal alarms to all the female students.'

The prognosis for Britain was not good. An interviewee wondered whether the country had 'a bright future', while another noted that 'people will not feel the country is safe any more'. Wild behaviour was not confined to the uneducated. A postgraduate spoke of her astonishment at how her English classmates in London appeared to have 'split personalities'. They were normal in the formal setting of the university and then acted 'sometimes crazy' when out of it. Another who studied in London commented on how bar culture was essentially dull:

'There is an emptiness in night life there – party, party and nothing else – at the night the people are boring.'

She compared this with her original expectations:

'When I went to England, I thought there would be something special in culture – people would say interesting things – speak about plays or stories. I thought it would be a garden of thinking.'

Another major issue was what was seen as discrimination against Chinese and other ethnic groups. Half of the people who had actually lived in Britain gave examples of this. As one put it, 'there is an undercurrent of discrimination against other races'. Another commented that 'young people are rude to Asian or African looking people.' One interviewee had been employed in a fast food restaurant and described how 'Where I worked, Indian people were treated differently from whites – there was a more negative attitude from the manager to days off for exams, etc'. In another case, a teacher of Chinese in England discussed the working relationship which she had with her 'mentor' in the school (a teacher from England). She described the stereotype which she believed the mentor had of Chinese women:

‘The problem with some English people is that they look down on Chinese and think the stereotype that maybe we have gone there to meet a nice English gentleman and get married. Then when they find we work hard and get a lot of attention from the children, parents and head teachers, they were upset.’

Others pointed to what they saw as institutional discrimination in relation to police registration or the conduct of banks. As one put it: ‘We have to register in police station, but some other foreign people do not have to.’ Bank procedures for international students were also seen as inefficient and sometimes discriminatory. One graduate described how when he had wanted to pay cash in, a bank worker asked him: ‘Is that black money?’ He commented that: ‘If I was white, she would not ask that question.’

There was also much discussion about the conduct of universities. Problems were more likely to be reported in situations where a university had recruited students extensively for courses such as business studies and classes were very big, rather than in smaller institutional contexts where teaching was more personal. Thus universities such as Bangor and Stirling were spoken of very positively: ‘In Stirling, (on a public relations course) the quality of teaching is high and they have patience to listen to what their students talk about.’ Another went first to Bangor and later to a larger university which recruited many international students. In the small department in Bangor, there had been a pro-active approach to her welfare and staff frequently asked if she was all right or needed help. A larger department was very different:

‘People are treated differently – students are not made welcome – they are there just for money. In the classes, most students are Chinese, but the teacher communicates with the Europeans more’

Another student spoke more positively of a smaller department in the same university. But the view that students are being recruited ‘just for money’ is apparently widely felt – and not just by the Chinese. A senior university administrator dealing with international students noted how they commonly refer to themselves as being treated as ‘cash cows’. This interviewee also commented that many institutions and groups in Britain see these students predominantly as a source of income:

‘International students are seen by everyone as money-spinners. At every place, people try to levy another charge on them – whether it’s the home office for visas, the police registration or the city council charging extra tax.’

The most serious instances of discrimination were in cases of physical or verbal abuse – where people thought they were being singled out for attack because they were foreign. One graduate described how in Luton she had been shouted at in the street and on another occasion she had been hit on the ear when a catapult had been fired at her from a truck. Another described how she and a friend had travelled on a bus late in the evening. A group of young white people had shouted at them, then made rude gestures and thrown food. The bus was very full and the two Chinese girls were upset because no-one had intervened.

‘They treated us very badly. Nobody did anything to stop it. Some even laughed – even after we left the bus they were still laughing. Most of our Chinese friends have had experiences like this.’

Another graduate described an incident where he had been playing football with a group of Chinese friends outside student flats. A local white boy who had been drinking deliberately drove a quad bike into the middle of the Chinese. One was injured and had to go to hospital. There was a sense amongst these interviewees that they were seen as easy targets and that those who should have been helping them were not doing so. As the player from the football game commented: ‘The police are useless, you have to look after yourself.’ Another who had a camera stolen in London also noted the inadequacy of the police response, saying ‘Because we were international students, police thought we couldn’t really complain.’ The student from the bus commented of the people who had abused her: ‘They think if you are foreigners, you are not protected.’

One of the interviewees in this sample organised an association of past students. She referred to the information which she receives about physical and verbal attacks.

‘There are many young gangs attacking Chinese/Asian students. Two Hong Kong students were recently attacked by 8 British young men in Southampton. I received the information by email. That really annoys us.’

Such attacks and the growing awareness of them can do enormous damage to the image of Britain abroad. Knowledge of them is likely to grow because of the relaying of such stories through word of mouth networks, to friends, parents and relatives. There has also been extensive featuring by media in Britain of some attacks and this information may then be published internationally. For example, one of the biggest Scottish papers is the *Glasgow Evening Times*. In September 2006, its front page was taken up with the story of three students from Strathclyde University under the headline ‘Forced out by Race Hate’. It was reported that

‘Three Asian students today told how they were being driven out of Glasgow by race-hate gangs. They fear for their lives after being threatened with stabbing and targeted with bricks and bottles. ... The friends have been unable to leave their homes to go to Strathclyde University due to the thugs.’ (7.09.06)

Many of the above examples offer a stark contrast between positive expectations and negative experiences. However, the interviewees in this sample also pointed to very positive elements of British life which they had not always anticipated. Some, for example, who had expected the British to be very formal and restrained were surprised at the humorous and relaxed nature of the people they met. Even some of those who had bad experiences with young people, made a point of saying that most British were friendly and willing to help others. Some interviewees were pleasantly surprised at the multi-culturalism of British society and the extra-ordinary mixture of people and ethnic groups in cities such as London. As one put it, ‘there is no ‘British’ people but a community of different races and cultures.’ The new experience of living in Britain also caused many to reflect very deeply on the nature of their own society and the differences between it and the UK. This became more apparent when the interviewees considered which aspects of British society might be useful in China.

## **2) What would you take back to China?**

### Good manners and the relaxed life

There were many elements of British life which the interviewees found impressive. These ranged from the care of animals to the protection of the environment and Britain's cultural and artistic heritage. But the features most often referred to were the good quality of interpersonal behaviour and the relaxed life of Britain. At its most basic, this was seen as a culture of manners and care in which most people treated others quite well (in spite of the bad behaviour of some youngsters). Over a third of the interviewees who had lived in Britain spoke of politeness and manners. There were also favourable comments on the welfare system, on 'trusting' and 'giving' relationships and on the culture of public responsibility which was seen to exist. The young woman who had had the bad experience on the bus made these very favourable comments on the general culture of politeness in Britain:

'Old people are very friendly, but some young people's behaviour seems strange sometimes. ... Generally people in Britain are very kind. British people are very well educated and they are always willing to help others.'

There were many other comments on friendly interpersonal relationships:

'sometimes people gave me help which I was not expecting – people treated nicely'

'polite manners ... smile to strangers'

'politeness, strangers greet each other'

'Polite people take you where you want to go without just pointing the direction.'

'People say 'thanks' and 'sorry' – I think it's a good way to keep people calm.'

There were many comparisons made between Britain and China and what each could learn from the other. Manners were seen as a very good British export, as in this comment: 'I hope Chinese people become more gentlemanly, polite and confident.' Another comparison was made by a graduate who remembered a car pausing for him in Britain, to let him cross the street: 'If you stayed by the road for ten years in Shanghai no car would stop for you.' A female who had studied in Cardiff described how she cycled to University. Each morning when she came to a bridge, her bike had to be carried and then 'young gentlemen' helped her across with it.

There were also references to the culture of 'queuing' in Britain:

'When getting on a bus, British often stand in a queue. In China they will quarrel just for a free seat.'

Some links were made between politeness and a culture of public responsibility which was seen to exist in Britain:

'(there is a) sense of public responsibility, how to behave in public, moving on stairs (standing to the right), opening doors, moving to let others through.'

This participant described how once on a rainy day she saw that a large piece of wood had fallen from a moving truck. It blocked the pavement and part of the road. She then spoke of how three boys had got together to move the wood to a safer place. A comparison was made with China: 'In Shanghai, if a piece of wood was there, it would always be there!'

Other participants discussed the culture of charity in Britain and of how young people acted without financial rewards. One spoke of 'the kind relationships people have with each other – people like to help others without being paid.' Others noted how 'in China everyone usually thinks a lot before helping others' and that 'people are less trusting in China'. It is certainly the case that in Britain, charity as an element of public culture is actively promoted in schools, churches and other institutions. A media organisation such as the BBC sometimes devotes periods of coverage to charitable events and to the activities of hundreds of local groups raising funds for needy children. There is no equivalent level of such activity in China. One possible reason suggested was that the Chinese state might see the development of local independent groups as a potential threat and would discourage the growth of these outside the Party structure.<sup>3</sup>

British people were seen as being kind to each other, but were also seen as being kind to themselves. Half of those who had lived in Britain made the point that the British had a relaxed attitude to enjoying their lives. There were many comments such as:

'Western people know how to enjoy life better than Chinese'  
 'people here know how to enjoy'  
 'good relationship between people, enjoying work and life'  
 'The way of life is to work when you work and play when you play.'  
 'People enjoy work and life, have optimistic attitudes more than China.'

One participant described what for her epitomised the British lifestyle:

'The way the British eat breakfast – gives a good feeling all day. It's all spread out, then eat one thing, then another thing. In Shanghai, we just grab breakfast and eat on the way!'

Britain was commonly seen as a relaxed society in which people helped others, felt personally secure and were able to enjoy themselves. Such perceptions do not necessarily match an exact reality in British society. This 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.'

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<sup>3</sup> Will Hutton notes that there are over 250,000 non governmental organisations in China including the China Charity Federation, but every one of these must have a government or party unit supervising its day to day operation (2007:132).

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 release 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 recent 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.’ (17.10.06)

The participants in this study made many references to the British system of state organised 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.’ Other groups in Britain were seen as having their own rights and opportunities. In China the position of women is less secure than in Britain, and many feel under very great pressure (usually from their mothers) to be married before the age of thirty. 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 twenty, 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 ten, 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 1980ies 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 a woman’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, 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 lifetime's experience of gender inequalities (2007).

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. It is also possible to point to 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 were pointing strongly 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.

In China, the weakness of such formal structures combined with high levels of instability meant that in general there was a much stronger reliance on informal networks of support. These are based on personal contacts – what is known as the culture of *guan-xi*. On this, the participants had much to say.

### Guan-xi Culture

This is essentially the use of personal relationships to gain advantage or favours. As one participant put it:

‘Guan-xi 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 *guan-xi* 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. To gain this support might involve gifts or owing a favour, which can be reclaimed later. So to set up a hotel, for example, could involve bringing various groups on side, such as local officials and police. A participant described how it might also relate to academic life or health care:

‘Even for academic entrance for masters, 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 *guan-xi*.’

She also commented that there were variations in quality and practice between different Chinese universities. 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 culture explains to some extent why the participants were so surprised that many people in Britain helped others without reward. As another graduate put it:

‘If it is a stranger, people in China think that if a favour is given, something is wanted in return. The one who receives the favour will think that the person who helped will want something.’

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 *guan-xi* was a more profound and inescapable part of life in China. As one put it: ‘Without these supports, in China you are nothing.’ She then added:

‘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 *guan-xi*.’

She described how this was very dramatically illustrated for her in Glasgow 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 they 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 *guan-xi* 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 guan-xi:

‘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!’

Another participant spoke of how she had discussed with friends the setting up of a restaurant/business in Britain. They had concluded that the regulations here are complex, but that once the legal requirements were fulfilled, then it would be possible to go ahead. In China, the friends had concluded, the process would be much more fluid and unpredictable:

‘They said the regulations here (in Britain) are more reliable – in China if somebody wants to set up a business, they have to set up good relations with policemen and officials as well as some illegal team, like local gangsters. Here, everyone knows the regulations, so what you have to do is more apparent. In China, some relations are underneath, so they can’t be predicted.’

This unpredictability in guan-xi can contribute further to a generalised insecurity, because the support relationships are informal and can always potentially change. This is true of local interpersonal contacts, but also of wider power structures and political alliances. As a male graduate noted, there is insecurity even amongst those who are rich and powerful as they worry about the strength of their own connections:

‘In China people think 26 hours a day about how to be successful – they watch other people and see their success, and they use their connections, sometimes inappropriately, and they worry if their own connections are as good as other peoples. People in China might have a lot of money but still be worried about how to make more and how to make their position safe.’

But it was also argued that the positive value of guan-xi is exactly its flexibility. The suggestion here was that if the formal regulations and restrictions of China had been strictly adhered to, then the current rapid economic growth would have been impeded.<sup>4</sup> As the same participant commented: ‘There is flexibility in China, you can walk around regulations and laws.’

This is an interesting example of how major features of British and Chinese cultures were seen as having positive and negative elements. A further case of this is in perceptions of the educational systems and teaching methods of both societies.

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<sup>4</sup> As Gold et al remark, although the Chinese authorities have implemented regulations and laws, business practice can still see ‘contracts’ as a cage which appropriate guan-xi can unlock (2002:15).

### Educational Approaches

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 amongst 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 amongst 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.’

It was pointed out that there are currently attempts to reform the curriculum in China, to address some of these issues. But 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.

Many of the graduates were greatly impressed by the fresh and original ideas which they encountered in their studies in Britain. One spoke of how she wished to take back to China ideas about ‘advertising, public relations, tv programming and design.’ The Arts Administrators, who visited Britain with the British Council, were also greatly influenced by what they saw. One commented that:

‘I got a culture shock in theatre and arts. Before I thought it was just Shakespeare, but after the Edinburgh festival, I found so many great characters and figures. I was shocked by the creativity of the British people. They found so many ways to explain Shakespeare. I was really shocked by the creativity of the Tate Museum.’

Not all of those who stayed in Britain had such a positive view of its education and creative culture. As indicated above, students tended to have the best experiences in smaller departments with close supervision. The difficulties arose where very large numbers of students were being taught in subjects such as business management and finance and where the majority of those studying were Chinese. One participant who organised an association of past students, commented that:

‘I heard many complaints about big departments – people feel they are not in the UK, they feel they are in China.’

One alumnus gave this description of studying management in England:

‘There are many Chinese students in management. In the student accommodation, the Chinese filled about one whole block.’

Another recalled a lecture she had attended in a large Scottish university:

‘It was a lecture on marketing with about eighty students. The lecturer spoke very fast, he put on slides very quick and explained very shortly. Behind me, two Chinese girls were chatting all the time, nothing to do with the lecture. It was just like being back in China.’

The comments about ‘being back in China’ are particularly significant since it is clear that many students come to Britain expecting to encounter British culture. Some seek a cultural immersion, both to improve their English and to broaden their own outlook and understanding of Western Society. A recent article in *China Daily* spoke of such graduates who return to China as the nation’s ‘great treasure’, exactly because they would be expected to have a more ‘global outlook’ (17.10.06). It is not surprising then, that participants were very critical when they found that they studied in classes with nearly all Chinese students, lived in accommodation with other Chinese and ended up socializing with the same groups. One female graduate commented that her English had got worse since she had lived in Britain:

‘Here, there are no opportunities to meet local people or speak English. In China we had lessons in English every day. Here, our English is getting worse!’

It was also thought that to study in such circumstances put some limits on effective learning. For example, a feature of some British education is collaborative study. In this, students work together in small groups to produce projects and present final reports. Such an approach is unusual in China, and there are many skills involved which can be learnt from other students. One participant saw this as an important reason for mixing people from different backgrounds:

‘Chinese are not good at teamwork. If you study in a local environment, you will learn a lot from the local students – but not if you study only with Chinese.’

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 difference between the two countries. In China, education has a history of being revered and close to being worshipped, with temples devoted to scholarly pursuits. The absolute priority given to it by parents together with its unquestioned status mean that relationships between teachers and pupils can be friendly and certainly not hostile. The Chinese teachers described how they would regularly attend meetings and ‘get-togethers’ 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 amongst some British school children which the Chinese teachers and other graduates found quite shocking. One expressed his puzzlement that young people would not take up the education that was on offer, concluding that there was less pressure in Britain:

‘Many young people are unwilling to have high level education; they don’t have pressure on living.’

### Equality and Open Media

For the participants in this study, the experience of staying in Britain, produced extensive reflection on the nature of both British and Chinese societies. There was praise for what was seen as the creativity and openness of British culture. Some attributed its positive qualities to its democratic structures, to equality before the law and to the freedom of the press. There was a feeling that China would benefit from stronger legal structures which ensured equal rights. As one participant commented:

‘British government has clever politicians, no corruption. Nice law system, everybody has got the same right, everybody is equal in the law.’

The British media were also praised for their more democratic agenda – both in terms of the subjects covered and who was able to speak. One graduate pointed to the role of ‘ordinary people’:

‘The media agenda (in Britain) allows ordinary people to tell their own stories. This is commonly seen in British newspapers and magazines. It shows a kind of respect to people. It’s more democratic – in China only famous people can tell their stories.’

Another pointed to the openness of subject matter:

‘The media, including television programmes, newspapers and magazines are so open-minded to sex, political opinions and social issues.’

A comparison was made with China:

‘When we first came here, we were very concerned to give a good impression to Westerners of China and Chinese. At the same time, everyone was very angry at the negative reports on China in newspapers, tv and leaflets in the street. But later we realised that these messages were blocked in China – so I felt we were fooled by the Chinese media.’

A greater freedom of the press was desired for China:

‘If in China we could have negative as well as positive, then normal people can have their own opinion – they can compare what they hear’

There were many features of British life which participants wished to take back to China and some as we have seen which they very definitely wanted to leave behind. They also spoke of how their stay in Britain had affected them as individuals and had produced change in their personal attitudes, beliefs and behaviour.

### **3) Did staying in Britain change you?**

#### Work and Leisure

Many of those who had returned to China spoke of changes in their attitudes to work and leisure. Being in Britain produced a concern with the quality of their own lives. As one expressed it

‘Before I went to Britain, I worked every day until midnight. Then I saw people around me enjoying their own lives very much – having a rest at weekends. I made up my mind to slow down when I went back.’

About a quarter of those who had stayed in Britain indicated this change in attitude. The desires for leisure time and to ‘live your own life’ were paramount. As another commented:

‘If I hadn’t gone I would have saved money to buy a bigger house – now I save money to live my own life, as well as to pay for my daughter. I work and I save to travel. I want to please myself, to treat myself. If I was not influenced by British culture, I would tighten my wallet.’

The new attitude was that ‘you should control your life and not let it control you.’

#### Sexuality and Gay Culture

The participants also noted very great differences between Britain and China on personal issues such as sexual behaviour and sexuality. For some, this strengthened their existing beliefs, but for many it produced quite dramatic changes in attitudes and behaviour. There was some criticism of lax sexual attitudes in Britain: ‘One night stands are very common’ and ‘entertainment programmes full of sex things’, while another noticed, ‘Essex girls with less clothes on.’ But other participants were more amenable to Western sexual culture. One male arts administrator was impressed by: ‘Edinburgh women, so sexy!’ Where had this attraction to Western women come from? He replied, ‘Marilyn Monroe, so beautiful.’ This is interesting since it does point to the influence of Western media in defining what is seen as sexually attractive. Another male graduate, when asked what he would like to take back to China, replied:

‘I want to take the English women back – because they are sexy, have big breasts – they look sexual. Chinese women don’t look like this.’

He was then asked where had this idea of women come from and he answered: ‘I watched too many American movies when I was a teenager.’ A female participant added that ‘the European idea of big blue eyes is now attractive in China.’ Another female said that she would like to take back: ‘Sexy British men.’ When asked to describe her ideal, she replied:

‘Tall, humorous, good accent, well mannered, generous, nice eyes like a deep lake – Hugh Grant a typical example.’

She had in fact met such a person and noted that, ‘He was 200% my ideal man!’

Another area of change was in attitudes to gay people. Nearly a quarter of those who had lived in Britain spoke of this and there was some surprise at the openness of gay culture, compared to China. As a female graduate commented:

‘In China, gays can’t tell other people they are gay – they are afraid. I thought they were very strange, people treated them differently. They hid that side.’

A contrast was made with Britain:

‘British people just treat them as normal people – there are pubs, clubs for them. My flatmate and I think its not so strange now. I used to talk with my friends about how do they live? What do they look like? Now I wouldn’t do that. They are just like everybody else.’

Some participants pointed out that attitudes in China were also changing and that there were gay communities in large cities such as Beijing and Shanghai. But it was clear that the experience of being in Britain had a powerful impact on some attitudes. Another described a friend she had met:

‘I had a friend in class who is gay. In China gays are shown as a very strange weird group. My friend did not at first say he was gay, but when he told me, I just thought he was ordinary. And all the other gays I saw in a club with him were ordinary too.’

Others pointed to the presence of gay magazines in bookshops, and commented on how this would not be allowed in China. The multi-ethnic character of British society also had important effects on some, as they interacted with people of different backgrounds and colour. As one noted:

‘It totally opened my eyes – the multi-culture society. I become more tolerant, more generous, because Britain is a more tolerant society.’

Another female graduate described how her views had changed about African/black people:

‘I met some very smart, nice African people. Chinese people don’t like black people, that changed my mind. I was so afraid of all black people.’

Not all responses to other groups were so positive and people's reactions depended partly on the circumstances of different interactions. One participant spoke positively of black people but negatively of Indian landlords:

‘I was told that black people are very dangerous in Britain by other Chinese. I didn’t have any problems, they are quite nice people. But me and all my friends got a very bad impression for Indian landlords – stingy and cunning.’

But another had very positive encounters with Indian people in her classes:

‘Some people in China think Indian people are lazy – have negative view. But here my opinion changed. My flatmate (in student house) was an Indian girl and my classmates were Indian. They are very active people, very good at social life, at meeting people – very open. I like them very much.’

Overall, the experience of meeting many different people, where it occurred, was described very positively. Groups who had appeared strange and varied turned out to have much in common, as one participant concluded:

‘Human beings are more or less the same. They want their children to go to university, everyone wants to travel, to struggle for money, to have fun, to develop a sense of humour – I also saw the same couch potatoes! I saw many things in common between Britain and China.’

Those who did meet British people were able to form close friendships, which affected them deeply. Living in Britain was described by some as a major life-changing experience. A society that was strange and difficult to understand became more open and comprehensible.

#### **4) Educational Value and Quality**

When we began this research our intention was to focus on possible changes in beliefs and attitudes as a result of direct cultural contacts and experience. We did not intend to investigate how British education was judged in terms of its quality or value. But in practice many students and others did speak on this subject, so we have included their views. As we have seen there were comments made on the motives of British universities which were said to be recruiting students “just for money”. There was also criticism of courses which had a very high proportion of students from China, since this reduced the opportunity to speak English. There were some criticisms of the quality of teaching and the services that were offered. An administrator in one large British university commented on the gap between the fees which were paid and what was being offered:

‘There isn’t a value for money. The registry takes weeks. The lecturers are tired because they are doing the same thing twice a day – one lot in the morning and then again. There aren’t the resources in the university to fix these things or the mindset – the attitude is “they are just students.”’

This is a strongly expressed view of one university but as we have seen there were also positive comments made by students on the care offered by their institutions and what they saw as the high quality of British education. To investigate this further we took another sample of students and examined their views on the motives of universities and their judgements on the quality and value of their education. This was still a very small sample compared to for example, the International Students Barometer which is designed more specifically to identify key issues in student satisfaction. Still we thought it useful to expand the number of voices in this report and to give more people the opportunity to comment on the issues which had been raised, including their evaluation of Chinese as well as British education. We selected 120 Chinese students from 44 British universities and they answered questions on four main issues. They were also invited to add their own comments and to include any other replies they wished to make. They were asked first, whether they thought British universities recruited Chinese students mainly to give them a good education, or to earn money from international student fees. Second, we asked whether they thought the education they received was good value for money. For the third and fourth questions we invited them to assess the quality of both British and Chinese education on a five point scale (very good, good, satisfactory, poor, very poor).

The results showed a clear majority indicating the main reason for recruitment as being to earn money (69%). But nonetheless a slightly higher majority of 70% stated that the education they had received was actually good value for money. They were also likely to have a higher regard for British education with 62% rating it as ‘good’ or ‘very good’. No-one in the sample rated it as ‘poor’ or ‘very poor’. In comparison, 29% rated their education in China as ‘good’ or ‘very good’, while 20% rated it as ‘poor’ or ‘very poor’. We should be cautious about making generalisations 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.

As with our first sample of 40 people, we found a great diversity of response. Some were very critical of the attitude of lecturers. One respondent in a very famous British university noted that, 'some teachers are not responsible at all, it's a waste of time in (this) class'. But another commented of their university that, 'facilities and teaching staff are outstanding'. While another noted that:

'It is a great experience if you can meet a good supervisor who is always there to offer help, and luckily I met this kind'

There were also comments comparing British and Chinese education. This respondent points to merits and defects and to the British focus on innovation and independence:

'Two totally different ways of education and have their own merits and defects. However, British education focuses on cultivating the ability of completing tasks, encouraging innovation and independence. These are cherished experiences.'

Some respondents also pointed to the high level of fees which are charged specifically for international students. As one very eloquently put it:

Please lower down the tuition fees...we are from the third world, sir!  
How could you charge us three times higher than the EU students?  
Have you ever empathized? Even twice is better. Why three times?  
Why? That's all. Thank you.

These results and those of our first sample point to many possible variations in the quality of the educational experience which is available. This diversity means that it can be difficult for future students to choose which course would offer the best teaching and overall value. One way of informing these decisions better would be for past students to offer their comments on the courses and universities which they have attended. This could be done on an interactive website which lists all of the educational options (see recommendations). The graduates could then offer their views and give ratings of them. This would then be a most valuable information source, which would very likely be widely used.

### **Conclusion: Education, Social Change and the One Child Policy**

For many of those who came to the UK, the encounter with British society was sometimes quite shocking. The drunken behaviour of young people in the streets, the attitudes of school children and the nature of some British higher education was not at all what they expected. Some reflected quite bitterly on the difference between their dreams and the experience:

‘When I stayed in China and never came overseas, I felt that I got my own dream about a utopian nation. But now I couldn’t imagine this dream at all.’

Another spoke of her sense of isolation, and the difficulty that the Chinese felt in penetrating British society:

‘For me, I’m a bit disappointed about living isolated. We can never really know what’s behind the surface and going on in this social system, because we were not growing up in this society and we are always feeling like drifting on a boat without a direction. We are shy to break down some barriers or argue with people in a strange environment.’

The universities could act to reduce this sense of cultural isolation. One possibility would be to instigate a formal system of contacts between potential Chinese or other international students and existing British students. The new arrivals would then have a British ‘friend’ and contact before leaving home (called a ‘buddy-system’, see recommendations).

In this study, it was found that the participants who did have negative experiences in Britain tended to develop a more positive view of their own society. But, as we have seen, many of the interviewees did speak favourably of their time in Britain, especially those who had been in more localised friendly environments and in departments which gave close and helpful supervision. It might be very useful to potential students if they could be informed systematically of the differences between educational institutions and the quality of experience on offer. They could then employ such knowledge in selecting courses and universities. An interactive website offering such information, particularly with the comments of past students, could be established by the British Council (see recommendations).

Overall, it is clear that those who had lived worked and studied in the UK, had access to an extra-ordinary range of new ideas and experiences. This transfer and exchange of ideas is likely to affect future developments in China in, for example, the role and status of women. As we have seen, some who studied in Britain were very impressed with what they saw. The number of women who study abroad is also likely to grow in the future partly because of the intense focus on education in Chinese culture and also perhaps as an unintended consequence of the one-child policy. As we have seen, China has many of the features of a patriarchal male dominated social system. In spite of the new political order, elements of traditional society remain. In such a society, the resources of the family are likely to be allocated preferentially to male children (in fact the desire for these led to infanticide in some parts of China). But the one-child policy, to be effective, will mean that each family will have about a 50% chance of its one child being female.

Also, because this will be an only child, there will be concentration of resources (for example, from two sets of grandparents). This means that more funds will be available for the one child which will increase the possibility of paying for the much prized foreign study. Paradoxically, in such a situation where the child is a girl, there may be even more pressure to give her a high level education because she will have to compete in a male dominated environment. As one graduate noted, some firms prefer men so female candidates have to attain top qualifications:

‘A lot of companies in China prefer males and they say it in their recruitment adverts – that’s why girls have to have a high education.’

The effect is most obviously seen in the large numbers of young Chinese women who are now in universities in Britain and other countries.<sup>5</sup> This is creating a potential constituency to demand more equal rights in careers, interpersonal relations and individual development. Such a trajectory for women is very different from the traditional Confucian notion of the ‘Virtuous Wife’, whose role is largely to support the advancement of the husband. Some parents could already see this new world for their daughters. One participant commented on advice given by her father when she left for Britain:

‘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 more clear. 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.’

Another, interviewed later, also described changes in belief about her future and that of other women as a result of studying in an English university:

‘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.’

On another occasion, a high-achieving graduate described how her father had argued that she, a single female child, should have her name added to the family tree in the village temple. This would be the first time ever that a female had been included on it. This was especially pertinent for her since when she was a baby her grandmother had advocated that she be thrown off the roof so that the parents might try again for a boy. Her mother had then never spoken with the grandmother again.

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<sup>5</sup> We can see this in figures for students from China in Glasgow University in 2007. In total of 536, 60% are female. In comparison, for students from India, 23% are female (total 205) and from Pakistan, 14% 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 HESA). 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.

Another participant described the difficulties of her own marriage and how her experience of living in British society had made her much more committed to human rights for women. Such developments can be seen as positive effects of cultural exchange. Higher education has a crucial role in allowing people to explore their own potential and to re-evaluate the conditions under which they and others live. This is education in its truest sense.

It is a world away from treating international students simply as a fund-raising opportunity. It is not just Chinese students who see themselves as being used in this way. As one university administrator from Manchester put it, 'They're recruiting them like mad here, because of the money.' Not everyone takes this attitude and there are variations in the level of effort which different institutions devote to the care of international students. As we have seen, British education is often rated very highly. But British universities do face funding difficulties and to see foreign students as a way of resolving these may have far reaching consequences. To resolve the problems that have been highlighted here would require new resources, but will they be made available if the priority is mainly to make money? Universities could for example devote more of their existing funding to the security and welfare of international students and to the integration of them with groups beyond their own culture and language. They could ensure that the high levels of fees which they charge are accompanied by high levels of service. The question is whether there is the will to do so amongst all university authorities. There is more at stake here than simply whether universities will meet their funding targets and have a sufficient 'through-put' of foreign post-graduates. The good reputation of British higher education (and indeed of Britain as a country of gentle) people took literally hundreds of years to establish. It is a major reason why students are attracted to the country in the first place. Such faith in our society and its institutions is a precious national asset.

## **Recommendations**

### 1) Buddy System/Integration of Accommodation and Leisure Activities

Universities could establish a system of contacts between potential foreign students and existing British university students. The British might be recruited from second and third years of study or from post-graduates. They could work on a voluntary basis or perhaps for a stipend. Their task would be to write to one or more foreign students before they leave for Britain and give advice and friendly comments. They could then meet the students on arrival with additional help with accommodation and introductions to the local community, places to stay, where to socialise and people to meet. This would be similar to the 'College Parent' system which already operates in Oxford University. It might do much to reduce the anxiety and cultural isolation which some foreign students experience. It would perhaps also help if accommodation, leisure and social activities were arranged in such a manner that international students were integrated with those from Britain.

### 2) Interactive Website

It is recommended that the British Council formally establish an interactive website which lists both the institutions and courses available in British higher education. Crucially, it should include the facility for past students to comment upon the institutions and the courses which they have attended. This would help future students to make better informed judgements about the overall quality of what is on offer. It would also reinforce the reputation of the British Council as being a source for independent advice and show in practice the advantages of both the freedom to criticize and of open discussion.

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