
The New Cultural Revolution in China



By Du Boqi, Finance writer and columnist, translated by Alvin Lee, Web Editor

Hundreds of thousands of Chinese students leave home to study abroad each year, hoping a foreign diploma will land them respect and a good job at home. Today that’s not always the case.

In May, Guo Jie, a contestant on China’s most popular job-hunting show “[求职](#)” – loosely translated as “The job is yours” – fainted on air following intense questioning by the host and an expert judge designated as the “boss”. Guo was armed with three foreign degrees following a ten-year stay in France, and in years past would have commanded a premium in the employment market. However, job seekers like him now have to deal with the host’s comment uttered on the show on that fateful night: “I do not wish to perform this tedious task of separating fact from fiction on this platform.”

That remark has since become the de facto standard opening line on the show. More damningly, the Guo Jie incident serves as a cautionary tale: An expensive foreign education does not always lead to success, but could instead lead to suspicion of diploma-buying.

Go West, Young Man

China has a long history of its students furthering their studies overseas. The first Chinese student ventured out from the Middle Kingdom in 1847, and in the following 100 years the country was swept by no fewer than five waves of the pro-foreign-education movement. From the founding of the People's Republic of China in 1949 to the Cultural Revolution in 1966, almost all of those who studied overseas were recipients of government scholarships, after which they became civil servants.

In 1977, the Chinese government went on a drive to encourage its students to study abroad, relaxing its heretofore stringent passport controls, and thereby igniting a tidal wave of self-funded Chinese overseas students. In 2011 alone, there were nearly 340,000 Chinese studying abroad, with some 315,000 paying their own way.

Given the massive numbers involved, foreign education has become a bona fide industry. Cash-strapped Western governments have zeroed in on the Chinese market, with the French being particularly active on the recruitment side. The French education ministry says the country currently plays host to some 35,000 Chinese students, and hopes to push that figure to 50,000 by 2015. There is, of course, no guarantee that these students will not suffer the same fate as Guo Jie.

Coming To America

Chinese students and their cheque-writing parents brave the entire foreign education experience –suspicion of diploma-buying included – for a simple reason: to get a leg up on the massively competitive labour market.

Han Teng is one such student. While preparing for his last examination before graduating, the finance major at Rutgers University, in New Jersey in the U.S., wakes up at six in the morning, and goes to bed at midnight following an hour of reading just to improve his English. This rigorous and gruelling schedule typifies his approach to school in the two years that he has been in America, but nonetheless he struggled to keep up with the syllabus.

Han had graduated from Nankai University – a school that's just one tier below the elite universities in Beijing and Shanghai – with flying colours, but he decided to further his studies at Rutgers to “put myself on a higher platform”. However, the difference in emphasis – Chinese schools focus on

theory, American ones prize analytical and R&D skills – compelled Han to devote his time and energy exclusively to school, often at the expense of all social activity.

Things did not improve as he approached graduation. The financial crisis strangled Wall Street into job cuts after job cuts. Among his classmates, the one with the best-paid job – of those who managed to get one – makes US\$80,000 as a programmer at Bloomberg, which works out to be about US\$60,000 after taxes. The rest of his class mostly landed entry-level jobs in banks, where pressure to perform was as high as the pay was low. “Ten hours a day, six or even seven days a week – par for the course,” says Han.

Han coped with those problems the only way he knew how, by working doubly hard. That work ethic was shared by his fellow classmates in America; the Chinese also share the frustration of dealing with one particular issue that diligence could not solve: fitting into mainstream American society. With Wall Street veterans striking out for Eastern financial hubs such as Shanghai and Hong Kong, Han is now considering heading to Beijing to “get a couple of years’ experience under my belt.”

Was going to school in the U.S. worth the time, effort, and money? “I have grown up so much during my time in America, and it’s an experience that cannot be bought with or measured in terms of money. I am still a long way to being an expert in my chosen field, but my time in the U.S. has given me a new perspective and worldview that I would not have had if I had stayed in China. If anything, I have understood what it means to hang tough, and I have learned to respect the magnitude of a task before taking it on.”

The Real Deal

Han’s experience is not much different from that of the average Chinese student in America, but the U.S. remains the most popular destination when Chinese parents decide to send their children overseas. In 2011, some 157,000 Chinese students made the trip stateside, making up half of the total number of Chinese nationals who embarked on an overseas education. Not surprisingly, the Chinese represented the largest foreign nationality on American campuses in 2011, for the second consecutive year.

This surge can partly be explained by the rising affluence of the Chinese middle class, but that is just half the story. Universities in Britain, France,

and the U.S. have introduced one-year postgraduate research programmes to cater to Chinese students, but demand has been less than overwhelming. Chinese parents, in a bid to immerse their offspring in Western culture, are sending their kids abroad at younger and younger ages, with an increasing number of Chinese teenagers attending high school in America. These youngsters then move on to American colleges, where one-third of all Chinese students are currently enrolled in an undergraduate programme – a stark difference from the past where the overwhelming majority of students from China were in postgraduate programmes, having already earned a bachelor’s degree from a Chinese university.

An expensive foreign education is no guarantee of success, but for the foreign-educated scions of affluent and well-connected Chinese parents, finding a job back home will not be too difficult. One such youth boasted of a promise that a friend of his father’s made to him, “If there is a job you fancy, just tell me.”

What Guo Jie would not give to have that promise made to him.

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