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“I WAS REALLY LUCKY”: RETURNED GRADUATES’ EXPECTATIONS OF WORK IN THE CHINESE HOTEL INDUSTRY

ABSTRACT

Due to the attractive job market in China, Chinese international students often choose to return to their home country upon graduation (West, 2014). This research investigates whether the returned graduates’ expectations match their work situation in the Chinese hotel industry. The study includes an analysis of seven semi-structured interviews with Chinese graduates who hold a tourism and hospitality degree from a particular university in South-East Queensland. Except for one graduate, the returned graduates were relatively satisfied with their current work situation in the Chinese hotel industry. Nevertheless, it is recommended that the university help build realistic expectations for Chinese international students. More interaction among students and teaching staff about their future work requirements should take place. Furthermore, creation of more alumni community networks in China and Australia for students to meet other Chinese international students and graduates is recommended. Finally, it is recommended that hotels in China connect new employees with mentors and provide the employees with training.

Key words: Returned graduates; Chinese hotel industry; job expectations

1. Introduction

Recently, an increasing number of graduates have returned to China upon completion of overseas studies because of the attractive business opportunities in China (West, 2014). Graduates returning to China in the 1990s or earlier with foreign business degrees accepted salaries that were low by international standards. In return, they were often rewarded by the government with free housing, spousal employment, and resident status (hukou) for children in large cities. These returnees were considered as patriotic figures, in that they had given up a higher living standard abroad to serve their motherland, China. They would often be promoted faster than their locally educated colleagues (Xu, 2009). Even though the majority of employers in China value international study experience when selecting graduate employees (Molony, Sowter, & Potts, 2011), Li and Yang (2013) have claimed that public perceptions have changed significantly over the years. Today, not all returnees are privileged or guaranteed good careers.

Nevertheless, Gribble and Li (2013) argue that career outcomes are a crucial factor for Chinese school graduates and their families when considering study-abroad options (Gribble & Li). In the last decade, Australia and the USA have been destinations of choice for most Chinese international students (Davis & Mackintosh, 2011). However, Australia is now also facing increasing competition from the UK, Europe and some Asian countries for incoming students (Barber, Donnelly, & Rizvi, 2013; Davis & Mackintosh, 2011). In order for Australia to remain a desirable destination for Chinese students, empirical research into the expectations of returned graduates is needed.

According to International Australian Education (2013), tourism and hospitality was the seventh most popular discipline area among Chinese international students in Australia in 2012. Davidson and King (2008) claim that Chinese international students studying a tourism and hospitality degree in Australia generally consider the related industry as a sector offering dynamic employment opportunities. Given the number of Chinese students enrolled in tourism and hospitality programs in Australia and the booming tourism and hospitality job market in China (particularly in the hotel industry), it seems timely to investigate whether graduates’ expectations match the current job market conditions in the Chinese hotel industry (Saurine, 2013).

2. Literature review

2.1. Re-entry of returned Chinese graduates

According to (Arthur, 2003); Arthur and Flynn (2011), more attention in the research has been paid on international students' initial phase of adjustment in their host country rather than on the re-entry in their home country. Furthermore only little research has been conducted on the career development experiences of international students (Arthur, 2007). This study contribute to the body of knowledge by exploring whether the returned Chinese graduates' expectations match their work situation in the hotel industry of their home country. Graduates who return to their homeland and realise that their overseas qualifications will not guarantee them job opportunities may experience "re-entry shock" (McSharry, Burges, & Wadeson, 2005). Typical difficulties resulting from re-entry shock include academic problems, cultural identity conflict, depression, anxiety, and interpersonal difficulties (Henderson, 2011; Şahin, 1990). Şahin (1990) has claimed that the research shows there are many similarities between graduates' re-entry and their initial entry to international locations in terms of adjustment and the process of adjustment. The re-entry "shock" might be even more serious and require a longer period of adjustment than the initial adjustment in a foreign country. It is therefore relevant to consider re-entry as a continuation of the initial international experience process and compare the results. In general, the traveller undergoes a decline in adjustment shortly after entering a foreign culture, which is then followed by a recovery stage with an increase in adjustment. After returning home, the traveller undergoes another decrease in adjustment followed by a stage of recovery. In some cases, travellers may never fully recover from their initial culture shock, while in other cases they may experience only a mild challenge (Şahin, 1990).

Workplace mentoring might help returned graduates deal with their re-entry difficulties that they encounter on a daily basis. Mentoring at the workplace involves a more experienced employee (mentor) and a junior employee (protégé). In their role, the mentor introduces their protégé to the company/organisation and the social and personal challenges that the job might involve (Allen, Finkelstein, & Poteet, 2009). According to Liu, Liu, Kwan, and Mao (2009), mentoring relationships fit well with the Confucian values such as close hierarchical relationships and "guanxi", which is a relationship characterised by reciprocity and exchange of favours (Alston, 1989; Chen, 1992). Mentoring also fits with Chinese collectivistic values in that it provides the opportunity for mentor and protégé to work together to achieve both personal and organisational success. Mentoring in the Chinese workplace is already taking place, and formal mentoring schemes can be of benefit to Chinese companies/organisations as well as for the employees (Bozionelos & Wang, 2006).

2.2. Graduates' attitudes towards working in the Chinese hospitality industry

According to Riley, Ladkin, and Szivas (2002), the general image of tourism employment is twofold: on the one hand, tourism jobs seem glamorous, while on the other hand, they lack prestige and have low status. Some of the positive characteristics of tourism jobs include the opportunities to travel, meet new people, and use one's foreign language skills. However, tourism jobs often require relatively low levels of qualification, resulting in low wages, which contributes to the industry's negative reputation. Chang and Tse (2015) have confirmed that jobs in the tourism and hospitality industry offer significantly lower wages than jobs in other sectors in China, which may be a major discouragement to graduates pursuing such positions. Riley et al. (2002) have claimed that the image of a particular industry has an influence on potential employees' perceptions of that industry, adding that these perceptions will then impact the quality and quantity of future employees.

According to Zhang and Wu (2004), there are many human resource challenges facing China's hospitality industry. Due to the increased number of hotels in China and the concomitant rise in the demand for employees, it is challenging to recruit and retain qualified personnel both at operational and managerial levels (Zhang & Wu, 2004). Currently, well-trained hotel managers proficient in English can easily find jobs in more well-paid non-tourism industries, such as IT and banking (Zhang & Wu, 2004). Adler and Leng (2014) have mentioned some reasons for the high turnover rate in hotels. For example, the hard work and pressure involved in the hotel industry make it difficult for newcomers to adapt to the industry. A labour shortage combined with long and irregular working

hours places pressure on employees, who risk burning out (Wong & Ko, 2009). The working atmosphere and relationships between managers and staff also contribute to the high staff turnover rate (Adler & Leng, 2014). Chang and Tse (2015) have argued that creating a more pleasant working environment and clearer and more satisfying career paths might encourage young employees to accept tourism and hospitality jobs despite the poor pay.

Because of the high turnover rate in the Chinese hotel industry, many hotels in the country are not willing to invest in the training and development of their graduate employees. Consequently, many of them feel the pressure of not being well trained and are more likely to resign (Zhang & Wu, 2004). Gu, Kavanaugh, Yu, and Torres (2006) have recommended that the hotel industry develop their training methods as a way to maximise employee productivity and avoid high staff turnover. Training motivates employees to perform better and to build a sense of loyalty to the hotel, since the company is seen to be investing in their future.

Another factor influencing students' and graduates' attitudes towards choosing a career in tourism and hospitality relates to the concerns of Chinese parents about the low prestige associated with working in the industry (Wong & Liu, 2010). According to Wong and Liu (2010), more accurate information about the industry might be a way to improve students' and parents' perceptions. To provide more realistic information to Chinese international students about career and working conditions in China, returned graduates should be consulted. Sinha, Oberoi, Bhatia, and De (2014) have claimed that alumni of a university can provide quality academic and career guidance to enrolled and prospective students. Furthermore, the authors have recommended a consistent mentorship throughout the entire course of a student's enrolment rather than in their final year.

3. Methodology

This study used a qualitative interpretative methodology. An interpretive paradigm tends to rely on respondents' views of the phenomenon being studied (Mackenzie & Knipe, 2006). The essence of the interpretive paradigm is "to understand the subjective world of human experience" (Cohen & Manion, 1994, p. 36). This research relies on the expectations of the interviewees in relation to their current work situation. A social constructionist epistemology has been applied. Social constructionism refers to the mode of meaning generation, whereby our culture teaches us how to view phenomena. Social constructionism emphasises that culture has an influence on the way we perceive the world (Crotty, 1998). According to Billett (1995, p. 2), "knowledge is sourced through individuals' interaction with a socially determined world in the forms of its culture, communities, and practices."

An identified weakness of the research on graduate employment is the lack of published qualitative data. In particular, data are limited regarding job tasks, job requirements, and knowledge acquired during studies, whereas there is a large amount of quantitative information on graduate jobs and income (Teichler, 2000). Johnston (2003) claims that quantitative approaches seem to be limited in addressing questions related to complex processes and human perceptions. She suggests that researchers use a qualitative methodology with an interpretive paradigm in order to focus on the data in more depth. In the current study, the use of a qualitative methodology made it possible to investigate the factors associated with the expectations of the students.

The study included an analysis of seven semi-structured interviews with Chinese graduates with degrees from a particular university in South-East Queensland. To obtain the sample of Chinese graduates, I targeted those who held a Bachelor of Business, award majors "International Tourism and Hotel Management" and "Hotel Management" (ITHM and HM) and those who held a Master of Business "International Tourism and Hospitality Management" (ITHM) and who had graduated from the university between 2010 and 2013. The interviewees were between 23 and 31 years of age, and they were all working or had been working in international hotels or state-owned Chinese hotels, in various positions. Four out of the seven graduates were females and three were males. Their work experience in Chinese hotels ranged from less than one year to four years. The interviews were conducted from March to June 2014. See Table 1 for information on the job positions and city of employment of the graduates.

Table 1

Profiles of graduates' educational qualifications, job position, and city of employment

Educational Qualification	City of employment	Job position	Number
Master of Business (ITHM)	Tianjin	Assistant Deputy to General Manager	1
Master of Business (ITHM)	Nanjing	Sales Coordinator	1
Bachelor of Business (ITHM & HM)	Xiamen	Sales Coordinator	1
Bachelor of Business (ITHM & HM)	Putian	Assistant Training Manager	1
Bachelor of Business (ITHM & HM)	Putian	Management Trainee	1
Bachelor of Business (ITHM & HM)	Chengdu	Receptionist	1
Master of Business (ITHM)	Beijing	Management Trainee	1

Snowball sampling occurred through the network of the graduates found on LinkedIn and through the network at the University. Five of the interviews took place over Skype from Australia and two of them were undertaken face-to-face in China. Given the challenge of recruiting graduates in China, one weakness of the study is the relatively low number of graduates interviewed. The study is thus not representative of returned graduates' expectations regarding their work situation in the Chinese hotel industry.

Coding was used as a method of data reduction. Properties and dimensions indicating variation in the data were developed through the method of constant comparison. For example, the researchers looked for consistencies within each transcript and across transcripts (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Subsequently, axial coding was used, allowing the categories to be related to each other by elaborating them (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). After both open and axial codes were grouped and labelled, the categories were integrated into a core category through selective coding. Selective codes use the same principles as axial coding, but the integration of categories is made at a higher level of abstraction (Strauss & Corbin 1990). The coding process was undertaken with NVivo10 software, which enables the importation of transcriptions and the coding of selected quotes.

A thematic analysis of the interview data was undertaken, and through it repeated "patterns of meaning" in the data were examined (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 86). The researchers identified themes inductively, which means that the "themes identified were strongly linked to the data themselves" and not coloured by theory (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 83). The thematic analysis was undertaken after the coding. The various codes were analysed and collated into an overarching theme at a higher level of abstraction.

In order to confirm the validity of the qualitative methodology, triangulation was applied, including data triangulation. For example, the researchers compared the interview data with various documents, such as the University's policies and strategies, mission and value statement, course profiles, internal statistics, and governmental statistics. Another type of triangulation that occurred in the research was analytical triangulation; for example, when data were unclear, the interviewees were asked to review the findings and answer questions on the researchers' interpretation of their interviews (Patton, 2002). Furthermore, Creswell (2013) argues that it is important to build trust with respondents, learn their culture, and check for misunderstandings between the researcher and respondents. This strategy was

important to consider in this study because all respondents were Chinese and had a distinctively different culture from that of the researchers. Therefore, language and cultural barriers were likely to occur before and during the interviews. Ensuring that the respondents received general information on the research was important for the research validity. Moreover, according to Creswell (2013), clarifying the researcher’s bias is important in order for the reader to understand their value position and any biases or assumptions that influence the research (Creswell, 2013). Noble and Smith (2015) also claim that the reliability of a qualitative study is ensured by accounting for personal and research method biases that may have influenced the findings. For example, I was myself an international student in Australia and my interviews and data analysis might therefore be biased. However, critical reflection on my position may also be a positive aspect of the analysis process. Finally, the applicability of the study was ensured through a rich detail of data collection and coding, facilitating transferability to other similar studies that could be undertaken among other nationalities of students from other programs and in other countries (Noble & Smith, 2015).

4. Findings

The central theme “Expectations” emerged inductively from two selective codes: “Expectations of Chinese returned graduates regarding the work situation in the Chinese hotel industry” and “Expectations of hotel managers regarding the work performance of Chinese returned graduates”, which were developed from several axial codes. These axial codes were developed from several open codes through the analysis of the interview data. Table 2 illustrates a summary of the central theme and the selective and axial codes. In this study, only a discussion of the first selective code “Expectations of Chinese returned graduates regarding the work situation in the Chinese hotel industry” will be provided. Anonymity has been preserved by referring to each interviewee by a letter for the “graduate” (G) and an identifying initial or another random letter.

Table 2
Summary of axial and selective codes, and central theme

Central Theme: Expectations	
Axial codes	Selective code
Satisfaction with their current work situation	Expectations of Chinese returned graduates regarding the work situation in the Chinese hotel industry
Unrealistic expectations	
Dissatisfaction with their current job situation	
Work pressure	
	Expectations of hotel managers regarding the work performance of Chinese returned graduates

Six out of seven graduates (GY, GAB, GA, GFY, GW, GFK) in this study seemed to be relatively satisfied with their current work situation. One graduate (GY) referred to her involvement in a management trainee program in a positive way:

I like this opportunity to be a management trainee because you have future goal[s], all the departments of the hotel, the front office, F&B, housekeeping, even the finance, marketing, everything ... So what I’m doing is my favourite [which] is human resource training. (GY)

Management traineeship programs are prestigious and competitively run, since the graduates are being trained to become future managers and will be promoted relatively quickly. It is likely that GY was satisfied with performing basic job tasks such as housekeeping because she saw this as a stepping stone in her career. Furthermore, GAB talked very positively about the training she had received from her hotel, which had helped her career development:

I was really lucky. I got a lot of trainings in HR department. This hotel belongs to Hilton Worldwide Group. And I was been sending out for trainings, train the trainers training. It's a special training for our trainers. I take this training which was very helpful to become an excellent trainer. (GAB)

Two graduates (GW, GAB) felt that returned graduates generally do not have realistic expectations about their job positions, as they think that they should do “much more important jobs” than the ones they are assigned. GW, who was working as a sales coordinator, explained how he had gained realistic expectations by talking to fellow students, tutors, and local friends while in Australia:

They told you to have to do something and like step by step, just forget about like you go through some ... reach some position by working. (GW)

The six graduates (GY, GAB, GA, GFY, GW, GFK), who seemed to be relatively satisfied with their current work situation, were working in international brand hotels (Hilton, DoubleTree by Hilton, Westin, Sheraton, Ritz-Carlton, Intercontinental Hotels). They were working the positions of assistant training manager, sales coordinator, management trainee, or assistant to the deputy general manager. None of these job positions included basic entry-level operational job tasks, such as housekeeping, F&B, or waiting on tables. Their work experience ranged from approximately one year to four years at the time of the interview, and it can be assumed that some were over the first difficult adjustment period.

GC, who had less than one year of work experience at the time of the interview, was the only graduate to express explicit frustration with her work experience in the Chinese hotel industry. She was working as a concierge and receptionist in a state-owned Chinese hotel, and was no longer interested in working in the hotel industry because of her disappointment with the working conditions. She was the only graduate who was working in a state-owned hotel. GC mentioned that she did not have high expectations of becoming a manager because she wanted to have a good work–life balance and not have too much pressure at work. However, she was very disappointed by the work pressure and the shift work in her current position. Her frustration about her work situation was clear throughout the interview:

I feel really headache. I feel really, really headache. Because, you know, in China, our policy is quite different, you know. It's different with your country, with Australia as well. It's quite different. So that's why I feel the headache. They always push to you. They always ask you, “Claire, can you do me a favour, like this, like this?” (GC)

Furthermore, she expressed a frustration about not being able to use the English language skills that she had learnt during her studies in Australia. She claimed that the chances of talking with foreign guests would be higher in an international brand hotel, where there were more visitors from overseas. The fact that her job contained many basic entry-level work tasks and that she was not able to make use of the skills she had learnt overseas may explain her higher frustration level compared to the other six graduates working in international brand hotels. They did not express similar dissatisfaction as GC.

Three of the returned graduates (GAB, GA, GFK) mentioned the pressure that they feel from the high expectations placed on them by their managers and themselves. The hotel industry is a competitive environment, where graduates with advantages, such as good foreign language skills, creative thinking, and overseas experience, meet higher expectations from managers than other employees who have not studied abroad. GAB explained:

They expect... how to say? They expect overseas students to be creative ... to have a lot of ideas, to find ways to solve the problem. (GAB)

GA argued that the high expectations that managers have of returned graduates can lead to accelerated promotion but also to more work pressure. GKF emphasised the high pressure that graduates place on themselves. To the question about whether the hotels in China could help returned graduates adjust to the workplace, he answered that mentors could help increase graduates' confidence levels and teach them about how to achieve work–life balance.

5. Discussion

The findings of this study found that the large majority of the returned graduates (six) were relatively satisfied with their current work situation in the Chinese hotel industry. They were all working in international brand hotels. Some of the graduates emphasised their satisfaction of being trained, for example, in the prestigious and competitive management traineeship program, which was perceived important for career advancement. Gu, Kavanaugh, Yu, and Torres (2006) agreed that the hotel industry should provide training in order to build loyalty to the company and to avoid high staff turnover.

However, some graduates felt that returned graduates generally do not have realistic expectations about their job positions. These statements corresponded with the claims by one of the interviewed graduates (GC) who seemed frustrated because of the basic operational tasks that she was undertaking in her job which did not fulfil her expectations. Wong & Ko (2009) agreed that newcomers to the hotel industry face difficulties in adapting to the challenging working conditions. McSharry, Burges, & Wadeson (2005) further added that when returned graduates realise that their job opportunities do not correspond to their expectations, they can experience re-entry shock including academic problems, cultural identity conflict, depression, anxiety, and interpersonal difficulties. GC who expressed a strong frustration with her work in a Chinese hotel seemed to be suffering from a re-entry shock. Her re-entry shock may be explained by her relatively little work experience (less than one year), compared to the other graduates who had between one and four years of work experience. She was undertaking many basic entry level tasks in comparison to the other graduates whose positions did not contain such tasks. Furthermore, GC was working in a state-owned Chinese hotel with apparently less foreign guests than in international brand hotels. She was therefore not able to make use of her English language skills that she had learn in Australia. This factor seemed to contribute to her frustration.

One student in the current study mentioned the importance of having mentors to help graduates adjust to the workplace in China. Mentoring in the Chinese workplace is already taking place (Bozionelos & Wang, 2006), but from the interviews it did not seem to be common practice in the hotel industry. A mentor program in the Chinese hotel industry for returned graduates would be useful to help them adjust to their new work environment and assist them in developing realistic expectations. Finally, one interviewee mentioned the importance of developing realistic expectations through fellow students, tutors, and friends in Australia without mentioning the role of alumni. However, Sinha, Oberoi, Bhatia, and De (2014) suggested that university alumni can be useful in providing career guidance to enrolled and prospective students.

6. Conclusions and Implications

Since more attention in the research has been targeted the international students' adjustment in their host country, this research has contributed to the body of knowledge by investigating whether the graduates' expectations match their work situation in their home country. The large majority of the returned graduates were relatively satisfied with their current work situation in the Chinese hotel industry. However, following suggestions are provided to assist the students in developing realistic expectations of the work situation in the Chinese hotel industry.

First, universities should help build realistic expectations for international students about their future work in their home countries. For example, more interaction among students and teaching staff on this

topic should take place. Moreover, creation of more alumni community networks in China and Australia for students to meet other Chinese international students and graduates is recommended. Social media platforms such as LinkedIn and Twitter could also assist in connecting students and graduates. In particular, a creation of alumni network would help Chinese international students in Australia become connected to Chinese alumni from Australian universities who have experience working in the Chinese hotel industry.

Secondly, hotels in China should assist their new employees who have studied overseas by connecting them to mentors. A mentor can help a new employee adjust to the workplace and to life in China in general, which might have changed since the new employee's departure. A mentor program might prevent returned graduates' re-entry culture shock.

Third, training of new employees in the Chinese hotel industry is important in order to increase the job satisfaction and career development of employees. Furthermore, it would build loyalty to the company and prevent high staff turnover.

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